

Your Original Face

Teisho by Fr. AMA Samy, February Sesshin 2011

At the end of the Heart Sutra is the line; Gaté Gaté, Para Gaté, Parasam Gaté, Bodhi Swaha. Gaté means gone; gone beyond, gone even further than beyond. Bodhi Swaha has a meaning like Amen or hallelujah. It points towards life being a journey. The poet T. S. Eliot puts it nicely:

We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

Life IS a journey! Life is also a narration; a story. We can view it in many dimensions but at the basic level we are born, we grow and we die. We are all journeying towards death. This is a simple way to put it; however each life is journey in many dimensions. As most of you will know, this journey is also risky and dangerous. You have all survived and are living here now. Many do not even survive the journey out of their mother's womb. Or they are born and then die. Or they grow a little and die. Not only is there death; there are so many physical problems. At any time and at every turn wait illnesses and accidents. Perhaps we don't fully realise how fragile and dangerous life is. Life is so precarious yet still we go on. You catch a small virus though and it can be over; your whole life gone in a trice. You see, it is just a dream, a daydream!

With relationships too there are dangers and complexities. There are not only physical risks, emotional dangers are also there. We may lose our job or lose our relationship; all these things. Relationships are always uncertain, ambivalent, risky. We can never be sure how the other person will respond or how you will respond. You may think you have a secure partnership/relationship; but it never is; we can never know what will happen tomorrow or the day after. We say life is a journey; yet most of you will know that all your plans have been broken, changed, turned upside down. From the early days onward, we plan and hope, yet something else will happen in life as we journey. So many things can happen on the way.

Is there a meaning to this journey? If so, what meaning? Is there a goal? A purpose an end, a telos?

Usually there are some achievements in our life; we do something or work at something. Being a parent; bringing forth a child is an achievement. Living well can be achievement. We can do all these things to give life a meaning, but more than this, the meaning is the journey itself. How do you live? The How is what is important. Yes, it is important that we do a task and realize some achievements in our ordinary course of life; but what about the quality? Why are you living? Even if you are sick it is possible to live a beautiful life. You can be very powerful and rich, but your life may be ugly. So, how are you going to live? It is the quality of your life that matters. If the quality is good, you can live anywhere in any situation. The quality will not depend simply on external things. Also remember, we depend on others and we depend on the world. In a way we all journey together. It is not an independent life.

We will affect and be affected by others yet it remains an individual journey. There is a Greek saying; 'call no man happy until he is dead.' It is only when life ends that you can say if the life has been happy or not. Not ordinary happiness -- has your life been fulfilled truly?

Zen is also a journey. We talk about awakening and all such these things but it is a journey. There is a sufi saying; 'There is a time when you journey towards God and there is a time when you journey within God.' A journey towards God, seeking and struggling; and when you reach there – what happens? Still it is a journey, only you journey within God.

Even if you are enlightened, still you journey, it does not finish, all your life is a journeying. Zen says that even Shakyamani Buddha is only half way! The important point remains; how do you live, how do you relate to life, what is the quality of your life. John of the Cross, a Christian mystic said; 'in the evening of life you will be judged by love.' So it will not be about how much you did, but that in the twilight of life you will be judged by love, by how much you loved. Not by how much you felt, no, by how much did you give yourself? Gave of yourself to others, to God, to others and to life. We have first to find ourselves, in a sense, but also our life is judged in terms of love. Think of these things.

The Heart Sutra also talks of the journey; gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate: going, going, gone to the further shore. Zen will say that the further shore is only this shore. When zen speaks of life being a journey, it is that life is questioning, questing, seeking, desiring and longing. Without these things there is no journey. You may not be seeking exactly, you may be at peace, but you want health, relationships and joy. Relating to the world and relating to yourself is a quest. Further, world and the others are a never-ending task and call. It is not just your questions, life is also questioning you! Who are you, it asks, who are you?

On one level, the ordinary level, it is the phenomenal plane; body, mind, relationships, emotions and health are all on this phenomenal level. This level though takes place on a background of what zen terms Emptiness. I am speaking in metaphors, but the whole of this phenomenal life takes place on a background of what we term Emptiness.

