A Time to Listen

(Based on a talk given by Rev. angel Kyodo williams in December 2008 at the Center for Transformative Change/New Dharma Meditation Center in Berkeley, California.)

Good Evening....

I've had the--I don't know if it's opportunity or misfortune--to be listening to previous dharma talks of mine lately. Mostly it feels like misfortune. And there was a particular period of time where I almost always read from the Tao te Ching first. We had both Thursday evening talks and also Sunday morning talks, and it occurred to me as I looked at the list of talks that I think I talked myself out.

So I've had an interesting relationship with talks for the past few months, not always a desirable relationship, not a relationship full of desire. I felt always like I wanted to talk--I have this little voice, that just entered my head that said, You're going to go there. Yes I am.

So I sent an email out that all of you may not have received, but eventually everyone will receive it. I've been putting it out in wider and wider ripples and making some appropriate adjustments to it as I go along. Its subject is Time to Listen and it's basically an explanation about a decision that has arisen for me to undertake social silence in the coming year for--I don't know how long. We could get to January 2nd and I'm done, but for now anyway.

And in taking social silence, which is what we are practicing here during the practice period, it likewise enables me to continue to meet the commitments that I've made. Unfortunately, in some ways my life has commitments through to October already, firm and clear things of work and gatherings with people that I've been in relationship with over years. So it's a choice that's easily possible for me but not easily doable without creating a reverberating effect which isn't what I want. So I chose social silence, as opposed to taking a year of silence, which was what was really calling me, as a medium ground.

Right now, I don't want to so much talk about the social silence I want to talk about time to listen.

I think that there's some point in each one of our lives, likely multiple times, in which we are called deeply to listen, to do something radical, to do something that is far beyond our own perception of our comfort zone but also far beyond our sense of possibility. And I am beginning to believe that those moments are part of what we live for. That we are here to wait to hear those calls and that the universe is in a state of vibration, pending vibration watching to see if we will listen, if we will respond to those calls. Most often we don't and we kind of
do it all over again. It's our version of Groundhog Day.

I'm a bad Buddhist, so I don't really have a good sense of our karmic life or rebirth the way we think of it, that is going from one lifetime to the next; I can't remember another life. This is what I have. I have a bad memory anyway these days and so maybe I was born before and will be born again. But I think that we certainly live these lives and die and are reborn over and over again in what we perceive as the span of our lifetimes. And we re-enter samsara; we re-enter the world of suffering over and over again because we don't heed those calls that come to us often very, very subtly. They’re almost stunningly frightening, and I remember that the beginning of this call was kind of like that.

We went to Alcatraz together and this fellow was there that Evon Peter introduced me to, a black guy that had been silent for fourteen years. You know you have those moments where your brain speech goes in two different directions at once. So part of my brain speech responded with, You've got to be kidding! Then there was the other part that came from down in my belly that said, Wow. Yeah.

What was particularly unusual about this fellow is that he was black. And that sort of destroyed many hidden beliefs that I had about who does such wacky things. White folks do those kinds of things and we accept that. And Indian Guru-type little men who write on tablets for forty years do this kind of thing. But not generic black guys, right?

So that blew away the spectrum of where I lived and where that possibility lived. It just took it and smashed it all together, because he’s just kind of right there to the left of me. That happened a little over a year ago. It was Thanksgiving day just over a year ago. And in the way that life does, I was offered many, many distractions so that I didn't have to really deeply listen to that call.

All kinds of interesting entertainment came about. Things happening with my body and my health and love and my family and you know, on and on—all of the things that get in the way of those calls. But I think if we're honest with ourselves and honest about whatever that moment is when it really strikes us, we can look back and say, Never went away. It actually surfaced over and over again.

I would have these moments of practically wanting to just get in my truck and leave and never turn around and come back again. That was a representation of that call for quiet, that call for listening to what was being said to me that I was somehow not quite able to hear.

So I will listen.
And one of the ways in which I'll listen is by having less of my own voice jumbling around in my head. When I speak, even now I feel very, very conscious of my own voice. In my head it feels like it's thundering in there, like it's a lot of sound so that every time I speak verbally I feel this fullness of my voice in my head, and I just want her to shut up. I just want it to be quiet in that way that enables us to listen more deeply, to listen more closely to the message that is being whispered over and over again. It's almost inaudible. What feels like every single moment of my existence is whispering, is happening. And it’s just beneath the surface of my capacity to actually hear it.

