

Notes on **Consciousness and Sensitivity / The Sound of Silence**



The Dhamma talk on June 24<sup>th</sup> was given by Jim Bronson. Jim began working with the inner life and spiritual traditions as a student of Krishnamurti in 1968. Jim's focus on Vipassana Meditation began in 1990 with Howard Nudleman and a precursor of Insight Meditation Center. Jim expresses his practice in the world through providing community outreach and education through [Kara](#) for people and groups dealing with tragedy and loss. In addition to talks and meditation instruction at IMC, Jim has organized self-taught retreats in beautiful natural settings. (You may listen to more of Jim's talks on [Audio Dharma](#))

Last night's talk, part two of a series on Practicing in a Precarious World, was **Consciousness and Sensitivity / The Sound of Silence**. On July 8<sup>th</sup>, he will conclude the series with a Dhamma talk on **Just One Breath**. Notes on previous talks in this series are available from [metta@coastsidevipassana.org](mailto:metta@coastsidevipassana.org).

The Buddha allowed for two different approaches to freedom from suffering, one for the lay community and one for monastics. The duty of monastics was to be fully aware and fully present every minute of every day. When sitting, they would just sit. When eating, just eat. After eating, wash the bowl.

It is the generosity (*dana*) of the lay community that allows the monastic community to concentrate fully on just being present. The practice of *dana* not only supports the monastics, but develops in the practitioner a spirit and habit of giving, letting go, and of not clinging to "things." While more gradual than the highly disciplined practices of monastics, this provides a way to freedom for the lay community.

*Just as the ocean has a gradual shelf, a gradual slope, a gradual inclination, with a sudden drop-off only after a long stretch, in the same way this Doctrine and Discipline (dhamma-vinaya) has a gradual training, a gradual performance, a gradual progression, with a penetration to freedom only after a long stretch.*

— *Udana 5.5* ( <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.5.05.than.html>)

The *Udana*, which contains a chapter of instructions for the lay community, is a book in the *Khuddaka Nikaya*, one of the collections in the Pali Canon. The Pali Canon is a remarkable assembly of the teachings of the Buddha, which has survived, and are still applicable and useful after 2,500 years.

The Buddha lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> century before the Christian Era (BCE), and taught for nearly 45 years, but none of the teachings were codified or written. Immediately after his death, the Buddha's followers began to see disagreements among the monastics about what the proper path should be, and exactly what the Buddha taught.

According to tradition, the 500 most senior monks gathered together in The First Buddhist Council ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First\\_Buddhist\\_Council](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Buddhist_Council)) three months after the Buddha's death, and compared their recollections of what he had taught. Ananda, the Buddha's companion, had been present for all of the Buddha's talks, and was a major contributor to the remembrances. In a pre-literate society, accurate memory was the norm, and among those skilled practitioners, Ananda had a reputation for possessing an exceptional and prodigious memory.

Ananda and other followers recited the talks of the Buddha, and the Council, which consisted of many who had attended the same talks, listened and corrected what was remembered. When agreement was reached on what the Buddha had actually said, each talk was memorized by a small group of monks, using the standard memory aids of repetition and stock phrases. Each group memorizing a particular talk was responsible for keeping and teaching that talk, and this oral tradition preserved the Buddha's teachings. Periodically, these groups would get together and review the teachings, to make sure that nothing had changed or been forgotten.

In 270 BCE, Ashoka, an Indian prince and fearsome warrior, was crowned emperor. Known as Ashoka the Cruel, he began a bloody conquest of the entire Indian subcontinent. The city-state of Kalinga put up a particularly fierce defense, and the blood-thirsty Ashoka countered by assembling the largest army ever seen in India. He proceeded to plunder and destroy Kalinga, killing over 100,000 people. The day after the battle was over, Ashoka walked about the city, and seeing nothing but corpses and burned houses, he was overcome by the extent of the destruction. Asking himself, "What have I done? If this is victory, what is defeat?" Ashoka converted to Buddhism, began a campaign against violence throughout his kingdom, made Buddhism the state religion, and became known as Ashoka the Great.

Ashoka convened the Third Buddhist Council to strengthen the sangha and to begin carrying Buddhism to surrounding countries. Ashoka's son, Mahinda, traveled to Sri Lanka and converted the King and country to Buddhism. Some years after Ashoka's death, India was purged of Buddhism, and Sri Lanka was one of the few places where the complete oral tradition had been preserved.

