

Wonderland¹

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Our theme for the month of February is identity. Who am I? Who are you? What is this reality that we inhabit? Today we will explore some insights of the Buddhist tradition into the mysteries of identity and reality.

Reading From *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* Lewis Carroll²

The Hatter opened his eyes very wide... but all he *said* was, 'Why is a raven like a writing-desk?' 'Come, we shall have some fun now!' thought Alice. 'I'm glad they've begun asking riddles.--I believe I can guess that,' she added aloud. 'Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?' said the March Hare. 'Exactly so,' said Alice. 'Then you should say what you mean,' the March Hare went on. 'I do,' Alice hastily replied; 'at least--at least I mean what I say--that's the same thing, you know.' 'Not the same thing a bit!' said the Hatter. 'You might just as well say that "I see what I eat" is the same thing as "I eat what I see"!' 'You might just as well say,' added the March Hare, 'that "I like what I get" is the same thing as "I get what I like"!' 'You might just as well say,' added the Dormouse, who seemed to be talking in his sleep, 'that "I breathe when I sleep" is the same thing as "I sleep when I breathe"!' 'It *is* the same thing with you,' said the Hatter, and here the conversation dropped, and the party sat silent for a minute, while Alice thought over all she could remember about ravens and writing-desks, which wasn't much. ...'Have you guessed the riddle yet?' the Hatter said, turning to Alice again. 'No, I give it up,' Alice replied. 'What's the answer?' 'I haven't the slightest idea,' said the Hatter. 'Nor I,' said the March Hare." Alice sighed wearily. 'I think you might do something better with the time,' she said, 'than waste it in asking riddles that have no answers.'

Reading From *Wonderland: The Zen of Alice* by Daniel Doen Silberberg³

The Buddha spoke a lot about "the other shore," a place where illusions fall away and we can see the world clearly. In Zen practice, at the end of the Heart Sutra we chant: "Gone to the other shore: gone, gone to the other shore." The other shore is the realm where body and mind fall away and we see that we're one with everything. It's often been thought of as elsewhere, in the future, both historically and in our lives. Many of us want to get there and concoct schemes and plans for reaching it. But it is nothing other than this moment, this life, this death—this Wonderland. If we search persistently and are lucky enough to stumble upon our rabbit hole, we may discover our own Wonderland right under our noses, where it has always been.

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2 Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, (First published 1865, Macmillan & Co. London) p. 97-98, 100-101.

3 Daniel Doen Silberberg, *Wonderland: The Zen of Alice*, (Parallax Press, 2009) p. xiv.

Music: Alice's Theme by Danny Elfman⁴

....And nothing is quite what it seems...
You're dreaming are you dreaming, oh, Alice...

Sermon

Our theme for February is identity. Usually we think of identity in terms of individual attributes. For example, in these times, many of us may worry about the vulnerability of people who are Muslim, or who are immigrants, people who are being detained at airports because of their religious identity or their country of origin. There has also been concern expressed this past week for those with LGBT or queer identity, because of recent support for so-called “religious freedom” legislation, which would allow people to discriminate against queer people based on their own disapproval of such an identity.

So that is one part of the meaning of identity—our nationality, our gender, our sexual orientation, our race, our religion, our political views—and it can be especially significant in the context of oppression or persecution. Sometimes, we have to claim and celebrate our identities in this way, or acknowledge the privilege that can be a part of certain identities. But these identities can also be used to separate and divide people. I think of German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller's poem, from the early days of Nazi Germany:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

There are times when we must go deeper than these cultural and political identities to come to an essential unity that binds us together as human beings, in compassion and resistance to oppression. There are many paths that can lead us to that essential unity, but today and next week, I want to explore elements of one particular path, from the Buddhist tradition.

It so happens that at our church's auction last spring, one person bid on the chance to pick a sermon topic—and they asked me to talk about the four noble truths of Buddhism. I will eventually come round to the four noble truths, but according to his holiness, the Dalai Lama, in order to understand the four noble truths, we first need to understand an even more basic principle of Buddhism concerning reality and identity. This principle declares that beings do not have an independent identity or reality; rather, all things are interdependent with each other.

