

'Love itself'
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I am wearing a fancy rakusu again today, not because we are having another ceremony, but because I want to talk about love, which is always a kind of ceremony. This is my party outfit, I guess. Those of you who are close enough can possibly see it has painted onto it an original painting by Mayumi Oda, a Japanese artist. In her work, she undertakes to show the bodhisattvas in female form. (Radical thought! Is it possible!) So this is an image of Manjusri herself, Manjusri as a bare-breasted woman, riding on a green sea turtle in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, with a hint of the red thread floating round her neck - the red thread of blood, tears, fully incarnated spirit, blessedly mixed humanness.

I am very fond of this rakusu given to me by John Tarrant in the Pacific Zen lineage, and I want to speak tonight in the spirit of Manjusri, the bodhisattva of discriminating wisdom. And it's interesting because in this case she's not holding up a sword, but something more like a shifting spanner. The Shifting Spanner of Discriminating Wisdom! Usually it's the sword of discriminating wisdom, that cuts through all delusion that would have us separate and alienate one thing from another, and from ourselves. So strangely enough when we think discriminating wisdom we think, 'Ah that's fine discernment, that is not this, this is not that'. No. Manjusri cannot tell you from me, *that* is her discriminating wisdom. Very close to the foundation of compassion.

So, this talk is about the shifting spanner of discriminating wisdom, also known as 'Love itself'. In that song we heard this morning in sutras, we have a scene in which someone is sitting in a room meditating while sunlight pours in, rays of light. Rays of light were coming in through the trees down there before, and all the gnats swarmed in the light which made themselves visible - very conveniently for the little tiny wrens who were sweeping in and taking them from the air. There's a kind of love between the eating and the eaten, isn't there? There's the way that cows love the grass to the point where the grass may even begin to love the cows...who knows? I can't know. But it looks a lot like it. Rip, chomp, rip, chomp chomp.

So, in the song someone is sitting in the room and the rays of sunlight light up the dust you seldom see. Remember as a child looking into that mysterious other world, of dust particles swimming in the light - galaxies of unknown planets or swarming beings, there was nothing you could really say. And yet adults just walked through it as though it was not there, they didn't mind or care, so strange!

And then in this particular moment, for somebody who has been meditating deeply of course, - that song was written after Leonard Cohen had spent seven years in a Soto monastery - these rays of love that come in transform the dust into, well, to the nameless, into formless circumstance as he calls it, the form of no form. Formless circumstance. And then the gap that we bear as a kind of wound, the gap between the nameless and the named, the formless and the formed, it closes for a moment.

The song goes on to say, in the refrain, *'I'll try to say a little more - love went on and on'*, [think of all the dust particles milling in the limitless light] *'Until it reached an open door, [Whoosshh!!] Then love itself, love itself, was gone.'*

What is the open door, and what is that 'gone'? From one point of view, one that we must take notice of, each moment is only here now. So 'gone' is a most sober fact. Whoosh! Each moment is only here now. Our most dearly beloved people on the earth are here only now, before they are gone forever, swallowed, as Robert Aitken once remarked, into a photograph.

So here we all are, here one minute and gone the next; but equally in any moment, we and the whole universe can be swallowed completely by a sudden true glimpse of ourselves. It can be something as simple as the sound of somebody sneezing and then blowing their nose that can swallow the universe for you, well it did for me once. And then we are relieved of all our possessions, and overjoyed to give them away.

So 'gone' is a word that bears further scrutiny, we must look further into this 'Love itself was gone'. Gone beyond. In the heart sutra 'Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate bodhi svaha' is saying 'Gone, gone, gone beyond, Gone to the other shore' - which happens to be this one by the way, minus our delusive opinions about it.

Our practice does not mean going beyond the world, but it certainly does mean entering it fully, falling beyond and clear of that old, dull, persistent ache of human loneliness, of being apart from all that is, *separate*.

For the one in the room, those dust particles in the light, an entirely ordinary matter, took him beyond himself into love itself, right to the point where love itself is gone. Love may be the least 'other' thing we can possibly experience, but this is speaking of the point of no other whatsoever. Not even love. When we see things as separate, we can't understand Linji saying, 'This, the whole world, is you, yet you think it is something else'.

