



Friday Mornings at Spirit Rock

Meditative Poems
by
Stephanie Noble



This
Just this...
...bliss.

www.stephanienoble.com

Also by Stephanie Noble
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No Left Turn on Sir Francis Drake

Learning to trust the wisdom of the signs
I turn right, and am grateful.

For now the way home
is graced by an arching canopy of conifers
with slivered shafts of sunlight
brushing the bark of towering trunks
with burnt sienna.

A parting gift that keeps me
yielding to the present.

2006

These poems come from meditations, insights and explorations I have had over the past decade or so spent at the Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California Friday morning class.

This collection is dedicated with gratitude to the teachers of that class, my dear sangha sibling, the staff and teachers of Spirit Rock who continue to create a vital retreat and refuge to support us all in our practice, and to all the inhabitants of this precious woodland valley who share their habitat so generously.

May the merits of my practice,
and my poems,
be for the benefit to all beings.
May all beings be well.
May all beings be happy.
May all beings live in peace.

Stephanie Noble
Friday Morning Class Manager
September 2008

Entering Spirit Rock

The sign says:
Yield to the Present.

I yield to the feel of
my palms
loosening their tight grip
on the steering wheel,
my breath
settling deeper in my lungs
and my heart
feeling its call has been answered.

The hills rise steeply around me,
embracing this little valley in a soft silence,
offering to quench my thirst with a
golden chalice of delicious awareness.

I say:
Yield to the present.
It is the sole dwelling place
of the Buddha.

2006

Creek Bed Meditation

Friday mornings at Spirit Rock, I walk the land.
I have chaperoned butterflies dancing,
sat with water skates playing in ponds,
listened to the earth symphony of birds, frogs, crickets
and water trickling in the creek.

Each week I note the subtle shifting of the seasons
as they seed, grow, ripen and fade before my eyes.
Winter-dampened fog-shrouded hills,
tree bark and boulders gilded with emerald moss,
bounding water gushing forth -- all give way:
wet to dry, green to yellow, cold to hot.

Now in mid-summer, the morning air is dry and still,
the hills are golden, the frogs are quiet.
I enter the dappled shelter of a laurel grove,
and descend into the rocky creekbed.
Its deep banks rise around me,
swallowing me whole.
Night chill held in the rocks
along with the vague memory of water
rises to cool my skin.
Beneath my feet leaves crunch and crackle
in the hush of morning.
The shaggy yellowed tree moss
hangs loose and dusty.
Gnarled roots dangle over the dry creek, searching.
I duck under fallen logs
following the cavernous twists and turns
the underpinings that shape
winter's waterfalls and spring's deep pools.
Not even a puddle remains.

It seems I am the only water here.
The air tingles with a dowsing awareness
of my wet presence in the midst of dry longing.

I feel the flow of myself as I move downstream.

Summer 1997

Dragon's Gate

In the West
there are dragons
knights reach
sainthood
by slaying

In the East
the dragon
waits at
nirvana's gate.

Sit with your dragon
until it wags its tail,
licks your hand and
invites you to enter.

2008

When Hello Doesn't Feel Like Quite Enough

O radiant being,
may you behold yourself
in every blade of grass,
in every drop of rain,
in every face you meet.

May your sojourn on earth
illuminate the oneness of all life.

Mountain Wisdom

Watching the play of the fog and sunlight
dancing with each other around the mountain.

Watching the play of inspiration and depression
dancing with each other around my mind.

Can I just let them dance?

Can I just be the mountain?

Dirt Bag Dharma

I don't know how long I had been ill...
Long enough to see myself as
fragile, wan, weak, in need of protection
from violent images and emotion
that could suck the life right out of me.

But I needed soil for my garden
and the worker assigned to shovel
ten bags of dirt for me was apparently
way overdue for a break, and no doubt
had other grievances fueling his anger.

I backed off -- to give him space, I thought,
but really more to give me space,
as I retreated to the cocoon of my car to wait.

Feeling guilty, I began to send him metta:
May you be well, may you feel ease.
At first the words had a begging quality
like the prayers of a small child, cowering
in a corner, terrified of the boogey man.

But then I began to feel the power
of my words flush through me, transforming me
into a strong conduit of lovingkindness.
So I returned to his side and soon
we were chatting -- who knows about what,
it didn't matter, because -- all the while
I radiated that peaceful energy.

