

TEACHER FEATURE

Unfolding Seasons

By Barbara Rhodes, Ji Do Poep Sa Nim

Each year the seasons of nature come forth on their own whether we ask them to or not. They are beautiful teachers that are around us all the time. Each season, each situation, each moment generously offers us an opportunity to see the mind that sometimes has trouble trusting how things are unfolding.

A famous Zen saying is, "Spring comes and the grass grows by itself." The grass just does it. Whether it's a late spring or an early spring, the grass has no opinion. You can sit on the lawn in complete stillness, and you will not hear a complaint from one blade of grass about spring being late or early.

One spring morning I was sitting in the orchard at Providence Zen Center. There were two cardinals; one was over by the beehives, and the other was near the pine tree about fifty yards away. They were speaking to each other. Their calls kept changing, and it seemed so beautiful. Then the cardinal by the beehives swept down into the brush and disappeared. The other bird kept calling out for a little while, then it stopped.

The practice of Zen is to just perceive and to see. But as

humans we sometimes apply our ideas to animals. I had decided that the cardinal that had disappeared was a male, and the one left behind was a female. So I was thinking, "That's too bad. The male left her; she's still calling, and he disappeared and stopped answering her."

But did some sad thing happen? I don't know. The cardinal stopped calling for a cardinal reason, not a human reason.

The seasons can show us not only our projections, but also our expectations. As summer approaches, my aversion to heat makes me distrust that season. I start wondering if it's hot and muggy in June, what will it be like in August? I start worrying that it's hot because pollution has ruined the ecological balance, and that my daughter won't be able to grow up in a "normal" world because of our myopia and greed.

But if I sit with my questions, I can feel very grateful. Grateful for the beautiful spring that has passed, grateful for the summer heat, grateful for my happy, healthy daughter. I

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This 90-Day Kyol Che is designed for seasoned Zen students who are able to live with few amenities in a foreign, monastic setting.

The cost of this retreat is \$300.00 for all men and women who wish to shave their heads and wear monk's robes for the duration of the retreat.

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can also feel grateful for all my worries. Worries wake me up. I can look at the content of my worries and learn what it is I still don't quite trust, and ask what it is that has aversions and attractions.

In the fall I've often taken my daughter to Temenos, a retreat center in northwestern Massachusetts. There's a beautiful, tall white pine that I've climbed many times. When my daughter was eight, I let her climb it with me for the first time.

Three quarters of the way up, I looked down and asked myself, "What have I done?" Instead of feeling grounded and balanced in what I was doing, suddenly my center went up to my head. That's not a good place for your center to be. I gulped and took a deep breath, and reminded myself of why I had wanted to climb this tree with her.

My daughter was really enjoying it, and she wasn't feeling frightened. So I just kept going, and the branches started to get thicker; there were more needles, and you couldn't see down as easily. There's a spectacular view from the top, and my daughter got to see it.

But going down a tree is even harder than going up. When we finally got to the bottom, we both laid on our backs on the ground, and looked up at the tree and admired it. I asked myself, "What is this?" Just to experience how we felt at that moment. We were both really glad we had climbed that beautiful tree; that was all.

On a warm morning during a Winter Kyol Che retreat, I was sitting quietly in the interview room, waiting to give interviews. The window was open, and I was listening to the melting snow on the monastery roof coming down, landing on



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on the ground. It was really nice to simplify, to just listen to that dripping, that melting.

Then a student came in for an interview; she was upset to the point where she couldn't even sit down. Just listening to that snow had made my mind so clear and simple that I could say to her, "Now the situation is to sit down." Finally, enough trust formed that the student was able to sit.

I asked, "Do you have any questions?" There were lots of questions . . . complicated questions, painful questions, lost questions. I didn't answer any of them directly. I just said, "Stop. What is this retreat? Let's try to practice what this retreat is."

I said, "Be quiet, then listen." The student heard the melting snow. "Let's just sit and listen to that for five minutes." So we sat and listened to it . . . just the trickling water.

Then I said, "You know, that's choicelessness." It was

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warm enough that the snow became liquid, with no idea or discrimination about it. The snow was just following the situation. Not wanting to hold onto the white crispness, not wishing to stay that way, and not wanting to become water, either. Just melting and then falling onto the mud next to the monastery . . . slap, slap, slap.

The ground knew the ground's job. Sometimes it thaws a little bit and takes in the water; sometimes it stays hard and the water runs down into the pond. It's all just following the situation.

The student finally began to relax, following that natural process going on outside the window. I had a lot of faith in the sound of that melting snow dropping off the roof. I was really in tune with just that morning, just that melting, just that January thaw. Through that came teaching, came support for the student's practice.

If the snow was thinking, it might be very frightening to melt, drop off the roof, and slap onto the ground. If we're thinking, if we're holding onto our own identity, what could be more scary than to lose it? "I'm crisp white snow. Oh no, I'm water!" Zap, like that.

With people, it's more subtle and slower than snow melting. But if we're holding onto what we think we are, the transformation becomes very frightening. If we're able to let go, and just be with the change, we will be able to recognize it as grace, as universal compassion. Rather than feeling fear, we will be able to feel grateful . . . grateful for the unfolding of this moment, grateful for the unfolding of the seasons.

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