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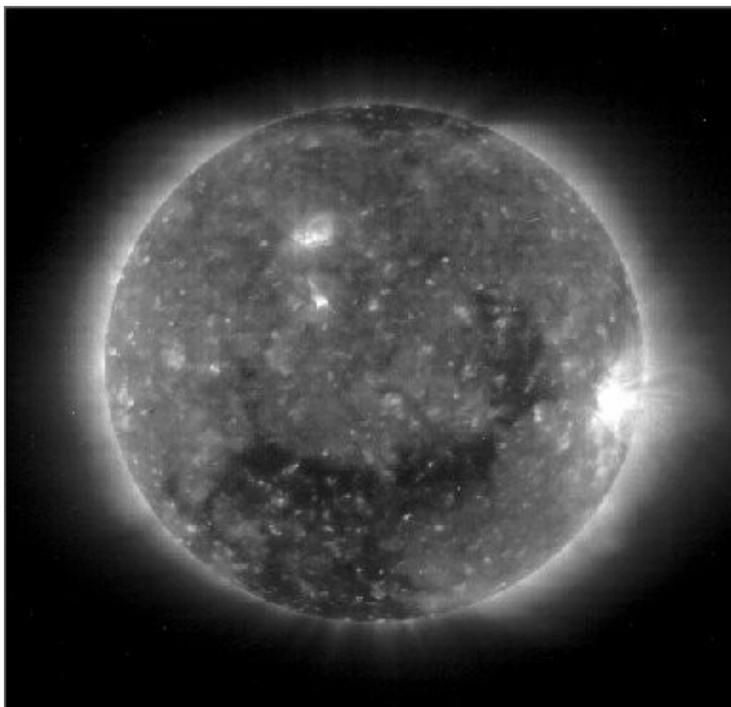
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Sun, Winter Solstice, 1996

Winter Solstice: Excerpts from a letter

Maylie Scott, December 1997

. . . As I write, the winter solstice is close, the darkest time of the year, reminding us of our own cycles of life and growth and death and retraction. . . . We are invited to let the short days slow us down so we can sense the cold ground beneath the business of our lives and listen quietly and attentively.

I walked past a spread of dried leaves in the corner of an empty lot and, hearing a particular rustle, noticed a sparrow, the same dusty color as the leaves, shaking itself out. The sparrow takes care of its life form and we take care of ours for the short spans that are given. This narrowing time reminds us of our origins, the dynamic matrix we arise from and return to. When we can abide, stripped down in this un-knowing, that includes our own doubts and insecurities, and chronic limitations, we can realize that the seeds of wisdom and compassion are actually planted right here. And then we can light candles and look into our neighbor's eyes and see the light generated in our own eyes reflected in theirs and meet one another as Dharma friends . . .



Maylie Scott, with her sister, Mother Mary John

Solstice

Denise Homer

photos by Denise

What appeared from the outside as a green lump on the flat landscape was in fact one of the finest architectural achievements of prehistoric Europe, Maeshowe, a chambered cairn on Orkney, a group of islands six miles off the north coast of Scotland. Bending straight over from the waist I entered the passage. I walked in this bent over position for thirty-five feet. The passage walls closed in around my shoulders and I fought off feelings of claustrophobia seeing the main chamber ahead. Rising up to my full height I felt very small in the thirteen foot high corbeled roof chamber. In all four corners were massive standing stones. Looking back down the passage way I imagined what it would be like to be here on the winter solstice watching the setting sun slowly creep up the passageway till it shown on the back wall. I stood in awe of the neolithic peoples who built not only Maeshowe, but also Newgrange in Ireland and Stonehenge in England. To the users of Maeshowe, just as it still does today, the return of the sun heralds a resurgence of light and the return of hope to the land.

This year, the Winter Solstice is on December 22, at 6:09 am Greenwich mean time or December 21,



Maeshowe, Orkney, Scotland

at 10:09 pm pacific time. The word solstice literally means sun standing still. On that day due to the earth's tilt on its axis the daylight hours are at a minimum in the northern hemisphere and nighttime is at a maximum marking the beginning of the astronomical winter.

Though Newgrange and Stonehenge are well known winter solstice sites, there are hundreds of other megalithic structures throughout Europe, Americas, Asia, Indonesia, the Middle East and Africa oriented to the solstices and equinoxes. Christmas was transplanted onto the winter solstice some one thousand six hundred years ago. Many solstice celebrations became our Christmas celebrations. Along the way we lost some of the deep connections of our celebrations to a fundamental, hemispheric event. Perhaps the desire to return to a more nature based celebration explains why attendance at Newgrange during the winter solstice is by lottery and Stonehenge has six hundred people hoping for a glimpse of the winter solstice sunrise.