Soon his shoulders and jaw softened, his voice lost
its edge, he chuckled at something I said,
and when his boss yelled another order,
he didn't bark or bristle as he'd done before.
Instead he smiled at me, rolled his eyes as if to say,
'Ain't this shitty life grand?'

In that moment,
standing amidst my dirt bags,
I realized I was well.

Shift of Perspective

One small step back from the fray the view widens.
Molecules dance freely to a rhythm
that rises up from the earth in waves.

Embraced in their boundless effervescence,
I rest in this still moment with a shivery delight
that imprints on my cheek like a cat's paw.

Metta Cake

A careful baker, I measured metta
using the back of a butter knife to level each cup.
Yet the cake would fall or simply lack sweetness
for no reason I could fathom.
My frustration mounted. I raged at the miller,
the leavening, the oven.
But cake after cake was politely nibbled or set aside
by my carefully culled guests at my perfectly laid table.
I suffered deeply the humiliation
and the waste of expensive ingredients.
But I kept trying, and one particularly painstaking night,
I fell asleep, exhausted from my futile labor,
in tears of self-recrimination.
To awaken in a dream world of metta beyond measure
Of infinite love boundlessly flowing
Of hearts open to give without depletion,
to receive without questioning their worthiness,
in an endless circuit of loving light energy.

Morning came. Sunlight fell upon my salty cheek.
I threw open the windows wide to the boundless light
and felt the warmth flow through me, unmeasured.

Sticky Side Down

If, perchance, you have landed on this life sticky-side down, here are some basic instructions:

1. Stop struggling
2. Laugh helplessly at the ridiculousness of the situation.
3. Breathe in deeply, taking in the sweet aroma of the earth as it holds you in its loving embrace.
4. Breathe out completely, sinking deeper into that embrace.
5. Notice sensations, like your skin touching the ground.
6. Watch idly as your thoughts and emotions pass through.
7. Breathe, feel, notice, watch, breathe, feel, notice, watch, bfnw...
8. Become aware of the rhythms of your breath.
9. And maybe, just as you make friends with what is, it changes
10. Breathe, feel, notice, watch, breathe, feel, notice, watch, bfnw...
11. And maybe what is now is okay, too.

Listening to the Rain Meditation

I am cloud scudding gently floating free
 Sky sponge absorbing rising mists
 darkening deepening steely blue releasing...

I am rain dancing in the dust
 hammering rooftops playing moist music
 seeping into earth quenching dry roots
 quivering dull leaves shining forests...

I am stream bounding forth
 polishing rocks cavorting fish
 transporting twigs, leaves, water skates...

I am waterfall in rapid descent
 plunging down rock face, dissembling into pattern
 pounding on pond drum, roaring through canyon...

I am lake, cupped in earth chalice
 cool still reflecting tree cloud sky...

I am mighty river flowing gently
 rushing rapids carving stone channel
 rising, seeping, bursting levees
 stretching flat fingers across flood plains...

I am tidal inlet
 ebbing, flowing, receding
 salty flood revealing silty marsh...

I am ocean, vast, replete, world within world,
 Pounding waves, drawing boundaries
 pulling tides, undertow...

I am deep spring, bubbling font of life
 lacy network of unseen channels...

I am tear, swelling, cheekrolling,
 burning salt hard sobbing deep cleansing letting go,
 making room for laughter...

I am water.

Wet January 1993

At Sea

In panic, I flounder and flail here.
Yet floating, once remembered, saves me.
The sun warms, the water buoys.

What direction? Who cares?
It isn't whether I dive deep
or swim far, whether land
is visible or sharks linger.

It's how each drop
that drips from my fingers
holds the whole universe
in the tension of its brief sphere
before rejoining the endless sea.

It's how each wave lifts and falls,
how each cloud forms and passes,
and each breath fills me
becoming the whole universe
before rejoining the endless sky.

1999

Begin again.
The fresh start,
The clean slate.
An enticing notion, to

Begin again.
But is there anything
on earth that arrives
out of nothing? That
really has the chance to

Begin again?
When does the bell gong
cease to ring?
The ripple from a stone
dropped in a pond
cease to lap the banks, and

Begin again?
Even the high tide that
erases our footprints
leaves its own detritus
of kelp and discarded shells
strewn along the pristine beach.

