

## **Hanging by a Thread**

**Pat George: Dharma Talk May 10, 2009**

There's a Zen story of a person who falls off a cliff and is hanging there holding onto a fragile branch about to fall into the abyss below. While suspended she sees a strawberry right in front of her eyes. So she lets go of the branch with one hand, plucks the strawberry, pops it in her mouth, and says, AAH! Delicious! At that point the branch breaks and she crashes to the bottom of the cliff.

This story has become a kind of Zen cliché, told very often. It's usually thought to be about death--how we should die, how to have a good death. The lesson being that we should live fully to the very moment of death, not feeling at all anxious about what is to come. After I told this story recently, I started to reconsider it. And actually I think it's more about life than about death.

There's another somewhat similar Zen koan that makes a related point. It's called "A Man Up a Tree." It goes something like this: You're up a tree. You're holding onto a branch by your teeth. Your feet can't reach a branch below. Your hands can't grasp any branch. Someone comes along below the tree and asks, "What is the meaning of Buddhism?" If you don't answer, you fail the Dharma. If you answer, you clearly have to open your mouth, let go of that branch you're holding onto with your teeth, and you'll crash below. The koan asks, "What do you do?"

This koan is clearly impossible physiologically; if you're holding onto a branch by your teeth, your arms would be long enough to reach that branch. But the koan is not describing a realistic, physical situation, just as this strawberry story isn't describing anything very realistic. What we have are symbolic situations to stimulate us to consider some questions about our lives.

Recently I talked about Ram Dass, who suffered a stroke which brought him near death. Afterwards he said he had flunked the big spiritual test: how to face death. He felt he had flunked because he didn't have any spiritual thoughts as he was dying. He only noticed the pipes on the hospital ceiling as he stared up from the gurney.

Some spiritual traditions feel that death is a big test. We call Zen training or practice. And the question is, what are we training or practicing to do? Many people feel it's for a good death. The big, existential, inescapable fact that all of us try to avoid thinking about is that the inevitable end of our life is death. And a lot of people think it's important to die well--whatever their idea of that is.

I used to be on the council of my training monastery, and new people would come before us and ask to become a member of the monastery. We generally asked them a few questions about why they wanted to do it. I remember a very old woman--I was not really young at that time either, but this woman was quite a bit older than I am even now. Her friend had recently died of cancer, and she felt that the friend underwent a horrible, struggling death. In going through this experience, trying to support her friend, she decided she didn't want to die like that. She said about her experience, "I decided if I want to have a good death, I'd better have a good life." There's quite a bit of wisdom in that and that was what brought her to the monastery.

So what can we learn from this story of the strawberry? There's a paradoxical aspect to Zen stories and koans so that you can't really explain or reason your way through them. Because of this they are often best read as poetry. How do we read a poem? We clarify the events and characters (if any) and objects, and then we explore their meaning? We ask: What is the symbolic value here? What is this trying to say to us? It's kind of like reading your dreams. You dream about a tree. So you have to ask yourself: What are my associations with a tree? What does a tree mean to me? The same is true of Zen stories and koans. Rather than trying to figure out the ideas, we read them as poems and look at the symbols and tone. Clearly the story about the guy hanging on the cliff with the strawberry is not dealing in surface realism. It's pretty unlikely as a description of something that most of us would find ourselves doing.

But looked at differently, it's certainly a very realistic depiction of the situation of human life--hanging by a branch, or by a thread, as the English idiom puts it. Because when we really look, we see that all our lives we are hanging by a thread, in every way.

Our lives are hanging by a thread physically, even when we're hale and hearty. We all know that life has to end in death, and none of us knows how or when our death will occur. Most of us assume it's down the line, but we all know people who were fine one day and gone the next. I've just had a friend who lost her voice--she was a little bit hoarse. She didn't even bother going to the doctor. But then it didn't pass, so she finally got checked out by her doctor. It turns out she has lung cancer, it's already metastasized and there's nothing they can do but ameliorative care. This woman has always been Miss tofu-eating, whole-wheat, no smoking, totally health conscious person, who looks rosy and terrifically healthy. So there you have it. No guarantees.

Emotionally and mentally things are often hanging by a thread as well. We're much more desperate and insecure than we'd like to admit most of the time. I consider myself pretty neurotic, but quite sane. However, I'm quite aware that this mental equilibrium could end. People get older and they sometimes get dementia; they get Alzheimer's. I could be ga-ga before my life ends. Any of us with enough stress, could flip out, become seriously depressed, lose our mental balance.

Economically as well, our situations are always completely up for grabs, and we're freshly aware of all this in these difficult economic times because things are even chancier than usual. People are losing their accustomed places economically. So in every aspect of our lives, there are times when we're just barely holding on. John Kabat Zinn, the doctor who is a Zen teacher and writer talks about "full catastrophe living." And we are all living in the midst of catastrophe--if not right now, at any given moment we face potential catastrophe. As for the world around us, it is always involved in more than one catastrophe at a time. This is not a view of life that we like to admit to all that often. We want to appear confident, secure, stable, solid, in control. But the truth is that we're very vulnerable on every front.

