

Signs of Spring

Pat George: Dharma Talk March 8, 2009

Usually the day we experience as the first day of spring is not the day of the spring solstice, but the first balmy day, the first time we see a robin or the first crocus. However if we're really paying close attention, what we see is that spring actually begins long before any of that obvious stuff happens. It begins with the gradual lengthening of the light. It's unnoticeable at first. The angle of light shifts, the days grow longer, minute by imperceptible minute.

Spring begins with the increased activity of the birds--their twitter and busyness--long before the first crocus blooms. It begins with the changing color and swelling of buds, long before we suddenly wake up one day and say, "Oh, my God! The forsythia is about to bloom!" or, "That tree is ready to burst into leaf." And beyond even these more subtle signs of spring, there are signs that are completely unseen. We know that deep within the winter bare trees, sap begins to rise. We know that far from where we are, birds wintering in warmer places, are beginning to head northward. We know that under the earth, far away from our sense perception, roots quicken, soft pale shoots begin to push up towards the surface. The axis of the earth shifts, a massive

movement when you think of it, but one we don't notice.

By now you're probably asking, "What's with Pat? Why is she on about spring? The answer to that question of what's with Pat is that this talk really isn't really about spring. It's about practice. It's about how practice works in our lives. It's about what we ask of our practice. And it's about what we actually get from it.

Just because we're human what we all want from practice--in the metaphors of spring-- is a full-blown spring. Blossoms. Thick green grass. A fat robin with a worm. Long, warm sunny days. This is what we're looking for. What we want is the obvious stuff. We want conspicuous shifts in our behavior and feelings. We want happiness. An increased sense of control and empowerment. We want the dramatic falling away of our bad habits and character flaws, of our foolishness and vulnerability.

But what we get are more like those very early signs of spring. We get slight shifts and stirrings under the surface. We get tiny movements that are barely noticeable, while on the surface everything seems to be static. This is because the level on which practice works—on which it operates—is underneath, in the dark, at a profound and unseen level, deep within the psyche, the body, the heart.

Before we began this talk we chanted that our practice is

“incomparably profound and minutely subtle.” And so it is. Just because it is so deep, subtle and profound it’s worthwhile-- it lasts. We don’t necessarily get the flashy and the obvious rewards we’re looking for from practice. But when you stop and think about it, all the most important things in our lives happen deeply and mysteriously. They happen out of sight, out of our control. Who knows, for example, why we fall in love with the person we fall in love with, or why we fall in love when we do? The Freudians may think they know, but I think it’s still mysterious. Who knows where the life-changing decisions we make really come from?

Sometimes we know what the precipitating factor of a decision is, but we don’t really know where it comes from. I’m thinking of decisions like deciding to have a child. Decisions about our life work. Decisions to make a big changes in our life. We don’t really know how those things bubble up. We don’t know much. We’re not even sure, if we’re taking an aimless walk for the fun of it and have no particular destination, why we turn right or left at certain places. We just do.

So all of life, when we burrow in and take a look, is mysterious and inexplicable. Even science comes to an end of its ability to explain. Most scientists agree on the big bang, but who can go beyond that? Who knows?

So it shouldn't surprise us, and we shouldn't forget as often as we do, that human life is a great mystery. It's from the depths of our being that what really rules us comes. All those shifts and permutations so important to who we are occur underground first. Not on the surface. Not in our conscious selves. They may eventually manifest in our outward lives, but they don't start there.

What do all these spring metaphors have to say about our practice? Basically they hint that we need to trust—trust that in our depths practice is operating. It's really easy to reach more than one point in practice when we despair about ourselves and practice—when everything seems pretty static. Truth to tell, whenever we take a close look at ourselves, there's lots to despair about. But at the same time, we need to remember that what really counts in our lives has to come from deep within. And that most often we're not going to be aware of what's operating there. We tend to be very materialistic about our practice. We want changes we can hold on to and discuss and mark and point out to others. But if we're honest with ourselves, we'll see that usually there isn't much obvious change. Practice is slow. It's profound, but it's slow. But that doesn't mean nothing's going on just because we don't see it. There might be a lot happening.

Spring Garden

***The surface:
Hard, icy
Crusted snow.
Just below,
A dark moist patchwork
Of rotting leaves.
Deeper still
Soft, slippery mud.
Further in,
There where the eye doesn't reach,
Roots stir, seeds burst.
Still weak, but determined, pale shoots
Push forth to sun.***