In Arcata a popular solstice ritual is a walk at the Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary. Henry David Thoreau said, "If there were Druids whose temples were the oak groves, my temple is the swamp." In many ways winter at the marsh is the best season. With no leaves on the trees bird watching gets easier and you don't even need binoculars to watch the Black-crowned Night Herons. (Binoculars are on loan from the



Interpretive Center in exchange for your driver's license should you want them.) There are over two hundred of them in their winter roost in the willows around the log pond. All day long they sleep, awaken, stretch, squabble with each other and wait for nightfall. As I leave in the evening they fly past me squawking on their way to go fishing for the night in the bay. The shortest day also means the fullest night of moonlight. The full moon is on December 24 and is in the sky for fifteen hours. Decembers full moon brings with it a week of our highest tides of the year. From the Interpretive Center I can watch the salt marsh fill up with water rising above the vegetation and for a week it looks like we have a new pond. I love this extra watery season when everything is full and sometimes overflowing with water.

On winter walks I always keep an eye out for the elusive bobcat. The first time I encountered one was on a wet, windy day. I was crossing Mt. Trashmore and it came out of the trees and headed across Mt. Trashmore. As it crossed my path it stopped for a second, and we looked at

each other with equal astonishment that any other creature was out on such a blustery day.

Rachel Carson said, "There's something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature - the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter." Take time to discover the Arcata Marsh & Wildlife Sanctuary this winter, Walk the paths and listen to the birds, the wind, and the sound of water. Watch for River Otters and the living artwork of a flock of shorebirds that fly together and in one quicksilver second, change not only direction but color.

Meditation 101: Less is More

Barry Evans

My instructions for first-time meditators are becoming more and more minimalist. These days, it's something like, "Sit quietly and notice what's going on." It used to take longer--when I was the meditation instructor at Kannon Do sangha in Mountain View, I would spend 30-40 minutes telling newbies how to sit, how to breathe, how to bow--not to mention how to enter and leave the zendo, how to ask a question, and (talk about setting them up!) what to expect.

Part of my 'quickie' approach these days is dictated by logistics. At the jail where Pete, Michael and I take turns with the men's meditation program, we are almost always with folks who have never meditated before, and we have limited time. I want to give them a taste *right now* of the essence of meditation. And when I'm leading our Eureka Wednesday evening group, new folks always seem to walk in as I'm about to ring the bell, so it's a quick, "Welcome...shoes off, please...chair or cushion?...so OK, why don't

you just sit and notice what's going on for the next 30 minutes...thank you."

That's it? What about eyes open? 45-degree head tilt? Cosmic mudra, thumbs just barely touching? Spine as straight as the proverbial tower of gold coins? Tongue on roof of mouth? Breath awareness? Counting? Attention on the hara? Letting thoughts through without stopping for a chat? All this is fine to experiment with once someone's made the decision to practice, but for first-timers? I like giving them a big field to play in by following my core belief about meditation, that there's no way to do it wrong...

...as opposed to just about everything else in my life! There's often this underlying editorial commentary, on the lines of, "Hey, good job, Barry...uh-oh, you really screwed up there...man, you're doing well...oh god, the day's gone and I've done nothing!" While meditation, on the other hand, comes and goes, the antidote to goal-oriented existence: I meditate because I meditate, and for the most part, I don't try to improve it or tinker with it. It is what it is.

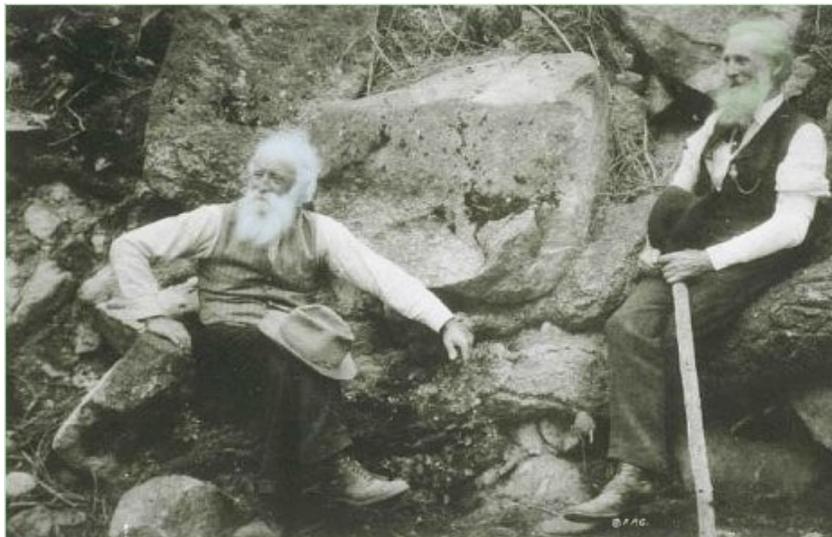
My concern with detailed meditation instructions is that by their very nature, instructions imply there are good ways and bad ways to do it. They say, this is what you *should* be doing, this is right, this is wrong. Instructions set up goals, just like in 'real' life.

