

The Present Moment¹
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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Lesson for All Ages

The Three Questions

A Zen Story²

Today we have a very old story from the Zen Buddhist tradition.

Once there was a king who was very busy every day helping his people and managing his lands. Many people came to him for advice about all their problems, and others came with requests—"We need a road fixed in our town", or "Can you come to my family's house for a special feast?" Often the king didn't get to the end of all of the work by the end of the day.

And so he began to wonder—he had three big questions: *(hold up the questions on a poster)*

When is the most important time to do each thing?

Who is the most important person?

What is the most important thing to do?

He thought if he knew the answers to those questions, he could do a better job as king.

He asked all of his advisors, but none of them had a good answer, and so the king decided to get the advice of a wise hermit. Do you know what a hermit is?

(Someone who lives all alone, and is wise and good.)

Now, if you are a famous king, it is difficult to travel anywhere without people trying to get your autograph, or asking you a favor. So he took off his kingly robes, and put on some blue jeans, and told three of his soldiers to do the same, and they set out on their horses for the forest where the hermit lived. Of course, people still knew it was their king... but they left him alone since he seemed different in his blue jeans.

When they got a ways into the forest, the king told his soldiers to stay back, and he went alone to the hermit's little cabin. The king found the hermit digging in her garden. The old woman said hello to the king, but just kept digging. The king told her his three questions.

Do you remember the questions? *(everyone repeats the questions)*

The hermit listened but just kept working. The king saw that she was very old, and the work was hard. So he said, "I could do some digging for you, if you like." And the hermit said, "thank you, that would be nice." So the king dug for one hour, and then asked his questions again.

(everyone repeats the questions)

The hermit still didn't answer.

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2 Adapted freely from a version in *Doorways to the Soul*, edited by Elisa Davy Pearmain, p. 103-105.

The king dug for a few more hours, and again asked his questions. Still the hermit said nothing. Finally, the sun began to set. Then the king felt discouraged. "I came to you for some answers, wise woman. But if you have none, tell me, and I will go home."

Just then someone came running up the path. It was a man with a knife—but he was holding his stomach, and blood was flowing out. He fell to the ground in front of the king, and dropped his knife. The king knelt down and saw the man had been stabbed. The hermit quickly got some bandages, and the king began to take care of the man's wounds. The king washed the wounds, and covered them, and applied pressure until the blood stopped flowing. He also got some fresh water for the man to drink. Then the man fell asleep, and so the king watched over him during the night.

In the morning, the man woke up and looked at the king. "Please forgive me," he said to the king. "Why should I forgive you?" the king asked, "What have you done?" The man answered: "You were my enemy, and I was planning to kill you, for taking my lands. I knew that you were coming here today, and hid by the trail for you to return. But when you did not return for many hours, I went to look for you, and your soldiers recognized me and wounded me. I escaped, but I would have bled to death if you had not cared for me. I meant to kill you, but you have saved my life. Please let me serve you."

The king answered, "Thank you for telling me this! I don't want to be enemies with you any more. I do forgive you, and I will even return your lands to you." Then he called his soldiers, and told them to take the man to the castle so his doctors could look after him. Finally, the king asked the hermit his questions, one more time.
(everyone repeats the questions, one more time)

The hermit said: "Your questions have already been answered." "How?" said the king. She answered: "If you had not taken pity on me, and helped me in the garden for many hours, you would have been ambushed by that man on the trail. So, the most important time was when you were digging in my garden. The most important person was me. And the most important thing to do was to help me.

"Later, when the man came running to us, the most important thing to do was to care for him. If you had not bandaged his wounds, he would have died without making peace with you. So the most important person was that man, and the most important thing to do was help him, and the most important time was when you were doing it.

"You see, the most important time is always the present moment. It is the only time that is important, because it is the only time in which we can do anything. The most important person is always the person you are with in that moment. And the most important thing to do is to do what is best for that person."

The king understood, thanked her, and went back to rule his kingdom very well.

