

## *Editorial*

# Gaining or letting go? Spiritual chauvinism and spirituality

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Recently I was invited to give a talk and participate in a panel discussion at the so-called World-Chi Gong Congress in Basel, Switzerland. I did not have much time there to sniff the atmosphere or learn. But what struck me right at the beginning was the whole lot of spiritual gadgets that were on sale and that the proper seeker had to have. From salt crystals to reincarnation therapy self-help books, from Tibetan prayer flags to harmonizing balls, from monochords to plurichords, from tiny little crystal necklaces to monumental crystal Ganesha figurines, you name it, it was there.

The impression I got was: if you really want to make any significant progress on your spiritual path, it is essential that you do x, have y, try z, and wrap it all in a, b and c. To clarify right from the outset: I am a great fan of Tai Chi and Chi Gong, having introduced Tai Chi courses in the adult education centre in Switzerland where I used to work after I had finished my studies more than 20 years ago, and having practised Tai Chi regularly myself for roughly a year. A lot of people whom I admire and respect have gained a lot from regular Chi Gong practice. So do not

mistake what I am going to say against any of these.

But I could not help a strange feeling being there. If you did that series of exercises, it was suggested, you would boost your capacity for subtle perception. If you engage in the 'real' and 'correct' Chi Gong, or whatever practice, you would gain a lot of strength, Chi, happiness, sexual energy, hair on your bald head (when that was said I felt some knowing glances resting on my bald head). Spiritual practice, it seemed, is all about gaining something, reaching a goal, getting somewhere, getting on with it, moving out of whatever state of miserable lowliness we are in. Spiritual practice, many feel, is about development, evolution, growth . . . at any rate, being somewhere other than where we are right now.

And then people do all sorts of things: They go on faraway seminars and spend an awful lot of money on very convoluted paths to enlightenment. They break up their relationships, because a soul-mate presents himself or herself as a much more fitting partner on the spiritual quest than the boring, pint-guzzling husband or the nagging wife.

They reshape their lives into a frenzy of spiritual activity.

It seems as if spirituality is all about doing something new, in order to gain something better. Be it enlightenment, be it a lot of Chi, better health, more well-being, happiness in life, a purpose, becoming a better human being, finding a more agreeable way of relating to people, refurbishing one's personality into a more efficient companion for enlightened mates, you name it.

When all those tempting prospects of gaining a new life were mentioned by my colleague on the panel, a venerable Chi Gong master (who surely had more hair on his much more youthful head than I did, testifying to the power of Chi Gong in invigorating hair), and the panel moderator asked my opinion, I did not even have time to think about a politically correct answer, when I heard myself already saying: 'Spirituality is not about gaining anything, but about letting go.'

Later on I thought that was actually quite clever. Whoever said that in me or through me was right. Spirituality is primarily not about gaining anything. It is first and foremost about letting go. And if we do that, then we gain something. If we 'do spirituality' in order to gain something, or for the sake of getting something, getting somewhere and reaching a goal, we have already lost it. If we walk a spiritual path because we feel that this is what we should do, or because it is just our nature to do so, or because we like doing it, or because out of the experience that if we don't it is not good for us and for everybody else, in short if we are spiritual, because this is what we are or want to be, then we gain. Perhaps more than we could ever dream of. But as soon as we do it in order to gain whatever we are striving for, we have already lost it. Let me explain.

Take joy as an example. Who would not want to live a joyful life, and who has not experienced the pang of a depressed, sluggish,

uninspired state, grey as one of those November days soon to come? What is the way out of such a state? It is, at least in my experience, forgetting oneself. Letting go of the obsession with my own well-being, thinking about how miserable I am, and how I could improve my emotional state, devising a strategy 'to cope' with the misery. As long as the misery and me being miserable are the centre of attention, I will never find a way out. The way out is: forget about the misery, at least for a moment, and be present, mindfully being with whatever is necessary now: Washing the dishes. Clearing out the rubbish. Vacuum-cleaning the floor. Filing the tax report. Reading the paper that is necessary to read in order to get that proposal straight. Picking up that student's assignment in order to give timely feedback. Or just going for a run or a walk. Listening to the kids' stories about what they have experienced. Simply being with life, as it unfolds. And the joy happens, as an aside to being mindfully present. As soon as we are trying to target it, to actively make it happen, to grab it, it recedes. As soon as we leave it alone and are present, it is being given to us, it is unfolding as if it were the most natural thing.

