

“The World Could Be Otherwise - Imagination and the Bodhisattva Path”, by Norman Fischer

I Imagination - pages 1-10

Touchability - Empathy (wordplay=Feeling one) - Healing the Failure of Imagination

The story of R. Desnos. I tell it briefly in the group and here is the link to the German translation. <https://www.winkelmann-seminare.de/2022/06/30/die-welt-koennte-anders-sein-norman-fischer/>

The beginning of really good stories often goes like this: Odette, a Holocaust survivor, did not witness the events herself, but she heard them from people she trusted. Odette passed it on to Susan Griffin, who in turn told it to Desnos' translator, Alan Bernheimer, through whom it came into Norman's hands.

The story forms the central core of the entire book, which everyone must or will discover for themselves. (Or forgets it, but that's hard to imagine). I could never forget it, because it kept me very busy and made me angry and critical at times. What about “structural violence”, I thought, it can't be that simple! Then again, as is usually the case, it made me gentle and reverent. And each time I discover another point that blows me away.

This time it's this: “Even more astonishingly, the guards also are affected. Like the prisoners they had been living a dark spell in which the marching of men to slaughter was a normal and acceptable everyday occurrence. ... The guards are disoriented, confused...They are no longer sure what is real and what is not.”

“Without the imagination reality is too flat, too matter-of-fact, lacking in color and fervor. To go beyond the possible to the impossible, we need to imagine it.

“The heart of a heartless world.” (Karl Marx calls religion as such)

Differentiation between fancy=fantasy and imagination. I feel sceptical about this turn. At least, in Europe, it is different. There is no big difference between imagination and fantasy. Fantasy as a rich imagination can be stimulated in childhood, can be almost killed off by trauma and cruelty, or can turn into destructive, delusional ideas, the duration and depth of which depend on the developmental psychological stage and the context. But in my writing seminars, I have encountered harshly treated “inner children” who invented imaginary playmates in order to survive at all. It can be assumed that artists often draw from such a reservoir, which could have the character of wish fulfillment and relaxation, successful revenge, but ultimately led to creative life design. Writing in particular offers tremendous opportunities to free oneself from old burdens and towards stability and vitality.

Norman speaks of religion and spirituality in the same breath and does not allow one to take precedence over the other. I feel resonance when he says that mystics often form a wild side of established religions, which he describes as imaginative. We would say that they see with the inner eye, hear with the inner ears, taste with the inner mouth (without material food!), smell with the inner nose (see mouth), and it seems to me from my own experiences that the inside of my skin is touchable. Basically, this only requires remembering and doing so again and again, as I know from the silence exercises I offer myself. Religion is not necessary for this, but conversely, a religious feeling, perhaps an old longing, can emerge.

As babies, we all have this high level of touchability, which is why we are so extremely vulnerable.

Isn't it also the case that the flip side of the hard, boring, painful exercise is the

experience and memory of this indescribable touchability? But not only that: through the growing empathy with myself, and thus also my resistance and the resulting emotions that can steer my relationships in an unfavorable way, my empathy with others also grows, it becomes one-feeling. To an ever faster recognition of my own difficult sides in the other person.

The fact that we also achieve deeper empathy with the world as it is, inside and out, and with our mutual interconnectedness, through this and by studying the Buddha's teachings, the Dharma, already resonates, already sounds, even if we don't really connect with it that much yet.

Fischer assumes that Mahayana Buddhism, as it shows itself in the Zen practice and above all in the vows and teachings, is THE royal road or queen's road to a fulfilled and fulfilling idea of transformation. If we were to resemble this embodied figure of a bodhisattva, to become like her, realizing ideas of nobility, altruism, bravery and infinite goodness etc., then that would be the highest, imaginable, but also liveable ideal of a human being. Fischer doesn't say this explicitly, but that's what I hear. Roshi Bernie Glassman used to talk about the fact that people must or can first become human - or not. I hadn't heard of this before and I was fascinated. At times I liked this idea, this imagination, even better than that of the bodhisattva, because it is more open, leaves more leeway, allows for more darkness. But I will come back to that later.

I would also like to mention the four noble truths of Buddhism here, as Norman does on page 10: suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, the eightfold path.

Suffering: Our and every conditioned existence is characterized by dissatisfaction and pain.

Origin: Dissatisfaction and pain are rooted in the failure of our imagination: namely, to see things as they really are. (I consider this sentence at this point to be THE driving force of this book)

Ending: We can end suffering by focusing our imagination, our fantasy, on things as they truly are, and entering into the peace of Nirvana.

The path: The way to achieve this opening is by practicing the Buddha way through

right conduct (way of life), right understanding and right cultivation of heart and mind.

Thank you! (We are now at the bottom of page 10.)

It turned out that our next Dharma-study-meeting was not yet about the 2nd part of the first chapter. I preferred to give a short repetition of the above contents (Norman's writing and my necessarily subjective resonance to it) and focus on deepening on the four Noble Truths, which are significantly interpreted in an innovative way by the author, as he names, in the 2nd Noble Truth (Origination), the origin as a "FAILURE OF OUR IMAGINATION", which is, I have to say, deeply true. Could this be different, one might ask, in another society, with another early-child-raising and-educating/mentoring way? I think: Yes, but will not go deeper with this argument.

In any way, this statement and discovery is amazing!

The 3rd Noble Truth: Its most important word is "opening". Opening to another imagination. To the truth how things really are. Yes! And HOW difficult, if we are once really cut from our innate longing for wholeness (I often missed the term "longing" in North-American spirituality, which plays a big role, I find, in the way-seeking-mind. Does it taste too much of "desire"? Well, I find that this kind of desire, of longing is one that draws us to God, to wholeness, into necessary separations, as a prerequisite of openness and union.

I love the outspoken connection of "openness" and the "peace of nirvana". How many veils of fears have to be torn, getting subtler and subtler...

I can smell this peace, only a person who breathes it him-/herself is able to induce that.

Regarding the 4th Noble Truth I feel astounded that Norman summarizes the eightfold path into three, easily to take to heart:

1. Right conduct
2. Right understanding
3. Right cultivation of mind and heart.

I love it. When I first heard it, I already admired the Dharma.

Next recorded and written talk: SEPTEMBER 15 (done), SEPTEMBER 22