

Karma Is Relentless. Everyone Here Is Buddha.

Ken Kessel JDPSN

From a question-and-answer session at the New Haven Zen Center on December 16, 2012.

Question: This is kind of a big one. I was having a conversation with my friend. He's a very rational, pragmatic person. Very smart. And I said, "So, do you believe that anything has a purpose? Is there a reason?" And he said, "What about what happened in Connecticut, in Newtown? How could that have a purpose? What about those kids? How could they deserve that?"

At some point in my life I knew a pretty decent answer to that—maybe. I'm not sure what it was. I just wanted to bring it up and see how you would respond to that.

Kessel PSN: Why is he your friend?

Q: Because he's a good listener.

Kessel PSN: There's lots of good listeners. Why is *he* your friend?

Q: I have respect for him.

Kessel PSN: There are lots of people you respect. Why *this* person and *you*? If you see *that*, the root of what brought that together is the root of what made Newtown appear. That may not be very satisfying. On the one hand we have mind, or Buddha-nature, or God, something that's vast and indescribable and exists before words appear. And then we have the unfolding of cause and effect, which we call karma. You could say he's a good listener; you could say he's very intelligent; you could say you respect him—that's all true. But over the course of many tens of thousands of years of human

history, what brought you and him together in New Haven? We don't know. Exactly!

Some of it is immediately clear. He's a good listener. You like somebody who listens well. You like to listen well, too. He's intelligent. You're attracted to that kind of mind. You respect him, and it's important to you to be in the presence of those you respect. So in an immediate sense, the two of you have some affinity. But what shaped you to have that particular affinity, and what shaped him to have that particular affinity? How could it be that two people with a similar affinity came together in New Haven to talk about something important?

In the Lankavatara Sutra, Mahamati asks Buddha, "Where do words come from?"

Buddha answers, "Words come from the conjunction of the nose, and the lips, and the teeth, and the jaw, and the throat, and the chest." Mahamati isn't satisfied and asks for a more philosophical explanation, which Buddha provides. But at the start, he says what's simply true. Human beings make human sounds. Dogs make dog sounds; cats make cat sounds; birds make bird sounds. There's some function to those sounds that is there before the words are uttered and that goes beyond them.

In talking with your friend about something important, something appeared that wasn't about the words. It was just about the nose, and the lips, and the teeth, and the tongue, and the jaw, and the throat, and the chest. You feel some connection with each other. The presence of that sustains love and attention, awareness and peace, caring, compassion and wisdom. Getting too caught up in the words you say to each other can interfere with that. But the intention to come together and explore something vital is a valuable thing.

If you value those things you'll find other people who value those things. You'll attract each other. We call that the karma of having similar affinities, which is kind of like saying your right ear is on your right side.

Just sit and investigate: what is a human being? We have that question, somewhere, and we may do many things to

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distract ourselves from it, but when we stop distracting ourselves that question resonates all by itself. When you were born, who taught you to breathe? When you were born, who taught you to see? When you were born, who taught you to hear? Who taught you to smell? Who taught you taste? Who taught you to touch? That's what this lump of flesh does.

Somebody may have taught you something about seeing that helped you see better. Somebody may have taught you something about hearing that taught you to hear better, but the innate ability to see is with you from the beginning.

We learn something about being human from the humans around us. Some of us have more fortunate experiences and some of us have less fortunate experiences about that. If you just sit, then you see, we have this innate clarity, and simultaneously, we have things that attract us and things that distract us. We reach out for things that we want but we don't have; we want to get them, even if we can't, and that makes our energy go off in one direction. We try to hold on to things that we have and we don't want to lose, even if their nature is to go out, and that also makes our energy go off in a certain direction.

That's a little bit like, I want air so I won't stop breathing in. Then it feels like I can never get enough. Still, at some point you have to stop breathing in. Or, I don't want this air anymore because it doesn't feel good, so I'll breathe it out. In fact, I don't want any air; it keeps changing into carbon dioxide. I don't like that, so I'll never stop breathing out. While this is an exaggeration, we all do something like that.

Receiving and giving become clinging and rejecting. To the degree that clinging and rejecting become the centerpiece of our life, we start to construct things mentally and emotionally that support clinging and rejecting, because we think they're important. When we do something a lot we get good at it. If you cultivate careful listening with your friend you become better at careful listening; it becomes satisfying. You get good at it, so you like it so you do it more. If I cultivate clinging and rejecting I get good at it, so I like it so I do it

more. Even if I don't like the result, I no longer connect cause and effect, and I've cultivated a habit.

