

Olympia Zen Center
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Appetite

So, I have really only one point that I wanted to make in tonight's talk. It's a long way to get there, but it's one point. You know my reading is wide, I don't necessarily subscribe to just reading in Buddhism. Even from the beginning of coming into Zen, I often felt that if the reading got so tight, I felt trapped by the subject. I thought that there was much more to life than simply reading Zen-texts, or even just to reading Buddhist texts. So my reading has been fairly eclectic. I have been interested in our culture and how we look at our own culture and apply the Buddhist teachings, how we find the Buddhist teachings in our own roots. So I'm quite happy to read in the Western side of our texts. I do feel, that if the Buddha's teachings are what He says, they must be universal. They must be able to be found in every culture if they are true. So I explore to find the roots of the Buddhist teachings in our Western texts.

As I mentioned recently, I am reading a text by Lewis Hyde called "Trickster Makes This World." It's essentially about the trickster archetype, and the ways in which particular people reshape the culture or take us in a new direction. They may use some kind of means that is outside of our usual cultural expression, but they appear and they shake everything up, and literally take us in a new way. The trickster plays an important role in our society in helping us move and get out of a stagnation. But there is one story, that is the very first part of this book that I want to talk about tonight and what I'm leading at is the way in which I find the Buddhist Teachings in our own culture, or let us say in the Western side of the culture.

There is a mythic story that comes out of the Northwest, from the Queen Charlotte Islands. It begins by telling us that the road was in darkness and an animal tribesman who was a chief, and his wife had a son born to them. The boy was a wonderful child and the father was very concerned about him and took excellent care of the child, but the father lived in fear that something would happen to the child. So he built a special place for the boy to sleep above his own sleeping area, so that he could truly protect this child. The boy grew and became large and soon he got sick and he died.

Now these parents had two slaves, (it's important to use the word "slaves" in this story), a man and a woman with the same name. Together they were called "Mouth at Both Ends." So the Chief called Mouth at Both Ends and asked them to take the boy's body up to the sleeping place in the loft and to remove the boy's intestines. They were to take the intestines outside and burn them. They did as they were asked, and then as occurs in many cultures, in many tribes,

wailing began to express grief. The parents were screaming and yelling and weeping in tremendous grief. After quite a few days, a shining boy appeared before them, and they said, "Oh, this is so wonderful, you have come back to be with us, we are so happy!" And the boy said "Yes, you were making so much noise that they were disturbed in heaven, so I was sent back to try and comfort your grief."

So the shining boy lived among them, and the mother cooked and she made whale-meat and all the delicious food that the tribe ate. Shining boy would put a piece in his mouth and then spit it right out. He would never eat anything. The mother was very disturbed about this as she was cooking for him constantly and he would just never eat. One day, when the parents were not there, Mouth at Both Ends who had this practice of eating the scales off of their legs, said to the boy, "Would you like to try some of these very delicious scales on our legs, they're very nutritious, they have a very lovely delicate taste. Why don't you try a taste?"

So the boy took some scales in his mouth, and said, "Oh, yes, you're quite right, that's delicious!" And he took some more, and he began to eat! He started eating and he ate all day, and then the next day he ate again all day long. He kept eating and this went on for days on end. He just kept eating and eating and eating. The family kept bringing food, and no matter how much food they would bring, he would just eat it up. And before you know it, he was eating up the food that was in reserve for the rest of the tribe. The tribe's people became rather upset about that and they went to the Chief, the father, and they said, "We can't allow this. Our winter is coming we need to store food for ourselves, and it's almost gone."

The father went back to the shining boy and said, "Look, you are going to have to leave, we just cannot continue to feed you like this, it's just impossible! You're going to have to go." The father continued, "I'm going to give you some things to take with you. I'm going to give you this flat stone, and I'm going to give you a blanket to wear, and I'm going to give you a bag of seeds. Please go to the mainland across the waters, and if you get tired and need to rest, throw down that flat stone and it will give you a place to rest in the water. When you put on this blanket it will allow you to fly. It's a raven's blanket, when you wear it you can fly. Also take this packet of seeds, it's filled with berries and it's filled with salmon and other fish eggs. Take it and you always will have some food." So indeed, the boy put on the blanket, turned into a raven, and he flew off into the sky.

Well that's the beginning of the mythic story, the beginning of the origin of raven. It's the birth of raven, but it's also the birth of appetite. It's a very complex story, this eating the scales of the leg, then taking the intestines out of the body and burning them as a gesture to take the boy beyond the possibility of needing food so that he could continue to live. Very complex and

wonderful story. But it is this question of appetite that so interested me in this story. It was the question of appetite within appetite.

