

What Is the Meaning of a Rose?

IN MY FIRST PRACTICE period at Tassajara as resident teacher about a decade ago, a student taught me a lesson I cannot forget. While I was still finding my way in that position, she said very sharply to me on one occasion: "You're not empty; you're not coming from emptiness."

She was right. I was taking my position very seriously and, without recognizing it, was carrying an attitude. She had a history of resistance to authority figures. And I had attitudes about students, especially new ones who had opinions about how things should be. She expected the highest nondiscriminating behavior from me but found me in my best fluffed-feathers pose.

I have never forgotten that.

Now here we are at Tassajara again, and the other day someone asked me just as I was going in to dinner, "What is the meaning of life?" The person asking was thirteen years old, and so I hesitated to tell her what came up at that moment, which was, *There isn't any meaning. She's only thirteen. Can I say that?* After

more thought, I realized I had to say that we create meaning in our lives—we ascribe meaning to things, to relationships, to circumstances.

What is the meaning of a rose, fish in the stream, the family dog? Things just are. We are the ones who say this is valuable: I like it and I want more, or this is bad and I don't want it. But the moment before we say yes or no to things, they just *are*. Every moment, again and again, we have a fresh opportunity to see this clearly. The meaning of things is that they exist. Their existence is their meaning.

The poet William Stafford speaks to this question of meaning in Bill Moyers's *The Language of Life*:

In writing I don't know what my intention is. This may sound strange, but I want to be on guard against trying to write good poems. Most writers say, "Oh, excellence! There's no use doing it if you don't do excellent things." But I don't feel that way at all. I feel that writing is an activity that brings all sorts of rewards, not just good poems. I would give up everything I'd written for a new one, for a new writing experience.

In our Zen-yoga workshop this week we've been talking about not trying to *become* Buddhists, not *trying* to go from ordinary mind into another state of mind. I spent many years trying to be someone other than Katherine. The more I practiced, the more I became Katherine.

My practice has gradually taught me the truth that each moment has its own realization, and whatever it is, it is enough, not because I am satisfied always with the taste of that moment,

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but because it just is. The meaning of each event depends on how fully present we are.

Have you noticed that the things that are really joyful in our life are the things we do for no purpose? We call that play, things that we do for the sheer pleasure of it, because we love the activity. We can spend hours doing such activity because it is deeply satisfying and meaningful for us, but maybe the world has no use for it; maybe we don't get paid for it.

In our yoga classes this week, trying to do a good dog pose may get in the way of releasing into it, of exploring the possibilities of the pose, without preconceptions. We may ask such questions as what happens in that posture when you move your body back from the thighs rather than from the arms, when you gradually let down your heels and experience the hamstrings and calf muscles for the *experience* of it, not to accomplish a different body by exerting maximum stretch but to realize the body by releasing into the posture.

The details are the meaning. Sometimes we hear God is in the details or the devil is in the details. In Buddhism we might say living is in the details. The poet Naomi Shihab Nye wrote:

poems hide. In the bottoms of our shoes,
they are sleeping. They are the shadows
drifting across our ceilings the moment
before we wake up. What we have to do
is live in a way that lets us find them.

Reality is also hiding in the soles of our shoes, in each footstep, in the passing of shadows, in the movement of our breath. Reality is not arising as the meaning of these things, but as the

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things themselves. "What we have to do is live in a way that lets us find them."

Put yourself into a situation and commit yourself to stay with it. The situation will bring forth everything—your resistance, your confusion, your joy, your gratitude. Following our preferences is carving our own dragon. Following the schedule is meeting the true dragon. The true person is the one who arises in the midst of unanticipated circumstances. It may be an unexpected, unrecognizable self. You may see the slippery side of your personality at that time; you might fall on your face and feel foolish. That's the risk of allowing ourselves to be fresh each moment—we might actually become authentic human beings.

In yoga we're not doing just the poses that feel good, but all the postures in order to get acquainted with the whole body, its reactions, resistance, fears, and satisfactions. How does one become oneself in this situation? We don't recognize the process, but the people around us notice we are less defensive, less frightened, less shy, less dependent, maybe more irritable.

For some of us there is no other way to live. We come to realize that we do this practice finally because we love the doing of it, the mystery and confusion of it. We know there is no other way to live.