

The Circle of the Way

Roshi Joan Halifax

“On the great road of buddha ancestors there is always unsurpassable practice, continuous and sustained. It forms the circle of the way and is never cut off. Between aspiration, practice, enlightenment and nirvana, there is not a moment’s gap. Continuous practice is the circle of the way. This being so, continuous practice is unstained, not forced by you or others. The power of continuous practice confirms you as well as others. It means your practice affects the entire earth and the entire sky in the ten directions. Although not noticed by others or by yourself, it is so.”

Zen Master Eihei Dogen

When we were building Upaya’s temple, we named her Dokanji, Circle of the Way Temple. The name originated with Japanese Zen Master Dogen. I think it was Kaz Tanahashi who thought of using this name, or was it me, or was it all of us? Of course it was dependent co-arising. At the time, the name felt so clear to all of us because of the practice style and ethos here at Upaya.

Our temple’s name, Dokanji, Circle of the Way, applies to how we endeavor to live our lives here at the Zen center. However, it’s important to note that this is our aspiration, not a description of how we already are. We aspire to realize continuous practice in an integrated, inclusive, non-compartmentalized way. Reality always prevails, however, so we struggle to actualize our ideal and we often flounder.

We need to expect these struggles, because we live in Western culture where compartmentalized, non-integrated behaviors are the norm. It’s common, for example, for people to cherish Saturday or Sunday as *their* days, freed from work, days for play or rest. There are Friday night behaviors, Saturday night behaviors, Sunday night behaviors, then Monday morning behaviors. We compartmentalize our behaviors into these different timeframes. It’s how the Western world is structured.

This segmented approach to time is a clear challenge that we experience at Upaya. We’re committed to taking these vertical behaviors that differentiate

time and function and create something like a musical staff, where the lines and the spaces between the lines are one whole, continuous movement, where our daily lives of service to others and our practice are not separate from each other.

Yet getting rid of compartmentalized behaviors is not easy, even here. We've acknowledged that all of us need "days off." We renamed these days "personal practice days," feeling it would be more congruent with our ethos to not think of them as an "off-day." However, what has happened is that people usually do laundry, answer emails, and cook on these days, that they still treat them as "days off." It wasn't enough to rename them; people slipped back into compartmentalization and differentiation. "These are *my* days, *my* time," and the rest is "monastery time."

But can we understand that "monastery time" is every minute we live? The vision of the circle of the way is that everything we do is practice. Underlying everything, there is a deep continuity in all our thoughts and actions and beneath our thoughts and actions. Western people find it very difficult to comprehend the continuous way. We like to separate things into pieces and take them apart. It is how science is practiced, how business is done, and how we see the world. It's the genius of Zen Master Dogen to bring us into seeing how we don't have to structure our lives into cells, that instead we can experience "being" in flow, and shift our perspective on time into time-being.

The Buddha says, "To practice the dharma is swimming upstream." For Westerners, it's not just swimming upstream—it's swimming against a tsunami. We have to change the view from it's *my* life to this is *our* life. As one man dying of prostate cancer said to me: "We belong to each other." We belong to the earth, we belong to the sky. We inter-are. Wisdom, compassion, body, mind are not separate. The same applies to our very moment-to-moment experience, to our experience of time, which is not separate from being. Each moment is causally intertwined with all other moments. We are intertwined with each other in a causal flow of multiplicities and multiple processes that Dogen calls time-being.

Dogen teaches, "Continuous practice is the circle of the way." All the musical notes are there, making a chord moment by moment which shifts and

progresses through time, creating an unrepeatable melody. This is simply the nature of life, whether we see it or not, this flow and weave of non-repeatable events that co-arise.

“This being so,” Dogen continues, “continuous practice is unstained.” It is unstained by any contrivances, by thinking, by naming, categorizing, or wishing. He then says that this is, “Not forced by you or others.” The music of life unfolds with its complex non-repeating harmonies and progressions that also includes silence and also, humorously or tragically, our delusions and disharmonies.

Yes, our blindness keeps us from seeing that we inter-are in time-being. Yet sometimes we see remarkably well. I remember one day being in Joshua Tree National Monument. An artist turned to me and said, “Everything is in the right place.” Maybe as an artist she had some kind of impulse to change things “artistically.” But instead, she had let go into the perfection of just that moment as it was. She let go into the music of the natural world and, in her surrender, experienced that she too was part of it, that she too was in the right place.