What a mystery! Worded as a riddle it would sound like the following: Aim for it, and you'll miss it. Wait for it, and it will never come. Seek it, and you will never find it. Try to build it, and it will collapse. Grasp it, and it is gone. It is in front of you, yet you cannot hold it. It is within your eyes' reach, yet you won't see it. It is in your midst, but only if you don't grab it.

Does that sound familiar? It is my private interpretation of what the Heart Sutra has called 'Emptiness is form, and form is emptiness'. A Western Christian version thereof is 'If the grain dies, it will bring forth much fruit'.

Spirituality is the art of not intending anything in particular for one's own sake but

for its own sake. And then whatever benefit will grow, will grow. You can't make a carrot grow by pulling at it. You can't make kids clever by stuffing ideas into their heads. You can't make spiritual growth happen by constantly bullying yourself (or others). You grow by letting grow, and this happens by letting go.

So, the relationship between gaining something through spiritual practice and letting go is quite subtle. It is paradoxical, somehow. The gaining happens as a result of not trying to gain something. We are being filled, by letting go. We are being given through not striving. But what exactly is this 'letting go'? What do we mean by not intending something directly? Again, let's attempt to figure it out, as much as is possible through words.

One element, it seems to me, is letting go of unnecessary ideas and concepts, and trying to be directly with whatever it is that is happening right now. Let me use a neuroscientific metaphor to make that clear. Our brain, we know that now after a lot of research, is representing reality to us in a certain way. Unlike a camera that just picks up all the photons and stores them on a photosensitive medium or as pixels on a digital image, the brain is highly constructive. It builds up reality and checks its internal image of reality against what we encounter through our senses and experience and then changes this representation of reality accordingly. That is a much more efficient way of representing reality than constantly representing everything anew from scratch. But it comes at a cost. We are not in touch with reality as it is, but we are in touch with our inner image of reality that has accumulated over myriads of interactions with the world around us since we grew in the womb. The job of our sensual and experiential contact with the world is initially to check out whether our image of reality is still adequate, and in a second step to adapt it

according to the new input. Take colour as an example. We know from experience that trees are green, the sky is blue and buildings are normally more or less grey. So we don't really look. Otherwise we would discover the many shades of grey and brown, of dark yellow and even green that buildings come in. Sometimes even pink or blue. Or we would see that trees have many different shades of green, and sometimes even are silver, or red. I remember vividly having been struck once by the sheer yellowness of a simple construction fence around a huge building site I used to walk past every morning when going to the train. Only this time I was coming from a week's retreat of meditation and seemed to see the fence for the first time, as it really was, in its striking, beautiful, even alarming yellowness. What an impression! It is this seeing for the first time that I mean.

By attending mindfully and really completely to the tiny little perceptions we can continually have – the precise ways our muscles stretch, when we walk out of the office to pick up something from the printer and the good feeling that it gives, or the saturated blue that the sky offers on a clear September afternoon, or the message that our colleague really wants to get across by talking endlessly about a particular meeting – we adapt the world-model our brain has constructed and offers us as a representation of our world. We let go of prefigured concepts and see everything as if it were for the first time. That is what is meant by 'beginner's mind' in the Zen tradition, or by 'becoming like the children' in the language of the New Testament. Letting go means: letting go of our prefigured images of how the world is, how other people are, how we are, of what to expect from the world, our colleagues, our friends and our enemies, on a continuous basis. And truly, this has a precise neuroscientific meaning. It means voluntarily getting out of the habitual mode of an 'already known' type of perceptions to

'completely new'. This is the way of bringing us into touch with reality, as it really is. And this creates joy, playfulness, serenity. Again, this probably has quite a basic neuroscientific background. If we operate out of our novelty mode, what happens in our brain is that we activate our reward system that is geared towards seeking out new situations and that generates a 'feel good' emotion to go with it. Thus, letting go means: letting go of the habitual mode. This allows us to experience things anew, as they really are, and prevents the fallacy that we already know what is going to happen or what is going to come next. By voluntarily deconditioning our perception and our being in contact with the world, we give ourselves, the world, and others a chance to really be as we all are.