Let me read a koan; number 23 from Mumonkan:

The Sixth Patriarch was pursued by the monk named Myo until Mount Taiyu. And seeing Myo coming, the Sixth Patriarch placed both the robe and the bowl on a rock and said, "This is the robe representing the faith; one should not fight over it. If you want to take it, take it away now." The monk went and tried to take it; however, it was as heavy as a mountain and could not be moved. Trembling and faltering, Myo said, "I did not come for the robe, I came for the Dharma. Please give me your instruction."

The Patriarch replied, "Do not think good nor evil. At this moment, what is the original face of monk Myo?" Hearing these words Myo was enlightened; his whole body was covered in sweat. He cried and bowed saying, "Other than the secret words and secret meaning you have just revealed to me, is there anything else that is deeper still?"

The Sixth Patriarch said, "What I have just spoken to you is no secret at all. When you look into your own true self, whatever is deeper is found right there." Myo said, "I was with the monks under the Fifth Patriarch for many years however I could not realize my true self. Now, receiving your teaching, I know it is like a person drinking water and knowing by oneself whether the water is cold or hot. My lay brother you are now my teacher."

The Sixth Patriarch replied, "If you say so, however, let us both call the Fifth Patriarch our Master. Please be careful to treasure and hold fast to what you have attained."

It was Eno who became the sixth patriarch; in China Bodhidharma was the first patriarch and then follows on the Zen Masters in number order. Eno was number six and then the lineage ended. Zen then branched out into Rinzai, Soto and other schools.

Eno was a poor layman and briefly the story goes that he came to study with the fifth patriarch and was sent to work in the kitchen because he was a layman. When the fifth patriarch became old and was looking for a successor he told his monks to compose a poem to express their awakening. There are different ways to test awakening, and he chose asking them to write a poem. The head monk wrote:

'The body is the linden tree,
The mind is a bright mirror in a stand;
Moment by moment wipe the mirror clean,
Never let dust fall upon it.'

The body is the tree, the mind a mirror on the stand. Moment to moment wipe the mirror and allow no dust to gather. This is not bad; what it stresses is asceticism and purification; effort and training. This is the gradual approach to awakening. The same as the Tathagata approach, which I mentioned earlier.

Our layman, Eno, heard this poem and thought it not so good. He asked another monk to write his poem on the wall along side the head monk's, as he himself was illiterate:

'The body original is not a tree
The mirror has no stand
Originally there is nothing at all
Where can dust fall?'

You see, what he does is to see beyond, to the source and ground, of all of phenomena; you can say also that he negates all phenomena. There is no tree, there is no mirror, there is no dust; originally from the beginning, there is nothing at all. This nothing points to Emptiness; this is patriarchal faith. When the Master read this poem of the layman he realized that this man was deeply enlightened. The story goes that in the night the Master called him and gave him transmission; the symbols of which were the robe and begging bowl. It is said they were Buddha's own robe and begging bowl! So the master gave Eno the robe and bowl and appointed him successor. He told him to leave the monastery as the monks would not be happy with his choice and might even kill Eno when they found out he has been appointed as the sixth patriarch. He advised Eno to leave immediately and practice somewhere for about 13 years before revealing himself to the world.

This is where the koan begins; The Sixth Patriarch was pursued by the monk named Myo until Mount Taiyu. Monk Myo was the strongest man among monks. When the monks found out in the morning that the master had given his robe and bowl to a layman, they were indeed upset and wanted to catch the man. The reason they wanted to catch him of course was to take back the bowl and robe. They all set out after him but it was the strongest one, monk Myo that caught up with him. When he sees him coming, Eno understands why. So Eno puts down the robe and bowl and says to Myo; 'You have come for these things, but they are only symbols of faith. Take them.'

Myo tries to take them but he is unable to lift them. His whole mind becomes confused. He asks himself why did he become a monk, was it only to receive these symbolic tokens? What had he

chased after Eno for? He was confused and frightened and began sweating and trembling. 'My lay brother' he said, 'I did not come for these things, please help me.' Perhaps events did not happen quite this suddenly, this is a story; but the understanding came; 'I did not come for these things, help me to awaken'.

Eno gave him the now famous response: 'Thinking of neither good nor evil, what is your original face?'

Language in zen is important, it is how the question is framed that is important here. We must awaken through language. Eno asks Myo, 'thinking of neither good nor evil'. What is that point? It is all dualisms: good, bad, evil; I, you, history, past, present, future; all dualities or rather dualisms! You are living in duality that is the phenomenal self. we live in dualities, in samsara. Birth and death, giving and taking; all these things. He said; thinking neither good nor evil – that means, let go of all dualisms.

