

Olympia Zen Center, March 31, 2010

## CONSTANCY

Last week I spoke about the taxi driver who had said that we were responsible to take care of our own bodies, but that our breath belongs to God.

So, I want to continue with what seems to me is the next obvious consideration: constancy. If we realize that our breath belongs to God, or that our breath is Buddha-nature itself, the Great Universal Buddha-nature, the Absolute, then where are we in maintaining that realization in constancy, in ceaseless practice.

The very first time that I came to Zen practice, I took a course in Zen and the Christian Mystics. In that course we read Zen Mind, Beginners Mind. That was back in 1971. Suzuki Roshi had just died, and Jack Weller who was teaching the course gave the opportunity to any of the students to write a paper on one of the chapters in Suzuki Roshi's book. I think only one or two out of thirty chose to write a paper and I chose the chapter on Constancy. I came across the paper about ten years ago, and I read it and didn't have the vaguest idea of what I was trying to say at the time. But the question of Constancy is certainly a very important one in practice, and still is to me, personally. The longest chapter of SHOBOGENZO by Dogen Zenji is his chapter on Ceaseless Practice.

So, I want to talk about it for a moment from a relative standpoint, the matter of constancy in our lives, just as we are as people, what that means to us, and how we work with it. I think we've all got a sense of that, about what we require. I mean for instance, I think about our relationships. We know in a committed relationship that we ask certain things of our relationships and we ask for a certain level of constancy. This still points back to our own selves of course, even if we are in an important committed relationship. All of practice still points to our own selves, because we still have to be with our own selves yet we might say to our partners: "Pay attention! You need to pay attention here, you need to pay attention to me." Still, for most of us it's very difficult to remain constant to our own selves, to just take care of, paying attention to our own selves, or to pay attention to a promise to change a habit, or to take up some small practice and to maintain that. It's very difficult. It's extremely difficult for us to be mindful all day, and yet we might ask that attention of our partners, that that partner pay attention to us, when we haven't quite worked out how to pay attention to our own self. How to be mindful? How do we work with a certain level of constancy, in mindfulness, it's an extremely difficult thing. Stephen Batchelor says that our problem is that we can't remember to remember. Mostly we don't remember to be awake, mindful about the breath, about this incredible Sacred Breath that we spoke about last week, that is still here tonight, as we speak of constancy!

This breath is breathing us continually, throughout our whole lives, this constant inspiration of the Sacred Breath of Buddha-mind, that doesn't belong to us, this breath that belongs to all of us, is breathing us continually. And it's so so difficult for us to be aware of it and to take care of it throughout the day. There are all kinds of aspects to this constancy then on a relative plane and of course that is what we are doing in practice. We are practicing to teach ourselves to remember more often.

When Dogen Zenji talks about Ceaseless Practice, constancy, one after the other, he lifts the

teachers, the patriarchs and the matriarchs who have gone before us, who have demonstrated extraordinary ability to do ceaseless practice. They practiced in a way that we hardly see today. We just don't see it. I think if we saw it we would think that person is crazy, that person is too extreme. We would point to them and we'd be worried about them. Many of the patriarchs practiced never lying down, made a life promise to never lie down, never to put their ribs up against the floor in lying down posture. Others like our Ryokan-san practiced begging. He never ate food except by begging in his whole life. He's a great example right here, of ceaseless practice. If we saw somebody doing that today we would think that it's too extreme. Other patriarchs practiced other things around food. Of course for Ryokan-san it was a question of begging and eating whatever came to him. Makakasho practiced in this same way around food, being particularly careful to only eat a certain amount of food, to not lie down and to do many, very difficult ascetic practices. Even the Buddha worried about Makakasho, thinking that he was too ascetic. Makakasho became very thin and people worried about him.