Begin again:
A seductive fallacy,
born out dissatisfaction and shame,
a need for forgiveness,
for washing away of sins,
for returning to innocence,
if only we could

Begin again.

2006

In the river of thought
 may I rest like a rock
 in the riverbed
 cleansing the water so that
 downstream it will be clearer.

If I'm not ready to be a rock
 unchanged by thought-stream,
 if I feel more akin to the flotsam
 tossed about by the rapids
 of thoughts, then at least

May I keep my head above water
 and see the wide world around me
 beyond the thoughts in which I swim.

May I find my weary way to the shore
 and rest on the banks of the river.

May I discover that I am not the river
 and bear no shame for its stench.

May I look upstream and downstream
 and see that its course is endless,
 that it neither starts or ends with me.

May I know not to dip my bucket
 in the river and offer the foul broth to others.

And then someday may I feel awake enough
 to re-enter the river for periods of time
 and sink deep into the rocky riverbed, fully aware,
 able to breathe in the vilest thoughts
 with cleansing compassion.

May some day the river itself be so pure
 that swimming in it will cause awakening.

2007

Any Path

All around
 the mountain
 there are paths
 leading to the top.
 Some are steep
 Some have many
 switchbacks
 Some are shaded
 Some are rocky
 Some are wide
 and some are
 narrow.
 But any one
 will take you
 to the peak.
 And yet
 how easy it is
 to get stuck
 circling
 around the base
 of the mountain
 trying to decide
 which path to
 choose.

In Celebration of the Winter Solstice

Do not be afraid of the darkness.
 Dark is the rich fertile earth
 that cradles the seed, nourishing growth.
 Dark is the soft night that cradles us to rest.
 Only in darkness
 can stars shine across the vastness of space.
 Only in darkness
 is the moon's dance so clear.
 There is mystery woven in the dark quiet hours,
 There is magic in the darkness.

Do not be afraid.
 We are born of this magic.
 It fills our dreams
 that root, unravel and reweave themselves
 in the shelter of the deep dark night.
 The dark has its own hue,
 its own resonance, its own breath.
 It fills our soul,
 not with despair, but with promise.
 Dark is the gestation of our deep and knowing self.
 Dark is the cave where we rest and renew our soul.
 We are born of the darkness,
 and each night we return
 to the deep moist womb of our beginnings.

Do not be afraid of the darkness,
 for in the depth of that very darkness
 comes a first glimpse of our own light,
 the pure inner light of love and knowing.
 As it glows and grows, the darkness recedes.
 As we shed our light, we shed our fear,
 and revel in the wonder of all that is revealed.

So, do not rush the coming of the sun.
 Do not crave the lengthening of the day.
 Celebrate the darkness.
 Here and now. A time of richness. A time of joy.

Winter '92/rev. '95

Bell Ringer

I carry the bell through the halls
 where my sangha sibling rest at midday:
 The only noise I make all week:
 Seven dings in each building.
 They open doors, turn off showers.
 I am welcome, even wearing shoes!

Then I go to the big bell where
 I bow, then swing without holding back,
 booming the call to practice
 out through the valley
 and up the grassy hills.

On the fifth morning
 Howie does a bowl bell meditation
 so delicious I buy one to take home.

where I continue to rise
 and practice at dawn,
 the sound waves sustaining my attention
 until my mind grabs on to my breath
 like an anchor rooted in the earth.

At practice end
 I ring the bell again
 and ride the sound waves
 sending metta to all beings.

2006

Breakfast, Day Four

The dining hall clatter becomes symphonic.
The ecstasy of scraping chairs and utensils!
I have never heard anything so beautiful
as the sound of a sangha in silence
earnestly clearing their plates.

June 2006

A Hole is to Fall Into

It's so hard to remember that
every hole I fall into holds a buried treasure

because I am too busy clawing my way out
and cursing my fate to remember to:

let go!

fall deep!

and, upon reaching bottom : sit still!

Here in this quiet darkness of non-doing,
the steady rising and falling of the breath
slowly unearths the buried treasure.

2006

Bondage

"What holds you in bondage?"
The dharma question insinuates itself
into my thoughts for weeks.
I hadn't thought I was in bondage
but the question refuses to rest.

Aha!
Suddenly I can see: It is my habitual nature
that holds me in bondage.
My habitual nature trudges
in ever deepening and narrowing ruts.
My treasured patterns weave a thick a web
that cocoons me from really seeing.
Shaken awake, I celebrate.

