

Where Waves and Water Are One

By Lin Jensen

When you dance, may you dance in the open, unimpeded, vibrant nature of universal body, vast and deep, where waves and water are one. When you speak, may you speak in the open, unimpeded, uncontrived nature of universal speech, vast and deep, where waves and water are one. When you think, may you think in the open, unimpeded, vibrant nature of universal mind, vast and deep, where waves and water are one. When you rest, may you float on the open, unimpeded, luminous nature of universal being, vast and deep, where waves and water are one.
(Adapted from a verse by Lama Choying Palmo)

An ancient Buddhist metaphor asserts the unity of waves and water, insisting that every place is at all times the place where waves and water are one. But where exactly is that?

On his way home each day, Chris Gaffney, chairperson of the physics department at Chico State University, walks by an area at the perimeter of the campus where some of Chico's homeless typically hang out. They gather at the point where the physical science building backs up against the Children's Park. There are benches to rest on and trees to shield one in the heat of summer, and in the winter a large overhang projects out from the building to offer shelter from the rain. Chico Creek runs nearby.

One day Chris was passing this spot when a man with a frayed and grimy backpack hanging from his shoulders approached him. It was a warm day and the man was draped in layers of soiled clothes. Chris thought he looked like he was wearing his whole wardrobe. "Can I ask you something?" he said to Chris. Chris, feeling a little wary, hesitated, but before he could reply, the man said, "I'm not



PHOTO: Chris Walwanis www.myspace.com/chriswalwanis

going to ask for money," and again, "Can I ask you something?" "Well, yes..." Chris began, but the man, sweating in his pile of clothes, cut in again to insist, "I'm not going to ask for money!"

Chris was wondering just how this homeless man would contrive to ask for money without appearing to do so, when the man simply said, "Pray for me?" And with that request out in the open, Chris told me, the man appeared to shrink inward as though he'd said more than he could bear having

said, and could not now take it back. You can't ask a stranger to pray for you without risk.

But Chris was already praying for the man, surprised to discover how quickly caution had given way to so unanticipated a response. It was as if the man's call had reached him even before it was given voice. "The whole event was prayer," is how Chris put it. "The man's asking was prayer. His backpack, his coat, his scuffed shoes, the very posture and movement of his body was the language of prayer." The distinction between the one without a home and the one on his way home, the one calling and the one responding, dissolved somehow in the moment of their exchange. And yet, there on the verge of Children's Park on a hot May afternoon, both Chris and a man in need of a prayer had never been more individually and completely just who each was, demonstrating once again the paradox wherein universal being clothes itself in singularity and uniqueness. Each momentary wave of us is distinctive and yet never for an instant ceases being one with the water. Buddhists call the realization of this inherent oneness enlightenment, and it has practical implications.

Enlightenment is said to be a dissolution of self and other, and while it's not wrong to put it that way, it's not wrong either to say that enlightenment is an intensification of self and other. You are not me. I am not you. We are only ourselves. There's nothing vague or abstract about such an awakening; it's rather an awakening to the detailed peculiarity that comprises all being. And yet it is just this awakening to our invariable singularity that gives rise to the perception that you and I are inseparably one. But "perception" is not quite right either. What I speak of is not perceived at all, but rather a simple knowing without thought. The dissolution of self and other is an abandonment of whatever idea I've shaped of you and of me and of our relationship. What's left when that's gone is just what I am and what you are and what we are together.

When you dance, may you dance in the open, unimpeded, vibrant nature of universal body, vast and deep, where waves and water are one.

Where Northern California's Feather River runs down the canyon from the high mountains, a deep pool has formed, its banks lined with a tumble of granite boulders. Here in the early morning light, the shadowed shapes of late spring clouds imprint themselves on the water's surface. Where the sun leaks through the overhanging branches of oaks and sycamores, the river is brightly dappled and the pebbled bottom of the pool is set aglow with intermittent splashes of light.

Born of water, my body's been drawn back to it the whole

of my life, a coming home that I've repeated again and again. This morning, stripped to the skin, I ease over the boulders into the chill waters fed by the melting Sierra snows. And when I push off, the current pulls me into the deeper water and I drift toward the foot of the pool, but when I turn to head up stream I stall, the stroke of my arms barely keeping pace with the opposing current. Diving down under I drop unexpectedly into pockets of calm water where the current is deflected by boulders and other irregularities of the bottom. But when I deliberately try to hunt out the protected areas of calm water, I'm just as likely to find myself in the full force of the current. But surprisingly, if I quit intentionally directing myself, my body finds its own way and leads me from calm to calm until I reach the head of the pool where I rise for air and the current takes me downstream again.

My body is the universal body. It has its own wisdom. It's not subservient to my intentions and moves unimpeded through the hours and minutes of my life. Form is its own mind. When I'm confused by circumstance, my body knows exactly where it stands. When I'm in doubt as to what to do next, my body moves easily into the next moment.

