

Eido Frances Carney, Olympia Zen Center, April 7, 2010

WE ARE NOT TRAPPED

Last week we spoke about Constancy. This week the topic comes out of an event in the news. A few weeks ago when I was down in Berkeley, someone sent me some incredibly beautiful photographs of caves. These were extraordinary caves with gorgeous landscapes and rivers and valleys and caverns and gigantic stalagmites and stalactites such as we have never seen before. Truly they were something we would have imagined from a movie-set. Photos of people also, the spelunkers, fitting themselves through narrow spaces. So we were looking at them together standing in front of the computer screen. We got into a big conversation about it. I was also remembering the young man, about six months ago, a spelunker, who got wedged between a couple of rocks and because he was hanging upside down on a climbing rope was not able to get out of that stuck situation. The fellow died and the cave was closed because there had been other similar accidents in that particular cave.

Then last week we had a mining tragedy in China. China has some really difficult mines. About seven people a day die in the mines in China. Right now we have a mining tragedy in the United States. Four miners are still trapped below, a thousand yards below the surface of the earth, which is unthinkable space to me. That would be a depth of ten football fields, so that's pretty deep down. In the news they speak about going in 5 miles to find the men.

This tragedy also recalled a story of one of our sangha members, Doug Mason. Doug and his wife moved to Idaho and it was important for Doug to get a job immediately so he took a good-paying job, but it was in a mine. Doug knew nothing about mining, he had never been in a mine before. There was some kind of mineral, I don't remember what, that was coming out of this mine. So Doug showed up for work and the fellow gave him instruction and some quick safety-lessons. Doug was to be the only person to go down into the mine. He was going to be doing this all alone. The fellow showed him the mine-shaft which was just a little rectangular straight down hole into the ground, maybe four feet by five feet, with a little one person elevator and just a little space for some equipment. Like going down in a dumbwaiter, he was to let himself down to the bottom of the shaft and then do the mining and bring out whatever he was supposed to bring out that day. Also, Doug is a farmer, pretty much he stays on his horse and rides on the fields up in the out of doors. He is a fearless cowboy. In any event, he started down the mine-shaft and down, down, down and down he went and thought "Boy! this is a long way!" He couldn't believe how far down he was going and he made the mistake of looking up. He was so far down that there was no longer any light from above. He had gone so far that the hole disappeared. There was absolutely nothing up there and he was just by himself, completely alone in this blackness and silence and a light on his helmet and a light next to him and the walls of the shaft. He panicked, he utterly panicked. But fearless as he is, he decided there was nothing to do but to go all the way down.

So he went all the way down and he found it quite beautiful in the underworld. The silence he found to be quite extraordinary and the solitude, all of it. He calmed down when he finally got to the floor of the shaft. There was quite a large space there and he was able to do his work and rather enjoyed it. However then he had to go back up, which he found also

terrifying. He got on the elevator and he got himself back up, he turned in his work for the day, shook hands with the boss and said, “thanks for the job but I won't be back!” That was the end of that mining job.

There is something for many of us very terrifying about this kind of situation. I was thinking also about my sister who watches a particular soap-opera in the afternoons and years ago some character who hated his mother-in-law, drugged her and put her in a coffin and buried her with an air pocket and a microphone. When the woman woke up she was enclosed in a coffin underground. He was holding her captive and communicating with her. People who watched the program went crazy. It made the front page of the newspaper that this character was trapped underground in a coffin. It was only a fiction, but people demanded that they get the woman out of there. They demanded that the story be rewritten. They couldn't stand the confinement any longer! Of course, they finally let the women out and the story went forward. There is something frightening to us about being so down deep into the earth like this. The idea of losing contact with the surface, with light, with the people around us.

So, there are some miners who are still trapped. That is, we hope that the four of them are still alive and that they were able to get into the safe area where they would have enough air and food for 96 hours. Perhaps when the gases are released and the rescue-workers are able to go back down, we will find that they are there. We hope so.

So this is one of those times where we have people who are trapped. Even gases that are trapped. The word “trapped” is what I'm interested in working with tonight because of this succession of the caves and the mining accidents that have occurred, and the notion of being trapped.

We might have felt when we came into Zazen tonight, when that bell rang, if we were sitting for the first time, that we were trapped on that cushion. It can be quite frightening to sit Zazen for the first time. Trapped in this space, where we can't exactly extricate ourselves for that forty minutes. I'm not making light of the situation of those miners, I can only barely imagine what it is for them. But this question of trapped is a very interesting one. I think many people are feeling this right at this time in many kinds of ways. Trapped by the economy, trapped in situations, and what do they do, how do they work with that?

Well when we have a word like that, when we have any kind of word, we have to spiritualize the word. We have to bring spiritual understanding to that word, we have to bring the opposite in order to examine the situation. The opposite is release.

