

One Gorgeous Mistake

by Vajradarshini

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...Nagarjuna, too, encountered this cup of the ego to which we cling.

[reader]

'If you are what you grasp, you would not be here, for what you grasp comes and goes. It cannot be you. How can the grasped be the grasper?'

[Vajradarshini]

For Nagarjuna clinging to self is to insist on being somebody. To be empty is to no longer be full of oneself, to be willing to be nobody. So emptiness for him is about easing fixations. And this ease comes with an awareness of contingency, awareness that all is co-arising, interdependent. And with this awareness, we pour instead into our deep ocean self.

So fixing is our way of dealing with an unpredictable world, with uncertainty. It's a way of coping with anxiety. But these cups we create cut us off from the ocean of existence. Our fixed sense of self veils us from a bigger, more vast awareness of self. But, if we look closely at self, it shows us reality. The cup looks still, but it acts in secret to help you. That which veils reality from us also shows us reality.

So Dogen says, 'To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things.' So when we study the Dharma, we study the Self, and in studying ourselves, we forget ourselves. I think it's more that in looking for ourselves, we lose ourselves. And this losing of ourselves is when we can be enlightened by all things.

So what does it mean to lose ourselves? It's literally, we look, but we can't find ourselves. So Viveka and people who've been in Viveka's workshop, had us looking for our mind, which was quite hard to find, um, earlier. Well, I just want you to look for your arm. Yeah, just look and see if you can find your arm. Okay, so you've got your arm, it's there. And then I just want you to look and find your shoulder. You can sort of find it through your clothes if you've got a t-shirt on. So you've found your arm and you've found your shoulder. And now I want you to find the exact point at which your arm becomes your shoulder. ...[Laughter]

So we find ourselves losing our arm and losing our shoulder, and losing our mind perhaps. ...[Laughter]...And if we're not careful, we can lose our whole selves.

So enough poetry and enough tricks. We're going to get scientific with Joanna Macy. So with radical impermanence, we find it's not that things are impermanent, it is that there are no things. If we go deeply enough into interconnectedness, all we find

is relationship, not even *things* to be in relation, just this flow of relating, just change. So all there is is change, not things *that* change. Nagarjuna calls it emptiness. Rumi is intoxicated by it.

[reader] 'There is no otherness in either you or me. Without otherness there is no me or you. I do not connect with me, nor do I connect with you. No connecting, no connections, no connectors.'...[Laughter]...

[Vajradarshini]

So our grief comes from creating a self out of this flow and then trying to protect that self from change when its very nature *is* change. ... Vasubandhu would say there is just experience. He shows us the mechanics of self, how minds create self and world, out of just experience. And he also shows us that it isn't our fault. We are just wired up normally. So that on a very deep level, we create this split between self and world, and from that countless other dualities: pleasure, pain; inside, outside; and so on. Where there is one, the mind makes two, and it's one big mistake.

So we may want to ask why,--you know--I wanted to ask, Why? Why am I made like that? ...uh ... Well, why not? [Laughter]...

Now I may well know that this so-called self does not exist, but I don't believe it for one moment. So everything is telling me the opposite. I've even secured my arm again. So the trouble with reality is that it's counter-intuitive. Tsongkapa found it was the opposite of what he expected, yet we need our intuition to find it. When eyesight fails, find a railing to follow. So can we trust our intuition?

The Buddha did not teach that you do not exist, only that you can't find your self. I didn't say that your arm does not exist, only that you might lose it. It's not that there is no me. There most certainly is. It's just that this me is empty.

[reader]

'If you are what you grasp, you would not be here, for what you grasp comes and goes. It cannot be you. How can the grasped be the grasper? You're not different from what happened then. If you were, you would not need a past.'

[2 speakers]

[Speaker 1] 'I was here before.'

[Speaker 2] 'No you weren't.'

[Speaker 1] 'I was and I wasn't.'

[Speaker 2] 'You neither were nor weren't.'

[Speaker 1] 'I will survive.'

[Speaker 2] 'No you won't. Opinions are absurd.' ... [Laughter] ...

