

# Catch the Body as It Flies

SOME YEARS AGO while preparing to visit a friend in Taos, I discovered that while she was giving me driving directions on the phone, I was creating a mental map of the road. Once in the car, I found myself following the map in my mind rather than the directions she had given to me. This was a problem because I wasn't finding my mind's image in the darkening countryside, and when I came to road junctures, I wasn't clear what to do. When I finally arrived, my friend recognized my behavior as familiar, something she did herself.

It seems we develop mental images of reality, and those images become reality for us. Internal images have great power compared to those "outside" of our mind.

Since that time, I have found other occasions when my inner voices are stronger than those "outside," such that I don't hear what is actually being said by others. So I began to pay close attention to the static in my own mind, the ongoing self-talk. It's similar to what Suzuki Roshi said once: "You are hearing my voice, but you are listening to the sound of your own consciousness."

I notice this with people we are training as chant leaders. No matter how carefully or repeatedly we may give instruction about chanting Japanese style, students often have an idea in their mind of how to chant, and this idea interferes with their being able to hear some other possibility. Sometimes there is anxiety in someone's body or mind. Sometimes there is an internal imperative based on earlier training. We have a wonderful student who has a strong clear voice, but no matter how often or carefully we demonstrate our style, his inner conviction persuades him otherwise.

I've been thinking with renewed interest how difficult it is to see or hear clearly. Settling the mind allows us to see things as they really are, relatively free of emotional or intellectual biases. Clear seeing may not happen the first time we sit, but maybe it will. Our chances increase with repeated sitting and continuous effort to calm the mind. The question becomes, what is seeing clearly? What do we see? How do things actually exist?

It is a fundamental teaching of Buddhism that all things—people, objects, circumstances—exist impermanently, have no inherent existence, and therefore cannot bring lasting satisfaction. When we see clearly, we see that things are simply the coming together and passing away of circumstances and conditions. This is what is meant as empty of inherent existence, no fixed identity or appearance. Therefore, we live in a condition of continuous restlessness or dissatisfaction.

When I originally encountered *The Great Failure*, by Natalie Goldberg, four years ago, I had resistance to reading it. I didn't really want to read about events years prior that cast a much respected teacher in a negative light. More recently I decided to

reread it, and now, in a different frame of mind, I found it quite instructive and helpful, even tender.

We resist seeing or hearing things we are opposed to or are afraid of. When we try, we find it harder than we imagined to settle the mind enough to let in what we resist or feel threatened by.

I find it especially difficult to listen to political opinions or perspectives different from my own, but I think how good it would be to be able to hear things that I don't agree with, to let in thoughts and feelings that represent some perspective that feels threatening to me, that I don't wish to exist in the world. It's as if by not listening we deny the existence of that perspective. I don't minimize the complexity of this.

Our practice of sitting quietly and opening ourselves to the world is a very profound, subtle practice that requires inner stability and a willingness to see how our mind allows only what is acceptable or safe into our awareness.

How does this practice really help us, then, if we can't really do it? Fundamentally the practice calls attention to that which we can't do, and maybe that's its primary function: to reveal to us how attached we are to the self and how difficult it is to see the world outside of the preferences we create.

It's as if the practice of generosity shows us how ungenerous we are or how the practice of mindfulness shows us all the ways in which we aren't attentive, generous, gentle, or kind.

I think I was able to read *The Great Failure* now (and to read it with my heart, not just my mind) because I had experienced some sense of failure in myself that was different from but related to the failure she is presenting in the book. Until you have experienced yourself as disappointing yourself or others, you can't really read about such an event in someone else's life with

empathy, because someone else's life is just a story to you. No empathy needs to come forth.

In Katagiri Roshi's book on time, *Each Moment Is the Universe*, he says real time is completely beyond our idea of time. This is like saying real zazen is completely beyond our idea of zazen, or our actual life is completely beyond our ideas about our life. We know that's true—perhaps also reassuring and unsettling.

For instance, even though we give detailed zazen instruction, we know that zazen is completely beyond our description of it. We give the basic teaching up front, and then there is the teaching from the back, the truth we discover when we try to do the teaching from the front. We don't know what our teaching from the back is. We discover that along the way.

Zen teaches kill the Buddha, kill your father or mother, kill the teacher. We have to do that. We do it the best we can. (It doesn't mean literally, of course.)

When we objectify our experience, we tell stories about our lives and the lives of others.

The purpose of studying Buddhism is to see ourselves doing that and to free ourselves from that habit. Although our culture rewards us for being verbal and quick-witted, the deeper truth is to know that things are more complex and subtle and insubstantial than our quick minds can grasp.

The Korean Zen teacher Seung Sahn called it "don't know mind." This challenges us to know breath as breath, sounds as sounds, sight as sight, taste as taste, smell as smell.

Can we see our mind picking and choosing as it's forming these sense experiences, which are not separate from our ideas and thoughts and feelings? This practice lets us see how we alter experience as it arises.

## THE TRUTH OF THIS LIFE

The voices of life are "just arising and passing." They don't really satisfy us in the ways our hunger may want to be satisfied. Instead, we grab onto things to find pleasure or frustration, something, anything, to engage our feelings and thoughts.

Buddhist teachers tell us we decorate our life with our thoughts and feelings and that life itself is just arising and passing. But perhaps life is not capable of satisfying our deep hunger for something good to hang on to—or not in the way we think we want it to. Knowing *that* truth is deeply satisfying.

Now almost twenty years after his passing, we understand Katagiri Roshi was making a great effort to bring us the authentic teaching of impermanence: there is nothing solid in our lives, and we're always chasing after things, trying to catch them as they fly by.