

Sisyphus

A dharma talk by Charles Genoud

There are many reasons to turn to meditation. Maybe one wishes to relax, feel more peaceful, or withdraw from responsibilities. Maybe one wishes to find meaning in life. A meaning in life can be serious motivation. Many of us are disoriented in our modern society. We wander through cities looking for something, or for nothing in particular. Is there anything that can fill the sense of lack in our hearts? We search in all kinds of ways to find meaning, whether in companionship, drugs, or the stock exchange. We try to escape this feeling of emptiness to find a life worth living.

Carl Jung, the Swiss psychologist, once visited a tribe of Pueblo Indians in New Mexico. He met with the chief of the village. Slowly, trust unfolded between the two men. The chief gradually disclosed tribal beliefs, the very role of the tribe on the earth. Every morning the villagers enacted a ritual that helped the sun, their father, to cross the sky. This was a great responsibility. If the ritual was not performed, the sun would no longer appear. Darkness would prevail.

How could the Pueblo Indians be expected to understand white men opposing such essential action? We can smile at their naive beliefs, Jung said, and yet envy the sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. We can imagine the spirit of the Pueblo Indians as they opened their day. Would there be room for despair or depression with such deep responsibility?

Africans bound for slavery were exported to the New World, to the West Indies, to Brazil, and elsewhere in huge ships. Many died crossing the sea. One-third died on the passage, another third died upon arrival. Only the remaining third survived. They had no possessions but whatever they were wearing.

Family members were scattered when a ship reached its far off destination. In Brazil, for example, family members — fathers and mothers, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, children — were separated from one another and sent off to different plantations. But though they had nothing, they had their beliefs in their hearts: here, their gods and protectors and the spirit of their ancestors could be found.

Slaveholders could never find and take their vision of the world. Nature for the Africans was more than just the gross elements that we can see: fire, earth, water and air. In these elements, or more precisely, in such manifestation as rivers, pools, or the sea, the Africans perceived a spiritual and luminous essence that they called *Orisha*.

Every African was linked to a specific Orisha depending on his or her own natural qualities. Thus, though having lost their families related to them by blood, many found comfort in their spiritual families. When slaveholders forced them to assume the Christian faith and to abandon their own religion, the Africans yielded to the form of it but not to the spirit. On the altars of their shrines they placed images of Christian saints, but they hid in the earth the symbols of their Orishas. They would begin ceremonies by prostrating, their heads touching the earth where the symbols of the Orishas could be found. Their lives had a meaning, and it helped them

to stay alive spiritually and physically.

This tradition is still ongoing in Brazil and Cuba and elsewhere. There are homeless children in Brazil who have found new family within the spiritual circle of an Orisha. Sometimes, if one attends such a gathering today, one can see these destitute kids seeking advice and love from an Orisha or from a *Caboclo* (spirit guide) that a medium is channeling. Feeling unconditionally accepted and loved, they stand facing the medium, their faces shining with awe. Such contact gives direction to their lives.

In a sense, many of us are more destitute than those slaves and poor children. The richness in their lives comes not so much from their belief in the Orishas as in the meaning they find through them. Having a meaning in life is important. Hardships are lighter when seen from a vaster perspective. There are already people helping the sun and successfully, it seems, to cross the sky. But what kind of meaning does meditation offer?

Buddhism can offer orientation to our lives. The well-known aim, endlessly stated in Buddhist texts, is nirvana: the eradication of all limitation, the unconditioned cessation of suffering. The end of birth, old age, disease and death. Nirvana is also called the unborn.

Turning to meditation for the sake of meaning we can finally succeed, and find in nirvana our ultimate aim. We simply need to engage in the practice of meditation to reach the aim. Our life has a purpose: unconditioned freedom.

Let us turn to the words of the Buddha to see more clearly what freedom is. The Buddha once said to his disciples that it is not possible to travel to the end of the world. But without traveling to the end of the world, he said, one cannot gain emancipation. Then he withdrew to his monk's cell. The disciples could not make sense of what they had heard. Finally, they decided to seek advice from Ananda, the Buddha's closest disciple. The Noble monk said, "The world is the eyes, form, and seeing consciousness, ears, sounds, and hearing consciousness." He described the five senses and added the mind, thoughts and mental consciousness.

