

Dharmette: A Zen Poem

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsda1 on April 13, 2011

These last days I've been thinking about a poem by Ryokan, a Japanese Zen monk. He lived in the 1700s or so. He apparently spent a lot of time living in a small, one-room hut in the woods, far away from the trappings of institutional Zen. He didn't become a great teacher. He didn't have a big monastery or a lot of students. They say he lived a very simple life, like a hermit. He was famous for liking to play with the children in the nearby village. He would play ball with them. He'd be like a little kid himself. He also wrote poetry about his somewhat solitary life, practice, and way of living. This is one poem:

*In the still night by the vacant window,
wrapped in monk's robe I sit in meditation,
navel and nostrils lined up straight,
ears paired to the slope of shoulders.
Window whitens – the moon comes up;
Rain's stopped, but drops go on dripping.
Wonderful – the mood of this moment –
distant, vast, known only to me!*

On the surface of this poem, it was probably a description of what it was like for him meditating some night in his little one-room hut in the middle of the woods. Apparently there wasn't much in his hut.

There's another poem where he writes of coming home and some thieves had robbed him of everything he had in his little hut. He wrote this poem:

*The thieves, the thieves,
they left it behind –
the moon in the window.*

So he's meditating seriously in his hut. He's probably cold, wrapped in his monk's robes. I was a monk in Japan and I remember sitting in the cold, wrapped in monk's robes. It was kind of a nice feeling. I sat in the monastery in Japan during the full moon outdoors on the balcony overlooking the rock garden. It was terribly cold – shaved heads – but you're wrapped up in your robe. It's quite something to be sitting there in the stillness of the night meditating. He described himself sitting straight in meditation, sitting in zazen.

*Navel and nostrils lined up straight,
ears paired to the slope of shoulders.*

When he was sitting straight, he was aligned. He wasn't slouching or falling asleep. He was really sitting well,

strong, stable, and present. Then the window whitens, because the moon is coming up. I imagine that out in the woods, it's pretty spectacular to see the full moon coming up, and the light that comes with it. It's quite something.

Then the rain stops. So now you find out it has been raining. I've had the experience of meditating in a small hut in the woods or various places, and the same thing happens. Rain comes pouring down on these little roofs, and it's quite something to hear the clatter of the rain. I find it very comforting to sit inside when it's raining. I'm dry, and it's really still and quiet. There's also all this noise – rain and wet. It's quite comfortable. It feels intimate, close, and still. It's a very nice feeling. But here the rain stopped. It had been raining. It now has stopped, but the drops go on dripping. You can still hear the raindrops dripping from the eaves of the roof. And he says:

*Wonderful – the mood of this moment –
distant, vast, known only to me!*

There's a strong mood, feeling, or sense of sitting there in this beautiful, still, quiet place. The feeling is one of vastness, and great distance with no limit perhaps, even though it's a small, impoverished one-room hut. This renunciant has nothing. The thieves have taken everything with them. He doesn't have much left, except

probably his robes and his bowl. But there is a sense of great vastness, openness, space, and freedom probably. Then he makes an interesting statement: "Known only to me!" I don't think he means he's the only person in history who has ever had an experience like that. I think what he means is that it's very personal, intimate, and something you could only have for yourself. You can't explain it to someone else, or borrow it from someone else. It's something that's very personal. So he has this very intimate and personal immediacy of sitting there in the stillness of meditation in the woods with the moon coming up. Probably if you use your imagination, you can imagine a little bit what that experience was like. Maybe you have had something similar.

With many of these Zen poems in Japan, there's the surface meaning, and then there's the symbolic. The two go hand in hand. There probably was an experience like this that he actually had, so the surface meaning is real. But then there's the symbolic meaning of the poem. There might be symbols that I don't understand, but the full moon coming up is a symbol of enlightenment or awakening.

in a Japanese poem, when they talk about seeing the full moon, they're talking about awakening. One the most famous uses of the symbol is the expression, "Don't confuse the finger with the moon," as you're

pointing at the moon. This means that when someone talks about awakening or freedom, the talk itself is not freedom. The description is not it. Don't mistake the finger for the moon. So here the moon comes up, and awakening, freedom, or some kind of profound peace surfaces for him. Sometimes, it comes with a sense of white. One of the reasons that the moon is used is that there can be a luminosity in the mind that sometimes occurs.

So the rain has stopped. The rain and clouds are usually what obscures the moon. Generally we can't see it when it's raining. In order for the moon to come, the rain has to stop, and the clouds have to go away. So this is all the defilements, attachments, and preoccupations the mind has. We always get caught up in concerns for the world. All that has to come to a stop. The rain is like the weather – it comes and goes. So probably it's going to rain for him again [laughs]. It's not like it stops raining once and for all. But it's settled and fallen away – all the concerns and preoccupations in his mind have fallen away. It's a beautiful thing to have a mind and heart that is not caught, or needs anything. It's not trying to defend itself, apologize, or prove anything – just there.

One of the descriptions of an arahant, someone who is fully awakened in the early tradition, is someone who

has nothing: *akiñcano* is the word in Pāli for someone who has nothing.

Because it's a Japanese poem and not an Indian poem, it goes on and says, "But the drops go on dripping." It's not completely there. There's still some little leftover, and it's not completely dry. The sense of the moon coming up, the rain having stopped, and the defilements falling away, but there's still something a little bit left. Some of the traces of that old way or that old karma is operating and is still there.

To me, when I read these Japanese poems, there is a recognition of a common humanity. We're not measuring ourselves by perfection, which is often the Indian approach – looking for absolute perfection. The Japanese are much more willing to live in a human world which is not quite perfect. So here the drops go on dripping, and in spite of that, it's wonderful to have the mind open, clear, vast, and spacious enough that, even if the imperfections – the defilements – are still there, it's okay. There's no need to take them personally, or to be upset by them, or react to them. It just drops – stuff coming and going.

Then the mood of this moment: "distant, vast." It's one of the wonderful paradoxes that you can have a sense of timeless presence, but it's happening now. It's happening at 12:01. How could something timeless

happen at 12:01 [laughs]? But the mood is of this moment: “distant, vast, known only to me.” This “known only to me,” I think, is a very powerful statement. He was alone in his hut, so there was really no one to share it with. But can you really share it with anyone else? Or to say it differently, there’s no need to share it with anyone else. It’s just there. It’s so intimate, present, and complete in itself. It just is what it is. It’s enough.

I find this poem evocative and very rich. It’s the kind of poem that sometimes you can read and reread, and it raises questions, perspectives, or a different way of looking or understanding.

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wrapped in monk’s robe I sit in meditation,
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So I hope that all of you will have a chance to sit peacefully and quietly at the edge of your window at home. May it be vast, distant, and very personal in a wonderful way. Thank you.