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Like Clouds; Like Water Rev. Master Mokugen Kublicki

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The characters used in the term 'unsui', the Japanese word for male or female monastic trainee, translate as 'clouds' and 'water', and are a beautiful description of the inner life of a monk, or any sincere person devoted to serving the heart of Truth. They echo the verse at the end of The Scripture of Great Wisdom: 'Going, going, going on beyond and always going on beyond, always BECOMING Buddha. Hail! Hail! Hail!'

The nature of clouds and water is to flow. Going on, moving with dignity in space, full of vibrant life and adapting to conditions. If an obstacle arises or an obstruction is met, clouds and water find a way around. They do not judge that which arises before them, nor cling, but embrace it and flow around or through it in their pristine activity.

The true nature of our heart is the same. Vibrantly alive, neither clinging nor resisting but responding to the needs of the occasion, to that which needs to be done. Clouds are as the freedom of spirit which comes with responsible, wise understanding. As water flows, the nature of compassion is always there at the very heart of our being, cleansing and refreshing, always finding a way, pulsing with the brightness

of innate generosity of spirit. An endless source that cannot in reality diminish or dry out; the very nature of all beings.

As we all know, this bright reality may appear to diminish because of karmic effects which we have inherited. However real and painful these feelings may be, the fact that we may not also see inherent compassion and brightness is due to our not seeing past the shadow cast over our heart. The shadows seem to deny the existence of compassion, nevertheless this is an illusion. However dark the weight of our karma, the eternal source can never be diminished; however deep the hole we may have dug for ourselves, the nature of compassion and forgiveness is deeper and wider still.

The problem that has engaged the resources of men and women for aeons, is how to deal with and understand the weight of suffering that mistaken beliefs and actions inevitably bring. Of course, this is nowhere more clearly and deeply explained and described than in the Buddha's doctrine of the Four Noble Truths. Even though at present all may seem bright and sunny for us, sooner or later we all have to face life's sometimes painful and unsatisfactory nature, and we have to find wisdom and peace within it.

The desire for succour and insight is inevitably great when pain is great, but it is precisely at this time that we have the potential to deepen our spirituality. Sadly, at that moment the choice for many is to flee; to somehow escape the pain of consequence of previous actions. Clinging to or rejecting just adds to the weight of suffering. But if we are like clouds and water in relation to our pain or difficulty, that is, if we can continue to let the spirit of compassion flow through the pain that appears as an obstacle or blockage, then

compassionate acceptance can embrace, comfort and purify that which attempts to cleave unity into disharmony. What is necessary is opposite to our first animal instinct—escape: escape through anger, despair or indifference. Instead of turning away, suffering needs to be faced square on. Whether bereavement or a sense of rejection, anger, fear, illness or mental pain allow the spirit of clouds and water to flow into its very essence.

In one translation of Seng-Ts'an's poem On Trust in the Heart there is a very helpful phrase:

Do not chase after entanglements as though they were real things. Do not try to drive pain away by pretending that it is not real. Pain, if you seek serenity in oneness, will vanish of its own accord.¹

The unfortunate mistake that we make is to pursue the false whilst fleeing from the real. We try to avoid our present circumstances by chasing after pleasures or illusions that vainly promise relief. But such relief, if found, can at best be only temporary and ironically delays finding true peace. It is our clinging to, or denial of, the real that causes the disharmony of body and mind which is suffering in its true sense. Where there is flowing acceptance and a will to move with the real, the pain of the tense blockage is eased. As clouds and water move, if we move with and accept and forgive the mistakes of both ourselves and others the pain is eased. But if we halt, dig in, make divisions, try to turn the clock back and refuse to look and accept, our heart is deeply saddened. Nevertheless the true refuge of the flow of the compassionate heart is always there and brings lasting peace. 'To seek serenity in oneness' is to not split off pain from ourselves but to include it in the embrace of

compassion. The act of 'being still' in mindful meditation or contemplation is true acceptance in action.