The old Zen masters spoke of the harmonization of mind and body, a teaching most often taken to mean that the body is brought into accord with the mind. But it doesn't necessarily work that way. Often, the body goes first and the mind follows. My body knows when to eat and when to fast, when to work and when to rest. It speaks the language of flesh and breath, the lexicon of the living moment. It knows its own joys, sorrows, likes, and aversions. I have learned that my body can be left to find its own friendships. It has led me through a life of loves, sexuality, parenting and age. In the end I trust it will lead me to my death.

When you speak, may you speak in the open, unimpeded, uncontrived nature of universal speech, vast and deep, where waves and water are one.

I don't disparage small talk anymore, that sort of aimless chitchat about weather or sports or cars or the new hairdresser we found or what we're cooking for supper. There was a time long ago when I thought such trivia was mere filler, a careless waste of speech in a world with far more urgent and lofty things to be spoken of. But it seems to me now that small talk is sometimes the only honest, uncontrived talk to be had.

I came upon a man sitting on a bench in Chico's Bidwell Park the other day. He was alarmingly fat, his skin stretched so tight over his great bulk that he appeared more like an overblown balloon than anything else. He'd rolled up his pants legs, and his ankles and bare feet hung from the bench

like swollen sausages aglow with an odd sort of pinkish hue. He was painful to look at.

It was early morning, and the public pool on Chico Creek had recently reopened for the summer. I'd been swimming and was just climbing up the pool steps when I saw him. I stood dripping water, and there he was on the bench less than ten feet distance from me. He was reading a book, hunched over the open page in concentrated thought. He held a stub of a pencil in his hand, which he lowered toward the page and then retracted, looking as though he had intended to make a notation of some sort but wasn't sure what. I was stalled halfway up the pool steps, and I suppose I was staring, because my presence apparently broke his concentration and he looked up and our eyes met.

"Another swimmer," he said and went back to his book.

"What are you reading?" I asked.

"A puzzle book."

"That's an awfully big puzzle book." It looked to be two or more inches thick.

"It's four books," he said, separating the stack of them to show me that there were in fact four puzzle books.

"You must like puzzles."

"They're good for learning trivia," he said. "There's more than puzzles in puzzle books."

We both seemed to be warming into the subject, and I came up out of the water and went over to the bench. But when I sat down beside him, he twisted away from me, his face registering unmistakable alarm.

"What?" I asked.

"People don't sit with me," he said.

"Do you mind if I do?"

"I'm not used to it," he answered.

"What trivia have you learned from puzzle books?" I asked.

He apparently liked the question well enough to regain his composure and said, "Most people don't know about Little Jack Horner and Jack be Nimble." "What about them," I asked. He went on then about how the Jack and Jill rhyme was a reference to King Louis XVI and his queen, Marie Antoinette. "You know," he said, "Jack broke his crown and Jill came tumbling after. That's really about beheading them." "What about Jack be Nimble?" I asked. "That's Black Jack the pirate. Nobody could catch him, too nimble and always got away. You see how it works?" "What about 'Jack jump over the candlestick'?" "That's a different trivia I learned," he said. "Some scholars think it's about 'candle leaping' at English fairs."

He grew silent for a while then, and we sat together on

the bench. I put on my shoes for the walk home and got up to leave. "Thanks for telling me about the rhymes," I said, and was just turning to leave when he reached his hand out toward me and then, hesitating, drew back. I waited. And then with a sense of sudden decision, he stuck his hand out once more. "Scott," he said. "Lin," I answered, and we shook hands.

So what was my conversation with Scott really about? Puzzles or what? Small talk has a capacity to invest even the most casual exchange with revelations nearer the heart. Through the agency of puzzle books, Scott and I flushed a little of our selves out of hiding. Just as waves are one with water, what was said of the surface that morning was also said of the depths. The voice of the universe speaks in the tongue of the particular, and what we say of ourselves is said of the universe as well.

Virtually all human language is metaphorical. We are connected to each other through the agency of metaphor, a quality of speech so prevalent that it often goes unnoticed. I can tell someone that I need to "settle down" or "get a grip on myself" without either of us registering the metaphorical referent of the expression. Someone the other day said his landlady had been "raising hell" with him. How long, if ever, had it been since I'd drawn that pictured referent to mind. I think the prevalent use of metaphor is often innocent of literary intention. We don't actually invent metaphor. It's given us. The images that frame our thoughts to language arise on their own. The open, unimpeded, uncontrived universal speech that Lama Choying Palmo's verse celebrates owes its vast and deep nature to just this quality of innocence. Metaphor serves its own end regardless of the speaker's intent. It rides the tongues of speakers unaware of its presence, whose talk gives voice and form to an otherwise unspoken universe.

