

Nonlinear time is nonlinear mind /

Caught in the net of the law

Susan Murphy Roshi

I confess I've always loved storms, and am always encouraged when rainbow serpent turns up around any of our Zen gatherings. It's like a confirmation but also perhaps a bit of a comment, to have lightning and thunder chasing all around the hills right now. Perhaps upon the fact that I promised to speak about indigenous First Law today, non-linear time, the pattern that the un-numbered chapter called First Law explores in *Sand Talk*. Rainbow Serpent matters.

I'd like to find a Zen way in to this non-linear time which is realised in non-linear mind. If that is the title of the talk today, I think the sub-title is, 'Caught in the net of the Law'. I take this phrase from a poem by Bassho:

White bait! Ah
their black eyes open
in the net of the Law

'Whitebait' are those tiny silver fish with large bright black eyes. And of course, when we are speaking about eyes opening, we are also speaking not just about the black eyes of the whitebait but about the very path we are on -- the path of waking up, the path of opening and awakening our Dharma 'eye'.

Remember that 'Dharma' also translates as 'the Law'. 'The net of the law' is a very resonant phrase. It seems to me to gather in dharma, reality, the teaching, every single particle of matter, every form, every being. Each moment, the Net of Indra, which is an image from the Vedic stream that flows into Buddhism and into Zen. This endless, intricate, woven net in which, at every knot in the net, we find a singular jewel. Every jewel is a unique particle of matter, a form, a being, a moment... and no facet of that jewel fails to reflect the entire net and every other jewel. This is like a more cosmological version of that net of infinite tender and tended relationship that Indigenous wisdom casts like a net across the earth itself. And we call that Country.

Country is very *of* the earth and the highly particular place where we are. We find the net of the Law right there. And nothing escapes the net of the law.

So whitebait! And there is a particle of meaning in the haiku that more or less means, *ah!* Their black eyes open in the net of the law. The net of the law is where our dharma eyes open. Basho's dharma haiku affords an interesting resonance with the name of this chapter, 'First Law'. Jack Kerouac, somewhere in his *Book of Dreams*, throws off a kind of casual koan when he asks, 'Night and day, why do they sojourn here?' You could give an explanatory kind of account of why we have night and day, in which we describe the rotation of the planet as it spins around the sun. But that has no purchase here because the real force of this comment, accepted as a koan, is the word 'Why?' which equally asks a question of you, 'Why do you sojourn here (in night and day)? What is this *sojourning here?*'

Sojourning is such a lovely word to describe a particular kind of expansive relationship with time and place -- not going somewhere in particular -- just, sojourning. Camping out in the utterly temporary. So why do night and day sojourn here with us?

This 'Why' lets us into a much wider non-linear and open-ended kind of wonder, 'I am sojourning here together with night and day', which is of course one unbroken unending fact. We might have a limited number of night and days. Some poet once said, 'Every year, unknown we pass through the day that will be the day of our death', the day of our death. At the same time we have a deeply undivided presence, with no wall of time around us at all. We practice that in zazen, and when we let ourselves really into our zazen, where does each breath even begin or end?

The old Buddhist image of this two faces of the experience of time is the two faces of the Buddha - Sun-Faced Buddha and Moon Faced Buddha. Sun-Faced Buddha lives for an almost infinite 1800 years -- the moment that is timeless, edgeless, the time of this self-nature that has never been born and cannot die. At the same time there is Moon-Faced Buddha forming the other face of this one Buddha -- born in the evening, dies in the morning. We live between these two faces and experiences of time. We have a limited number of days and night within the fullness of unending time. When

did we all agree to place ourselves for some reason between the little iron teeth of tick-tock-tick-tock, tick-tock-tick-tock? That chews away our lives. Before tick-tock time there was day and night and day and night and there was the procession of seasons to sojourn in, and all of these were productive, they brought forth infinite variety of moments of being, edgeless in their rhythm -- the never-ending story of one thing always becoming another, not life ticking away in some kind of eternal deficit account, a growing deficit account...leaving us in an increasingly bitter quarrel with time.

Night and day sojourn here as *us*. In the great body of our life everything moves together and everything is passing through -- rocks, mountains more slowly than us, butterflies much more quickly. The rates of change are utterly beside the point, the significant matter is that we all, ALL sojourn entirely together in change itself, as change itself. So that's a glimpse into the strange character of the net of the Law, in which all of us are caught, along with the whitebait with their open black eyes.

