

Just This Is It

WHEN WE GO into the heart of something, we tend to go slowly, maybe sideways. The heart is precious. We don't rush into it because the heart is covered, protected from our approach.

The ancestors I've been studying lately open the heart of the teaching.

In a book about Dongshan,* when Dongshan was departing from his teacher Yunyan, he asked, "What shall I say in the future when someone asks me to describe you?" After a long pause, Yunyan replied, "Just this is it."

Although Dongshan did not understand at the time, later when he was crossing a stream, he saw his reflection in the water and was awakened to Yunyan's meaning. He then composed this verse:

Avoid seeking elsewhere, for that's far from the self.

Now I travel alone, everywhere I meet it.

Now it's exactly me, now I'm not it.

It must thus be understood to merge with thusness. (*The Record of Tung-shan**)

When Dongshan was preparing a memorial service for Yunyan, a monk asked him what teaching he had received from Yunyan. "Although I was there," Dongshan said, "I didn't receive any teaching." And that was why he revered him so much, because Yunyan never directly gave him any teaching, but allowed Dongshan to discover for himself.

When Yunyan was a student, his teacher was Baizhang.* Baizhang taught "What is it?" So the succession went from "What is it?" to "Just this is it." That's the teaching the ancestors left us. That's the heart.

Generations later, as recounted in *Zen Buddhism: A History*, Dogen Zenji was told, "Nothing in the entire universe is hidden," when he asked a monk, "What is practice?"

In a poem by Hongzhi,* a few generations before Dogen, are the words:

When the mysterious pivot finds the opportunity to turn,
the original light auspiciously appears. . . .

Clearly understand and know by yourself.

When speaking of someone who did not understand, a teacher might say, "Karmic conditions were not right."

Maybe you feel like a pile of concrete, a sheer cliff with no handhold, maybe a pile of dung. We proceed slowly into this territory, gradually becoming familiar with our bodies and minds, asking continuously, "What is this? What is it?"

If we are drawn to this work of deep intimacy with ourselves, we will find ourselves circling the heart, going round and round. After cancer or a heart attack we might find the way easier, our defenses softened by a confrontation with our mortality. What is the shock you need to stop your habits, your habitual energy? Are you afraid that if you really tried to do this work, you'd find you couldn't do it?

Practice comes alive when circumstances are desperate and painful enough, when we realize we absolutely have to do it, regardless of the outcome. When we bring our full energy to this investigation, it is impossible to fail.

What is it? Just this is it.

Practice is to find our own way, following these questions.

Avoid seeking elsewhere. Now it's exactly me.

Nothing in the entire universe is hidden.

My way is my way; your way is yours. There are many teachers and awakening stories because of our ancient twisted karma, and the path that opens for each of us is unique. Circumstances and relationships, hang-ups, fears, griefs, and mysteries become exposed in the most unexpected ways. We keep coming up to our wall, and if we can look at it with the help of a teacher, a therapist, a friend, we can begin to burn away those things that prevent us from getting to the mysterious pivot.

I'm in my seventies and amazed at the things I am willing to look closely at, that are available to me, that weren't thirty years ago. I wasn't single-minded then; I had other agendas, other streams. As our life matures, as those streams merge into the one burning question of our life, as options diminish, we can bring more and more energy, enthusiasm, necessity to this inquiry.

What is this?

THE TRUTH OF THIS LIFE

Hold up a mirror: what is this? It's hard to look into a mirror.

Just this is it.

Just this lemon? Just this dish? If we don't call it a dish, what is it? What do I see? If I don't name its blue and squiggly lines, what is it? Zendo meals are a great time to study *what is this?* To watch the tendency of mind to dominate our experience.

When we receive our food, can we receive it as *what is this?* Can we just taste it? Can we just know in the mouth and on the tongue without the mind discriminating, without language forming? If language does form, can we go beyond the words? Can we see the effect of naming, of discriminating, of judging on our experience? Naming a soup salty or bland, or vegetarian or bean is different from experiencing it on the tongue, in the throat, on the lips, drawing it from the spoon. These are practices to expose the conditioned mind.

Maybe we can only catch this nondiscriminating mind one second a week, but oh, what a second! That's a moment we don't ever forget. Our five days of sesshin are an opportunity to have these kinds of direct experiences, unmediated by the mind, which likes to take over our life.

Hongzhi said, "You must completely withdraw from the invisible pounding and weaving of your ingrained ideas." If you want to be free of this invisible turmoil, you must know it completely, observing it with a calm mind. We have a ringside seat at this practice. Another Zen ancestor put it this way: "Don't keep searching for the truth, just let go of your opinions."

Searching for the truth is going hunting. Don't let mind become a hunter. Allow the mind to settle into its own comings and goings, its own passages. Inhale, exhale. Nothing more to do. What is it? Just this is it. Unexpectedly entering the heart.