

The paradox of continuity and discontinuity in practice.

When we are instructed in zen practice, we are told to be aware of “this one breath”. In such awareness, there is no observer (subject) separate from this breath (an object). Breather, breath and breathing are inseparable – there is just “breathing awareness”.

Such an experience is a discontinuity in the sense that it comes unexpectedly and is in stark contrast to our normal everyday view of breathing. We don’t question the view we have had many hundreds of thousands of previous breaths, and it is reasonable to assume (or we hope) that we will have many thousands of future breaths. Therefore, there is a paradox. One pole of the paradox is a direct experience of no-separation (a discontinuity), and the other pole is breathing (breath-by-breath) spread out over time.

How can this paradox be resolved?

Our normal everyday experience involves a separation between “I am here” and “the world is out there”. Yasutani Roshi said this separation is our greatest problem. Similarly J. Krishnamurti said, “In the gap between subject and object lies the entire misery of humankind”. This separation is sometimes present in our zazen when there is a central observer who observes the breath as something “external” to the observer. The expression “awareness of breath” includes this duality as it implies a subject, which has awareness of the breath that is the object.

One of the founders of quantum theory, the brilliant scientist Erwin Schrödinger, wrote very clearly about how subject-object duality and the perceived world of objects arises in accordance to what he called the “principle of objectivation”. He wrote, “By this I mean the thing that is also frequently called the ‘hypothesis of the real world’ around us. I maintain that it amounts to a certain simplification which we adopt in order to master the infinitely intricate problem of nature. Without being aware of it and without being rigorously systematic about it, we exclude the Subject of Cognizance from the domain of nature that we endeavour to understand. *We step with our own person back into the part of an onlooker who does not belong to the world, which by this very procedure becomes an objective world*” [italics mine]

That is, when we step back as an observer, the world of objects is born. The “subject” is separate, centred here, and the objects are “out there”. In addition, this stepping back as an “onlooker” is automatic – we do it “without being aware”. Schrödinger wrote about the principle of objectivation as not only being at the basis of the objective scientific method, but also as being relevant to our everyday experience of life. In addition, Schrödinger also had the insight that when the world of objects is created, we then insert ourselves back into that world of objects, “...I conclude that I myself also form part of this material world around me. I so to speak put my own sentient self (which had constructed this world as a mental product) back into it...”

In other words, by stepping back as an observer, the world of objects is born as a mental construction, and we insert ourselves back into that world as an object.

There is some evidence to confirm Schrödinger’s thoughts about subject-object duality. Some children can recall at a young age when they first became aware of

themselves as separate individual entities – this realization has been called “I am I”, or “self awareness” by the gestalt psychologist Dolf Kohnstamm.

For example, a young boy, four to five years old, is lying sick in bed with the measles. His mother buys a cabinet with a glass door and places it at the end of his bed. Suddenly he sees the reflection of his speckled face in the door and concludes, “That’s me!!” In order for this to happen, the boy has stepped back as an onlooker and focussed on an image and objectified it. Crucially, the onlooker (subject) identifies with that image (object). Babies don’t identify with objects in this way. Their awareness is very open – phenomena just come and go. Even if their own hand arises in their awareness, there is no objectification of it being a “hand” and no sense the hand is “my hand”. The process of identification is also clearly conditioned. When we carry young children in our arms and look in the mirror, we point at the reflection in the mirror and tell them that image “out there” is them.

As time goes on, identification becomes more complex and involves more than just identifying with a visual image like the boy just described. However, the pattern remains the same: There is separation –and then identification with phenomena “external” to the observer (subject). For example, in another story, a young girl a little older than the boy described above. She looks in the mirror one summer afternoon and sees her face. She is disappointed as she was told by others she was pretty and vibrant, but when viewing her reflection feels she didn’t see a pretty face. So the identification is no longer with an image of her face, but with certain thoughts, which are fundamentally no different to a visual image in a mirror.

We can see that a persisting sense-of-self develops in relation to this ongoing process of identification with objectified phenomena – and this starts at a young age. It reaches a point where that sense-of-self can itself be objectified and is therefore observed as an object in the world of objects (“self-as-object”). The following is an extract from Anne Franke’s diary when she was fifteen years old: “No one knows Anne’s better side, and that’s why most people can’t stand me. Oh, I can be an amusing clown for an afternoon, but after that everyone’s had enough of me to last a month. [...] You can’t imagine how often I have tried to push away this Anne”.