There is a story of some pre-schoolchildren, who were given the task of identifying what the largest thing was in the world. The kids answered all kinds of things, some kid said “it's my dad!” some kids said “it's the mountain!” “Dinosaurs!” “Whales” all kinds of answers like that. There was a little girl, I don't know if this is a true story because if it is, this is a wonder-child... but a little girl, about four years old, said “the biggest thing in the world is my eyes!” The teacher asked, “Why do you say that?” The girl said “because the dinosaur fits inside my eyes, my dad fits inside my eyes, and the mountain, all those things fit inside my eyes! My eyes are the biggest thing in the world!” Amazing child, amazing to say such a thing!

Of course everything that we are looking at right now is fitting inside of us. Can you imagine. Every single person in this room, each one of you has all the rest of us inside you, fitting inside your eyes. This is our Mind. We know that we can only see because what we see is inside of us. We hear those birds because those birds are inside of us. That sound has to be in us in order for us to hear. So, we have to ask is there an outside? And what is there that the Mind cannot hold? There isn't anything that we can think of that isn't in the Mind. There isn't anything outside of the Mind, it's impossible. Impossible to get outside of the Mind. So the question of the spiritual work of this idea of being trapped, and the work with the four miners in terms of my working with them spiritually, is to understand the spiritual truth of Release, in connection to their very, very difficult situation, very, very difficult circumstances to be in.

And yet at the same time the Mind itself is able to release. We are able to release ourselves by holding Reality, and the True Reality of ourselves. When we sit Zazen, if the bell rings, we might say, "O, no, this is impossible, I can't do this, I'm stuck here, this is really, really hard." It takes us some time to learn and to understand that when the bell rings, (at the beginning of Zazen) we are completely released. When the bell rings in Zazen, this is a great release. This is complete freedom, to hear that bell ring for Zazen. The mind is able, in the process of Zazen, to release us from our woes, our suffering, our tremendous difficulties. And everything has to be faced, I'm not saying that in those miners being trapped they don't have to face and realize their situation, of course they do. And each one of us has to do that, we have to realize the extent of our situation, and at the same time, when we feel that, the weight of the circumstance, we have to open ourselves to release and to the potential and possibilities of the Great Bodhisattva, the Thousand Armed Kannon who holds every possibility. And to die may not be the worst thing. It's not about that, it's about releasing ourselves from the constraint of the situation and into Realization. Realization within our difficult circumstances.

For all of us, there are going to be challenges, which of course are the potential for Realization. Every challenge is a potential for deep Realization. And as we were speaking last week we have to remember to remember the truth of ourselves. We forget to remember the True Reality, the Truth of ourselves, that we are not trapped.

And I like to remember too, the quality of the Buddha: Spaciousness. The Buddha made great space with his Mind. Always creating space around us, space as he looked into those around him. Always making space to allow us to be relieved of and released from our suffering. For many of us that sense of being trapped is just our own small creation. And it presents itself as a great Koan in our lives, to really meet it and to see really, really deeply into the true Reality. Our True Spiritual Nature.

When news such as the mining tragedy comes toward us, the idea is to Spiritualize what we hear. To transform the world through our own Spiritual Nature. If I can release those miners within myself, their Spiritual Nature released in me, then they are saved within me, whether they come out of that mine or not. Do you know, that the insights they might have in that particular circumstance, may be far greater healing than getting out of that mine.

I think about my friend Rob, whom I was with in Berkeley. He was sitting there with the rest of us looking at those computer-cave pictures. It was deeply important to Rob to take the Precepts before he died. That he would once again, repeat those vows to take Great

Deep Insight, and spiritual declaration at the point of his death, because he's still alive, you know. It doesn't matter how long we live after that. That we do everything while we are alive, even when we are faced with the moment of death. We are still alive until we die, so all of it is about living, about continual release. Given those very difficult circumstances we can focus so much on death that we forget that we are still alive, and that's what we need to do.

And I'm sure you all remember that Koan of the monk who trips and falls over the edge of the mountain, and as he's falling he sees some strawberries, and he grabs one strawberry, calmly eats and says "O, how utterly delicious!"

So that is our work, to spiritualize every single moment, to work with the breath, as we spoke two weeks earlier, that it's our job to take care of the body as best we can, and then our breath belongs to God, to Buddha-Nature. So as long as our breath is working, Buddha-Nature is breathing in us. And that's what we pay attention to, that is our point of living; that is the point of our lives, to live in such a way that we recognize the deep Reality of each moment, giving within ourselves the deepest Spiritual Dignity to those men caught in that very difficult blast. Understanding true release.

We can't realize Buddha-Nature and think that we are trapped. The freedom of the breath is so startlingly free. And we can deeply Realize with every breath, that every breath is complete in itself. So we breathe this way in prayer. This is how to pray for those miners, to breathe spiritual freedom for them, to breathe release. To know their True Reality is Release.

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