



# COUNTING MOONS

Article by Steve Kokker

Joni Mitchell indeed never lies. In *Big Yellow Taxi*, the First Lady of Folk sang, “Don’t it always seem to go, that you don’t know what you got ‘til it’s gone.” It was the cry of a generation stuck in a world which seemed to be accelerating, ever-changing and out of one’s personal control. It’s also the same cry of anyone who’s ever avoided living in the present and then later regretted that they didn’t make the most of things when they had the chance.

This theme is on my mind, this year at the Tea Sage Hut in Taiwan, because one of the recurring teachings to us students that has arisen over the last few weeks has been: take advantage of everything available here. We’re encouraged to make full use of our access to teachings, a teacher, the chance to work on ourselves, to grow, learn, to absorb the atmosphere, ask questions, actively participate in our own growth and to tease Kai Ya—to make full use of that which surrounds us. This reminder has somewhat the same effect as when the Zen master strikes his students unexpectedly with a cane during less-than-focused meditation: ‘Hey! Be awake! Live this moment!’

This idea is poignant to me as one of my *idee fixe* over the last few years has been exactly this: how we often tend to not be conscious enough to fully live out the moments we find ourselves in. I regularly find myself reminding others (I’m sure frighteningly tediously) that, “There may never be another chance to do this!” or “Hey, we’ll never live another last Friday in May 2013 again—let’s enjoy it!” or “This is your last summer as a fifteen-year-old, so don’t waste it!” or “Wow, look at that full moon... how many more of those will we see in a lifetime? 400? 100? Let’s enjoy!” It is the principle of *ichigo ichie*, which a Tea Life sharpens in people.

As a productive Virgo, I’ve always been keen about not wasting time, but for much of my life that has been in order to maintain a state of motion for its own sake. As a teenager, of course I would read during bus rides to school, but when I realized that I could transform the horror that was wasting time waiting for the bus or even walking to the stop, I started utilizing that time to be productive too; one nosy neighbor used to call my mother to say, “Stephen was actually writing while walking on the street today! He should look out more where he’s going!” I would make a to-do list or jot down very important ideas while walking, as well as use the time to memorize high-falutin English words. I’d always have a book with me no matter where I

went so I could read while waiting for less punctual friends, and I’d multi-task while watching TV or having a bath. No regrets about all that; I did get lots of cool stuff done. But it took years to realize the waste of time in this compulsive utilization of time. Action, just for its own sake, and not properly directed and motivated by one’s higher self is not optimal usage of our short time on Earth. I’ve learned (and am still learning) to be more focused, and choosy about how I spend my time—to be conscious of the preciousness of it and yet not be obsessed with having to zip to and fro in a masquerade of productivity. If the moment requires stillness and non-action to be nourished, so be it; a compulsion to ‘do something with it’ can destroy that which it has to offer. Taking advantage of what’s around us can be as subtle as simply opening up to what’s there, shutting off a part of our questioning mind, or simply...listening. No action, no effort, and yet so much abundance. Here at the Tea Sage Hut, where some hard lessons come up frequently and where living in an intentional community naturally leads to facing oneself in the mirror, the best way to take advantage of our time is through non-resistance (‘surrender’ is the preferred term).

Ultimately, after a lifetime of fretting over how little time we actually have in this life (all those books to read! So much to see and do!), I finally realized that there is no big tragedy in having little time, or even that many opportunities happen but once—the trick is simply to fully live out each moment you do have, and that way one never feels lack. I spent half my life relating to the outside world from the other side of a camera lens, and somewhere in the back of my mind was the unstated thought, ‘I will enjoy/appreciate this moment/scene later, when I look at the photo’. Nothing wrong with creatively expressing oneself, but I was avoiding direct experience of a moment by partially shielding myself from it with a camera and the feeling that I needed to capture/do something with it. Atom Egoyan’s genius film *Calendar* expresses very deeply the drive to live vicariously through some other medium and its ultimate consequences.

*Ichigo ichie*. Those words now hover not only over every tea session of mine but as often as I can, I keep that thought floating gently, unnoticed in the space between me and any moment I’m living. “This is the first and last time for this moment” sensitizes us to the present in a delicious way; there’s a giddy joy in it, as well as a hint of melancholy—the two elements which together get so close, so deep to an essence of our humanity.



## Getting Close

So while here at such a rare place as the Tea Sage Hut, I do my best to keep focused and alert to the present. I know from the past how nourishing my time here has been, how far-reaching the consequences if only I remain open to teachings, if I do not approach them through filters created by a whining mind which doesn't want to accept something, thinks it knows better, or flicks on the *Be Critical* switch. The same goes for any interaction in my life. The point is not to accept anything and everything whole and without any kind of intelligence—wisdom is needed to know what is mine, what is not mine; we all know what happens to the Yes Man. However, without emptying our cups regularly, without remaining open to what's around us, we say “No!” to our own growth.