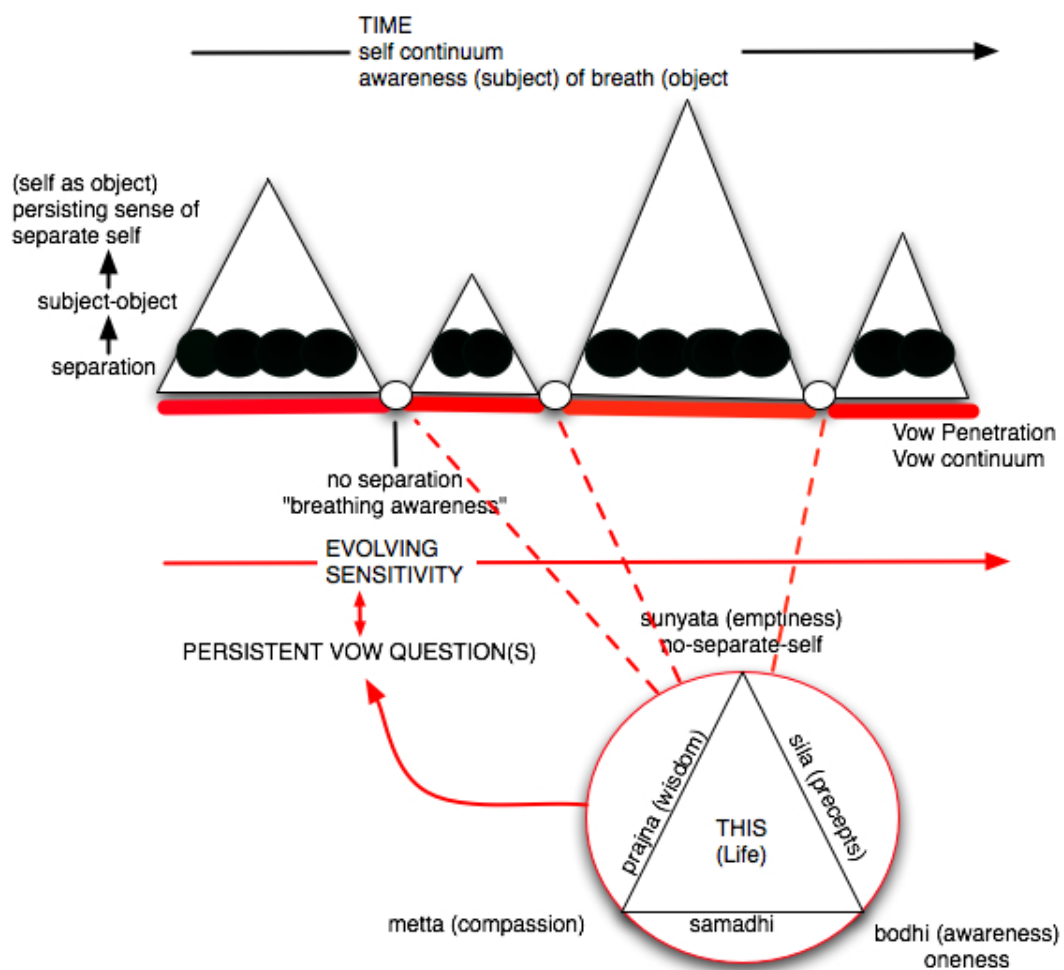
By referring to herself in the third person, her subject, which has stepped back as an onlooker is viewing herself “Anne” as an object. It is just as just as Schrödinger points out above, she has inserted herself back as an object into the world of objects.

This persisting-sense-of-self, with its associated separation, “me here – the world out there” becomes so familiar, we don’t notice, or question it anymore. It is like a black hole, which is persistent but unseen. The analogy with the black hole is relevant in the sense that black holes are very dense and as we get older our sense of self may become heavier and more dense as the process of identification accumulates by including our unhappy past stories and unfulfilled future intentions. The philosopher Daniel Dennet has an analogy of the self as something continually weaving stories like a spider– the self being the “centre of narrative gravity”. This centre is called “I” – it seems obvious what it is, but like a black hole it is hard to shed any light onto it.

