

Water Speaking Water:
The Koan of Kindness
Dharma Talk by Bonnie Myotai Treace, Sensei

A student's voice sings out, *"Take me to the river...take me to the ground...I want to be delivered...I want to be found..."* She has a beautiful voice, plaintive, and when she sings it is from a soulful, ancient place that seems to change the plain afternoon air into the suddenly liminal.

The student voice: so haunting, full of hollows around the vowels, earnestly asking for birth, for water, to be brought to earth. Our school is called BOWS, the Bodies of Water School, and Kate is singing her intention. I play her song over and over here in our hermitage. The day is bright. Outside the two waterfalls are swollen from days of rain, and their sound is more intense than usual. Light flickers through the leaves, motioning with the mild breeze. What is it to ask for water, to sing for it from the bottom of one's feet? There's an old koan that seems part of the day:

Someone asked, "I've heard how the teachings say that 'the great sea doesn't harbor a corpse.' What is the sea?"

Master Caoshan said, "It includes the whole universe."

The questioner asked, "Then why doesn't it harbor a corpse?"

The master said, "It doesn't let one whose breath has been cut off stay."

The questioner asked, "Well, since it includes the whole universe why doesn't it let one whose breath has been cut off stay?"

The master said, "In the whole universe there is no virtue. If the breath is cut off, there is virtue."

The questioner asked, "Is there anything more?"

The master said, "You can say there is, or there isn't, but what are you going to do about the dragon king who holds the sword?"

This is often a poignant koan, most likely because on one level it is designed to help loosen the habitual need for self-belonging— and our corollary anxiety over exclusion and abandonment, of being “outside.” When it is engaged with sincerely, it opens up the vulnerability of position, both interpersonally and in terms of the nature of things. And then, with that radical quality of love that koans of genuine clarity always offer, it invites a new possibility: a confidence beyond all false posturing, a reminder that the “dragon king’s” capacity to cut through duality, the “is” and “is not,” (as well as “can” and “can not”) has rested squarely and easily in one’s own hands from the beginning of time.

Master Caoshan (Jap., Sozan), is a familiar character to many Zen students as the successor to Master Dongshan (Jap., Tozan), instrumental along with him in the forming of the Soto School. Beyond that Caoshan is a figure largely shrouded in mystery. We hear about his arrival at Dongshan’s monastery and his departure years later, but there are scant references to what happened in between other than that he received Dharma Transmission. Later in his life he went on to develop a teaching style characterized by wandering, never staying at any monastery for more than one seasonal training period. It is reported that he did not like public speaking. His lineage did not continue beyond a few

generations, yet his contribution through the formation of the school and his role in shaping Dongshan's subtle and profound teaching style into an enduring treasure, give him a place in the history of Zen that is quite rare and quietly powerful.

In the present koan a student asks, "I have heard that the teachings say that 'the great sea does not harbor a corpse.'" We will need to explore what the sea is and what the corpse is before we can proceed effectively into the workings of the koan.

The sea is often used in Zen to indicate that which does not exclude anything, the container of all stillness and movement—thusness, or the vastness of the unbound. It is said, "all streams return to the great sea," meaning all Buddhist teachings are aimed at awakening. All things are within one reality. Buddhist teachings are said to be like an ocean in that they become deeper the further you go into them, and also in that they have a uniform flavor: the taste of liberation. The "oceanic reflection" or "ocean seal" refers to the calm mind reflecting all things, a great sea of thusness.