Another way to understand 'letting go' is letting go of ballast, emotional ballast, behavioural ballast, ideological ballast, conceptual or spiritual ballast. As a consequence of how our brain operates, we not only form perceptual pictures of the world, a perceptual construct, but also higher concepts. About what we ought to do when, or what others are likely to do under certain conditions, of what is correct in this or that situation, what is proper and right and how to sort experiences and events in the world. And surely, this, generally, is a great way of making us efficient. By not having to theorize, each time we meet someone with a certain expression on his/her face, about the meaning but by instinctively understanding the higher concept of, say, friendliness, we have a good chance of quickly reacting correctly. Such schemata, as cognitive psychologists say, activate higher order concepts, together with feelings and emotions and behavioural patterns as to how to react. Again, this is a very useful way of economizing our relationship with the world. But it is also binding. It tends to make us slaves to our habitual patterns. And so it becomes habitual that we react towards

certain stimuli in a certain way. Quite boring really. We associate 'evening' with 'TV', 'crisps', 'pint' and 'being uselessly tired' and that's it then. We never give ourselves the chance of perhaps experiencing ourselves, on a certain day perhaps, not at all tired, not really interested in TV, crisps and beer. I, for instance, am a great devotee of good wine. For quite a while I was unable to imagine a really comfortable evening without having some good wine with it. That was wonderfully relaxing, sensually gratifying and really nice, except that it restricted the way in which I could operate on any given evening. I was not able, for instance, to read something more complicated, because I am not able to do so alongside drinking wine. It did not allow me to use my time during the evenings for something else, writing an editorial, for instance. It limited me quite considerably in fact. Until I discovered how to make an implicit law out of a simple pleasure and liking. As a consequence, I have not stopped drinking wine. But I have stopped making it an unquestioned habit. I let go of the concept that a good evening has to be accompanied by good wine. And I discovered, much to my surprise, that this actually widened my radius of action, gave me many more pleasures than I was able to have previously. Now I can sometimes pick up a really challenging book that I want to read, but haven't found time to grab during the day. Or I can write something I want to write, but could not have done during the day. And suddenly I feel much more energetic, much more liberated and free. Letting go, in that case of a certain concept of what it is like to have a comfortable evening, actually enriched me.

Similarly, every one of us, I guess, has pet habits, theories, concepts, beliefs that are difficult to let go of, because they are deeply ingrained. I know people who cherish the pet belief that they are worthless or not loved if they don't work overtime, or don't clear out their email inboxes every day before they

leave. Or that the first thing one has to do in the morning is to read all emails that have arrived overnight. You have to pick your own pet idea of how to run your life, start your day, end your day, use your weekend. Try and do something else for a change, or just challenge this belief, let go of it for a while and see where that takes you. You will probably discover with much surprise that this letting go will actually give you something.

This forgetting ourselves, not being bound by our concepts and ideas about how we, the things and people around us, and the world at large are and have to be, is the key to spiritual growth, it seems to me. This letting go is actually a very simple act, and yet so difficult. Sometimes we must practise a lot, meditation, Chi Gong, praying the rosary, doing Yoga, take your pick, in order to achieve that. But it is important to recognize that whatever we practise is a means to an end and not the end in itself. If we forget that, we are in danger of inflating ourselves. We then become enamoured of the practice itself, with what we can gain by doing Tai Chi or Chi Gong, or Zen, or praying the rosary. We start being subtly proud of our achievements. We start setting inner goals and substituting the old concepts for newer ones, more subtle and more difficult to recognize. And where we previously thought we had to

achieve at least a grade A to be a worthwhile human being we now think we have to be with a spiritual teacher who testifies to our enlightenment in order for us to be on the right path. I am not sure that there is any difference here, except that one form of binding ourselves has been substituted by another one, more dangerous even, which is nothing less than spiritual chauvinism. For then the danger is real that we use this new spiritual concept to alienate ourselves from others and from the world around us. Only those who are similarly seekers of enlightenment are then worth our while. Only if someone has the right practice or belief do we 'really' think highly of him or her. Otherwise they are just from among the crowd of simpletons who are not worth the effort of trying to relate to, talk to, be with. And suddenly what we have gained, a new insight into the world or into ourselves, becomes the most subtle of weapons we wield against ourselves and others.

This, it seems to me, is the real meaning of spiritual poverty. It is about the ability to really let go of concepts, inner and outer, in order to be able to be with things and people. Simply, without frills, no second thought. And then all the riches are there that we have not seen before. But this gain sneaks in quietly, as a by-product of our letting go of our wish to gain something.