At particular points in our lives, at times of rapid change or when big trouble comes to us, the insecurity of our lives becomes very apparent. At other times it sinks into the background and we're lulled into ignoring it. Nonetheless, it is still present. I have students with all sorts of, not always apparent, but sometimes serious difficulties in their lives. At times when things are very shaky for students, they often make great

progress in their practice because, I think, they are forced to realize they can't control everything in their lives. So they give up and move forward in practice.

But it isn't only when we face a particularly vulnerable personal moment or completely crash that the insecurity of our lives is revealed. We don't have to fall off the edge of a cliff to encounter death. We routinely die to vast portions of our everyday lives. We are just not present, we just don't see. According to Zen we all have a head full of assumptions that are really illusions, delusions. These assumptions blind us to reality.

What are these assumptions? We have assumptions about the solidness and permanence of ourselves and the rest of the world. We have assumptions about how suffering enters our lives. We think it comes from the outside, and that we suffer because other people and the world in general make us suffer, Thus we think that if only we could manipulate the circumstances of our lives to our liking, we could eliminate suffering from our lives. We assume that we're not responsible for most of the world's problems, and that there's nothing we can do about them anyway. We operate on the backward assumption that the big and important things in our lives deserve our attention, and that we can somehow sleepwalk through all the little things--the details.

All of these assumptions are false, and they make for a very insecure approach to our lives. They mean that we're really living our lives upside down most of the time. They mean that we hang by a thread rather than sit on a solid foundation.

One of the ways Buddha is described at the time of his enlightenment is that he "took his seat"--literally this means he sat zazen on the ground. Supposedly he made a cushion out of a little bundle of dried grasses. But in a larger sense, when somebody takes their seat, they ground themselves--physically, emotionally, psychologically. They take their seat on a foundation of Buddhist truth. They touch the earth. On the altar we have a Buddha who touches the earth with one hand. Supposedly this indicates that he's calling earth to witness his enlightenment. This kind of taking your seat is groundedness. It's

solidness. It's being seated on the correct assumptions about life. It's seeing clearly. Most of us aren't there most of the time.

What we do is reject that solidity and dangle over an abyss--filled with our "self-centered dreams," as we say in our closing chant. It's pretty interesting that the answer Zen provides to the kind of insecurity which is based on delusion, is not really a promise of security. Zen practice ends the insecurity that results from trying to face life on a foundation of dreams and delusions, but what it asks us to do is to embrace life moment-to-moment, breath by breath. And in doing this what we embrace is not knowing. Because we can never fully know what the next moment will be.

What Zen wants us to see is that, yes, we are hanging by a thread--this is true. And we need to thoroughly know that this is the condition of our lives: this insecurity, this not knowing. We need to be completely present, hanging there at the end of this thread and not try to run from the insecurity, not try to cover it up, not try to make it secure when it isn't. Perhaps our feet are scrambling for a foothold. Perhaps sweat is breaking out on our brow and our palms. After all, we're only human. We want security. But nonetheless we need to know that we're out there, one-hundred percent, dangling by that thread. This is our human condition.

Saul Bellow has a novel, *The Dangling Man*. And really this is the condition of all of us: hanging there by that root at the top of a cliff, hanging there in that tree unable to find a firm place to stand. What can we do about it? How can we live? Our koan is: faced with this inescapable condition of insecurity, how do we escape? The paradox is: it's inescapable, but there is a way out. What is it? How do we find it?

Can we find any clues in that strawberry? The strawberry is not about death. To the contrary, what better symbol for life than that red, juicy, heart-shaped fruit, so sweet and delicious! Its season so brief; its shelf-life so undependable. Isn't that very much like life itself?

So the question this story asks is ultimately not about death but about life. It asks if in the face of our insecurity, in the face of our inevitable

death, in the face of our suffering, can we seize the opportunities of life? Can we appreciate the pleasures and joys of life, in the midst of all the angst. Because if we can't, then life is only suffering. And all of us will lead lives of quiet, or frantic, desperation until the inevitable crash comes.

Inherent in the story is the dangling person as a metaphor for us all. That dangling person--just put yourself there--is presumably under great stress, life-threatened. Aren't we all under great stress? Aren't all our lives threatened, whether we recognize it or not? If we were that hanging person we would most probably have a head busy contemplating the coming disaster. Isn't that how most of us spend much of our lives, contemplating the next disaster? But that precarious person, the story tells us, is actually present to the situation. Present on that cliff side. Present enough to get out of her head long enough to notice the strawberry; brave enough to risk further insecurity by plucking it and eating it; and able to give that taste enough attention to actually experience it's deliciousness.

The story asks: are you able to do the same? Can you be present in all your precariousness to the joys that life offers? If you're waiting for everything to be perfect before you can enjoy yourself, you're not going to have much joy. Because things are never perfect. It's up to you. How do you answer the story? How do you answer the koan? How do you answer your life?