

Hey everybody, this session is about the nature of Gift and what is a Gift?

I'm not going to start with a definition because I'm kind of wary of definitions outside certain realms like mathematics maybe, where precision is important. Often precision means exclusion; it means shearing off of nuance and ambiguity and trying to simplify the mystery into a false and narrow kind of knowing. It is an attempt to dominate and control, which is the exact opposite of the spirit of the gift.

Instead of a definition, I'd like to dance around the edges of what a gift is, what it is and what it isn't. There are three characteristics that, to me, mark what a gift is; they would be sovereignty, release and relationship. I will talk a little bit about each of these.

By sovereignty I mean simply that to give must involve some kind of free choice. That doesn't mean there is no compulsion of any kind. There could be guilt, there could be social pressure, etc. that are among the motivations to give, but for something to be a true gift, there must be at least some element of un-coerced choice. If I point a gun to your head and demand your wallet, no one would say that you have given me a gift when you hand it over. This should be totally obvious.

Secondly, release, meaning a release of control. In his marvellous book called "The Gift" by Lewis Hyde, in it he says gifts go "around the corner" or "into the mystery," which means we don't know whether or how they will come back to us, or in what form. You might reasonably expect that you will get some return gift or some kind of benefit from your giving, but if it is really a gift, then you will have no assurance of that. So for example, if I lend you a thousand dollars and make you sign a contract and make you put up collateral that I can seize with the help, if necessary, of armed agents of the state, that \$1000 is not a gift. From the perspective of the separate self, giving is profoundly irrational. It's a loss with no guarantee of corresponding gain. Why would you do that?

As far as what is a gift, I don't want to be a purist. The purist would eliminate even the possibility of return to qualify something as a true gift. It must be totally anonymous for example. I think there is a role for anonymous giving, but in the real world gifts are usually witnessed and they generate gratitude, the desire to give something in return. That's good for community

As far as the mixed motives for giving, David Graeber offers a clear illustration in his book "Debt: The First 5000 Years." Imagine a lord gives a jewelled sword to one of his knights. He is not unaware that this publicly given gift will cement the knight's loyalty, that it will establish his own dominance and burnish his reputation for lordly generosity. Mixed in with those motives might also be real affection for the knight, a feeling of sacrifice and "I want to give you this, I like you." Human affairs are usually like this, they're complicated so you can't say that the sword isn't a gift because these other motives are there because at least there is a spirit of generosity and true giving in among those motivations

This scenario points to a third feature of the gift which is relationship. Gifts create and strengthen relationships and that distinguishes them from transactions and from barter. Gift economy is not about barter. Say I buy a mitre saw from the hardware store. I pay them and the transaction is done, it's closed. I don't owe them anything and they don't owe me anything. But if I borrow the saw from my neighbor, and don't pay rent for it, then after I return it we have a connection. My neighbor maybe feels freer perhaps to borrow something from me or ask me a favor, so we have a relationship. Barter doesn't do that any more than a monetary transaction does that because barter says "I've given you, you've given me, we're done".

This obligation, and that's what it is, the gift relationship creates kind of an obligation, which means a tie between two people. This is not attractive to the separate self. The separate self does not want obligations. The separate self wants to be independent, to not owe anyone anything. That's one reason why people are often reluctant to receive. New Age doctrine says reluctance to receive must be because of feelings of not deserving, but usually there is something else at work. Receiving a gift puts one in a position of obligation. Even if you won't reciprocate directly to the giver, you might feel like you owe something to the world. Receiving a gift affirms your dependency on gifts; therefore it is an affront to delusions of independence. It reveals our dependency and invites us into greater dependency. This is happening in our current, modern context where we strive for the opposite, for independence. Financial independence meaning "I don't depend on anyone's gifts," "I can pay for that, thank you." And now I don't owe you anything. We remain separate. That's what the separate self wants because so often in our society to owe is to be under the control of powers that are really hostile to our well being, to a soulless money economy that's very different from being in debt, obligation and gratitude to people around us who we know.

To give and receive gifts breaches a boundary, namely the boundary between me and you, between self and other. It is inimical to the Story of Separation. That is why, as we will see in this course, that entering more deeply into Living in the Gift is also a step to another story of the world, another self, another reality. By doing it you will lose some of your separateness, some of your independence. You will become more tied to the world, more dependent, more inextricably tied to something much bigger than yourself. That might mean you will feel a loss of control over your life. That loss of control is compensated though by a feeling of greater belonging, of greater connection. It might show you that the control was never real to begin with, that what you are losing is an illusion and that perhaps what you really wanted through the control was precisely that feeling of belonging that comes through the release of control, through the release of these strongly held and maintained boundaries. So there's a paradox here, that what we have been doing to get what we want gets in the way of getting what we want.

Let me be clear that I'm not telling you here to release all boundaries and give up all control. Sometimes it is appropriate to refuse a gift if you don't want that relationship and you don't want to release that boundary. Living in the Gift isn't an all-or-nothing proposition. I'm assuming if you have gotten to this point in the course that you are called to take the natural next step into gift. Not all or nothing, but the next step. What is that next step? What kind of separateness still serves you, and what are you ready to release?

If you are wary about releasing these boundaries, that is very reasonable because we do not live in a gift culture. We live among institutions that systematize “more for you is less for me.” A system in which people take advantage of each other and everyone tries to get the best deal. People come and they say to me, “I’m going to offer my services for free and trust that the universe will support me,” and they ended up living a precarious existence until finally they started charging a fee, that happens. And I also know people who do the same thing, offering it for free and they experience miraculous abundance, so this isn’t a guaranteed formula for unhooking yourself from the world of commerce. Later we’ll go into some of the reasons why it seems to work for some and not for others. Right now I just want you to understand that this is not a formula or a path with a map.

The question then again is what boundary, what form of control, are you ready to release? Remember the gift is fundamentally about a release of control and a stepping into trust, giving into the mystery, giving around the corner. On the giving side, the control you are releasing is that of making sure you get a return on your investment, making sure your gift will be reciprocated in some way, that you will gain some predictable advantage from it, material advantage, social, psychological advantage. It doesn’t have to be monetary. The advantage of people thinking you are good or that you get to excuse yourself from blame because, you know, I’m so giving. I no longer can be castigated as a member of the privileged class because I’m giving so much more than I’m receiving. These are all examples of a kind of subtle control over life that you may be ready to give up. The release of control applies to the receiving side too, because it is then the release of staying independent, the release of not owing anything to anyone. It’s the release of, “I give more than I receive, so I’m OK, I’m worthy, I’m valid, I’m not greedy, I’m not an exploiter.” It is a release of what stops you from fully stepping into life with its messy dependencies.

So just to be clear, Living in the Gift is not an escape from the messy dependencies, yet is a step further into them. It’s a step further into life itself, the connections, the intimacy, the attachment. Let’s make a seed question for this session around that, around “what form of control are you ready to let go of?” The question is NOT, “what form of control *should* you be ready to let go of or should you let go of?” It is not, “what form of control do you *wish* you were ready to let go of?” The invitation is simply to recognize a readiness, to recognize a readiness and to trust the readiness and trust the not-readiness. This is not a path of self-improvement. It’s not something that you try to make happen for yourself. The improvements, if you want to call them that, they’ll come, but they will come as a gift. You don’t need to earn them. You cannot earn them. They are already here, waiting.

So again, “what form of control are you ready to let go of?” Identify that readiness. It may or may not be obvious that doing this corresponds to living in the gift. Yet, as you may discover, ANY release of control is a step into gift.

What form of control are you ready to let go of?