Let's come back to the Heart Sutra, because you really can rely on the Heart Sutra. Well, you can rely on it for a number of things - you can rely on it to drive you crazy at times. You can rely on it to affirm your freedom and to hold that affirmation of your freedom in front of

you, as something very strange at first. I don't know whether being driven crazy and having your freedom affirmed are actually so different, in the end.

One of the lines of the Heart Sutra says, 'Not pure, not stained, without loss, without gain'. Not pure, not stained. 'Not pure' is a great Dharma gate. In a sense it's every moment of being in this so-called dusty, bright and dark world. In the days of the Buddha, the dusty world meant the world of cause and effect, of all its mixed-up things, of everything that is not clear of delusory thoughts. Bodhidharma comes along and declares the first principle of the holy teaching to be 'Vast emptiness, nothing holy'. Nothing holy or unholy, nothing pure or impure. So, 'it' is not pure, says the Heart Sutra, 'it' is not stained - then what is 'It', this original nature, your home, your true life? I do not mind if you wish to call it God from time to time, which may be little more than a slightly differently angled way of holding it. That's a long debate. But the important thing is - not separate... and so, nothing holy.

The sword of discriminating wisdom, cutting through separateness, can find nothing holy, nothing that is outside of holiness - what a blessing! So let's have a look at 'not pure', this vast, generous offer of a very mixed, entirely singular universe. After all we can't even sort out emptiness from form - *very* mixed. Reality is mixed beyond any chance even of 'mixing'.

I want to share a poem by Tessa who was here for the first four days of sesshin. She left me with a gift of poems that she has managed to write here and there in her life which is quite an accomplishment as her life contains one 6-year old and one 2-year old daughter. She explains:

Sometimes in the lull of an evening, sometimes in the early dawn, there is a moment or two of peace in our home. The children sleep, the phone is silent, there are no demands. Here, there, is space for the odd bit of writing.

So here's her poem called 'Etudes' – studies, out of here, there.

'Beneath those ivory nails
so creamy
earth scrubbed out
lies sand
an ocean,
fish, blood, seaweed
marrow flower
tomato seed
chicken shit
prickle of oat straw
comfrey
grass clipping
flower
music

love
spirit -
the mudra gesture of
mothering small children
and gardening.

This was the first sesshin Tessa has managed to secure for herself in four years. And so she wept a bit when she left. Her poem points us in the same direction as Leonard Cohen's dust particles, into formless circumstance, which is to say form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form.

Sometimes in this dusty world, form is called accident, or sometimes it's called The Fall. Or karma, which is really just another name for cause and effect, for the knock-on effect of things, for one thing becoming another, one thing leading to another. You know that old saying, it sort of excuses almost everything, 'Well one thing led to another, 'or, 'Events overtook me'. So it is pointing right into living and dying. Which is not a stain upon the universe but is the very nature of the universe. Rumi said, 'A great mutual embrace is always happening between the eternal and what dies, between essence and accident... And remember, the way you make love is the way that God will be with you.'

The way you make love is the way God will be with you. Essential nature and 'accident', emptiness and form, this great mutual embraced always happening. The seamlessness of this, which in human beings can be a kind of yearning, or love, made you, made me, makes me, makes love, makes the universe. Waking up is fully inheriting the yearning that has created and confirms this, it creates and confirms it moment by moment, every moment is the Creation event. It is so profoundly undivided that calling it by a word, even by a word like 'love', is too limiting. Love, itself - *gone*.

Thomas Tranströmer writes about this matter in a poem called 'Baltics':

The channel has become eccentric
Today it's teeming with jellyfish
 for the first time in years
They pump themselves along with calm consideration
They belong to the same shipping company, *Aurelia*
They drift like flowers after a burial at sea
If you take them out of the water
 all of their shape disappears
As when an indescribable truth is lifted out of the silence
And formulated into a lifeless mass yes
They are untranslatable.
They have to stay in their element.

