

## Calling the Mind Home

In Zen monasteries in Asia, there is an instrument called the *Han* used to signal the monks to come to the meditation hall to begin sitting meditation and to chant the service liturgy each day. It is usually constructed from a thick piece of wood hanging by a rope and is struck with a mallet. The sequence of hits tells the monks how much time they have to be in their seats before meditation begins and the sharp report of each blow can be heard throughout the temple. It is a very effective way to summon the monks while maintaining verbal silence.

Traditionally there is an inscription written across the face of the *han* which points squarely to the heart of spiritual practice. The particular translation that appears on the *han* at the Austin Zen Center says:

Great is the matter of birth and death,  
All is impermanent, quickly passing.  
Awake! Awake! Each one.  
Don't waste this life.

It is as if each morning and afternoon, this message rings out with every hit on the *han*. "Don't sleep through your life. A human birth is precious – an enormous blessing and an enormous responsibility. It passes so quickly, like everything and everyone, so wake up or you might miss it. Don't waste this miraculous opportunity to live!"

How often do we need such a reminder? I think that every morning and every afternoon is not a bad idea since it is so much easier for most of us to slip into the gentle sleep of daily routine or the frantic distraction of an over-scheduled life. We may take stock of our lives as each year draws to a close by reflecting on the past twelve months and make resolutions for the coming year. But this process can also become an empty ritual, repeated only once each year, and, hence, devoid of the jolting immediacy and transformational potential of attention to the present moment. This immediacy and vitality is represented by the crack of the *han*.

Adopting a daily practice of prayer or meditation is a very practical commitment to this decision to live fully and responsibly in the present. I once asked one of my teachers for his definition of "discipline" and he replied, "Remembering what you want." In this sense, being disciplined about spiritual practice is not a promise to someone else. A promise too easily invites us to take the role of a child trying to please a judging parent. True commitment and mature discipline is also not a burden to be endured in the hope of improving one's self or becoming a "better person." Discipline is, instead, a clear adult decision to be self-responsible - to remember, again and again, where we have chosen to invest our energies and how we have decided to share our gifts. Our deepest aspirations and heart-felt wishes for a life of spirit can be fully expressed in the simple acts of sitting in meditation, silently praying, or offering ourselves in devotional activity. In these ways, commitment to spiritual practice is an ongoing

willingness to remember what is most essential and most important in our brief lives.

With such a commitment to regular practice we must also face our capacity and willingness to be responsible for our lives. Zen teacher Norman Fischer, in describing this capacity for responsibility says: "...responsibility is the willingness to confront nakedly and clearly what's in front of you in its own terms and to be called forth fresh by what occurs. The Greek root of the word *response* means to offer, to pledge. To be responsible is to offer yourself to what happens to you, to pledge yourself to your life."<sup>1</sup> This is can be a huge task – hugely challenging and hugely rewarding. And, of course, each person must find his or her own way of answering the call that life presents. We must first learn to listen deeply and then be willing to respond, to be "called forth".

How will you answer the call of your life's challenges? What regular practices will you engage in this New Year, which will demonstrate your deepest commitments and responsibilities? Remember the call of the *han*: "Great is the matter of birth and death. All is impermanent, quickly passing. Awake! Awake! Each one. Don't waste this life."

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<sup>1</sup> Fischer, Norman. Taking Our Places: The Buddhist Path to Truly Growing Up. Harper: San Francisco. 2003