What comes up quite early in 'First Law' is the word non-linear, and non-linear itself is a kind of ridiculous term. Somewhere, Tyson actually has a bit of a fight with it, or rather, says the word itself creates a fight between *non-* and *linear*, as though you can't think outside linear except to offer it in negation. And linear mind, which is always setting out to discern one thing from another, with the hope of reaching something it chooses to call a conclusion. But has anything ever truly ever concluded on this earth, or in this particular universe? Yet within it, we are caught by our own habit of mind inside another kind of net, which is a particular way of holding our minds slightly apart from all that is, standing apart and 'looking on'. Not gathered in.

Meanwhile, the Indigenous pattern wisdom we have been exploring comes up against that, and says there is nothing here that is not 'gathered in'. It is not necessarily easy to wrap a mentality formed in linear time around *no time*. And yet our bodies inhabit non-linear space-time as the very fact of being, of what a body is.

Now a teisho is not a lecture, it doesn't explain. The word itself can better be translated as song, or shout. In other words what I am going to try to work through

cannot and will not be a lecture on philosophy or physics, though in the numberless chapter First Law, those things are also at play.

I can't show you the document confirming the bloodline of dharma transmission - but I will describe it to you. At the top of the bloodline is Shakyamuni Buddha. And from Shakyamuni Buddha, a line comes down the page and begins a long, looping process, all in red, which is the bloodline. And along the bloodline you record very carefully the dozens of significant names in the Zen lineage down from the Buddha, all the way down to your most humble and by now weary self - amazed self as well, to find yourself on that bloodline, caught in the net of the law.

But then what happens is even more interesting. The red bloodline goes down from below your name and then all the way around the page and back up to the top, even higher than the Buddha's name. It then passed down through a mysterious circle – the source of all that is no thing at all - before it comes down to the name of Shakyamuni Buddha.

So linear, non-linear? Is this linear, is it non-linear? That circle will never explain itself, but within the roundness you can feel the presence not just of the cyclical, and the unceasing nature of this flow – but also of the inconceivable, the blessedly healing empty nature of reality itself, which qualifies everything and every name that is on that document. Every name -- the fact of all the lives that touched each other to pass the Buddha Dharma down through so much time to your humble self and all the way back to the ever productive disappearing point, the great round from which the Buddha emerged.

Now this is another way of understanding the net of the law, and the fact that this whole matter that we dream in linear terms is one unending circle. That a bloodline is not, in the end, *linear*.

Let's bring Dogen's 'Uji', *Being Time*, into an *us-two* and conversational yarn with First Law, for both are so productive in the way that they wonderfully fail to separate time from place, or time from beings. Beings are inextricable from their expression of place. They express place vividly while utterly failing to separate time from place,

which situates us in the reality in which we can learn to be a custodial species, aligning to the no-time of country, which is awake as flow; and we see, when we are awake to it, that it is *timeless* expression of flow.

Flow, in Tyson's words, becomes something like this. He says, of First People's Law, 'Nothing is created or destroyed because of the infinite and regenerative connections between infinite systems'.

You could equally say it the other way around: *because* of the infinite and regenerative connections between systems, or eco-systems, or net of regenerative relationships, nothing exists high and dry, standing alone, able to be created or destroyed. Therefore time is non-linear and regenerates creation in unending cycle.

He says somewhere, 'Kinship moves in cycles', and the most beautiful example that he gives is in the kinship pattern in which your great-great-grandmother is your child. So that the people alive in a given moment have a retroactive relationship of a regenerative nature, in which it is made clear that all times are existing or meeting together in useful way at once. Kinship was my favourite part of doing Anthropology, a long time ago. Those wondrous kinship systems. The way they break up the concrete of your mind.

So kinship moves in cycles, such that your great-great-grandmother is also your child. The land moves in season cycles. The sky moves in stellar cycles and time is so bound up in these things that it is not even possibly a separate matter from space or from the place where we are. All the way through *Sand Talk* there is the move to a deeply dedicated and *custodial* interest in what is, and what comes along with that deep custodial interest is the natural requirement of the human heart to take care of it. So the how and the why of 'sojourning here' disappear entirely into the *facts* of what is.

