

KEEPING COMPANY WITH THE COSMOS

PETER REASON

It was still fully dark when I was first drawn from sleep; the guestmaster was raking out the wood burning stove in the Chan Hall just below where the male retreatants slept. A few minutes later we were all aroused by the sharp clack of mallet on wooden board, signalling time to get up. I scrambled into layers of warm clothes and was up and out into the yard in time for morning exercises. The near-full moon had travelled across the sky during our sleeping and was now just visible over the roof of the old farm buildings, lighting the edges of the scattering of clouds. The Orion constellation, bright overhead when we went to bed, was now dimly visible on the horizon.

Our teacher walked to the middle of the yard, clapped hands three times, and led us through morning exercises. Afterwards, we gathered round to hear her words for the day. Now we were settled in the middle of the retreat, she asked us to be aware that each moment of perception was unique; and invited us, before going in for our early tea, to take a turn around the yard, opening our senses to the particularity of this morning. I walked the few paces down to where the stream tumbled under the gate and listened to its percussive music; others stood gazing at the clouds or looking up into the still-naked trees that stood over the yard. But not for long, I soon turned back up the muddy slope to the main house to slip off my boots and sit in silence with my companions, nursing my hot mug of tea. And when the bell was rung, we filed out in disciplined quiet, tugging our boots on, to make our way once back across the yard.

In the Chan hall, the meditation bell was sounded three times. We sat for an hour in flickering light from the oil lamps, each facing our portion of wall, each seeking in our own way to notice and let go of our stream of thoughts; to discover – without striving – that empty space where the human mind is quiet and opens directly onto the world. Then we turned to face each other, chanted the ritual of morning service – the sutra, the vows, the aspirational prayers – and once again filed out of the Chan Hall, bowing to the Buddha as we did so, across the yard yet again, now in the gathering light, to have our breakfast.

So unfolded the morning routine of our retreat. Not a word had passed between us, other than from our teacher. We had been instructed to maintain inner and outer silence, to draw into ourselves and withhold all forms of social communication, so that each person's retreat could follow its own path.

After breakfast we were sent on our way to our different jobs – chopping vegetables, stacking firewood, mopping floors – that kept the practical affairs of our retreat running smoothly. But now something strange and beautiful and quite unscheduled happened. We had been awake for nearly two hours. During that time the moon and stars had faded, and the February dawn slowly emerged. Now, at last, the sun was rising from behind the distant hills on the far side of the valley. A line of clouds was lit from below, stretching orange and red across the southeastern sky. A sliver of an arc crept above the sharp line of the horizon, followed, so slowly, by the whole sphere.

I had stopped on the threshold to the Chan Hall, absorbed; sunrise takes place every morning, and every morning is utterly different, utterly special. These are moments of transition, moments of grace when we

can be most aware that the wild world is beyond human control. Today, the whole sphere of the sun stood clear, deep and intense, encompassing the whole earth with light and warmth that winter morning.

When I drew my gaze away, I realized that many of my fellows had also stopped, each arrested at a different spot in the yard; each standing, silently facing the rising sun, in a spontaneous shared ritual of attention and honouring.

After a short while, the deep intensity of colour faded, full daylight emerged and the sun, now too bright to gaze at, set off on its daytime transit across the sky. One by one we dispersed to go about our morning tasks.

* * *

As we stood and watched we were each in our separate worlds yet curiously drawn together in an unspoken intimacy. How does this come about? In his account of the world-view of ancient Chinese sages and poets¹ David Hinton describes how through the discipline of Chan meditation, the mind empties of the stream of thought that maintains our sense of personal identity; the boundary between inner and outer fades away; we may experience ourselves as part of a seamless web of life. Empty mind 'attends to the ten thousand things with mirrorlike clarity...'

Of course this is not an experience that can be actively sought after but one that one may prepare for and may arise in a moment of grace. Maybe, midway through our retreat, we were ready for this opening, a moment not arising when sitting facing our piece of wall but gifted to us by the sun's rising.

Hinton points out that at such empty moments, perception is itself a spiritual act: as 'identity becomes whatever sight fills eye and mind',

it takes on depths beyond the separate self, isolated from others. The shared experience ‘things utterly simple, utterly themselves, and utterly sufficient’ offers new possibilities for friendship and intimacy. He tells how for poets in ancient time

... it was common for friends to sip wine together and watch the moon rise, for example, or mountain peaks among clouds, or plum blossoms in evening light. In this, they were doing nothing less than sharing identity.

Such experiences are maybe not confined to meditation retreats. Have we not all experienced moments of shared intimacy: at dawn and dusk; when the fathomless night sky opens to the universe; when a rainbow arcs across the sky, strong wind howls through the trees; when a child is born or an elder dies? As Gary Snyder tells us, such moments take us out of our little selves into the wider whole.

Yet even more than this, Hinton tells us empty mind is nothing other than Absence, that elemental loneliness from which, in Taoist thought, the ‘ten thousand things’ emerge into Presence and into which they fall back. The friendship you and I can share as we gaze together at the sunrise is more than lonely people sharing experience or even identity. It is the Cosmos keeping itself company.

NOTES

1. David Hinton, *Hunger Mountain: A Field Guide to Mind and Landscape*, Shambhala, 2012

