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Getting Rid of Our Concepts

In Buddhism, the greatest relief or solace that we can obtain is that of touching nirvana, where nonfear has become something that is part of everyday life. We have a great fear inside ourselves. We are afraid of everything—of our death, of being alone, of change—and the practice of mindfulness helps us to touch nonfear. It is only here that you can experience total relief, total happiness. Nirvana is the foundation of our being, just as water is considered to be the essence of all waves. In the beginning we think that we have a beginning and an end, a birth and a death, and we might think that before our birth we were not there and after our death we will not be there, and we get caught up in the concept of being and nonbeing. Together let us look deeply at a wave in the ocean. It lives its life of a wave, but it lives the life of water at the same time. If the wave were able to turn toward itself and touch its substance, which is water, then it would be able to attain nonfear and nirvana. We live with the concepts of birth and death, of being and nonbeing, of unity and plurality; we have not had the occasion to touch the ultimate dimension of our being. This is nirvana, which can be translated as “extinction.” But extinction of what? Of all emotions, including the notions of birth, death, being, and nonbeing.

Birth and death cannot touch the bodhisattva, nor the wave once it has realized that at the same time it is water. Concepts such as birth and death, being and nonbeing, might in some sense be applied to waves. As far as water is concerned, these qualifications cannot describe the nature of water. When we speak of birth, of death, of being and nonbeing, we are talking in terms of phenomena. In Buddhism, we call this the historical dimension. When we talk about waves, we are in the historical dimension, but when we talk about water, we are in the ultimate dimension in which we cannot speak of birth and death, of being and nonbeing. The wave might think that before its birth it was not there and that after its death it will not be there, but these are notions—concepts—that cannot be applied in the dimension of the ultimate.

The Buddha declared the following: “There is a world, but there is no birth and there is no death, there is no high and no low, no being and no nonbeing.” If that world is not there, how could the world of birth and death, the world of being and nonbeing, be possible? He was talking about the ultimate dimension; he was talking about the water, but all he said was a few words because we cannot use concepts and words with regard to the ultimate.

When we talk about the theology of “God is dead,” this means that the notion of God must be dead in order for God to reveal himself as a reality. The theologians, if they only use concepts, words, and not direct experience, are not very helpful. The same goes for nirvana, which is something to be touched and lived and not discussed and described. We have notions that distort truth, reality. A Zen master said the following to a large assembly: “My friends, every time I use the word *Buddha*, I suffer. I am allergic to it. Every time I do it, I have to go to the bathroom and rinse my mouth three times in succession.” He said this in order to help his disciples not to get caught up in the notion of Buddha. The Buddha is one thing, but the notion of Buddha is another. Another Zen master said this: “If you meet the Buddha on your way, you must kill him.” You have to kill the notion of Buddha so that the real Buddha can be revealed to you. That day, there was a very solid person in the assembly, a monk who stood up and said these words: “Master, every time you say the word *Buddha*, I have to go to the river and clean my ears three times in

succession.” So they understood each other perfectly. We must not get caught in the trap of notions and concepts.

Fear is born from our ignorance, from our concepts regarding life, death, being, and nonbeing. If we are able to get rid of all these concepts by touching the reality within ourselves, then nonfear will be there and the greatest relief will become possible. For the Buddhist it is necessary to transcend the notions of birth and death, because those notions do not apply to reality. This is equally true with regard to the notions of being and nonbeing. For the Buddhist, to be or not to be is not really the question. The true question is whether we have enough concentration, enough mindfulness, enough practice to touch the foundation of being that is nirvana.

That is why we should do what we have to do to make this meditation of looking deeply a matter of everyday life—when we are eating, when we are drinking, when we are sleeping—and one day we will be able to touch the ultimate reality that is in us. Nirvana is not something that we should search for, because we are nirvana, just as the wave is already water. The wave does not have to search for water, because water is the very substance of the wave. Living deeply makes it possible to touch nirvana, our ultimate reality, the world of no-birth and no-death, and all our fear will be taken away because of this direct knowledge of our true nature.

I wish for all of you to have a brother or a sister who is a serious practitioner of the Dharma, a spiritual friend who possesses solidity, joy, freedom, understanding, and love. Then your practice will be much more enjoyable, because you will have the support of a sangha, of a practice community, of a being, of brothers and sisters in the Dharma.