This mysterious matter comes down repeatedly to the place where we are, to our very *being*. We casually call ourselves beings, just as though that was not in itself a most wonderful and expansive mystery. We call ourselves beings, and the place where we are -- how can that possibly be separate from our being, our being here? And when

your zazen opens into in a state of more complete being, or of 'just being', then at that moment, what you are is nothing but the rich question Wumen poses in the verse to Case 35 of the Gateless Barrier: '*Is this one? Is this two?*' This mysterious reality, is it one, is it two -- this one beginning-less indivisible matter, in which beings and things appear, infinitely varied, in extraordinarily detailed form? We are the question here, that simply embodies the 'answer' breath by breath.

The rain pouring down right now is a constant reminder of having a body -- a body that scintillates in the presence of water, and this 'scintillation' is *being*, both the fact of infinite variety and of no *thing*, no *body*, no water, all at the same time. Is this one, is this two? Our very being is the imponderable and ongoing resolution of the question.

This is a little like trying to *mentally* encompass "emptiness is form, form is emptiness". Mentally, it might be a hard job, but bodily, no trouble at all. Impossible not to embody it. In the on-line discussion, Rick and Warren formed a kind of co-arising us-two at a certain point yesterday and did a beautiful job of finally resolving the Buddha's 'dependent co-arising' into *Sandokai*, or 'Taking Part in the Gathering'. And they did it by way of Warren posting a photo of a tiny snail making its way along his own or someone else's finger. Both finger and snail can do nothing but fully actualize being time, non-linear mind -- there isn't a choice.

Now in First Law, that unnumbered chapter, Tyson explores the fact that it is ultimately impossible to be an outsider, an external observer, looking into reality. For in fact reality constantly flows in relation to your viewpoint, it shifts. And he moves through a brief account of the way in which Einstein's theory of relativity - which you could sum up as the space-time law that pertains to the molecular level of matter, in which time is the fourth dimension of space-time - cannot align with the nature of the sub-atomic particles that comprise matter. Einstein's space-time cannot be made to lie down in the Procrustean Bed, if you like, of quantum mechanics, and vice-versa. The film that was recommended, 'Infinite Potential', explores David Bohm's beautiful series of attempts to reconcile these two. But any sub-atomic particle, an electron say, appears to behave as a thing, as a speck of matter of some kind, when you are not trying to measure its position in space. But is clearly describable only as a wave of

energy, the moment that you try to do so. Ungraspable. The grasping impulse is beautifully defeated. Just as it is in working with the first gate, Mu.

At some point, Tyson suggests, 'Change your look into your gaze'. Not a bad description of the shift that zazen awareness opens in us. A gaze is wide, it is a shift from a narrowly specified object awareness - as in standing outside and examining an object - into unbounded field awareness. And field awareness is not simply a wider kind of look, for field awareness completely includes and contains *you*. You are one subject communing in that field awareness with any or all the other mutually communing subjects. So this is an unbounded field awareness, in which there is all of creation manifesting as the infinite net of the whole, of which you cannot *not* be part. I don't know that this is so different from the experience of really deep Samadhi, or sesshin mind, as many of you know it. That deeply settled presence has no edges; your senses radiate with no beginning or end point. They include everything arising with no sense of beginning or end. Even the breath has no truly discernible beginning or end, in that open state.

Tyson explores how in terms of physics, an electron or photon, for example, forms not a single position but a field of probabilities of potential location at any given moment in time. This is his way of moving to spatialize the understanding - that is so ungraspable, luckily - that an electron can be both a locatable and discrete speck of matter, and the pure flow of wave, once. Both are equally true accounts. David Bohm was famous for having said, 'The opposite of any great truth may very well be another great truth.' Tyson says, 'Because a photon or an electron or maybe a quark, forms a field of probability as to potential location in space at any given moment in time, it cannot be pinned down to any single location in linear time... it forms something like a beach in which each grain of sand is a possibility of its presence.'

Even the words 'a possibility' gives you the necessary amplitude, that is also the sense of the mysteriousness of your very being. You can have all kinds of banal stories about your time, your place, your life, your story. Perhaps even your tax-file number. After all, the fundamentally most banal story of all is *tick-tock*: or 'tick' resolved in 'tock'. In the meantime, at the deepest (quantum) sub-molecular level that

physics has yet been able to gaze into the nature of what this is, we find space and time in *field*, not *linear* configuration.

And yet it is a fact that it is tick-tock time itself that is so caught up in the pathos of history, or else the pathos of history is so caught up in it. If you think of that pathos to include climate crisis, world-changing pandemic, layer upon layer of waves of human beings coming into existing places and overwhelming the existing people there, of colonizing history and settler mind – the many painful matters we have been allowing to hurt us as we look into our time...

