

Love of Fate

A dharma talk by Charles Genoud

Tonight I'll say a few words that will provide some context for the practice we are doing in Gesture of Awareness, so we understand how it is a spiritual practice. I will also say something of the spirit in which we are doing the work. It's quite important to turn again and again to the spirit of what we're doing because that's what holds the work together.

I have seen in my own discovery of Buddhism how the notion of samsara and nirvana can be understood in many different ways. Maybe the first is to see nirvana and samsara as two different places, a little bit like the Christian paradise; one tries to be good enough so one can go "there." Nirvana is seen as a place of freedom and escape, samsara as a place of conditioning. We can formulate it in more subtle ways, but sometimes it comes down to that. It can even be expressed as wishing to be reborn "there" in the Buddha fields. Every tradition provides food for misunderstanding at times; I'm not criticizing the notion of Buddha fields, just saying we can misunderstand Buddha fields as a place where we'd like to go in order to avoid samsara.

Then we can get a bit subtler and understand that nirvana and samsara are not something outside but rather inside us. Samsara is understood as negative or difficult states of mind – anger, desire, sadness, anxiety, jealousy, all those difficulties – and nirvana is understood as the stopping of all that. We have a sense of a pure mind, completely devoid of all those difficulties, and we use our practice as a strategy to achieve that end. We try by all the subtle means we have in the practice, to eliminate those difficult or negative states of mind and promote positive, pure states, or a mind that is free from all that – a pure mind. Certainly this is a more subtle way of understanding, but, in a sense, as long as we see it in this way, nirvana is an impossibility. If we accept this view, we are bound by difficult states of mind; when there is a difficult state of mind, we have to free ourselves from it. Even if we could, our freedom would depend on this strategy or skill of ridding ourselves of these negative states.

I think we can understand freedom and bondage not as states of mind, but as a way to relate to our experience. When we relate to our experiences, or the contents of our experience, with confusion – that is bondage. When we relate to our experiences, however difficult they might be, with wisdom, that is freedom. In the latter case, we don't depend on the state of mind, on what is arising, because if we depend on what is arising, we have no freedom. We need to wait for it not to be here, and, therefore, nirvana will depend on time, which means that now it is impossible to be free; I have to wait for *that* to go away. Therefore nirvana would be something conditioned.

We can see presence in the same way. If we believe that presence is a specific state of mind where there is no distraction, agitation, sleepiness, anger, desire, attachment; a state of mind that is vast, pure, devoid of all that we regard as limitation; then, when there is, say, sleepiness or agitation, presence becomes an objective that can only be reached in the future. And presence in the future doesn't work. We might speak

of it with a very positive connotation: “Presence is so fantastic!” But when we see it as a specific experience, we misplace it. We try to promote it and make an objective of it, and, of course, that makes it impossible.

So, like freedom, presence is not a pure state of mind devoid of distractions, sleepiness, jealousy, and anxiety; presence is our relationship to all that. How do we relate to sleepiness, to distraction, to anxiety, to joy, to peacefulness? So as long as we believe it is a specific experience, that feeds our tendency to do something about it, to transform, to improve.

On any retreat or in any dharma center, we can see practitioners, or ourselves at times, using the practice to avoid being in touch with life. There are different ways of doing this. There is an ascetic way, where we try to get away from desire, aversion, jealousy, all those negativities, to protect ourselves. It’s a way to cut us off from life, from the richness of all these arising mental states.

Another way of avoiding life is escaping into spaciousness. And we have plenty of descriptions to seduce us in this place of escape — “universal consciousness,” “vastness,” or however it is described. It is quite dangerous, because then we believe it is what practice is about; it’s about spacing out beautifully, being one with the universe.

One can also escape through positive feelings, like love and compassion. Not that anything is wrong with those states, except when they are used as a way to escape. For example (and we have seen this quite often), can we, when we try to practice, have love for ourselves? Sometimes it’s so difficult. It is strange that we pretend to have so much love for all the others when we cannot love ourselves. We need to first deal with what really matters; the love for ourselves. If we want to love all sentient beings and cannot love ourselves, that is an escape. We are also sentient beings that deserve love.