[Vajradarshini]

So if this self, this cup, this fixation is what I've grasped, then where is the grasper? And if this self, this cup is the grasper, then where is what has been grasped? Where we are going, there is still me, still you, but no grasping. We're going beyond fixations.

[reader]

'Were mind and matter me, I would come and go like them. If I were something else, they would say nothing about me.' ... [Laughter] ...

[Vajradarshini]

So I want you to just close your eyes for a moment, and I'm going to tell you something that Rumi says about the self.

'Even if the veil of self is as thin as an eyelid, it will blind us to the reality of things as they are.' ... [Inaudible joke]

So, where do we find this wine?

[reader]

'Gone, inner and outer, no moon, no ground or sky. Don't hand me another glass of wine. Pour it into my mouth. I've lost the way to my mouth.'

[Vajradarshini]

The wine is in the tavern, The Carabat. And carabat, it means literally ruin. So that's the name of the tavern. You'd call it a ruin. So in the Tavern of Ruin, we find not only wine but music, dancing girls, and prostitutes. And pious Muslims would not set foot in these places, but when crowds of people became too much for Rumi, he would go to the tavern to meditate. ...[Laughter]

And once he was supposed to be giving the Friday lecture and nobody could find him anywhere, and it was reported that he was in the tavern and his disciple Hosen goes to find him and he so like doesn't want to set foot in this tavern, especially on a Friday, and so he covers his eyes up and he somehow manages to find Rumi in the dark and he doesn't open his eyes until he's right in front of Rumi's face so he doesn't see anything else that's going on there.

So the tavern is samsara. It's a glorious hell that we human beings enjoy and suffer and push off from in search of truth. So I like this idea of pushing off like in a boat from firm land. We push off from samsara in search of truth. The tavern is the human conditioning, condition. It's happiness and suffering. There's a Bjork song which says, 'I carry my joy on the left and my pain on the right.' And that's the human condition.

I think sometimes as Buddhists we can think that there is something wrong with samsara. We can even try to fix it. There *is* nothing wrong with samsara. Samsara is perfect.

So samsara, the Tavern of Ruin, is the perfect place created by us from which we push off in search of truth.

So perceiving a mind, we cling to a material world. Does this mean that there *is* a material world which we cling to, or more that clinging creates our world? With our help, existence arises in emptiness.

[reader]

'Praise for the emptiness that blanks out existence. Existence is place made from our love for that emptiness. Yet somehow comes emptiness. This existence goes. Praise to that happening over and over.'

[Vajradarshini]

This world, which is made from our love for emptiness. ...

So how is it we make our world? ... We create our world through perception. It isn't that there's no world out there. It's just that self and world are interdependent. So we shape the world through perception while the world shapes us. Consciousness is colored by what it feeds on. So for Joanna Macy, insight is insight into the very process of perception. To understand perception, would be to understand how self and world co-arise in emptiness.

The Buddha therefore tells us to pay close attention to the world of our senses. So what happens when we seize an object? There is a co-arising, a co-igniting, of self and object in that moment, in emptiness. They arise together, self arises with object. So for this lectern to exist, three things needed to coincide. So there needed to be a sense organ. You know if I was asleep, there would be no lectern in my world, unless if I'm having anxiety dreams. ... [Laughter] ... So there's the eye. There needs to be a sense object that comes within range of my sense organ. So if this was outside, well it wouldn't exist, again, in my world. And then there needs to be impact. There could be me with my eyes open and a lectern, and the lectern would still not exist unless there was some contact which was either deliberate or accidental. I might have just bumped into it rather than been looking for it .

So the truth of this perception itself is a relationship of mutual dependence between these three things. We co-arise, co-ignite with the world of things. In a sense self and world create one other, or at least depend on one another. So these three—organ, object, and attention—are, they constitute a sensory sphere, or a sort of, they co-ignite. And that co-ignition is a sensory sphere.

So when the Buddha said, 'There is, Monks, that sphere wherein there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor air, wherein there is neither this world nor world

beyond, nor sun, nor moon. Monks, there is a not born, a not become, a not made, a not compounded. Monks, if there were not, there would be no stepping out here from what is born, become, made, compounded. So there is, Monks, that sphere.' And the sphere that he's talking about—Nirvana—is not a place or a realm, but a way of perceiving, where senses and world drop away.

Yatha buta jnana dharshana, seeing things as they really are. And Padmasuri said that my name means that, really. ... um And in a way, it's almost, that's almost been a kind of my, my thing, I suppose, this idea of seeing things as they really are. But I think it's also been quite misleading, in a way. It's not that one day I'll see *things* as they really are, it's not that there's a real world that's out there hidden behind this illusionary world. Insight is a way of perceiving. So it's not that we will have insight into *things* as they really are, but we'll have insight into our own process of perception. That's what we'll see. We'll see our process of perception. And when we can deeply understand the way we experience, when we fully see the process of our own perception, that will be seeing things as they really *are*, which I guess is just like this.

[reader]

'Were everything not empty, nothing would happen. Nirvana would be a letting go and a stopping of *what?* Nothing let go of, nothing attained, nothing annihilated, nothing eternal, unceasing and unborn. That is Nirvana.'

[Vajradarshini]

So, emptiness for Nagarjuna is contingency—to see dependence, connectedness, and relatedness in everything and to ease our fixations. So as we ease this fixation of self, we also ease that which separates us from our world, so we are freer to enter into the shifting, beautiful, tragic flow of the world which we are creating and being created by. So we'll have an intense awareness of life in all its complexity and beauty. Yet when we look to find the person absorbed in that life, there'll be no one there.

So it's not that self and world will disappear. In fact our experience will be all the more vivid, but there'll be an easing of our grip. Self and world, but no longer grasper and grasped. So it's not that we go beyond experience; it's just that we let go into experience. And although I create my world with complete seriousness, fixing me, fixing you, things, that which I try to fix is utterly unaffected by my effort.

[Laughter] ... However much I define, label, dissect, analyze, I leave no trace on the seamless web of life.

[reader]

'Your muddled conclusions do not affect emptiness. [Laughter] Your denial of emptiness does not affect me. [Laughter] It is all at ease, unfixable by fixations, incommunicable, inconceivable, indivisible.'

[Vajradarshini]

So we find the wine of emptiness in the Tavern of Ruin, samsara.

[reader]

'Last year I admired wines. This, I'm wandering inside the red world.'

[Vajradarshini]

So, as you know, wine is not to be rushed. [Laughter] Wine has to ferment, to age, to mature. And fermentation is one of the oldest symbols for human transformation. And another symbol for human transformation is cooking. So in a lot of Zen stories, um, you hear about people being cooked. And Rumi also talks about being cooked. He says, 'My life in three phases: I was raw, I got cooked, I burned.' [Laughter] ...

[reader]

A chickpea leaps almost over the rim of the pot, where it's being boiled. 'Why are you doing this to me?' The cook knocks him down with the ladle. 'Don't you try to jump out. You think I'm torturing you. I'm giving you flavor so you can mix with spices and rice and be the lovely vitality of a human being.'

Eventually, the chickpea will say to the cook, 'Boil me some more. Hit me with the skinning spoon. [Laughter] I can't do this by myself.'

[Vajradarshini]

So the cook is Rumi's teacher, and the cook is discipline. Rumi's intoxication starts in discipline. He cooks himself, then burns with his love for God. His practice starts in the sphere of self and world. He fasts.

[reader]

'There's a hidden sweetness in the stomach's emptiness. Be emptier and cry like the reed instruments cry.'

[Vajradarshini]

He goes without sleep.

[reader]

'Don't go to sleep one night. What you most want will come to you then. Warmed by the sun inside, you'll see wonders.'

[Vajradarshini]

And he lives in poverty.

[reader]

'Last night my teacher taught me the lesson of poverty. Having nothing and wanting nothing, I am a naked man, standing inside a mine of rubies, clothed in red silk.'

