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The Dance of Affinity

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STUDENTS COME to practice Zen Buddhism with questions, basically “Why?”—and this is a question that relates to karma. Originally, the word *karma* meant “action” but it evolved to mean “cause-and-effect” and “affinity.”

“Why” is the door to affinity, the Buddha’s own joy in identity. He announced his reconciliation of the question with his exclamation: “Wonderful! Wonderful! Now I see that all beings are the Tathāgata.” That is, all beings are fully realized as they are. “Only,” he went on to say, “their delusions and preoccupations keep them from realizing that fact.”¹

Why should there be suffering? Why should there be illness? Why should there be old age? Why should there be death? These questions arise from our desire for permanence, and are thus rooted in delusion and preoccupation. Yet they led to the Buddha’s realization and can lead to ours. Blake wrote: “If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise.”²

The question, however, must be correctly focused. If the focus is upon the fact that one has the question, or that it is difficult, or depressing, nothing comes of it except more suffering. Unlike bushes and grasses and zebras and mongooses, we are blessed and cursed with self-consciousness. We are all of us nonetheless Buddhas, and by the fact that we are self-conscious, we can, with the most profound modesty, become aware of our own wisdom and compassion.

The Buddha’s first sermon, devoted to the Four Noble Truths, shows the way to a reconciliation of our questions. The fourth truth is the Eightfold Path, which teaches us how to follow his example and realize what has been true from the beginning. From Right Views of the self and the world, to Right Meditation, the eight milestones guide us on the way of selflessness and love. We follow these simple stones with the same longing that drew the young Gotama from his father’s house to the forest and ultimately to the tree of enlightenment. The world is unfolding with the power of longing—the Buddha for all his completeness is nonetheless unfolding with the power of longing of each being.

Unfolding is the moment-by-moment course of particular beings, in keeping with their individual nature—that is, by their affinities, drawing upon some things more than others. It is no accident that you appeared, and at the same time there is no gentleman with a white beard up there in the sky who decided you should come forth. Nor were you determined by an impersonal fate outside yourself. Rather it was formless tendencies to become your body and personality that came together—the you-aspect of the universe, so to speak, coalescing to become what you are.

Physics and its mathematics track tendencies. Aristotle observed that things tend to fall down. His scientific descendants are now more refined in their understanding of how objects in motion relate to each other, but their conclusions are still couched in terms of tendency. The Law of Karma is simply the Buddhist account of the tendency of things to relate to each other. Moreover it traces tendencies of tendencies. The great harmonious body of tendencies tends to coalesce in unique ways. They coalesced as you and continue to coalesce as you.

When I say that your particular tendencies came together and continue to come together, I mean they are yours only in that they make you up. And when I say “they” make you up, I am not using the right pronoun. It is *you*—the plural *you*, infinitely plural, including birdsong and rain. There are countless plural *you*'s, each one unique and particular. And of course, when the plural *you* loses cohesion, then you as a person will die. What happens then? The elements that came together from such disparate sources dissipate into earth, water, fire and air. Your karma continues to become the parent, the uncle or aunt, the cousin, the grandparent, great-grandparent, and so on, for innumerable beings. Will there be a time for your elements to coalesce again? If so, would elements of other *you*'s sneak into the complex?

Add that to your question box. In any case, before the final irrevocable option at the end of your present mind, you tend to follow a certain path among many that offer themselves. Just as you are ready to take a certain step at a certain time in your life, so before you were born, the vastly disparate elements that were you and not yet together, were ready at a certain moment to conceive. The same history can be traced for all beings. Modern physics and psychology have developed a term to describe this step of coming together: “non-causal synchronicity”—and Buddhists have their terminology: *fushigi na en*, “mysterious affinity.”

What is it that brought us here together today? Just within our own memories, we can sense that each of us has been preparing for this moment throughout our lives. Looking back we can see that everything you and I did and experienced from the time we were very little, each small decision, each encounter, each incident, directed us inexorably to this place at this time.

Moreover, we can trace the conspiracy of our parents, grandparents, and on back to the first appearance of our ancestral

human beings, and before that to our ancestral lichen and our ancestral gases, and even before that—all breathing together to bring us here. In each generation, in each moment, birdsong in the trees, stones in the fields, and clouds on the mountains inspired and expired together to bring us here. All the accidents and incidents in the lives of our ancestors—and in the lives of the many other beings in the great hemisphere of our multi-dimensional past—line up on hindsight to make this meeting possible. The mystery of this conjunction is the “why.”