Let me switch now to the Buddha to make my point. This question of the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha teaches that life is suffering and that suffering comes about because of desire. I have never truly questioned this but I have to say that this word “desire” has always been a little bit abstract. Many people have argued about that word and translate it as craving. It’s hard to find the right word for it. Craving creates our suffering. Desire creates our suffering. For me, the word “appetite” so clearly explains what the Buddha is after, far more than any word that I have ever heard. I know we just spent a year studying David Loy who speaks about the nature of lack, but I have to tell you, when I go to the store and I am looking at chocolates and my appetite for chocolate, I don't sit and think to myself, “Gosh, I wonder if this is coming out of lack in myself?” which is ultimately a very intellectual notion. But, there is nothing intellectual about appetite. Appetite is right down in the guts. Appetite is in the alimentary canal. Mouth at Both Ends (that's what the slaves represent in this story) digestion, appetite, and the alimentary canal.

If we look and use the word appetite, we see there are all kinds of appetites. There is appetite for war, there is the hunger and appetite for goods, there is an appetite for too much food. There is an appetite for just about everything! For acquisition, for information, for needing to know everything. There is an appetite for everything! The Buddha tells us, the most important thing in our whole lives is to know ourselves. We should know the nature of appetite. We should know what our appetites are. The Buddha isn't telling us not to eat, nor is he telling us that we should live without reasonable care of ourselves. But the Buddha always tells us moderation. The Buddha always tells us to find this Middle Way and to notice what our appetites are. But most important we should know ourselves. We should know what our tendencies are. If we look around our culture today, if we look around in our world, doesn't the word appetite explain and point to so many of our problems. Everything in this human realm, in this phenomenal realm, requires some kind of appetite. Everything in this realm eats and eliminates. Of course we humans, have the most voracious of all the appetites.

So, this is the way we can find the Buddha's Teachings in the very roots of our own Western cultures. There is another story about Hermes coming out of the Greek culture which I will speak about next time, but if we look in our Western stories, we will find the Buddha's Teachings. For me, I have not always been able to resonate with some stories that come out of cultures that are not my own. I can appreciate them and understand them, but they don't get into my roots, my bloodstream, my psyche. I have said for many years that we struggle to find our mythic base in this country because we don't seem to have a collective story that we can point to

to tell us about our behavior, about ourselves about the origins of such things as the origin of “Appetite”!

For those who don't know the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha states the problem of life, and then points to the origin of the problem. He says that the problem can be overcome, and what those things are that we can do to overcome suffering. There is suffering in the world, life is suffering. Suffering is caused by appetite (I will now say the word appetite). Appetite can be quelled. We can live with knowing and calming our own appetites. The way we can do that is the Eightfold Path by practicing Correct Understanding, Intention, Speech, Action, Livelihood, Effort, Mindfulness, and Meditation. The Buddha points essentially to moderation in our life, and how we go about it. The Buddha is extraordinarily practical in His Teaching. This is his most essential Teaching. All the other Teachings come out of these Four Noble Truths.

Student

How close with lust ?

Teacher

Appetite for sex. Appetite for money, acquisition. I don't about you, it's just so resonant, so obvious and basic in us, in this body, the question of appetite. We all get hungry for many things.

Student

Do you think our lack, we Americans we don't really have any myths, kind of feeds into wanting more because we don't know, where we're going or how we think to base ourselves on, because we don't know how to behave, so we run around...

Teacher

I do see that lack is an existential issue. No doubt about that. Not just American. But voracious appetite I also think is universal. It's not just American. We do it in a particular way, maybe we do it with more abandon than other countries, but we're not going to be able to do it for very long. There is a limit to it. It is not just America. The Buddhist Teachings are universal and therefore true for all of us. We just had this Free Fall, this abundance, this notion within this land that we can have whatever we want, and that we're supposed to go after whatever we want. That's been our beginnings, our myth actually. But that's a different kind of mythology. The kind of mythology I am talking about when I speak about mythic stories, they are basic stories that try to explain our origins or our life-problems. That other kind of sort of popular cultural mythology is a different kind of range of mythology in which we believe something untrue, that we can have whatever we want.

Student

I think that what Joe was kind of getting at was wondering if this voracious appetite is in a way fed by not having the kind of myth that you're talking about.

Teacher

I see. That's possible. We still don't have any roots in this country, a feeling that there is some rootedness that we share together. We have no commonality of story, no commonality of roots. We suffer a lot in that, in search of meaning. We keep searching for a way, "Oh, maybe if I do this, I'll find my way and that will make me OK, or maybe if I incorporate some Native American into my practice maybe, I'll be OK....And maybe if I find the right sentence in that How-to Book, I'll be OK after that.

Student

It seems that culture and myth are in service of cultivating appetite. It almost turned against itself. I don't have an answer for that, except to realize what it is and try to...what?

