

## from “There are No Repetitions” – What is Zazen

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

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

What is the condition of our minds right now? How are our hearts? This moment is all we have – so at this moment, how creative are we, how in touch with the source are we?

We need courage to be creative. To be sensitive and aware requires great courage. This word “courage” comes from the same root as the French word “Coeur,” which means heart. So please, have the courage to listen to your heart, to your body, your hara, not just to your head. You will discover new ways to experience your life.

We are always at the beginning. It is always the very first time. Truly, there are no repetitions. When I play the piano, I often come to a repeat sign. Can that passage be repeated? If I am teaching a piano student and we see a repeat sign, I tell the student that there are no repeats. We return to the beginning of a certain passage, but it’s never the same. It’s always fresh. Someone asked me, “Don’t you get tired of answering the same question day after day – what is Zen, how do we practice?” Never! It’s never the same question, because it’s always coming from a different person, in a different moment; and each person asks the question from his or her own state of mind. The words may sound alike, but each time they are coming from somewhere unique.

What is zazen? Hui-neng defined zazen this way: “In the midst of all good and evil, not a thought is aroused in the mind. This is called ‘za.’ Seeing into one’s self-nature and not being moved at all, this is called ‘zen.’” We sometimes say “za” is just to sit cross-legged, but it means more than this; it means to sit with no discriminating consciousness, no dualistic activity. And “zen” is to wake up to our fundamental self, not to be disturbed by anything – just letting it come, letting it go; in-breath, out-breath; just here. Allowing the calm, deep breath to penetrate every part of the body, allowing the hara to fill up, we let go of all fixed notions. We let go of “I.” We let it all fall off. We are here to discover a way of relating to one another, rather than to expound a set of doctrines. With this attitude, our sitting is receptive, alert, awake, open, so that we can hear what the silence has to say. We are letting ourselves be the vehicle for whatever teaching may come our way, not forcing or grabbing at anything.

Because I consider myself an artist, I tend to think in terms of poetry and music, but above all, it is the art of our own life that we are engaged in. The greatness of a poem or a painting is not that it portrays a certain scene or experience, but that it shows the artist’s vision of his or her own meeting with reality. Hence each thing, each time, is fresh and new. It is never the same place. There are no repetitions. It is not the head or the hand that paints the picture or performs the sonata. One of my teachers gave me a wonderful koan: “Play the piano without using your hands.” When we are empty and free, then the brush or the notes move by themselves. This is the source, whether or not we call it Zen, that we are touch with. Is it done

by heaven, or is it our doing? Our doing is heaven's. Our movements are heaven's. If the artist interferes, or if we as artists of our lives interfere with this source through some self-conscious preoccupation, what happens? What is to be expressed gets lost, becomes hard, constrained; there is not true expression. When mind and heart are open, empty; when there is no selfish motivation; then all one's actions are one with heaven. The spirit flows freely, and we have a heavenly dance.