

6a. Flow History and Theory

12 April 2018

The only thing that never changes is the fact that everything changes. Despite the ubiquity of impermanence, the richness of its significance is hard to grasp, yet the understanding that it has significance has been known and described for as long as there has been language to describe it.

I mentioned last week that the experience of *flow* (which is the word I use to describe the direct sensory experience of impermanence) is the same as the *chi* you experience when you get an acupuncture treatment, a concept rooted in Taoism and consequently Chinese medicine. It is also the same underlying energy of *kundalini*, for those of you familiar with the yoga practice by that name. (In fact, just this week I had a conversation with a yoga instructor who told me that sometimes *kundalini* is experienced as the ringing in your ears that in the west we call tinnitus, and which can be a productive object of meditation when focusing on *flow*).

When the english word *impermanence* is used in the context of meditation, it is frequently as the translation of the *Pali* buddhist word *anicca*. *Nicca* means “permanent,” and *a* negates that, so *anicca* means “not permanent.” In early Buddhism, this was usually associated with the concept of suffering, in that if we place our hopes for happiness and fulfillment in things or circumstances, our hopes will inevitably be dashed because things and circumstances are not permanent and will eventually be taken from us. *Anicca* was also connected with the idea of “no-self” or “not-self.” We consider our “self” to be a permanent thing, but in fact it is not fixed or unchanging, and so there is no thing that can be called a “self.” The experience of existence is the experience of being an impermanent thing, or of being “not a thing”, which is to say, the experience of *not-self*. Over time, *anicca* also became connected with the idea of *unification* or *merging* with what is, or with the *source*. You can see that impermanence has many and deep connotations.

That’s in Buddhism. Mystical (and even not so mystical) Christian writings, descriptions of being touched by God make clear that what we call *flow* is closely related to the Holy Spirit. In the New Testament, Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit being like “rivers of living water flowing through you,” the transfiguration was described as being like “a bright, shining light,” John the Baptist referred to baptism by the Spirit and “by fire,” which can be interpreted as purifying or motivating. All these descriptions could as easily describe intense experiences of *flow*. If these biblical references seem

vague or too poetic for you, read St. Teresa of Avila or St. John of the Cross. Or even CS Lewis. The similarities are remarkable.

The English words “Holy Spirit” come from the Latin *Spiritus Sanctus*, which is a translation of the Greek *hagia pneuma* (yes, that’s *pneuma* as in *pneumatic*, having to do with air). The Greek term, which presumably came into use with the writing of the New Testament texts, translates the Hebrew phrase *ruach ha-kodesh*, which was a term referring to that aspect of God that can inhabit and inspire a person. It is not surprising that this was the word which was in use at the time of the new Christians was chosen to describe what came to be known as the Christian Holy Spirit. It is interesting, though, that when Luke writes about the arrival of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, he describes it as a “mighty wind.” The Hebrew word *ruach* means “wind,” or “breath.” This use of *ruach* and other words for wind are found throughout the Old Testament. So in the early Abrahamic faiths, the infusion, or direct experience, of God is felt as a power that cannot be seen, but is in constant motion, and which causes what it touches to dance in response. Rather like *flow*.

Then, in Islam, the arabic word *ruh*, which comes from the same linguistic root, is also translated into English as the “Spirit of God”, but, “the deeper meaning of *ruh* is the 'closeness' or 'connection' with God... We also learn from the Quran that each and every human is created from God's *ruh*... And although the word *ruh* can be safely understood as Spirit, having the *ruh* of God inside of us signifies that we have a 'connection' with God.”

(<http://quranreminder.blogspot.com/2013/04/the-word-ruh-in-quran.html>). *Flow* is our connection with Source.

Whether you call it *chi*, *spirit*, *God*, *kundalini*, *flow*, or any of many other ways of naming the direct experience of impermanence, it is clearly a deeply profound and transformative experience to those who have felt it and tried to describe it.

Why is *flow* so profound? Let’s see if we can dig a little deeper and find out.

Last week I spoke a little bit about how *flow* is a purifier. It shakes up deeply held hurts and beliefs and so on and sends them bubbling up to the surface. You can learn to taste the purification associated with *flow*, even in the relatively superficial encounters you might have when you first start out.

Another way *flow* affects us is as a *unifier* or *integrator*. Remember that in February I taught you some techniques which involved making distinctions. I talked about sensory clarity as being the

ability to distinguish between different kinds of experiences, and between different parts of those kinds. It is important and empowering to be able to make these sorts of distinctions. For one thing, it allows us to *see things as they really are*, which frees us from the blind reactions and drivenness that comes from our unconscious mental and emotional responses to what is really happening. Distinctions also make it possible for us to disentangle and endure overwhelming or unpleasant experiences, and to more deeply enjoy pleasant ones.

But as we are able to distinguish more and more detail, we eventually come to see that, just as every person, animal, tree, and rock are made of the same finite number of basic elemental building blocks of atoms and molecules, so are we also all made of the same underlying forces of energy, which we can experience as *flow*. There is no fundamental difference between me and that chair. Nor is there any fundamental difference between my subjective inner world and the objective outer world.

Imagine a landscape before you that includes a wood and a field of tall grass. As the wind blows, you can see that the branches of the trees are moving about, and that the stalks of grass are swaying in the breeze. But if you pay attention instead to the wind itself, you can see the breath of the wind moving through the trees and then through the grass. It's a single moving force that causes both the woods and the fields to come alive. In the same way, the *flow* of the source moves from inside to outside, from subjective to objective, and you discover that you are neither tree nor grass, but you are the wind. Subjective and objective experience are just superficially different results of the motion of the wind. In fact, we see that we are nothing more than this activity of blowing, our "self," our "world" are just movement caused by the flow of the source.

This has very deep implications when it comes to understanding what we call *others* and it inevitably affects the way we interact with our so-called external world. Give that some thought!

When we observe mundane changes in our experience like the throbbing of a pain or the increase and decrease of the volume of the sound of passing car, it is like we are looking at the woods or at the field. When our attention makes that slight jump to seeing the winds blowing from one to the other, then these mundane events have dissolved into flow and are no longer separate, individual things. They are rather a side effect of the wind.

Last week I quoted the zen claim that when you are enlightened you will see the stone buddha dance. Perhaps now this makes a little more sense. As you see more and more clearly and deeply, you will see the motion of the energy of the source in every moment and event and interaction in your

activity of being. You can touch the Spirit of God, and you see that you are nothing more than and only and entirely the Source of all things. You discover that there is no difference or separation between what you believe to be “you” and anyone and everything else. As you merge into reality, your basic assumptions about what reality is dissolve also. This is a change in experiential understanding, but you still live in the mundane world of eating and sleeping and hanging out with your friends. You’ll jump back and forth between pure energy and congealed objectivity, but you will never again be fooled by the solidity of daily life. Being enlightened, in the way this zen saying is using the word, does not mean leaving the solid world of illusion and living forever in the perpetual motion of the wind. It means that you are now *able* to leave the one and to enter the other. You live in both. You are no longer imprisoned in this illusion of solidity.

This is why *flow* is so significant. And understanding that the increasing intensity of the itch on your forehead is the manifestation of this entire profound significance is a great way to start chasing after the wind.