So there are many ways of escaping, and that’s why I think our spiritual practice requires so much honesty. Of course we are fascinated by the various beautiful descriptions: this “vastness” and “universal consciousness,” although it’s not really how the Buddhists expressed it. We are fascinated. But it’s important that we really try to be honest about it. Am I ready to meet myself, to know myself? What is the use of knowing the universe, or the universal consciousness, if I don’t know myself?

“Presence” is a vague term, actually; the understanding may not always be so clear. If presence is not a specific experience or the content of the experience, it does not require the absence of distraction, sleepiness, agitation, etc. But it is also not only the knowing of those sensations. “I know I am sleepy.” “I have a pain in my shoulder. Oh, it is burning.” This is not presence. Presence is the quality of mind in which, through an experience, consciousness knows itself. In presence, knowing and being are one and the same; consciousness knows itself through an experience. Any experience, when we are present to it, reveals the consciousness.

When I ask you, “Can you feel in the chest, in the feet, in the back?” it’s not that I’m interested in exploring the different sensations — “Can I feel this sensation or that sensation?” It’s rather so that we don’t get drawn into one experience, and suddenly get fascinated by those vibrations. So shifting, for me, is a way not to get caught in the contents of the experience. What remains, finally, is the fact that all these experiences are being experienced as presence, not as tension, heat, vibration, etc. If we were concerned with sensations, with being very precise about what’s happening in my knees, in my legs, we would stay much longer than we do in order to really know what we are experiencing. That’s not what we want; that would be concentration. Concentration is fixing the mind on one experience, which has its value, but we are not interested in that, we are interested in the consciousness knowing itself through this experience.

I can raise my hand like this and be fascinated by the weight of my hand, or I may feel the presence of my hand; the presence of my hand is *my* presence. There is no fragmentation in presence; you cannot cut it in pieces, you cannot divide it like a cake. So I may also experience just the presence that is revealed there, just with my hand.

As I mentioned the other day, I don’t believe we can really explore the dimension of freedom without the quality of presence. There may be some specific techniques, but I believe they will be much more difficult than first being present. I think it’s easier to be present because it’s clear. One is not lost. Presence is not freedom. But without presence, I doubt there is freedom. What does it mean, “without presence”? It means one is lost in past and future, in elaboration, and in taking those elaborations for the truth.

So, for me, quite an important dimension of my spiritual practice is the quality of presence in whatever I am doing. I don’t believe that cultivating the absence of presence for a long time will lead me anywhere. If I do something wrong for years, it won’t transform into something positive. There is no reward there: The Buddha will not say, “Well, Charles, here — after thirty years of confusion, let’s give him something!” It doesn’t happen like that. Thirty years of confusion just makes my confusion stronger.

Exploring freedom implies exploring presence. But now we know that presence is not an experience; therefore I cannot make an aim of it. Then what can I do? In this sense, meditation or Gesture of Awareness is not a technique. A technique is a doing of something in order to accomplish something in the future. Rather, Gesture of Awareness is an attitude with respect to what is arising in this instant. That is what is at stake, our attitude with respect to what is arising now. We could call this attitude equanimity. It’s like experiencing whatever is arising with equanimity. In the Dzogchen tradition this always comes down to *Pang lang med pa; reh dogs mad pa*: “Nothing to push away, nothing to pull towards one,” “No hope, no fear.”

Equanimity, “No hope, no fear”, those attitudes are ways to help us understand what is at stake. Not that one word is better than the other. When we use different expressions, hopefully we finally get what those words are trying to point to.

But we can also misunderstand this equanimity or “Nothing to push away, nothing to promote” as a way to be “patient”: “That’s OK. I’ll wait. I can’t do anything, I’m not supposed to do anything about it.” So I stay there, hoping one day it will go away.

I’d like to suggest another expression: *love of fate*. To really love what’s happening. That may say it differently. We are pointing to the same thing, but differently. Not only should we be equanimous with what is happening, having this balance of mind, but, in a sense, loving it. This doesn’t mean loving peacefulness, freedom. It means loving the anger arising, the sadness arising, the disheartening thoughts like, “Oh, I’ll never make it, it’s so difficult, I’ll never understand what all this stuff is about, I’m hopeless.” To love that is our freedom, because in that which is present, there is a quality that is to be found nowhere else. Nowhere. This quality is that *this* experience, now, reveals my presence. *This* experience reveals the totality of myself. When I want something else, I am wishing for death; I am going away from life. It is an escape into wishing for that which does not exist.