*What do you think about the answers to the questions?
Would you have answered them that way?*

Our Reading today was from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*,³ by Annie Dillard. Here is a short excerpt from the reading:

I set my coffee beside me on the curb; I smell loam on the wind; I pat the puppy; I watch the mountain... I am more alive than all the world.

This is it, I think, this is it, right now, the present, this empty gas station, here, this western wind, this tang of coffee on the tongue, and I am petting the puppy, I am watching the mountain. And the second I verbalize this awareness in my brain, I cease to see the mountain or feel the puppy. I am opaque, so much black asphalt. But at the same second, the second I know I've lost it, I also realize that the puppy is still squirming on his back under my hand. Nothing has changed for him.

Sermon

Margy and I adopted two kittens, who came home with us on Christmas Eve. Now, I promise, I will not talk about the kittens every week in my sermons! But this week, they have been the most important thing to me, so perhaps I am in love. We call them Billie and Sassy, after the great jazz singers Billie Holiday and Sarah Sassy Vaughan. Billy is black with white tuxedo markings, and Sassy is a tabby, with silver and black markings like a lynx.

Kittens are like jazz musicians in at least one way—they improvise their lives, moment to moment, and flow from one activity to the next with a kind of effortless grace. So in this way, they have been my teachers this week, as I reflect on living in the present moment.

The kittens chase and wrestle with each other, and frolic after strings and ribbons that we dangle for them. They accept our caresses with pleasure and purring, and then collapse onto our laps and fall asleep. After a while, one will wake up, yawn, stretch, and begin to pounce onto the other one, until they are once again a tumbling ball of fur. They are endlessly curious about everything, and find their way into every small crevice of the house. They get hungry and look at us expectantly, and Billie will meow. We feed them, and they eat. Billie is voracious and gulps down her food as fast as possible. Sassy nibbles calmly and slowly.

Margy and I sit and watch for hours, occasionally remembering to take some photos. By this watching, we have learned about their unique personalities. Sassy is mellow and flops down and stretches out sensuously. Billie folds in her paws under her chest, and assumes a dignified pose, or curls up in a tiny ball. If they are on my lap, I want to sit still until they wake up. If they disappear, I go hunting for them until I find them—their favorite hiding place, a drawer under the bed.

³ *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, excerpted in *The Annie Dillard Reader*, p. 324-325.

On Tuesday, when I was planning to start my sermon, I found I couldn't focus on writing at all. Sunday seemed a long way off, and besides, the topic was living in the present moment. I went back to watching the kittens.

But it is not so easy for grown up human beings to live in the present moment. I knew in my mind that Sunday would come soon enough, and I would have a sermon to preach. So finally, on Thursday, I sat down to ponder and write.

About half of my time, it seems, I am planning for some activity in the future—What will my sermons be for next month? What meetings must I put on my calendar? When will I schedule a visit to my parents? My datebook goes for months ahead of time. Every morning, in my journal, I tend to start writing by describing something that happened yesterday. Only after doing that, can I begin to try to give my attention to the present moment.

That is what meditation is all about, of course. I focus on the breath coming into my body right now. My breath fills my body with life. My breath fills my soul with life. My mind likes to wander. I get quiet, and then suddenly, unbidden, I remember something about a meeting at church the previous day. If there is a problem to be solved, I start imagining possible solutions. After a while, I remember again that I am trying to meditate. I try to lay down the problem, and focus on the breathing again.

It is very difficult to stay in the present moment. Thursday afternoon, I take a walk, and I find myself arguing with the Zen master's story of the three questions. Is the present time really the most important time? Is the most important person really the one with whom I happen to be right then? Is the most important thing really to help that one person?

In order to do my work as a minister, I have to be conscious of many people who are not directly in front of me in the moment. In fact, part of the challenge of ministry is not getting lost in the details of the day-to-day moments, and day-to-day encounters, but stepping back enough to see the big picture. To ask, what needs my attention that is not right in front of me right now? All of us do that in our lives. We look ahead to the future and set goals. I think that is important too. I argue with the Zen masters in my mind as I walk.