We cannot be forced into this deep experience of letting go into the music so that we *are* the music. We cannot be forced into this experience by being admonished that “washing the dishes is enlightenment.” We only arrive there by relaxing into what Dogen calls “the miracle of the moment.” Then you might find yourself in the vast field of collective realization, not forced by you or others. So washing the dishes is just washing the dishes, “unstained” according to Dogen, by thinking, naming or categorizing. Unstained--spontaneous and miraculous.

The same might be said of the practice of shikantaza, just sitting--panoramic nonjudgmental inclusive receptive awareness. You can't force shikantaza. You can't sit down and say, “O.K., I'm going to do shikantaza.” Dr. James Austin, in the Zen Mind, Selfless Insight retreat, pointed out that receptive attention, or shikantaza, is an involuntary process. It happens. Shikantaza happens. Not because you want it to. You can't sit down and willfully make shikantaza happen. The brain doesn't work that way. Shikantaza is involuntary. Trying to “just sit” is not “just sitting.” Trying interferes with “just sitting.” When you “try to just sit,” you are practicing “*trying*.” You are not “just sitting.”

The circle of the way also is involuntary. The structure can point to it but to realize it means you *realize* it. A strange way to say this is that “it makes you real.” You become real. You become authentic through this involuntary letting go. You can’t make it real by will. You make it real by letting go—it arises from this deep experience of selfless letting go, or the self letting go, what Dogen calls “the dropping off of body and mind.”

Some people are resistant to “zen” structure. One of my good friends in dokusan said about sesshin: “This is a lot like being in the Army.” Well, maybe yes, maybe no. There are some differences and there are some similarities. One of the most important differences, but also one of the most important similarities, is the continuity of all functions. The functions of our life inter-are. You can’t come into the dokusan room and say “I’m a bodhisattva. I want to be ordained, and then grab an object and say this is *mine*.”

What we ask for here at Upaya is congruency, to notice the split in our behaviors, and then not to split from the split. When you notice that your behaviors are not congruent with your ethics or ethos, for example, you don’t hold yourself up in judgment and abuse yourself. Instead, you bear witness to how many times you leave life by objectifying and compartmentalizing. When you discover you are alienated, that you have objectified “the other,” then you might be so broken-hearted that there is nothing else to do but to let go into the “study of the way.” In the best (or maybe, the worst) of circumstances, this is involuntary. It’s not even an imperative. It’s deeper than an imperative. *It can’t not be when it arises. There is simply nothing else but being let go into the dharma as one gets renounced by one’s alienation.*

I have a small sense of this in my own life; small, and yet enough to recognize when I encounter someone who has been actualized by this to some degree in their life. I always experience an incredible sense of relief at discovering: Oh, here’s one who’s not living in a compartmentalized way. Here’s a person who is not objectifying other beings. Here’s a person who confirms or is mindful of each being and each thing.

Dogen goes on: “The power of continuous practice confirms you as well as others.” To confirm each other and ourselves reminds me of the Zen Ancestors words: Not knowing is most intimate. This experience of being confirmed is to be penetrated by each being and thing, including ourselves, in an unmediated and intimate way, beyond ideas of who and what. This experience of confirmation arises from the base of receptive attention, being in an open attentional field. Our experience of connectedness with and through the world is easily visible in fishes as they swim in a school, in tango dancers, or in a mother holding her baby. Whenever we experience being released from the tight fist of fear, when the music and the dance become one thing, we know mutuality, interbeing, dependent co-arising. The mother and child are not separate from each other; dancers flow around each other; fishes move as one body. We meet, really meet, in a field beyond all thoughts and conceptions. Thus “the power of continuous practice confirms you as well as others.”

The structure of the sesshin is a powerful example of interbeing and co-confirming. Sometimes four or five days into the sesshin, when everything is flowing, we discover that we are in harmony, not like a machine but like birds flocking. We are one body, confirmed and confirming each other.

One time in Mexico I was invited to go to a sugar cane field where the swallows gather in great numbers every afternoon. I went and sat on the hillside with some friends to witness this beautiful event. Just before dusk, a few swallows flew in without giving any indication that something special was about to happen. Then suddenly, thousands upon thousands of swallows were there, and whoosh, they made a giant swallow that stretched across the sky. This miraculous formation of beings interdepending dipped and dived, swooped and danced, without anyone directing the dance. It was just this vibrating mass of beauty in the sky dancing as one body. And then, just as suddenly, right before the sun dropped below the horizon, thousands of black swallows flowed out of the sky like a dark river at dusk; they flowed downward and disappeared into the sugar cane. All the Mexicans applauded and I did too.

