

from “There are No Repetitions” – The No-Person Person

From *Subtle Sound: The Zen Teaching of Maureen Stuart*

Chapter’s Title: There Are No Repetitions (second half of chapter)

On loan to us at the Cambridge Buddhist Association for a while was a most extraordinary calligraphy, by Soen Nakagawa Roshi. The top character, “human,” was very still. The bottom character was a wonderful swirling energetic character: “Heaven-dance.” The heaven-dance comes through all of us when we let go of all our ego-stuff, when we melt down the ego and let this source move freely through us.

In Japanese culture, the creative process is described by words like *ki* – vital energy; *kan* – transcendent intuition; and *myo* – wondrous action. When energy strikes intuition, a wondrous sound emerges. *Myo* also refers to a certain artistic quality not only in works of art, but in anything in our lives, in nature. This *myo* is something original, creative, growing out of one’s own consciousness, one’s own experience: spontaneous and personal creativity.

We speak of the wonders of nature. Nature is full of *myo*. Nature is always showing this unfathomable, absolutely inexhaustible *myo*, and there are many wonderful poets who express this to us. Basho, who was the role model for Soen Nakagawa, who in turn was the great inspiration for my life, wrote wonderful poems of nature, but they are not just nature poems; they richly convey this *myo*. Here are two examples:

Stillness
penetrates the rocks
cicadas chirp

The temple bell dies away
but the fragrance of flowers resounds –
evening

Such elegance! By the way, the word, elegance, is also used by physicists to describe their discoveries. Basho has given us a glimpse of the source. To come to such elegance, to come to such feeling, doesn’t happen by taking some pill, or some magic potion, but through strong discipline. This is not only true of Zen practitioners, but of all great artists. How many times did Beethoven write, rewrite, tear up, sort out all the things that came to his mind, day by day, week by week, month by month, until he finally distilled everything down to the wonderful sound we hear at this point! How many times do artists draw, draw again, over and over again, perfecting their technique so that they may work freely and directly from this source. We can speak very easily about how we should be free, how we should empty our minds, how we should open our hearts, but to do this we need strong practice. As musicians we practice hour

after hour perfecting a phrase so that we may have some freedom of expression when it comes time to give it to someone else. As Zen practitioners we sit in zazen, hour after hour, day after day, year after year, refining our minds and spirits, to come to this elegance, to come to this place where we can be what Rinzai called the true person of no rank, or what Dogen called the primordial person: one who has freely dropped off the ego-self. Basho described this condition in another haiku:

Along this road
goes no one
this autumn evening

We are the no-person person, and at the same time, we are doing what needs to be done, completely fully, absolutely, concentratedly.

We must be completely present with whatever we are doing – so completely present with whatever we are doing – so completely present that there is no separation between it and us. Sitting on the cushion is relatively easy. To take it into everyday life, to be completely mindful of what we are doing, this is more difficult – and essential. We must make our base very strong, like the Daruma doll – no matter how many times he’s knocked down, he pops right up again. We are doing mindfulness practice to nourish this fundamental source of our being.

We have this source within us, but we must do our practice over and over and over. Sit over and over, do whatever tasks we are engaged in over and over. Yet nothing is repeated. It’s hard to keep wide awake, to keep vividly present in the midst of endless repetition. But look at this! Taste this! We may have drunk a million cups of tea, but we have never tasted this one before.