

WE ARE ALL ESSENTIAL WORKERS: A REFLECTION ON WHOLEHEARTED ACTION IN THE PANDEMIC

-Prajnatara Paula Hirschboeck, April 9, 2020

William Johnston, a Catholic priest and Zen Roshi, wrote a classic book, Silent Music: The Science of Meditation. In it he discusses the power of the contemplative life for human evolution into a future of love. Here is his report on scientific research done in 1974. “Scientists have proof that the Carmelite monastery, the Zen temple are not a refuge for people who want to waste time. They are generating large quantities of a very high and precious energy.” What happens to that energy the scientists do not know. Johnston says, “I believe it is the material basis for unmeasurable spiritual energy that builds the Earth (113).” Love is the most powerful energy in the Universe – it carries forward the thrust of evolution (174).”

How and where are you using your energy these days? Inside cooking soup, listening to news, working from home? Or outside interacting as an “essential worker?” In any situation you are the the place where this pandemic is occurring. Whatever you are feeling- -confused, frustrated, trusting, angry, grateful – -your heart is the place where all the feelings of humanity are occurring. This is the teaching of interdependent co-arising. If you doubt you are essential, remember that teaching. You are, we all are, in the ICU of this world. It is the self that believes otherwise who cries out “ What could I do!? What should I do!” Because of our interdependence, if that self clings to afflictive habits, more suffering is transmitted into the world. A suffering self also has forgotten its “PPE” or Personal Protective Equipment. What is the “PPE” for our essential work? The Korean Zen teacher Chinul contrasts the difference between folks with no PPE and those who are awake, buddhas. “Buddhas know how to protect their heart*mind.” For you, what skillful means are your protection? Is your PPE more sleep or more exercise? More online contact or less? Within the universal interdependence of the pandemic ICU, discern how to protect your personal heart*mind. Each of us is unique. This is the path of Right View: seeing the diversity of the relative (“not one”) simultaneously as the oneness of the universal (not two.)”

Kindly investigate your 'do-er' self. Are its habits causing you to suffer? Shakyamuni Buddha was once asked "What is the secret of practice?" His reply was only 3 words: "An appropriate response." Please do not struggle to find the meaning for this answer! Breathe...wait...rest your overworked frontal lobe in the lap of Immensity. Relax into Awareness. That which is aware of your confusion is not confused. That which is aware of your "coulds and shoulds" does not have a "to do" list. Allow Radiant Awareness to melt the delusions of this self. That is its job! Take refuge in the Mother of Wisdom who is beyond all your understandings. She has been within you since you were knit together in your human mother's womb. Trust the generative Source is finding its expression through you. And, as you take refuge, the whole Cosmos is taking refuge in you. Zen calls this the 1st and 2nd dimensions (or "ranks") of enlightenment: the personal in the Universal and the Universal in the personal. Rumi uses a metaphor: many people realize they are a drop in the ocean but not many realize the whole ocean is flowing in each drop.

Perhaps an "appropriate response" is simply to be available. Be the empty open circle for the infinite's flowing through you. With practice you will recognize the difference in an inappropriate response-- feel a tightening. Obstructing Life's flow closes the circle into the "knot" of self-making. It takes courage to be open in such tension. Roshi Susan Murphy calls it "choosing not to object to what is going on." A mother-to-be in labor endures terrific pain. Screaming and sweating she courageously allows the space of her body to open for the baby. Can we humans in the pandemic's ICU realize we are also in the delivery room of birthing buddha nature? Meister Eckhart asks us birth God's "Isness." Thomas Aquinas says, "Every human person is 'capax universi,' capable of the Universe. May we not obstruct the cosmic creative Source. Radiant awareness is shining through the self-knots of fear. Realize the knots as jewels of buddha nature in the infinite net of the Cosmos. Murphy asks us to "yield the self to the completeness of each moment." (Minding the Earth, Mending the World: Zen and the Art of Planetary Crisis.) Yielding does not seem like action to the 'do-er' self. Accepting the completeness of each moment is non-doing. By yielding in non-doing your true essence is free to act. Honor your wholehearted self's offering for here and is the essential work of Wisdom and Love. So Be It.