

Awakenings by Martine Batchelor (Toronto, June 17-19, 2011)

This morning I wanted to talk about awakening, and look at it in different ways. I prefer to use the word awakening rather than enlightenment because enlightenment has all kinds of images attached. Generally we start to think of enlightenment as suddenly becoming like a Christmas tree and starting to float and things of that nature. Awakening means that we start to awaken to something.

I wanted to talk about the symbols that you can find in the Korean tradition. In the Korean tradition you light a candle, you also offer some water, and you light some incense when you start to do any ceremony. And you do this because they are all symbols of awakening. The first one is a candle. The candle is a symbol of two different things. Firstly it is a symbol of selflessness, because as it lights the room it disappears. It's something that disappears as it gives something. And the other idea that is interesting with the candle is that as it's lit, it illuminates itself, but also it is illuminating for others. Awakening helps us to be less self-centered and to be more other-centered. We can be brighter for others, it's not just for ourselves. These are the two aspects.

Then you have incense that spreads its perfumes as it disappears. So again it is a symbol of selflessness, of opening to others, being less fixed, less rigid, less solid. It is a kind of dissolution that benefits others. And what is interesting about incense, and the idea that it spreads everywhere, is that the fragrance doesn't think, "Over there, they don't look so nice, I'm not going over there. Over here, they look so nice, I'm just going here." The fragrance spreads everywhere, awakening opens to the whole world without discrimination.

The third element is water. And again water has two aspects. One is reflective, whatever comes above the water, the water will reflect just as it is. Again it's not going to discriminate and refuse to reflect a monster and better reflect a beautiful person. It reflects things just as they are with equanimity and equality. The second aspect of water is the idea of fluidity, water adapts to whatever container it is put in. If it's put in a round bowl it's round, if it's in a square bowl it's square. It's the same with a river, it adapts, it's fluid. In a moment of awakening we become more creative, we become less fixed, less solid, we become more fluid and open, like the water adapting to its circumstances, to the conditions.

Another example is the mirror. Often one hears of the mirror as an example of awakening. A mirror reflects whatever is in front of it, and when the object goes the mirror does not retain anything. Often that is not what happens to us. We are doing something, and generally we are already somewhere else, there is a residue either of the past or the afterimage. The idea of the mirror is that you totally reflect what is going on, you are totally present. And so the mirror has that, it reflects totally what is in front of it, but once the feeling is gone there is nothing left in the mirror, there is nothing that sticks. Often there is this idea that if we're equanimous that we're above things, that there is a separation. Moments of awakening on the contrary make us more here, but here in a way that doesn't stick. I think it's also important to see that the mirror is a metaphor, we are not trying to be a mirror and mirror everything. That's why I talk about creative engagement. A mirror cannot creatively engage, it's kind of stuck there. Be careful, it's a metaphor to express an idea, it doesn't mean we have to be exactly like a mirror, to reflect without doing anything. Because I think as human beings we have the possibility of creative engagement in moments of awakening.

Some time ago I read a book called *The Day The Voices Stopped: A Schizophrenic's Journey From Madness to Hope* by Ken Steele and Claire Berman. It's a beautiful book but also very heart rending because it's about a man who had schizophrenia from the age of 17. He recounts all the tribulations that happened to him: being rejected by his family, going to hospital... and hospitals in those days were very nasty places to go. He keeps tripping himself, it's better, then he falls again, it's better and he falls again. But there is a beautiful moment at the end of the book... finally he is on the up in New York and the doctor gives him a drug against schizophrenia, and at the beginning it doesn't make any difference, the voices are there all the time. And then after three months suddenly he experiences himself very differently, and it's so different — because he has been like this for so many years — that he gets frightened and goes into the bathroom just to be in a safe place. And what happened is that for the first time since he was 17 he hears the traffic outside. And then he realizes this is the drug working. The voices have stopped, and because the voices have stopped he is aware of the world in such a different way. He goes out of his apartment and for the first time he really sees his neighbour, he sees her as a human being, and really feels compassion for her.

For me the description of that moment when the voices stopped sounded like what awakening would be like. In that moment all your self-referencing stories, worries and anxieties stop. And then there is a space open for you

to be aware of the world in a different way because you're really there to the sound, the smell, the taste, the people. You really see others, instead of seeing others through your own filters, because I think this is our impediment. A lot of the time we don't see where we're at, we see others through the filter of ourselves. I think what he was describing at that moment was seeing the world without that schizophrenia, and then he was 100% in the world, while before he was just 50% in the world.

