

An Afternoon of Training

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I am sitting in a room at Pine Mountain Buddhist Temple that technically is not “my room” although I sometimes for convenience call it that. I am grooming Nanda, who has become a cat of many mats. So I am painstakingly trying to comb out and untangle her various knots and mats without causing her too much pain and distress. She frequently needs to jump up and run away, but she is back usually within seconds. The minute I set the comb down and start on another project, there she is presenting herself to me for more. It is not hard for me to see my own Zen training in this cat’s behavior--- nor perhaps even in her matted hair, which has become so a part of her that she cannot straighten it out by her own efforts alone. She and I keep gently trying one another’s patience, and then just giving up or setting the grooming project aside for awhile to enjoy one another’s company--- which is also training.

I have a slight cold and have been resting more than working. It is raining outside. The mail comes. In it are two colorful surprises for me.

Last week I cashed two relatively small refund checks from a public utility company. Who would have thought that those would bounce and that my bank would be charging me for this mistake? I start churning out fearful, angry feelings automatically---- seemingly uncontrollably. I am starting to feel rather like a swirling mass of problems or defilements walking around on two legs. I do not think that I did anything wrong here, but I am sure I am in a mess. I start looking for external solutions, ways out of “the mess” when the problem that is uppermost is actually more internal. Something that Rev. Master Seikai said to me recently is starting to come back to me. He said: “What do we really have here besides a lot of emotional reactivity?” Some might say, well we have here

two bounced checks, bank charges, a slight cold, a rainy day. These things in and of themselves are actually pretty small. The bounced checks are not mine. The bank charges are not enormous. These things can be dealt with.

How many times have I heard Rev. Master Phoebe say, "I thought I'd just cheer myself up" and then apply some simple skilful means? I now find myself thinking these thoughts! How fortunate I am. I am able to go for a walk by the river which is flowing quietly today. I even walk in it where it is shallow in my rubber boots. The sky is huge and grey, this land, the whole world so sparkling and glorious. I see a small quartz rock with some red on it that reminds me of a koi fish, only here the water is swimming and the stone is quiet. (Often in koi ponds when the fish are swimming back and forth, the water seems relatively still.) I realize how lucky I am to be here at this very moment, even as it starts to rain again and I have to leave the river and go indoors.

At times it appears to me that I have this mess of karma that follows me around like my shadow and signals me to despair, even when I am "being good" and seem deserving of perhaps something else. But then again things are not always as they appear to me. Perhaps I am being signaled to just practice, to just live. I remember a well known Buddhist teaching that I read about just days before in a book by Dainin Katagiri who was quoting his "unlucky" teacher, Hayashi Roshi: "The karmic retribution of good and evil occurs at three different periods in time. One is the retribution experienced in one's present life, second is the retribution experienced in the life following death, and third is retribution experienced in subsequent lives." So it is not always apparent which action, the results of which you seem to be reaping, resulted from... but he reminds us, that it is always important "to sow good seeds". It is difficult to not be grateful for compassionate teachings such as this. I am so supported by this life that is going on regardless of mistakes made, checks bounced...

So I am back in “my room”. Nanda has seen me arrive and immediately presents herself to me purring and purring, until the time comes when she will have to stop, back up, and run away, before once again shyly approaching, time and time again. Grooming her is so very circular, repetitive, serious, and playful--- a game of increasing trust, patience, and acceptance.