The Dalai Lama called it dependent origination. He said:

"Firstly, ...the principle of interdependent origination... that is common to all Buddhist schools explains it in terms of causal dependence. ...This principle means that all conditioned things and events in the universe come into being only as a result of the interaction of various causes and conditions."

"Secondly, we can understand the principle of dependent origination in terms of parts and whole. All material objects can be understood in terms of how the parts compose the

⁴ From Tim Burton's film *Alice in Wonderland*, 2010.

whole, and how the very idea of ‘whole’ and ‘wholeness’ depends upon the existence of parts. Such dependence clearly exists in the physical world."

"Therefore there is nothing that has any independent or intrinsic identity of its own. Whatever identity we give things is contingent on the interaction between our perception and reality itself. However, this is not to say that things do not exist. Buddhism is not nihilistic. Things do exist, but they do not have an independent, autonomous reality."⁵

The Dalai Lama speaks about this interdependence in very philosophical language. But Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, Thich Naht Hanh, illustrates it in a way I found easier to picture, through an exercise of our imagination. I have shared this exercise with some of you, in worship and in the classes I teach. He invites people to take an object, any object. Say for example, this piece of bread that I am now holding in my hand. We look at this bread, and say—this is a piece of bread. But let us imagine together what has conspired in order for this bread to be here in my hand.

First of all, bread is made from grains of wheat. In order for the wheat to grow, it needed topsoil, with its fungal and bacterial components, its minerals and small worms. It needed the decomposition of the plants of many years, decades, and even centuries to create fertile soil. The wheat needed the sun shining to create photosynthesis, and the rain falling, giving it water. Think about the earth itself turning round in its orbit of seasons, and the moon that shapes the tides and the weather, all utterly necessary.

Think about the wind, which enables the plants to self-pollinate. We must also remember the ancient peoples in the Middle East who began to cultivate the grain during the seventh pre-Christian millennium, and others who developed it and carried it to many continents through the intervening centuries. The wheat in bread co-evolved with human beings, and does not thrive in the wild.

This bread is made from organic wheat, so it didn't need petroleum fertilizers, but it took petroleum in the form of gasoline to harvest it and ship it to the bread makers. Petroleum is created from the remains of ancient plants, so this bread is also dependent on them. Think about the metal in the trucks that drove the wheat and the machines that mixed the bread, and the mines where the metal came from and the factories where the machines were made.

Think about the yeast, and the process by which human peoples discovered and developed the properties of yeast to raise the dough of bread. Imagine the honey, and the bees that work tirelessly to make it, from the flowers and their nectar. Think about the water that enabled these ingredients to be blended together. Think about the fuel to heat the ovens.

I could keep talking all day if I followed all the interdependence just linked to the origin of this one piece of bread. Paraphrasing what Thich Nhat Hahn would say: "If you grasp the [bread's] reality then you see that in the [bread] itself are present all those things which we normally think of as the non-[bread] world. If you took away any of those non-[bread] elements and returned them to their sources...[the honey to the bees, the metal to the mines, or the farmers to their parents], the [bread] would no longer exist. A person who looks at the [bread] and can see the universe, is a person who can see the way."⁶

5 His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *The Four Noble Truths*, Loc. 117, 128, 139, Kindle version.

6 Thich Naht Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, p. 47-48.

In ordinary perception, we think of objects having a particular identity: this is a piece of bread. But according to Buddhist thought, on a deeper level all things are one thing, the bread is connected to everything that caused it to come into being. Individual things, then, are like waves in the ocean, coming into being, going out of being, but always, the ocean is the true reality. They would say that when we think of individual objects as separate things, that is a kind of illusion. The only reality is the larger whole.

And Buddhism also applies this to the self, our own consciousness and identity. In other words, a human being does not have an independent identity, but is also like a wave, coming into being, going out of being, part of the larger ocean. When I say “I” to what am I referring?

And this brings us to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Or rather, it brings us to the question of perception. Usually, we go through our days as if we have an independent identity, as if we are one being interacting with other beings, other people and objects that are not us. It certainly is a functional way of being in our world.