When we talk about awakening I think we have to see that we are aspiring to become like Buddha. Buddha means the awakened one. If we aspire to something, we need to have an idea of what we are aspiring to. Are we aspiring to be a Christmas tree or are we aspiring to be in the world in a different way? I think this is important because it will send us in different directions. This is the difference between de-grasping or creative engagement and trying to look for a big experience. Often enlightenment is associated with a big mega experience, so often we sit in meditation waiting for something special to happen. And I'm not saying it's not a good idea that something special would happen, we can have all kinds of experience which can be useful because they can have the same effect as the man with the voices. When we have a meditative experience, or de-grasping experiences, we experience ourselves differently, and then we know we can experience ourselves differently. So you can have all kinds of experiences, but to me all these awakening experiences are actually not taking us to a metaphysical place, but they're moments of being in the world in a different way.

One of the first experiences we might have, if we do meditation, is to suddenly start to feel very quiet and clear, and it's a quiet that happens by itself. We cannot force it, it just happens, and it happens through the cultivation of concentration and experiential inquiry. One of the first qualities to arrive is quietness and clarity. We can feel suddenly quiet and clear in meditation. And generally at the beginning you get very excited, this is it, there will be awakening in the next moment, and then it stops immediately. As soon as we grasp it and identify with it, it goes. And then what is interesting is just to be with it. And it's like when we are with the thing itself, the thing will sustain itself, by itself. Perhaps we could sit in quiet and be in that de-grasping state as long as it lasts because that too will dissipate, that too is impermanent because our energy as we sit here is impermanent.

There is another experience we often have, it is what I call the emptiness experience. Suddenly we feel very empty. You might be sitting or walking - often it happens on a retreat - and suddenly you feel so different. You don't feel so fixed, so rigid, so solid, you feel like you are melting with the world, or you feel like you're not there. When people come to me and say, "I feel empty, I feel frightened," I generally touch them to say, "Look, you're still here." You're experiencing yourself differently, you're empty because your borders are different, you don't feel so separate. We have a different feeling of ourselves, there is less grasping.

In Korea there were some friends who wanted to practice very hard. They went to the monastery and practiced day and night. And then one of them had an experience of emptiness. "I am awakened, I am enlightened!" So he ran down to the master and said, "Master, master, everything is empty, I am enlightened." The master took his big stick and hit him and said, "You see, not everything is empty. Continue to practice."

The experience of emptiness is interesting because it makes us feel ourselves differently, but it doesn't mean we have disappeared. I don't expect you all to disappear into a big cauldron of emptiness. It's just that we feel ourselves differently, we're not so sticky. Yesterday we were talking about words, and words are rather empty, they arise and they pass away, but often we're so sticky that any words that come to us, it's as if we're covered by Velcro. You know Velcro? There is this stickiness, the meditation dissolves the stickiness, so when we hear a word we can creatively engage with it, if we need to, or else we can leave it, if it doesn't have much to say about us, or the situation.

Another thing we might experience which is rather wonderful is an opening of the heart, when suddenly we feel that we love everybody. That there is nobody we cannot love. Because generally we love the people who are nice to us, the people who are not too weird or disturbing. But what is interesting in that moment is that we love everybody - cranky, not cranky, everybody. We open our hearts. To experience that makes us feel very differently, but again this is impermanent, and the question is how can this help me with my very difficult neighbour? Because I think in a way you have the experience, you have the moment of grasping, but how can this be of benefit in our lives?

In the Zen tradition you have this idea of sudden and gradual, and what is considered superior is sudden-sudden. Once we were hosting a Chinese master and I asked him, "What do you think about sudden and gradual?" "Sudden and gradual? Terrible. Zazen, it's sudden-sudden!" This is a big thing in Zen, sudden practice, sudden enlightenment. But I practiced in one of the rare temples in Korea where they were into sudden and

gradual, and this temple was very much looked down upon. But personally I think it makes much more sense. You have a sudden opening, sudden de-grasping, sudden moment of awakening, and then you have to apply the practice gradually to make it really become something in your daily life. Then you have another moment of sudden awakening and gradual practice.

My teacher Master Kusan had three awakenings. One might thought one should be enough (laughs). After the first one he went to the teacher and gave him a poem and the teacher said, "Good, good." After the second one he gave his teacher another poem. When the third one came, the teacher said, "Hmm, you know better than me now, now I become your disciple, and you become my teacher." In a way this path is for each of us to become our own teacher. What we are trying to do is to dissolve this grasping, this fixing, because if we dissolve it, we will be in the same situation as the man with the voices. We will start to experience ourselves and others in such a different way and with much more wisdom, much more compassion.

I wanted to read to you two quotes from the Zen tradition. The first one is from Dahui, and Dahui is a teacher in the 12th century in China who developed the practice I'm going to suggest we do this morning, the hwadu meditation, the questioning meditation. What is interesting is that this master had a lot of connection with lay people. There is a book of his letters, which has been translated and it's all about various scholars, politicians, different people writing to him. This is what he answers to one of them. "Your letter informs me that your root nature is dim and dull. The one who can recognize dim and dull is certainly not dim and dull."

