

## ***On Beliefs - Maylie's Last Dharma Talk, April 15, 2001***

So what do we do with our beliefs? I can't quite swallow the idea that it is possible to have no beliefs. I think that all of us have them, and they are diverse and not necessarily long-lasting although they may be. And we really believe them and we can become pretty attached to them and have pretty strong reactions when an aspect of our belief system is challenged.

If you are somewhat familiar with the Heart Sutra, you can hear this all being played out with the two bodhisattvas talking to one another, Shariputra and Avalokiteshvara. Well, that's a belief, and that can seem remote, irrelevant, or not. Then there is the difficult stuff about form is emptiness and emptiness is form. That can be dismissed as just too difficult, or it can be filed. What does that mean? Then there is a long section about taking apart everything - nothing: no teachings, no person, nothing, nothing. Then the last section is this great BOOM, BOOM, BOOM, the drumbeat of THIS IS THE GREAT MANTRA, THIS IS IT! So, what do we do with that?

So we all have, I believe, beliefs with which we operate, and the question is how do we hold the beliefs and how do the beliefs help us to connect with one another and the world? And how do we use the beliefs so they don't separate us from experience? The teaching is that we hold the beliefs somewhat lightly on the basis of prajna paramita, this non-dual understanding.

I want to make rather an odd switch to a book I have just been reading, *Of Wolves and Men* by Barry Lopez. He has spent a lot of time with the Eskimo and a lot of time for this book in researching wolves. He is noticing the way our culture looks at animals and the way people who are largely unaffected by our culture look at animals. There's a whole study of wolves that compiles behaviors and types, et cetera, that gathers knowledge about wolf behavior and then makes certain generalizations. This is very different from the way the Eskimo live with the wolves, the way they consider them.

The wolf the Eskimo sees is a variable creature who does things because he is a certain age, or because it is a warm day, or because he is hungry. Everything depends on so many other things. Anagook [that's the Eskimo word for wolf] may be a wolf with a family who hunts with more determination than a yearling who has no family to feed. He may be an old wolf alone on the tundra tossing a piece of caribou hide in the air, running to catch it. He may be an ill-tempered wolf who always tries to kill trespassing wolves wandering in his territory, or he may be a wolf who toys with a red-backed mouse in the morning and kills a moose in the afternoon.

Examine some of the [until recently] basic precepts of wild-life science in the light of all

this, such as that wolves kill primarily the weak, the old, the injured. Too simple, say the Eskimo. Temperature and humidity affect the wolf's and the caribou's endurance. Terrain affects their ability to run. For caribou and moose, the nearness of deep, open water is important. With no water to get into, even the healthiest caribou fall prey to the wolf because no caribou can outlast the wolf.

Then he begins to write about the correspondence, the identity between the wolf and the Eskimo, how they both support themselves by hunting, and they have to be very skillful and persistent and know how to survive in the most extreme conditions.

I would like to suggest that there is a correspondence between the worlds of these two hunters about which the reader should be both open-minded and critical. I will not try to prove that primitive hunting societies were socially or psychologically organized like wolves that lived in the same environment although this may be close to the truth.

What I am saying is this: we do not know very much at all about animals. We cannot understand them except in terms of our own needs and experiences, and to approach them solely in terms of the Western imagination is really to deny the animal. It behooves us to visit with the people with whom we share the planet and an interest in wolves, but who themselves come from a different time-space, and who - as far as we know - are very much closer to the wolf than we will ever be.

What, if anything, does this correspondence mean? I think it can mean almost anything if you are trying to fathom wolves. It became clear to me one evening in a single question. An old Eskimo man was asked who, at the end of his life, knew more about mountains and foothills of the Brooks Range...an old man or an old wolf? Where and when to hunt? How to survive a blizzard or a year when the caribou didn't come?

After a pause, the man said, "The same. They are the same." The remark has special meaning for what it implies about wolves. It comes from a man who has had to negotiate in polar darkness and whiteouts when the world surrounding him was entirely without the one thing indispensable to the Western navigator, an edge. Anthropologist Edmond Carpenter has written about the extraordinary ability of polar Eskimo to find their way about in a world that is often without horizon or actual points or objects of reference. What the Eskimo perceives is relationships, clusters of information that include what type of snow is under foot, the direction and sound against a parka wrap of wind, any smells in the air, the contour of the landscape, the movement of animals and so on.

By constantly processing this information, the Eskimo knows where he is and where he is going. By implication, the Eskimo suggests that the wolf does something similar.

So what do we do in this world that we have beliefs about, but essentially we don't know. And sometimes there is a whiteout, sometimes there is a blackout, and then what? It is

said that the Middle Way has no point of reference, so how do we find our grounding in a place where there is no point of reference?

Moving on now to my own situation, I discovered on Friday that I have quite an aggressive cancer, cancer of the colon metastasized to the liver. So, blackout, and there is a great deal to take in. I'm feeling okay; I'm feeling pain free and not too uncomfortable but very weak. The weakness makes it natural to just be very slow and close to the breaths as they come in and go out. I also feel that I have had a wonderful life, and I don't need to hang on.

And we don't know. It could be quite soon; it could be not quite so soon. So a very complex blizzard with so many of us involved and so many really deep, heart connections. How can we be together in this transition time? How can we open our hearts to one another and learn? Great teaching. Greatest teaching. Suzuki Roshi said, "Death is the best teacher." How can we - in our individual ways and as a group - draw together? And, of course, there is great sadness. There are long, life-long relationships. It is good to be able to express that, and I welcome - I really welcome - people calling and dropping in. Actually, not dropping in but calling first. Of course, everyone has been really supportive and helpful. Often when the telephone rings, I get a little "Ah! Oh!" Someone is there so to call, That's fine and to come and have a little visit, that's fine too, and let's see what we make of this together.

I'd like to end by reading a short poem by Jane Hirshfield called "True."

It is foolish to let a young Redwood grow next to a house.  
Even in this one lifetime, you will have to choose.  
That great calm being, this clutter of soup, pots and books.  
Already the first branchtips brush at the window.  
Softly, calmly, immensity taps at your life.