

Balloons

Alan Zundel at the HeartAwake Center, May 9th 2007

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Last week I was talking about this process of spiritual awakening, and describing the transitional state between being spiritually asleep and being spiritually awake. I think most people, most of us, are actually in the transitional state most of the time most of our lives.

The day after that Marianne said to me, “you know, you sounded contradictory; the beginning and end of the talk was kind of confusing.” I said, “Oh, really?” So I listened to the tape the next day and yeah, it *did* sound contradictory—maybe this doesn’t surprise those of you who have come here regularly. [*laughter*] But I thought, “I’ll tackle some of those points again in a different way.” Of course, I often end up saying the same kind of things in different ways over and over anyway.

So, a new convoluted metaphor tonight. Okay, imagine—like you see out here—you have a real nice view: sky, hills with trees—now you’re all looking out the window and not paying attention to me! [*laughter and comments from others*] Okay, good, good. This beautiful view; it’s clear, it’s open—you just feel peaceful looking at it; you feel at one with it. You kind of lose your sense of who you are and just enter into oneness with this scene, with the beauty of the scene. This is spiritual awakesness, this looking out at this beautiful scene, with this openness, this oneness, this freedom to let things come into your vision.

Now, one of the things that comes into your vision, is [*laughs*] —balloons. You see these balloons floating by, one by one, sometimes a few, sometimes a big one, sometimes a little one. Like kids’ balloons, not like the huge balloons with the baskets that you go up in, but kids’ balloons. You can even reach out and touch them. So they’re just in front of you, going by, blocking your vision for a moment, like kids’ balloons, floating in the air with strings attached to them. And these are unusual, in the sense that—usually, some of these kids’ balloons, you know, when you blow them up and you bring them close to your face, you can see through it; how it’s kind of transparent or semi-transparent, and if you hold it a little bit away from you, the color, it seems more opaque, so you can’t see through it as well. Well, these balloons are different, in the sense that, as they go by a little distance from you they’re more transparent, you can see through them more easily, you can still see that scene pretty well. But if you take it and you bring it up close to your face, it becomes opaque and it’s harder to see through.

So these balloons that are passing by your field of vision are things that are going through your mind: your various thoughts about things, your emotional states—this all sounds very familiar, doesn’t it? [*laughs*] —your memories, pictures that come into your mind that you’re imagining. Anything can provoke one of these balloons to just suddenly waft through the breeze—you know, things that are going on around you, something somebody says to you, a memory—anything can provoke one to go floating by your vision. That’s what consciousness is like: you have this free view but these balloons float by, and usually they’re not that big of a

problem for you. But if one of these balloons draws your attention for some reason, seems especially interesting to you, what you can do is you grab the string and you pull it up closer, right? And the closer it gets the more opaque it gets, and the harder it is to see that view. If you strain you can see through and see some of the view, but it's distorted; it's colored by the balloon, and it's not as clear, and you're more aware of that balloon in front of your face than you are of that beautiful vista beyond the balloon.

This means when you have particular thoughts or feelings or memories or any of these things that are going through your mind, that for some reason draws you attention very strongly, you're bringing it into your field of awareness very closely and losing your sense of the larger picture. You're drawing it real close to you, and it becomes the most prominent thing in your field of vision. Now, it would seem like the thing that would most draw you attention is if the balloon is especially attractive to you. And that's often true. Sometimes a thought comes along and you say, "oh, that's a very interesting thought." Like you hear a speaker or you read a book or someone says something and you say, "oh, that's an interesting thought, that set of ideas; I want to take that and draw it closer, look at it, try to see what I think about this." So attractive things. Or memories—memories of things that are very attractive, you draw them in close and you just become immersed in them, right? You lose your sense of who you are and where you are and you're there in that memory, it's very—it has that pulling power for you. And other things as well.

But you also become attracted to balloons because they're particularly *unattractive* to you, as paradoxical as it seems. You can grab that string and pull it close because it's something you *don't* like. With thoughts, these are thoughts, these are ideas, systems of belief, that for some reason you don't like. And you bring it and you draw it close to you and you say, "I want to look at that and see what I don't like about it—what's wrong with that picture, with that set of ideas? I really want to take a look at that carefully and decide what I think." With feelings, a lot of times you draw in feelings that you don't like—like something you fear, you picture something you fear, you're anxious about, and it attracts your attention and you draw it in close, and you hold it close and it brings up that fear and anxiety even more strongly, and it blocks out the rest of the view for you. So that anxiety becomes something very present and opaque. Anger, you know, something comes along and you feel a sense of anger arise—if that anger attracts you you draw it in close and then you dwell on it. Whether you want to or not, it's right there.

