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Olympia Zen Center
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Death and Soul

As you know we are having a Day of Prayer and Healing for Japan on Saturday, May 21, 2011. So I was also thinking about my visit to Evergreen College last week, where I spoke to a class that was studying the nature of the soul and death and dying practices. Because I was there on a panel with other clergy I didn't have the opportunity to speak about Japan and about the underpinnings of the suffering that is related to death and dying. So I want to speak about that tonight and then talk a little bit about the soul.

When you first go to Japan, one of the things that hits you - at least it did me when I lived Ensuji and visited the homes of various friends – one becomes aware of the home-altar that is a place of reverence where the ancestors are honored. Anthropologically it's called “ancestor worship” but I think that would be a wrong way to say it. It is honoring the ancestors. Everyday, without fail, each morning a little tiny bowl of rice and a bowl of tea is placed on that altar in offering to the ancestors. This goes on in about every home in Japan, and of course also occurred at Ensuji; every day fresh rice and tea is placed on the altar. Also at the Temple everyday, you will see some of the same people come and they'll visit the family's gravesite and they will fill up a small buck of water and they will take a little broom and sweep the grave every day and pour water over the stone.

Many of you know about the Obon festival that we have here in Olympia. During Obon the spirits of those who have died during the previous year are invited back to the family – to reside with the family for three days. Candles are lighted on the doorstep so that the spirit will know where to come. The entry is open for them. Also during that time, the priest from their temple visits every single home, will pray at the home altar and will stay and drink tea with the family for a brief visit. Then on the last day of the festival, there is dancing in the street and playing of drums and celebration. Then candles are lighted on little boats and they are sent down river to go out to sea. Many people will not swim after Obon festival, which usually is about August 15th. They won't swim after that because the belief is that not all of the boats make it far out in the ocean to where the spirits reside, and if children go swimming those spirits will pull those children out into the sea. The children will drown. I have been at the gorgeous seashore in August. Even when it is roasting hot, nobody is in the water. It really does happen that way in these modern times.

There is a great deal of belief around the spirits and around their function in the household and in the family. Some of the overtones of this are related to

Confucianism where the belief is that there is a heaven and that after the ancestor dies, he or she goes to heaven and looks down pouring benevolence onto the family, overseeing the family and helping with good works. So the more that the ancestor is paid attention to, the greater works that are going to manifest within the family or even on a particular region or town. So long as that spirit is being attended to, there will be some benevolence that will fall upon the giver. So the care of the cemetery is very primary, including the placing of the ashes and holding of the ashes in the family plot. The family plot is usually just one stone, maybe of the size of where I am sitting, and there is just one stone at the face of the headstone, with just a family name on it. Then there is one more stone close to the headstone that is easily pulled aside and then the ashes for centuries of families are placed into that headstone. So one's individual name doesn't reside on the family stone, it's a collected space. There's enormous care about that and even in modern times, even with the rebellion of the younger people who don't believe that they should invest so much money in funerals any longer, this care of the plot and the placing of ashes continues.

I don't think that in Japan you would see this scattering of ashes in the river or at the beach or wherever we tend to throw peoples' cremains. We tend to throw them almost anywhere in the US, which feels a bit horrific to me... People who go to a funeral might be given a little bit of ash from that particular person who died. I think people don't understand what it is they are doing.

Given all of this practice, you can imagine what it would be for a family now that huge cemeteries have been washed away in the tsunami. They're just gone, and of course many of the families are gone with them, but people have lost not only everything they've owned, they've lost the ashes of their ancestors, and where they had resided. It's an enormous suffering for people. Enormous sense of loss, that we can't comprehend because our culture doesn't hold that as something so sacred. It's a tremendous incomprehensible suffering that is felt in that nation.

Another thing of course, right after the tsunami, with the collection of the bodies, people were placed into mass graves. This kind of thing is unheard of in Japan. They had no choice, they had to be buried. Tremendously painful and difficult for people. So the beliefs connected to the ocean and the spirits residing in the ocean, must be very extraordinary for them right now.