But according to the first noble truth of Buddhism, this way of being is Dukkha. Dukkha has been translated in many different ways—one version says “suffering”—as in, “Life is suffering.” But others say that is not quite right—dukkha can mean “stressful,” or “dissatisfying,” “incomplete.” There is illness, old age, death. Or, when things are good, they don't last. Nothing lasts. Everything is passing in and out of existence like waves in the ocean, including ourselves. So we need another kind of perception.

Buddhism doesn't ask people to take all this on faith. It offers methods for gaining this other kind of perception. The classic method of Buddhism is meditation. We quiet the constant babbling of the mind, to go deeper. Or, we merely observe the babbling of the mind, from a quieter observation space.

But Zen Buddhism also offers meditators another tool, riddles that can't quite be answered, called koans. For example, one well known koan is this question: “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” A koan is a riddle that befuddles our ordinary reasoning process, in an attempt to shift us out of our ordinary perception.

And this brings us to Alice in Wonderland. Alice in Wonderland is something like an English language koan. Alice follows a rabbit down a hole, and then nothing is as it would seem. She drinks from a bottle and is smaller, she eats a cake and is bigger. It rattles her sense of her self. She says to no one in particular: “Dear, dear! How queer everything is to-day! And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I've been changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I? Ah, *THAT'S* the great puzzle!”⁷ Who am I? After another round of growing bigger and smaller, and talking to various animals on the path, she runs away, and finds a caterpillar sitting on a mushroom.

The Caterpillar and Alice looked at each other for some time in silence: at last the Caterpillar took the hookah out of its mouth, and addressed her in a languid, sleepy voice.

7 Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, p. 19

'Who are *YOU*?' said the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, 'I--I hardly know, sir, just at present-- at least I know who I *WAS* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.'

'What do you mean by that?' said the Caterpillar sternly. '**Explain yourself!**'

'I can't explain *MYSELF*, I'm afraid, sir' said Alice, 'because I'm not myself, you see.'

'I don't see,' said the Caterpillar.

'I'm afraid I can't put it more clearly,' Alice replied very politely, 'for I can't understand it myself to begin with; and being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing.'⁸

Alice has fallen out of her ordinary perception into a reality where the rules of every day life are no longer followed. The Mad Hatter asks riddles that have no answer, and "the self" is so changeable as to be not "the self" any longer. And just so does Buddhism invite us to ask, Who am I? Am I this individual named Myke, or Carol, or Peter? Or am I actually the larger universe, not separated into objects and beings at all? Am I a wave, forming and reforming in the ocean? Or am I the ocean, observing the waves as they form and reform? Who am I?

Daniel Doen Silberberg says, "When we get to the other shore, to what I am calling Wonderland, we experience One Mind. One Mind is what we experience when we remove everything we know. The last thing to fall away is the idea of our separation from the world. Once that idea is gone, there is nothing left, and then you are on the other shore, in Wonderland, and experiencing One Mind."⁹

This one mind, this "Wonderland," is Enlightenment, which includes "an understanding of both the relative mode of existence (the way in which things appear to us) and the ultimate mode of existence (the true nature of these same appearances)."¹⁰ When we fully experience that all beings are one being, we are released from the suffering that comes from attachment to our ego self and the ups and downs of our individual lives. But I will talk more about Dukkha and the four noble truths next week.

I want to come back around to another principle that the Dalai Lama says is essential to understanding Buddhism. He says, "The second principle is that of non-violence, which is the action taken by a Buddhist practitioner who has the view of the interdependent nature of reality. Non-violence essentially means that we should do our best to help others and, if this is not possible, should at the very least refrain from harming them."¹¹

When we realize that we are intrinsically related to all other beings, that we are one with all other beings, we cannot oppress people because of their religion, or country of origin, or sexual identity, or political beliefs. Rather, we will do our best to help anyone who is in need of help. The Dalai Lama says that the purpose of Buddhist practice, as in all religion, is to create compassionate people.

Closing Words

May our hearts open with compassion to this day.

May we recognize our self in the person close to us,
and in the person who seems like a stranger.

8 Carroll, p. 59-60.

9 Silberberg, p. 3.

10 <http://www.matthieuricard.org/en/blog/posts/what-does-buddhism-mean-by-enlightenment>

11 *The Four Noble Truths*, Loc. 85.