We don't often see this kind of asceticism today. There is a saying in Zen practice that when one is practicing ceaselessly in the monastery and doing extreme dedicated practice, that Heavenly Bodhisattvas come to feed them. All of their food is provided by hosts of Heavenly Bodhisattvas. And once they become Enlightened, the Heavenly Bodhisattvas can't do that anymore, because they can't see them. They can't find those monks because they have become invisible, when they Awaken. Actually that's sort of true because the relative concerns step out of the way, they don't worry so much about themselves, about all the petty ego-things that concern people, they get out of the way. So Awakened people do in a sense become invisible, become transparent so the Heavenly attendants can't find them. Even though we don't see people doing these kind of practices much today, ceaseless practice is going on.

I don't know about you, but even in Olympia the sun rises. Even in Olympia daytime comes, night-time comes, the clouds go by, the earth continues, this is one example of ceaseless practice. Springtime comes, the plum-tree continues to blossom, year after year after year. What is manifested in the garden is manifested in us. This is an example of ceaseless practice, it's all around us, all the time. This is an example of the Sacred Nature of Buddha, that this is going on. And we see it, we notice it. We don't always look at it as ceaseless practice of what is appearing before us, yet the appearance of Buddha is continuing again and again in our midst.

Well, I'm not one to look for techniques to say how we go about helping ourselves to understand ceaseless practice in our own lives, because we know all kinds of techniques and routines that we attempt every New Year. Maybe every once in a while we attempt them, and, I speak for myself, they fall by the wayside. I think for most of us that's the case. So the question of constancy is not about some absolute routine, something we latch onto, sink into and accomplish something via some absolute disciplined attention, that's not it either.

I've been looking at this all my life. I know that when I entered this subject in the beginning of practice this was my Koan. But I do think that there is something in the nature of what we live out -and I will describe it as partnership because whether we are with a human partner or we are with practice as partner, that doesn't matter- I think the point is how much we actually love that partnership? How much do we know that we love

our own selves, in that partnership and that without that piece of it, without that ability to love and honor our own self, our own breath – the ego aside – to love and honor this life, we can't do it. We can't be ceaseless without the nature of love.

So there is something important in the nature of love about this, about constancy. I don't mean some sentimental love either, it's something about the passion for life and for wanting to be complete in life. To know that we really lived! That says that it's better when I pay attention than when I don't. It just is! Life is better when it's Awakened living, than when it's not. The quality of it is more wonderful. If we notice that, then we naturally pay more attention.

So the issue of constancy is not so much about the close-up picture. Constancy is about a broad sweep over one's whole life, about really undertaking one's True Depth over our whole lifetime, and being willing to be with that. If we can't do it with our own selves, we can't ask a partner to do that for us. We really have to do that. We become really very worthy partners then, when we take that up, whether it's a human or practice as partner. There is tremendous happiness in that. So there aren't some acute techniques about this. It's a question of the matter of the passion of one's whole life. What we say and do that is the completion of our lives.

And then there is another aspect to this Koan that is related I believe to Dogen Zenji's Koan. Dogen Zenji's Koan asked the question, if we are already Enlightened, why is it necessary to practice? Why should we have to sit this way? Why should we have to do this? I think constancy is that same related Koan. If we are already Awakened why do we have to pay attention? Why should we have to do something, that is an expression of Awakening, which is practice? Ceaseless practice is the pure expression of Awakening. So the sweep of one's whole life is that practice goes through and throughout our whole lives. It isn't a question of "O, I was bad because I didn't sit zazen this morning. Therefore I must be not constant!" It's not like that, it's a knowing over our whole lifetime that we will pay attention, that we will take up this practice. Because it is the expression of Awakening. There's a whole bunch of things we're going to do in our lives too, besides just sit on the cushion. But, sitting is where it all begins. If we have Zazen, if we really understand Zazen as the primary practice, this is where it begins. Everything steps from there.

This ceaseless practice on the cushion over one's whole lifetime then gives us the ground work for bringing true passion to the rest of our lives. And I mean devotion, a devoted life in which we really guide ourselves to what we want to do. It begins with the recognition of this Breath. This Breath does not belong to us, it is Buddha-nature...in and out of us all day, all night. The constancy of it is extraordinary. It never ceases until this life finishes.

Gratitude to Josepha Vermote for her transcription.

Eido Frances Carney  
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