Teacher

Sure. Well that's the point in this story where Mouth at Both Ends are eating their own scales. They are essentially devouring themselves. Some of that comes out of the observation of what an actual raven does. In the behavior of the raven, when it bends over and it cleans itself, it rubs its beak against its legs in order to clean its legs. So, it looks like it's eating itself, so some of this myth comes out of the observation of that bird. The story comes that way, and in some ways it makes it more real, and as you are saying, we begin to devour ourselves in our own culture by over consumption. When there is nothing else to acquire what are we going to do ?

Student

We create the cultivation of waste. These issues are with our particular way of living, saturation and so on, we make products that change frequently so that we can throw them away. This supports the cultivation of appetites, but in order to make that work, we have to be convinced and participate in it.

Teacher

Yes, we keep using the voracious appetite for new consumption.

Student

Many people have known someone who was dealing drugs and then stopping. Making the decision to stop, you can imagine the kind of perspective that would give you. I guess my question is what is that like with deeper emotional psychic picture of our culture?

Teacher

Well if we don't have a basic practice in place, if we don't have something, literally a practice then withdrawal is pretty rough, if we don't have some root to hold on to. Withdrawal of anything is rough, because the urge is to replace it with something. Perhaps a positive addiction, right ? The idea that whatever it is that we withdraw from must be replaced in some way. So, what is it not to replace?

Student

I guess the thought that comes to mind is, look at all of these people who have never had the experience of living out of a backpack and wondering how to take care of themselves in life.

Teacher

Well, my feeling is, if something happened that we lost everything, we have to know who we are. We should know ourselves, because that's all we have. All of the stuff is illusion anyway. The Buddha is telling us that appetite is the origin of suffering, so sometimes we need to lose everything in order to see what we've been doing. This is happening to us, we are overcome by our productions that we are poisoning the water and the air. We're doing it. We're creating our suffering via this.

Student

Seems that political correctness has dictated that we pay homage to all and celebrate nothing.... How is anybody expected to have any kind of a rooted belief system in that environment ?

Teacher

I think that if we reside in doctrine (myth is not doctrine) which we declare as the Truth then we can't step outside of that. Myth is not that kind of doctrinal truth, it's a way for us to see the world and to open to wider view.

Student

When you're speaking about appetite, the word passion kept coming up in my mind and I was curious about the Buddha's perspective and your perspective on how this idea of passion is related to desire. If I feel very deeply passionate about doing something in my life, where is the middle way, of passion? The Buddha himself was very passionate about finding Truth.

Teacher

I do think that they are two different things. Passion could lead us to misuse our appetite, but passion also leads us to find ourselves and to give tremendous creative expression in life. Passion ought to be fostered as far as I'm concerned – artistic passion, creative passion, whatever it is ought to be followed. But you know, if I'm passionate about money and think I ought to get money, that's a different thing.

Student

Thinking of passion that comes out of a place of lack. I find that many of us find our deepest passions in the places where we have the most lack.

Teacher

I think that's quite so, that is to say an artistic passion very often comes out of a sense of lack that seeks to explain, that seeks to create itself in some way, create a world that comes out of the notion of lack. That thing may very well be. As a matter of fact in our reading, Loy addressed this lack in the artist, knowing that this existential lack occurs, creates a world - out of the

creative artistic passion – literally creates a world that stands on top of or outside of that lack, or expresses that lack in some way. I don't see passion as being problematic so long we know what we're about and so long as we know that it isn't the roots of appetite. I think it's a really important factor in one's life and ought to be followed.

Let's say there is a painter who is deeply passionate about work. If one is doing that in order to become famous that's unhealthy appetite. If one is searching out a painting for some sake, it's an altruistic end, which is quite different, which is not wanting anything necessarily except that that thing must be expressed.

Student

You mentioned positive addiction, I wondered if you subscribe to that thought, and do you feel like we should replace the craving appetite with something else. Imagine chocolate, you're standing in front of the rack of chocolate bars, where do you put that energy ? Do you just stay with it? Sometimes it's just a miserable spot to be in and I'm not sure how to replace that.

Teacher

I think that, first of all recognizing that that's appetite, right away allows you to buy one bar. It isn't that one ought not have chocolate, or that one ought never have whatever that is. But if the appetite is more, more, more, then it's a problem.

Student

What if something is truly bad for you ?

Teacher

Like tobacco? There are all kinds of gimmicks around quitting smoking. And there is no doubt about it, when I quit smoking many years ago, I had to stand up to eat so I wouldn't smoke afterward. Then I got tired of standing and knew that it only takes ten days to quit smoking. I probably ate more than I needed to after I quit smoking because I unconsciously was replacing it with food. If I had to do it again, I'd probably try to notice that more. So there may be all kinds of tricks, but we ought to know what we're doing with them, that's all. We may replace it with something positive, going out running instead of having that cigarette. So that's becomes a wonderful thing. We get healthy. And then we have to know if running becomes an addiction and turns into something neurotic. Then we have a problem again.

Eido Frances Carney, with gratitude to Josepha Vermote for transcription.