I want to invite each of you, during this practice period, to put your ear to your heart and to listen.

Listen for what it is that is calling you just beneath the surface of your capacity to hear, and ask yourself, as I did, What will it mean if I don't respond? What kind of life is possible for me if I don't respond to that call? What will I not know? Maybe even worse, What will I continue to know if I don't listen?

And each of you that are participating formally in the practice period has set particular intentions. I know you are probably full of intentions at this moment, bearing down getting ready to really take them on. Likely, you also have your own personal challenge that you'll take on. Because I'd like to do this with some company, I want to invite you to add this to your list of intentions. To give yourself permission, as I'm giving myself permission, to really listen. It may not be for you; you may not need to have utter silence. Maybe what is being called for is for you to dance or to sing at the top of your lungs. So what you hear will be utterly different than what I hear. But I want you to give yourself permission to listen.

So now I'm going to reverse course and read something from the *Tao Te Ching* on the end just because I feel like it.

*Chapter 47, Tao Te Ching*

Without opening your door,
you can open your heart to the world.
Without looking out your window,
you can see the essence of the way.

The more you know,
the less you understand.

The Master arrives without leaving,
sees the light without looking,
achieves without doing a thing.
--translated by Stephen Mitchell

You ever get a recording in your head? I've got a recording in my head, and maybe it's because--I don't know why. I read a poem one day in our admin meeting and I certainly do not have it memorized but part of the poem is, at least my poor recollection of it, is playing in my head and it's called True Love by David Whyte.

About the fourth stanza down he says, you just want to live and you just want to love and you don't drown any more because you're tired of drowning. And so all you can do is take in your hand the one that you know whose hand belongs in yours.

He's speaking about true love; it doesn't have to be a person.

I think I keep hearing it playing because it's like this: I feel like each of us should take in our hand the one whose hand we know belongs in ours. The only way that we can discover what that hand is, who that hand belongs to, what the symbolic representation of that is, is to listen.

Because there's so many things that we can put in our hands. There are so many things that we can make ourselves busy with.

And it's so not true that you have to have the awful adjective of Kyodoshi-ness to do this. And everything about the world that we're living in is telling us that that is not our right; it is something that is not available to us. And that's why I want to so encourage you to not only seize that opportunity but to understand it as a responsibility. To understand that to listen to your heart, to spend that time and then to act on to whatever it is, is absolutely the greatest gift that you can give to anyone in your life.

And it's your responsibility if you really want to live. If you really want to live, it's your responsibility because for as long as you deny that call you're giving less of yourself. For as long as you continue to just muddle through life--and you'll have joys and you'll have happiness and you'll smile and you'll have friends and you'll love--there will always be a part of you that will exist in a state of loss, of terrible, terrible loss. And none of us should ever go through our life and end it with the experience of that great regret that comes from not having done what we were called to do, of not having followed the many things that we heard.

And maybe it will take you off a cliff and you'll die, but you'll die in bliss because you did what you needed to do. It belongs to each of you, and you should take it.

May you go well.....
True Love
by
David Whyte

There is a faith in loving fiercely the one who is rightfully yours, especially if you have waited years and especially if you never believed you could deserve this loved and beckoning hand this way. I am thinking of faith now, and the testaments to loneliness and what we feel we are worthy of in this world. Years ago in the Hebrides I remember an old man who walked every morning on the grey stones to the shore of baying seals, who would press his hat to his chest in the blustering salt wind and say his prayer to the turbulent Jesus hidden in the water, and I think of the story of the storm and everyone waking and seeing the distant yet familiar figure far across the water calling to them, and how we are all preparing for that abrupt waking, and that calling, and that moment we have to say yes, except it will not come so grandly, So biblically, but more subtly and intimately in the face of the one you know you have to love,
so that when you finally step out of the boat toward them, we find everything holds us, and everything confirms our courage, and if you wanted to drown, you could, but you don’t, because finally after all this struggle and all these years, you don’t want to any more, you’ve simply had enough of drowning, and you want to live and you want to love and you will walk across any territory and any darkness, however fluid and however dangerous, to take the one hand you know belongs in yours.