What is your original face? Usually this question is asked as 'what was your original face before even your parents were born?' That means beyond history, beyond space and time; what is your original face?

So, there is our original face and our phenomenal face; our historical life and our trans-historical life. In Buddhism they talk of the phenomenal life in terms of interdependence. This is this therefore that is that. All things are interdependent. Everything is connected. You are a body-mind and are not simply independent; the earth and gravity holds you, the bell brought you to the zendo – all these things. All are interdependent; the sun, moon and stars; nothing is autonomous and standing alone.

One meaning of emptiness is co-dependency. What does this mean? It means that no one is absolutely independent. We do not have independent, substantial, self-subsisting selfhood. We are all dependent on each other. Buddhism and in particular Theravada Buddhism is strongly based on interdependence. Even science now says we are all interconnected. Our self is dependent on our brain, nervous system, body and evolution. Psychologists will say you are determined by psychological factors. Biologists will say you are determined by matter and evolution.

Tell me! If this is so, what is your original face, what is enlightenment, how do you awaken? Understanding causal conditions is not awakening. This is only a form of determinism. On the other side there is the extreme view in some spiritual ways that you are only spirit, only consciousness and not your body. Your body and the earth are illusion, maya; what you are is only pure spirit, nothing else. Is that awakening? This is the opposite extreme that denies body and causal conditions.

There is an article by Richard Rohr in which he talks about three eyes within the Christian tradition. The first eye is the eye of flesh. He takes the example of looking at the sunset. See the beauty, enjoy that, be that and feel that. For the first eye this is all there is, feeling, enjoying and experiencing. This is the eye of flesh. Being aware of the body and breath is mostly on this level.

Then there is the eye of reasoning. This means finding the causal connections, origins and effects. What is sunset, how does it happen? Understanding that the earth revolves bringing morning and evening; this is reasoning and seeing the interdependent and codependent factors. Reasoning though is not awakening.

The third eye is called the eye of understanding. In Zen and Buddhist terms we can call it pranja-- wisdom. Supreme wisdom! Non- dual knowledge. The eye of understanding is the eye of wisdom. Richard Rohr calls it wonder and mystery; you realise there is a depth and mystery to reality. It is not simply reasoning or causal conditioning. It is not simply bodily or emotional. It is much deeper, it is the eye of wisdom and the spirit opens up. It is unknowing, a mystery, it is a miracle, a marvel!

He also makes the important point that the eye of wisdom is based on the previous two eyes. The three eyes cannot be separated. You must have the eye of flesh and the eye of reasoning for, only then the eye of understanding is meaningful. If you cut them separately this is no good. If you say there is only spirit and wisdom to spirituality then this is again no good. You must acknowledge body, history and mind; then you can pass on to wisdom, mysticism and deeper understanding.

I talked earlier about consciousness; many traditions including Buddhism and Hinduism will equate consciousness with Self. Consciousness has many levels, different dimensions. One of which is vinjnana, the discursive ordinary level of what we know and discriminate. This is important! You must recognize, respect, accept and live with that, not deny it. Then there is a deeper consciousness. Consciousness is not only subjective. When one looks at a table one can say, yes, I can feel this table; there is subjective awareness. One can be aware of seeing the table. There is also awareness of being aware (of seeing the table), awareness of the consciousness of touch and distance. This is subjective consciousness, discriminatory and discursive. There is separateness. I am here, you and that are there. Is there then a basic primordial consciousness?

It is usual to ask 'who is hearing?', 'who is asking?', and 'what is my original face?' So, who is it asking the question? Can you ever grasp that 'who'? Think about it! You could say that your brain is asking or that your discursive consciousness is asking, but as soon as you say it is this or that asking then you are objectifying and the self that is asking has disappeared. You can never grasp the self that is seeking and asking. It cannot be grasped. The primordial self is beyond or underlies all the levels of consciousness. At the same time, that self is consciousness, but what sort of consciousness? Take as an example light. Can you see light? How do you see it? I ask you; how do you see light? You see light only in term of phenomenal things. Light itself you cannot see. It is only when light falls on things that you see light. How do you know dawn has come... the trees become clear, the sky becomes clear; everything can be seen! You say, yes, dawn has come, I can see things. Light makes present the things. You see light only in terms of the things. Things become present in light!

Our primordial original face of consciousness is that light. It makes the world present. The original or primordial self is as light, it is neither subject nor object, you cannot locate it anywhere; neither here nor there. It is still 'I', but this I is not an object. Of course, yes, still I am AMA Samy and I am this and that, I have a history, body and mind. Ask yourself though, ultimately, who am I? This I which is so to say the puller of the puppets on the stage cannot be grasped. The consciousness that goes with this I is the light which illumines the whole universe. The original face, which is your self, illumines the whole world. The world can become present only in the light of your self.

You cannot become aware of the self, of your original face except in terms of the world! In terms of the Others!

Is there then no consciousness? Yes there is, but this cannot become objectified. It is not a consciousness you can grasp. It is not a consciousness you can see. You can see it only in the face of the others. See it in the face of the world. What does this mean?

It means: the world is your face. All beings are yourself. Your self illumines all the world; the world and others and you are given together.

Here, let me read you the verse from the koan:

You may describe it but in vain.

Picture it but to no avail

You can never praise it fully

Stop all your groping and maneuvering.

There is nowhere to hide the True Self (original face).

There is nowhere to hide the self! Where could you hide it? Where can you hide yourself? Let me tell you: I will hide myself in you, in the world, the trees, the mountains, the poor, the rich. Nowhere else. You cannot hide the self; it is transparent! It is shining bright all the time; it is coming all the time. Heaven and earth become present in the light of the Self. Can you awaken to that? Awaken to your Original Face?

Your individual, phenomenal self is at the same time very important and central, for it is only through your phenomenal self that the True Self can be manifested. This is a precious self, it is the window. You must guard and protect yourself. The Self, your original face, shines through this phenomenal self. That is why it is so important to take care of your phenomenal self. Guard it, respect it, protect it and cherish it. Actually, the two faces, the two selves, are not-two and not-one. In the same way you must cherish and respect others for, the other is the face which comes to meet you. It is your own face! Respect it, take care of it and love it. The other is the face of yourself coming to meet you.

The original face is spaciousness. It is letting be. It is being. It is realized in Zazen practice. Dogen says that Zazen practice is the dropping of body and mind. This means that your body and mind are not separate individual substances. Your self is the universe and the universe is sitting in zazen. All the world is manifested in this awareness and emptiness. So take care! What about no thoughts, no fantasies, no imaginations and no emotions? When there are no imaginations and no thoughts or fantasies, you cannot become aware of your original face! The point is not to identify yourself with any particular thing; this is the point of no-thought. When Zen says no thought, no imagination and no emotions, it does not mean literally no thoughts and no imagination, just that you should not identify yourself with these. You are greater and bigger! You are not simply your emotion, thoughts and you are not simply your problems. These things are important and you must care for them but you are greater; you are greater and deeper! You have a depth that embraces the whole universe. The self embraces the whole universe.

Keep in mind that the phenomenal side and the original face are different yet as Richard Rohr says all the three eyes are important. The wisdom eye is necessary and mystery is a beautiful term. the third eye has to be opened to realize this. The point is though that you should not neglect any of the levels. Spirituality has dangers; some will talk about body, mind and brain and interdependence as if it is all there is to it; even Zen people will talk like this, that there is only interdependence.

No, this is not enough. The other extreme is also not good. Advaita will say that you are ONLY spirit, Atman or Brahman; that you are not body. These two extremes are only clinging to ideas. Let go all these attachments to these ideas. You are on many levels, yet the ultimate self is beyond all levels. This is the mystery; it is unknowing, wonder, a miracle. Your whole life is a miracle, a mystery!

The famous zen layman Pang said: 'I split firewood and draw water--marvelous activity, wondrous miracle!'

All the simple things we do -- pissing and shitting and drinking water, all are miracles, don't forget that. It is emptiness bodying forth as form. You are Buddha-self, you are God-self and at the same time you are ordinary and mortal; an angel who shits! Move in all the levels. Do not stick to the dimension of your so-called original face; you must care for the other dimensions so that through them you can pass onto the deeper level. You also have to use imagination; not fantasy but imagination.

Imagination holds all possibilities. You can become all the world in imagination, for imagination is in-between spirit and body. Utter emptiness, pure consciousness is beyond even imagination but with imagination you can enter into all beings and all realms.

As I quoted the verse to the koan, you cannot hide your original face. If so, now show me your original face here and now -- What is your original face even before your parents were born?

AMA Samy, February Sesshin 2011