
The skull in our suitcase

By Bart Weetjens

What we can learn from Zen in challenging moments

Imagine, You drive to the Airport to fly home. When you get there, you walk in, and just five minutes later you are being arrested, handcuffed, and you're told that you're facing 30 years in prison.

Do you feel the shock?

Now let me tell you: I don't need to imagine this. Because it happened to me for real. Let me take you on a journey – that led me to deep insights about how to apply zen practice in real life.

It was 2015, the evening of 9th of February. I travelled from Tanzania, where I had lived and worked for 12 years, back to my home country Belgium.

It was dusty, noisy, hot and humid, as usual in Dar Es Salaam. When my driver dropped me shortly before dusk, I made time to take in the magnificent sunset in paramount colors. I surely would miss those back in Belgium.

I strolled to the entry and pushed my suitcase through the scanner. It contained some personal belongings that I didn't want to leave in Tanzania. Among them there was the skull, the human skull that had decorated my desk since I was a student. When I put it into the suitcase, for a moment I thought that possibly I might have to explain the whereabouts of that skull at customs. But my attachment to the object, which served me as a reminder of the impermanence of life, was too big to simply let go of. I argued to myself that my Swahili was fluent enough to explain about the skull's origins, even if it was poorly documented. Moreover, I was a familiar face in Dar Es Salaam airport, because I traveled almost weekly on international flights those days. My humanitarian work received a lot of attention and I was a familiar face at the airport. My luggage was never checked.

Well, this time my suitcase was opened, and there was no space for explanations... In no time I was arrested, handcuffed, my passport confiscated and I was evacuated to the airport's catacombs, where I learned that I was accused of possession and trafficking of human body parts, facing a 30 years sentence in prison.

OMG. Prisons in Tanzania are not particularly a wellness resort. In just a few moments, my savoring experience of the last tropical sunset had suddenly turned into my worst nightmare.

That night, held in custody, I was sitting on a cardboard sheet on the concrete floor, I felt broken. I was in stress, anxiety and despair, and I was filled with anger. I sure was innocent, but would the Tanzanian justice system acknowledge that? The odds of spending the best part of my life in jail were extremely daunting to me.

It felt like all possible negative emotional states occupied my mind... simultaneously. Self judgement was a big part of that. How could I have been so mindless, so ignorant? How stupid was I?

All kinds of scenarios crossed my mind. For how long would I be isolated? How long before I would see my family again? Was there any chance for me to escape from this absurd situation?

All these thoughts, judgements, and projections made me completely NOT present, and even more stressed. By dramatizing my own situation I swirled down in a universe of grief, sadness, and self-pitty. I tried to control my tears, but I failed.

While sitting there in tears on my cardboard sheet, a wandering cockroach passed by, it stopped, turned into my direction, and stayed there immobile while moving its antenna up and down, left and right, and in all directions. I imagined it was sensing my misery. A few seconds later it wandered off again into the dark on the other side. But just that moment, face to face with the most unlikely of all creatures, my attention was drawn back into the present moment. Thank you cockroach!

Where was my relaxed, content mind, the free and fluid mind that I had experienced during long Zen retreats? Where had gone that deeply embedded feeling of harmony, of interconnectedness with all that is? In my misery I remembered my teacher's guidance: "Always stay connected to the body posture and the breathing," which is all about PRESENCE. So I tried to do that.

And what did I feel? It felt as if I was strangled by a snake. I noticed my heart was beating strongly and speedy in my chest, and I noticed my breath was superficial.

There was nowhere to go, and it seemed there was nothing sensible left for me to do but surrender to that reality.

So I stopped fighting it. I stayed in the reality of the present moment. I welcomed my fear and faced it.

And that was key: just staying with noticing how the fear was impacting my body, how my shoulders felt tense, how my chest felt cramped, how the curbed posture blocked my diaphragm, and how all these tensions kept my breathing superficial, and my mind over-excited.

In Zen training, I had learned to re-center the mind by adopting a grounded, balanced, natural tonus in the posture, by consciously relaxing unneeded tensions. I had learned to feel the support of the earth's gravity, that incredible force that supported me in any given moment. I had learned to naturally extend the body posture by straightening the back, tucking in the chin slightly, and by letting the top of the head lean toward the sky. By relaxing the shoulders, the chest and the belly. By inclining the pelvis slightly forward, so that the diaphragm can relax, which frees the way for the breathing to descend into the lower belly. Visualizing the downward movement of my exhalation gradually helped me pacing down the rhythm of my breathing, and lower my gravity point back where it belonged, in the hara, this boundless center of life energy, just below the belly-button.

And what did this focus on posture and breathing do with my mind? I can tell you: It was kind of magic. For a moment, I got a glimpse of harmony and a sense of wellbeing, even in these circumstances.

Of course, that good feeling didn't sustain. My dualistic 'thinking' mind was immediately taking over again, and again, and again. Neuroscientists would say this is normal, as we are wired for such through evolution. But every time I noticed a mental construct again, I brought my focus back to a graceful posture, and I tuned into the breathing, in particular the exhalation. My mind-on-fire slowly made space for stillness.

What happened there?

