

You know what it is like to really know the taste of something,
and that's where I'd like to start today. I begin with the poem
that came to me as I worked on this subject:

To Know the Taste of It

Rabbits have kept my asters too close-cropped to bloom,
but asters wink up, purple-eyed wonder, all over the field!

We are falling, together

A nine-year-old washes her hands, hair and clothes with great care
before holding the newborn cousin,

falling together

My dear friend in the hospital says cheerfully,
“They are taking such good care of me here!”
although they can't even figure out what is wrong with her.

Meanwhile, in other places
bits of body-meat are splattered across a window,
and IED sounds way too much like
the IUD with which we tried to hold new life
in abeyance—

the mind wants to push *both* of them away,

as we are falling together

So how is it that on this golden afternoon
the wise, wide air of end-of-summer
is able to hold it all—
we are, I am able
to hold it all in this one late-summer breath
as I drag the pruned branches
down through the field.

The boundless air of the day
lifts the great skirts of time
as she takes her giant step across
the infinitesimal crack
between now and autumn.

This is the taste of it
for me today, this
and a curious weariness
in my so-hopeful bones.

It is not to fall in love
but to fall,
in love.

So it turns out that, as I offer you a taste of Zen as I know it, I'll be talking about taste and falling, or taste while falling.

In my experience, a lot of our troubles, our perpetual dis-ease with our lives—mine, certainly, and maybe yours—is related to how hard it is to get life to behave. Does that seem true for you? Do you keep looking for a purchase on life, a steady, safe place to stand while you get things under control so that you can begin to do what you really want to do, which is to help solve the seemingly insoluble problems of your own life and the lives of those you love, and maybe of the world you love?

To get all those irritating problems out of the way, so you can be happy?

If I could just get this job under control, I know I could get a lot more accomplished.

If I could just get rid of those last ten pounds, I could probably get a job! And maybe I would live forever.

If only my mother hadn't been so judgmental, I could be a much better artist.

If we could just get rid of Saddam Hussein, we could get the Middle East to be a stable partner in the world. Like that.

Meanwhile, your life, your days slip by
and you are not tasting them,
and each time you solve a problem
another crops up.
Still falling.

If so, if it's like that for you, here's the radical move that Buddhism offers: It offers ways to get the courage to give up—to relinquish for a minute—that desperate quest for a purchase on life, long enough to taste it just as it is to know the feeling of falling through time, intimately to taste the full taste of your own life to have your heart both broken and healed by it, again and again to free up the action of your natural curiosity, and to fall through even that, by grace, to find yourself held by the vastness itself in which each and every particular thing emerges, shining.

From there, to slowly learn to respond simply to what is, with generosity.

If it's not working to tackle it head-on, maybe we can try another move.

The Zen tradition, with which I am most familiar,
offers a radically spare practice of stopping:
not of stopping the falling,
but of stopping while falling.

What's that?
It's a persistent inquiry:
asking, *What is this? Is this so?*

You ask it of the things, the stories, the opinions and beliefs
that fill the foreground, letting them come and go,
and they tend to drop away
so you can notice the much bigger, wider space of Mind,
the natural activity of Mind;
which *is* a great generator of stories, but
at the core is not active, really—
is a still, open, warm inquiry.

How does one do this?

In order to taste again—to get intimate with our own experience,
to let it in,
one can practice a kind of fasting of the senses
and maybe a kind of fasting of the will.

This is not to force anything, or to accomplish anything—
but to let *what is* emerge.

You get still, and you get quiet, and you get curious.
You find your breath.

You witness.

 If it's sweet, you witness.

 If it's a much more intense flavor than you are used to tasting, you witness.

 If it's just plain bitter, you witness.

You let it in.

And then you might discover that you know this rhythm.
One taste follows another; they come and go.

You know it intimately.

A young man who's been meditating recently remarked
that he suddenly realized he was hearing from HERE (center of forehead)!
This felt like a deeper, freer hearing to him.
It was literally true for him, not a metaphor.
This sort of thing happens.

As a baby, you taste everything. You are not very sophisticated in your
ability to integrate your sense experience.

As your life unfolds, your faculties develop. At the same time, you are
accumulating layers of experience, stories and opinions about your experience,
fears, desires, regrets, resentments and preferences,
and it's hard any more simply to witness. But the thing is, you now have
all these great faculties!
and along the way, your heart has been touched, broken open,
maybe enlarged by your life. It may have untapped capacity.

At this point, a meditative practice offers
a chance to stop, to get still and quiet and curious
in the service of kindness, under the loving eye of our ancestors.

If you try this, it doesn't take too long to discover some things:

That you don't much like, in fact are heart-sick of some old habits
of allowing fears and desires to crowd life out.

That when you get still, and quiet, and curious,
these old habits lose some of their power—lose their grip.

That you really can taste with your whole being.
When you let your life all the way in—
the good, the bad, the ugly—
and let the stillness open around it, all your faculties are
the open gates of your heart-mind, which sees true.

That with this true seeing, life shines—everything shines
and while it is shining that way, you are able simply to respond.

Then you might find that there's a new thing you can do.
You know a new way of asking, of inquiring deeply about what is true, and you
can practice this new way to build your capacity to respond freely.

The koan tradition, in Zen, has a wonderful way of engaging this asking.
We've observed that the mind trades in stories.

What happens if you integrate that strong story function with the deep dreaming of our simple asking?

The old masters of Zen developed methods for playing with stories this way. For example,

Sitting deep in the seat of your awareness,
you hear the story. You carry it in your awareness
like a dream, curiously.
And the story poses a question, not at a surface level,
but in that deeper, tasting way.

Take this story (which is a variation of an old Zen story).

A woman hangs below the lip of a cliff, holding onto a root
that is pulling out, tiger above, thousand-foot drop below—
and, just nearby, a strawberry.

I've actually always disliked this story.
It seemed to be about getting what you could out of life,
and I didn't really think that was the point.

But if we take it in as a dream,
we are all of it: we are the tiger, hungry for flesh—we are the strawberry,
hanging ripe and sweet in the sun. We are the woman whose arm aches from
holding on and who doesn't want to fall. We are the taste in her mouth that is
fear, hunger and strawberry—whether she gets it or not.

We are the dirt falling from where the root pulls at it.
We are the air through which we are falling.
We are the falling, and
we are the vast universe in which we fall, all together, until
the falling itself is the ground we stand on.

So then the story is not at all, anymore, about what does she do!
The story is about asking, about tasting in our own mouth
—in our own life—
the full taste of our human dilemma.

The story is about love;
because when we *are* it, the whole thing,
when we *know* we are it,
we know how it is for woman, strawberry, tiger,
cliff and chasm to be falling together through space and time.

And then, tasting each bit as we fall,
we are free to do whatever it is we must do.

Why does this matter?

It matters because when we shut our lives out
when we refuse to taste, and refuse to fall
the shutting out creates lies in and between us,
and those lies hurt us and hurt others.

Life calls to us, calls again and again
asking of us our true and loving response,
which is what we have to offer
in thanks for the joy,
for tiger, strawberry, friend and wind, the taste of falling.

Sarah Bender, Sensei
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