In 92 BCE, a famine in Sri Lanka caused concern that portions of the Buddha's teaching may be lost if the monks responsible for a particular section all died. A Fifth Buddhist Council was held to deal with this crisis, and as a result, a great project was organized to transcribe all of the oral tradition on palm leaves (paper had not been invented yet). The palm leaves were organized into three baskets (*pitaka*) – one for the monastic rules (the Vinaya), one for in-depth study (the Abhidhamma), and one for everyone (the Sutras). <http://www.lovatasinhal.com/ospp> This collection became known as the three baskets (Tripitaka), or the Pali Canon ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pali\\_Canon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pali_Canon)), and the original oral content has been preserved virtually unchanged since the time of the Buddha.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British discovered and began to translate the Pali Canon. They were struck by the relevance of the material for modern life, and the richness and vitality exposed in the inner life described and taught by the Tripitaka. We are here tonight to explore this richness.

In *Freedom from the Known*, Krishnamurthi asks us:

*"Have you ever examined how you listen, it doesn't matter to what, whether to a bird, to the wind . . . to the rushing waters . . . in a dialogue with yourself. . . . ? If we try to listen we find it extraordinarily difficult, because we are always projecting our opinions and ideas, our prejudices, our backgrounds, our inclinations, our impulses; when they dominate we hardly listen to what is being said. . . . One listens and therefore learns, only in a state of attention, a state of silence, in*

*which the whole background is in abeyance, is quiet; then, it seems to me, it is possible to be free."*

Freedom comes out of silence, accepting things just as they are, embracing the complexity of daily life, having a spaciousness around it.

Acceptance of things as they are is about being comfortable with silence. Our untrained minds are racing all the time, like in Wonderland, where the Red Queen says to Alice, "Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"

Meditating and mindfulness change the rules of the race. The more we practice meditation, the more comfortable we are with silence. As we practice more and more, what comes to mind has space in it – it no longer is packed full with distractions, side tracks, and trivia.

Why do we want space and silence?

*Hello darkness, my old friend  
I've come to talk with you again  
Because a vision softly creeping  
Left its seeds while I was sleeping  
And the vision that was planted in my brain  
Still remains  
Within the sound of silence*

*-- Paul Simon*

After he was enlightened, Buddha was walking down a path and he was completely glowing. He was shining. He was effulgent. He was what sufis call "munawwara" (radiant, effulgent).

*A man came up to him and was so taken by the light, he asked, "Are you a celestial being, or a god"? He answered, "No". And then he said, "Well, then you must be a magician". "No".*

*"Are you a man"? "No". A God? "No."*

*"What are you"?*

*"I am awake. I see clearly."*

Our hunting, seeking minds are looking, searching, running to the point of exhaustion. If we slow down, we have the space and quiet to recharge, we gain vitality -- we feel more alive. The Buddha's experience under the rose-apple tree as a child filled him with the joy of life and full contentment. In order for us to experience this joy, we must create the spacious awareness to invite it in.

Words cannot convey the true experience of silence. As soon as words are spoken, silence is broken, and we've lost the quiet space we were seeking. If enlightenment is the moon, words are a finger pointing at the moon. They can show us the way, but they cannot take us there.

Buddhism often uses paradoxes to point the way. Zen is especially well-known for this. Paul Reps compiled *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, a book of Zen *koans* (stories) that help point the way,

*A soldier named Nobushige came to Hakuin, the Zen master, and asked: "Is there really a paradise and a hell?"*

*"Who are you?" inquired Hakuin.*

*"I am a samurai," the warrior replied.*

*"You, a soldier!" exclaimed Hakuin. "What kind of ruler would have you as his guard? Your face looks like that of a beggar."*

*Nobushige became so angry that he began to draw his sword, but Hakuin continued: "So you have a sword! Your weapon is probably much too dull to cut off my head."*

*As Nobushige drew his sword Hakuin remarked: "Here open the gates of hell!"*

*At these words the samurai, perceiving the master's discipline, sheathed his sword and bowed.*

*"Here open the gates of paradise," said Hakuin*

In *Joshu's Dog*, another famous story in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, the commentary discusses passing through the barrier to freedom.

*...your previous lesser knowledge disappears. As a fruit ripening in season, your subjectivity and objectivity naturally become one. It is like a dumb man who has had a dream. He knows about it but cannot tell it.*

*When he enters this condition his ego-shell is crushed and he can shake the heaven and move the earth. He is like a great warrior with a sharp sword. If a Buddha stands in his way, he will cut him down; if a patriarch offers him any obstacle, he will kill him; and he will be free in this way of birth and death. He can enter any world as if it were his own playground.*

This commentary is often summarized as "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him." What does this mean?

