

#4 Constancy

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3/08/23

To cultivate your spirit means: not to go seeking for something outside of yourself. This direction is such a contrast to the pace and focus of our modern culture. We want new experience, direction, accomplishment, applause and satisfaction. To move at our own pace in a world addicted to speed is a gift and a treasure: to ourselves and others. Yet how we relate to ourselves is a delicate affair. We chant a gatha each morning from Joko Beck: Caught in a self centered dream, only suffering. Holding to self centered thoughts: Exactly the dream.

This is the only way to practice Zen. If your effort in practice does not have the right direction, more study and sitting and services will only make you busier. Watching what we tend to attach to can be a very useful mode of practice. Some are attracted to the forms of the schedule, the discipline of sitting practice, the intellectual elegance of Buddhism, and the appeal of submerging oneself in sangha. Although these ways are dynamic and can be very engaging, eventually we may come to see that it is our individual relationship of all of these elements which becomes the field of practice. Each of us has a particular bent or forte, which informs our initial responses to the challenges of sitting and community. We may plunge into Zazen or work or study or self denial, etc. All of these elements are intriguing or challenging in turns. Accumulating more of the same may not necessarily further. We lead from our strength, but at some point we may need to redefine what strength is.

Buddhist practice and understanding is not based on the accumulation of information. Instead of gathering knowledge, you should clear your mind. If your mind is clear, then true knowledge is already yours. You then hear the teaching as if it is something which you already knew.

Being knowledgeable or familiar with the literature or forms of practice can be a kind of trap. Even though practice includes a lot of repetition and plainness, it should not be an excuse to develop a hazy or predictable relationship with our sitting, our work or our relationships. Clearing our mind is an intriguing concept. There is the allure of this state when we are developing our sitting practice. But as Suzuki has reminded us, to not be bothered by what we think is the true condition of *Shikan taza*: non dual sitting. Clearing our mind is actually more about acceptance than intention. Can we embrace the forms of practice and not

become victims of them? If we can accept the requirements of sitting and the schedule, and still have attention and energy available to develop openness and connection in relationships, we will find our practice more balanced and sustainable. *Friendship is the whole of the spiritual life*. To hear the teaching as if it is something we already know: means to listen without judgment or preconception. Eventually, we might notice how rarely we are able to be available in this way. The basics of Buddhism are actually very ordinary and simple. It is our hunger to “accomplish” practice, which includes our impatience or need to distinguish ourselves, which complicates our views and holds us back. Suzuki is actually talking about emptiness, but in a very simple and poetic way. It sounds simple, but it is not easy.

When you know everything, you are like the dark sky. Lightning may strike, after it passes, you forget all about it. Nothing is left but the dark sky. With emptiness, we are always prepared to see the flashing.

Again, his theme is non attachment. Not attaching to the teaching, and even more, not being held captive by our own fixed views, leaves us open to consider the teaching. Buddhism is quite revolutionary: both challenging and engaging, if taken on completely. But in some ways, completely is not our primary challenge. For most of us, edging in on the challenges of sitting and community are plenty of engagement, step by step. What Suzuki says next is really quite a subtle and profound insight regarding practice.

To receive knowledge as if you are hearing something you already know is how to accept the teaching. This does not mean to hear things as an echo of your own opinions. It means that you should not be surprised at whatever you see or hear. If you are ready to accept things as they are, you will receive them as old friends, even though you appreciate them with new feeling.

We always want to put what we hear into our own inventory and on our own terms. To some extent, this is how we work with information and learn. On the other hand, it is how we gloss over what is truly new and challenging, and by putting it into our own vocabulary and matrix, we may rob it of its original intention and flavor. Discovering how we tend not to listen, and are resistant to most of what challenges our assumptions and our desires... is where practice starts. Insight is not gained through accumulation, but rather in noticing all of the ways we choose to limit ourselves: through our need for comfort and security. Avoiding and/or clinging to relationships is second nature to us. To be open to

the moment means to notice our attachment and our reveries, our need for distraction and comfort, and the myriad challenges of dropping our preconceptions and facing what is happening to us.

Also, we should not hoard knowledge. We should not try to surprise people with our wonderful treasures. We should not be interested in something special. If you want to appreciate something fully, you should forget yourself.

