

MONDAY DHARMA TALK – “INSIDE THE GRASS HUT.”

I recently bought a book titled “Inside the Grass Hut” – Living Shitou’s Classic Zen Poem. The poem is actually called “Song of the Grass Roof Hermitage” and this particular book by Ben Connelly is a reflection on each line of the poem with the intent of drawing our attention to “what is here now” in the midst of suffering, uncertainty. Life and death.

Thank you, Richard, for sending your dharma talk from last Monday. I had to smile when you quoted from the gospel of Thomas, “ I’ll destroy this house and no-one will be able to build it again.” And the reference to Case 4 from the Transmission of the Light referring to the “house demolished and the self overthrown.’ Must be something about houses and huts!

Some of you may be familiar with Shitou’s poem? Shitou is regarded as an important early Zen master who is said to have lived from 700-790 CE. He is highly esteemed in the Japanese Soto tradition.

What I want to do tonight is read just the first and last verses. There are seven altogether. I’ll read the first one and then paraphrase some of Ben Connelly’s comments along with my own reflections.

READ:

I’ve built a grass hut where there’s nothing of value.

After eating, I relax and enjoy a nap.

When it was completed, fresh weeds appeared.

Now it’s been lived in – covered by weeds.

Come into my home, says Shitou. This home which “makes the absolute minimum claim to permanence.” This is facing the great question of life and death. Ben Connelly reminds us that “suffering arises from trying to turn away from impermanence; liberation arises from facing it fully.” He suggests that Shitou builds this hut to encourage us to let go of the story that we can somehow go against the fact that nothing lasts and everything is always changing.

So why not relax and enjoy a nap. Let go. Let go. I wondered if this is a stark reminder of the frenetic world we live in. Restlessness is part of our genetic makeup. In ancient times there was always the threat of being invaded, or simply struggling to find food and shelter on a daily basis. Now we’re more likely to go after those things that entertain or offer false shelter and comfort – just that constant movement often associated with avoidance. Not just avoidance of the fact of our lives right now but the avoidance of the suffering of others.

Cynthia Bourgeault is a Canadian Christian contemplative who has lectured and led many retreats. She talks about engaged contemplation and refers to historical figures such as St Francis and Hildegard of Bingen from the Christian tradition as well as modern contemplatives such as the Dalai Lama. For her they are models of a deeply contemplative

life which is expressing itself constantly as a fountain of action and creativity and involvement in the world.

One could be mistaken for thinking that this first verse of the poem is an invitation to be a fountain of inaction. But the core of this verse is to be fully awake even when napping. When tired we sleep. The world is fresh with weeds. Who would think you can enjoy weeds? Our practice causes “the categories of what you enjoy to expand and the separation from your life caused by ceaseless mental activity to fade.” We can live in the hut - a metaphor for our life in this form we call my body – and not avoid the weeds.

READ:

Let go of hundreds of years and relax completely.
Open your hands and walk, innocent.
Thousands of words, myriad interpretations,
Are only to free you from obstructions.
If you want to know the undying person in the hut,
Don't separate from this skin bag here and now.

Ben Connelly's comment on this first line relates to karma. He acknowledges this is a complex and very old idea in Buddhism. But the line comes back to that invitation to “let go.” To let go of not only our own conditioning which developed from the moment of birth but the “hundreds of years of conditioning we carry.” We can do that by actually seeing this moment with our whole selves. He goes on to suggest that if everyone in the world was a little more relaxed the world would be a better place. It is not an invitation to just do something for ourselves. Even on the mat we practise allowing things to be as they are and that includes being ourselves.

“Open your hands and walk, innocent.” The word innocent reminds one of the state of mind of children. There is an intimate relationship between doing harm and suffering. Can we keep our hands open and walk in the world and be contemplative action?

We love to read (or I do) to discover or uncover ideas, writings, stories whether fiction or non-fiction. (Read third & fourth line). Just don't be ensnared by the words. Don't allow the words to build ideas that reinforce a sense of being separate. At the same time words, ideas and so on are part of “the process of liberation.” It is we who create the obstructions.

Read last two lines.

These two lines remind me of the words from the Gospel of Thomas. This hut which is built by us is constructed as a place of safety. When we realise it is frail we open the possibility of freedom. According to a story from the Dhammapada the Buddha said after his enlightenment, “House builder, you have now been seen. You shall not build the house again.” You are the undying person. Ben Connelly suggests this is a reference to “your face before your were born.”

I like the last line: "Don't separate from this skin bag here and now." Does it make you smile? Does it sound harsh? The whole universe is here in the one skin bag.