Of course, in terms of the conventional world there can be no virtuous behavior that involves harming someone else. The issue is not about someone you might find on the road, the question is rather about seeing the something outwardly which is, in reality, simply an inner quality possessed by all humans. The Zen master is therefore pressing and encouraging the student to think deeply and to force the mind into other areas of understanding.

The Buddha represents a capability within ourselves. If we look to something external as the way to freedom, we have placed a barrier in front of ourselves. The barrier must be destroyed – kill the Buddha.

How does the lay practitioner develop the skillful inclinations and impulses that lead to a life well lived, peace of mind, freedom to be one's self, just as one is? A little known but effective practice is the daily recalling of the Five Remembrances:

*I am of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape growing old.*

*I am of the nature to have ill-health. There is no way to escape having ill-health.*

*I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death.*

*All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them.*

*My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. (My actions are the ground on which I stand.)*

*- Thich Nhat Hahn*

These five things, if remembered, free us from illusion. When we are not lost in illusion, we gain the gift of letting go of tension and worry. As our grasp loosens, we become more relaxed. We develop the space to deal with things, and reduce our stress and suffering.

From opening spaciousness in the inner silence through vipassana meditation we find that it is not so hard to accept the Five Remembrances. Rather, we see that our freedom lies in accepting them and then seeing all the other richness that our lives hold, approaching the world with a beginner's mind, unencumbered by the projections Krishnamurti pointed out; "our opinions and ideas, our prejudices, our backgrounds, our inclinations."

Suzuki Roshi, founder of the San Francisco Zen Center, commented about staying fresh, accepting, and open hearted, when he spoke of "Beginner's Mind," in his book "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind". "There is no freedom like the freedom of the beginner's mind. In the expert's mind there are few options. In the beginner's mind there are many options. Our awakening to our true nature begins with our having a beginners mind."

When Jim was at a six week retreat at Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts, he experienced the power of this. As was usual on a long retreat, the first weeks were difficult – issues and things kept coming up, but eventually they settled down, and Jim began to experience the serenity of long meditation. Just as he was settling in and relaxing, the grounds crew began mowing the grass. After several days of this (the grounds are rather large), Jim adjusted to the intrusion, and once again began to settle in and relax. Then deer hunting season began. The silence of the meditation hall was interrupted with guns being fired, and visions of Bambi killers kept intruding. As Jim began to accept things as they were, the hunting season was over, and the retreat drew to a close. On a walk about the grounds, Jim entered a clearing in the forest, and spotted a deer, who spotted him at the same time. Thinking that the deer would probably be a bit nervous about people by the end of hunting season, Jim reached inside himself for space. The deer glanced at him, and then calmly began eating grass. Both Jim and the deer were present in the clearing in a timeless moment, filled with luminosity and quiet love. This precious moment of being present is something Jim still treasures.

Jim once worked for Outward Bound in a wilderness camp. Part of the training included what to do in case of forest fires. One of the lessons involved the Mann Gulch Fire in 1949 (*Mann Gulch Fire: A Race That Couldn't Be Won*. [http://www.fs.fed.us/rm/pubs\\_int/int\\_gtr299.pdf](http://www.fs.fed.us/rm/pubs_int/int_gtr299.pdf) ). Nineteen firefighters parachuted near the gulch to put the fire out. The fire was small, and they didn't anticipate any problems as they went downhill to fight it. The wind shifted and picked up, and the fire began racing uphill through highly flammable brush. The men did not realize their danger until the fire was nearly upon them, at which point the fire was moving at 300 feet a minute – just a little faster than the men could climb back uphill. Ditching their gear, the crew scrambled for safety. One man, realizing that there was no way to outrace the fire, had the presence of mind to set a small fire around himself to burn the brush before the main fire reached him. He called the other men to him, but they ignored him in their panic to outrace the fire. He lay down in the small clearing he had created, and the fire passed over him. Two other men who got on the far side of the burned clearing also survived. None of the others did.

Being present can give us choices which are not apparent to those who are overcome by the moment. Jon Kabot-Zinn tells us to deal with depression by doing as Zorba the Greek did, and “accept the whole catastrophe.” This acceptance of things as they are, allows us to sculpt the artwork which is our lives. The Five Remembrances allow us to escape reaction, panic, and stress, and live our lives in freedom.

*My miracle is that when I feel hungry, I eat, and when I feel thirsty, I drink.*

*- Bankei*