Now, you do a lot of this drawing things in during the course of your life. And some things that come up repeatedly and you keep drawing them to yourself and you really like them, eventually you end up tying them to your belt and carrying them around with you so they're always with you. They may not be always right in front of your face—they're, like, bouncing around behind you and you're not noticing them—but it doesn't take much for that balloon, because it's tied to your belt, to float out right in front of you and it's real close already, and you just let it come right in, right? And it's there and it's hard to get rid of because you've tied it on to your belt. It was so distressing to you or so attractive to you that you wanted to draw it in close, and you've almost made it a part of yourself—you *have* made it a part of yourself.

So the spiritually asleep state would be the state when you have lots and lots of these balloons in front of you and they're all tied to you, or they're passing by in such crowds and there are so many others, some attached to you, some passing by, but there's such a crowd of them and you're looking at them all, and you're not paying attention to that view hardly at all. That's when what's going through your mind becomes more prominent to you than any larger sense of existing in life and who you are, and just being one with what life is. So you become entranced by thoughts, memories, feelings, and they draw all of your attention in. You can get a view, a glimpse, of what's going on in the world around you, but it's really colored by those.

It's easier to see this in other people than in ourselves. You can see this in other people when they react to you and they have impressions about you that you think are really off. Something about you just drew a memory for them or something like that. But we do it, too—I do it, I know. And it provokes things and it colors your view of what's going on. Or feelings do that as well, right? When you're feeling anxious about something, the world looks much more threatening to you; you think about all the bad things that can happen. Or when you're angry, the world looks like a place that you really need to do something about it and you get this sense of, "I have to correct that; I have to address that—tell that person what's what, or do something about this."

So, you have all these balloons passing by in front of you and spiritually you're sleeping and you can barely see that view. Now, when you start to start to wake up is when you feel like these balloons are crowding your view and you just feel kind of constricted and hemmed in and you want to find your way out. So you start trying to push the balloons around and get a clearer picture or look through them and say, "What's going on beyond there? All these balloons are blocking me," and you feel that sense of constriction and dissatisfaction with your life, right? And if you do self-examination, or if you do meditation, or you engage in that kind of prayer life, those things can help you. It's almost like the breeze slows down and those balloons get a little calmer and you can peek around them, or they move out a little bit and you can see through them. They become more transparent and you can see the scene a little bit and you say, "Oh, I'm getting a glimpse of what I'm missing here; I can see around this and I can see that there's this expansive feeling here and this beauty and I don't have to be just all tied up in what these balloons are in front of me."

So you get a sense of that. Or you go to other people and you listen to them talk and they start describing this picture, this beautiful scene, and you say, "Wow, that really helps me see that a little better; I'm seeing through that balloon. Right, that's a mountain over there, and now I can see it a little more clearly; that's good." So you're getting a clearer view; this is the process of awakening. You're getting a clearer view, you're letting these balloons fly a little more freely—you're meditating and these thoughts are just passing through, or you're going through your day to day life and thoughts arise and pass, and they're not bothering you too much.

But every so often a balloon will come up that's real close and tied to you, and you start to go, "Eh! That's a hard one to get rid of! I can let go of the string, but it stays there. If I push it away, sometimes it just pulls the knot tighter. I can't get rid of that!" So what do you do? You let it be. As long as you maintain the sense that, "Okay, I'm staring at this balloon, it's in front of me—but that's not all there is. I'm just going to let it be, for the moment," that string

will start to loosen up as the breeze gently blows it, and gradually that knot will unwind. It may not come completely undone; it may then pass behind you, out of your field of vision, and you say, “Oh good, it’s gone for now;” you feel like that’s passed. But then it comes back and you say, “What the heck! I thought I’d dealt with this thing and now it’s back again!” But little by little, as you let that be, and you try to maintain that sense of distance—“Okay, I’m going to let this be, and I’m going to keep my focus on that beautiful vista as well as I can see it beyond there,”—gradually that string starts to unravel, and there comes a time when that string will just unwind and it moves away from your belt and it just floats away. And you say, “Oh, what a sense of relief; that balloon, if it passes by again, I’ll just see it and wave. [laughs] I recognize it, but I don’t need to grab it and draw it close again.” You *might* do that; I mean, it might come up and all of a sudden you’re looking at it and you say, “What? I grabbed that again! What did I do that for? Let it go! Let it go!” [laughs] But you engage in this, and gradually your sense of this beautiful scene is improving, it’s getting better.