So, in summary, there is a progression:

Separation → subject-object → persisting sense-of-self → self-as-object

The persisting sense of self moves through an illusory world of space and time. In the diagram below, the complex structure of the self is represented as triangles, which have a black hole as a centre. This black hole moves linearly through time. We can easily remember ourselves as children and can imagine ourselves as growing old. The time dimension seems to arise when, as children, we become aware of ourselves as something separate and distinct. With this naturally follows the thought that there was a time when this “separate self” did not exist and there will be a time in the future when it will cease to be. Without time, a persisting sense of self is not possible.



Discontinuity:No-separation:THIS

When we have a direct experience of Now awareness, the continuum of the self is cut. In such an experience, the separation between “me here” and the world “out there” dissolves – there is no separation. No longer is a sound at some distance “outside” – it is at zero distance. No longer is there a subject hearing the sound (object): subject-object-hearing are inseparable, our whole being is the sound - there is only THIS-Awareness-NOW, at zero distance- whatever is arising is not “out there” but your real

face NOW. Such an experience is an actualisation of Life. We can call it “THIS” or “Now Awareness”.

Zen master Huang Po wrote about such a discontinuity, “A perception, sudden as blinking, that subject and object are one, will lead to a deeply mysterious wordless understanding; and by this understanding you will awake to the truth of Zen”.

With such an experience, the usual, unquestioned separation involved in the objective world is seen as an illusion. Space and time are also shown to be an illusion. Zen master Huang Po’s wordless understanding emerges from a dimensionless point experience (discontinuity). For example, if you put your finger in the flame, at that instant, there is no separation with the experience of heat – it is at zero distance, and also the experience is inescapably now. However, we easily slip back into separation where a subject is observing and judging the pain as an object.

Is there a Vow continuum?

What is it that is energizing our practice? If our practice is genuine, it is the Vow. The Vow expresses itself as a yearning question, and this persists through practice, like a continuum. Normally genuine zen practice is talked about only in the context of Now, but what about the Vow- is it only Now, or does it have a continuum, like the self? Is there anything of the Vow that persists? What can we know of the Vow?

We can see this in the stories of the zen masters of old who pursued a question, or even modern Zen masters, like Hogen san, when he told and wrote about his Life-koan. At times it seems like there are many different questions in practice, but often, the seemingly different questions are like bubbles rising up from the one real yearning question in our depths.

Does persisting sense of Vow penetration make THIS possible to happen, and/or vice versa?

Even though the yearning question is within a continuum of time, it is rooted in Life (as represented by the trinity in the above diagram). Life can only be NOW (as represented as discontinuity in the diagram). Life yearns to actualise and it does so through our sense perceptions. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote a book, “The Phenomenon of Man”. He described how life evolves to ever increasing sensitivity. He wrote, “For man to discover man and take his measure, a whole series of ‘senses’ have been necessary, whose gradual acquisition, as we shall show, covers and punctuates the whole history of the struggles of the mind” and also “The consciousness of each of us is evolution looking at itself and reflecting upon itself”.

This is significant because evolution is not only being defined in terms of matter, but in terms of awareness. Why do we have eyes? So that evolution (Life) can see itself. Why do we have ears? So that Life can hear itself. Life happens NOW at zero distance. Life is evolving to ever greater sensitivity. That is why we are impregnated with a vow question, so Life can both evolve to ever greater sensitivity and complete itself Here-Now (discontinuity).

More specifically, in some cases, vow-questions seems naturally oriented to the point experiences depicted in the trinity above. That is, some vow questions relate to Bodhi-awareness, some to Sunyata (emptiness), some to Metta (compassion).

In my case, the vow question is aligned, or emerges from the point Bodhi-awareness. That is why it is natural for me to describe the discontinuity in terms of no-separation (oneness). When Zen master Huang Po wrote about the discontinuity as “A perception, sudden as blinking, that subject and object are one, ..” it is also being expressed in terms of the point experience Bodhi-awareness.

However, we all may have our own internal vow inclination based on the trinity. For example, the perception, “sudden as blinking” may be one of universal love (Metta-compassion).

If we were to ask Mother Theresa, “What is your Vow? She may reply, “God’s love”. Bodhisattavas, many who are unknown, have their Vow question aligning with Metta – the point experience of compassion.

Similarly, other vow questions align with sunyata (emptiness).

Ramana Maharshi (or Bodhidharma) sat silently in a cave. If we were to ask, what is your Vow, they would probably not reply with words. If we are sensitive enough to notice, their still empty presence (sunyata-samadhi) would be wordlessly actualising their Vow.

