

One Breath Great Vow: 1921

'Thursday' by William Carlos Williams

Gary Gach explores a few simple words – about a day of the week – nothing less, nothing more – in the poem by the great American pioneer of modernist poetry, William Carlos Williams

THURSDAY

I have had my dream – like others –
and it has come to nothing, so that
I remain now carelessly
with feet planted on the ground
and look up at the sky –
feeling my clothes about me,
the weight of my body in my shoes,
the rim of my hat, air passing in and out
at my nose – and decide to dream no more.

William Carlos Williams
(1921)

There you have it. In seventy-five words or less. Mindfulness. The Buddha Way. Plain and simple. All in one sentence. It's a complex sentence, because, while truth may be one, it can play on a range of levels, prompt a bunch of responses, all at once. All in the space of one breath. From the outset, he confesses what's often an initial entry into Buddhism. Disappointment. Dissatisfaction.* But, wait – he tells us he's not alone. Ennobling recognition: the reality of disillusionment, as both personal and universal.

Carelessly? I read that as no longer with cares. Or: haphazard ... however one happens to be ... as is. No longer driven by dreams ... their concomitant apprehensions and regrets. Rather being present, to whatever is.

The next two lines locate where all this takes place. Ground to sky. Within that span, he takes a really marvelous turn. Feeling from within. Truth is universal, everywhere, but – *ehipassiko* – we need to see for ourselves. As the Quakers say, ‘Where shalt thou seek the light, if thou dost not turn within?’ Feeling one’s clothes about one might resemble how a fashion model walking on a runway will be coached to ‘feel the material.’ But not to vogue, not to exaggerate. When our mind goes off in 1,000 directions, the stability of our body is still present. The body within the body.

The wonderful word choices continue. Breath as air passing in and out. Not intervening, he just observes breath, as it comes and goes. He’s writing with the lamp of mindfulness. Fresh, perhaps, at the nostrils, coming in; warmed, by the body, falling away. Like so. (By the way, next time you write, anything, see if you can practice conscious breathing. Mindful writing.)

And *hat-brim*. Perfect word. I love how that marks where self meets the rest of the cosmos. Ego as just that: an artifact of fashion. An adornment. Familiar, and everyday.

And, but for the flourish of the last phrase, *Thursday* is familiar, everyday, plain speech. A brief soliloquy, spoken on the stage of the common place. The common wealth. The last phrase completes it, without further comment, into a pledge. To decide to dream no more.

Renunciation isn’t throwing away all your stuff into a river. It’s an inner decision. Turning away from worldly dreams. In such a moment, Siddhartha is henceforth called Buddha. Even before the awakening, is the vow, the intention, the seed already there.

Nourishing seeds, time plays into it. In retrospect, Dr. Williams had inherited a poetics whose language was about as lively as a stuffed owl. *Thursday* is a tentative attempt to heal poetry. To restore its freshness, candor, relevance. The transformation of grounding it in personal experience and expression. What we actually see and say.

Words are Buddhas too.

The topical dharma of *Thursday* might have been intended, or influence, as what’s in the air. We do know Dr. Williams’ parents’ generation read Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia: The Great Renunciation*. The life of the Buddha, as retold in Victorian poetry, sold over a million copies. Dr. Williams tells

his own story, in a brief poem, circa 1921, in his own words, for his own generation. To paraphrase Pound’s rendition of Confucius – ‘made new.’ Right down to the casual, off-hand title. Bodhi Day might be Thursday. Or the next breath.

He never pursued the topic, *per se*. Buddhas in America, back then, were sitting mostly in glass cases, in museums. Still, descendants as well as ancestors are contained in the present moment. The quest for living Dharma, body speech and mind, would be taken up by the son of a friend of the doctor. *Thursday* confirmed for Dharma Lion Allen Ginsberg the viability of the Way in America. Buddha’s presentness, audible, vocal, local.

Two years after *Thursday*, WCW sketched an even briefer, 16-word poem, untitled – anthem, eventually, for millions of lovers of loving speech; Buddhists included. If you’ve never encountered it yet, please look the opening phrase up sometime. ‘*So much depends ...*’

* *Thursday* appeared in WCW’s fifth book of poems, *Sour Grapes*. It might be a synonym for *dukkha*, the inherent unsatisfactory nature of existence. We crave what can never truly satisfy – and when we get what we’d craved, we’re disappointed and push it away. Originating in Aesop, the phrase is slang for a gripe, but the poet holds no such grudge. Recalling his youthful book, at 73, Dr Williams commented: ‘All the poems are poems of disappointment, sorrow. I felt rejected by the world. But secretly I had my own idea. Sour grapes are just as beautiful as any other grapes. The shape, round, perfect, beautiful. I knew it – *my* sour grape – to be just as typical of beauty as *any* grape, sweet or sour.’ [from *I Wanted To Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet*. New Directions, 1977]

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