When one starts to develop this attitude of the love of fate, loving exactly what’s arising right now, suddenly we discover the richness of it, and we never wish for anything else. This sadness, anger, whatever, I would not exchange it for anything else, because there *is* nothing else. All the something else I could exchange it for does not exist, and I don’t want the non-existing. I don’t want to exchange it for nothing. Because nothing is lacking there; in this sadness, sleepiness, distraction, anger, confusion, even peace, tranquility – nothing is lacking.

This we can only discover by loving what’s happening, and this starts to be so fantastic. When something’s happening, it doesn’t matter the way it appears. It may be appearing as a painful, difficult experience that I usually would like to change for something else, but suddenly I see that this exchanging an experience for something else doesn’t work – we have tried for many years. And we are here, so it did not work!

So let’s explore this love of what’s happening right now. The love of fate is a full engagement of it, a total affirmation of life, and not a negation, (when we try to wish for something different). I think there’s maybe a danger in the practice of meditation to see it as a negation of life for some other life which does not exist. But the love of fate is a total affirmation of life. That may seem to require courage, but in a sense it does not, because there is no choice. There is nothing else.

This love of fate, this total love and affirmation of what’s happening right now, allows for an intimacy with the experience that will finally be beyond any possibility of affirmation. In this intimacy there is the impossibility to affirm anything, and in that there is no grasping, and in that there is freedom. Half affirmation doesn’t work, because there’s still half negation; we want something else. But the total affirmation leads us to this intimacy, and in this intimacy there is no room for grasping because there is no tool. Grasping doesn’t make sense at this time. We may sometimes be fascinated by emptiness—“Form is emptiness, emptiness is form”—and we wish for an emptiness that

is a negation of life, an emptiness that means not this, not that. That is a misunderstanding of emptiness. When we go through this total affirmation, we get to the emptiness that is the nature of the experience, not its negation. That's quite different.

We can see now that, in the practice, if we try to transform or improve whatever is happening, we cannot discover the dimension of this experience. We can improve: maybe after a week of Gesture of Awareness we feel more fluidity in our shoulder and we are smiling. That's good, but we're not really working with what we're here to explore. I'm sure there are much more efficient ways to be more supple and such. So that's the spirit of what we are trying to explore. We need to always come back to this spirit, even if sometimes we should stray. We begin the first day of work with the body, so to speak, because we know we need to warm up, and that's fine. But we still we should not lose sight of the spirit of the work.

In one Sutra, a monk asked the Buddha, "Tell me, sir, when one is lost in the middle of the lake of lamentation, of confusion, of torment, of difficulties, tell me, sir, where is the island, where is the refuge?" Meaning, "Where is freedom?" And the Buddha said, "It's in not having anything, in non-grasping, there is the refuge, there is the island."

There is a difference between presence and freedom. There can be presence with grasping; presence can grasp to presence, and there we have a description of pure presence, pure consciousness, and vastness. But that's not freedom. That's the beginning, that's the ground of our jail, because from that, everything can arise. But when there's no grasping to this experience, or to this quality of presence, then there is freedom.

I think it's important to make that distinction. We often read texts that are not very clear, or maybe we are not so aware, or they use technical language that means non-grasping but we are not always aware of that dimension. In any of the Buddhist traditions, and I would say even in others, it always comes to that: grasping is conditioning, no grasping is non-conditioning, and is freedom. And the most dangerous is to grasp to pure presence because then we won't question it. When we grasp to our sadness, we will question it, we will be tired of it, but we may really enjoy grasping at pure presence. It's so fantastic. It does, certainly, have a dimension of bliss, wholeness, all the seductive aspects of an experience.