Now, to take some of the more difficult points that I was making last week and on previous weeks, there also comes a point where you’ll have a collection of balloons tied to your belt that are some of the final balloons that are tied there. And they’re real core balloons; they’re balloons that are very, very close to the core of your sense of identity, of who you are. I think it usually comes from childhood stuff, but it also comes from—my guess is, my sense of it is, that you just are born with certain predilections, and some types of things attract you, like ways of life, or ideologies—political ideas, religious ideas—they attract you and you bring them in and tie them on to yourself and it becomes a big part of who you are. Or it can be how you’re growing up, the particular family situation you have, might be a core of your identity—it might be a good thing or it might be a bad thing, from some perspectives, in terms of psychological suffering in particular. You may grow up in a family where you’re blamed for things all the time so you grow up with this set of balloons that say, “I’m a victim,” or “I do the wrong things and I have to make it right.” Or it may be a good thing; the balloon may be “I’m a good person and I try to do the right thing.” But it’s something that you see as the core of your identity. It also has to do with religious sense, I think. Those of us who grow up in Christian homes, often, very deeply, even when you try to go away from it, you find that’s there—that sense of who Jesus was and that’s in your mind and in your heart somewhere and you try to model that in different ways.

So all these kinds of things become core to your identity: your religious upbringing, your family situation, things that just seem to attract you and your personality somehow feels an affinity with them. And there also comes a point, as you’re gradually letting things go, where this bundle of things will unloose and float there out in front of you and you say, “Wow! *That’s* who I thought I was! That’s a bundle of feelings, and ideas about myself, and memories, and behavioral patterns that I picked up, and they just seemed like me but they’re those *things* and that’s what it was composed of. And without those, I don’t know *what* I am, but I have this beautiful vista in front of me and that’s sufficient; that’s sufficient.” This is your sense of self, this is when your sense of self lets go.

What happens after that? Well, I can’t say long-term, but in the short-term my experience is when that sense of self lets go, some of those balloons kind of go off in the breeze, and you just let go and they’re gone. Others, they just keep floating around you. [laughs] That’s part of who you are, you know, the way you express yourself in life, and things that come

to be your self in the world. You just don't take it in as deeply because you can see through it. You see that beautiful scene, you don't just see this stuff, these ideas about who you are, about what's right and wrong, or what your general feeling state is—that stuff is just passing through your mind, and happens to be things that *your* mind is very practiced at presenting. So you still have a sense of self but it becomes more transparent to you, less of a problem to you, less of a burden to you maybe.

Beyond that, there can still come moments, as I said before, when a balloon will pass by and you find yourself automatically bringing it up close and then you say, “Well, what am I holding on to *that* for? Let go of that!” One of the things that I mentioned last week, that I think maybe this can make a little more clear, is this idea about what does it mean to see this vista in terms of who I am and where I'm at; the idea of, “Am I enlightened? Am I now at one with God?” When you're looking at that vista this kind of thing doesn't occur to you. It passes by in a balloon of its own, and you say, “Look at that balloon; what does that say?” And you bring it up close and it says, “You are enlightened!” and you go, “Oh, am I? No! Am I?” And you start playing with this balloon, and it blocks your view and you're all enmeshed in it all over again. And it becomes a struggle to let go of that as well, that thought, that idea. It either troubles you, because you're wondering “Is this for real? Is this true?”, or you're taking it in like, “Wow! This is really happening!” Or whatever it is, but it's preoccupying you.

Beyond *that*, you may feel yourself inclined to talk about this with other people, and other people listen to you—whatever they think of it [*laughs*], they at least give it some passing interest. Another balloon that can come by at that point is, “Gee, I'm a spiritual teacher.” And if you take *that* balloon and you bring it in close and you start to get all preoccupied with that, that colors your view, and that colors the way you behave, and that—that's the same thing all over again, right? You've become entranced by another balloon, you've lost sight of that vista, and there you are again.

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