

“Come In, Sit Down and Enjoy Life”

By Rev. Master Seikai

Jiyu-Kennett, the Zen Master who ordained and taught Rev. Master Phoebe and myself, used to say to her, “Come on in, lass, and sit down and enjoy life.” It was one of her expressions that she used fairly often, usually in an attempt to get monks to slow down a little and just sit and talk with her. There was so much to do in the monastery – the schedule was tight and didn’t normally allow for much in the way of socializing – and monks got used to going immediately from one focused activity to another for all of the waking hours in a day.

I’m sure Rev. Master Jiyu knew this. She, after all, created the daily schedule. So the problem, at least in my mind, with hearing the words “come in, sit down and enjoy life” was that, by all appearances, our lives were constructed in such a way as to make that virtually impossible. And if that was so, why was she contradicting her own training regimen by asking us to sit down and enjoy life?

Well for one thing, time and experience showed that Rev. Master Jiyu was quite willing to contradict herself on a regular basis, for the purpose of knocking out from under her monks any clinging to an idea of “this is how things should be, because it’s how we do them.” I would guess that her ability to do this was guided by intuition rather than any deliberate thinking on her part. That she would shake things up just for the sake of keeping people on their toes.

I think, however, that she also genuinely wanted us to sit down and enjoy life for its own sake. That wish can be taken on two different levels: one is that you can sit down in an easy chair (in the monastery there weren’t many of those, so it would have been whatever you could find), take a break from what you’re doing, chat a little bit and enjoy life; the other level is that of sitting in meditation – and enjoying life within meditation practice. The latter is a bit harder to understand.

Looking at the first level, here in America we don’t really have the time to sit down and enjoy life anymore. This is reflected in how houses are built. Houses used to be built with a front porch, which made it possible to sit outside, but under a roof, for no purpose other than to sit, talk, read the paper and generally enjoy life. It seems that before World War II people actually did have the time to do those things. But life changed; it got faster paced, people spent progressively less time sitting on their front porches – if they had one, which new houses didn’t – less time chatting over the fence with their neighbors, less time enjoying life in a way that didn’t involve some kind of frantic activity such as driving to an amusement park.

Porches were wonderful for summer evenings; I can remember sitting on porches as a refuge from mosquitoes, or just as a place to enjoy an evening breeze. Air conditioning probably had a lot to do with putting an end to this. Suddenly indoors had

the added attraction of being pleasantly cool in summer; the television beckoned, and there were lots of things to do now that electricity animated all sorts of gadgets. A couple of generations later, we have exponentially increased the number of gadgets, including some very addictive ones, such as the I-phone and the I-pad.

“Labor saving devices”, once upon a time, were ballyhooed as a revolution in the creation of “free time”. The vacuum cleaner, the gas powered lawn mower, the electric hedge trimmer, the electric kitchen mixer, the modern refrigerator and freezer....and so on....would save *all kinds of time, which could then be spent on leisurely pursuits*. Irony aside, I have often wondered: What went wrong? Why did labor saving devices end up creating labor and reducing leisure time? It’s one of those existential questions which I think about, but it seems few people either want to, or have the time to think about. Something went wrong somewhere; life became hectic and stressful.

My theory in answer to my own question runs something along these lines: The more you can do, the more you want to do things. The more you want to and are able to do things, and do them in a hurry, thus saving time and money, the more those things become expectations that we have. We totally expect that we can drive places as opposed to walking or riding a horse; we totally expect that we can talk to someone on the phone instead of writing a letter – actually, why use the phone if you can email or text someone, which is quicker – and there are about a hundred other such expectations which we never even question because they have just become part of life. We depend on them. Dependence. Life is stressful because of how much we depend on so many things, so much gadgetry, so many expectations of things we need to have. Even if can can’t fix them when they break.

Going back to ‘the more you can do things, the more you want to and are able to do things’. The key word here is probably the word want. Wanting is one of our biggest problems in the Western World; desire for things is regarded by society as good. We need to keep on consuming – it’s good for the economy, after all, and lots of things save time. But how many people want to really question or challenge these basic assumptions of our society and culture? Maybe a few offbeat poets, hippies, and dropouts. Monks may not make the list because there are so few of us.

But as I said earlier, even in monastic life we didn’t really have the time to sit and enjoy life very much unless our master asked us to. So the real challenge is our underlying attitudes and assumptions. Are we going to just keep pushing day after day, trying to accomplish things, trying to accumulate things? Or is it possible, even in the midst of the modern fast-paced world, to sit down and enjoy life? Another existential question.

