

The Wisdom Of Taxi Drivers

I'm back from Berkeley on Monday, and I had a good experience in a taxi. I heard some very important words, so I wanted to speak about them tonight. I suspect everybody in this room has been in a taxi one time or another and depending upon what city you are in there is a different flavor to riding in a taxicab. In Japan for instance, the taxi drivers are very kind, very soft, they all wear white gloves. They have lace doilies decorating the head rests, some of them have a little flower, all very civil. Berkley is a little more rough than that.

I got off the plane in Oakland and Linda was to pick me up. As I was waiting, she phoned to say that she wasn't able to make it and I should come up to the house by taxi. I collected my luggage and crossed to the taxi platform, got into a cab and off we went. Very often you only have to give a little bit of encouragement to a driver and they'll just talk. That was this guy. He talked quite easily.

He was from Afghanistan and had moved to the United States about five or six years ago with his wife and their three children. He was a college graduate in mechanical engineering and was working as a taxi driver since he got to this country putting his kids through college. The oldest boy just graduated with a degree in criminal justice. The next boy would graduate next year, and his daughter was getting ready to go to community college. So he was expressing deep gratitude for his life in this country. I said that Afghanistan I thought was a beautiful country and he said, no longer, it's been destroyed in the thirty years war, and he expressed deep sadness and regret about that.

We were driving along, and he asks: "So you're coming here on a holiday?" I said: "No my friend is dying and I'm coming to see him." "Oh," he said, "well, you know, when we enter this world, when we're born, everybody else is standing around laughing and we enter the world crying. When we die, we start laughing at death and everybody else starts crying."

We went a little further, he said more things, and then he said something really very beautiful: "You know, we believe that our body belongs to us and it is our job to take care of the body, but we don't know really when we'll be born or when we will die because our breath belongs to God."

I was very taken by that. It was a very beautiful moment. We were stopped at a light when he said that and I had a deep experience of my breath not belonging to me. A moment of great liberation and release. So I want to talk about that tonight. About our breath belongs to God. I don't want to talk about whether we believe in God or not, or the existence of God. I can talk about God in the sense of the Absolute. God beyond God. In Zen Buddhism we don't talk about God very much, about a sense of God, but there is deeply a sense of the Absolute and a sense of

Great Beingness, far beyond our comprehension. So it was in that way that I took it, that “our breath belongs to God. It's not ours.”

For a moment, if you think about that, if you just take one breath with that realization, it's tremendously liberating, in that there is this balance between the relative and the Absolute. And that the Absolute resides in us continuously and in every moment as the breath comes in and out. And here is this body given to this physical expression, whatever it is that I call me, or whatever this appearance of this Buddha-expression is, in all of these forms sitting around in a circle. The air does not belong to us personally, but truly belongs to Great Being.

So I looked into Dogen Zenji about this matter. I'm sure that I will be working with it for a while, because I had great experience from that taxi-driver. This is just some brief research on Dogen Zenji around this matter.

The 27th Ancestor Hannyatara...

Hannyatara was Bodhidharma's teacher. Difficult for me to go into this big history for those of you who are new tonight. But Bodhidharma we mentioned in our prayer-echo tonight, is the Patriarch who essentially brought Zen Practice from India to China. Bodhidharma's teacher was Hannyatara. New research on Hannyatara shows that Hannyatara was a women. It's a little odd to chant her name among the patriarchs, but nevertheless as far as the Indian tradition is concerned Hannyatara was a women.

So Dogen Zenji our founder, is writing in Shobogenzo:

The 27th Ancestor, the venerable Hannayatarata of Eastern India, was once invited to dine with an Eastern Indian King. After the meal, the King asked her, “All the other monks have recited scriptures to me, so why have you alone not recited any?” Hannayatarata replied “In my humble way, what I breathe out, does not conform itself to external conditions and events. And what I breathe in does not take up residence in the realm of my Skandas.”

The Skandas are also what we chanted here tonight: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind, consciousness, perceptions, formations. So Hannyatara continues:

“The Scriptures that I recite are always like this. Thus they are comprised of hundreds of thousands of millions of billions of Scrolls, not one or two Scrolls.”

So Hannyatara answers: *In my humble way, what I breathe out does not conform itself to external conditions.”* The breath that I breathe in, what I breathe out is completely the Dharma, she is saying. It does not get mixed up in life circumstances, it is greater than that. The in-breath does not reside in the world of aggregates. It does not reside in the world of perceptions, formations, eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind. So if breath is truly the Buddha-dharma if the breath is God beyond God, then it doesn't take residence in these complications that come out in the circumstances of our lives. The breath remains simply the enduring Absolute Breath. It doesn't get stuck or caught. It's the one thing involved just in this moment. It is astounding to realize this, that the breath is the Absolute Now.

Dogen Zenji goes on to explain. *What the Venerable One Hannayata is now putting her full strength into saying is that not only does what she exhale not conform itself to external conditions, but external conditions do not conform themselves to what she exhales.*

So the condition has no effect upon the breath of the Absolute. It has no effect upon that. *Even though her breathing out was an external condition, it was not her conforming herself to external conditions. Even though she is breathing in and out, even though she is involved in this everyday life, still the breath does not conform to external conditions. Innumerable eons have come and gone, but people have not yet understood the ebb and flow of breathing in and breathing out...that we are completely sustained by the Absolute in each moment.*

So, *her not taking up residence in the realm of her Skandas, in the realm of conditioning, made her exhalation of a single breath equivalent to hundreds of thousands of millions of billions of Sutra-Scrolls.* In the Absolute now, in this Absolute moment of this inhalation and this exhalation, we cannot comprehend the extent of it. The immensity of it cannot be counted. We cannot comprehend every breath throughout all of existence, but Hannayata could comprehend all of this in one single breath. We can also say that throughout all of existence there has only been one breath.

So simple our Zen Practice, the teachings are so simple. This taxi-driver's wisdom was so simple and profound. I felt grateful to him because he just expressed the Dharma. I have no idea of what religion he was speaking from. We never mentioned religion. In our breathing in and out, in our in-breath and our out-breath, there is not a question of religion in it, is there? We don't say to ourselves, "OK I'll take this next breath if it's Catholic, I'll breathe out this next breath provided it's Jewish." We just don't do that. This is the sacred shared experience beyond the limitation of religious dogma.

Dogen Zenji points to what the Buddha says: *"From the winter solstice on, the days grow longer as the sun moves father southward. From within my eye, a light pours forth, and into my nostrils pours the Breath of life."*

In our practice, we don't have to worry about beliefs or doctrine, or dogma, or culture or anything if this realization of breath comes to us. As we know it's the first thing we do when we are born, it's the last thing we're going to do in this world, it's receive a breath. We have merely to examine it. Examine it and be completely with it to understand its full impact. Receiving the breaths without their being owned by us, is a remarkable thing to breathe in that way. If we realize this we can't help but live a life of gratitude, we can't help but realize that all this is the Dharma. We can't help but realize everything is shared. We can't help but realize that we are never alone, even though we may be solitary. So when we have difficult times, when some things are going hard for us, remember this breath belongs to God.

To understand that what we say, the words we use, whatever comes from our mouths ride on the billows of the exhalation of Breath. What we say, resides in that Breath, and we can't help but

take better care of the quality of words and thoughts that ride on that wind. Next time you take a taxi, you don't know if it will be a gift, we just can't say. I was very grateful to have that gift from the taxi driver, and to bring that to Rob: our breath belongs to God. It helps in terms of not fighting with the breath, not fearing that it won't be there.

Eido Frances Carney