

Lecture/Dharma Reflections, on the book: The World Could Be Otherwise, by Norman Fischer. Pages 38 top to 41 top: Fearlessness. The World as a Gift.

Fearlessness

This is not about material gifts. Instead, here you are offering your heart, your feelings. (At this point, my unease that I have often felt becomes clear again: Why should heart be separate from giving at all? Or is there a separation between „giving“ and „giving“ in English, as in Germany? The one goes without the heart, is simply a fact - „Please pass me the salt“ -, the other is about choosing with care. Isn't the heart always involved? In my life, I have thought so much about giving in various ways etc., and have observed and suffered so many disappointments, but also caused and felt joy and surprise. The theory of gift-giving is miles away from the practice. I allow myself to be far more honest than I used to be, prefer to say thank you better twice than too seldom and believe more in humility, humor and forgiveness than in the right gift).

The following point Norman makes is very important. I have had the same experience in well run self-awareness groups. And, one might not believe it, in Auschwitz. It is possible, as Norman says (though it is very important not to overstep boundaries of decency and shame) to let others share in your happiness. Without feelings of guilt. Norman says you can do this by including them, the unhappy ones, and not closing yourself off from the other person's pain or thinking you have to protect yourself. I hardly suffer from insecurity in this regard any more, and when I do, I take it upon myself. That is a great liberation. But this is an upaya, which should also be practiced, because it is not common in our culture. We think it is beneficial to play down happiness and pain. However, in doing so, we also downplay intensity, but intensity brings life. (My words.)

"We are all abbots and abbesses of our own lives," says Norman, recounting the ceremony in which he was appointed abbot for five years. Being happy was his number one goal, and, important to say, true happiness is never selfish. For him, Norman, this made deep sense. A happy abbot is the prerequisite for a happy community. I always say this to parents or individual fathers or mothers: make sure you live happily, then your children will want to grow up. And even if it doesn't work out and the son, the daughter, your students suffer - I don't think we should play down their suffering, that's done far too often - but we can point the way. As a mother, I can show by example that I lead a happy life. And that's actually true, even if I'm doing moderately well financially, perhaps that's what keeps me alive, young and active, because the most secure people are often NOT the most creative. They have far too much to lose. (My words again.)

Buddha seems to have said that generous people look better than others. If someone is particularly attractive, he or she was perhaps particularly generous in the past life. I don't know, I don't like this argument, although I also look better than I used to, healthier, happier, more harmonious. But to use that as a criterion? That somehow repels me.

At the San Francisco Hospice Center, the volunteers initially thought they were giving their time, patience and skills out of compassion. After a while, it turned out that the helpers had become more open, felt more whole and were given gifts.

Besides, what you gave - whether money, time, possessions or love - was never primarily yours. It was a gift of life to you, simply given, and you just pass it on.

The world as a gift

Early Buddhism can sound very strict when it urges us to guard the gates of the senses - seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching - as if what might happen is dangerous. It reminds us that we have been warned against carnal pleasures, and it sounds like we shouldn't have any pleasure or fun.

But it's about something completely different. Meditation slows you down enough so that you can observe the sequence of sensory perceptions. You notice that it is not always just a feeling of well-being and pleasure that arises, but a subtle clinging, a greed for more and better. If you sit in a restaurant and listen to people, many will talk about other meals they have had elsewhere and compare the two. When we think of a beautiful view, a delicate smell, there is usually an admixture of sadness that it will be gone soon, that you didn't hold on to it and didn't get enough. The closer you look at it, the more you notice the lack, sadness arises in the midst of the pleasant sensual experience. (I actually would count sadness or melancholy into acceptable feelings, as well as grief, they let us mature, thus deepen.

There are also unpleasant experiences, painful, repulsive tastes, smells, sights, things that are too cold and too warm, many things that you want to escape. As a drastic example, Norman cites a case told by Buddha himself, namely that a leper roasted his limbs on the fire to get rid of the pain. Norman once got such a painful rash from a plant that only very hot water helped him. (I'm not so satisfied with the examples because I think that many people are familiar with the idea of drowning out one pain with a more drastic one. This is actually very human and also applies to emotional pain. Just as I believe that the practice of sensory perception never ends and can both warn us of danger and draw us towards healing and love. As for smells, for example, which we are barely able to control. Nevertheless, my experience with meditation confirms what has been said. It is not for nothing that these insights come under the great heading of generosity, and we will need the art of observing the sensory gates in order to be more just, more equanimous, more patient, etc., to live more healthily).

Norman says that we unconsciously fear time and death all the time, and therefore desperately drink in sensory experiences. In doing so, we see to it that we avoid unpleasant ones and enjoy the pleasant ones, but from an ultimate point of view, both are distractions and therefore negative. The Buddhist teacher Ajahn Chah said that an unpleasant sensory experience is like a snake bite that hurts immediately. A good sensory experience, on the other hand, is like grabbing a snake by the tail. While it doesn't hurt at first, it can hurt in the future. From a Buddhist point of view, therefore, no sensory experience is truly pleasant.

However, it is impossible to avoid sensory experiences. As long as we are alive, our senses are at work. And now comes the way out, which I will translate literally. (These literal translations are to be understood as instructions for thought, for action, for life. Why do we spend time with a teacher at all? What do we want? I hope to be able to make a little wisdom palatable to you that is of practical use, i.e. practicable). When we look at our human conditioning, we can go beyond sensory distraction; we can end the grasping, clinging, comparing and avoiding that usually characterize our acts of perception.

When we do this, we perceive every act of perception as a gift received in peaceful gratitude. We don't need to grab it greedily or push it away in our anger. This is another way of understanding the perfection of magnanimity - namely as perception itself, in which

we receive the world as a gift. (See my text in English on the topic of giving thanks for everything, because everything is a gift. It is a mystical, grandiose, elegant practice, I learned from a Lakota Elder, but Muslims also cultivate it and at the end of life maybe you too?)

I now come to the last paragraph on page 41, to "The world as a gift or "as a given": How would you practice this? Realize it? Live? It is easiest after meditative practice, especially in a retreat. When your mind has calmed down, please, practice looking with gentle eyes, listening with gentle ears. Practice feeling the lift on your cheeks, the taste of food, the scent of flowers. Be fully present with sensory experience, and you will feel how to receive the gift of your senses - without wanting more of it.

I bow my head and say thank you.