

The Statue of Avalokiteshvara

Good afternoon. I'm happy to be with you for this 5th consecutive summer sesshin at the San Rafaela Center. It's becoming like a tradition. Thank you Soji Sangha for your welcoming hospitality.

We sometimes give pop quizzes at Zen Clare Sangha. Here is one for you today. Just two questions:

First, what's the most important moment in meditation? Thoughts? – anyone?
(Answer: when you sit down to do it.)

Second, what's the most magical moment in meditation? Anyone?
(Answer: When you realize you've been distracted.)

A follow-up here is what to do when you realize you've been distracted in meditation? If you're uncertain on this point we can take it up in dokusan. End of pop quiz.

The theme of this sesshin is the *Bodhisattva Ideal*. It expresses in the figure of *Avalokiteshvara*. Who is that? Avalokiteshvara is the exemplary Buddhist figure that embodies compassion. She goes by the name Kwan Yin in China. Avalokiteshvara – Avalo for short – embodies and is seen in various forms, sometimes with lots of hands and eyes. These hands are very busy helping people. This is the energy of Avalo, the helper who hears and responds to the sounds and suffering of the world.

The Heart Sutra is narrated by Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva. It's not just Avalokiteshvara, but she's being called a Bodhisattva. Bodhi means "awake" and sattva means "someone who's alive." Sometimes sattva means "hero" – so we have an awakened hero, or a warrior of the enlightened way. A Bodhisattva vows to help others along the way – to be of use in the world: to not withdraw and only work on his or her own enlightenment but to be alive and aware and responsible.

Enkyo Roshi of the Village Zendo has this to say about helping others: "Helping others sounds quite noble but I think few people have that goal in mind when they enter practice. I didn't for sure. I wanted to take care of myself – *not realizing* that "I" am interconnected with all beings; and that by taking care of myself I would, in fact, take care of others. That realization came later.

Enkyo continues: "So it seems to me that it's a very noble thing to say – I'm going to help others. But what I see in the people who take up Zen and continue to

practice is that this is actually what happens because they begin to see who they are, and who we are is not limited by this “skin bag” we inhabit. We are in fact always in relationship. As we enlighten ourselves we enlighten the energy around us and we enlighten those around us; those we work with, those we walk with, those we struggle with. We just do it. It’s just what we do. We are in fact Bodhisattvas.” End of Enkyo Roshi’s comment.

All right then, let’s look further into the Bodhisattva Ideal today, by taking up a couple koans.

Koan is a Japanese word. *Ko* means public or official; *an* means a document pertaining to examinations. Literally, a koan is a document possessing an authority upon which everyone can rely. In Zen, koans are said to be the highest truth expressed by the buddhas, patriarchs and masters of old. They have the power to cut off delusive thinking and open our eyes to true reality.

Our Clare Sangha founder Janet Richardson Roshi often said “our life is our koan.” Bidden or unbidden, we are faced with koan-like challenges and situations throughout life. From time to time we are all “people in a pinch.” And one never knows what a person in a pinch might say or do.

As an example: Some years ago, there was this butcher’s apprentice in Galway. In a terrible shop accident one day, his right ear was sliced off. The butcher heard the apprentice scream. As a helping person, he ran over and picked up the detached ear, popped it into a paper bag, then he rushed the apprentice to the hospital to find someone to sew the ear back on. The butcher ran into the operating room, took the ear out of the bag and put it on the table for the doctor.

Then, do you know what the apprentice said? “That bloody ear isn’t mine,” he said – “my ear always has a pencil behind it!” So it is you never know how people respond in a koan or pinch, especially a hard pinch like that one.

Let’s look into two koans concerning our bodhisattva responsibilities.

The Statue of Avalokiteshvara:

Hold up the statue. This koan is from “The Iron Flute” collection of 100 koans with commentary by Nyogen Sensaki, one of the early Japanese Zen teachers in America.

Here’s the koan:

The people of Korea once commissioned an artist in China to carve a life-sized wooden statue of Avalokiteshvara. The work was completed, the statue carried to the harbor for shipment when suddenly it seemed to be stuck fast to the beach, and no human power could move it. After negotiations between the Chinese and Koreans, it was decided to keep the statue in China. The statue then returned to its normal weight and was later enshrined in a nearby temple. A person paid homage to the statue and said, "In the sutra we read that Avalokiteshvara is the possessor of miraculous powers, and in all the lands of the 10 quarters there is not a place where he does not manifest himself. So why did the statue refuse to go to Korea?"