We will keep all of this in mind on Saturday when we are offering our good wishes to send to Japan and as we spend the day, just thinking of them and praying and being present, and remembering that the depth of the difficulty in the culture is huge, it's so deep, we just can't comprehend and hold it.

Then there is this question of soul. I thought that it was a very wonderful thing that this class was taking up this discussion of soul. We hardly hear it anymore,

it's such a deep word, we don't have another word to replace soul. Something that we know is so deep, that it connects so deeply to us. I grew up in the time when we still used the word soul and we believed that we had a soul, and indeed this was the belief in the Abrahamic tradition for a very, very long time, up until the scientific era comes into play and arrive at modernity. We really believed that the soul was the interiority of ourselves. If you were raised Christian we believed that the soul had residence in us and that when we die, that soul went on to it's eternal rewards, either heaven, hell or purgatory. Or if a child died without baptism, the child went to limbo. That's how I was raised, with these beliefs about the afterlife and the soul. The soul also acted as a kind of conscience for us, an interior balancing point in which we could examine our own behaviors and we could make changes in ourselves for the better, we could be assured of some better eternal reward.

As psychology developed in the 20th century, the word "soul" lost favor and the word "self" came to supplant the word "soul." Now we hardly hear that word. If we are talking about our own interiority we use the word self (I'm talking in Western terms). We talk about the self, connecting to ourselves and being with the self. This is really purely from the field of psychology that attempts to look into our histories and our motivations and our behaviors, and to help us with the human dilemma, the human issues of life. Of course psychology is an interesting problem in itself. Psychology can't answer the big questions of life, can't tell us why we were born, can't tell us the meaning of death or why we die, or even what we should do with our lives, how we should live. Psychology has tremendous limitations and if we enter psychoanalysis we are in the field of the limitations of the psychoanalyst and in the limitations of whatever construct any psychoanalyst would use in our interaction with him or her. It's got a sort of rocky ideology, because it only has the self, a limited self as the basis for it's direction. It doesn't look out toward that which is greater than we are (of course the soul looked toward and represented something that was greater). Even put aside the immortal soul, the notion of soul looks toward something greater than the small self. We're still stuck with all of the existential difficulties, no matter how much psychology will do, we'll still be stuck with the existential issues that come up, and we'll have to still wonder about life and death and guilt and pain and suffering and all of these things.

It is religion that attempts to deal with those larger questions. So far as Buddhism is concerned, the Buddha said that there is no indwelling soul, or there is no immutable soul. There is no soul in you that has an identity that is going to go on after we die. Dogen has a wonderful chapter on this if you are interested in reading it, where Dogen confirms the Buddha's teachings. There is no soul that will have an identity, no permanent soul that's going to go on , to heaven or hell or wherever we think we would go. And yet, if I say the word soul - and I'm only talking for myself because I have wrestled with all of this and it's everyone's job to wrestle with this matter for each her-or himself and to come to terms with death, and dying and life

and the soul and all of these things, and what this is all about – but for me if I say the word soul it means something. It does mean an interiority. It means something deeper than I mean by myself. It means some kind of light or spirit or function, deep life-function of some kind. Maybe we could call it Buddha-nature. I'd be happy to call it Buddha-nature. But it is something other than what I think of as myself as a personality, something so deep that I want to reach toward. Maybe it's Bodhicitta, it's something that I want to reach toward that is greater than what I am. Perhaps it's the Bodhisattva urge toward the heroic, our urge to connect and touch something much greater than we are. Maybe it's the urge to be Buddha which is in each one of us, the Bodhicitta-seed alive in each one of us. We all have that life need to connect to the All, to know that we have touched a kind of an absolute.

