

## Baling's Three Turning Words: Talk in Pueblo, Nov. 19, 2014

Hello, and welcome! I'm happy for this invitation to spend time with you all this evening. For those of you who are new here, I'm happy that you are connecting with this remarkable community of Zen practice, Wet Mountain Sangha. If you should want to take up a practice of Zen meditation, or deepen the one you have, a community of practice is not just nice---in my experience, it's essential. And this one, as you'll discover, is vibrant, smart, open and fun.

I've been invited this evening to offer you a taste of Zen meditation in the koan tradition---a tradition that I love, and a path that I've been walking....sometimes skipping, stumbling, crawling....for more than 30 years.

So what we are going to do is to move in and out of meditation as a way of exploring Zen's response to the three questions posed on your flyer:

Where is freedom? How can I find equanimity in this crazy ride we call a life? And how can I actually help with the daunting challenges of my time?

Because the central practices of Zen seem to me to be Zen's response to these questions.

In China, almost 1500 years ago, Baling, a man who was leaving his teacher and going off to teach on his own, wanted to show his gratitude to his teacher, by expressing as best he could all that he had learned. And he said 3 things.

Here's the first, and we'll take it up as our first meditation. He posed a question and answered it:

*What is Zen? Snow in a silver bowl.*

So to begin, please settle yourself comfortably upright, hands in your lap, with your eyes ahead and down, mouth closed....take off glasses....

First, just take a few breaths.....etc.

Now, let your awareness spread in all directions, past the horizon, including everything.

Now, let your breath sweep the entire space.

Now, notice the holding. Just be the holding, the here-ness within which each thing comes and goes. The space inside is warmed by the warmth of your friendly curiosity.

Like the bowl of a silver sky, not made of anything, but present and luminous.

Now notice how the bowl fills with snow, nothing outside of it....your bowlness is that big. Sounds appear and disappear...

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And at times maybe no distinction between the holding and the snow. Who's holding who? Snow holds bowl, bowl holds snow.

Just the subtle shining of each and all.

This beauty and ease is your birthright. It is never absent. Is fundamental to the nature of what is. Meditation is just absorption in that.

It will refresh you; it's a homecoming, a place where you can rest. As close as your own breath. This is the simple freedom of being, of being here-ness itself.

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And, most of the time we are coming and going, engaged with the doing of a life. What practices will help us find equanimity in the midst of it all?

So now, here's the second thing our ancient friend, Baling, said:

*What is the Way?*

*The clear-eyed person falls into a well.*

Maybe not your first image of equanimity? Catastrophe! Disaster!

This is about what Jon Kabat-Zinn calls "full catastrophe living." It's a radical move.

What if we turn the catastrophe on its head and say, "This is exactly this! Fall, baby, fall! With eyes clear, arms open....."

May sound crazy---but this is exactly the move of liberation. Here's the well, the well-spring. Just this very catastrophe of a life.----when we can fall open-eyed, open-armed through the darkness, the full not-knowingness of it. I don't know. How about if I fall farther into this. Not passive.

Bernie Glassman goes to Auschwitz. *I find something I don't understand, he says. And I have to go there.* Or, suddenly someone I care about is angry with me....or I'm angry with them. There's something I don't understand. Can I fall all the way down into that awareness, *I don't understand.....what's here?* Life may want to offer a creative response here that I have no clue about yet.

This is a somewhat different definition of mindfulness, isn't it? Here, it's the practice of going with eyes open, heart open, arms open, ready to fall with what goes down. Into the intimate darkness of not having an answer. And we can practice this.

It may not be comfortable. But it is so truly a refuge from all the hurting we tend to do when we refuse to fall—when we insist on just charging ahead. And it allows us to be truly, intimately present for our life. The one we have. Not the one we thought we should have.

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So let's sit for a little while simply with this sensation....of being willing to fall when we meet the bump, fall into the well.

(sitting)

So---this is freedom on the road, freedom of heart and mind.

And now we meet our third question: How can I actually help? Let's see what Baling had to say:

*What is the sword so sharp it cuts a hair blown against it?*

*Each branch of coral holds up the moon.*

So the question: What has the power, the keen blade, to cut through all my thick and difficult obstacles? My lethargy? My fear? My business? My so so many reasons not to engage? Even the slippery, hard to identify ones, subtle as a blown strand of hair? What can help here? Sure seems like I'm all alone in this!

So let's try his suggestion:

Settle for meditation....

Imagine all of us here in a shallow, tropical sea. Warm, clear, water gently moving.

It's night. Our coral reef is bathed in the light of a big, full moon.

And we are coral. Each branch a little different shape, all connected, all alive, made of so many tiny beings

Bathing in the richness and clarity of this sea.

And each of us, each one in her or his place, every single branch of us, is holding up that very same moon.

(sit quietly)

To me, this is such a beautiful embodiment of the way it is!

When I remember this, I am not going to do harm.

I'm not going to insist that only my view is right.

I'm not going to think I have to do it all by myself.

I can rest in the knowledge that there are so, so many of us holding up this light!

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How do we learn to trust this, to have confidence in it? By doing. By offering whatever we can offer, each together pitching in something. And remembering.

This morning someone posted on facebook a sign from Berlin:

“Many small people who in many small places do many small things that can alter the face of the world.” This is the freedom we have in being completely interwoven, while each stands in her own place.

So----What does Zen offer? In my experience, it offers ways to practice coming home to the freedom we already have, so that my freedom can do some good where some good is needed.

Concentration: being bowl and snow, snow and bowl

Mindfulness: falling into the well

Generosity: enacting “each branch of coral holds up the moon”

This is where we take refuge, and this is what we offer.