Its element is neither human nor not human but our element is human, and so we call it love, a human word brought into being by what began as a very small and very helpless mammal, one of the most undefended creatures on the earth at the time, when dinosaurs were still managing their last few rampages. We stem from a very small tree shrew, so high, that in time brought the word 'love' into the world. When I was a child I would go to the Australian museum every single Saturday when we first moved to Sydney from Cairns, which had a small museum but nothing so wonderful as The Australian Natural History Museum. My brother and sister and I went there every Saturday and the first thing I would go to, as if to a sacred site, was down in the corner of one glass case, where you could see this little tiny stuffed tree shrew with huge eyes clinging to a branch above a small notice that announced, 'Our earliest ancestor'. Our earliest human ancestor.

So, one thing led to another, and here we are. That small undefended creature just clinging onto this branch, from that comes the word love. Rumi's poem says 'the way you make love is the way God will be with you'. The way you make love...I remember a Sam Cook song that went, 'Go into that kitchen, make some love with the pots and pans'. So when you make love with the pots and pans and food and steamy washing up, or with your brush or your musical instrument or your laptop and the truth forming in your mind, or with your lover, or your child, sister, brother, mother, father, or with the sky, the moon and the stars, or the trees, the light, the wind – God, or your own self-nature, makes love that way with you.

What is it, to make love in this sense? It is practice, it is when rigour and love are brought to bear, dissolving your self and with that, all the ifs and buts that have hurt your entire life. So that discriminating wisdom - sometimes known as love - has a chance to breathe through us. Or the way you make love with your caring about the world.

the woman planting rice ~
her row veers off
towards her crying child

You can hear in that the way someone makes love with her caring. Or the way you make love and come to terms with your hardest, most secret and elusive feelings, that's God being with you, from Rumi's point of view. Another poem of Tessa's says:

Cracked open
in the heat of a fire
Almost extinguished
until rain and time and love
Coax fragrance

Cracked open in the heat of a fire, you've seen them, those seed pods cracked open, almost extinguished until rain and time and love coax fragrance. As any gardener knows, compost, however it smells right now, already has the fragrance of what will bloom from it. It's redolent with that fragrance, the fragrance is coaxed from the moment you lovingly tend the compost.

Xitou's 'Taking Part in the Gathering' says 'Light and dark are like two feet walking, back foot front foot'. It's a mixed world, blessedly mixed, all is blessed under this moon of change that we live under. Everything recognizes itself in everything else.

The song 'Love Itself' is very much about that moment of something recognizing itself in something else. Someone recognizes himself, herself, in dust particles in the air. And that of course does not leave out anything at all. It doesn't leave out the shit in the toilet pits, which right now is making a lot of micro-organisms very happy indeed. The Net of Indra, this extraordinary recognition of everything in everything else, the former poet laureate of America, Robert Hass speaks about it. He said, 'I think about the children when they came home from the hospital, wide starting eyes, wet mouths, fat uncontrollable tongues. I thought they responded when I bent over their cribs because they were beginning to recognize me. Now I think it was because they were coming to recognize themselves.'

That's very interesting, isn't it, that we cannot finally tell apart seeing and being seen. There is intimacy when we see something and find we are seen by it. The famous psychiatrist R.G. Laing reckoned that small children don't get up at night to see if you are there, when they wander in saying 'Mummy??' They are coming in to see if *they* are there. It's like we're all longing for the moment when, like a small child in the dark, something will say to you, 'I see you', and let you say to yourself, 'They know me, I am truly who *I am*, I'm recognized.'

When we practice, these little shocks of being recognized, as not who we could ever *think* we are, arrive from all over the place. They can be delivered by trees, by stones by the feel of the earth under your feet as you walk slowly on the earth - just the way your foot meets the earth can recognize you if you are really present. Or the sigh of your breath in the early morning dojo recognizes you. The way the cliffs hold the light until the very last moment. These are moments when there is some breaking up of some hardened part of your heart, when some long foregone conclusion that has shaped your life, or in fact *mis*-shaped your life, starts to crack up. Dogen said our lives are one continuous mistake. You know this *one* continuous, seamless mistake. It's full of accidents, it is in fact composed of nothing but accidents, and it is only the embracing eye of love, love itself, that can freely recognise and celebrate the mistake as 'grace', a miracle.

