

Zen and Agriculture

Zen speaks not only from the heart but from the very heart of things. A direct connection within and without, dissolving boundaries. Language without language. Without the earth there would be no life, that thin layer, so thin compared to the diameter of the earth itself. And yet it supports us. Without food there would be no perception, no mind. Without water and air there would be no plants. How remarkable this life is even in its simplest forms.

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Not surprising that the land teaches of its own accord. Man is so small on this earth that many only really appreciate the true scale of things when they are in the mountains. So vast, so enormous and your life so small and fragile amidst the peaks and glaciers. Not surprising therefore that monasteries often seek the remoteness of mountain valleys. But not all of us can live in the mountains. And if we did the peace would be destroyed and the food would run out. You are what you eat.

All of us undertake physical exercise in some form or other, but few live by it. To live by your own manual work, your own sweat and muscle, is in this day and age no mean achievement. To work on the land has its own rewards far beyond the material benefits. To work with the mind through the body is an old trick and one that reaps many benefits. Some work on the body through the mind. The two go hand in hand. Even something as simple as gardening has extraordinary therapeutic power. Agriculture at least in its peasant form, has not only endless toil but endless opportunities. Opening the mind comes with practice. Any manual work will do, whether it be forking dung, shearing sheep, shifting bales, using a chain saw, loading wood on a trailer, feeding and watering animals, hedging, hurdlemaking, scything, digging ditches. The list is endless. Some it is true require great skill and the use of machinery. To learn sheep shearing for instance takes many seasons. Very often in the old days it was taught non verbally. The apprentice would be required to roll wool and only shear the odd sheep in the tea breaks. i.e. he had to watch, try and watch again until he had taught himself. Many of the best shearers couldn't read or write and only after a few years they would offer an opinion, or begin to talk about the finer points of shearing. The same goes for hurdlemakers. The skill cannot be taught directly and herein lies the connection with Zen. For they are perhaps without realising it on the very threshold of a wisdom which is beyond words. Like Zen masters they realised that the essence of true learning comes from awareness and the silence of inner commitment. And this can pop up in the most unexpected circumstances. A friend of mine who has a small farm and scrap business near Shaftesbury once said whilst he was shearing in a low shed "When you forget your are shearing, you know you are really shearing". A true Zen statement which reflects a fine degree of concentration and awareness. Like Hui Neng the sixth Patriarch and woodcutter. Body and mind dropped off. Such comments are not isolated and within the farming community there exists a certain earthy knowledge like that amongst fishermen, that is only transferred indirectly. It cannot be taught and it is this strange knowledge that only comes from working on the land, not just from weekends but all the time. It is this link between agriculture and Zen which is I believe fundamental if we are to progress.

Many would argue that mechanisation of agriculture has not only changed farming out of all proportion but that it has changed the psychological structure of villages and this is a sad fact which escalated out of all proportion in the last twenty years of the twentieth century. The middle path between mechanisation and efficiency is not an easy one to tread, but for the Zen adept even machines can have a discipline of their own which is satisfying. Wielding a chain saw in an overgrown coppice is like a martial art, ploughing and combining also have their own inner satisfactions. Alas agricultural practices are more and more controlled by financial forces way beyond the reach of small farmers. Putting the spirit back into the land is however not just the preserve of Glastonbury, there is perhaps more to the new wave of organic farms and farm centres than meets the eye.

But to return to Zen it is within the bounds of poetry that expression reaches its true perfection, or as DT Suzuki so rightly says, "Even seventeen syllables maybe too many." Or to quote John Tarrant in his excellent article on Zen and Poetry in Resurgence "This body of the Buddha is the native earth of poetry" Till the soil and you shall reap rich rewards living on this earth is its own koan and the solving of the koan is now more important than ever. To return to the earth is no easy matter but it is a journey all of us must undertake in one form or another if we are to survive. Owning land is not enough, living by one's hands is far more precious than a thousand acres of arable farm. When the opposites arise the Buddha mind is lost. Poetry is indispensable to Zen but it is from the earth that we live and it is the way in which we extract our food that is important. Small wonder that the cook is always the most important person within a Zen monastery, True Zen agriculture offers a vast field of opportunities and if the mind is open the wisdom of the earth will manifest itself. It is this which lies at the heart of agriculture and of Zen. The universe unfolds of its own accord. To live by

your hands you till the soil of your mind and your heart, and if the soil is fertile who knows what will grow.

James Crowden 1992