

Morning stars

Stanley Lombardo, JDPSN

Shows stick, hits table

Sky is dark, stars are shining.

Shows stick, hits table

In original nature, there is no sky, no stars.

Shows stick, hits table

Which one is correct?

If you say correct,
your life can never be correct.

KATZ!

In the clear eastern sky

The morning star rises pure and bright.



One of the things about Buddhism that has always seemed completely right to me is that Buddha's enlightenment came when he saw a star. Everyone knows the story about how after years of asceticism struggling with the question of suffering, he decided simply to sit under a tree until he understood. One night toward dawn as he saw the morning star rising, his mind opened.

Long before I heard this story for the first time I became interested in astronomy. When I was about twelve years old I began to learn the constellations. It was springtime and every night at about eight o'clock I would go outside and identify some stars I hadn't known before. I found that if you go outside every night at the same time, new stars and constellations are rising in the east while others are setting in the west. So as the weeks went by I would look forward to new stars always coming up. But it was a slow process, and what I really wanted to see were the stars that wouldn't rise in early evening until

wintertime, the exceptionally bright constellations like Orion, and, the star I wanted to see more than any other, the brightest star in the sky, Sirius.

Then I learned that if I got up early in the morning to observe, instead of in the evening, I could see Sirius rising around the end of summer and wouldn't have to wait until winter. I had never been up that early, but one night in August I set my alarm for 4:30 am, got up, and went out into the back yard. It was still dark, and I saw all kinds of stars I had never seen before, and there, just over the roof tops and under the chinaberry tree in my backyard was a star that had to be Sirius, flashing green and blue and orange and white, impossibly brilliant. I watched it rise slowly through the branches of the chinaberry tree until it disappeared in the brightening dawn. That experience stayed with me, so when I heard the story about Buddha's mind opening when he saw the morning star, I thought, oh yes, of course.

Before I left Kansas to come here, a friend of mine, Cathy Preston, gave me a poem she had written. The title is "A Gatha for Your Journey." It's in the style of the Hua Yen gathas, or poetic vows, that Robert Aitken, Roshi, has recently reintroduced. It goes:

*Whenever the work of saving all sentient beings
Becomes too much for this present moment,
I vow with all beings
To breathe in the grace of the morning star
And remember that they are really saving me.*

I think this poem expresses true morning star enlightenment, the enlightenment of reciprocal compassion. This world is full of suffering. Not only human suffering, but the suffering of animals and even of the planet itself. Buddha's practice, and ours, is to wake up to the cause of this suffering and help end it. When Buddha was born, just out of his mother's womb, he took seven steps and said, "In all the universe, only I am holy." That was his baby's mind. Then he grew up and led a very privileged life. When he encountered the mystery of suffering he began to practice, and when his mind opened up after his hard training, the first thing he said was, "How wonderful. All beings have this enlightened nature; only they have forgotten it." So then he began his life work of helping people wake up to their original nature. He saw that all suffering begins in our ignorance of our original, bright nature. Because we have forgotten that we already have everything, we form desires, and from the inevitable frustration of these desires comes anger and hatred. Waking up to our original nature means realizing we are already complete, not lacking

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anything. When we attain that, we can let go of all the psychological acquisitiveness to which we become addicted in our desperate attempts to fabricate and sustain a self at all costs. That letting go is the beginning of the end of suffering in this world.

As if it knows that, the world itself is always trying to wake us up, each one of us, every moment, with every phenomenon it manifests, like a cosmic alarm clock for a race of troubled, restless sleepers. That's what Zen Master Seung Sahn is reminding us of when he says things like, "Go ask a tree" or "The sound of a waterfall is better than the sutras." So all of us have this original job, this great question, "What am I?" The consequences of answering it are enormous, and the answer is right before our eyes.

Hits table.

Yahweh said from the burning bush, "I am who I am."

Hits table.

Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life."

Hits table.

Buddha said, "In all the universe only I am holy."

What can you say?

KATZ!

A roomful of shining faces on a December evening. ☉

Reveal your true nature

Jeff Kitzes, JDPSN

Shows stick, hits table

Life is like a cloud that appears.

Shows stick, hits table

Death is like a cloud that disappears.

No life, no death.

No appearing, no disappearing.

Shows stick, hits table

Katz! Just now, breathing in and breathing out.

Twenty years ago I first heard the teaching which says that if you use death as your advisor, you will wake up to this moment and truly be alive.

For a twenty-year-old college student this was a revolutionary concept. If I remember my own death, the power and intensity of this very moment becomes evident.

Ten years later my father was sick with cancer and facing his own death. He said to me: "All my life I thought



I had to hide who I was... Schmuck!" He realized the futility and waste of spending a lifetime not revealing his true nature to the world. It was only by facing his own death that he could perceive this fundamental truth.

So, we must all wake up; RIGHT NOW! At any moment this ceiling could fall down. Our death awaits, at any moment

it may appear. The illusion of immortality is very strong. Be careful. What can you do?

As Zen students, we've learned the necessity of keeping a don't-know mind. When we keep the Great Question, *what am I*, the reality of this present moment appears. If just now we open our eyes, breathe in and breathe out, what do we see, what do we hear, what do we smell, taste, and touch? If we are awake then only this moment is the truth.

Next, we say, how does this truth function. Moment to moment this is the challenge of our lives. How do I use this moment, express my true self and help others? When we put down our opinions, condition, and situation, this very moment becomes alive. Our don't know mind cuts off self-centered thinking, and acting for all beings is possible. Then the incredible suffering which we see every day can be felt in our hearts. Only then can we truly get on with the great work of life and death and help others.

So I hope that when we see this stick (*holding up Zen stick*) and hear this sound (*hitting table with Zen stick*), we all can wake up, attain our true selves, and help save this world from suffering.

Thank you very much. ☉