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## Just This

Sometimes certain words and circumstances (events, a particular time or person) come together in such a way that the world loses its grip, a part of the brain slips back, and something inside shifts. In a sense "words fail," but in a wonderful way: They vanish beyond the chained synapses of thoughts in our brain to something deeper, to reveal the message that's always been there – "just this."

A few months ago in California, listening to a dharma talk by Joko Beck, was one of those circumstances for me. Joko's words hit me as solidly as a handful of thrown stones, splitting open the shells of memory and meaning inside my head until I sensed them in my skin. After years of Zen practice, of hearing certain similar words over and over, somehow this was different.

I asked myself, How come? Why was this different? Was this "feeling" anything I could put into words and if so, what ones?

Joko's dharma talks are always an expression of who she is – a person naturally in her life, not "there" in a way where there are edges of personality, and so there is never any strain or reach. Her talks are deceptively simple, elegant as a mathematical equation, nothing extra. This talk, too, was extraordinarily simple on the surface.

On the surface, the canvas, Joko was painting a picture of Soen Roshi, one of her former teachers. The first brush strokes: "A remarkable teacher...kind, a true monk...completely ordinary in his life except when you were in his presence and felt the compassion, the true love ...". Another brush stroke, Soen's vow -- *Namu Dai Busa*<sup>1</sup>. He chanted this vow, she said, all the time and in all kinds of places -- "out in the woods on his knees, *Namu Dai Busa*; in a Catholic monastery, on his knees, before the image of Christ, *Namu Dai Busa*." "Always", she said, "the vow pushing his practice."

It was with Joko's words, "vow pushing his practice," that the canvas disappeared. I felt the way I sometimes do reading a poem or listening to a symphony, the hairs on the back of my neck standing up, feeling the "design" unspoken and present in which the "thing" is held.

I read somewhere once about a man who lived on the edge of a desert. Everyday he took his broom and swept the desert floor. Each day, everyday, he went out to the desert, broom in hand and attempted to sweep up the desert. One day someone came across him,

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<sup>1</sup> *Namu Dai Busa* is the vow of compassion. Loosely translated, it means, I throw my life into the arms of the Buddha, or Life itself. It is a vow of the "little self" forgotten in the act of unity with Life itself.

astonished by what he saw, and asked the man, "Why are you sweeping the desert? Don't you see it's useless?" The man answered, "It's an *opportunity* because it is an *impossible* task at which to work, exactly as one might meditate or pray."

And so the talk for me was the "handle" of that broom in my own life, seeing it is "useless" and it is okay. Here was Joko, today, and day in and day out, always and ceaselessly attempting to find the words, yet knowing the impossibility. But in the attempt, and, through her words, showing us Soen Roshi, day in and day out, on his knees; making the humble bow, not ascending the mountain, but coming down it to where his life, and mine, is lived, "the vow pushing his practice."

The vow pushing his (or our) practice is the ceaseless sweeping of the sand, the endless grains of beliefs, concepts, and thoughts on the desert of our little self; to continue doing this impossible task just to do it because it is the opportunity to really see who we are; to continue doing it, even when the winds kick up and the sand stings and we don't want to do it at all; sensing we will never get it all swept. It is the only vow, the only religious vow to take.

I remembered then so many other words. "The still point of the turning world"... "Thy will, not mine, be done." Words, I loved to play with, spin around in my head, words whose truth I thought I got.

I recalled the "ejaculations," "aspirations," and the "little prayers" I'd said over and over through Catholic elementary and high school, the words rimming my brain as stiffly as the smell of Clorox rimming my uniform blouse collar. All of the words mixing with the insistent smell of incense and candle smoke and holiness, as I repeated over and over silently, "Thy will, not mine, be done." As a schoolgirl this aspiration, these words, were magic – an incantation that I recited not on Mala beads, but Rosary beads, feeling as I whispered the words in the semi-dark church that if I said them often enough, fervently enough, shook this spirit stick, then somehow the blazing light of Christ, Wisdom and Peace would shine down on me, cleansing me, making me free. Even as I said these words, I knew there was a huge gap between me and this Christ. As six and seven years olds, all of us sitting soldier-like and ramrod-straight, chanted immediately and together, "Thy will, not mine, be done."

Many years later, I became a Buddhist and took what is known as the "precepts," a set of vows. The three pure precepts, "Do not create evil, practice good, actualize good for others," followed by what is called the "Ten Grave" precepts, to which I and others chanted stiffly, ramrod-straight, earnestly, and in unison, "We will do this," after being asked by the Preceptor, "Will you do this?"

And now, so many, many years later, in a small room in California, here was Joko, *doing* the vows – and through her words, Soen was alive -- the embodiment of the every day, actual *functioning* of the vows, their meaning not in the "taking" of them, not in their words, and not in adding anything extra. For me, it was a taste of a simple willingness to keep looking at "just this." This, then this, and then this – the willingness to be naturally

in whatever our/my own "right" life is, nothing big or extraordinary or unattainable. Just to look at what's happening now, "kissing the joy (or sorrow) as it flies by."

Since this talk, sometimes now, when someone disagrees, or I don't want to do something, or I think it should be done my way, I can feel a little puff, maybe a whisper behind my ear, and the thoughts disappear in the experience -- just this.

Recently I planted a butterfly bush in my tiny garden in North Carolina. It doesn't look like much; certainly it does not have the elegance of a rose bush or azalea that demand attention in their flood of color and scents. It's a very ordinary bush, except to the butterfly who merges with it, completely losing its own shape, color, and form. Unless you were to shake the bush, the butterflies are indistinguishable from it; they are not separate. But neither is the bush separate from the butterfly. Both together, the design and the thing held, are an expression of "butterfly bush." Yet the bush is a bush, and the butterfly, a butterfly.

The vow is the vow, the practice is the practice, but with *the vow pushing our practice* -- our practice the simple, day-to-day acts, the vow the day-after-day willingness surrounding it, together they are "practice-vow," and expression of Life, just this, as it is. Lived.