It is linear time, measurable time, time in the sense of identifying clear beginnings and ends that are imposed upon this edgeless flow with a forensically strict synchronisation – without which the entire engine of wealth creation could not proceed to rampage over the earth. Synchronized time is the way we force endless growth upon the exploited living Earth. Looking at the vast empty sky through a narrow tube..

In fact, it was the ability to measure space-time in a fine-grained way with a sextant that permitted James Cook to travel across the ocean with an instrument that effectively could measure latitude and longitude against earth's revolution around the sun, and earth's revolution upon its axis, in a very exacting way. In other words the colonization of our continent was dependent upon a measurable space-time, and brought the mind of that measurable linear mind, post-enlightenment mind, to encounter what Bill Gamage's book called 'The Biggest Estate on Earth', immeasurable acres of wonderfully tended, alive Country. Which to that to the colonizing eye just a rich set of resources awaiting use and exploitation.

And that eye was almost functionally blind to the spiritual time-space subsequently translated from words like *tjukurba* to 'The Dreaming' – which sees creation always unfolding complete in the roundness of right now, with no start, no finish. It is complete and therefore timeless at every moment -- as Tyson puts it, '...where past, present and future are all one thing, one place. And every breath ever taken is still in the air to breathe'. W.E.H. Stanner called it the 'everywhen' that is deeply mapped

onto kinship which is country, which is place, which is time. So custodianship arises as *country*.

In the Yolngu world view, there are three categories of living things. The first category is: things that move themselves or have an effect on others. So that includes sun and wind and moon, night and day, stars, it includes rocks and rivers and mountains, glaciers, it includes fire. In fact, from the Yolngu point of view it also includes any car that also still works. Great joy can be taken in a car, usually a Toyota, that still works. So those are the things that move themselves or have an effect on others - first category of alive. Second one is things that breathe or have the ability to reproduce, so all plants and animals, but excluding humans. For humans create a third category, from a Yolngu point of view. And they are in their own category for a demanding and particular reason: They have the power to have laws; and to keep those laws; and to be able to forgive.

I hope you can feel how that arrives in you. For me it arrives deeply, it lets us understand what a custodial species might look like. Caught, with great respect and willingness, in the net of the Law.

So, if there is a linear time, in which all things are relative and limited, and non-linear time, in which nothing has ever begun or ended, what time does *being* inhabit?

The book that was my favourite book to read with my children, and their favourite book for me to read with them, is *La Corona and the Tin Frog*, by Russell Hoban, who is also a philosopher as it happens. The story offers a way into this matter of the absolute and yet relative truth of time, both of which are very great truths. After all, along with the edgeless nature of every breath we take, the Jisha ends each sesshin evening with the great truth that, 'Life and death is a grave matter, all things pass quickly away.'

The four stories in the book revolve around an old La Corona cigar box – made of wood, and on the lid was a kind of ideal-world picture: a beautiful and mysterious woman with a half-smile like the Mona Lisa, sitting in front of a wide verdant landscape, and in the far distance a train click-clacking on some journey... And inside

the old cigar box there are all the kinds of left-over bits and pieces that were once of vital importance in a child's world, those odd stray things that have to go somewhere, so they go into a special box. At which point, they all start relating to each other in fascinating ways, a bit like a medicine bundle.

The final story is about a night watchman, made of tin, and his only job is...when lit up inside with a little metal burner...to puff out incense smoke, puff, puff, puff that announces the time. He calls out, 'One o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock' but can only do this in puffs of smoke. He is burning to say something in actual words, but his only job is burning incense, he can't speak. He has fallen in love, however, with a fairy princess depicted on a weather map - a piece of paper that once changed hue with atmospheric conditions I think, who is there in the box as well. In this story there's also a crocodile with a strong inclination towards becoming a poet. And a literary spinster mouse living in the wainscoting, who publishes a modest quarterly literary journal.

One mysterious night, as the time approaches midnight, that tiny moment between when the hands of the clock have reached midnight but there has not yet been any kind of sound - that turns out to be a transformative moment. A time between linear and entirely non-linear time, where transformation is possible.