In the 13th Century the great poet master Dogen in his *Mountains and Rivers Sutra*, wrote, "Water is neither strong nor weak, wet nor dry, cold nor hot, being nor non-being, delusion nor enlightenment. Solidified, it is harder than diamond: who could break it? Melted, it is softer than milk: who could break it? This being the case, we cannot doubt the many virtues realized by water. We should then study that time when the waters of the ten directions are seen in the ten directions. This is not a study only of the time when humans and gods see water. There is a study of water seeing water. Water practices and verifies water; hence there is a study of water speaking water." Here water becomes a tremendous language for teaching: Harder than diamond, softer than milk... harder than diamond expressing the unchanging suchness of all things. Just this moment! Softer than milk, likewise, referring to the conditioned suchness of things. With these two phrases—harder than diamond, softer than milk—Dogen takes up water qualities to reveal the absolute and the conditioned aspects of reality

The great sea: how great can it be that if it does not offer harbor to each and every thing? The student came across this line in the Nirvana Sutra, and it drove him down the road, into deep study, expressing in some sense his primal affair. To be driven in this way is to have in place a certain quality of heart-mind: a quality that recognizes depth and calling, rather than rejecting superficial contradiction.

This long-ago student, and the tone in Kate's voice today, perhaps not so different; the river song in the hermitage continues into a refrain that begs the same question: "*Open up these lost songs... open up my light... teach me to be kind... teach me tonight...*" If nothing is excluded, why is a corpse not harbored? What is "a corpse"? Is it someone who has died the great death, the death of the ego, the death of separation? Or is it the dead weight of self-absorption, of self-centered, self-possessing delusion that precludes all real kindness? What is that weight, that lifeless thing that never finds its true harbor, or any real rest or relief from itself? How, indeed, do we become kind? How, indeed, do we become our real selves?

Buddhism teaches that as we draw the skin bag around the idea of self, we live in a bubble of delusion, not letting the fresh water of reality flow in or flow out as experience. Always, that line between "us" and "it," maintains distance. When we operate at that distance, our attempts at kindness have a pre-meditated quality, strained with yearning or hopelessness. For this and so many reasons, this koan is a great gift, like a ladle of water from that hidden spring we sense belongs to us.

Caoshan's, "It ... includes the whole universe..." is reminiscent of the way many Zen students initially try to present their first koan, Muji. "It's everything!" we say. "It's the whole universe!" But with such an answer we've just gone in a circle; nothing has really opened up. Remaining is the question: what is the entire universe? What is it that contains everything? Unless the questioning becomes increasingly acute, the process becomes muted and remains immature, never advancing beyond the kind of thinking that dulls the mind, and depresses the sensitive heart. So much more is possible.

I heard someone recently explaining that the reason many of us feel we have a lousy life is that we ask lousy questions: "Why can't I do it? What's wrong with me?" (Or "Why have we so fouled the world? What's wrong with us?") Of course, the mind creates answers: "I'm inadequate; I'm a pig; I'm being punished by an unjust universe." ("We're idiots. We'll never get out of this mess...") It is possible to ask a different quality of question: "How can I step fully into the koan? Not later, but right now? What would it be like to enjoy the process?" Even this kind of questioning can get in the way at times, but occasionally it's grand medicine. "How can I step fully into the challenges that come my way and not fight with time? What if things as they are were not a mistake and I was perfectly positioned?"

In terms of the koan at hand, the questioner does go forward, deepening the ocean by walking into it: *"Well, since it includes the whole universe why doesn't it let one whose breath has been cut off stay?"*

The master said, "In the whole universe there is no virtue. If the breath is cut off, there is virtue."

We could rephrase this: In wholeness, there is not some "thing." Intimacy allows no perspective. Where there is cutting off, however, there are things. Separation allows multiplicity of perspective. If it can be cut off, then it began. If there is being there is non-being; if there is virtue, there is evil. The koan at this point is such a shower of generosity; like the student in the story, if we don't quite see, we look for elsewhere, for "more."