[Vajradarshini]

And Shams, Rumi's friend and teacher, is a dervish. And dervish means one who is poor, the one who is poor in God. And it's very interesting that Shams keeps his poverty secret. I really like this idea of keeping your poverty secret. So he stays in merchants' accommodations and he has this great big padlock on his door and then when you go in, he's just got this straw mat on the floor. [Laughter]

So the cup wants to be lifted and used, not broken, but carried carefully to the mix. For Rumi the body isn't an opponent. There is only love, and such an abundance that it leaves no space for food, sleep, or shopping. [Laughter] ...

Joanna Macy tells us that 'me' and 'mine' is an obsessive trick of the mind, where it sets itself apart from its physical experience. It is the mind itself that needs to be freed. So this liberation comes not from us separating ourselves from the world of things but from increasing our awareness of it.

So the very notion of thathata, suchness, is the suchness of things. The reality that we're looking for is the reality of things, the emptiness of things, of the phenomenal world. So it is the particularity of matter, the thingness of things, that is helpful to the mind, returning us again and again to immediate and real experience.

So wabi-sabi [Laughter]—my favorite subject—wabi-sabi is a Japanese term for an aesthetic in which the so-called faults of conditioned existence are its beauty. So in wabi-sabi we enter into a relationship with the world, which allows the world to show us reality. We coax beauty out of ugliness. And wabi-sabi is the beauty of things that are imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. It's the beauty of things modest and humble, of things unconventional. So it's the shape worn into an old stone step, it's the lid of a china sugar bowl that's been very carefully mended. It's the scar on my knee. It's old glass in windows that distorts the view.

With wabi-sabi, the beauty is transitory. Things are either emerging out of nothingness or disappearing into nothingness. Therefore it shows us the nothingness that lies behind all things. Wabi-sabi is springtime and autumn. It's buds and shoots, seed heads, leaf skeletons. It's dusk and dawn. It's every kind of becoming and dissolving.

So the mind is to be freed by this disciplined attention to the suchness of things, to the here and now. In these moments the mind can break through fixation and perceive the living process of which it is a part. For Nagarjuna emptiness is the fasting of the mind.

[reader]

'When emptiness is possible, everything is possible. Were emptiness not possible, nothing could be possible.'

[second reader]

'Some nights stay up till dawn, as the moon sometimes does for the sun. Be a full bucket pulled up the dark way of a well, then lifted out into the light.'

[Vajradarshini]

When Shams met Rumi, he threw his books into a pond. He told him that though the saints don't fail to pray and fast, it wasn't enough. One must strive for the inner truth of these outward practices.

So you probably remember the same happened to Rechungpa. He goes off to fetch water while Milarepa is lighting the fire. But he ends up watching the goats and comes back hours later and when he comes back Milarepa is in the process of burning all his books. And Rechungpa is furious and Milarepa just tells him that it's his own fault because he's been gone so long, he thought he was dead. [Laughter] And anyway, if Rechungpa wanted entertainment, Milarepa could've provided it. [Laughter] At which point two suns and moons shone forth from his eyes and ears. From his nostrils streamed lights of five different colors. His tongue became a small eight-petaled lotus, and from his heart rained forth beams of light, which turned into numerous small birds. To which Rechungpa showed no interest [Laughter] but continued to demand his books back. [Laughter]

So don't be a cup with a dry rim.

[reader]

'These forms we seem to be are cups floating in an ocean of living consciousness. They fill and sink without leaving an arc of bubbles or any goodbye spray. What we are is that ocean, too near to see though we swim in it and drink it in. Don't be a cup with a dry rim.'

[Vahradarshini]

So Rumi is already a teacher of Islamic law, already a mystic and a poet. But Shams wants Rumi to be empty. 'Try to be a sheet of paper with nothing on it. Be a spot of ground where nothing is growing.' He tells Rumi, 'Want more. Want more than each thing that comes before you. The intellect and the senses perceive cause and effect, whereas the spirit perceives wonder upon wonders.' He teaches Rumi Sama, the turning of the whirling dervishes, where inside one is like a mountain, a whole range of mountains and outside like straw.'

[reader]

'Walk to the well. Turn as the earth and moon turn, circling what they love. Whatever circles comes from the center.'