What is it that caused your great-grandmother on her meeting with your great-grandfather to recognize him as her future mate and the future father of her children? You can call it a mystery, but it is a mystery that does not imply doubt. We can presume she felt something definite. She felt affinity.

Affinity identifies the attraction that brought our great-grandparents together, our grandparents together, our parents together, and our own feelings when we join with our mates. It also identifies the attraction that brought all the elements of your body and personality together, and all other bodies and personalities. The many ancestors and sisters and brothers that made you up felt something definite in their own way, and came together to become a particular liver, heart, brain, and quality of intelligence, creativity, spirituality, and overall personality, all of them in keeping with the qualities of your other parts. This conjunction sets the tone of your life.

Affinity, affinity. All beings are made up by affinity. The whole universe, through every dimension, forms a vast net of affinity that is all of a piece—a multi-dimensional web. With any movement within the web, everything moves. Each gesture, each blink brings a new kind of equilibrium and new kinds of interplay throughout the net. This is a never-ending process from the unknown past to the unknown future, and through all other dimensions including the eternal present. Touches that bring joy and harmony bring new interplay and new equilibrium. Touches that cause suffering and death bring new interplay and new equilibrium as well.

Touches that bring joy and harmony are choices for the present and future; touches that cause suffering and death play out the past. Touches for the present and future arise from consciousness, that is to say conscience, for as the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us, consciousness and conscience have the same definition. To be human in the deepest sense is to be at once aware and concerned. Thus the Buddha responded to the urging of the gods, and arose from beneath the tree to share his realization, first of all with his four disciples in Benares.

The world changed radically, but each touch by each being brings joy or sorrow, and everyone and everything adjusts. It is a panoramic interplay. The countless adjustments in turn generate the process of constant change in both the objective and the subjective worlds, and this process is never-ending.

My birth and yours were unique, each birth is unique, and every incident across the world and across the great nebulae is unique—and every event unfolds the universe. When I stop to take a drink of water, everyone and everything is at that moment refreshed. My spirit is renewed, my words are clearer in diction and meaning. All beings are thereby more deeply enlightened, and the effects of this deeper enlightenment are felt at once, and they will play themselves out endlessly.

That drink of water came from the kitchen tap, but the tap is, of course, not the source of the water. Countless trees, shrubs, grasses, rivers, lakes, oceans, rocks, various kinds of soil, clouds, wind, the sun, the moon and many other beings all brought the water to the tap, and the cycle does not end with me. Each incident in your life and mine, and in all lives, is the interplay of all beings, and this interplay is not only in the objective world, nor is it only in the subjective world. The footstep I hear in the corridor in the early morning is myself, and so is the song of the thrush and the scent of the pua-kenikeni. The sun is my heart, as other teachers have said; the atmosphere is my breath—and this is true for you too, and for the cushions in this hall.

Chance and destiny are not adequate concepts for explaining karma. It's really a dance, isn't it!—a dance of sisters and brothers who come together by mysterious likeness and attraction. Their dances in turn come together with all the dances across the world. For some this can be joyless, even the dance of exploitation and murder, but for the Bodhisattva it is the great cotillion of intimacy.

When you are intimate with any being, you live through what that being lives through. This is a release from preoccupation with yourself, sometimes joyous, sometimes heart-rending. It is the Tao of intimacy. Sometimes it is joyous, *mudita*, the third of the classical Four Noble Abodes, boundless joy in the liberation of others. Sometimes it is compassionate, which by etymology is suffering with others. Either way, it is Buddha's own release from self, the heart of his teaching and practice.

Intimacy is not passive, and it is not confined to the human world. The song of the thrush recasts you, and in your response you recast the thrush and all beings. If you whistle back, you are creating more consciousness of intimacy, as you will notice by the way she flits closer and sings again. You are constantly being created and you are constantly creating others. When you are open and responsive in this way, then you are turning the Wheel of the Dharma with all beings.