Add that up: we have seven billion people, now. Beyond just now, there have been a lot of human beings on earth. Not all of what we do nurtures life. Even if it feels like it nurtures *my* life, it may not nurture life broadly. It reflects "I want, I want, I want, I want. I don't want, I don't want. I want to make my situation good and comfortable." So add *that* up, generation after generation, billions of people before us, and billions of people now.

Our founding teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn, was fond of saying, "Human beings number one bad animal!" Everybody gets *that*. If he'd said it more eloquently it wouldn't have been as striking. Buddhist traditional teaching is that in the past, people killed many animals both for food and for recreation in a way that was thoughtless, so those animal consciousnesses then get reborn as human beings, and carry that thoughtlessness with them.

So now we have many human beings who are not human beings. They have human bodies, but they have dog mind, or cat mind, or falcon mind, or duck mind, or bird mind or tiger mind. Sometimes people even have two minds, half dog, half cat, so they're fighting inside. Zen Master Seung Sahn used to talk about broken consciousness. And if you have tiger mind and I have lion mind, I want to hurt you. If you have a dog mind and your friend has a dog mind, you have some affinity. You can play that out, and you're free to take it literally. And in fact I can't disprove it, nor can I prove it, for that matter.

But it also paints a picture of the kind of things that persist, and how they persist. As Buddha says, karma is relentless. We collectively cultivate the habit of not being mindful of how we live on the earth. This creates generations that don't pay attention to that well. That has consequences.

Of course, there are pockets of people who are more committed to being more broadly mindful. Some of those pockets of people are sure that their way is the only way. Some of those pockets of people have a sense that this is a good way, and I'm glad that other people are also paying attention in a way that seems to work for them—we have something in common.

If you add that up over time, there's something natural about this awfulness. Ignorance plus ignorance plus ignorance plus ignorance equals a lot of ignorance. That creates a certain field, a context. We have collective vulnerability and individual vulnerability. Sadly, finally, naturally, at some point, this kind of thing tends to happen. And naturally, if it happens close to home, we notice it more, we feel it more, we ask questions about it more.

But as Paul noted in his talk, there are other pockets of

people on the earth where these large tragedies happen a lot. And in fact some of it we're participating in by proxy, just because we pay taxes. And we don't pay attention to that the same way. It's hard to feel a similar horror, partly because it's far away, partly because we're not participating directly, and partly because we learn of it through sources where we've taught ourselves that what comes through those sources is pretend or we can just turn it off.

We feel what happened close by in Newtown very deeply, and we should. If we didn't, something inside us would be dead. But we don't necessarily feel everything else that deeply.

So, you have your friend, and in a deep sense, you don't know why, but you know you have him. You feel it's good.

Recently, I had pneumonia and I don't know why, but I had it. I can also pick it apart: I had certain constitutional weaknesses and certain bad habits and certain vulnerabilities, and all that adds up to pneumonia. And I feel that's bad. We don't necessarily wonder why, if something is good. But if it feels bad, then we do wonder. Why me? Why children? Why this child? Why in Newtown? Why any one at all? How can it be satisfying to say that there are aspects about the unfolding of karma, where we just can't see the particulars?

What can we do?

What do you want to do? That's the first question.

Everybody's here, so you want to do something, otherwise you'd be someplace else. But you're here, so you want to do something, because you're suffering, because you're human, because you have desire, because you have a body. Those of us with bodies who are human who have suffering don't like that. That's good.

If I step on a thorn, I feel pain. If I'm letting my body function, I'll pull my foot away, and then if I continue to let my body function, I'll look down at the part where I stepped on the thorn. I'll try to take it out, because the pain directs my attention to something important that's toxic. If I direct my attention in the right way, maybe I can bring some nurturance to the thing that was toxic or injurious and allow healing to happen.

What do we do with pain? What do we do with suffering? Partly, we want to say, "Shhh! Quiet, I don't want to see it." Or we want to push it away, outside, to make a space that's safe, inside. That feels better. But



Photo: Francis Lau

it's not safe. It's also not unsafe. We have ideas about safe and unsafe. Something's holding the skin and bones together, but that's very tenuous and dependent on a lot of things. We happen to be on a planet that supports our life. There are lots of ways of not supporting that. It's safe and it's not safe to be in this body, but here we are.

