

from Subtle Sound...,
Maurine Stuart

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Depending on Nothing

ON APRIL 8, Buddha's birthday, we celebrated with fifteen so-called children and thirty other children of older ages and stages. I told the story of Buddha Shakyamuni being born a prince in a little state in India. When his mother, Lady Maya, was nearing the time when she was ready to give birth, she wanted to return to her native place, and on the way she stopped at a garden full of flowers. When she raised her arm to pick one of these flowers from a tree, the Buddha was born. He immediately stood up, the story goes, and took seven steps eastward, then seven steps westward, then south, and then north, seven steps. Then at the center he stopped. Raising his right hand, and pointing with his left hand to the earth, he proclaimed: "Above the heavens and beneath the earth, I am the noblest one."

Of course a newborn baby cannot walk seven steps in any direction. But this has a special meaning. "Above the heavens, beneath the earth, I am the noblest one." It's the same for every one of us. Everyone is the noblest one. You, I, and everything in the universe; here, there, everything is nothing but the noblest one.

Here's another story, one that takes place in our time. When

Soen Nakagawa Roshi came to the United States for the first time, it was on Buddha's birthday. At his first Zen meeting in San Francisco, someone gave him a baby Buddha statue as a gift to welcome him to America. While he was here he kept that baby Buddha with him. During his morning service he bowed to that baby Buddha, chanted with that baby Buddha. On his way home to Japan, after sitting quietly on the deck of the ship one morning, he threw the baby Buddha into the ocean. So that baby Buddha is now standing at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, proclaiming, "Above the heavens, beneath the earth, even at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, there is nothing else but the noblest one."

Once a monk came to Joshu, and quoted a famous saying by Sosan, the Third Patriarch: "The Great Way has no difficulties—just avoid choice and attachment." And then he asked Joshu, "What are nonchoice and nonattachment?" Joshu answered, "Throughout heaven and earth, I alone am the noblest one." Each one of us alone is the noblest one throughout heaven and earth. From the beginning there is nothing dualistic. It is beyond asking "Is it or isn't it?" The monk who was asking Joshu this question was still caught in a relative point of view: choice and attachment or nonchoice and nonattachment.

The sun shines, the moon shines, the rain rains. They shine and rain on all of us. They do not exclude anyone. When clouds come, what? Cloudiness. When rains come? Raininess. As Ummon said with stunning simplicity, "Every day is a good day." It is when our discriminating minds interfere that we have trouble.

We tend to see everything outside ourselves through the conceptualizing of color, shape, sound, taste, touch, and so on. But do we truly see? Do we truly taste the essence? When we *think* of something as good or bad it is due to our own habit of thought. It is because we have so much attachment to this discriminating mind that we do not experience our Buddha-nature, or absolute consciousness, or whatever we may call it.

With our zazen, we are learning to give up this imagined individual self. We are melting it into *Muuuuuu*. With one long, deep, wonderful breath, melting down, melting down.

Some kind person came and asked me, "How are you feeling in this springtime all alone?"* Depending on nothing, how do I feel at sixty-five in the springtime, alone? I said, "Good! Really good! Inside there is still a sixteen-year-old girl, happy no matter what." And that is because of this wonderful practice, in which we are always refreshed, always renewed, always coming to realize that there *is* This Mind that is never disturbed. So often we do depend on this or that, instead of having our own experience; we depend on thoughts that have been thought by someone else. What is it like to depend on ourselves alone, on our own experience? We come to understand that we are a part of the whole universe, not some separate self. We do not understand this by reading about it, but through our own digging into ourselves. "Before you have penetrated, it all seems like a silver mountain, like an iron wall," Engo says. "When you have been able to penetrate, from the beginning it was your self that was the silver mountain, the iron wall." Buddha-nature is everywhere. When our minds are clear as crystal, all the Dharma is revealed: here, there, inside, outside, visible, invisible.

Some people think that Zen Buddhism has just arrived here and that they have to propagate the faith, so to speak. This is nonsense. Zen Buddhism has been here a long, long time, quietly doing its work. Calmly and peacefully, people have been practicing for years and years and years. We have a beautiful temple, a beautiful house dedicated to this noble religion. But a Buddhist temple has nothing to do with bricks and stones. Such a temple is built of pure, eager, willing, and loving hearts. There is nothing mysterious in Buddhism, and there is no propagation, no compulsion. No one is going to bind anyone's will. But

*Maurine had recently separated from her husband of many years, Ozzie Freedgood.

within the strong, formal practice that we are engaged in, we find our own freedom. This is a place where all of us, from all walks of life, with various levels of education, points of view, and backgrounds, have come together to help one another in a true bodhisattva spirit. We chant the Four Great Vows together: I vow to save all sentient beings. I vow to get rid of my delusions. I vow to master the Way. I vow to follow the Path. Endlessly. We are not here for tranquilization or some sort of pleasant effect, but for something much deeper. We are here to practice together, deeply and clearly, and to live it without saying one word about it. We certainly are not doing this in order to be able to say, "My life is so much better since I started doing Zen practice." Nonsense. So it is, but there is no need to say so.