I thought I'd share a few of the reminders which I have used to keep myself from lapsing back into busi-

ness and the resulting reaction against that which is. These help me stay rooted to what's currently real and valuable to me (versus continuing to run past programs of what was once interesting or valuable, i.e. running on automatic pilot like we so often do):

- *Stifle the ever-complaining mind.* Part of the brain will forever like to whine about the situation we're in for what it is and for what it is not. There is no effective way of maximizing the present when part of you is reacting against it. If I'm bent on thinking that Wu De spends too much time talking about *Kill Bill*, or that the Garbage Truck Song disturbs my hallowed meditation time, I'm by definition shutting myself off from more subtle lessons. Sure, I can learn them the next time, or in the next life, but if I'm ready for them, it could probably be done more expediently right now.

## Counting Moons

- *Be present but not obsessively so.* The thought that ‘this opportunity might never again arise’ need not become compulsive and lead to an attempt to squeeze out every last drop of a situation, to force things out which are not naturally forthcoming. We need not feel the need to get to the very bottom of a subject discussed with a friend or to push out tears of joy when beholding a yellow blossom covered with dew. This will not necessarily extract more juice from our experiences, it may distort them. This balance between taking full advantage of an opportunity and not going overboard, driven by a light panic of ‘this may be the last time’ takes a while to figure out. It may not yet be the time to have this experience, and perhaps nothing more is needed to make this moment complete. Yet when somewhere underneath our fears or mind noise, it feels right to say “I love you” or “I really appreciate your friendship,” do it! When the impulse to reach out and hug, touch, caress is there, do it! The chemistry and timing may not occur again and we’ll have thrown away an occasion to connect with another. No need to falsely create a moment; certainly no need to short-change it either.

- *Choose your regrets.* Regret is an insidious feeling that the ego often uses to unleash a whole watershed of self-blame and pity. It’s an insidious strategy to wedge distance between us and The Moment. Use regret wisely. I choose to very, very rarely regret those things I have done, rather those which I failed to do. This at least offers the chance for future redemption and decreases the likelihood of me failing to pay homage to a later moment when the time comes. I choose to not spend much time regretting past behavior which could have undeniably been more tactful, caring or less selfish. However, there is some heart-wrenching which accompanies the knowledge that I failed to give my father the last shave of his life, for example. I arrived as an orderly was half-done with it and didn’t respond to my inner impulse to ask him to let me take over. That familiar, lying, cowardly voice stepped up the volume and told me that next time I will do it, or that maybe I shouldn’t ask this question for whatever reason. There was no chance to repeat this beautiful moment later. Or that one night I didn’t follow my impulse to drive out to see my grandmother when I knew she wasn’t feeling well. An impulse told me to drop by; my mind told me other things. That night, I learned the next day, she had died, and I live with the knowledge that I did not properly close a circle as best I could, and I easily could have, were it not for various frequencies of mind noise. I regret not having provided more assistance to friends who came to me in need because I was not sufficiently rooted in the present. These memories do not cripple me but they sharpen my attentiveness to similar situations and strengthen my resolve to not repeat the same errors. If there is a potential to offer someone a moment of human connectedness, and I ‘know’ it’s the right time to do it, I try to offer this.

- *Keep an eye on the balance.* The complaining mind will do much to destabilize one’s balance into believing that something is not as it should be; a major road-block to being fully in the present. While the complaining mind is present to some degree in everyone, it tends to be activated most when one is off-kilter. But we’re human bodies too. When you’re tired, or run down, haven’t eaten properly, or reeling from an emotional blow, defenses are low and that’s when resistance to what is strengthens. Aside from meditation and mantras to keep away negativity, making sure some basic needs are attended to is essential: are you getting enough down time, exercise, proper food, rest, social and work time? Sometimes a good sleep, a day off, a proper meal, or a laugh with a friend is all that’s needed to get back on track.

So... full moons. Indeed, how many more will we see in our lifetimes? Some finite number for sure, and likely less than we’d like to think, considering that many will be obscured by clouds or remain unseen as we stay inside, sleep, party or don’t bother to look. And when one’s remaining time here on this plane can be reduced to a shockingly small number of full moons left to enjoy... well, it makes us a bit less likely to take them for granted. Every event in our lives that we cherish can be thus numbered (how many more tender moments with this person; how many more chances to learn from this lesson in this way; how many more delicious matcha rolls or crumbly chocolate chip cookies, etc.).

Being conscious of these crazy, finite numbers is no cause for alarm or lapsing into depression. They are just the sounds of bells ringing, signals to stay awake and start acting a bit less from the brain space and more from the heart, as our higher selves would like us to...

*P.S. Doing this also makes much better tea!*