Another sutra may offer light on this strange statement. Once, as the Buddha was teaching a group of monks and nuns, Mara, the Evil One, assumed the shape of a farmer. His hair was disheveled and his feet were splattered with mud. He held a great plow over his shoulder. Mara strode up to the Blessed One and said, "Hey, contemplative. Have you seen my oxen?" The Buddha instantly recognized Mara. "And what are your oxen?" he said. The Evil One challenged him. "The eyes, forms, and eye consciousness are mine. Where can you go to escape me? The ears, sounds, and hearing consciousness are mine. Where can you go to escape me? The tongue, taste, and tasting consciousness are mine. Where can you go to escape me? The nose, smell, and smelling consciousness are mine. Where can you go to escape me? The body, physical sensations and bodily consciousness are mine. Where can you go to escape me? Mind, thoughts and mental consciousness are mine. Where can you go to escape me?" Mara described all the characteristics of the world. Where was freedom to be found?

Now, to dispel illusion, the Awakened One must defeat Mara. His answer is uncompromising, shattering. "Where there are no eyes, no form and no eye consciousness, there, Mara, you cannot go. Where there are no ears, no sound, and no hearing consciousness, there,

you cannot go.” The Buddha spoke of all the sense organs, sense objects and consciousness. And then he spoke of the mind, thoughts, and mental consciousness. Mara said that you cannot escape illusion in this world. But the Buddha replied, “Where this world does not appear, there is no illusion.”

What does it mean that there are no eyes, no form, no eye consciousness and so on? Does it mean that one should cut oneself off from the world? Does it mean that one should stop all perception and prevent the world from appearing to the mind? But to close off all the senses would be impossible.

The practice of concentration is a means of withdrawing from all sense data. In meditative concentration, one is no longer concerned by sights, sounds, tastes, smells and sensations. Having withdrawn attention from the senses, nothing is perceived anymore. The world no longer appears. By not giving attention to inner experiences like desire and aversion and joy, or to thought patterns of any kind, a state of peace, of bliss and limitless consciousness naturally arises. Unconcerned by these states, one is not attached to thoughts, mind and mental consciousness. Nothing appears anymore. One reaches a state beyond the reach of Mara, a state free of illusion.

By the end of the path, by having gathered causes and conditions, or rather, by having pushed away all obstacles, we reach the aim. Such orientation gives sense to our lives. Meditation has provided us with the meaning we were looking for. But can this state of ultimate withdrawal be freedom? Withdrawing from the world cannot be an unconditioned freedom as it depends on the absence of the world. This is but a temporal and thus limited freedom. It is just a holiday from the turmoil of samsara.

Can nirvana be stated as an aim without damaging it? It has to be created. It is subordinated to the practice which will lead to its being. An aim can not be unborn; it is necessarily of the future. It gives orientation; it is a line drawn between now and then, between the time of its absence and the time of its actualization. Thus, an aim is only a fragment of a whole that includes its absence and its presence. The path to eliminate its absence and to eradicate obstacles is the condition for the actualization of the aim. And to see nirvana as an aim is to condition it. An unconditioned aim is an impossibility. Nirvana, unless it loses its very nature, cannot be an aim. We have failed in our quest for ultimate meaning.

Nirvana cannot be grasped through any concepts that would limit it. Nirvana cannot be the answer. We have to choose—we can cling to meaning, and be confined to the conditioned, or we can be concerned with unconditioned freedom and lose the comfort of meaning.

What are we to do if we are concerned with nirvana? Practicing a path and gradually eliminating obstacles can never lead to nirvana. And not practicing anything, as is the case for so many people, does not provide for freedom. Are we not at a dead end? Something must be wrong, somewhere. In both cases we are trying to see the aim from the point of view of the conditioned; we are trying to make up some unconditioned aim with bits and pieces of conditioned fragments. This is exactly why we are trapped in samsara.

Our vision is fragmented—being excludes non-being and non-being excludes being; bondage and freedom exclude one another. The very existence of samsara limits nirvana. From the point of samsara, nirvana is an impossibility.

Can we imagine a freedom that is not the opposite of bondage and does not require its eradication? This would mean reversing our vision and trying to understand the path from the point of view of the aim, of the unconditioned. A path needs to be in affinity with its aim. It is not possible to light a fire by means of water, or to wet a cloth by exposing it to the heat of the sun. It is not by navigating on a boat that we can reach the top of a mountain. The path has to be congruent with the aim.