I don't think for a moment that I have an immortal soul that is going to go on after I die. I really do believe that I will not know when I am dead. I'll just be dead. I have no way of knowing that I will be dead. We have been asked that before “What makes you think you will know when you are dead ?” Such a great question! Maybe you will know, but I won't know when I am dead. If you die we will know when you are dead, but you will not know. Something opens up from there and connects to life, some light connects to life. There is just life after life after life. I don't mean in a reincarnation way. There is consciousness and life and that goes forward and perhaps whatever vow I have lived will have some ramifications and meaning in this life for someone else. That will go forward in all of us. And that vow that goes forward is maybe that sense of soul that I speak about, that sense of wish to urge to the heroic, urge to touch that which is greater than we are. The Bodhisattva vow, to save all sentient beings.

It was interesting in the discussion – there was Buddhism and Judaism and Christianity –we all did come to some meeting place, that nobody could say what soul was. And I don't think there was any of this rather, perhaps dated declaration of the Immortal Soul as we would refer to it when I was growing up. “You will lose your Immortal Soul my child! I didn't feel that that was there, but there was the sense of some abiding spirit of life that goes on with each of us as we live.

Perhaps this connects to a talk that I gave way recently about the Greeks and the urge to live in connection of receptivity to something larger than we are. I could call that soul, living an absolute mystery, living in the receptivity of allowing that mystery, inviting the mystery to shine a light on us, to give a shining in some moment.

So if we do live in that way in which we open with real receptivity to that knowing that there is a deep mystery that we can never say what it is, we can never explain and yet it's there just ahead of us. We're looking, looking and shining appears on us, continually in all kinds of ways and leads us to live in an expression that is at

the deepest heart like soul-expression, the expression of one's deepest connected consciousness. To find a way to express that in this life, that's everything.

Student

Early in your talk you seem toI guess as I think about self, I think about something that's fabricated, that I make up a story about myself. Yet when I say the word soul, that's not what I see, that's not the picture I get. The word you used was interiority, I think perhaps it sometimes the voice that says do this, no this, that I can ignore to my detriment.

Teacher

You know I was speaking from a Western side, but certainly from Dogen's standpoint, Self with a capital S, also I could say the same, but we can't name that, and I have to also say that that is Buddha-nature, and I can say that my notion of what the soul is, is not different from that. But because of the word soul and our culture and Abrahamic tradition, we have a concept of soul, and we've grown up in a tradition and a concept. If you have an idea of God, you don't just give that away! If you had an experience of God then you say there is a God! If you've never had an experience of God you can never be convinced that there is a God. For me I would say God is Zazen, maybe God is the same as Buddha-nature all pervading life-force. It's not a person for me. It's an Absolute in the sense that we say Absolute. Some people who come from Christianity and practice here, they think of Zen practice as God beyond God, because we haven't got any other notion of the Absolute to work with and we must have something, I think. We must have something to work toward, so the Bodhisattva ideal of course is what we have in Mahayana Buddhism and we work with that. But that truly is a heroic ideal. We are to actually be that ideal, not to think that that ideal is out there. There is still this aspect of the mystery, of a life-mystery that we can't grasp hold of. You could say that is the Self, you could say that is Soul, you could say that's God, you could say it's Buddha-nature. But I think that if we reside only in the psychological we have no way of touching that and so we have to step outside of the psychological in order for the big Self to fulfill self. Imagine living our lives and not reaching for that. What is the detriment to ourselves to never reach for that? What happens to us both psychologically and spiritually if we never reach for an ultimate place? It must be something very detrimental.

Student

It lies at the heart of our life, what is the purpose of this, what is this about?

Teacher

Ya! For me, even some aspects of Zen are not transcendent, there is nevertheless this notion of the transcendent in Buddha's Awakening, so this is what we reach for, this is the point of faith, the Buddha's Awakening. At least for me. We must find this out for ourselves and take the time in life to examine all of this. It is extremely important. The unexamined life is not worth living. There is nothing threatening in

this, nobody is going to beat you over the head because of what you come out with, but you will have looked and searched and come to some point of an indwelling kind of confidence. You will have complete confidence in you as self because you did that, that is the same as reaching to Buddha Nature. Just the idea of searching oneself is the same as holding that ideal. But nobody is going to hit anybody over the head whether they examine or don't, whether they search this out. There is nothing in Buddhism that says your outcome is going to be this or this or this, but it will be your search that you have done. That's what the Buddha is saying, that we might confirm what the Buddha says or we might not. We might say, "You know I don't think the Buddha was right in that matter at all! I think there is something that I feel about that." That's to be Buddha for yourself, to do that examination for yourself, exactly as the Buddha did. There is nothing frightening in it. It's deep and warm and life-giving and joyful and elating and fantastic, because it's not about nothingness and emptiness in that nothingness sense. It's about giving life to ourselves.