I was listening to the radio while driving one afternoon, and heard David Suzuki speaking about the problem of an earth population that is growing exponentially, and using up all the resources. The situation is dire, he said. So where did he find hope? He said that human beings are born with foresight—we can look to the future and imagine clean air and clean water. We can imagine a future in which we could drink clean water directly from the rivers. And if we can imagine such a future, then we can work toward that goal. We can evaluate all of our actions, to see if they will bring us to that goal. He finds hope in our capacity for that foresight.

So maybe the present moment isn't the only important moment. On New Year's Eve, or New Year's Day, we have a custom of setting goals for the future year. You know. We look at our present selves, our present situation, and offer our self-criticism. Here is how I can do better, we think. Most resolutions are about losing weight, quitting smoking, or getting out of debt. Maybe we make resolutions about living more lightly on the earth. Creating a sustainable future. Research shows that about half of the people who make resolutions have abandoned them six months later. But, people who explicitly make resolutions are 10 times more likely to attain their goals than people who don't explicitly make any resolutions.⁴

So, I wonder what the Zen masters were getting at with their focus on the present moment? After all, there are other Zen stories that have to do with persistence, and perseverance toward the goal of enlightenment.

I am thinking about this question, while I walk down the road in the cold light of late afternoon. I am enjoying how the sunshine casts deep blue shadows on the whiteness of the snow. The day before, I had been walking through thick snow in my snow shoes, breaking a trail in the fields and woods behind our neighbors' house. That was hard work. Today, walking down the road feels like a breeze. What makes something easy or hard?

It came to me that the Zen masters had an approach to life that was like walking in the road, rather than trudging through deep snow... there was an ease about it. They didn't try hard, they somehow acted without effort. These lines came to me, from the Tao Te Ching: "The Tao is always at ease. It overcomes without competing, answers without speaking a word, arrives without being summoned, accomplishes without a plan."⁵ Just like the kittens.

Not at all like my own days, which usually seem to require a lot of effort. Even taking a walk requires that I first interrupt my natural momentum, and make myself do it. Do you know what I mean? I plan my good habits—I plan a time for meditation, and a time for walking, and a time for cooking a good breakfast. Then I try to make myself do them. I plan time for writing, and time for being at church, and time for being off-duty, with Margy and the kittens. So how can I live in the present moment, if I am busy making all these plans? Even paying attention to the present moment requires some amount of resolution.

Back at home, it is still a quandary to me, so I post the question on Facebook. These days, there are many forms of distraction. I take a break to read my email and check my phone messages. There are no new messages. This is a peaceful moment. There are no huge problems to solve, in this moment, except for finishing a sermon. Except for understanding why attention to the present moment might be important for us.

4 See: <http://www.proactivechange.com/resolutions/statistics.htm>

5 *Tao Te Ching*, translated by Stephen Mitchell, #73.

If it is hard to stay in the present moment, when all is peaceful, it is even harder in a moment of frustration, challenge, or struggle. I remember a story I heard about King Solomon.⁶ King Solomon told his advisors, "I have dreamt that there is a magic ring that holds the secret of serenity. If a happy man looks at it, he becomes sad. If a sad man looks at it, he becomes happy. I need you to find me that ring." Well, of course they looked high and low, but no one found any such magic ring.

Finally, one advisor was walking in a lowly neighborhood, and saw an old man setting out trinkets and jewelry for sale. Making one last try, he described the ring to the old man. To his surprise, the old man smiled. He took a small gold ring and began to engrave it with some words. Then he handed it to the advisor. The advisor smiled. "This is the ring!" He gave the man all his money, and brought the ring back to King Solomon. King Solomon took the ring, and read these Hebrew words, *Gam Zey Ya'avov*: "This too shall pass." His sorrows turned to joy and his joys turned to sorrow, and then both gave way to peace. This too shall pass.

One day, when I was feeling overwhelmed by a thorny issue at church, these words came to me. I realized—in twenty years, I likely won't even be a minister of a church anymore. I will perhaps be a retired person. All these challenges that seem so big right now, they all will have passed away. Perhaps they will have been solved, or perhaps not. Whatever they have been, things will change. All the joys of this work will be over as well. And suddenly, I found myself cherishing these moments of today; even cherishing the challenges. I felt blessed to have the chance to do this work, and live this life I am living. None of it will last forever.