This kind of "landing" in the stability of a graceful posture transformed my fear into trust. A regained trust that resulted in calmness and clarity.

There was an opening to new possibility.

What came up in me while sitting in stillness, was a haiku by the renown Japanese poet Chosu: "Broken, broken again, the moon on the surface of the sea, it so easily mends"

So how could I mend my brokenness in this unfortunate situation?

I remembered the profound teachings I received just before I moved to Tanzania. My teacher advised me to pursue three foundational practices to lead a harmonious life in any given circumstance.

The first practice is STILLNESS.

Generally it consists of stopping to DO, stopping to act in the outside world, stopping to speak, in my situation an inner dialogue, and stopping to think, by changing from DOING to FEELING and from THINKING to BEING.

BEING in STILLNESS means to open up to the direct experience of reality, without the filters of our conditioning. It means to become aware of the living reality of the present moment, which is eternal. We are always HERE in our bodies, and the present moment is always NOW. The practice of stillness is needed to build presence, the continuation of embodied awareness.

Traditionally, stillness is practiced by sitting quietly in full awareness, but it is not limited to the sitting posture. We can all practice stillness in our daily life - standing up, walking, traveling in a vehicle, waiting in line at the supermarket, or being held in custody, like I was. It only requires to intimately take refuge and remain aware of the body, while continuously adapting the posture in relation to circumstances and personal needs.

While presence directly results from the first practice, the practice of stillness, the second practice, which is the practice of re-perception, directly results from tuning into, and staying with the breathing.

So, what is REPERCEPTION ?

With re-perception I mean the ability to re-assess reality with the enhanced awareness that we develop in the intimacy of the stillness.

When we embrace stillness, when we focus our attention to the embodied experience of the present moment, something magic happens. We notice the breathing, we feel the heartbeat, we become aware of the tensions accumulated in the muscles. We get a better sense of our internal processes, of the state of our body.

When our mind is over-excited, stressed, anxious, or angry, we can use the breathing, especially

the breathing out, to naturally, automatically calm down. Simply focusing our mind on breathing out completely, until the gravity point of our body lands back in the hara, automatically stops the excitation, while reconnecting with our original life force and creating space for something new: a new inhalation, a new insight, a new emotion, a new action. When we breathe out completely, there is non-thinking, and when we breathe in again, there is thinking. (Let's try this right now: Let us all breath in) By consciously staying tuned in the present moment with this process of breathing out and in and out again, our disturbing thoughts related to an uncertain future or a regretful past, gradually fade away, while making space for a fluid mind, a mind that embraces reality as it is. A mind that is open to possibility, the possibility of fresh, natural, harmonious, loving and caring thoughts.

The practices of stillness and reperception may lead us to all kinds of positive personal outcomes, like more calmness, more clarity, self-determination, confidence, courage, and so on.... But without the third practice, the outcomes remain limited to the personal sphere, while true meaning is born in a caring relationship to the world.

To become truly universal and boundless, the third practice is key. And that is to practice without any personal goal, without aiming for any personal benefit, without any expectations. Not pursuing anything in particular, nor rejecting anything in particular. Just embracing reality. That is how we can develop a free mind, a mind that isn't attached to anything, that lives an undivided life, wholeheartedly. A life embedded in a deep sense of belonging. And then it becomes natural, almost automatic to embrace reality generously, with love and care. For me, sitting on the cardboard in the dark, that meant in the first place to accept my complicated situation.

But in any given moment, as challenging as it may be, these three practices will lift you up:

1. Welcome to the body.
2. Breath consciously.
3. Generously embrace reality.

So, this could be the end of this talk, but I am sure that you would like to know how the story with the skull ended:

Early morning, after a sleepless night, I heard a vehicle driving up the courtyard. A representative from the President's office passed by. He wore a black suit, golden glasses, a golden watch, two golden rings, and his blinding smile revealed a golden tooth. In a friendly manner, he apologized for what had happened to me the night before, and he encouraged me to be patient. Since my case had already made it to the public prosecutor's desk, there was no way he could still intervene. I needed to sweat out the investigation. He gave me his number and I was set free under condition that I'd report daily.

When I walked out on the sandy street, there was a newspaper stand with flocks of men standing around, discussing the headlines. My skull story was front page, luckily only in Tanzania. It felt odd to buy these newspapers.

It took six weeks for the forensic DNA testing to be concluded in South Africa, and my passport to be rendered. After that it took another 7,5 months and 5 hearings in court before my innocence was acknowledged and I was finally set free. I felt released, and deeply grateful for the insights I gained over the course of this adventure.

Whenever I now have moments of despair, I remember those hours on the floor and I recall what I did to mend easily like the broken moon on the surface of the sea.
And this is also what I want to give to you today: The certainty that, in any given circumstances, you always carry a superpower within you that can be activated anytime.

Now, to conclude: let me invite you to ask yourself: What is the skull in MY suitcase? Let me invite you to open up your luggage, and explore the hidden stuff inside, the stuff that we are ignorant about. And whenever you become aware that you are shocked, anxious or depressed, take it as an invitation to intimately reconnect with yourself: may I find stillness, may I re-perceive reality, and may my motivation to do so be one of care and service to all.