Verse:

*Why ask a foreigner
To carve a wooden statue?
The immovable statue on the beach
Is not the true Avalokiteshvara;
The enshrined statue in the temple
Is not the true Avalokiteshvara;
The empty ship returns to Korea,
But the man who opens his eyes...
Is he not a true Avalokiteshvara?*

There you have the case and verse of the koan. It is followed with commentary by Sensaki. So if you're a student working on this koan, you present your understanding of it to the teacher. That's your job. Can you demonstrate why the statue of Avalokiteshvara refused to go to Korea? Where is this famous Avalo anyway? Who is the true Avalo?

Does this koan seem reasonable? A couple of you are shaking your heads. Well, you are right. As my first Zen teacher Sr Elaine MacInnes liked to say, if it's reasonable it's not a koan!

On to the second koan for today:

Glassman's Light in The Street:

Most of you know the 3 Zen Peacemaker tenets and skillful means taught by Bernie Glassman Roshi: "*not knowing, bearing witness and taking action.*" We appreciate the Peacemaker methodology for our practice to notice and respond to the needs of the world.

Twenty years ago, Glassman articulated a koan during a winter gathering of the Zen Peacemakers at Wisdom House in Connecticut. This was back in the day when he named Sensei Janet Richardson as *roshi*.

Glassman addressed the assembly: “In Zen we hear of the All-encompassing Dharma and of the interconnectedness of beings and of the One Body – and all like that. Yet, for most people, such notions are meaningless.

Every week in the streets of our cities, homeless people die of exposure. Rarely does anyone come forth to claim them, or help. Apparently, this is because no one knows them. In our nation’s capital, unknowns have been known to freeze in winter. Likewise around the world. Backlogs of frozen cadavers build up in the morgues due to lack of funds for proper burial.

Glassman continued: Downtown Yonkers last week, a sangha member saw this family in a dark alley. They were “up against it” in the night cold. Who are these people? Why is this? What can you tell me?”

Verse:

*The light shines in the darkness
And the darkness does not overcome it.
Can you show me your light in the street?
In the Yonkers’ alley,
At just such a time, what is your light?*

So these are two koans we use in Zen Clare Sangha. They point to the Bodhisattva Ideal and call for your direct demonstration of it. In this sesshin, you are invited to demonstrate your understanding of one or both of them in dokusan.

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Looking further into our theme of the Bodhisattva Ideal, I want to briefly take up the teachings of Master Thich Nhat Hanh (TNH) who is recognized as a spiritual teacher most concerned with actualizing the Way of the Bodhisattva.

TNH used to tour the US every couple years, giving talks and holding retreats. I attended several talks, first in the late 1990s where I met his senior-most successors Anh Huong and Thu Nguyen who founded the Mindfulness Practice Center of Fairfax (MPCF) where they teach. (As an aside, they have kindly assisted Zen Clare Sangha over the years. For one example, they transmitted the

practice of “Evoking the Bodhisattva Names” which we have incorporated into our bead ceremonies honoring student home practice.)

Let’s look into what and how TNH teaches and comes through to students.

TNH typically starts his talks with a bell of mindfulness to bring us here and now:

(Bell) I listen to the bell and its wonderful sound brings me back to my *True Home*.

(Bell) We offer homage to Avalokiteshvara – the bodhisattva of compassion who hears the sounds and suffering of the world **(bell)**.

TNH teaches we cultivate peace in our practice. And breath awareness is a way to do this. The breath brings us back to our body, it links our body, mind and spirit altogether. Noble silence helps us learn this.

Right effort in breath awareness can be to put our whole body and mind into breathing. We can *be the breathing in our mind and in our body*.

Likewise with any action undertaken in our daily life. We can *be the activity, absorb ourselves into it*. In Clare Sangha we call this “being where we are and doing what we’re doing” – or more simply “one-with practice.” Learning how to do this helps us practice with *wholehearted effort*.

Wholehearted effort is like Shunryu Suzuki-Roshi’s (author of Zen Mind, Beginners Mind) teaching of Zen activity as activity that burns itself up completely – 100% combustion. It leaves *no trace*.

Concerning peace, our body suffers when there’s a lack of peace. It suffers from our own abuse and misuse. We want to make peace with our body:

Breathing in (gesture) I’m aware of my body **(bell)**

Breathing out (gesture) I’m aware of my body **(bell)**

Breathing in (gesture) I calm my body **(bell)**

Breathing out (gesture) I calm my body **(bell)**.

We want to allow our body to rest. And we want confidence in our ability to do this. It takes practice. Our body has the power of self-healing, though many don’t know how to allow healing.

TNH teaches that **mindfulness** is our inherent capacity of healing and renewal. Paying attention. It is the basis for transforming ourselves and creating a more

harmonious family and society. To be mindful is to be aware of what is going on in our body, in our feelings, in our mind and in the world, as we avoid harm to ourselves and others. With the help of **conscious breathing** – breathing and knowing we are breathing – we are able to touch and be nourished by the peace and joy that are available within and around us, in the here and now.