I wonder if this is why so many people try meditation once--and quit, feeling they've somehow failed? At Kannon Do, we estimated that out of five or six people who came the first time to the instruction session (followed by a sit) we saw just one of those folks again. For the vast majority, that one time was enough. How many times have I heard something like, "Yeah, I tried meditation once, but it didn't work for me...I just couldn't do it right...my mind wouldn't calm down..."?

If a newcomer *does* have questions or concerns, I encourage them to try it first and to ask the questions after. My belief is that someone sitting for the first time learns more about meditation in 30 real-time minutes than any experienced meditator can explain to them in that same amount of time.

Because meditation isn't a set of instructions: it's an adventure.

This article appeared in the Winter, 2007 Tricycle



John Burroughs and John Muir on the trail to Nevada Falls in Yosemite, 1909

Fringe Benefit

Michael Quam

In the winter of life your fur—
what's left of it—turns
snowy white. You can
wear any color, fly any flag.
Now, this morning,
What will you choose?

Elkhorn Slough

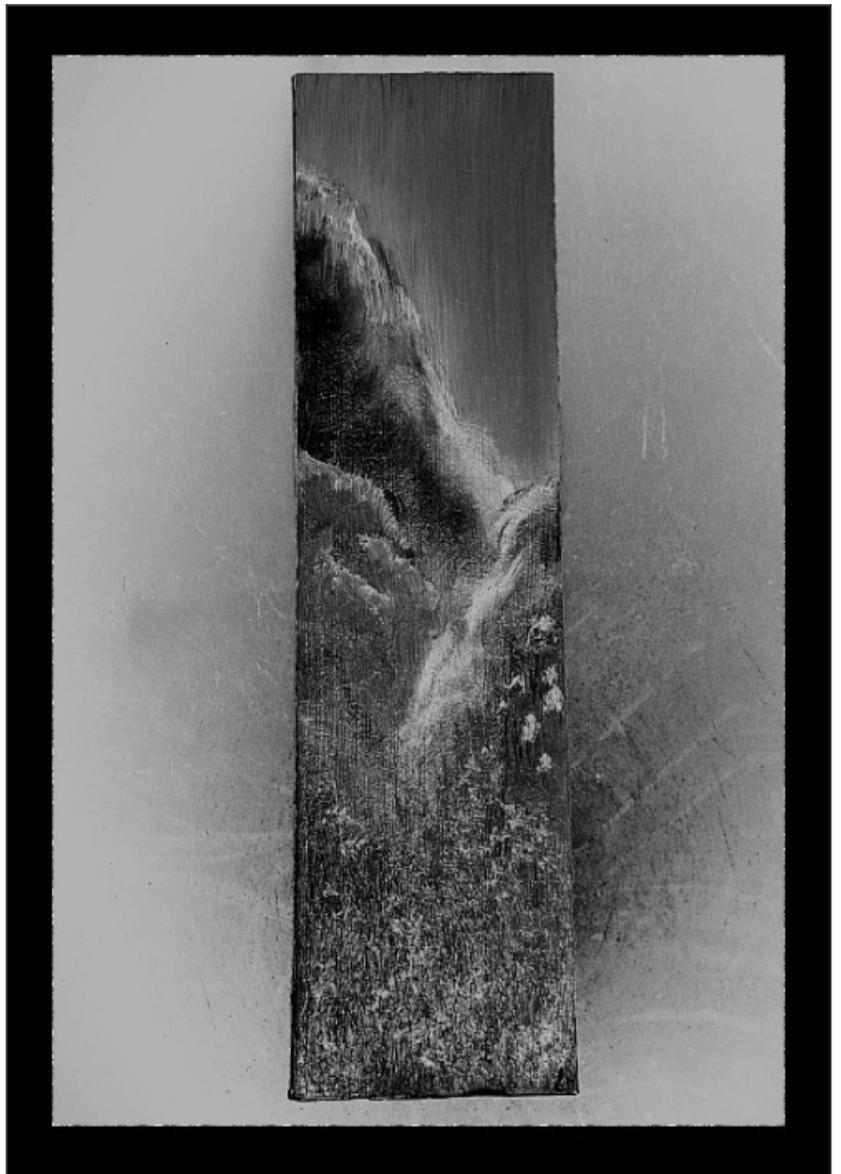
Angie Boissevain

Beyond the estuary
strawberry fields,
long walk on a railroad track,
to a grove of eucalyptus,
where dozens of snowy egrets
are beating wide sunlit wings,
and with shrill cries
are building nests,
and raising young.
We stand in the shade of oaks,
beings from another
less sane country,
and watch, as we regain our
balance,
and slowly find our lost selves
as part of these.