What if you don't know how to whistle? What if you are schooled to ignore the bird or even to kill it? How do you handle a complex of affinities that provide, say, a weakness for alcohol, or an inordinate sex drive? If you find yourself with these tendencies, are you responsible for them? Yes, indeed. Negative tendencies are either rooted in the poisons of self-centeredness, or they lie in the human imperative for union and are somehow twisted up. Prune the

poisonous stuff and let the plant grow appropriately to your vow to save the many beings.

How about the complex of affinities that bring you to a bank just as a robber comes in? Are you responsible for this situation? Lots of incidents led up to it, and once their results are in train, you might have no control. There is such a thing as world karma. I as the world am responsible, but there might be no way for me as an individual to help once the crisis has become acute.

Thornton Wilder's novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is the story of people who appear from completely different circumstances to die together when a bridge collapses.³ It is a lesson in fate by hindsight. After all, what is fate but something in the past, in memory! The novelist takes us back into the lives of members of the disparate group that came to the bridge just before it fails, and shows how inevitable it seems that they should arrive together for their deaths.

The travelers had no control over the collapse of the bridge, and it is a sense of this lack of control that brings to human consciousness the "quiet desperation" of which Thoreau speaks. The arid soil of family misery might smother the spirit of its members for their entire lives—even though they longed from the beginning to work their way through it. The bundle of affinities that is you might not make it through your next financial crisis, or your next psychological depression. Without blaming yourself, however, you can still accept your fundamental responsibility. Terrifying death was the only option for the travelers at the moment the Bridge of San Luis Rey fell into the gorge. In less lethal circumstances you can use your experience of affinity to loosen particular karmic bonds, build upon what has happened, and thus maintain your Bodhisattva path. You might be struggling in a threatening situation, but there you are.

The French mathematician and astronomer Pierre Simon Laplace, who lived at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, suggested that the atoms that came together in 1756 to form Mozart's brain did so in an altogether predetermined way. Even when they were merely dust in the aeons before the solar system came into being they were programmed, Laplace declared, to produce *Don Giovanni* in Prague in 1787.⁴ I am not suggesting anything so hopelessly fatalistic. Everything builds anew upon what has gone before, but there are diverse options at every step. You and I and everything and everyone move according to our affinities at each turn, at every moment. Looking back, we can see the mystery of inevitability. Looking ahead we can only hope and trust.

Everything we do from here is our step-by-step practice, using what support we have at hand. It is possible to transmute dependency upon alcohol to action based on a clear sense of mutual interdependence. It is possible to transmute an inordinate sex drive to the path of infinite compassion. It is possible to transmute self-centeredness to a realization of the multcentered universe. It is possible to transmute a preoccupation with the material world into insight into its ephemeral, and indeed into its potent, yet empty nature.

With this insight you are open. You let sounds enter your body, and they recast you; kill you really, and transform you to a new being who integrates those sounds. You model more and more clearly the character of the universe in your particular Bodhisattva mold.

Of course, in being open to the world you pass off many things, just as you eliminate most of the food you eat. But your excreta don't look like broccoli and carrots anymore. They have been transformed by your process of absorbing what you have an affinity for, and disposing of what is left over. Sometimes you eat inappropriate food, and get sick. So it is important to eat appropriate food, and it is important to expose yourself to appropriate influences.

Toxic sense experiences can make you sick too. It is important to place yourself in a nutritious setting when you can, if only by arranging plants in your apartment. "Sounds of the valley stream wash your ears clean;/the canopy of pine trees touch your eyes green."⁵ Yet even the sounds of traffic and the squabble of neighbors can be good reminders to persevere. Nothing is static. When you persevere you unfold. Unfolding is the Buddha Way.

Notes

The author is the retired Zen Master (Rōshi) of the Honolulu Diamond Sangha, now living in Puna on the island of Hawai'i. This contribution is from a talk to students of Zen Buddhism. It was edited by Nelson Foster.

¹Haku'un Yasutani, *Introductory Lectures on Zen Training*. In Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), p. 28.

²William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 7, Proverbs of Hell. In Geoffrey Keynes (Ed.), *Blake: Complete Writings, with Variant Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 151.

³Thornton Wilder, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (New York: A. & C. Boni, 1927).

⁴David Lindley, *The End of Physics: The Myth of a Unified Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), pp. 51-52.

⁵Sōiku Shigematsu (Comp. & Trans.), *A Zen Forest* (New York: Weatherhill, 1981), p. 134; cf. p. 55.