Next morning, I ran down the hill to the sugar cane field. Platoon after platoon of swallows flew up; each group did a little macro-swallow dance, then disappeared in different directions as they went to search for food. At the end of the day, they would find each other again and give themselves over to the dance of interbeing.

The swallows are a visual experience of the reality that truly we're all connected to each other, that this life, this existence, is all connected, causal, unrepeatable and continuous.

This is what we hope to cultivate during sesshin, and during our daily lives, yet we can't *make* it happen. But before we are let go of, there is preparatory work to do. First, we learn the craft of the practice. And then as we practice, like an artist, our self-consciousness slips away without us even realizing it. Then, the behaviors in the zendo become like a dance, a dance characterized by beauty and gravity, concentration and subtlety. The dance goes from the sub-atomic to the molecular to the individual, then to the collective and out into the cosmos. Then it circles back again into the very pulsing of our blood. It is a dance of selflessness, and it happens only as all of us release into the field of time-being.

It won't work if we feel oppressed or directed by ourselves or any particular person. It doesn't happen because we have been ordered to do it; we can't be afraid that we are going to disappoint the abbot. At a certain point, we have to recognize that the structure, craft, and discipline are here to support us; they are present to provide deep nourishment for a collective and inter-independent experience of flow, of interbeing, of awakening.

To repeat Dogen: "The power of *continuous* practice confirms you as well as others." The more we simply cooperate with the whole process of sesshin, the more mutually confirming it is. The more we stay in the structure and don't break it by emailing or talking, the more deeply confirming it is. What's confirmed is not only our own experience. Although our own samadhi has the chance to deepen, we experience that the samadhi of others is deepening also as we do this together with and for each other.

We can also experience this with the precepts. Even though some people do not like the idea of the precepts, most of us at Upaya have discovered that practicing precepts is a saner and more practical way to live. If you live at Upaya with all this wonderful cultural diversity, you have the opportunity to realize what it means to live in a way that does not disturb you and others. It doesn't mean being selfish or self-centered; it means being generous, kind, and considerate, having mental stability, not being caught in the reactive conditioned mind. It also means having the heart to deeply cooperate with one another to support the deepening of practice. One day, we might discover that the precepts are how a Buddha would live. This might seem simplistic. Yet we are all buddhas, suffering buddhas and happy buddhas, moon-faced buddhas and sun-faced buddhas. So why not realize it right now? We're playing hide-and-seek with our own goodness; we're hiding from our own basic nature. We're seeking something which is already here. It is already everywhere.

The precepts themselves are practices of liberation, not to be used to blame ourselves or others, not done judgmentally or with a kind of piety (which is just insecure self-importance.) We do these practices simply because we love. We love. Without an object. Simply because we love. Our practice acknowledges and confirms interbeing, causality, dependent co-arising. We inter-are.

Dogen completely understands this. He says, "Your practice affects the entire earth." Every time you turn off a light, you're reaching right into the heart of Iraq, right up into the Arctic, right into the sky. Dogen says we reach right into the entire sky in the ten directions. This is a time when the demand for oil is radically degrading our very atmosphere. A friend in Nanking said, "We never see the sky here." China is polluted, Vietnam is polluted. Vietnam is the fastest growing economy in Southeast Asia, poisoned with our dioxins from the war, now booming economically by making more and more irrelevant things for us consuming Americans. They are being poisoned directly and indirectly by our consumerism. We inter-are.

We need to ask ourselves, how much do we really need? We're creating a phenomenal economic boom in Southeast Asia and in China as a result of our rampant consumerism, and we are inspiring consumerism throughout the world. But do we need so much? Can we take exactly what we need in our bowls and not yearn for more? Can we see how our hunger for things is polluting not only our mind and lives but this very earth and sky? And especially can we notice how consumerism keeps us away from our true essence?

What do we really need to actualize the best in our hearts? When I went to Tibet in 1987, I was there for four months, hitchhiking. I bought the Chinese army's version of power bars from some woebegone soldiers in a remote outpost in Western Tibet. I was grateful to be eating these thick rectangles of lard, salt, sugar and refined flour. I'd take a big bite and chew it slowly, recognizing that from one point of view they should be on the 'no eat' list for the whole world. But I'd eat this thing and think, the fat will give me warmth, the carbohydrates will give me energy, the salt will help me out, and it will kill my appetite; and then I'd smile inside and confide to myself, well, it might kill not only my appetite but might kill me. But no matter--these kinds of judgments were not interfering with my enjoyment. I was just happy; I was grateful. I wasn't calling up my local nutritionist for counsel and consolation.

