

Dharmette: Letting Go of Concepts

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on August 24, 2011

What's on my mind to talk about today is high theology. For people contending with theistic religions one of the big issues is God. God is in the middle of it all: "Should I believe in God? Is there a God, or is there not a God?" But since Buddhism is a nontheistic religion, for Buddhists the comparable question that people might struggle with is: "Is there a self, or is there not a self? Should I believe in self?" So people in Buddhism get caught up in this whole 'self' thing. In a certain way, God in theistic religions and self in Buddhism are both touching on very similar territory in the mind and the heart.

Of course I know that, especially in theology, there are many ideas of what God is. There are so many that I think there's free license to define God the way you want, or to be creative about it. I'm fond of some of the Christian mystics who say that as you get closer to God all ideas of what God is disappear. They have to fall away because any idea you have of what God is gets in the way of the encounter with God. The point is not whether to believe in God or not, but to meet God and know God. The idea that you have to believe in God is rather unfortunate. It makes for spiritually poor people, because it's the knowing that's important. And how do you know? Certain mystics would say that it's when all ideas about what God is fall away. And then there's what's left.

In Buddhism there's all this discussion about self and there's a big emphasis on not-self. "So what's all this about not-self? Am I supposed to believe in not-self? This not-self doesn't make any sense. Of course there is a self, but they say that there's no self. What are we supposed to do with this thing?"

If you really go into the question of self in a deep way and look at where the idea and understanding of self arises and how it comes into existence for us, then the practice goes really deep. It becomes quickly pretty clear that any idea of self or not-self needs to fall away. Also any concept of self or not-self gets in the way of a deeper exploration with life, a deeper contact with ourselves – and freedom. So in Buddhist practice, all the ideas of self and not-self have to completely fall away as we go deep into freedom.

So here we have two different traditions. One in a sense points to God – something external at least in many people's minds. Another tradition points to something internal: self or not-self. But in both traditions, the concepts and ideas of those have to fall away. Also in both traditions, there is a falling away of any sense of inner and outer, inside and outside, and external and internal – because these are just concepts and ideas. To bring the mind to a state of peace, freedom, luminosity or openness as fully as possible requires a falling away of concepts and ideas.

It's my assumption that, whether it's theistic concepts or Buddhist concepts, once these concepts thoroughly fall away, what's left is probably very similar. There is a big overlap between them. I like to consider that what's left is presence or awareness, to use a slightly more precise technical word. It's not anybody's awareness or presence. It's not my presence or God's presence. It's just presence. It's not God's and my presence, or God and self merged. Religious people can get very creative and poetic in how they describe these things. "Self and objects fall away. Self and God collapse and become one. Everything is God or everything is self."

People have words they put on top of it, but it's not the words that are important. It's the freedom and peace that comes when these concepts fall away and we experience our life and reality without the overlay or filter of all these concepts and ideas. Then we meet something really profound. That meeting is not something exactly personal because the idea of person has fallen away, and even impersonal has fallen away. But it can show or teach us that there is a bigger context that holds our life. There's a flow and pattern of life that is bigger than any concept or idea we have of 'me.' So many of us get caught up in "I'm responsible and it's all up to me," or we identify ourselves so strongly with all our problems. It helps so much to have a more open, spacious understanding of how life unfolds when it is not all knotted up around "It's my life, my process, and me."

There's an advantage of certain theistic ideas when God is represented as all loving and supportive, especially when it's anthropomorphized. It's easier for people to relate to and feel supported by, and you can just relax into it in a nice way. The disadvantage of God is that sometimes people abdicate all responsibility. They don't do the

inner work to understand themselves and what's going on here in some deep way, and take responsibility for what's here. Buddhists sometimes take too much responsibility for what's here because of the concept of self and not-self. But is presence and awareness personal? Is it mine or someone else's?

The Buddha is very careful not to add any descriptions or concepts on top of the experience of freedom. This is not to say that the experience of freedom or the awareness or presence that's there or not there makes you one with or independent from the universe, merged with the Godhead or with the source of life, or that you've transcended life. These are all ideas that people add on top of it. Over and over again you see the Buddha seem to say, "Let's not go there, let's not add anything on top."

There are mystical traditions in Christian or Western religions and in Buddhism as well. Not that it's a mystery exactly, but it has to do with this inner experience, emptying of the mind of concepts and encountering something that is freer and freer of concepts and ideas. Buddhism is very good I think at really challenging us to be very impeccable and clear about noticing where we still are applying concepts and ideas on top of our experience. So the concepts – even very subtle ones that keep us held in from freedom – just fall away. So just let them fall. It's okay. In that freedom, that falling away, there is something that's profound, beautiful, peaceful and reliable. But as soon as you try to explain what that is, then you begin to lose it.

For those of you who are theists I hope I haven't offended you with some of these ideas. But I think the whole concept of believing in God is irrelevant. It's much more interesting to meet God. And if you meet God, the God and you disappear. Isn't that good? [laughter]

For those of you who don't care for this level of discourse at IMC, you can just leave it here. Thank you.