Some of you have seen the film 'Babette's Feast', set in Denmark in the late 18th century. It has quite a long and involved story, which I'll cut very short, but it involves two very sweet-natured and biddable, willing sisters. Their mother has died, but their father is the leader of a small church that insists a holy life is to be lived so restrictedly that there's almost no sign of life left. The one true sign of life that's left is love itself, in the sense of charity that the two girls carry out for him among the villagers. Everything is rendered very grey but nevertheless each of the sisters early in their lives falls in love - one with a young nobleman who is a soldier, and the other (who has a god-given singing voice) with her French music teacher. In each case, the father actually decides no, I need you for the church, you're to be my helpmates. So time passes and these two spinster sisters have grown elderly. The father has died but they are still dutifully serving the church. The church hasn't flourished or grown much, the members are all ageing and have turned rather grumpy in the process. But the sisters serve them with great forbearance and loving charity, but it's not exactly 'love itself' that's going on in this limited grey world.

Into this little north sea village a French woman almost literally washes up, an asylum seeker, a boat person. She is in flight from the latest fallout of the French Revolution. She cannot stay in Paris any longer if she wishes to keep her head on her shoulders. No-one knows anything about Babette when she walks into their lives, but the two elderly sisters kindly agree to let her become their cook, just to help her out. They don't really need help with their exceptionally simple lifestyle but they show her how to dip the dried fish in water to soften it up for a few hours and then how to make the porridge - perhaps sometimes you can combine the two, otherwise you have them separately. That's the feast, to that point. Babette listens carefully and carries out their wishes, serving them as lovingly as they serve the whole community.

Time passes until suddenly, a huge surprise, Babette wins the Paris lottery. It turns out she has subscribed to it faithfully every week with her tiny wages, and now suddenly she has won. The two sisters are disconcerted, and then rather heartbroken, because they have grown to love Babette, they have embraced her and they are quite sure now she will disappear from their lives now that she's rich. And she says, 'Well, putting that aside, let me do something for you.' It's approaching the 50th anniversary of the great man's death. They have in mind some small ceremony for the occasion but Babette says, 'Could I put on a feast for you?'. The sisters say 'Mmmm, I don't know about that.' They are quite worried. All the people in the church are very stirred up by this radical idea, they gather worriedly among themselves and say 'Ohh, dear me, what will we do? We don't want to hurt Babette's feelings, but can

we risk it?’ And she’s very firm and says ‘No, I insist’. And because they love her, the sisters at last say, ‘Very well dear, go ahead.’ But among themselves they reassure everyone with, ‘Well when we’re eating we won’t taste it. And if we have to drink the wine...’, they’ve seen wine being brought in, ‘...if we have to drink the wine, we won’t even think about it.’

So the feast, the most extraordinarily sensuous process you can imagine of all this strange food brought in by boat, and gathered by Babette, and cooked, so lovingly cooked, and turned into the most amazing ten course feast. There’re about six kinds of wine, each needing different kinds of glasses. The old folk find themselves with many different forks and knives and they have no idea what to do, but they simply give themselves over to it, worriedly of course.

And gradually, gradually, the feast transforms them. But they don’t know they are being transformed. They are very sure that they are just focusing on not quite being there. But the feast is transforming them. They have no choice in this matter because the real feast is love, and so very old grievances are brought out, honestly, into the open, and just forgiven, let go of. And people who have been tight-knit sworn enemies virtually all their lives wind up relaxed, almost warm towards each other. Two of these old folk suddenly admit to each other that they’ve always loved each other. Pity they are married to other people. But acceptance is happening, unstoppable.

And so it goes on right to the crowning moment when the General, the one who used to be the young soldier who so loved one of the two young daughters, who is now elderly, beautiful and elderly, rises and says, ‘It’s time for a toast!’ The old folk grow very worried: ‘Oh dear, oh dear but okay...’ The General picks up his glass that has been filled the finest Veuve Clicquot champagne from the vintage year 1875, and he proposes a toast. This toast is magnificent. It discloses a general amnesty, which is everywhere present and is the whole toast of this universe, when we really see.

