

The Great Doubt

Teisho held at the ZenZondag on April 7th 2013 by Olaf

Today the theme of our sitting is 'Great Doubt', which is a hefty theme. In Dutch we say 'heftig'. The Great Doubt is part of the three pillars of zen in East Asia. Although the three pillars of Buddhism are "Buddha, Dharma and Sangha" in East Asia they wanted to create three pillars that describe the process of the path instead of the final result. These three pillars are "Great Faith, Great Effort (exertion) and Great Doubt". Great Faith is a trust that is not based on any evidence, Great Effort we all have heard the Chinese expression for this, it is called Kung Fu in Chinese. And Great Doubt, this actually is the driver of the entire process. Of course you need Great Faith in order to do this practice of sitting for years and years on end, without any evidence that it will help, that it will result in a final bliss. You need Great Faith, which is also known in Sanskrit as Bohdicitta. But in order to keep it up you need Great Effort. To sit down day in day out, every day you have to make the choice again, while there are ten thousand things that need to be done NOW. But still you go and sit.

And then Great Doubt, it sounds very illustrious, actually it is not. It is terrible. There are forms of zen buddhism in Asia that cultivate the Great Doubt, in Korea they do that. But actually there is no necessity to cultivate it, because it is there, always, all the time. It is the ground of our basic human existence. What we learn when we grow up is to hide it, cover it up, to act as if it is not there. But it is something you cannot escape, because in any life at some point things will occur which will confront you with this Great Doubt. When you are confronted it is there with nothing between you and the Great doubt. Very often it occurs when a vicious disease strikes, or an imminent death or the parting of a loved one occurs. This confronts us with this enormous doubt: "Why? Why me? Why now?" We have no answers. But we are taught to act as if it is not there. "Be a grown up. Be strong. Work hard so you don't think about it." "Do all sorts of things as long as you don't allow that great doubt to mess up your life." It is a very strong programming we are exposed to. But that is mainly the reason why we sit. We sit to train ourselves to stay alert, to stay awake in the face of this Great Doubt. We train ourselves not to run away from it. We don't train ourselves to accept it. If you think that if you will accept it, it will go away, that is a fatal flaw. It won't go away, it is unacceptable. It is like a great wall in front of us, a wall we hate, we don't want. A wall we want to get to the other side of, but there is no other side. But, we don't hang our head down and accept the wall. The wall is unacceptable. This is expressed in many religions, in many spiritual paths.

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Famous is the Dark Night of the Soul of Saint John of the Cross. But also very well-known is the biblical story of Jesus hanging on the cross and he cries out "Father, why have you left me?" He is alone, he is totally alone in this blackness. Although it wasn't tradition in India at the time of the Buddha to say anything about the personal experiences, but it is also there in the story about the awakening of the Buddha. Sitting 8 days under the bodhi tree, fighting the armies and the temptations of Mara, when on the last evening it becomes totally dark and the story stops there. 4 hours later he looks up to see the morning star and he exclaims: "Now all sentient beings in all ten directions together with me have become free of suffering." There was something in this total darkness, this not accepting but staying there without wavering. Here Great Faith and Great Doubt they go together, you cannot separate them. They are two poles of the same thing. This is basic to our humanness, we are born alone, we die alone and in between we take a couple of breaths. But this is somehow a flaw in the way we see ourselves and reality. I remember Shunryu Suzuki talking about oneness and difference. He talked about his hands. He said: "I have two hands. A left hand and a right hand. This is my left hand and this is my right hand. And they are different I know my right hand from my left hand and my hands know it too. But as soon as my left hand is accidentally cut my right hand comes to help it. Not for a moment my right hand will stop and think: "Why did you do such a stupid thing? Couldn't you be more alert and prevent it from happening? Why should I help you? I have so many other things to do, etc." No, the right hand immediately comes to help the left hand. Without any hesitation, because they know they are one, although they know they are different.

Then Shunryu spoke about a waterfall he had seen in Yosemite park. It was an enormously high fall, close to 900 meters high. And he was so impressed when he was standing at the bottom of this waterfall. At the top he saw this massive amount of water going over the ridge. And the while falling the water spread out into a fine mist of billions of droplets. But down at the bottom this fine mist of water disappeared in the pond below and the river flowed on. And he saw our life in that. We start out from a mysterious source and we become a droplet together with billions of other droplets. And we feel that this droplet is very precious and needs to be taken care of. Sometimes it bumps into other droplets and they fuse and separate again. But you want this droplet to be there eternally. And finally the droplet falls in the pond and becomes the river again. There is an old Tibetan saying: "The only way you can prevent a droplet from evaporating, is by bringing it back into the sea." Actually when we are that droplet and we are falling, we feel we are separate and unique. And

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of course we are unique, but we are also never separate from being the river. And so long as we do not know this down to the marrow in our bones, there is this Great Doubt. And the Great Doubt is the source of our suffering. But it is also the source of our liberation. We have to look at it, see it, without trying to run away, without trying to cover it up. We are allowed to hate it, we are allowed to not like it. That is fine. But we are not allowed to hide from it, because by that we extend not only our own suffering, but the suffering of all beings. This is one of the reasons why compassion is such a central theme in Buddhism, but also in Christianity and in many other spiritual practices. Because it has to do with this flaw in our thinking, in our experiencing. It is part of being human. It is also the source why being human gives us the possibility to liberate ourselves. The only thing I can say is: "Keep sitting, keep going on and don't run away."

With that I would like to go back into the silence.