

‘Spring spreads evenly through mountains and valleys, yet in their own way the flowers and branches grow long or short.’

Shunshoko kōge naku, kashi onozukara tanchō

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When you feel the oncoming of spring after a long winter, new buds appear on willow trees and peach trees blossom in vivid colour. We are wrapped in warm, comforting spring breezes that have inspired poems from old:

An endless picture
Of willow and cherry trees
Woven together;
The capital is shrouded
In its ornate spring brocade!

*Miwataseba
Yanagi sakura o
Kokimazete
Miyako zo haru no
Nishiki narikeri*

The self, earth and heavens are full of spring.

The spring warmth spreads evenly through the plains and mountains. The south-facing branches soaked in sunlight grow long, and the north-facing branches grow short. The legs of cranes that search for food in the shallows grow long, the legs of ducks are short. The spring spreads over all things evenly, though all things receive the spring in their individual way. It is in this reality we find a Zen moral in the oncoming of spring.

The following words of joy from Emperor Hanazono (1297-1348) touch upon the deepest wisdom of Buddhism: *‘I have dedicated myself to my Buddhist training for an arduous 20 years. Now that I finally welcome the spring the breezes and haze are no different from the those of the past! Each day I still put on my kimono and take some food. All I see differently is a landscape free of any impurity whatsoever.’* (*Nijyūnenrai shinku no hito. Haru o mukaete kaezu kyūfūen. Jyakue kippan, inmo ni shisaru. Taichi nanzo katsutte ichijin aran.*)

In Hanazono’s time, the Imperial Court was divided into two lineages, the Jimyoin-to and the Daikakuji-to. The Emperor was powerless to the Kamakura Bakufu who controlled political power over the nation. Even the succession of the Imperial Throne was by direction of the Bakufu. Ambition and intrigue stirred among court nobles, and under the constant stress of having no one to trust, the Emperor took refuge in Buddhism. After many years of study he encountered Daito Kokushi who helped him understand the greatest mysteries of life. Thanks to his Buddhist quest and attainment, the Emperor turned his days of distress into days of great joy.

'*Welcome the spring*' in his poem is a metaphor for opening one's eyes to the enlightenment of Sakyamuni Buddha. '*The breezes and haze are no different from the those of the past!*' refers to opening one's eyes to the greater wisdom of things, but realising there is in fact nothing special to behold. It's to say nothing has changed from the past, it's to say 'an enlightened view remains an ignorant view'. One's face does not change, one does not grow taller. The state of the world and economy don't change a bit. You still get up in the morning, wash your face, get dressed, and take some food.

If this is the result of a greater attainment, it makes you question why you should put effort into Buddhist studies and sit in long hours of zazen. May be the only thing to say is we cannot do anything but sit, so we sit in zazen. But though the physical appearance of the world is the same whether people have an open or closed mind, there is a great gulf between both states of mind. Chinese monk Jōshū Jūshin (778–897) said '*Laymen are worked for 12 hours, whereas I work for 12 hours.*' The difference between people that 'work' and people who are 'worked' is that people who work according to their own will and volition live life with freedom. People that work according to the will and volition of others do not control their lives and live without freedom.

The mind living free according to one's own will is the mind that can proclaim: '*All I see differently is a landscape free of any impurity whatsoever.*' Emperor Hanazono also wrote this waka poem:

Though we must struggle
Through the flames of samsara
Buddhism must be heard;
Infinite winds, rain and snow
Our journey without hindrance!

*Hi no naka o
Waketemo hō wa
Kiku beki ni
Ame kaze yuki wa
Mono no kazu ka wa*

When Emperor Hanazono was searching for the truth of existence through his Buddhist training, the foundations of the self he once knew disappeared. He was able to see past himself to a greater reality where his true essence was in fact, a self of no self.

When one understands the self doesn't exist, they don't lose everything; instead they awaken to a self that is not confined to a single body. They awaken to a new self, a much larger self that encompasses far more: they awaken to a self that is the very life-force that runs through all things. When your mind realises it is but part of this inexhaustible life-force, a great mind free of evil, you can't help but be overcome with a huge smile. Even break out in a little dance.

Further, this elation is expressed as gratitude in the mantra: '*Throughout one's daily chores let one not forget: work to repay the debt to one's teachers, and will the flourishing of Buddha's teachings.*' Deep in our nature is a dignified, universal, pure humanity. Sakyamuni Buddha showed us the highest Way for humankind. The Buddha showed us how to clearly awaken to your Buddha or spiritual nature; to see

that you and the world, that you and humanity, are not separate. The Buddha showed us the greatest path there is - the path of living enlightened to the truth of existence, the truth of the self and humanity. The following verse appears in the scriptures:

To be born a human is a rare blessing - a blessing that is mine!
To listen to Buddhism is a rare blessing - a blessing that is mine!
If I do not achieve my purpose with this life,
When will I ever be blessed with this rare life again?

*Jinshin ukegatashi ima sude ni uku
Buppō kikigatashi ima sude ni kiku
Kono mi konjō ni mukatte dosezumba,
Sara ni izure no shō ni mukatte ka kono mi o dosen*

To 'welcome the spring' is to treasure the rare blessing of human life. It is to awaken to the Buddha nature inside. I think awakening to your Buddha nature and discovering the pure life force within should be the ultimate goal of life. Directing the joy that comes with this discovery towards serving your society is the key for redeeming humankind.