

Appreciation

“Even the general took off his armor to admire the peonies.” Zen poem.

This Zen poem is packed with Buddhist ideals. Today, I want to talk about “appreciation” in the Buddhist sense, the appreciation that encompasses all beings.

Appreciation as defined by Webster is the recognition of a quality, value, significance of people and things; an expression of gratitude; awareness of delicate perception, especially the aesthetic qualities.

From the poem we learn that respect is an aspect of appreciation. In this case, appropriate attire was the sign of respect. In other situations it might be the same or different. The expression of respect can be through body, speech or mind.

For us, bowing is a sign of respect. We bow to our Buddha Nature, the Buddha image. We bow to our cushions as the seat of enlightenment, then to the Sangha, the community of fellow practitioners. We bow to our ancestors during service and when we greet or bid farewell to each other.

In the expression of speech, we use kind, wholesome words to communicate respect. Our tone is usually subdued, our language, more formal, and we make eye contact to convey sincerity.

When we appreciate persons, sentient beings and things, we may have the thought they too have buddha nature and one day will be a buddha. Appreciation, when practiced in this way, has the aspect of equanimity. When fully practicing appreciation, all beings, inanimate objects, all are equally valuable. All have buddha nature. All are interconnected. One handles objects with care, notes the small and the large.

Our general also was aware of the event. He was so mindful that he realized armor was not appropriate. So appreciation is grounded in mindfulness, in awareness.

When the time is right, just like the general, we let go. We abandon our discursive thoughts, our troubles, and plans for the moment of appreciation. Then, we focus our being on the object of appreciation. Suddenly, our thinking is stopped. We are no longer separate from the object or person. Appreciation is nondual expression.

It is here in the meeting of the appreciated and the appreciator that emptiness comes forth. The experience is direct.

Appreciation is included in Love. Appreciation is the precursor, the prelude, the prerequisite to love. It takes you down the path to love and prepares you along the way. Sometimes in our quest for Love, we can't find it. There are moments, sometime days, like this. So, when you can't find Love, look around you to see what you can appreciate. If you practice in this way, you will find your way.

There can be downside to appreciation if we start grasping at that which we are appreciating. This is something we all have done. You may observe yourself appreciating something then a desire to own it, take it, comes up. Now, we have another opportunity to let go. Of our thoughts and desires. This all happens quite quickly. Experienced meditators can spot the mind spinning the story and apply an antidote.

In Spring, our Zen ancestors expressed their appreciation for the seasonal gifts:

**RED PEACH BLOSSOMS OVER THE WALL
OF A VILLAGE HOUSE¹**

KISEI REIGEN, GBSS II:201

The path meanders in and out through villages and flooded fields:
Whose house could this be, its small peach tree so red?
Stray branches appear and disappear from behind the wall--
The gate to the bamboo grove is shut: must be guarding his blossoms.

VIEWING BLOSSOMS AT KANNONJI AND EIMYOJI²

GIDO SHUSHIN, GBZS II 450[583]

At Kannonji and north at Eimyoji,
Few visitors walk the secluded paths deep in spring
On the single tree in an empty garden, blossoms like snow--
Incredible how few colors spring requires.

WRITING A SPELL TO PROTECT BLOSSOMS³

KEIJO SHURIN, GBZS IV:133

Wind and rain just as the blossoms are falling!
I laugh as I write an incantation to hang on the flowering branches
People returning home sobering up from their wine will have a hard
time reading *this*--
Slanting across the sparse plum shadows, a poetic charm in Sanskrit.

**A MESSAGE TO SOMEONE WHOSE BLOSSOMS
I SAW FROM A DISTANCE⁴**

KISEI REIGEN, GBSS II:219

Far off there in the distance – is that a peach tree? An apricot?
Up to the gate without bothering to ask whose house it might be;
The whole spring, just like some crazy butterfly,
I'll go anywhere for the sake of blossoms.

VIEWING BLOSSOMS AT A MOUNTAIN TEMPLE ⁵

KEIJO SHURIN, GBZS IV:84

The road enters the green mountains near evening's dark;
Beneath the white cherry trees, a Buddhist temple
Whose priest doesn't know what regret for spring's passing means--
Each stroke of his bell startles more blossoms into falling.

Letters from Emptiness

Although we have no actual written communication
from the world of emptiness, we have some hints
or suggestions about what is going on in that world,
and that is, you might say, enlightenment.
When you see plum blossoms
or hear the sound of a small stone hitting bamboo,
that is a letter from the world of emptiness.

Here are today's questions:

How am I receiving the letters?

How am I receiving life?

¹ p. 89; ² p. 96; ³ p.114; ⁴ p.114; ⁵ p.124 Zen Poems of the Five Mountains David Pollack

⁶ Shunryu Suzuki Roshi quotation