Thus, one of TNH's principal points is that mindful, conscious breathing is a way to cultivate peace and healing. Mindful breathing helps us be engaged and pay attention to all we do.

Looking within, we find we need peace and healing in life because of our *Ill Being*. This is the 1st Noble Truth taught by the Buddha: The truth of suffering – *dukkha* – unsatisfactoriness, that which is difficult to bear.

Because we suffer from Ill Being, it engages us. It motivates us to do something about it. And the way to do something is to first look into this ill being – we look into it, we investigate it carefully.

By the power of mindfulness and awareness, we begin to understand our ill being – whether it manifests as anger or hatred, or a constant craving of something – like grasping or greed – and to understand what nourishes it.

When we understand what's causing illness in our body and soul, we see what to do about it. In general, we want to stop nourishing the causes of our ill being, and not to water the seeds of them.

The sangha of practitioners is a wonderful help and encouragement in these efforts – in this inner work. Basically we're all doing the same practice.

TNH describes ill-being in detail. We all have experience of it. Anger, violence, despair, a constant craving – they're the foundations of unhappiness.

Breathing in I'm aware of my feeling (**bell**)

Breathing out I calm my feeling (**bell**).

Right mindfulness has a sharp energy in it. TNH likens it to the Holy Spirit in the Christian tradition – to energy sent by God. By shining light on the path before us, it helps us know what to do and what *not* to do.

Experiencing the energy of mindfulness is an encouraging by-product of practice. It is akin to *yoriki* in the Japanese Zen tradition which means settling or foundation or concentration power.

Peace is also a by-product of mindfulness practice. Peace comes from our letting go and coming back to here and now where we are. Jack Kornfeld says letting go may simply mean to stop holding on. (Gesture opening of closed hand) Both he and TNH emphasize that healing can only occur in the present.

In dealing with the poison of anger or hatred, TNH teaches that: *The seeds of anger are always there. But when you notice, when you keep alive your understanding, they don't manifest. Understanding is something that stays with you; and practicing the precepts, practicing meditation helps you deepen your understanding all the time.*

TNH teaches: *Don't speak when angry.* You can go back to mindfulness of breathing. "Mother" the anger, embrace it without becoming it or acting it out. This reminds me of an old saying: *Least said soonest mended!*

Our practice is not to hold on to anger. Don't suppress it, but don't hold on to it. Try to let it go. If the anger persists after 24 hours, you must ask the help of a teacher or friend. TNH was very definite about this – as if speaking from observed experience. He illustrated this with a story:

In Viet Nam, a young couple falls in love and gets married. Later the man is called off to war and must leave his wife and young son. After long time, he finally returns. There is a great reunion, they are very happy to be together again. So the wife goes to the market for food and ingredients to celebrate the reunion and make an offering to the ancestors.

While she is shopping the son tells his father "You are not my father. My father was here when you were gone. When my mother stood and talked he was there and when she sat down he was there."

Hearing this, the husband became very upset. So upset, he wouldn't talk to his wife. He began drinking a lot. The situation worsened day by day, and the wife didn't know why her husband was so hostile. After some time of this, she saw no chance for relief. Then, do you know what she did? She drowned herself in the river!

*Soon after, the man learned what the son meant by his father being there when he was away at war. **That** father was the shadow of the mother on the wall, her own shadow, like herself. The shadow father stood when she did, and he was there when she sat down.*

It was too late for the real father then! – too late for the wife to help with his anger then! It's a sad tale that brings a lump to the throat. Yikes!

So TNH's teaching is not to delay in resolving your anger. Mother it, take care of it, be skillful in not holding on to it, in letting it go. Similarly, he teaches not to hold back your compassionate action – toward yourself or others. Time is often of the essence in this life.

My strong sense is that TNH's teaching expresses the Bodhisattva Ideal underlying all Mahayana Buddhist teachings, including Zen, that our happiness consists largely in our devotion to the happiness of *others*.

In closing, here are two teachings that relate one thing in practice with another:

Breathing in I'm aware of my breathing – **bell**
Breathing out I let go of thoughts and images that arise – **bell**
Awareness of breathing, letting go thoughts and images – **bell**
No letting go, no awareness – **bell.**

Breathing in I let go and come back to the present moment – **bell**
Breathing out I enjoy the freedom of being here and now – **bell**
Coming back, freedom of being here and now – **bell**
No coming back, no freedom of being – **bell.**

All right then, there you have it, thanks for your attention. May all be well.

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