While the nature of universal speech is uncontrived, it's not a language without ethical parameters. My Soto teachers once set me to work on the Buddha's teaching of Right Speech. "See if you can practice Right Speech for a month," is what I was told. Now the Buddha's teaching of Right Speech turned out to be primarily an abstention from wrong speech:

Right Speech means abstention (1) from telling lies, (2) from backbiting and slander and talk that may bring about hatred, enmity, disunity and disharmony among individuals or groups or people, (3) from harsh, rude, impolite, malicious and abusive language, and (4) from idle, useless and foolish babble and gossip. When one abstains from these forms of wrong and harmful speech one naturally has to speak the truth, has to use words

that are friendly and benevolent, pleasant and gentle, meaningful and useful.

Deprived of wrong speech I found I had a lot less to say. I work on the practice of Right Speech to this very day. It's a humbling undertaking and secures me from delusions of self-improvement.

Universal speech is, well, universal. Its vocabulary was laid down before a word of it was spoken. Our human role is to summon it to our lips. No one can claim it for his own. Yet it manifests solely in singular utterances of unique occurrence that are infinitely varied and intensely individual. Speech occupies the juncture where shallow and deep meet, where the waves our talk makes and the water of which it's made are indistinguishable one from the other.

When you think, may you think in the open, unimpeded, vibrant nature of universal mind, vast and deep, where waves and water are one.

Thought is an unavoidable concordant of mind and has consequences. What I think matters. "Thought is the fore-runner of action," Bhikkhu Bodhi explains, "directing body and speech, stirring them into activity, using them as its instruments for expressing its aims and ideals." How, I ask, can I free myself from harmful thoughts of possession, ambition, envy, craving for public recognition or success – all those inadvertent little graspings that take up residence in my mind and lead me toward ill-will and cruelty?

Reverend Sekai, a Soto priest, once told me what he did with "bad thoughts" as he put it. Sekai had a small room allotted him at Shasta Abbey where he resided at the time. Having no space for a more conventional altar, he set a little altar up on a windowsill in his room. When he found himself visited by a troubling thought or feeling, he didn't struggle with it or necessarily try to fix it. Instead, he carried it to his room and offered it up at his windowsill altar. Sekai and I were working in the monastery garden the day he showed me how he did this. He stood among the bean rows, cupping his hands as though they were filled with bad thoughts and raising his open palms upward in a gesture that said, "Here, I give this thought to you." "Do you actually say anything at the altar?" I asked. "It's already said," he told me. The Buddha's teaching is one of relinquishing thoughts of lust, ill will, and cruelty. Sekai had found a direct and simple way to enact this relinquishment.

Mind is a movement of the universe that forever spills into its own filling, for creation acts in vacancy. From this

common absence has mind come, and comes still into the interim between events, born of nothing, returning to nothing. Mind joins flesh to spirit in an unlikely bond we term sentience. Stones have it as well, as does each cell, tissue, organ, and system of our bodies. The Earth itself is a spilling of mind into form, peopling the void with seas and continents, mountains and plains, and all manner of creatures. We humans come into this unlikely inheritance troubled, amazed, and delighted to find ourselves the agent of thought for which we bear the consequence. And that's a beautiful thing, for we can shape the very nature of mind itself and offer to the universe an instrument to think with.

When you rest, may you float on the open, unimpeded, luminous nature of universal being, vast and deep, where waves and water are one.

This is the rest that comes when the wave of being subsides into the vast and deep sea. It's a return to the universal being of which I'm comprised, an expansion of self. I might hand the checker at the market my driver's license, but the name and address on the license has ceased to account for me. Identification serves a purpose of course, and when I leave the market with my groceries, I'll find my way back to my little house on East Sacramento Avenue in Chico, California, easily enough. But when I settle into the deep sea of myself, my residence expands and I find myself occupying an unbounded space, vast and deep, just as Lama Choying Palmo said I would. I may still insert the key into the lock on my front door, but that little twist of the lock has become a movement of the whole universe, and while living in this particular house, I've somehow taken up residence everywhere. The name listed on the title to my lot is everyone's name. I'm unwittingly set afloat on the Lama's "unimpeded, luminous nature of universal being."

As we all are. What I'm describing is the common condition of human kind, all the more true when I happen to not notice it. But when I do awaken to this undeniable circumstance of existence, it brings to momentary rest all the apparent conflicts of body, speech, and thought, gathering them up into one sweet, untroubled mind. It's not something I or anyone else can take credit for. It comes unbidden in its own time, a treasured gift of insight broadcast through the deeper waters of the mind to the waves plying the surface overhead. ☸

Lin Jensen is the author of Bad Dog! A Memoir of Love, Beauty & Redemption in Dark Places and Pavement: Reflections of Mercy, Activism, & Doing "Nothing" for Peace, both published by Wisdom Publications www.wisdompubs.org