The path to unconditioned freedom is an unconditioned path. An unconditioned practice does not work toward the accomplishment of any objective. It is without consequence. If unconditioned freedom is possible, it means it is already and always present. Samsara does not hinder it. Bondage is illusory.

Wouldn't it be senseless to try to untie bonds which don't really exist? Unconditioned freedom reduces samsara to a dream. A practice that justifies the assumption that something needs to be done perpetuates confusion. From the point of view of the unconditioned, of timelessness, the path and the aim are not different from one another.

The practice is not for freedom, it is freedom itself. Yet it is a freedom which is freedom from no bondage; it has no opposite. Bondage and freedom, samsara and nirvana—are mere words. To try to avoid one and accomplish the other is to give them reality, and is a mark of confusion.

Some French philosophers speaking of the meaning of life came up with the notion of the absurd. But to ask if life has a meaning or not—isn't that to reduce life to an idea, to set it up as a concept which then has meaning or not? Life simply is. Thinking of it, one gets lost in a world of thought. One loses touch with life. Yet to understand the absurd as the contrary of meaningfulness, a meaning in the negative, may be an oversimplification. Following Camus, I would like to use the myth of Sisyphus to speak of freedom and the absurd.

In the Greek myth, Sisyphus is condemned to push a rock to the top of a mountain. The rock rolls down as soon as it reaches the top, and Sisyphus has to push the rock again and again for all eternity. He is condemned to this fate because he had tied death up and kept him in his house. But Hades, the lord of the dead, broke loose and condemned Sisyphus. Camus suggests we consider this Greek hero as being perfectly happy. And he is free, too, we may add.

How is it possible to find freedom in this most confined situation? Camus gives us a clue. He notes that it is the nature of this hero to efface himself. Sisyphus is a man who still works, but he works uselessly, deprived of the work of time. This giving up of any notion of time and meaning leads to the absurd and to freedom for Sisyphus. The absurd for Camus is not the meaning of that which is without meaning—it is not a concept. Rather it is that which slips away from the grasp of meaning. The absurd is what is seen when the mind, turning back, looks at itself. It means that the mind, having lost all objects, rests on itself. The mind's experience is then a non-experience. In this non-experience the world is lost—the world as subject and object,

the world as being and non-being.

If he sees his condition within the framework of time, Sisyphus would face at each instant the burden of eternal action, the pushing of the rock ever and again to the top of the mountain. An unbearable situation. The only possibility for Sisyphus to be unburdened is to have no expectation, no goal. Sisyphus cannot push the rock to the top of the mountain; the smallest aim reintroduces the notion of time and its binding. Thus he just pushes the rock aimlessly, timelessly. To be free, Sisyphus has to abandon any attempt to control his fate. Control would require distance, a stepping back to evaluate his situation or to direct himself toward an aim. Sisyphus turns loose of such workings of the mind. If he held to the necessity of meaning he would fall into despair for his action would be precisely endless and purposeless. Hades was kind in his condemnation. He could have condemned Sisyphus for 1,000 years or 10,000 years. Sisyphus would then have waited full of hope. But he is condemned for eternity, and this frees him from any possibility of hope.

There is no pusher and nothing pushed for Sisyphus. No actor and acted upon. The absence of distance leaves no room for duality. In this pure intimacy Sisyphus disappears. He doesn't try to escape his fate; he doesn't try to lose himself by concentrating on something else. Rather, he gives himself up to the absurd. He effaces himself, and so too the rock and the mountain. There is no bondage and no freedom for Sisyphus. He resides in the inconceivable.

The relation between meaningfulness and the absurd may be similar to that between the conditioned and the unconditioned. The absurd is not the other side of meaningfulness any more than the unconditioned is not the other side of the conditioned. The situation of Sisyphus is an allegory of samsaric life. Freedom is not to be found outside of samsara. It is to be found within samsara itself—not by getting rid of it, but by realizing that it has no power to bind. It does not exist. Samsara is as much an illusion as is its cessation, nirvana. A freedom is an ultimate freedom if it is freedom from no bondage. Meditation practice is ultimately meaningful if it has no effect. It is meaningful if it is useless and absurd. The absurd, the inconceivable, is the sign of freedom.