

“Become Sober”

Ernie Rimerman

There is a Zen story I read years ago that has stuck with me and been helpful each time I remember it.

A Chinese Zen master, known as Zuigan in Japanese, would call out to himself every day:

“Master.”

Then he would answer himself: “Yes, sir.”

And after that he added: “Become sober.”

Again he would answer: “Yes, sir.”

And after that he would continue: “Do not be deceived by others.”

“Yes, sir; yes, sir,” he would answer.

It’s a koan; but I didn’t try to solve the koan. I just became more aware of how unmindful I often was—how much chatter was going on in my mind. “Become sober.” That reminder helps me to let go of the chatter or whatever else is distracting me from the present moment.

As I incorporated meditation and other Zen Buddhist practices into my life, I began to appreciate the still, small voice or intuition (the Buddha Nature) within the mind and heart. I had noticed it occasionally in the past: a wise feeling or intuition that wasn’t me figuring things out in my mind but was just coming up by itself in my mind and heart and being offered to me. I began to appreciate that it was always gently there—but often unnoticed by me. “Master,” ‘Are you drunk with your flights of thought and emotions, or sober? Look at what is happening within your mind now.’ “Yes, sir.” Something within me was finally ready to respect and surrender to the infinite compassion of the Buddha Nature.

This intoxication of un-mindfulness, greed and aversion often still arises. “Become sober.” I have a choice; I can go with un-mindfulness and act on greed or anger—or, I can listen to what is going on inside me and listen to the Buddha Nature and say: “Yes, sir.” Sometimes the prompting is to act—but not in confusion. Sometimes the prompting is not to act—instead to look deeper inside myself. Either way, when I listen to that still, small voice, there is a better chance to avoid causing suffering and to find true contentment.

“Do not be deceived by others.” Interacting with others creates a whole new dimension. I find it is much more difficult to be mindful when with others. And, I can allow myself to learn from interactions with others and from any mistakes, regret or emotions that I feel afterward. Do not be deceived by myself. See clearly how any greed, anger or confusion in my mind, when I am with others, can produce the conditions in which suffering can arise for myself and for others.

Have just a little more patience; be just a little more mindful: “Do not be deceived by others.”
“Yes, sir; yes, sir.”

Finally, I don't find mindfulness to be a burden. I find it to be satisfying. Usually it is just remembering to pay attention to what I'm doing or what is happening. Sometimes it brings joy. For example, taking a moment to fully watch a crow interact gently with a squirrel and allowing myself to smile in empathy and to feel the connection with life that we all share. Or it can just be walking from one room to another and being aware of the walking and noticing what my feet and body are doing and surrendering into the miracle of walking, letting compassion enter both me and the walking.

Becoming sober, not being deceived by my thoughts and feelings, I can fully enter the joyful, present moment. “Master.”