

# What Is the Flavor of Plain?

THE FLAVOR OF PLAIN appears in one of the koans in the *Book of Serenity*. It may not be very interesting for most people, but the flavor of plain is what Suzuki Roshi brought us. Ultimately the flavor of plain is what sustains us.

The phenomenal world activates the senses. The eye seeks stimulation; the ear, the tongue, the body, the mind—all seek to be engaged. Ultimately our life is just one breath after another. This is what Suzuki Roshi brought us. He brought us himself.

He was enormously important to us, as his way of being was dramatically different from our way. By today's standards he wasn't flashy; he wasn't on the cover of magazines; he wasn't on TV. It was years after his passing that San Francisco Zen Center released tapes of his talks because he hadn't wanted his talks circulating in the minds of those who had not been in the room where they'd been given: the talks were just for the students in the room at a particular moment. Anybody outside would be hearing something else.

This reminds me of what Bill Viola, the video artist, was

saying in his 2004 *Shambhala Sun* interview: at any moment, with a camera, we capture a frozen moment of reality and believe that moment is true, but actually that moment is frozen from a flow of time and events.

Our consciousness is like a camera: it takes sound bites, emotional "takes," and that's what memory remembers—frozen moments. When I think back on what excites or frightens me, it's a still image of a moment—a frozen moment. We hang our identity and other people's identities on those frozen moments, but at some point we come to understand them as fleeting moments, and likely distortions of what happened.

An art form that represents reality as we understand it today would have to be capable of multiple perspectives. This is what Picasso was looking for: multiple perspectives to express the infinite aspects of reality. With the technology available today and with what we know of quantum physics and subatomic particles, we can actually see that reality is movement. The early Greeks knew it too. Heraclitus said, "Everything flows." Now we can see it with our instruments.

In *The Jewel Tree of Tibet*, Robert Thurman, a Buddhist scholar, reminds us that the freedom Buddha promised is not something we are going to get in the future. We are already free. Our problem, Thurman tells us, is that we are trying to maintain an identity, a "self," in the midst of the freedom that we are. That doesn't work. We often want to burst out of the cage of conditioning we're in, but the habits of memory, identity, and security claim us. Fear keeps us in our conditioned place. Clinging to our beliefs is the ultimate identity problem, he says. We are trying to be our rigid self in the middle of just being a relational being interwoven with everything else.

## HOW THE UNIVERSE THINKS

Suzuki Roshi said one day during an especially painful time in sesshin: "The problems you have today, you will have the rest of your life."

He was reminding us that if we come to the Zen center to solve our problems, we are likely to be disappointed. They aren't solved by being abandoned but by our changed relationship to them. What he meant was that the way my consciousness, and yours, manifests is what we have to work with. Our mind is the problem that we bring to practice. As Rumi said, "The wound is where the light enters you." So the problem, confusion, is where there is an opening. That's where you focus, that's where you bring your energy, that's the place you hold open.

Our fixed ideas about right and wrong are the places where we have a lot of energy. Giving up right and wrong is one of the essential stages of liberation. And if we keep holding the koan of our lives, gradually the body hears it. Something in us will just collapse out of exhaustion, out of trying to hold up an edifice that doesn't exist.