

Ekodo: Birdsong

By Sean Weaver

As he screamed at me I noticed that his face became slightly twisted, with furrows in his tanned brow like delicate wavy patterns on an untouched sandy beach. The bellbirds still sang sharply, as a miasma of beech foliage shimmered in the sunlit backdrop to this episode of fury.

The argument was over a difference of opinion in the way our forest campaign was being managed. As a habitual Robin Hood I commonly find myself snatching power from domineering protagonists and distributing it where possible to undervalued members of a group whose exiled wisdom is often valid, valuable, and at times crucial to the success of an eco-political endeavor.

As a kaleidoscope of adjectives sprayed towards me I said to myself “so this is abuse.” Naming it helped to create a soft distance between the delivery and the target, allowing me to hear this as a phenomenon rather than a paralyzing invective that would otherwise make me blind deaf and dumb to reason and self-composure. I was experimenting with the Zen practice of listening to abuse and hearing it as one would the song of a bellbird. Neither good nor evil, just as it is, perfect in its own way.

The instruction is to encounter all experiences as an opportunity to be compassionately awake - even the experience of abuse. “...*It is a compassionate device to liberate us entirely from the mean-spirited delusions we have built up with our wrong-full conduct from the beginning-less past...*” so one Zen sutra goes.

In the kitchen of environmental politics we commonly encounter the heat of conflict. This goes with the territory, which is why many people stay away from politics. As is sometimes said of politics: don't wrestle with a pig – you both get dirty but only the pig enjoys it.

But in our wholesome efforts to live by our values, we will often find that the path of political engagement can be discovered beneath our feet. And this path invariably delivers us to conflict situations, where differences in opinion are the norm between our group and our opponents, and also (and sometimes the fiercest) within our own ranks. Legend has it that Mike Moore – onetime prime minister of New Zealand – once introduced a new cohort of MPs to the empty parliamentary debating chamber by waving his hand to the opposition benches saying “your opponents are over there, and your enemies are all around you.”

So if we do not want to deal with differences of opinion, or the interpersonal challenges that come with conflict then it is best to stay away from the politics of environmental or social justice. The trouble is, on the one hand there is no way of avoiding conflict if we choose to remain human. And on the other, if we truly want to turn our passionate concerns into action, then sooner or later we are going to have to wrestle with that pig.

But there are sophisticated emotional tools for the task, and as spiritual athletes we can master them in our training as bodhisattvas of the Earth. It is merely another aspect of compassionate practice, where we hoist our sails to harness the abundant energy of the interconnected world as us, as the experience of that very

abuse itself. With this energy we can endure the heat of fury's kitchen, and heal more quickly from the occasional emotional bruising that comes with any dedicated quest to bring about positive change.

So how do we do it? What is the secret? Where is this energy? : Noticing the furrows in his tanned brow like delicate wavy patterns on an untouched sandy beach. Listening to the bellbirds singing sharply, as the miasma of beech foliage shimmered in the sunlight...

The training is to first notice what is happening – to be mindful and experience-ful of what is occurring. It helps to name it. It also helps to take a few deep breaths. This creates a little distance and allows us to avoid drowning in the blinding stressful vortex of conflict. What is the sound of conflict? Birdsong, a squeaky footfall on a shiny corridor, wind in the trees, and sometimes shouting. What does conflict look like? Blue sky with patches of wispy cloud, shimmering leaves tossed by a gentle wind, paint cracking on a ceiling, a dull brown carpet, a furrowed brow, a twisted face.

By noticing what is actually happening to our senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch) during stressful encounters, we give our awareness a chance to be present in the real moment as opposed to the imaginary one created by defensiveness, indignation, arrogance, and countless other delusions brought up by thinking. Here we can more readily maintain our composure, know what is happening, and choose how to act with integrity.

By not loosing the pedals we get to harness a calm and powerful energy as we embed ourselves in the interconnected world, as the interconnected world, as this set of senses, as this integrity, as this decisive action, legitimate from the beginning, needing no justification whatsoever. Our authority comes from our own authentic experience of conflict itself and exactly our awareness of what is happening right here right now. This is power. This is politics without the pig.

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