

Continuous Practice

THE CIRCLE OF THE WAY

CENTRAL TO DOGEN'S TEACHING is the idea that each moment of Zen practice is a moment of enlightenment, and each moment of enlightenment is a moment of practice. Thus, continuous practice is undivided. This means that the path and the destination are inseparable. Dogen wrote:

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 undivided, not forced by you or others. The power of this continuous practice confirms you as well as others. It means your practice affects the entire earth and the entire sky in the ten directions.

There are two components to Dogen's continuous practice: bare awareness and wholehearted exertion or engagement. When I was a young practitioner, I preferred the term *exertion*. But

now, I much prefer *engagement*. In this chapter, we'll look at four ever-deepening stages of advanced practice:

1. Conceptual and nonconceptual language
2. Consciousness
3. Existence
4. Returning

Because continuous practice is undivided, each stage is thoroughly penetrated by the others and each opens organically and naturally into the next without a moment's gap. So there is no need to strive—continuous practice is not forced by you or others. When our practice is wholehearted, we just relax into it.

LANGUAGE AS A TOOL FOR AWAKENING

In Zen retreats we practice silence because verbal language tends to cover up the more subtle things that are happening all around us all the time. Our body expresses itself through movement—for example, the way we sit on a cushion or walk. Yet often we are unaware of our body language and the body language of others.

And what about the language of the trees outside our windows or the language of grass? Across from the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center is beautiful Lake Calhoun. It constantly changes color, speaking in its own voice, as Dogen would say. We practice silence so we can experience language at the deeper, subtler level of nonconceptual language. Dogen calls this "wholehearted expression," which is a key component of continuous practice. As the Zen teacher and poet Norman Fischer says, "All language is singing."

All language is singing—even conceptual language. But the problem arises when we hold on to words as if they refer to objects

that really exist. When we do that, we suffer. If we're attentive to the language of our body while holding on to words in this way, we may feel a contraction. Our world becomes smaller. From a Buddhist point of view, this contraction is a source of suffering.

In meditation we pay attention to our internal language so we can break free of the belief that our story is the one true picture of the way things are. If we're not holding tightly to that one true picture, we can open up and relax. It requires continuous practice to break free of our need to reify, or solidify, our thoughts as if they represent truths. We have to see them as they are arising so we won't get caught in the stories they weave.

During a retreat a student came to see me in dokusan. She wanted to discuss the different ways she talked to herself during meditation. She realized she talked to herself in four ways. The first way was problem solving—sorting things out step-by-step, in a very practical and logical way. The next way was in the form of thoughts that seemed to arise from her subconscious—mostly irrelevant, waking-dream-type stuff. She observed that these waking-dream thoughts bubbled up and dissolved immediately.

The third and fourth ways were the most sticky—she noticed that she tended to cling to them and contract around them. The third way, circular obsessive thought, seemed to illuminate the obsessive-compulsive nature of her mind. The fourth way was daydreaming and fantasizing. The last two types, she acknowledged, could easily dominate her meditation.

In one of his discourses, Buddha made a similar observation. He used the analogy of four horses. The best horse runs at the shadow of the driver's whip. A good horse runs at just the slightest touch of the whip. A poor horse runs only after it feels the whip penetrating its skin, and the worst horse runs only when the whip penetrates to the bone.

In meditation we notice which horse we're on. Even if we're on the last horse, in that moment of noticing, bare awareness is present. In the next moment, we may be back on the last horse again—but the moment we notice, we have returned to bare awareness. The practice is just to notice which horse we are on. Suzuki Roshi said, "If you want to tame a horse, give it a large pasture."

In Zen it sometimes seems that we disparage language—but language is important. Like any powerful tool, it can be used to move us toward enlightenment or toward delusion.

Every day the Zen teacher said to himself, "Don't be fooled by anything."

"I won't be," he replied.

SEEING INTO CONSCIOUSNESS

Sigmund Freud, the founder of modern psychology, was a master of language. Psychology departments are not very interested in Freud anymore, but literature departments are. He knew how to use language to penetrate the psyche and bring it into awareness. Psychologists don't use Freud's terms much these days. But whether they know it or not, they *are* using his basic teaching. For instance, instead of talking about the superego (Freud's term), they talk about the internal parent, who is all about *should* and *should not*, which is the same to me as the internal critic talked about in Zen. One could argue that Freud was expressing ancient Buddhist concepts without knowing anything about Buddhism.

Freud postulated three forms of consciousness: id, ego, and superego. Id is our instinctual reactivity. It develops first; then the ego and superego develop simultaneously. The ego arbitrates the struggle between the instinctual drives of the id and the