Of course, the answer to it will be up to every individual, and how they choose to live their life. Where that’s concerned, I think that meditation practice, the second level of sitting down and enjoying life which I spoke of, is central to this question and challenge. Meditation practice is the practice of stopping. Just stopping all the busy stuff that goes on in life and just sitting down to do nothing. That’s right – nothing. For

years I approached meditation with an underlying idea of wanting to gain or accomplish something, such as enlightenment or wisdom. But my own experience basically crushed that approach, and I slowly learned to just sit there without any desire for anything whatsoever.

As long as we are trying to get somewhere in our meditation, it probably won't be very enjoyable. Most people are trying to quiet down their minds, trying to carve out a little space where the mad crush of thoughts, ideas, feelings and memories can't get in and disturb the peace. The problem is that there is aversion in this, and the place of deeper meditation is to sit *with* all the noise and confusion of our own minds and not try to get away from it. So, in order to truly, deeply, sit down in meditation and be able to enjoy life, we need to be able to enjoy our own crazy, meandering, noisy thinking. Not such an easy thing to arrive at. In other words, it takes practice.

But I can do it. I've taught myself to enjoy breathing in and out. Without anything in particular to accomplish, I can sit down in meditation and watch my mind and my breathing and enjoy it. If life isn't enjoyable on that very existential, moment to moment level, will it ever be enjoyable? Not in any kind of durable way. So, it seems to me, the way to enjoy life is to dig deeply into it, look at all of its constituent parts, and learn to be at peace with them. Those constituent parts include all sorts of things which are not desirable, such as impatience, irritability, intolerance, inadequacy, depression and anxiety. The true test of sitting still is to confront these things and learn to accept them for what they are and let them go. In my own experience, the road to inner peace took me directly into and through the jungle of my own mental difficulties; there was no escaping them. I have made it my practice to face up to every shred of mental and emotional turmoil and, first, accept it for what it is. I ask the essential question, "what is it?" And, often that is enough for it to dissipate, but if there is something to be learned, then it is necessary to keep facing, keep questioning, keep sitting with it until it dissolves.

I think that Rev. Master Jiyu's saying "come in, sit down and enjoy life" was a metaphorical way of pointing to something very deeply significant that she wanted us to learn. I, for one, was slow to learn it because I was so driven by my own wants – to get things done and have the momentary pleasure of finishing something that creates some job satisfaction, among others. In my case it took a pretty deep level of fatigue for me to fully appreciate the value of being able to just sit down and enjoy life. I had to learn from my own experience to get there, which seems to be how we arrive at an understanding of most of life's important lessons. We can try to put good advice directly into practice; I've done that, also, and it does work. But in other areas, such as this one of learning to enjoy life, I've had to learn the hard way.

Learning something the hard way isn't bad; the lesson will be all the more deeply implanted in our consciousness if that's how we arrive at it. And life is, after all, a constant process of experimentation, trying things out, seeing that they either work or don't work in any given set of circumstances, learning from what has happened, and then going on. We will be greatly hampered in our ability to keep moving forward on a

spiritual level if we are too preoccupied with ideals of how things should be. This operates both on an immediate level, the one I mentioned at the beginning of this article, and also on a much broader level of how we choose to live our lives – our values and what we regard as truly important.

If we really want to enjoy life, we have to recognize that the fleeting satisfaction of temporary things is not really going to do it for us. If we are able to move beyond that dogged craving for immediate gratification towards a more mature approach to life, learning to allow things to take time, and beyond that to learn to enjoy the moment that is directly here and now, we can get a handle on it. But this spiritually- based approach takes practice; there is no escaping the need to practice it, and it can only be practiced one day at a time and one moment at a time. Hundreds and thousands of moments add up to days, and days add up to years. Years add up to a lifetime, and that is really the commitment which lies at the heart of what Rev. Master Jiyu was trying to teach people. She wanted to enjoy life, and generally did, and she wanted us to do so as well. But at the same time, she knew that one has to pay the full price for entering that place. As Zen Master Dogen put it in his *Rules for Meditation [Fukanzazengi]*: *If you do these things for some time you will become as herein described, and then the Treasure House will open naturally and you will enjoy it fully.*” (Translation: Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett).