

TEISHO – 06-02-04 – EXTREMELY GOOD NEWS

Tonight's talk is called Extremely Good News. And this is because of two things Chogyam Trungpa said, that very Zen Tibetan teacher, two fine elucidations of the Way. He said, 'Meditation is just one insult after another.' And he also said, 'Chaos should be regarded as extremely good news.'

So, the first of these, 'Meditation is just one insult after another.' It very much points to the way that ego shows itself up. The moment we become quiet, the moment we settle, the moment we really loosen and settle into our sinews and bones and start to feel that kind of gift of stillness and silence – *that's* when it becomes unmistakable how vast and effortful and relentless the effort is that is made by ego to construct and assert and proclaim and conduct its project, its kind of shonky little eternity project! 'I am here forever (all evidence to the contrary).' So it's that very slowing and refining of the attention that lets us see how the ego is for ever fending off the insult of reality and trying to get around it, contriving reality for the self. The insult from one point of view is that we catch it out in the act. From the other point of view it's that when we're not quick enough to do that, when we have slowed our attention deeply enough, we can't help but feel things the way I'm sure an oyster feels – every grain of sand that washes in to the most tender surface and does not wash out again, it hurts and has to be dealt with. Just one insult after another, and you can either receive it just as it is, or add ego to it: it is an open choice, if you are slow enough to notice.

So the fine-grained attention of meditation is this wonderful gift that allows us to finally become more aware of how we are living in receipt of one perceived insult after another. The Buddha called it suffering. It can be pain, it can be physical pain, it can be irritation, it can be the slightest niggling form of mental irritation. It can be in fact old griefs that come up and flood your body – from what crevice you can hardly remember anymore. Unexplored layers of your experience that can make themselves felt when your body and mind become more intimate with each other. Following the breath is to allow body and mind to become intimate, to become one.

Practice grows a more refined awareness of anguish, and a more subtle intelligence towards what anguish brings to your awareness, when you are very still and you are very receptive when you don't go after it and you don't move away from it. At this point there's a smile in calling it an insult – it's just pain, just painful, and that's all right. What Chogyam Trungpa was pointing to with the word insult is more the aspect of resistance, the aspect of flinching away, of *being insulted*,

of being hurt, of becoming the state of being hurt or being disappointed or resisting what I called a moment ago the overwhelming evidence – and saying no, not me, everything else is subject to the flow and the tides, and the coming and the going. Being given everything and then having to give it all up? Everyone but me, is the little cry.

So meditation is just one insult after another because it is the real letting go of the self. And even just to incline a little in that direction is to begin to experience the full power of resistance. And you might have encountered this even before got into this room. You could possibly have had quite a few times when you thought you'd come. The first time you thought you'd come up those stairs and subject yourself to the strange process of meeting yourself, but something more important came up. You'll also meet this process of resistance very strongly when you first decide to go to sesshin. 'Yes, I'm going to go to sesshin,' you declare. And then you discover all kinds of reasons why that's just simply not possible. Who doesn't know what I'm talking about? Sesshin for those who don't know is a silent retreat, a seven day silent retreat where you have very little, very little way to avoid meeting yourself, a wonderful inescapable opportunity.

Consider all the dramas that create themselves around every step in the direction of letting yourself go a little. I can remember some of the earlier sesshins that I did. You know, the way that the whole world can take on quite florid symptoms of your own inner resistance, your own drama. The very first long weekend retreat I went to I managed to get my car stuck in the middle of the river crossing at Gorricks Run. At that stage it wasn't such a built up causeway and you had to cross through water at every point. I came late to sesshin because I had a small child. That was not an excuse. That was my burden. A very small child. And so no-one was there to tell me don't try to cross the river so I thought well I'll have to drive on, and drove across, and stalled in the middle with water running right through the car and over my feet. I had to go and find a tractor driver who could drag the car out and that was another long and wonderful story. I've sold the car now but I always smiled when I saw the dark green tidal mark half way up the doors of that car –the high watermark of my resistance!

So the voice of the insulted ego is the one you hear when you're sitting in the middle of a Friday night and says, 'Why are you doing this? It's so painful. Well, it's not actually that painful but there're surely better things to do. You could be more comfortable reading or listening to music! 'You hate this', says the voice of resistance.

Now I'm not talking about some ritual execution that's needed for ego. Sometimes Buddhist texts seem to be imply you must kill the self, you must cut off the mind road, you must chop off everything. Not quite everything but ... Ego has importance as a vital servant of your existence. Ego is an absolutely essential part of your survival as an animal with complex consciousness. You could not even navigate your way across a street without it. And some teachers say you can't throw your ego away or, from another point of view, begin to ease out from under the grip of it until you really have a reasonably coherent and reasonably confident ego. You just can't throw away an unconfident ego - it will never let go of you. It will always be clinging. I say *relatively coherent and confident* because all of us have gaping holes and wounds in our sense of self. It's the very nature of it. The question really is finally the grace with which we can handle these gaping holes and not inflict them upon other people, and what effort of awareness we learn to make towards them with skill, with sufficient practice.

But ego is essentially a childish construction by its very nature. It is constructed in childhood. Ego in a sense is the strategies of being that were dreamed up by a child, in a context of relative helplessness. A sense of self is a measure of your determination for survival, the best possible survival that you could work out in your circumstances. So you, me, we are a kind of funky and odd little construction of hopeful eternity. All in the face of the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. What often comes up very large and vivid in prolonged meditation experience such as extended retreats, is the experience of having a ring side seat in an alarming kind of circus in which we can see ourselves performing - in which we can catch sight of our intense irritation, our overblown childhood size irritation, our fantasies, our constructions of other people. Everything - anything! - at certain moments can be writ large as a kind of insult to the self. And in a meditation retreat, in any time of sitting, you have the best seat in the house, the finest chance to actually catch sight of this. And that's because what we catch sight of, through the practice of meditation, what we begin to experience consistently, is something quieter and larger and simpler, amazingly more simple than the self. A kind of awareness that can actually in a way enjoy the ringside seat, is not disturbed by having the ringside seat, is able to laugh.

There's a lot of laughter in silent retreat, not all of it audible. Because having those ringside seat at the rich human comedy of ourselves is in fact a very rich and instructive business. From the moment you're not fully subscribed to the self, from the moment you have a little bit of distance

between you and the full subscription to the self, this rich vein of exploration opens up. And meditation is the gradual withdrawal of that otherwise lifetime subscription to the self.

I picked up some magazine recently and saw an ad for a new Dior perfume called Addict. And the image was a very anorexic model glancing anxiously back over her shoulder to catch sight of herself in a dimly and insecurely reflective surface. I think that image is a wonderful clue to the grip of ego. And I'm not pointing here just to the apparent narcissism of that image but to its link with the very word, Addict. The grip of ego is not unlike the grip of an addiction. And really if you've ever worked closely with an addict to try and help them live a life, find a way to live a life, you'll know that the life of an addict is absolutely one insult after another. One gruelling effort after another to re-establish, even briefly, some kind of acceptable coherent looking self. On effort after another to even begin to meet the mystery of resistance.

And only an addict can actually sign up for the detox program. You cannot ask your mother to sign you up for sesshin! I think it was Patrick who suggested that the one exception may be Shane Warne! [laughter] His mother can sign him up! His mother makes all arrangements for him, and he is not to blame for that. But for the rest of us we have to do it for ourselves, take responsibility. So it is for an addict. An addict who has not signed up for the program can draw no benefit from the program. It and the addict will not meet in any part of the universe. In other words you have to engage your own resistance. You have to agree to it. That is practice, breath by breath by breath. And if you don't, nothing happens, nothing at all happens until you agree to engage with your resistance, and to use it. It's a wonderful gift. The measure of your resistance is the strength of your yearning to meet yourself. The strength of your sense of what it is your truly love. Ego will always add to the case against your true self, until it has met it. So meditation is really the softening of the resistance by every skillful means that comes to you. Every form of resistance is a new theory of how to meet resistance more skillfully.

And when you begin to succeed in that then you really begin to see into the word *chaos* which, Chogyam Trungpa assures us, is extremely good news. Chaos. From one point of view chaos is the kind of thing that kick starts you into a meditation practice often. It can be a grave upset in your life. A kind of watershed experience which you just can't reconcile with all the accounts of what life is up to now. You have to see more deeply because you have to become bigger to meet what it. You have to grow, you have to do something radical to meet bigger in every direction. So it's often chaos that finally drives us past ourselves enough to get up the stairs

and into the meditation hall, past all the various stages of resistance and into a meditation retreat and then we can begin to encounter ourselves more deeply, more soberly, more directly. So a major life catastrophe is extremely good news. It is often the shape of chaos that can break through. It can shatter the glass at least momentarily. You know, I don't want to live with glass between me and my life. I don't want to die knowing that I've lived in a glazed state all my life. So the major life catastrophe can break the self sufficient cycle that keeps you gliding past reality.

Chris Cormack, in one of the discussions we had here one night, described the moment when he was down on his knees in a gutter vomiting when a friend said, 'This is the greatest moment of your life'! He was shocked by that announcement and it did begin to change his life, he took that on as a possibility. Could this be the greatest moment of my life? It's like what Thich Nhat Hanh says, when he asks you on the in breath, to say 'this moment'; on the out breath to say inwardly 'wonderful moment'. Whatever is happening just this moment, wonderful moment. This, *this* is the greatest moment of your life. Everything in the universe up to this point has arranged itself just for this moment of your awareness now. Pretty amazing. So in a way the chaos is the fact that the ego wants to glide past the present moment right to the bitter end, hoping always there'll be no bitter end (and secretly yearning for it?), and that is because being here we are positioned to lose everything, even ourselves. Everything changes so nothing can be yours. And chaos is also the extraordinary fittingness of this fact.

Gary Snyder, a wonderful Zen poet and philosopher, and Bodhisattva, a great Zen figure I think in the West – Gary Snyder was sitting with a fellow poet called Lou Welch in the Lower Sierra Mountains in California - and Lou Welch asked him whether he thought that the rocks were paying attention to the trees. And Snyder said he didn't really know and he wondered what Welch was driving at here with this question. And Lou Welch replied, 'Well you know the trees are just passing through. Relatively speaking. The rocks are here for longer than the trees.' And Gary Snyder wrote a poem in the collection, *Axe Handles* – one of a number of poems he wrote called 'Little Songs for Gaia' – which says:

As the cricket's
soft autumn hum
is to us
so we are
to the trees
as they are
to the rocks

and the hills

A beautiful image of the true nature of sangha, the community of all beings, the field of beings, throughout space and time. And just passing through. All of it. The original Sanskrit word ‘sangha’ means *a meeting of mysterious streams and diverse energies*. So that’s what sangha is - indeed that’s what chaos is too – a meeting of mysterious streams and diverse energies. Beautiful, is it not? Make use of that meeting – that secret confluence is a remarkable tool, a jewel, in getting past your resistance. Sangha is often taken to mean, for those of you who don’t know, the community of people who practice together and now we see it’s a little more simple and therefore more ancient than that.

So of course the mountains are also just passing through. If you’ve been out to the Central Desert you would have seen the McDonnell ranges, which are by now just the quartz core of what were once 28 - 35,000 foot mountains. But they still have that monumental quality! They still are mountains of great stature even though they are now the very worn down quartz core of those mountains. And so the mountains are just passing through. And so, we could just add, as the rocks and hills are to the ocean and the air, and the ocean and the air are to the sun and stars and galaxies. Everything is passing through. The universe itself is just passing through. It’s just one great exhalation full of trillions and squadrillions and, you know, impossibly innumerable frequencies of time. Our frequency of time is different to the crickets. They say that the kind of time the hummingbird lives in with its incredible speed of metabolism and movement, in that kind of time we are all moving like this [slow as treacle] – that’s the frequency of humming-bird time.