What he says is said in the presence of the woman he loved so dearly but could not choose to be with all his life, as they both so wished. She could not choose to be with him because of her filial piety. He says, ‘That which you choose, you receive. But that which you do not choose is also lavished upon you’, and he goes on to say ‘Because chance and eternity have kissed’ (or ‘Form is exactly emptiness, emptiness exactly form’). And this is the very nature of a general amnesty, which we may call grace, because his toast is really saying there is nothing here but grace. Until, that is, we interrupt it and suppose something, carve one thing out from the seamless grace and doggedly oppose it to something else.

Later on when he's putting on his coat, the sister he loved is out in the hall helping him into it, and he says to her with great love and candour, 'You know, don't you, that I've never sat down to a meal when you were not there. Every single day of my life you've been with me.' And of course she nods, knowing this because it is entirely true also for her. (That which you do not choose is also lavished upon you, and we know this when we are not busy interrupting the grace of being here by 'knowing something'.) That not knowing - that is love, 'love itself'. Branches of light stream into that darkness, those branches are you, me, cow pooh out in the grass, and the wattlebirds over in black wattles. They are the wild dogs howling in the night. They are the spring breeze with all its cheeky suddenness. They are the spring rain when it suddenly comes. Robert Hass also calls what Dogen called the one continuous mistake - 'the long wound of becoming'. That is our one continuous miracle, one continuous dharma gate.

Babette's shifting spanner of discriminating wisdom couldn't see any difference between spending all her wealth on one true feast, a work of art, for the people who took her in, and spending it on herself. It turns out that she was the most famous chef in Paris. And that this was her chance to do just once again what she was born for, her chance to practice her art. Nothing could stop her from doing that.

I'll just read you one more of Tess's poems, the one called 'Spring'.

Potties and lemon balm
Flies and blossom
Chicken eggs and fruit trees
Words and water
Laundry rip
and dance of steaming eyelids from little sleep
Mouse and jonquils
Scan, bend, gather, place,
Sing comfort, the hurt of love
Blur of food
Mist of caress
Nothing holy, everything holy
Air and ache,
Words and water
Flush of early years
Tears and the swell of heart
Explosion of feeling
Insanity of the days
As the blossom shocks
Exquisite and brief

When the Buddha sat down under the bodhi tree, it's said that he vowed never to get up again until his search for his self-nature was complete. And on that night when the morning

star recognised him completely, his search had indeed ended. But it was a hard slog, that night, every one of those nights. The pull of the mind away from Mind is a hard slog. Bernard Glassman says there are many tales of what happened to him that night, but the one he likes best relates how Mara, the lord of illusion, the lord of one thing separate from another. Mara flung illusions of all kinds at the Buddha sitting beneath the tree. He began with monsters and demons, but as each apparition approached him the Buddha said, 'This is me'. Mara sent famine, flood fire, earthquake, car bombs and these too, the Buddha said, 'This is me'. Finally at the very end Mara sent his daughters, the most beautiful women in the world, to try to draw the Buddha from his search, but as he watched them approach the Buddha simply said, 'This is me'. Finally Mara gave up, he'd thrown at the Buddha every situation that life could present. And instead of rushing back to his father's palace where all suffering was denied, the Buddha said, 'This is me', until all possible rushing about came to a stop right *there*, 'This is me', and the morning star, Venus herself, could finally advance and confirm who he really is.

Each and everyone of us was raised in a palace surrounded by walls. In those very things that we most deny lies the greatest energy for healing. But first we must bear witness to Aids, to poverty, to hunger to our grief, to rivers, mountains, laughing children, victims of car bombs, to war, to Auschwitz, to the morning star, by saying 'This is me.'

So as I said earlier, when you cut it here, it's gold, here, gold, gold, it's all gold. That's our job here, recognizing the gold even in the dross of our own fear, our fear of suffering. Love itself is recognition, 'This is me, this is me, this (*bang!*) is me.'

So, it is love that pulls us out of separateness into the eloquent and immense silence that embraces, that can embrace, everything, everything in this universe. And really that is too big for the word love, too big for any human attempt to contain or limit it. Love may be our most unlimited word but it goes beyond love. It finally has no name, no address, no birth or death in karma. It cannot be pure, it cannot be stained, and there is nowhere and nothing in it in which we cannot see and recognise ourselves.