A story is told about a billionaire who was asked, "What's the secret to wealth?" He said, "Gratitude. If you don't have gratitude then no matter how much you have you're poor, because you are always looking at what you don't have. If you have gratitude then you are never not wealthy." It's like the Zen story of the hermit monk living in the mountains. While he's out gathering wood and roots a robber comes and strips his cabin, "everything" is gone. As night deepens he sits at the window and looks out at the evening moon, thinking to himself, "If only I could have given the robber this perfect, white moon." He's still wealthy. And he's asking a good question: What can I give now? How can I give at this moment? What is it that doesn't exclude even our misfortune, that includes the whole universe, that is absolutely trustworthy in its completeness? In *Sensitive Chaos* Theodore Schwenk draws a picture of birds in migration. The depiction offers a beautiful window into who we are, what relationships might be actually expressing even as we're blithely constructing our stories:

Each bird lies on a wave which is made in the air by the leader who initiates it. The beats of their wings follow the ups and downs of the wave and simply make visible what, as a vibrating aerial form, surrounds and bears them all in the arrow formation. ...A bird does not need much strength, for it is as though the movement of the wave of air were to raise and lower its wings for it. If one of the birds has an excess of energy it will do more

than simply allow itself to be carried along. With the beating of its wings it will strengthen the whole wave, will infuse the aerial form with energy from which all will benefit. ... Indeed, even the leading bird itself draws energy from this field.... Thus it comes about that during a long flight over many hundreds of miles each single bird elastically connected with the whole flight beats its wings exactly as many times as all the others in the formation. The entire process is an aerial form, an organic whole moving through the air. The bird is a creature of the air. It is born out of the air and entrusts itself to it. It cannot possibly be abandoned by the sky.

It cannot possibly be abandoned by the sky. Sky and sea and self: can we be abandoned? Can we secure one another? The student asks: “What is kindness?” The student asks, “Why not let one whose breath has been cut off stay?” Caoshan is not oblivious to the truth implicit in the flock of birds. So, where are we to find the compassionate wisdom at work in his teaching? “Drag this student out by his toes!. Out with the dead meat.!”

The teacher may seem to be explaining, but what he’s doing is something altogether more unnerving. This is where “never abandoned by the sky” and “the great sea doesn’t harbor a corpse” is resolved. It’s where the paradox of our absolute uniqueness and our complete, inextricable connectedness is realized.

The Nirvana Sutra line contradicts what is often construed as the basic truth of Buddhism: the unity of all life. The stickiness of our mind can make it very difficult to trust the vitality of the teaching here, but just as is required in studying Dogen, one’s point of view is asked to shift, to flow, if not word by word, at least line by line, to a new perspective. In the whole universe there is no virtue. What point of view that? *No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind*—in complete intimacy, where would you stand to know virtue or its lack? And then Caoshan shifts. “when breath can be cut off, there is virtue.” Be alive, not later, but now. There is no other one. There is no reason to delay or defer. You and the great sea, the journey to the river and the river itself: bring it *all home*.

In another koan Caoshan is asked, “What sort of understanding should one be equipped with to satisfactorily cope with the cross-examinations of others?” Caoshan says, “Don’t use words and phrases.” The student says, “Then what are you going to cross-examine about?” Caoshan says, “Even the sword and axe can’t pierce it through.” The student says, “What a fine cross-examination. But aren’t there people who don’t agree?” Caoshan says, “There are.” The student says, “Who are they?” Caoshan says, “Me.” It always comes to this. We might say there is nothing to prove, or perhaps better: everything, absolutely everything, is owed to life.

The old koan asks which is true? The universe of no separation and no exclusion, or the universe in which the breath can be cut off, in which we are inevitably distinct and distant? The student says, “Please, isn’t there something more?” How do we not, subtly or overtly, fall into the stasis of this in how we live? This is at the heart of Kate’s intention-song, her imploring into the daylight for real ground, asking so earnestly for the walk we each make to the river. It is *the* good question. In water language, it is the tongue beginning to taste the inarguable, “water speaks water” (or, “water verifies water”) — the moment when everything comes home, and no one can say different. What is kindness when the world, nothing but water itself, suffers such thirst? Indeed, what is kindness when one of six humans have no water suitable to drink? There is no mistake in the water, you are not in the wrong place in it—yet even as it is whole and perfect, it requires

your all. It celebrates and supports your *all*. Caoshan, great teacher, leaves us with the question warm in our palm: *“You can say there is or there is not. But what are you going to do about the dragon king who holds the sword?”*