

Affirming Faith in Mind (24) Enlightenment is Possible

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The Wombat Sangha Meditation Group

A 92 year old man came to Phyllis's funeral. He has had a wonderful life as a well-respected teacher in the Sutherland Shire and has written many English textbooks. Bob Walshe is quite well known in the Shire because of his great work with a great heart and kindness. He is a very remarkable man. He has been a wonderful activist in the environment movement and began the Sutherland Shire Environment Centre, now running for 25 years, and is still involved. He was awarded the OAM for his services to society.

At the age of 92 he has been asking Janet about Zen Buddhism and the dharma. He has been interested in Taoism for some time and the mysteries associated with that, so is now interested in Zen.

In Tibetan Buddhism it is considered a great step for someone to "take the teachings" as Bob is doing. Robert Aitkin's book, *Taking the Path of Zen*, calls us to undergo commitment, effort and endeavor. It implies that the student wants to be free of the things that bind us to worldly habits and attachments that hold us back.

In the 1970's when New Age things were popular there were a multitude of pursuits you could take up at the same time in spiritual enquiry. In the poem *Affirming Faith in Mind*, the Third Patriarch says quite firmly, "not two". Jesus famously said that a man can't serve two masters. Another saying is that you can't ride two horses at the same time.

We eventually come down to one practice; one energy. In the New Age heyday we explored many possibilities, floating around like butterflies trying out the nectar from different flowers, but it wasn't very rewarding.

The writer of the *Shodoka* mentions that he studied words and sutras for many years and eventually found that it was all in vain. It was just words then he discovered the path and truth of this teaching and practice.

At any age the path can be taken up. It is a powerful event in human life. So I recommended that Bob read *Taking the Path of Zen*, not flitting from one path to another. At any age we can die the next day and we haven't got the luxury to dawdle. There is no luxury of time guaranteed.

We were going to lend Bob a book about mindfulness but mindfulness practice doesn't emphasise the breakthrough. The trouble with New Age things was that people became fascinated with crystals and other energies but none of it went so far as to break-through. There was a fascination on the surface layer of things. Byron Bay was like a spiritual Disneyland with all the different options available, becoming like a market of colour and enjoyment. Krishnamurti used to call it a circus. Human beings have always been drawn to those colourful and

exciting things. When Jesus worked a miracle, he said to not get attached to it. He called it attachment to appearances. Our practice is more boring but goes much deeper than those colourful practices and experiences.

When I was with Nisargadatta Maharaj in India, someone asked him, "What is the most important thing that a human being can hear?" He replied, "That there is enlightenment, there is freedom, and to break through is possible."

Enlightenment is possible. The Dalai Lama tries to arouse *bodhicitta*, the desire for enlightenment. Reading spiritual books can also arouse this and take you out of the realms of material attachments that we get bogged down in. I hope when Bob reads this book he may realise this as well.

The other thing that is very powerful in our teachings is koan work. There are many books on the teachings and commentaries on koan work, for example, *The Gateless Gate*.

Koans have the ability to free you up from attachments. They can give deep insight into self-nature. The first koan is the koan *Mu*. It is almost compulsory to pass this koan before undertaking further study.

A variation may be "*Who am I?*" Also, Bassui Zenji, from 12th century Japan, had a very important koan, "*Who is hearing?*" Who is hearing this sound?

Those three are typically used. *Mu* is used mostly. It brings everything to one. There is not even a phrase in it: it is a single word of a single syllable.

If Bob decides to take this koan at his ripe old age, I would be very happy as it would show he is on the path to a really deep awakening. As Nisargadatta said, the most important thing to hear is that awakening is possible, but then you have to take the path to that awakening.

Just hearing that news awakens the *bodhicitta*. Even asking "What is Awakening?" arouses the *bodhicitta*, because you are interested in it enough to ask. It is possible that if on hearing the news, you dismiss it and return to your material world.

The Christian term "Good News" is about salvation. In our interpretation of the good news our salvation is here, now, embodied. We value this embodiment, we value the possibility of awakening. Without the body we don't even talk about it being a possibility.

"Taking the teachings" implies a huge gratitude for having a human birth. It is a most incredible event. Conceivably we could have had a life as a tiny ant or other sentient being. Why not, apart from our own unique karmic inheritance?

So the huge gratitude that goes behind that of taking the teachings is massive in awakening the *bodhicitta*. That gratitude operates and starts to move into the practice of wanting the freedom of enlightenment and wanting the freedom of awakening. You value your time in your body to achieve awakening. The time in your body becomes incredibly precious; moment by moment.

That spirit and intensity directs itself into the practice of *Mu*. It is written in the *Mumonkan* "How then should you work with it? Exhaust all your life energy on this one word *Mu*. If you do not falter, then it is done. A single spark lights your dharma candle."

Your own variation will have the same energy behind it, the same *bodhicitta* behind it. If the case is that you are told you have only twelve hours to live, certainly that tends to focus the mind and attention. But normally, we are coasting along thinking we are alright with endless time. We tend to keep thinking like that until something rudely interrupts us, like the news of a limited time to live. It can happen at any time to any of us. Then the energy gets focused. The bells are ringing for the final lap! The rabbit wakes up, he has been sleeping while the tortoise is already far down the road. We have that strong tendency to be asleep on the job as if there is endless time. This habit is unbelievably strong.

One of the five hindrances is sloth or laziness. The opposite of that is restlessness.

Using that single word of a single syllable indicates urgency. If there is an emergency, you would run outside and yell "Fire!", "Help!", or "God!" When the fire is raging you don't yell out anything else: just a single word of a single syllable, because it is urgent and you are desperate. As the author of "The Cloud of Unknowing" says, this single word of a single syllable can penetrate Heaven.

In our New Age process we wander from flower to flower sucking nectar. Then when we get serious, the path emerges for us. It emerges as a deep moment by moment practice. We are trying to break through because we have heard that enlightenment is possible. This is the thing we needed to hear that was missing.

So when Janet was going to give her friend Bob Walshe a book about mindfulness, I suggested that it would be better to give him a book about enlightenment. As a 92 year old he is facing his last days, and needs to hear that a breakthrough is possible in this lifetime, here, now. Otherwise we all could face ten more lifetimes, putting it off, staying in the same habit, unless we hear the news that it is possible right here, now.

The last words in the commentary on the koan *Mu* are: "How then should you work with it? Exhaust all your life energy on this one word Mu. If you do not falter, then it is done. A single spark lights your dharma candle."