

East of Eden

Now and then I pick up the *Essays in Zen Buddhism* by D.T. Suzuki. Lately I am reading about early Zen expression in China and the last chapter of the Avatamsaka Sutra with its light-emitting Buddhas. Half intimidated by the knowledge and the depth of D.T. Suzuki I ask, what is it for me today? After all, it is comparing ancient texts to even more ancient ones. How does it express itself in the western world today, and in my own life? Of course we have Jeff's books and his talks, and again that leaves me half intimidated, unable to ever sit as many retreats, not even thinking of the books bending the shelves in his office. And the question didn't let me go. So how do I respond? Besides continuing to practice, I want here to look at some stories or quotes that matter to me.

I have to admit there aren't many quotes that ever really struck me in that context. By chance two of them can be found in *East of Eden* from John Steinbeck. There aren't many novels that I read twice, but this is one of them. It's the biblical themes of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, set in rural California. at the turn of 19th century and up to about the time of the Second World War.

I read it for the first time when I was in my twenties. A quote from chapter 18 "*go through the motions*" kind of lived with me, and it helped me greatly sitting through a summer retreat in Tofukuji a couple of years ago. I re-read the novel last summer, being now in my fifties. Still loving it, and reading a very different book it seems. Again a quote got me, this time towards the end of the novel in chapter 51.

Let's start with that scene towards the end of the novel. Cal's brother Aron is dead. A few months earlier Cal had presented a gift to his father Adam - a lot of money - to make up for lost business. Adam rejects the gift. Cal is deeply hurt and jealous that his brother Aron is loved more by his father. He triggers a chain of events leading to Aron joining the army and dying in the war. With a hangover from emptying the larger part of a bottle of whiskey the night before, full of guilt and shame, Cal sits in his room burning the money. The Chinese servant and cook Lee visits him in his room.

At last Cal said, 'Go ahead – you want to talk to me. Go ahead!'

'No,' said Lee, 'I don't. And if you have no need to talk to me – I'll stay awhile and then I'll go away. I'll sit down here.' He squatted in a chair, folded his hands, and waited.

Cal turned from him. 'I can out-sit you,' he said.

'In a contest maybe,' said Lee. 'But in day to day, year to year – who knows? – century to century sitting – no, Cal. You'd lose.'

After a few moments Cal said peevishly, 'I wish you'd get on with your lecture.'

'I don't have a lecture.'

'What the hell are you doing here then?'

'I can out-sit you,' he said. Expecting a good situation, health, a streak of success, a position or a job, a peak experience, to remain forever, we are up for a contest, a contest we will eventually lose. We all have a lot of experience losing these contests.

Our practice confirms Lee's answer. We even might put it a bit stronger: we can sit daily *because* of that century to century sitting. From that century to century sitting, we are free to sit. Like having internalized a never changing retreat or practice schedule: free to sit down, free to get up, free to ring the bell. Tapping into this century to century sitting things truly resolve. It's very different than forcing ourselves through issues and then thinking we are done. We also find a great source of patience here. We suddenly have time.

'I'll stay a while and then I'll go away. I'll sit down here.'

'I wish you'd get on with your lecture.'

'I don't have a lecture.'

Lee is free to sit down with Cal. *'I'll stay awhile and then I'll go away.'* No lecture. We sit down with ourselves and each other on the cushion. No lecture. Initially fueled by our will to *'out-sit'* whatever we come across: pain, sleepiness, the urge to stop and look for something else, this century to century sitting is there to *'out-sit'* us. And although it's boundless, bottomless, we will never fall deeper than this *'century to century sitting.'*

The other scene, which struck me first when I was in my twenties is about Adam, the father of the twin sons (Aron and Cal). He was just shot in the arm by his wife as she abandons the family, leaving him with the newborn twins. He is visited by Sam Hamilton his poor and wise neighbor.

'I don't want advice.'

'Nobody does. It's a giver's present. Go through the motions, Adam.'

'What motions?'

'Act out being alive like a play. And after a while, a long while, it will be true.'

'Why should I?' Adam asked.

Samuel was looking at the twins. 'You're going to pass something down, no matter what you do or if you do nothing. Even if you let yourself go fallow, the weeds will grow and the brambles. Something will grow.'

Adam did not answer, and Samuel stood up. 'I'll be back,' he said. 'I'll be back again and again. Go through the motions, Adam.'

Sam does not fold his hands and sit down. Sam has a lecture. It's kind of how we learn Zazen: *'Go through the motions.'* And he explains it: *'Act out being alive like a play. And after a while, a long while, it will be true.'* Of course he is right, we know that. In a sense that's how we do our first sits. We do like everybody does. Sam also makes a promise: *'And after a while, a long while, it will be true.'*

In contrast to a peak experiences which fade away, this *true* is very different. He doesn't say it will become true. He doesn't say we will get better at it. He says: *'it will be true.'* Of course we feel that on our second day that our practice goes better than on the 1st day. And our third retreat is maybe less of a roller coaster than the first. It's hard to really begin time and again, as if it was our very first sit. Here we meet the other quote - *'no, Cal. You'd lose.'* It's good that we lose. Then it's true. True is peerless. Comparisons and improvements simply don't apply. Better is always ours, it's a me-thing. True is not. True is about being.

Sam and Lee, Adam and Cal, are now safely tucked back into the pages of the novel How does it really express itself today?

With busy workdays, sitting on the cushion, maybe writing a few lines, Zen now and then seems to be something for the fringes of the day. A friend sat Rôhatsu, and another one arrived at the Hermitage. Of course I had a bit of a feeling that they would do the real thing, me being left with business meetings and travel to come. I leave this all with Jeff's response: "Safe travels, there will be cushions to sit on wherever you go."

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