In summary, even though our vow question aligns with one of the points on the trinity, we also need to realize the other points, otherwise our practice can become unbalanced. In the book, “Zen at War”, there are examples of seemingly enlightened zen masters whose actions and words are not so compassionate. For example, Yasutani Roshi, a zen master with sharp Bodhi-awareness, was also anti-semitic.

Notice in the trinity above, there is not only the dimensionless point (discontinuity), but the opposite side representing quantity. For example, even though Mother Theresa’s vow (path) was one of Metta-compassion, with her selfless deep prayers she also realized Sunyata and actualized Samadhi in her daily life as she helped the poor and dying, as well as realizing Bodhi and actualizing Prajna. For example, there is a wonderful story when someone asked her what she does when she prays. She answered, “I am listening to God”. The questioner then asked, “What is God saying?”, to which she replied, “He is listening too”. Very inspiring wisdom (prajna) arising from the depths of Sunyata-samadhi. Similarly, Ramana Maharshi did not remain in wordless sunyata-samadhi. After a while he started to talk so he could help people (compassion)

Now, or Now -by- Now?

The above diagram seems to suggest a time continuum broken by multiple discontinuities. Is there one discontinuity, or a linear progression of many discontinuities through time? It is easy to imagine that we are within the continuum of the self (delusion), suddenly wake up (discontinuity), and then descend back into the continuum of the self, and this process repeats through time. Harada Sogaku Roshi wrote that in a period of practice of twenty years he experienced many discontinuities

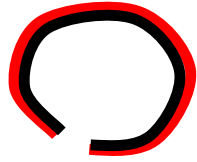
before resolved a deep yearning question, and then tranquil in his heart he “could fall into sleep with a loud snore”. So, there seems to be multiple discontinuities.

There is only NOW, not multiple NOWs. Even our delusions are NOW. Imagine we are going to meet a friend tomorrow, we may even imagine the place and what you are going to say to that person. That imagining is NOW. Similarly with memories – they are NOW too. The present illusion of separation “me here - the world out there” is also NOW. We are easily deceived by illusions of some other time or other place and lose awareness of this one NOW. Even though we easily intellectually acknowledge that such imaginings, or memories, are NOW, that knowledge can’t help us.

When we realize we are inescapably NOW, then we clearly realize there is nothing else and can’t be anything else, not even another NOW. Zen Master Huang Po said, “Your true nature [NOW] is something never lost to you even in moments of delusion, nor is it gained at the moment of enlightenment [Now awareness]. It fills the Void everywhere and is intrinsically of the substance of the One Mind. How then can your mind created objects exist outside the Void [Now]?” Schrödinger expressed similarly, “Mind is by its very nature a *singulare tantum* [Latin: single only]. I should say: the over-all number of minds is just one. I venture to call it indestructible since it has a peculiar timetable, namely mind is always *now*. There is really no before and after for mind. There is only a [one] now that includes memories and expectations”.

Dogen said, “those who realize delusions are Buddhas and those who are deluded about realization are ordinary beings”. If we intend to achieve, or hope for an experience of Now awareness (discontinuity), we blindly enter into an illusion (the continuum of self and hence time), and so we become an “ordinary beings”. If we *realize* our illusions as being Now phenomena, we aren’t deceived into stepping into the continuum, for the illusion is unmasked as being Here-Now – there is nowhere to go.

Ramana Maharshi said, “Where can I go? I am here”. NOW is unmoving. During sesshin and for a time afterwards, we may have special states of awareness, which we would like to keep. That intention to “keep” is already launching us into the continuum of the self (and hence time). We don’t need to retain awareness as it can’t extend beyond NOW. The goddess of the underworld who delivered teachings to the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides said, “For there is nothing else and will be nothing else apart from being [Now], because Fate has bound it [Now] to be whole; unmoving”.



The diagram below above conveys the same meaning as the previous diagram above. The blank page represents the inescapable, unmoving, singular NOW. The continuum of the self is represented as the black circle. This continuum has its origin in separation. The inside of the circle represents “me here” versus the outside of the circle – “the world out there”, but that separation is inescapably NOW (blank page). Also both the continuum of time as well as the illusion of space are NOW (the black line represents both a trajectory in space and time). Surprisingly for a scientist, Schrödinger also stated that space and time were an illusion and there is only NOW, “The world [NOW] is given but once. Nothing is reflected. The original and the mirror-image are identical. The world extended in space and time is but our *Vorstellung* [imagination]”. Zen master Huang Po expressed similarly, “.. for this Void contains not the smallest hairsbreadth of anything that can be viewed spatially; it depends on nothing and is attached to nothing.”

