

# Swaying in the Sangha of Trees

By Leonard Bass

This morning, I spoke to five thousand spruce trees. I am not crazy; I just needed to tell them something. I did not go up to each one, personally, though I may decide to do this as well while I'm here.

Here's what I said to them:

"I'm trying to wake up. Thank you for your patience."

This isn't the first time I've talked to the spruce trees in this quiet wetland grove. I've been coming here for years—almost every winter since I started courting my wife, some 19 years ago. Her family originates from the small towns nearby in what is affectionately called "The Southern Tier" of New York State, due south of Buffalo. In the late 1940's, her grandfather had the great foresight to purchase a remote, 68 acre parcel of land bordering a wetland pond and nestled in the shadows of the rippling Allegheny Mountains. He, with the help of my in-laws as dating teenagers, then planted the five thousand spruce trees—just saplings back then—given to them by the Conservation Department as part of its forestation project.

Needless to say, the trees have matured. They now stand tall and proud, and blanketed, on this day, in a majestic shawl of freshly fallen, woolly white snow. After her grandfather passed, my wife's family continued the wisdom that brought them this land by constructing, by hand, a small, rustic A-framed cabin in the heart of the property. They set it back in the spruce grove, adjacent to the wetland pond and oriented it towards those gently crested mountains. One of their goals while building the cabin was to knock down *not one* single spruce tree in the construction process. So, even today, there are no roads in here; one must simply know from experience which spruce trees to carefully weave one's vehicle between to get back to the cabin.

The first time I started talking to the spruce trees, I'll admit, I probably did have "one too many". My wife and I take turns—one week each—coming here in the throes of winter for personal retreat and blessed solitude. We're both raving introverts, and as such, our idea of a good vacation includes the notion of a hefty break from one another other as well. As a Zen Buddhist for the past 23 years, I always look forward to my week of solitude as an opportunity for a lay-practitioner to try on the textured and austere life of a Zen monk, attempting to live in a seamless stream of mindfulness and quietude.

In the mornings, I'm up by 4 am doing prostrations before the statue of a Buddha. By day, I sit for hours on my mat and cushion, interspersing these sittings with short periods of walking meditation, sometimes out amongst the spruces. At night, I read accounts of old Zen monks from the mountain monasteries of Korea and Tibet and Japan, some of whom were *crazy* as all get-out, living for years in caves or as raving lunatics in the tufts of trees! Some of them were even known to indulge, from time to time, in a flask or two of monastery-distilled whiskey or gin. Zen is like this, I've come to understand. It's rugged and simple and full of inconsistencies unknowable to the ordinary mind.

In the year of my tree-talking experience, my in-laws, at the behest of my wife, had installed a twenty-seven jet hot tub out on the wood deck (so much for the "austerity" aspect!). The hot tub sits underneath a couple of very tall, very stoic spruce trees. At night, in the dead of winter, one can sit comfortably



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in the tub underneath a breath-taking view of the shimmering stars while basking in the glow of the moon's soft luminosity. At times, one can even hear the furtive howl of a lonely band of coyotes off in the distance. It was on such a night, with a flask of Sambuca by my side, when I first heard the spruce tree "talk".

Now, to be clear, it wasn't like the tree *really* talked. I may have been slightly inebriated, but I wasn't delusional. It was more like I was just sort of channeling, out loud, what it was saying.

Here were the first words it spoke to me:

"We are trees."

(This, it turns out, is *always* how they start off their conversations. It's a bit like, "Yo, wassup?" as I've come to understand it...)

So...what can I say? We talked, a good long while, it and I. It told me things I never knew about trees. I told it things it never knew about humans. It talked a lot about rootedness, and the problems this presented to trees everywhere. I told it all about mobility, and the problems that this, too, presented—to humans. The most fascinating thing was, each of us perceived the other one's greatest strength to be exactly the elixir to its own species' troubles.

"When the storms come," it told me, "we have no choice. We have to face whatever it is. Some of us make it, but the old and the diseased ones... sometimes they don't. You...you don't have this problem. When the storms come, you get in your mobility carts and steal away."

"Yes," I said back, "but look at it this way. If you had one of those mobility carts and could simply run away all the time, you'd never have to face anything tough in life. You think that's a blessing, but actually, it is not. The problem with humankind *is*, in fact, its mobility. We think it is always better somewhere else. So, we go ahead tearing up the planet in search of this better place, and we do it over and over again. If we were simply rooted in the earth, like you, we couldn't possibly be ruining the planet the way we are."

We went on talking like this a while. And why not? One of the great gifts of a solitary retreat in a remote and desolate outpost is the ability one has to take "certain liberties" with the otherwise agreed-upon parameters of sanity and social graces. In our haste to "get along" with one another by adhering to the fixed terms of our conventions, how quickly we forego the magical, the mysterious, the infinite realms of substratum that lay just outside of those convention walls.

So, while some might call my tree-talking experience something akin to utter “lunacy,” and others might dismiss it as simply the “Sambuca talking,” the question I would ask is, ultimately, does it matter by which means we come to discover our unshakable interconnectedness to all life? The transformative aspect of such experiences indelibly saturates the soul. We cannot help but bring the fruits of such experiences home with us, long after our time of solitude has ended. From this standpoint, I would argue that those who would talk with trees would find it impossible, from that day forward, to shear them off at the knees for profit and greed.

“So, my brethren and I were wondering,” it asked me further into our conversation, “what is it that you do here, anyway?”