To not be interested in something special is a surprising ideal. We are attracted to the great meal, the beautiful person, the wonderful performance and the elevation and attention we crave. All of these things might happen to us, but more likely, savoring the unexpected on an ordinary day may be a better strategy. A life of craving, according to the Sutras, is a life of hunger and dissatisfaction. Part of our practice is reciting the Metta Sutta several times a week, to keep some of our basics in view.

Sometimes we think it is impossible for us to understand something unfamiliar, but actually there is nothing unfamiliar to us. People say that it is impossible to separate Buddhism from its cultural background: this is true...

But I am no longer just a Japanese Buddhist. I am living in your cultural background. I am sharing your food and communicating with you in your language. Even though you do not understand me completely, I want to understand you. There is always the possibility of understanding as long as we exist in the utter darkness of the sky, as long as we live in emptiness.

To take the view that we already possess the whole world, and most relationships are available and open, if we have the presence to pay attention, to open ourselves and to respond with sincerity in the moment. Readiness means to live with simplicity, without an agenda or script. We can inspire connection and discover it in the most unexpected circumstances. Suzuki uses the term *the possibility of understanding*. I like the term: *the possibility of connection*.

Perhaps they are both the same: connection may be what he calls understanding. We do have to bear in mind that people and relationships develop at their own pace and through the intention of both parties. His statement: *"I want to understand you"* is such a departure from the posture of so many spiritual teachers: who arrive to bestow "understanding" rather than to seek it. Suzuki is best known and respected for what he inspired in others, rather than what he brought from Japan, even though it was a developed and vast embodied teaching, refined over thousands of years. What is salient is that he

inspired a great number of descendants over several generations to take up the practice for a lifetime, and work to develop it for and through others.

I have always said that you have to be very patient if you want to understand Buddhism. The usual translation of the Japanese word: *Nin* is patience, but perhaps constancy is a better word. You must force yourself to be patient, but in constancy, there is no particular effort involved, just the unchanging ability to accept things as they are.

Suzuki is explicit in his description of what matters in practice. The limitations are mostly in our inability to fully notice and appreciate his approach. The contrast between patience and constancy is both subtle and significant. One is pressured, and feels like a project, the other is an approach which includes the long view and the cultivation of qualities which enhance it. Practice is endless. Eventually we begin to appreciate our relationship to it in those terms as well.

To those who have no idea of emptiness, this ability may appear as patience, but patience can also be non acceptance. Those who know emptiness, even if only intuitively, will always be open to the possibility of accepting things as they are. Again we have a vivid insight into the subtle ways we need to recognise our self limiting tendencies. Patience, emptiness, constancy, all in the service of accepting things as they are. We come to practice hardly aware of these qualities as fundamental to our development and appreciation of practice. We can appreciate everything, and in everything we do, even though it may be very difficult, we will always be able to dissolve our problems by constancy. He is referring here to one of the most challenging aspects of Buddhist practice: How to develop practice in ways that are encouraging and sustainable, for ourselves and others. We initially approach practice as a self improvement project, or as a refuge from life's heartache and challenges. As a basis for practice, this is unsustainable. If we are fortunate, we discover people whose perspective is wider and more generous. We eventually see our challenge more in terms of including people, rather than impressing them.

*Nin* is the way we cultivate our spirit. *Nin* is our way of continuous practice. We should always live in the dark empty sky. Even though clouds and lightning come, the sky is not disturbed. If a flash of enlightenment comes, our practice forgets all about it. Then it is ready for another enlightenment.

It is necessary for us to have enlightenments; one after another, moment after moment. This is what is called enlightenment before you attain and after you attain it.

Continuous practice. Working and practicing with others in darkness. What does the situation require of us? How can we offer something which might be valued or of service? These are not our first impulses. In time we become clearer on what we value in others, and what we aspire to cultivate in ourselves.

They say *the Buddha Way is unsurpassable, we vow to attain it.* In our liturgy, we use the expression, *we vow to become it.* Attainment, although it might happen, in the Soto world, is just a distraction and a diversion. We aspire to live in the empty dark sky. Or as Suzuki said: *The blue sky is my home.*

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