

Reflections from the River: Buddha-Dharma in Nature

Rev. Master Jiyu wrote in her *Kyojukaimon* Commentary, “Look with the mind of a Buddha, and you will see the heart of a Buddha.” Seeing Buddha in all things depends on us. Buddhism holds that everything can teach if our minds are open to the Truth. Natural settings in particular provide an excellent opportunity for “hearing” the Dharma because there is a minimum of human manipulation of elements. Thus temples are often built in lovely natural settings, and temple landscaping often endeavors to create a natural feel in the layout of plants, trees, water, stones, etc. Great Master Dogen was a great lover of nature and devoted a chapter of his *Shobogenzo* to the “Spiritual Discourses of Mountains and Water.” On a recent outing with a fellow monk to the Koosah and Sahalie Falls on the McKenzie River in the Willamette National Forest, I had the privilege of “receiving” an abundance of Dharma. Herein are some of my reflections.

First, in sitting on a deck watching the river ceaselessly flow by, I wondered where all this water comes from. In visiting this spot for many years, that question continues to arise. A park exhibit gave a scientific explanation: water evaporates from the Pacific Ocean, precipitates over the mountains in the form of rain and snow, which in turn create creeks and eventually rivers that flow back to the ocean. However, this explanation has never satisfied me. There is still some Mystery here that I choose to recognize and honor. In any case, sitting by the rushing river always feels like washing out my ears and mind, thus providing a welcome relief and refreshment from the toils of daily life and training.

When we drove upriver to the first waterfall, Sahalie, and viewed the river plunging and roaring 120 feet through mist and spray into the pond below, I was immediately struck with the thought, “The power of good

cannot be stopped.” This is a paraphrase of the fourth law of the universe, “Without fail, evil is vanquished and good prevails.” We can obstruct the river of Life, create obstacles and diversions, but inevitably the river flows on and good emerges.

Part of the river I’ve visited in the past illustrates this point further. Flowing through the canyon’s volcanic rock, at one point the river disappears into the earth and then downstream finds shape again as an aquamarine pool. The lack of organic material in the pool brings about this beautiful color that is almost other-worldly. The quiet, pure green-blue reminds me of the still beauty of the Unborn, and how It can manifest even after seeming to disappear and flow on.

As we walked downriver, stately Western red cedar trees with their lacy foliage completely embraced and covered entire huge boulders. From the trail’s edge the tall trees extend their smooth, striated roots over and around the rocks, like tentacles, down to the riverbank. They reminded me of how we endeavor to become one with our karma. We cannot ignore it, push it aside, destroy or make it disappear. Through training we can accept, embrace, and become one with it. Soto Zen meditation halls often illustrate this teaching through the statue of Monju on the Beast. Manjusri loves, tames, and rides the wild-eyed beast of self. Often in the depictions his robes flow over, merge, and disappear into the body of the energetic lion. (See photograph of the statue in Sojiji’s meditation hall on page 134 of the 4th edition of Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett’s *Zen is Eternal Life*.)

Another teaching from the trees came from the towering grand old-growth Douglas firs. Often their tops were a single, bare, knobby stem, inform resembling medieval cathedral steeples. Being the highest trees around, had they been struck by lightning or whipped mercilessly by the wind? Taking our example from the old trees, we too can remain dignified

and upright regardless how much old age, disease, and disappointment batter us. Dogen teaches in the Confession and Contrition chapter of the *Shushogi* that in order for the Buddhas and Ancestors to help us, we “should sit up straight in the presence of the Buddha.” We can remain still, strong in spirit, and uncomplaining regardless of what life throws our way.

The next teaching came from viewing Koosah Falls pouring clear water 90 feet into the river below. We can view life as a river, seeming to have an identity as one “thing.” As the river goes over the waterfall, all the water drops separate, and then come together again in the pool below. Such is rebirth. Is the river, or the person, the same or not the same? The Buddha taught that both are true – it’s the same, yet not the same. Our analytical, intellectual minds have difficulty with this truth, but I’ve found it to be intuitively true to the way things are. Meditation enables us to sit still with contradictory and sometimes puzzling concepts and paradoxes and leap beyond them to a new perception. Rev. Master Jiyu called this the “third position,” beyond the opposites.

Next came a teaching on faith and patience. The bridge downriver from Koosah Falls by which we cross and return up the other side always seems much further than I remember. Rather than give up and turn back, we hiked on, and yes, eventually the bridge appeared. We had the same experience in reaching the bridge above the upper falls by which we returned to the side where we began.

Another interesting, yet familiar twist presented itself after crossing the first bridge as we sought for the return path. One starts out on what one feels sure is the trail, and it dead-ends at water’s edge below a cliff. Then one must retrace one’s steps, or else climb the steep bank to search for the real trail. My body not being in the best physical condition, I puffed and panted as we climbed. I found that I had to keep moving, sensing that if I stopped I would fall back down the cliff. There was no rest until we

reached the top. Life and training are like this. At times we can't afford to stop; then once a goal is accomplished, we can rest. And, for us that day, just as in life, there were more challenges. We had to hike over rough, jagged lava flows, having faith that if we persisted in a particular direction, we would find the trail. We did.

One last teaching the river offered appeared on the return trail. From a huge, moss-covered Douglas fir lying on the damp ground, a small forest of trees sprang forth. From death came life. All things pass away, life continues.

These reflections are not particularly unique or remarkable – they are basic Buddhist teachings – but I hope they give a sense of what can be visible as a result of meditation and training. I wasn't looking for “teachings.” Simply as a result of practice, it seemed my eyes and heart were naturally open to the truths that presented themselves. If we continue, we will all have such opportunities and rewards on the Path.

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July 24, 2009

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