“Well, to be perfectly honest,” I said, trying to think like a tree, “I guess I come here to try to grow my roots.”

“Grow your roots?” it chortled. “You have no roots!”

“Well, no, not like yours,” I said back. “What I mean is, I’m just trying to learn to be still—like the way you are—rather than constantly running from thing to thing, the way humans do.”

“Be still...and grow your roots?” it blurted back, obviously bemused. “That’s impossible!”

“Really?” I asked. “Why?”

“You have to sway,” it replied.

“Sway?” I said, uncertain of its gist.

“Of course, sway. Do you sway?”

I thought about this a while. In my sitting meditation I’ve often noticed myself—just ever so slightly—moving from side to side from time to time. I don’t know why I do it, it just sort of happens sometimes. I kind of like it, so I don’t try to regulate it in any particular way.

“Come to think of it,” I said, finally, “I guess I do sway!”

“That’s good!” it said back to me. “Then, you *are* growing your roots!”

“I am?” I said, “How so?”

“Well,” it said back to me, “when the storms come, we start swaying. We sway from top to bottom, so what sways high, always sways low—that is the ancient law of swaying, after all. This may be hard for you to see but, below ground, in our roots, we are also swaying. You see, everything is interconnected this way. This swaying underground loosens up the soil that we are rooted in, and this loosening of the soil makes it possible for our roots to grow bigger around.”

“Wow, I never knew that,” I said back, amazed. Thinking about it further, I observed, “So, if it weren’t for the storms, you might not be as big as you are today, right?”

“True enough,” it agreed. “Still, that doesn’t mean we enjoy the storms, or that it makes it easy.”

“I understand,” I said. “I think we have an expression for this sort of thing. It goes, ‘whatever doesn’t kill ya, makes ya stronger’.”

It most heartily agreed.

Ever since my initial “conversation” in the hot tub with the spruce tree—call it what you will—I now return to this magical grove every year with the sense that I am a temporary visitor in what, essentially, is their sacred “sangha”—or spiritual community, as it is referred to in Buddhist circles. They are the resident monks of this timeless arboreal shrine, and though I am a welcomed

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guest here, I am, from their humble perspective, nothing more than a “rootless wonder”: ambulatory, headstrong, and in search of something they cannot grasp. They watch me as I amble to and fro, out to my truck parked by the road and then off to the grocery store or to the laundromat, head stuffed with useless jargon, lists of lists, regrets of yesterday, hopes for tomorrow. Each year, they laugh at me, referring to my year apart from them as, “my year of chasing the wild gander.” They think it is the funniest thing they’ve ever heard that I leave and come back every year to try to grow my roots.

“They start growing, and the next thing we know, you’re back in your mobility cart, yanking them right out again. Then, we don’t see you for another year. You come back, and you’re trailing all these dead and trampled roots behind you, telling us you’re back again to grow your roots. It’s the funniest thing we’ve ever seen! We keep wanting to say, ‘Well, what do you suppose is going to happen when you yank your roots out like you do every year, over and over again?’”

I try to explain to them that I’m trying to grow my *spiritual* roots no matter where I am, here or elsewhere, but they don’t get this. “If you can’t stay in one place for more than a week, then how do you expect to grow anything whatsoever?” they ask. To this, I have no good answer. I find it difficult to sit still in my meditation sessions for more than thirty minutes at a time. Then, I have to get up, walk around, stretch out, do the dishes, write essays and a billion other things on my list of things to do, before I can meditate again.

I make it part of my practice, though, to walk slowly among them, palms together, breathing deeply, smiling and thanking each one for their great example and service during my stay. They—the trees—are truly the masters of rootedness, and I, their humble disciple, come here each year to learn from

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them their fantastic resilience and fortitude.

In Zen practice, we are asked to be still long enough to see with utter clarity just how our thoughts and emotions help shape our reality. We can’t really do this if we’re constantly on the go, physically or otherwise. So, we pull up a mat and a cushion—or a decent straight-backed chair, if one prefers—and we park it. We breathe deeply and we watch.

In time, with practice, the picture of our lives begins to clear. We have been so inundated in it, we’ve yet to witness it as if from afar. What we see, often times, is hauntingly depressing. And yet, it is a start. For there is hardly a hope of changing anything if we remain in the “inundated” state.

With the great resilience of the trees, who stand bravely in one place no matter the circumstance, we get hit with the gale force winds of our own existence. Sometimes we even break, the force is that strong! But mostly, I would guess that, after talking with the trees, what we do is learn to sway. And when we sway with the brilliance and starkness of whatever comes up in our meditation practice, the soil of that which binds us and imprisons us is loosened. In this loosening, the roots of our true selves are finally freed and allowed to grow bigger around, just like the spruce trees.

So, this is the wisdom that my sangha of trees has imparted to me through my years of solitary retreat. This morning, while walking slowly among them, I asked them, once again, for their patience. This path of unraveling the true self takes time—more time than I ever imagined! In a few more days, I’ll once again get into my “mobility cart” and hightail it out of here, back home to Michigan. I’ll try my best to hold onto this vast wisdom until my next return visit, one stormy cycle around the sun from now. And, hopefully, I’ll try to keep swaying with whatever happens to come up for me till then.

May we all be so fortunate at some point in our lifetimes to be in the company of a lively band of trees. And hopefully, we can all learn to make our sway a dance!

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