I want something, but I can't get what I want, so I'm suffering. In some ways, everything boils down to that. Just look at the raw form of it: I want something; but I can't get it, so I'm suffering. If we're clear about what we want, then the inevitability of suffering guides our attention in a way that lets compassion emerge. That's like looking at the thorn you stepped on. As a race, we're throwing out thorns and then stepping on them and then saying, "Who put the thorns there?" We did that. We did it collectively; we also do it individually. It's hard to do something about how we've done it collectively, unless we want to do something about how we're doing it individually. That allows us to participate in a different way.

That's where we have some authority, in how we participate. I don't have so much authority about how someone else participates. I have some. I may have some influence; I may have some power. But really, the most we can do something about is how I participate in this area that we occupy, what this skin and bones occupy. And if we do something about this area that our skin and bones occupy, we might start to have a more clear and tempered influence over other spaces. We move through space and time with other beings who occupy similar spaces that we recognize, the same way that dogs recognize dogs, and birds recognize birds.

First, then, is to recognize what is a person, and the first person to recognize is the one sitting on the cushion. Oh, that's a person. There's one! There's one, there's one, lots of people. Oh, also, I'm a sentient being. Oh, sentient beings are numberless. That's a lot.

You too, you too.

Zen practice is taking a complicated mind and allowing it to become simple. That doesn't mean disowning your intelligence. It doesn't mean deadening your capacity to feel. It doesn't mean inhibiting your capacity to respond. Because that's also denying something. That's also a form of ignorance. But if we become intimate, in the sense of very familiar, with

what *this [points to body]* is, then that's portable; we carry it with us everywhere. And it's difficult in the sense that distraction is easy. Cultivating distraction is tempting, and then it becomes habitual, and then it feels like we have no choice. It's easy in this sense: *[hits the floor with Zen stick]* that's clear. Nobody mistook it for a duck. When you walked through the door, you didn't come through the wall, but instead you sat on the cushion, and you didn't try and sit on the ceiling. How can that be? It's actually kind of simple.

So with this sense of simple-difficult, if we start to direct our energy toward appreciating what it is to occupy this space, that changes the perspective on everything else. Because we like to distract ourselves, we have to make some effort to create circumstances that support the intention of attentiveness and clarity. It's a powerful yet fragile intention, like most of our intentions. So we help each other. We made a room, we bought a house. And then we put out cushions, and some of us wear lay robes. Some of us take precepts to live life in a particular monastic way. Together, we have practice. Oh, you're a nun, that's wonderful, how can I support that? That's me practicing generosity, because it's good for me. She gives me an opportunity to practice being decent with another human being. Oh, she wears those robes, so I'm supposed to be decent with her. Maybe I think, him, I don't care, but I'll get bad karma if I'm not decent with her.

If I recognize that her presence is my opportunity for practice, so I'm grateful to her for doing it, then I get better at practicing that, so maybe I can be nicer to Paul. Sunim, on the other hand, practices the same thing from the other side of the coin, for which I'm grateful. So we support each other by taking different jobs. And we recognize that this is a good thing. Chanting is a good thing. Bowing is a good thing. Having interviews is a good thing. Sharing meals together is a good thing. Working together is a good thing. All of these opportunities in this space are opportunities to practice what we know is most important, but we try to avoid. We do it here so we get good at the simple form of it, so we can do it someplace else.

If we make that kind of energy and intention to practice, we find a way for it to persist beyond the cushion. A couple of years ago I just decided to carry beads around all the time, because I'm a little stupid, so I need a reminder to practice. I found a way that works for me. This is good; we have to remember. So I want to thank everybody for remembering to come here. I want to remind us that this is a place to come where the more of us who come, as you walk through the door, there's a feeling that it's really good to sit in a room with all these Buddhas. Not just that one, on the altar, but that one and that one and that one. Everybody here is Buddha. Everyone outside of here is Buddha. Remember to look. ♦

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Iceworld

White full moon in the sky
White snow on trees,
meadows and pagoda

Did the world become ice?
Did the mind become ice?

Stone pagoda licks
Ice full moon

Crack, crack, crack

Steps on frozen snow at night

—Arne Schaefer JDPSN