Whenever there is the continuum of the self (black line), there is also the continuum of the Vow (red line). The gap in the circle represents the discontinuity: NOW-Awareness=Life=THIS. Note however this discontinuity is singular as the space in the gap is inseparable from NOW (the background blank page). In this timeless Now-Awareness there is neither a Vow continuum (red line) or Self continuum (black line) as these are through time (and space).

If we experience Now Awareness, it easy to enter into the continuum of the self as the ego can creep in and take hold of such an experience by identifying with it, or incorporating the memory of the experience into the narrative of the self. This happens very quickly and unnoticed because the greater the realization, the more subtle the associated delusion. For this reason, precepts (Sila) are very important. As mentioned above, our sensitivity evolves within the Vow continuum. Even though the delusions/illusions associated with the self become more subtle, this sensitivity allows higher precepts to arise to counter them. If not, we would be totally deceived by these more subtle delusions and never be able escape from them.

Empedocles' warning

Following Parmenides there was another pre-Socratic Greek philosopher called Empedocles. Like Parmenides he is considered to be one of the founders of the Western philosophical tradition. He left esoteric teachings in the form of a poem, which he transmitted to his disciple Pausanias. His teachings begin with the following passage:

Palms so narrow and closed in – have been
poured over people's limbs. But countless
worthless things keep crashing in, blunting their
cares. During their lifetimes they see such a
little part of life and then they are off:
short-lived, flying up and away like smoke,
totally persuaded by whatever each of them
happened to bump into while being driven
one way, another way, all over the place. And they
claim in vain that they have found the whole.
Like this, there is no way people can see or hear
or consciously grasp the things I have to teach.
But as for you:
Because you have come aside here, you will learn.
Mortal resourcefulness can manage no more.

Some explanation is necessary. "Palms" was a word used by ancient Greeks to refer to the senses. The image that these have been "poured" onto human being refers to the Gods who sometimes would bestow gifts on humans by "pouring" them. In other words, Empedocles is suggesting the senses we have, eye, ears, smell, taste touch are gifts from the Gods.

In his translation, Peter Kingsley, a scholar of ancient Greek philosophy, says that over the centuries, thousands of pages have been written on Empedocles' teaching which includes how the universe formed, matter etc., aspects which conform to the accepted view of Empedocles as a founder of Western science. However, scholars hardly comment on the initial passage above. Kingsley says that scholars instinctively avoid it. The above passage is about our individual human existence and what is written is not pleasant to read.

Our palms are "closed in" meaning our senses are largely blocked so we walk around randomly blind, deaf, dumb, and in such a blinded state "bump" into things. We are easily convinced the things we bump into are important. We deal with "countless worthless things", so we don't really know how to care about anything anymore. We may think we have found an answer to our lives, but we are deceived. And our lives are over so quickly – a puff of smoke – and we are gone.

Isn't Empedocles' opening passage an accurate description of our daily lives even though it was written about 2,600 years ago? How often have we been deceived into thinking some matter is crucially important. We fret about it only later to find out it

wasn't that important after all. Don't we usually walk around mechanically barely seeing, hearing, tasting, touching. It echoes what was written above – we (self-as-object) move around in an objective world bumping from one object to the next. We learn strategies to deal with, and get through life, that is what the term “mortal resourcefulness” is referring to. Kingsley says “mortal resourcefulness” could have been translated as “human awareness”, but that's a contradiction as we are usually so unaware. Kingsley writes about “human awareness” as follows: “It's a potential never realized; a pitiful joke; an inattentive alertness; a faculty of perception which is blocked up; a mastery that consists of helplessness, a refinement which is all clumsiness, a cunning that deceives itself”...and that's all that “mortal resourcefulness” can manage to achieve.

Like Empedocles' student, we stepped aside from our busy daily lives to attend this sesshin. Empedocles' passage is a stark warning. We can easily step into the continuum of the self and continue like Empedocles describes until we disappear like a puff of smoke. However, in parallel with our self continuum our Vow is also penetrating our practice, if we are sensitive enough we feel its question(s). Vow penetration makes THIS (Now awareness) possible to happen, and vice versa. Then that which is before us is our face. Life is actualising and completing itself.

There is only THIS one breath.

Genjo

Maleny sesshin, November 5-9, 2009

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