

Searching for the platypus

"This is not mine, I am not this; this is not my self."

From The Buddha's Discourse on the Characteristic of Non-Self

We can become fierce protectors of our own happiness; especially, perhaps, when our life has been difficult for a while, when we have fought hard to overcome challenges, when acting ethically may have come at some cost to ourselves, and we want now to be able to sit back and enjoy the fruits of our efforts and our righteousness. If we are students of Buddhism we may understand that clinging to happiness in this way will cause us difficulties, but at a deep, visceral level we have a profound desire to be rewarded for hard work and good deeds. There is an evolutionary advantage in being attached to 'myself' and 'what is mine', and to defend it. And we do need to take responsibility for looking after our lives. Yet by approaching our lives with an exaggerated sense of entitlement, we can soon lose touch with our more quiet, reflective aspects.

Watching my breath during a meditation retreat, breathing in, breathing out, I settle into the steady rhythm which seems inevitable, timeless, automatic, and yet one day I will draw my last breath; I will breathe out, and then, for whatever reason, depending on the manner of my death, the involuntary expansion of my chest to draw the next breath in will not happen. It will be the end of a lifetime of accumulated identities and connections, of experiences and learnt behaviours, of opportunities missed, of being taught by generous teachers. A lifetime of wanting happiness, of saying goodbye and moving on many times, of searching; and then of slowly learning to suspend searching at times and instead allow experiences to unfold.

During a break in the retreat I walk down to the Yarra river which is flooded after recent rainstorms, reaching up the embankments and winding its way around river red gums which look majestic rising straight from the water. It is still raining, hardly anyone is about, and the footbridge is empty. I stand quietly on the bridge, watching the whirling water, and with happy anticipation look out for the pair of platypus who

live in a burrow nearby, and who are often seen foraging near the bridge. For a few minutes there is no sign of them, but my patience is soon rewarded, and I can watch them both – swimming fast with their upper bodies reaching up, resting on the surface of the water, ducking up and down, and one even resting on its back for a while and scratching behind its ear. I've caught glimpses of them before, but I have never been able to watch them at such length, swimming about so openly, undisturbed and unafraid, and I walk back to the retreat centre for the next meditation session with delight and joy in my heart. I have become aware, during this retreat, of the habitual posture of impatience with which I approach most moments. I ask myself again and again – am I meeting this moment with kindness and openness, or with a closed impatience? The answer, most of the time, is impatience.

The next evening I'm back at the bridge, but this time it is a pleasant, sunny evening, the night before a public holiday, and people are out in droves, wondering in loud voices where the platypus are, trying to engage me in conversation, commenting on the high water, the log which is now flooded, the lack of platypus, how often they've seen the platypus and how many times they've seen one or both. Through all this, there is no sign of the platypus, and I think they have perhaps moved elsewhere for the evening. I remain standing on the footbridge, watching the light of the sun on the fast-flowing water, and after a while there is a lull in people crossing the bridge, I have the place to myself again, and suddenly there they are, the two platypus, more shy than the previous night, not as exuberant in their antics in the water, yet unmistakably both of them are visible.

To meditate is to be quiet and receptive. If we meditate regularly, we can expect to become more optimistic and healthy, less troubled by disturbing emotions. Yet Zen meditation also asks us to be open and non-judgemental, and this involves giving up on what our sense of 'self' feels entitled to within each moment. This sense of entitlement can find its expression in many forms, ranging from crude and materialistic to far more subtle states, yet at a fundamental level it rules our lives. Even those of us who make space for regular quiet, reflective times, still are likely to approach our search for happiness just like the people searching loudly for the platypus – in impatient expectation. To be truly receptive means to relinquish our limited sense of self, without disassociating, and without sacrificing ourselves.

I grew up in a range of countries, both Asian and European, before coming to Australia. Had I grown up in different places, or in just one country, the person I am would have been someone different. Had I been born thirty-five years earlier, I would have grown up during the Second World War. At one point in my childhood I decided I wanted to learn the piano, which led me to study music. I was born blue in the face and was put straight into an oxygen tank – if my brain had been deprived of oxygen a little longer, I might have been left with an intellectual disability, or not survived at all.

Our lives are a series of circumstances and decisions, often those of others, which in some arbitrary way lead us to where we are right now, and which we identify with as ‘I’. Through this ‘I’ we relate to the world, impact it for better or worse, learn and develop, triumph and fail. We feel comfortable around people with a strong sense of being, who don’t need to prove themselves by putting others down. Yet to allow ourselves to be receptive to each moment with openness and kindness, rather than impatience and imperiousness, is to recognise the randomness, the ever-changing nature, and the inherent emptiness of who we are.

‘Being just this moment, compassion’s way’

Practice Principles, Ordinary Mind Zen

Giving ourselves permission to approach life with greater openness automatically taps into our compassionate heart centre. This is the difference between nihilism, a disconnected emptiness, and the Buddhist shunyata, an interconnected emptiness. It is easy to confuse basic assertiveness with an exaggerated sense of entitlement, and nihilism with shunyata. The Zen path asks for a disciplined life, yet also a life which isn’t rigid or judgemental. Finding our way between these various states is akin to watching a Tai Chi master perform a set routine in which each movement flows freely. There you can see strength combined with effortlessness, fluidity and inner freedom within an attentive focus which never becomes stuck.

There is nothing passive or weak about being open and receptive. It requires purposefulness, discipline, courage, and the constant willingness to learn, both from

life and from our teachers. In our busy everyday life, it may not always seem to make much sense to live with greater openness. We can become very focused on getting ahead, shielding ourselves from noise and pollution and the sometimes difficult moods of people around us. Yet to become permanently fixed in a self-protective stance limits our ability to live freely and compassionately in each moment.

I now have a small wooden platypus on my desk, handcrafted in Tasmania, reminding me of that precious time on the bridge, the gift of being quiet and undemanding, watching the platypus swim in the river on a warm rainy evening.

Anja Tanhane is a mindfulness teacher, registered music therapist, and a student of Geoff Dawson in the Ordinary Mind Zen tradition. She can be contacted on tanhane@iprimus.com.au.