"But why does my habitual nature
hold me in bondage?"
Yet another dharma dilemma rises up unbidden
to dog me for yet more weeks.

Aha! Here it is:
My predictable patterns
create a sense of permanence.
My habitual nature is trying
to construct a safe world
that will be there in the morning.

But permanence is a delusion!
Nothing is permanent.
My habitual nature may want to
protect me, but it only shields me
from the fresh light of awareness.

Ah,
May I see anew in every moment.
May all beings see anew in every moment.

November 2002

With thanks for the question posed by dharma teacher Mark Coleman

Jay Squawking

The scrub jay defends her territory,
seeing boundaries where I see none.
I begin to wonder about my boundaries:
How many of the barriers I see,
the assumptions I make about
limits and possibilities
can be seen by the jay?

1996

The Douser

The douser with his wiggling sticks
locates the spot to sink the well,
so that deep into the earth
buckets drop and rise
full of sweet pure water.

I too am a douser of sorts
locating the just right spot:
 right here
 right now
to sink a well of relaxation
where my breath drops and rises
pulling up the pure infinite sweetness
that courses boundlessly within.

I have tried drilling other places,
other times, drifting lost in abandoned sites,
hauling my heavy gear thirstily toward a mirage.
The douser would have told me
the ground is shallow everywhere but
 right here
 right now
and those buckets would come up empty.

Some doubt the douser, because his skill
can't be explained. It seems
he simply knows how water sings
and lets go enough to listen.

May I too let go enough to listen
to what is
 right here
 right now.

May my sticks wiggle joyously
and my well sink effortlessly.
May these buckets quench the thirst
of all beings everywhere.

2007

Stillness in the Storm

The tree sways in the wind
Wild storm whips its branches
Red and yellow leaves descend
dancing across the field.

The core of the tree is still.

The ocean swells into waves
Wild storm stirs its surface
Foaming surf pounds the shore
leaving tidepools in its wake.

The depth of the ocean is still.

The grass bends in the breeze
Wild storm flattens its blades
Field shimmers light and dark
revealing the path of the wind.

The roots of the grasses are still.

Where do you hold your consciousness?
Just on the transient surface?
Whipped by every wind,
victim of every storm?
Settle into your core,
plumb your depths,
sense your roots.

At center you are still.

1993

Prodigal Mind

When my mind
returns to the breath
there is such a sense
of homecoming
such a celebration of
this most perfect union

that I would not be surprised
if the invitations were sent out
the band hired
and the cake decorated

were there only enough time
before my wayward mind
sets off to wandering again.

2006

Mad Bird Dharma

The bird is madly tapping on the window
Seeking its reflection.
We sit inside watching
distracted from the dharma talk
by the urgency
the desperation
the futility
the cycling back again and again
in attraction, torment and despair.

Finally Libby gets up from her zafu
and sets a tissue box on end on the window ledge.
The reflection disappears
and the bird, released, flies away.

We all look at each other.
Aha! Dharma delivered.

2006

The Running Child Meditation

In the foyer of the meditation hall
a small child runs back & forth
back and forth, feet plopping & rising
& pausing & turning again.

Inside the sitting room a meditator
feels irritation rising up within her.
"What could that parent be thinking?
Why don't they take that child outside?"

Another meditator is drawn
into a memory of her own children, now grown,
and the sweetness of the footfalls in the foyer.

Another notes in awe the boundless energy
of youth and feels her own lethargy.
"I am old," she sighs.

Yet another is caught in the aching emptiness
of the old dream of the child she never had.
She hadn't expected it to find her here
and feels a victim of its intrusion.

Another doesn't notice the sound very much,
so loud are her own thoughts, planning, planning.

Another doesn't hear the sound at all.
She is almost asleep in a fog and nodding,
catching her head each time it drops.

Another hears the sound as simple sound,
unattached to any image –
a rhythmic cadence, soft and round.

Another composes a poem in her head, titled
'The Running Child Meditation.'

And all of these meditators are me.

2000

Lizard Wisdom

That little lizard loves
the sun-warmed stone statue
of the Buddha so much
he may well choose to be
a bodhisatva
just to sit there
on the Buddha's heart
hot and still
until all of us
understand such
lizard wisdom.

1999