In another place the Tao says:⁷

"There is a time for being ahead, a time for being behind;

a time for being in motion, a time for being at rest;

a time for being vigorous, a time for being exhausted;

a time for being safe, a time for being in danger.

The master sees things as they are, without trying to control them.

She lets them go their own way, and resides at the center of the circle."

What is the center of the circle? Maybe living in the present moment does not mean that we don't make plans or set goals. For human beings at least, plans are a part of our lives. We do remember the past, and anticipate the future. But, perhaps living in the present moment is about welcoming and *loving* the present moment. Cherishing our selves and our situations, just as they are. Instead of looking at what is wrong, and making resolutions to try to change ourselves.

6 One version is in *Doorways to the Soul*, edited by Elisa Davy Pearmain, p. 20-21.

7 *Tao*, #29.

Here is what the Tao has to say about resolutions:
If you want to become whole, let yourself be partial.
If you want to become straight, let yourself be crooked.
If you want to become full, let yourself be empty...
If you want to be given everything, give everything up.⁸

The Zen masters and Taoists seem to have found a power which they trusted more than the power of force. They called it the Tao—the Way—but said no one could define it. It was a great unnameable process underneath the passages of time, which caused water to flow and flowers to bloom; kittens and puppies play in it, and it also unfolds in our lives—they said—if we do not resist it by resisting our own lives trying to be something else.

I am remembering a small story in the Narnia movie, *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, which Margy and I saw on Wednesday. The younger sister, Lucy, wishes she was as pretty as her older sister, Susan. When she finds a magic spell that can make her look like the one who is most beautiful to her, she can't resist the temptation to speak the spell. Looking into a mirror, she sees herself changing, until she looks just like Susan. But then she is suddenly propelled into a dream world, as Susan, where Lucy doesn't exist at all. Frightened, she wakes up, and the wise lion tells her—"Don't wish to be someone other than yourself—what would the world be if you did not exist? You are here to be yourself." For our lives, we are the most important person to be. No one else can be us.

Perhaps, living in the present moment is about welcoming and loving ourselves, as we are today. Not waiting until we are thinner or prettier or more successful or out of debt. But just the way we are. Right now. I think about the blessings in my life. I think about the challenges in my life. We all have some. In another twenty years, what will have passed away? We don't know.

All we know is what we have right now. The setting sun casting shadows on the snow. The kittens playing on the couch. Margy making dinner in the kitchen. The sermon slowly unfolding, with a mysterious process that I never really understand. The stories that have come to us from the ancient ones.

Sometimes we wake up and see how beautiful everything is. Sometimes we collapse on our beds with longing and loneliness. Then it all changes again. Round and round.
"The master sees things as they are, without trying to control them.
She lets them go their own way, and resides at the center of the circle."

Breathe in and out now. Breathe life into your body. Breathe life into your emotions. Breathe life into your thoughts. Breathe life into your spirit. Breathe in love. Breathe out peace.

⁸ *Tao*, #22.

I want to close with (an excerpt of) a poem by one of our late, wise Maine elders, May Sarton.⁹
She wrote:

Now I become myself. It's taken
Time, many years and places,
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces,
Run madly, as if Time were there,
Terribly old, crying a warning,
"hurry, you will be dead before -----"
(What? Before you reach the morning?
or the end of the poem, is clear?
Or love safe in the walled city?)
Now to stand still, to be here,
Feel my own weight and density!.....
Now there is time and Time is young.
O, in this single hour I live
All of myself and do not move
I, the pursued, who madly ran,
Stand still, stand still, and stop the Sun!

Closing Words by Annie Dillard

"How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.
What we do with this hour and with that one, is what we are doing."

⁹ From *Collected Poems 1930-1993*. The complete poem may be found in several places online, including:
<http://oldpoetry.com/opoem/show/52015-May-Sarton-Now-I-Become-Myself>