That's the first one, and then I wanted to read you two poems by my favourite nun whose autobiography I have written about (*Women in Korean Zen: Lives and Practices*, 2006), and this is Son'gyong Sunim. This is the nun in Korea I admired the most, and at the same time she was one of the most humble people I have ever met. She was really amazing and you would always find her working even though she was the head of the meditation hall... I went for one month to sit with her and a large group of nuns during the free season. I was the youngest one sitting so I was placed opposite her, and in the morning we sat facing each other so everybody would keep awake at three o'clock in the morning. In Korea we would sit for 50 minutes at a time. She would sit up straight at first and within two minutes she would drop her head, and I was really worried about whether she would wake up in time, as my knees were painful towards the end of the sitting, but then two or three minutes before she had to hit the clapper to mark the end of the sitting and the beginning of the walking period, she would pull her head up. She was amazing. Here are two poems by her.

*Buddha cannot see Buddha
Sees Buddha
I cannot see I sees I
I saw the nature awaken to the Way
What rubbish.*

That's the first one. Here's the second:

*Clear water flows over white rock
The autumn moon shines bright
So clean its original face
Who dares say
It is or is not.*

So now what I'd like to do is introduce and suggest you do this meditation today. Again if it suits you do it, if not then don't. In the monastery in Korea where I was, you just ask a question. It's very simple. You just sit there, your eyes are half-closed and you ask inside yourself silently: What is this? That's all. What is very important about this practice is that it is not a practice of answering. It is a practice of questioning. One has to see that Korean Zen is very different from Japanese Zen. In Japanese Zen in the 17th century Master Hakuin developed a system of koans and the answering became very important. But Korean Zen is more about questioning meditation. What you try to do when you ask this question is to develop a sensation of questioning. We're not interested in answers. We're trying to develop a whole sense of questioning body and mind. Cultivating questioning. It's a difficult practice in terms of it doesn't give you any reference point. In the Korean Zen tradition you ask without any reference point. By asking the question it helps you to open to the moment in a different way, without defining anything in that moment, without grasping or fixing anything in that moment. Instead, you throw the question into the moment. What is this?

There are two elements of the questioning: concentration and experiential inquiry. In terms of concentration the words of the question are the anchor, whenever we come back, we come back to the question, "What is this?" And as a great Zen master said, "You can have a thousand times a distracted thought, but it gives you a thousand times the opportunity to come back." It's the same principle. Each time we come back we dissolve the habit, we dissolve its power, so we come back to the question: what is this? In the same way if we come back to the breath, the sound or the body, you come back to the question, to the whole moment. So we ask the question again within a wide open awareness. The question is the anchor and in the background you have the thought, feeling, sensation, and sound arising and passing away, and you just leave them in the background, coming back again and again to the question.

In terms of the experiential inquiry, we don't ask the question like a mantra: it's not a sacred sound, they are not special words. If English is not your first language use another language, and try not to do it in English with a French accent (laughs). What is this? Often people ask where they should put the emphasis. WHAT is this? What IS this? What is THIS? But no word is important, what is important is the question mark. Try to become a question mark with your whole body and mind. Of course sometimes people find different formulations of the question that works better for them. What is important is that whatever question you use, it shouldn't lead to proliferation. This is not an analysis, this is not psychological, this is not scientific, and be very careful, this is not an existential questioning about the meaning of the universe. This is just a technique of meditation, which again is practiced inside the frame of ethics, meditation and wisdom.

We can ask the question in different ways, related to other practices. We can do it with the breath. You breathe in and as you breathe out you ask, What is this? That's one way to combine it with the breath. Another way is that you pay attention to the sensation of questioning, and when it dissipates you come back to the question again. Some people might say the question more often, some people might say the question less. I think it's important to complement it. You can follow your breath and just ask the question two or three times in thirty minutes. It's the same with opening to sound or to the sensations of the body, the question can be complementary. Try not to ask the question forcing the head. Try to ask the question from the belly, bringing the energy down into the body. It's also important to balance quietness and clarity. If you find yourself doing the question and it agitates you, go back to the body, back to the breath, back to the sound. If you feel a little sleepy, ask the question and it will wake you up. Try to balance the two elements of quietness and clarity.

I have found there are three types of people. The first type of person thinks the questioning meditation is great. They ask the question and it really suits them. The second type of person thinks, "What is this? Why am I asking this stupid question?" If that's the way you feel, then don't do it, you're not obliged. There are many ways to meditate and it's just another method. Like any method it doesn't suit everybody. And the third kind of person asks the question and actually it makes them a little anxious. And if it has this effect on you, don't do it too much. Just do it a little, and then do more the breath, the body, the sound or loving kindness. I would like to suggest this morning that we try to do this practice together.