Student

I keep coming over the word quest and then quest for Self or finding Self. Seems like all the great stories that the quest in each encounter would provide something that was necessary to continue the quest, ultimately.

Teacher

Ya. This is true, Buddha did do a quest and we have forgotten a lot about that. We have grown to be a pretty lazy society, we don't have much questing. To really be the Bodhisattva is tremendous commitment, so we don't have so much deep commitment I think as we used to have. It's harder to find that really deep rootedness, but I think that there is a quest in it. What we wind up doing, is transferring our own quest over to someone like Luke Skywalker. That's what we do. We don't have a mythology to work with, we are not a homogeneous culture, so we don't have an homogeneous story. We're all stuck on our own, hoping that "I'll find this in myself, maybe I'll find that, maybe I'll find that!" It's very difficult today because we don't have a cultural cohesive piece. Luke Skywalker comes along, who's not even real, and this is how we transfer our heroic over to Skywalker.

Student

Doesn't art provide..

Teacher

Yes it does indeed. We can take a creative route, which we advocate in Zen practice, we can take a committed creative route in expression, and that is also the heroic expression.

Student

I was thinking about self examination, wouldn't it be the same as being awake, being actually fully there, and being awake about oneself and everything around me. I mean just the act of the examining means that I am not sleeping, not just going

through life unconscious. Living in that state of awareness? And from there also develop mindfulness maybe.

Teacher

Yes, but it still begs the question, “How shall we live?” It still begs what do we do? It still begs for something, some life-activity more than to say “Well, I’m present!”

Student

Maybe I mean, the process itself, is also a form of being awake, it's not the end-product..

Teacher

Sure, of course. I don't think that you come to some answer and you say “OK I'm done !”

Student

I think that Zazen is very, very important because it points to the Self. Once you get there and you can't go anywhere else, it makes you like Eva said, you become more and more aware of what you're doing, during the day, in your interactions with other people.

Teacher

Yes indeed. For certain.

Student

I was thinking that if we're creating ...Skywalkers to be the quest-seekers, didn't they also provide a Buddha-like guide by way of Yoda ? So you're trying not only to provide the quest but trying to provide the teacher

Teacher

They do. The construct of Zen practice with the teacher and the student, the intention does have that the teacher represents the Buddha for the student. Not that this teacher IS the Buddha or is perfect, but it allows the student a temporary transference until the student sees that what they're looking at is just themselves. At that point the student walks through to the other side of the teacher and then looks out with the teacher behind. That is the process. So the teacher-student relationship is very important in that development in Zen practice, it's the primary piece – we don't have God, it's about life here and now – our question is how do we live in this life, in this here and now. The transference piece is a most interesting construct in Zen practice and it has an appropriate function so that the transference occurs within the Buddha-construct, the notion of the Buddha, so that Buddha develops in the student.

Student

I was thinking soul is such a powerful concept, in Christian culture especially. Coming from a background where my grandfather was a Pentecostal minister, soul is the kind of ultimate Ego-trip. It was a prominent matter of the state of your personality that would live on forever. With a step back, you said, soul maybe is your

essential Buddha-nature. That is so much more powerful in the sense of Self (your personality being just the small self). It's just such a powerful way of thinking about it.

Teacher

Right, and it's co-joined with everyone because it's not a small, personal identity, that I would hold on to even after death, it's joined with all of life.

Eido Frances Carney with gratitude to Josepha Vermote for transcription.