

A Reflection on Japan, Time and Mortality

March 17, 2011

Here, in this time of revolutionary outbreaks, bombings, tsunamis and drifting atomic clouds, I was in the middle of work this morning and couldn't stay awake, just couldn't. I never, ever, take a nap in the morning, but my body threw itself down on the couch and I slept for 20 minutes. As I awoke I had a dream that I was walking into heaven at springtime. The birds were returning and everything was greening up. I awoke with a smile. How strange to have one foot in hell and one in heaven! And yet, isn't this our situation today? As I have watched the Japan catastrophe unfold, my inner experience has zig-zagged across the globe of possible emotions. Usually, something so far away brings me *the idea* of compassion and empathy, but this time, when I watched the wall of water rush in to cover and sweep everything away, tears came to my eyes. Unexpected, but there it is. We are all so vulnerable to the immeasurable sweep of time and to the limitless powers of nature. I want to help and I even thought of going to Japan. I'm trying to connect with the shakuhachi network, but now they're advising people not to come. Our country is sending charter jets to bring Americans back. Terrible.

I have such respect for the Japanese people and their commitment to group identity, solidarity and mutual respect. We all know about the complicated nature of such a culture, how "group mind" can cover over unpleasant truths, both socially and personally; but still, there is goodness, courage and truth in the Japanese willingness to live out an interconnected vision of reality.

Yes, there are important political, economic and policy implications flowing from this disaster. But if we can pause in silence for a moment and simply relax into our hearts, that wall of water that carried away so many thousands of people suddenly symbolizes the flow of time, where everything that we cherish is taken away. I think that's the Big Story here, and one that most Japanese would understand: the ephemeral, fragile, fleeting nature of our mortal existence. Japanese sensitivity to mortality is perfectly integrated with a perception of beauty and connectedness. Perhaps they receive this vision and value from 1,500 years of Zen culture, with its teachings on impermanence, and the surprising, precious awareness of simply 'what is' in each moment. This is why the cherry blossom festival is so vital in Japanese culture. Japanese people, like us, try to control what is controllable, and maybe, like us, they often try to control what is uncontrollable (Why can't we create our own safe, reliable, eternal energy source, separate from the mercurial movements and seasonal fluctuations of Nature?).

In Buddhism, wisdom of discernment is symbolized by the keen edge of the "sword of Manjushri" which slices through the exact boundary between what we can control and what we can't control. For those who know how to wield it, the sword moves forward into our moment-to-moment experience gracefully and effortlessly. We in the West speak about the Serenity Prayer. After watching the videos where a great tsunami wave obliterates all life, my prayer goes like this: "Lord, help me to acknowledge all of reality as it changes and as I am able to receive it; help me to assess my abilities, skills and gifts; and help me to discern where, when and with whom I can offer these gifts to make Your compassion, love and creative presence more real. Help me to give myself wholeheartedly to the immense flow of time that comes from You and returns to You."

blessings,
Jonas

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