New Mexico - Edwina

Angie Boissevain

Hectic strobes and streaks,
stupendous flashes,
the black sky shrieks.
You drive like a banshee,
arroyos roaring,
slither on one little dirt road
then another, half
blinded by rain, by dark,
and never lost.



Mountain / Ice ~ Suzanne M.

Dharma Gates are Boundless

Compiled with commentary by Michael Quam

As I write this, it's late afternoon and the light is already fading. A week ago we stopped trying to save daylight and dropped back to standard time. The December solstice is rapidly approaching. I grew up in Minnesota and spent most of my life in the Midwest. This time of year meant a long cold darkness coming on, with lakes freezing and snow drifting across the roads, filling the ditches. Now, I'm learning about winter here on the North Coast, rain and more rain, fierce storms coming ashore, the rivers full to overflowing. It is a wild elemental season. And it puts us in touch with the sheer physical realities of outer and inner worlds. I'm reminded of the opening statement in Anthony Doerr's brilliant novel, *About Grace*:

The human brain is seventy-five percent water. Our cells are little more than sacs in which to carry water. When we die it spills from us into the ground and air and into the stomachs of animals and is contained again in something else. The properties of liquid water are these: it holds its temperature longer than air; it is adhering and elastic; it is perpetually in motion. These are the tenets of hydrology; these are the things one should know if one is to know oneself.

In our practice we are opening to the reality of the present moment. Sometimes, in the midst of darkness, something will provoke a moment of clarity, of astonishing beauty. In Barry Lopez's story "Winter Herons," a man whose heart's home is in the wilderness of the north country, is standing in Manhattan waiting for his lover and longing to be far away. When suddenly, he experiences a visitation:

Overhead, above the surface of the pool of light cast by the street lamps, the canyon of the wide avenue disappeared into darkness. He had walked only a few blocks when he realized that birds were falling. Great blue herons were descending slowly against the braking of their wings, their ebony legs extended to test the depth of the snow which lay in a garden that divided the avenue. He stood transfixed as the birds settled. They folded their wings and began to mill in the gently falling snow and the pale light. They had landed as if on a prairie, and if they made any sound he did not hear. One pushed its long bill into the white ground. After a moment they were all still. They gazed at the front of a hotel, where someone had just gone through a revolving door. A cab slowed in front of him—he shook his head, no, no, and it went on. One or two of the birds flared their wings to lay off the snow and a flapping suddenly erupted among them and they were in the air again. Fifteen or twenty, flying past with heavy, hushing beats, north up the avenue for two or three blocks before they broke through the plane of light and disappeared." (*Barry Lopez, "Winter Herons," Winter Count, p. 24*)

Not all such moments need have such drama. They can come in midst of the mundane and show us how extraordinary it all is. Eamon Grennan captures this perfectly in his poem "Pause":

The weird containing stillness of the neighborhood
just before the school bus brings the neighborhood kids
home in the middle of the cold afternoon: a moment
of pure waiting, anticipation, before the outbreak of anything,
when everything seems just, seems *justified*, just hanging

in the wings, about to happen, and in your mind you see
the flashing lights flare amber to scarlet, and your daughter
in her blue jacket and white-fringed sapphire hat
step gingerly down and out into our world again
and hurry through silence and snow-grass
as the bus door sighs shut
and her own front door flies open and she finds you
behind it, father-in-waiting, the stillness in bits
and the common world restored as you bend
to touch her, take her hat and coat from the floor
where she's dropped them, hear the live voice of her
filling every crack. In the pause
before all this happens, you know something
about the shape of the life you've chosen to live
between the silence of almost infinite possibility and that
explosion of things as they are—those vast unanswerable
intrusions of love and disaster, or just the casual scatter
of your child's winter clothes on the hall floor.

(Eamon Grennan, So It Goes, p. 43)

The chattering classes on the cable news channels won't let us forget that we are also entering another season of politics, bound to last much longer than any natural season. Already, it has gone on so long that we are sick of it, and one is tempted to tune everything out, especially when the actors in our political arenas seem unable to make decisions that benefit the earth and all its beings. A sangha member contributed this statement regarding the politics of peace:

A man can do something for peace without having to jump into politics. Each man has inside him a basic decency and goodness. If he listens to it and acts on it, he is giving a great deal of what it is the world needs most. It is not complicated but it takes courage. It takes courage for a man to listen to his own goodness and act on it. Do we dare to be ourselves? This is the question that counts." *(Pablo Casals, in conversation with Norman Cousins, Anatomy of an Illness, pp. 78-9)*

Casals was a great musician and a wise man who recognized, in our Buddhist parlance, the Buddha within each of us. I would only add this: in a democracy we must enter the political arena, as sullied as it may be, and engage our fellow citizens, recognizing the Buddha and therefore the potential in all of us to make a good and decent choice and act on it. May this season of darkness and water refresh us all!