[Vajradarshini]

Go deep. Go beyond books, beyond thought, beyond partial truths.

So Nagarjuna knows the difference between the sublime truth and the partial truth. He warns:

[reader]

'Without knowing how they differ, you cannot know the deep. Without relying on conventions, you cannot disclose the sublime. Without intuiting the sublime, you cannot experience freedom.'

[Vajradarshini]

The Buddha finds himself suspended in silence, between a yes and a no, between self and no self, suspended in an empty silence. This deep and empty silence is the middle way. Emptiness is not a place or a state. It's a way of living, of living in the middle, of not settling down anywhere. So Bhante has another term for sunyata, for emptiness. He calls it mysteriousness. Everything is completely mysterious. And the middle way means staying inside the mystery of life, the mystery of self and world.

Two Zen monks:

[readers]

[Monk 1] 'Can you grasp emptiness?'

[Monk 2] 'Yes.'

[Monk 1] 'How do you do it? [Pause to wait for answer, which doesn't come.] You don't know how to grasp emptiness.'

[Monk 2] 'How do you do it then? [Pause to wait for answer, which apparently comes.] Ouch! You're hurting me!' [Laughter] ...

[Vajradarshini]

Believers in emptiness are incurable. Let go.

[reader]

'Buddhas say emptiness is relinquishing opinions. 'I am free! I cling no more! Liberation is mine!' The greatest clinging is to cling like this.'

[Vajradarshini]

So we don't get to emptiness, to mysteriousness, through mystical abstraction. We have to find our own way to cross over the gap between reason and experience, between our head and our heart.

[reader]

'In the true bewilderment of the soul, he went out beyond any seeking, beyond words and telling, drowned in the beauty, drowned beyond deliverance.'

[Vajradarshini]

Don't be a cup with a dry rim.

[reader]

'Waves cover the old man. Nothing more can be said of him. Every moment the sunlight is totally empty and totally full.'

[Vajradarshini]

So what has shown you emptiness, what has shown you mysteriousness? Where have you seen it? Form is emptiness, emptiness is form. This is the truth we are attempting to push off from the tavern of life in search of. In the past every time I felt myself push off into the truth, it's been into an experience of seeing through things, of a sort of dissolving, of fluidity, of emptiness. I was with my Dad when he died a few months ago, and I watched his cup fill and sink without leaving an arc of bubbles or any good-bye spray. I saw form become emptiness. And since then, it's hard to explain it, but it's like when I push off into the truth, there's a fullness there. Forms appear, a continual manifesting.

So all around us, form plays in emptiness, reality showing itself everywhere, night and day. So it's springtime and out of nothing all this manifests, blossoms before our eyes, and then in the autumn it will dissolve. And if we look closely enough, it's dissolving now. It's either coming into being or it's dissolving.

When we do sadhana practice, this is the truth that we push off in search of-- manifesting, dissolving, creating, letting go. They go hand in hand. The same with pure awareness. So the whole universe is appearing and dissolving all around us, in the most ordinary things. We prepare a meal, it appears, it's eaten and gone. Lots of dirty dishes have appeared. We wash them up and put them away. This is continual becoming, being, letting go, dissolving. This truth is so close, yet we do not see it. It's as close as our jugular.

[reader]

'Keep wanting that connection, with all your pulsing energy. The throbbing vein will take you further than any thinking.'

[Vajradarshini]

So don't be a cup with a dry rim. Don't look elsewhere for emptiness when it's pulsing at your throat.

[reader]

'The dissolving of objects and easing of fixations is peace. The Buddha never taught anyone anything. When Buddhas don't appear and their followers are gone, the wisdom of awakening bursts forth by itself.'

[Vajradarshini]

So all of this is neither an illusion nor real—you, me, things—is neither an illusion nor is it real. Because it isn't an illusion, we respond with compassion. Because it

isn't real, we don't get hung up about it. Just don't be a cup with a dry rim. Drown yourself in truth and beauty.

[reader]

'We have a huge barrel of wine but no cups. That's fine with us. Every morning we glow, and in the evening we glow again. They say there's no future for us. They're right, which is fine with us.'