So we live in different frequencies of time but it is one harmonic - all these frequencies, one harmonic. The universe itself is turning to one. And that is meditation. It is settling the agitated, the easily insulted, the chaotic, settling the chaos to the point where you can see the richness of the chaos, then you have joined it, and when you join that chaos there is no chaos. There’s just the harmonic. Just the open Way. When the mind is in that unsettled, easily agitated, easily insulted state it’s a little bit like a radio receiver that’s out of tune. It can’t pick up or send any clear or coherent message. It’s out of connection with the field, with the whole, the formless field of benefaction. And so meditation is turning to one, tuning to one, becoming attuned and *that* one is completely one with just passing through. It’s delighted to pass through. What else would you wish to do in a universe like this one, but pass through with the passing through, paying attention

while you have breath and chance to do so? It's like the breath itself, which is endlessly showing us the nature of it, the nature of letting go. Of coming into being and relinquishing into being, of how it is done. And when you are willing to let go, even of yourself, then that low hum of uneasiness resolves into a far greater harmonic of calm, of concordance, the concordance of all things passing through. And this is an infinitely sustained calm with no effort, fretful self in it at all.

So, yeah, the extremely good news really is that you can give up survival at all costs, and have the present moment. When you do that your mind reveals itself as this original ease. And a miracle is the only thing that can happen. Look at this miracle as I drink this water. Great miracle. So the extremely good news of chaos is just that – original ease. And it begins by losing the self, losing the painful costly act of self-definition and self separation at all costs and joining with the nature of your life, the nature of the air that you breathe. Each thing that presents itself in your awareness. This ease is a little like asking, 'What if I was to call fear, excitement? What if I was to call it re-enchantment? Or what if I was to call tiredness, tenderness? And surrender.'

Chaos is, of course, the secret name for everything that flows, for everything passing through. Clouds. Water. Landforms. Breath. Dreams. Thoughts. Feelings. Knowings. Selves. As I've sometimes commented the Chinese character for flow is also the character for abundance. Unceasing abundance. Inexhaustible abundance. And that's the heart of the secret. Poems have a way of putting such secrets on display. And Gerald Stone's poem called Lucky Life has a glorious final verse that I'm going to read to you. This verse occurs after a number of other verses which canvas all sorts of mishaps by the beach, and accidents that happen, lost keys, cars bogged in the sand, old age, all the frustrations of the eternity project, of the ego. And it finally comes down to an exhausted and grateful rest. The poem finally recalls, ah yes, underneath it all there's the ocean, the ocean of just being. And this is the final verse.

Lucky life.

Lucky life is like this.

Lucky there is an ocean to come to.

Lucky you can judge yourself in this water.

Lucky the waves are cold enough to wash out the meanness

Lucky you can be purified over and over and over again

Lucky there is the same cleanliness for everyone

Lucky life is like that

Lucky life, oh lucky life, oh lucky lucky life, lucky life

So zazen is a very, very lucky state. You're lucky people. That ocean that we come to by choice against the vast and amazing range of resistance that we can dream up. Despite our addiction to some idea, some dream of comfort, which turns out to be one rather scared idea of comfort. Zazen, in the end the ultimate comfort, is so lucky because you can judge yourself fairly in that clear water. Clear water has no front and no back and you can truly see who you are. It is cold in the sense of the Buddha's expression, unlimited friendliness. That in a sense is a very bracing and enlivening proposition. Unlimited friendliness is like Lin-chi saying, 'There's nothing I dislike'. An extremely brave proposition and hugely courageous. It's not part of the comfort project to extend unlimited friendliness to all that is. It's part of the waking up project. It's cold and embracing like the cold ocean. It's cold enough, as the poem says, to wash out meanness. Meanness is littleness and little fears make us small and mean and little of soul and every mindful breath washes it away again and again. Lucky you can be purified over and over and over again, breath by breath.

And there is the same cleanliness, as the poem puts it, for everyone. And everyone of course is all people, diverse people but also ants, those people, and mountains, those people, and cats and bricks and every sacred hair on your head. So lucky life is like that. It presents exactly the right difficulty to raise your courage to meet your life at last, to find out who you really are. When you join it, you turn to one.

And at that point you will have no doubt in the world about your lucky, lucky life.

Thank you for your trouble.