

# Change

Dharma Talk by Ven. Shikai Zuiko O-sensei  
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I wonder when it will happen. You never know when it's going to happen, really. You never know when it's going to happen.

You Never Know When It's Going To Happen' was a childhood game. When I was very little my father would hold me with his big hands, I'd be on his knees and he would raise his knees up gently and put them down gently. And he'd say: "You never know when it's going to happen. You never know when it's going to happen. You never know ..." And Daddy would suddenly part his knees...

"AHHHH, DADDY!"

My stomach would rush up around the heart, the breath would shorten, there would be the falling, the falling, the rushing, the rushing...

When I was a little girl, there were my father's strong knees, the voice I trusted, the hands I trusted. And we were playing a little game. Now, maybe it was a dangerous little game (aside from the fact that I could have fallen on the floor, but at that age we sort of bounce, don't we?)

Perhaps it was setting up some sort of pattern. Perhaps if I looked into this very, very closely, I could be able to find the point when something went wrong. But hold on, hold on. This is now. What can I do with 'never knowing when it is going to happen'? Well, as I'm practising, as I'm sitting here in the Hatto with you, I can see, I can notice a movement of attention when such a thought comes up, when such a memory comes up. I can notice self-image wanting, wanting to explore content, wanting to create stories, wanting to wrap it all up in one final statement. Well, I can say "in conclusion that" but...there is no final conclusion.

There is just this process; there is really just this process of life. There is just this birth and death of moments of experiencing. This practice demands and instructs, sometimes begs and pleads, that we notice our movements of attention into our story lines. That is what we must do. Things change, everything changes. The weather's changing. It's always changing. Most of the time we're so wrapped up in our stories about the difficulties that we are going to encounter, about the hazards, about the possibilities, about how great it will be when the sun is shining, that we don't notice this moment. We don't notice what it feels like, what it sounds like, as we crunch, crunch, crunch across the ice of the frozen driveway.

Self-image loves its stories and self-image wants to make itself solid. Even dealing with the question of change is seen as an opportunity for self-image to 'wrap it up'. It'll twirl its little mustache, slide its little glasses down on its nose, arch its eyebrow very sagely and say: "Change is the only constant. Yes that's it, the only thing that ever going on is change. That explains it all."

Now, because we have, in a sense, a product, self-image can assure itself that it understands. Therefore it doesn't need to practise. It can walk around safe and secure in this knowing. But what happens if if we should notice that moment of strategy, that stance, and what will happen if we should take the risk and practise that moment? We feel the breath rising and falling. We see the seeing. We hear the hearing. We notice how this contraction of certainty about what's going on starts to dissipate. Things are changing. Now, when things change, in our life, and in our practice especially, when we start to notice how things really are,

when we start to notice how we really are, when we start to notice that we are sitting with our little stance of being a Zen student, and when we dare to practise that moment of recognition, things start to open. We start being able to open to openness. Things are changing. And then we experience fear.

Fear. We call it fear but we must remember that that is just a word, it's just a descriptive word that we have agreed upon as having some sort of meaning. What is this fear? What is this sensation when nameless. What are we experiencing and why? And why won't it go away? Why won't it go away? What is it that we're frightened of? Well if we get asked that: stories, fragments of stories, words, pictures display themselves like paper and dust blowing in the wind. Oh yeah, we can come up with a story. But we don't know.

In "Living With This Breath", Zen Master Anzan Hoshin says:

*I don't think that people know what they are frightened of. I think we often find in practice, as our practice deepens, a kind of fear beginning to come up. And we can see that there is a tendency perhaps, for us to be frightened by that. "Perhaps I'll have to give up everything if I actually wake up. AHCHK!" But if you start to look at that feeling, you can see that no, that it isn't so much what you're frightened of. And so you say: "well I'm frightened of this, or this, or this, or this. But the fear is basically unconditioned. That is to say, it doesn't really have any kind of reason. It's not really fear of anything; it is just fear. The fear is itself a kind of contraction, a kind of holding. If it can give itself something to be afraid of, then it can build itself up and propagate itself. But, its main function is just to freeze, just to create some sense of barrier between this and that. Just to create self and other, just to create me and the rest of the world.*

I watched a rerun of Cagney and Lacey, a detective story featuring two female detectives. Lacey, the dark lady, says to Cagney: "Chris, what is it that you want?" Chris Cagney says: "Mary-Beth, I just want everything to stay the same." And isn't that what self-image wants?

This fear of change, this wanting to make everything solid, comes up time and time again in popular culture, in literature, in how we interact with others. There is a love song, "Stay as sweet as you are, don't ever change, umm..." Now who can do that? What happens when you do change? What happens when you cannot maintain that sweetness all the time? And what was it anyway? It wasn't really you because it was something that someone else saw for a moment through his or her own filter. Maybe it didn't really have anything to do with you at all. Self-image: little dictator, trying to control everything. Trying to make everything solid. But yes we know; "the only constant is change." Ahh, we'll just sit with that. We'll just focus on that. Focusing on the content we do not notice that that is what we are doing. We do not notice that we have created another opportunity for confusion and distortion as attention moves into that content. The context is ignored. And we think we know something. Self-image thinks it knows what's going on, but it doesn't notice itself becoming confused because of the deletion of context. It doesn't know that the seeing has changed, the hearing has changed, the awareness of the seeing and hearing has changed. It's as if it's not there. So we are out of balance.