And at that moment all sorts of things happen. The tin night watchman finally manages to utter words, not smoke. He cries out, 'Now is the only time there is!'

which is deeply inspiring to the poet crocodile, who immediately composes a poem, which inspires the spinster literary mouse to cry 'Quarterly is not enough!' The clock escapement mechanism literally decides to escape the clock, and leads the way out under the slightly open window, and all of the long overlooked childhood treasures that are the inhabitants of the La Corona box follow, in procession to they know not where - it hardly matters, they know it's time to set out, no longer caught in the closed story called 'tick-tock' or emptiness or form. And so, led by the clock's escapement mechanism, all the stray bits and pieces walk away, in procession, many of them paired off and in love.

There is one more thing worth mentioning. Among the inhabitants of the box and its vicinity on the nursery shelf was a monkey-puzzle game of chance, and under its lid, a strange, indefinable creature. You never saw it straight on, and so it became more and more uneasy-making. The puzzle was to successfully roll the little metal balls into the holes where its eyes were, but you never really would want to have that thing look back at you. Now when the magical moment happened, it – whatever it is - slipped free of its little round box and slithered along behind them, saying, ‘They’ll want me too. Everyone can’t be nice all the time.’

In other words, without difficulty the Way does not appear, does not wake up, and we just sleep on. As the spinster mouse said, *Quarterly is not enough*, life and death is a grave matter, and things do pass all too quickly away. And yet the original self knows no time at all, ‘now’ has no beginning or end. And the nature of our being here that we confirm in waking up has always been happening. Is this one? Is this two?

So, to change look into gaze... that’s another way to bring the mind to meet Dogen’s time-being as it says hello to First Law. To put this as simply as I can, what Dogen does in *Uji* – translated as time-being or being-time - is proceed to dissolve the distinction we make between time and the actuality of being - saying time itself is being and all being is time. Dainin Katigiri’s book on this subject sums it up in its title: *Each Moment is the Universe. The Way of Being Time*.

So each thing in the entire world - and that includes an ant crawling round the rim of your tea cup, for example - is complete as a moment of being-time. And the self itself, indivisible from all that is, is time. Can you feel here how time, place and space compose this being-time? To realise a moment of unbounded being time, we have just a limited number of time-shaped days at our disposal, as the Jisha reminds us every night of sesshin. We only have the moments of this life, but to realise being-time is to realise existence as interdependent with all other moments of being-time, unrestricted as to past, present, future. That’s the realizable essential *nature* of what is.

One net of infinite relational co-arising -- that’s just how it is to actualise a moment of being-time. And this being is realized in practice, and then realized and again realized

and still more realized. Realizing and embodying doesn't end. We don't come to some end of the question, 'Is this one? Is this two?' We just live and embody this liberating question as the strong charge of being, itself.

And in being-time we are connected to all moments past and future and to all beings. Interbeing. Thich Nhat Hanh once beautifully said, when someone asked, 'After someone dies, where you can meet them?' replied, 'We are *always* meeting, at the wonderful heart of peace.' That dissolving point of self, in zazen, which dissolves the self-imposed restriction of linear time-based being – we meet there as easily as all things do in dream, with no walls in the mind.

So Dogen says time does not flow away from us, since we ourselves are time. Just as you cannot stand outside reality as an observer, we can't be outside time, and time cannot be outside us, it is all one radiating flow. All moments, past, present and future flow into this moment. Dogen asks, 'Reflect now whether any being or any world is left out of the present moment' - or left out of that tiny snail as he moves unhurried along a finger...

So practice faces us towards vigorously abiding in each moment, which is to actualize this whole universe of being time. Not drifting through it half asleep, but actualized in these moments of being. So all beings are already reality in the deepest sense, both caught in and creating the infinite net of the Law.

There is no choice here, and earth and universe generate the very capacity in us to awaken to this joy, of finding ourselves held in the net of the Law... a truth that has to be actualized and continually re-established in action, or 'praction', as Victor Steffensen calls it in *Fire Country*, where he speaks of practice and action realising each other. Feel for the affinity and resonance of this non-linear mind with Tyson's First Law of non-linear time and non-linear being,

So the ultimate conversation of 'us-two' taking place in every circumstance is continual reconciliation. While that goes on, and on, unceasingly, I hope you can see how the affinity of Being-Time and First Law, their deep conversation with each other, is pretty damn rich.

Susan Murphy Roshi

Taking Part in the Gathering, Term 2, 12 July 2020

ZEN OPEN CIRCLE

TAKING PART IN THE GATHERING TALKS TERM 2, 2020