'Be still' is an earnest entreaty that needs investigating and to which we find greater depths as we keep up our practice. A mistake one can make is to think that to 'be still' one needs to somehow sublimate or bypass any pain or discomfort one may feel, to replace it with feelings of pleasure or bliss. The pain, however, can teach us a deep lesson and cannot be eased by being buried under the rubble of a hard resisting mind. To be still is to be still in the heart of where we are now, to accept all that we find whether it is deep joy, pain, fear, anger, resentment...the lot! It is not a negative passivity but an alive and positive faith. The pain or pleasure is not the beginning and end of the matter, there is something that lies beyond it, and we can reach through to it. In The Litany of the Great Compassionate One are the words 'O'm to the One Who leaps beyond all fear!'—to leap into compassionate acceptance of what is. This is not to indulge or wallow in the self, but to see clearly. And when it is time to let go and move on, to do so. To 'be still' allows the compassionate flow of acceptance into the heart of life and this releases the crippling strangle-hold of fear that our emotions can grip us with. We can see beyond the difficulty to the next step, and so are not limited by it. I have always been struck by my Master's words that desire and craving are but respectable words for fear.

I remember a graphic example of my own which taught me the futile nature of resistance. A friend's father had died prior to the death of my own parents. Whilst offering support and joining in a meditation vigil I felt a sense of

inadequacy at how I might possibly react when faced with my own sense of bereavement. This inevitably brought up a dark feeling of fear and dread. Fortunately, an inner movement of the heart knew that I should not flee from but embrace the fear and pain. On this occasion, this released such a sense of gratitude and faith in the compassion within birth and death that although the situation was still sad, it was held within a bright faith of the inherent compassion within all things. However uncomfortable life may sometimes feel, at heart evil or ignorance is being converted and good prevails. We certainly do not need to go looking for difficulties, but should they arise, if we stay calm and keep our faith within them, and if we keep to the refuge of the Precepts, our faith can blossom into certainty and gratitude. The eternal Buddha is nowhere other than where we find ourselves, and is revealed when we drop the clinging and resistance of the doubting mind. When things get rough I remind myself that it is in the going on with faith, welcoming the next step before my very foot, without doubting, that is the key to a glad heart. Like clouds...Like water...

As we learn to unfreeze our clinging and ignorance through compassionate acceptance, true wisdom grows in our heart. We realize that feelings that are conditioned fade with time and do not have a separate permanent reality. 'Volition is the doer of karma, and feeling is the reaper.' That is, we have the choice of how we behave and think, and this means that we can change negative habits and find peace. Our body and mind need to be guarded carefully so that we do not indulge unreasonable expectations of self and others and do not stick rigidly to our opinions and criticisms—a surefire collision course with suffering! Compassionate tolerance, and a trusting recognition of the Buddha Nature

of all, is fluid and alive and does not compromise the Truth. We sometimes need to be firm and put out a restraining hand in a situation, but the hand should always be compassionate and not damning or judgmental. By cutting the roots of karma, although our feelings may still reap consequences, the fact that they run their course does not need to separate us from a tranquil heart. From this we learn to live more skillfully and compassionately and are not enslaved by our senses. We learn not to repeat our mistakes and to use our body and mind with wisdom. It is said that acceptance is the key to the gateless gate, and with acceptance we can learn to worry less about what is to come. If we are yet to reap the consequences of our actions, through contrition (sange), we can face them with equanimity, and 'we open the way for the Buddhas and Ancestors to help us naturally.' We can stand up straight and not judge, condemn or deflect the inevitable. The law of karma does not stand in the way of our finding wholeness and unity with the Truth. It does not matter if conditions are dark or bright for we know that which lies beyond the opposites. We need not be thrown off balance by the changing nature of emotions and events. Seeking serenity in acceptance and oneness, pain will vanish of its own accord. Ultimately 'there is no one who does the deed nor is there one who feels the fruit.' There is no permanent separation. We have all seen examples of people who in the midst of deepest oppression or suffering, glow with a radiant inner peace. This peace is there for all of us no matter what our circumstances, and it is through not clinging or rejecting that this peace is found. Like clouds.. .Like water...

When you let loose this brilliance through your eyes, you bathe the Buddha body and Buddha land in splendour; when

you set this luminosity free through your ears, you can hear the sounds and voices of the Buddhas at work; when you let the radiance pass out through your hands, you change yourself as well as others; when you let it pass out through your feet, you put yourself into action, now stepping forward, now stepping back.²

¹ 'On Trust in the Heart', by Seng-ts'an in Buddhist Texts through the Ages, ed. E. Conze (Harper Torch Books. 1964), p. 295.

² Keizan Zenji, The Denkoroku or The Record of the Transmission of the Light, trans. Rev. Hubert Nearman, O.B.C., with Rev. Master P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett as consultant and editor (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey. 1993). p. 60.