I have given you a Sutra. I don't know Pali but I have some questions about the translation; it doesn't seem to work very well. Malunkya is an interesting character, a monk who at one time in his life was concerned with scientific knowledge. He went to the Buddha and said, "If you cannot tell me whether the world is limited or unlimited, or if it is eternal or not, I'm going to leave." He really wanted to know all about the world. And the Buddha told him that he would never answer these questions because they are completely uninteresting ... they don't lead to freedom. He said, "It doesn't matter. You will be dead before you find the answers to these questions. That does not concern me, what concerns me is bondage and freedom."

When this monk is very old — so, you see, there is hope for all of us! — he goes to the Buddha and asks the question, in a much more humble way. The Buddha said, “That which you cannot see, you will not grasp at that. That which does not exist for you, you will not grasp at that.” He goes through the different senses. That makes sense: what does not exist for me, how could I grasp at that? But then he says, “In the same way, when you see, you can have the same attitude. When you see, if you are not grasping at that, you will be free.”

“In the seeing, there will only be the seen.” Although the Buddha said something like that, in this translation the “seen,” for me, is an object. So the translator here, for me, is completely ruining the power of the text. Because in this experience of seeing, if the meditator does not build a “seen” and a “seer,” then he will be neither here nor there, nor in between; he will be free. So in this sense, we understand why he said it. First he gave the example: when there is something that you cannot see, you will never see, you don’t grasp, so there is no object, so to speak. Now, even in the experience of seeing, you are not going to make an object, neither a seer, so why would you grasp at it? And if you don’t make a seer and a seen, but just a seeing — in this unity, there is no possibility of grasping. That’s why I don’t like “In the seeing, just the seen.” I prefer, “In seeing, just seeing; in hearing, just hearing.” I checked with a Pali scholar and he said that we can translate this both ways. The text does not say if it is “In the seen, just the seen” or “In the seeing, just seeing.” When we have this quality of “seeing just seeing; hearing just hearing,” then we will neither be here nor there; there will be no subject, no self, and you will be free.

But what does it mean? If, when we see something, we do not accept it fully, then we keep it an object. If we don’t accept it fully, in the seeing there is a seen — we make it an object. Either positive or negative, if we grasp at it because we like it or want to push it away, we stay in this fragmentation of the seer reacting to a seen. So the attitude of the love of fate is what will allow this quality of “seeing just seeing” in our mind.

Now in *Gesture of Awareness* we’re concerned a bit more with bodily sensations because that is mainly what we are working with. So, in our bodily sensations, we are not making an object; nor are we making an object of a being, a meditator, or a walker sensing this sensation. There is just the sensation, and the sensation is not an object, it’s consciousness. (Maybe “body of presence” does seem to express a little bit of that.) So to know oneself through the body is not to know the body. To know oneself through the body is, essentially, to know the nature of the mind. That requires some quietness in our practice. If we are doing something too complex — we need to be careful about the pillar or the other person — we cannot have this quality. That’s fine. But at times the body is not experienced as something physical, as an object, it’s just experienced as awareness, and that’s what we are exploring in our way.

I think it’s on the second page, about halfway, he says “touching a tactile sensation.” How you can touch a sensation? A sensation is precisely the touching of something. You don’t touch a sensation; a sensation is consciousness. So “touching a tactile sensation” is not very skillful. A body sensation is consciousness. A sensation *is*

consciousness. Otherwise it is an arm, a body – those statues have no sensation. So when we are exploring sensation, it's not *this* sensation or *that* sensation – like the seeing of blue or the seeing of red. But the sensation is a quality of presence; it's just presence. We can explore any sensation, it doesn't matter which one, just as a quality of presence.

That's what we are working with in Gesture of Awareness, but we also know that, at times, we need to work in grosser aspects, and we will do that, too. Let's imagine we start a class, we walk fast. Or it is after a fantastic lunch, everybody is sleepy, we could explore sleepiness, but we could also walk fast and explore. We will deal with that, not making a new objective of not doing anything. But, again, we should know where the spirit of the practice is - and then we keep that in mind, walking around, and sometimes just expressing it.

We can know the mind through investigation of the nature of the thoughts ... but we can also know the mind through the investigation of the nature of sensation, exactly the same way. There is no difference. We don't investigate, but in a sense we explore with intimacy. It's not bodywork. I have nothing against bodywork, but I don't think it's that.

We will end here for today.