Practice demands that we notice, and at the moment of noticing any facet, whatsoever, of our experiencing, that we use that moment of noticing to notice what else we are knowing. Over time, we experience increasing openness and of course, more opportunity for fear. Something we call "fear", to rush in as the Roshi says, like the storm troopers, to try to close everything down so that self-image can maintain itself as centre to its experiencing and everything else as fringe.

As the Roshi said in the Dharma Assembly "Living with this Breath",

*We like to believe that we are the centre of our experiencing, and everything else is fringe. Some parts are closer to us, some parts are further away. It is like our thoughts and feelings are closer to "us" than "out there" is.*

If we sit here, and look out through our masks, not even noticing that we are wearing them, eyes peering out from behind. Seeing everything else as other, we can at that time notice a freezing occur. We can notice this feeling of being trapped. At that time there can be story lines coming up that often are descriptions of how we are and how the world is. Now we will, we have gotten into the habit, as a collective basically, to call this our personality. So we'll say, "I just have the type of personality that gets really upset when I hear people talking about death." "I just have the type of personality that always wants to do the right thing." "Now I'm a person who's very jolly, all the time." We are very grandiose and very certain when we describe personality. And we don't notice when we are doing it until we start to practise. And then we will sometimes notice this freezing of space, this talking through the mask, this creation of a self. When we do notice it we are noticing something that is true about how we are in that moment. That is the only moment that we can practise. Ground that moment of noticing something true about how you are, in this moment, using the breath as a touchstone to this moment of experiencing. It becomes increasingly more difficult to maintain this personality.

Interestingly, the word "persona", comes from the theater, comes from Latin. "Per" means "through", and "sona" means "sound". "Sound-through", sound through the mask. In those days in the theater, characters held masks in front of their faces. The masks could not move, the masks, of course, were frozen. The character would be defined by the sounds that came through the mask.

Personality.

We put on our little mask. Most of the time we don't notice it. Then we start to notice it and sometimes it's really embarrassing. And we can experience a lot of, "Well I don't know what it is and I don't know what to do, do I?" Sometimes we'll just laugh and laugh for no reason, as a reactivity. We don't recognize the energy of that laughter as being basically the energy of bodymind not knowing what to do. But that energy is available for you to practise with.

We set up, as we said, behind the mask and I'm "in here" and there's "out there" situation. What's out there? The Roshi says:

*Out there, are the colours and forms and sounds. The ones that we love, then there are the people that we don't and so on. It's all arranged in that kind of way with our sense of self as the knower and knowns stratified in layers of importance based upon the three kleshas of passion, aggression and stupidity. But death doesn't quite fit into that strategy, so as soon as some encounter with death begins to come up we seem to freeze it by getting into fear which then places it outside of us so that we can try to maintain it as some level of "fringe". Something that is "out there." Something that is "other." Something that has "nothing to do with me."*

Self-image, then, can adopt a number of stories that it can put out through the mask. And sometimes we see

that. Because we are practicing we see the “I’m in here and everything else is out there”, and we remember to feel the breath, and we see the seeing, and we hear the hearing, and the masks slips. And then, perhaps often, we don’t know what to do, and fear comes up again and we forget that that’s simply something else going on, something that we can know.

The Roshi has been asked many times, “What is the nature of fear? Why fear? Why me? Why am I afraid?” In the Dharma assembly about death and dying, the Roshi said:

The main function of fear as such is simply to create contraction in order to maintain that sense of centre and fringe, this and that, self and other, which happens at a level that isn’t really personal as such. It is not really ‘I’m afraid of losing my thoughts and feelings, and I’m afraid of this and that’, but just a kind of very unconditioned fear.

But self-image wants to figure it out. It wants to have a little package of answers for everything, and sometimes we believe that’s possible. We believe that if we create or follow a story line, and propagate it, that somehow everything will be explainable. Our lives will be explainable. Birth and death will be explainable. The life that is arising as you will be explainable. Well, none of this is explainable. We can describe it but the description is not what it is because what it is, is arising right here right now as you and can only be experienced. We are asked to ‘question into’ but the question is a question without words. It is questioning with this whole bodymind into this whole moment.

The Roshi says, in *Living with this Breath*,

*It is important that we not fall for easy answers or become trapped within or by categories when we look into this issue of death and into this issue of life. But there are some things about death that we know for sure. One is that you will die. You don’t know when, you don’t know how, you don’t know where, but there’s no doubt whatsoever that you will die and that this breath can be your last breath. Living in such a way that we know that this breath might be our last breath does not mean living with the idea of death. It means living with this breath. It means living with our life as it is arising for us now. It means living where our life really is.*

The room expands and contracts as you breathe in and out. The colours and forms flicker and change. The eyes focus in and out. The body sways forward and we might notice that, we can straighten. Breathe in. Straighten the neck. Feel the mudra, feel those fingers touching each other. Feel the space around the fingers. Feel into this moment of your life. Notice how things change.

In “Before Thinking” the Roshi says: “Each moment that we are living is a process of continual change.”

Isn’t that amazing, we can know it. Isn’t that wonderful? There’s nothing to hang on to.

[The Sensei sings] “Stay as sweet as you are, [O-sensei laughs].

Thank you for listening.