I ran out of these power bars when I ended up on the northern shore of Lake Manasarovar, where there seemed to be nobody about and nothing growing but nettles. So I did as Milarapa did: I gathered wild nettles and made a simple soup. Drinking the pale green broth, I thought it was the best soup I'd ever eaten. Then one day, walking, I discovered a lama in a cave near a broken-down gompa. I begged food from him because I had nothing to eat. He gave me the last of his very funky rice and some white flour with weevils in it. He was so kind, so utterly humble. He could have given me a big stir-fry and I wouldn't have been happier. I wept from sheer gratitude.

So what is it we need? Do we need gold or jewels or do we need to awaken our sense of the incredible enrichment of just this moment as it is?

When Roshi Bernie Glassman and his wife Jishu and others were up in

Upaya House working on the precepts, Bernie came up with, “Do not cultivate a mind of poverty in yourself or others.” Thich Nhat Hanh often describes the time he was walking in Plum Village, and he came upon a Western woman with a tight and unhappy face. He saw her as a hungry ghost. She had that look in her eyes, that there’s nothing that’s enough.

The deeper our consumerism penetrates us, the farther away we get not only from our own liberation but the liberation of all beings. The hungrier we are for things, the more we objectify the world around us and the easier it is to plunder and destroy the very ground of life. It means that your practice, as Dogen says, affects the entire earth in the ten directions.

Dogen also says: “Although not noticed by others or by yourself, it is so.” There’s no prize or award for living honestly and with kindness and compassion. One does not self-praise: ‘I’m a good bodhisattva.’ You don’t win the lottery by being good. “It’s not noticed by you,” says Dogen, and it’s not noticed by others. The natural, uncontrived state of mind and heart is sufficient, and leaves no trace.

The heart-mind involuntarily arises in the experience of the body and mind studying-realizing the way. Awakening is involuntary. “Continuously” doesn’t mean only practicing on Saturday or Sunday. Dogen means *continuous practice*. Be Buddha continuously, all the days and nights of the week. Awaken continuously, allow continuous awakening to be the natural thread of your life.

Dogen, by the time he was 23, had already lost a lot—his parents, his two most precious teachers, and he’d traveled to China on a harrowing boat trip. He writes:

In May of 1223 I was staying aboard the ship at Qingyuan. Once I was speaking with the captain when a monk about sixty years of age came aboard to buy mushrooms from the ship’s Japanese merchants. I asked him to have tea with me and asked where he was from. He was the tenzo from Ayuwang shan.

He said, “I come from Xishu but it is now forty years since I’ve left there and I am now sixty-one. I have practiced in several monasteries. When the Venerable Daoquan became abbot at Guyun temple of Ayuwang I went there but just idled the time away, not

knowing what I was doing. Fortunately, I was appointed tenzo last year when the summer Training Period ended. Tomorrow is May 5th but I don't have anything special offerings for the monks so I thought I'd make a nice noodle soup for them. We didn't have any mushrooms so I came here to give the monks something from the ten directions."

"When did you leave Ayuwangshan?" I asked.

"After the noon meal."

"How far is it from here?"

"Around twelve miles."

"When are you going back to the monastery?"

"As soon as I've bought the mushrooms."

I said, "As we have had the unexpected opportunity to meet and talk like this today, I would like you to stay a while longer and allow me to offer Zen Master tenzo a meal."

"Oh, I'm sorry, but I just can't. If I am not there to prepare tomorrow's meal it won't go well."

"But surely someone else in the monastery knows how to cook? If you're not there it can't make that much difference to everyone."

"I have been given this responsibility in my old age and it is this old man's practice. How can I leave to others what I should do myself? As well, when I left I didn't ask for permission to be gone overnight."

"Venerable sir, why put yourself to the difficulty of working as a cook in your old age? Why not just do zazen and study the koans of the ancient masters?"

The tenzo laughed for a long time and then he said, "My foreign friend, it seems you don't really understand practice or the words of the ancients."

Hearing this elder monk's words, I felt ashamed and surprised. I asked, "What is practice? What are words?"

