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The Erotic Life of Emptiness

By John Tarrant

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“Form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form. There are no walls in the mind.”

—*The Heart Sutra*

“‘What is not given is lost.’ These words were spoken by Father Ceyrac, a French Jesuit missionary who has devoted himself to the wellbeing of children in South India for over sixty years. A similar thought is found in Buddhist teaching: ‘What is not done for the benefit of others is not worth doing.’ Seeking happiness just for yourself is the best way there is to make yourself, and everyone else, unhappy.”

—Matthieu Ricard

Whenever you think about generosity, one of its opposites appears along with it—greed, or stinginess or acquisitiveness. A well-known Thai abbot, Achaan Jumnien, invented a long-running spiritual practice organized around these opposing themes. Perhaps ten years ago, he had a canvas harness made for himself—something like a fisherman’s vest. Whenever anyone gave him anything—a watch, money, a bottle of water, a radio, a cup, healing medicines, an amulet or two—he would fix it on the harness. He bristled with objects; it was the kind of thing that would have made him a career in the art world. He accumulated things and from time to time passed them on, but first he wore them. He said the whole apparatus weighed about sixty pounds. He took it off to sleep, but otherwise he walked around in it, carrying the burden of everything he received.

He had come to Spirit Rock, in Northern California, where we talked together through translators. In one of those conversations, he mentioned a friend of his who was an even more successful abbot than he, and very wealthy. That wealth was good, Achaan Jumnien said, because it allowed his friend to help people. “Perhaps,” he said, amused, “he is wealthy because he is more generous than me.” But the abbot with the harness was also generous in many ways—with his teaching, with his smile, with his unsolicited advice, and with his homemade healing medicines. He was generous with appreciation, too. When Jack Kornfield introduced us, he explained that I, too, was an abbot, which was a generous estimate of my importance. Achaan Jumnien immediately commiserated, saying what a rotten job it was. He was so enthusiastic about how dreadful it was that I took the message that it was an excellent rotten job and not to be given up.

Achaan Jumnien had his own origin myth about how he took up the Buddha way, and it went like this: as a child he once sat in meditation all day without moving, just to prove that he could. He fell into a deep inward place, and after that his mind changed completely. He did seem to have a tremendous feel for the emptiness shining inside things.

When I saw him a year later, he had ended the experiment with objects and taken off the harness. His performance left me with an image of someone exploring the theater of ownership, gifts, and generosity—how we love to receive things and how they begin to own us, and also how we can be free of them and in some way step into emptiness by passing them on. It was an example of the way art can be more instructive than a sermon.

The discovery of emptiness is a kind of falling in love. There is a vertigo in it: we step off the cliff of what we know and are certain about. During a retreat, for example, when I’m doing interviews, someone will bring in a common object—an oak leaf, a rusty pipe wrench found on a path—and put it on the altar. That object then becomes the thing that contains all the trees and the stars and belongs with the Buddha statues and other representations of eternity. We can allow objects to

act on us so profoundly that afterward we are not the selves we thought we were.

When I first started to notice emptiness, it went like this: “Oh, I thought I was a man, but actually I’m like that branch,” or “Oh, I’m like the checkout girl with the nose piercings and the graffiti tattoo around her bicep. I’m not one tiny bit different from her.” This is an appreciation of the varied ways of life—that the dog has buddhanature and so do I. Next the understanding of emptiness becomes “Oh, I’m not like that tree; I *am* that tree. I’m not like that girl; I *am* that girl.” The erotic falling-in-love quality comes from noticing that I’m not outside the world any more, watching—instead I *am* the world unfolding—the eager dog, the drought in Australia, the homeless person in Santa Monica who offers me some excellent chocolate cake. Vertigo is a natural reaction: “I thought I knew who I was, but I’m not sure anymore.”

The earth is generous, giving me tomatoes and basil and lemon verbena and marjoram and chardonnay grapes, all now withering in the autumn. And the generosity comes out of a relationship: I planted the tomatoes in spring, gambling on whether or not there would be another frost. The fact that there might be a frost that would ruin all the work is part of the game.

“The Heart Sutra” records the discovery of emptiness, and I like to imagine that the template for this discovery is a naked meeting with the world. The lover takes off her clothes, and stretches alongside you, and you both become lost. It’s not so hard to see that the lover becomes you. This is such a fundamental act that perhaps it is the model for all giving.

Suffering might be the absence of such a meeting. Suffering is what happens when we are lonely and forget that we participate in the world. People often complain about love, or at least about its consequences, but welcoming the consequences is part of the game of generosity too. The earth gives a Yes without regard to what is given back, and being a human is also a gift, not a purchase. Even the No’s we get are gates to the generosity of the world.

Those gifts that are precious to the giver are especially interesting. A friend told me a story on this theme: “When I was in kindergarten, a little boy had a White Stag jacket. He took off the zipper pull, which had a little deer on it, and gave it to me. It was a lovely thing to him, and I still remember it.” When someone gives you something precious it means that, beyond the usefulness of the gift, you are precious. The gift marks a moment when you are welcomed into the other person’s heart.

Inside the teaching of Zen there is an understanding that gifts are like that zipper pull: They drag us into a world in which dogs and deer and even we have buddhanature. Generosity trusts the emptiness that runs through things, even ungenerous or ungainly things—it links to the clarity that underlies all our madness. Whenever my thoughts turn toward greed, acquisitiveness, or stinginess, my shoulders tense up, and it feels as if I’m holding my breath. To find a remedy, I don’t have to improve my thoughts, though—just be generous with them. Then freedom seems to appear automatically.

In the end, generosity doesn’t have reasons. Generosity might be strategically effective or virtuous, but that’s not important. The point is that there is no good reason to love life or each other, yet we do. Generosity keeps faith with our appreciation of each other, it stems from a natural empathy with everything that, like us, has the courage to take a shape in the world.

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