The tenzo said, "Keep asking and penetrate this question and then you will be someone who understands."

But I didn't know what he was talking about and so the tenzo said,

“If you don't understand then come and see me at Ayuwang shan some time. We'll talk about the meaning of words.” Having said this, he stood up and said, “It'll be getting dark soon. I'd best hurry.” And he left.

In July of the same year I was staying at Tiantongshan when the tenzo of Ayuwang shan came to see me and said, “After the summer Training Period is over I'm going to retire as tenzo and go back to my native region. I heard from a fellow monk that you were here and so I came to see how you were making out.”

I was overjoyed. I served him tea as we sat down to talk. When I brought up our discussion on the ship about words and practice, the tenzo said, “If you want to understand words you must look into what words are. If you want to practice, you must understand what practice is.”

I asked, “What are words?”

The tenzo said, “One, two, three, four, five.”

I asked again, “What is practice?”

“Everywhere, nothing is hidden.”

We talked about many other things but I won't go into that now. Suffice it to say that without this tenzo's kind help, I would not have had any understanding of words or of practice. When I told my late teacher Myozen about this, he was very pleased.

When the tenzo said: “One, two, three, four, five” he meant this includes everything. To realize the circle of the way is to realize nothing is hidden, that everything is included. To understand that our very aspiration is awakening, no different than the practice of the precepts, no different than cooking in the kitchen, no different than the production of phenomena in the mind, that everything is a vehicle of liberation.

“On the great road of Buddha ancestors there is always unsurpassable practice continuous and sustainable.” The great road of the Buddha ancestors is everywhere. It's the road between Santa Fe and Sedona. It's the path between here and the kitchen. It's the kitchen itself, the utensils, the ladles, the chopsticks. It's cleaning the temple, it's using the toilet. It's right here, between us, connecting us. It threads through our very blood and nerves, bones and marrow.

It is our skin, our heart, our life. It is the realization that all beings and things inter-are. The path and the temple are the way. That is the very heart of continuous practice. “It forms the circle of the way and is never cut off.” It is never compartmentalized. It is never special. It is never different than what is right here in this moment. It is not fabricated through narrative. And it is unrepeatable. We cannot travel this path again. It is always new, and always fresh.

“Between aspiration, practice, enlightenment and nirvana there’s not a moment’s gap. Continuous practice is the circle of the way. This being so, continuous practice is unstained, not forced by you or others.” It arises involuntarily, not because you have willed it or another has forced it. It is completely within the experience of letting go. “The power of continuous practice confirms you as well as others. It means that your practice affects the entire earth, the entire sky in ten directions. Although not noticed by others or by yourself, it is so.”

When we named our temple Circle of the Way, when we named this center Upaya (skillful means), we aspired to live these names. By naming ourselves thus, we set a standard for ourselves. There is something important to understand about the relationship between organizations and their names-- whatever you call a thing will also present you with the shadow of that name. This is a clue about Upaya—the issue of skillful means is present for us all the time. We are accountable to that name and we must also expect that unskillful means are happening in the shadow, outside of our awareness. We need to recognize this and be vigilant, to constantly ask, “What are we not seeing? What do we need to see?” And the same is true of this temple, The Circle of the Way. In its shadow, we’ll find behaviors that compartmentalize, that separate, that deny that we inter-are.

A key aspect of our practice, then, is to bear witness to and reflect the obstacles we see in our institution, each other, and ourselves because we have publicly and bravely committed to these names and are willing to look in their shadow. Our names are clues and thus can be lights that illuminate our shadow

selves with and through each other. As we endeavor to be the circle of the way, to develop skillful means, we will discover that this Upaya which is our life and our refuge is, of course, vulnerable to the illusion of separateness.

In our daily lives, we often struggle to embody these courageous names. We also are swimming against the stream of Western culture and our conditioning. The willingness to live within the truth of all of who we are is a precious, rare and often difficult thing. These struggles in our sangha and ourselves make us more open, more humble and more disciplined. It is the heartbreaking failures through which we pass as individual practitioners and as a community that are the very means for our compassion, clear mind and resiliency to develop.

In the end, it is the depth and strength of our compassion and humility that develop us as human beings, humans who have the aspiration to awaken from the behaviors that produce suffering. Can we do this? Can we look honestly and fearlessly into the face of suffering--in ourselves, in our community and in our world? We can and we must. How else will we discover:

“What is practice?”

“Everywhere, nothing is hidden.”