

## 04 Signless

In the last session I was talking about the first characteristic of ordinary existence, impermanence or anitya (Sanskrit).

I said that meditation or deep reflection on impermanence could open a gateway to liberation or awakening, known as the signless, or animitta (Sanskrit), and would say more about that in this session.

In Sanskrit 'nimitta' means 'sign' or 'name' or 'label' or 'word' or 'concept'. So 'animitta' means without sign or name or label or word or concept. 'A' is a negative prefix in Sanskrit.

Animitta, the signless, conjures up a sense of a wordless experience, an experience that goes beyond words and concepts, that can't be grasped by labels or words.

We live in a world necessarily dominated by words or signs. Without attaching labels to things or phenomena or people, we could not live our lives.

The problem comes, as far as the Buddha is concerned, when we limit our understanding of things just to those labels.

When we label or name things, we fix them as if they were unchanging, separately existing subjects or objects. We don't see them in their fullness and depth. We mistake a conventionally useful and necessary linguistic device for the true nature of the phenomena or thing.

If we could see them in their fullness then we could break through to awakening.

To reiterate, I am not saying that signs or words can be dispensed with. As Sangharakshita says, we can use words and concepts to go beyond concepts. Let me give you an example.

I often start the leading through of a meditation with asking practitioners to first notice the sounds they can hear.

I ask them not to simply dismiss the sounds with a label of recognition, or to categorise them as good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant -which requires acknowledging and recognising those tendencies – but to notice the detail of how the sounds change, coming and going, varying in intensity of loudness or tone, again using words to describe them. Then I ask them to move beyond that to simply be aware of the changing flow of sounds.

I go through other named categories of experience – body sensations, thoughts, images, emotions – similarly identifying types of experience, and then moving beyond words simply to be aware of the changing flow.

Such guidance using words, concepts, categories, is useful to help the process of becoming interested and absorbed in the meditation, after which they can be let go of, as the practitioners enter into the wider, wordless, changing flow.

Other times the use of words or labels can get in the way of an experience.

I often notice in myself the tendency for an experience in nature such as a sunset, to be accompanied by a semi-conscious running commentary in my mind. It's as if I can't let go of words.

A more dramatic interruption might involve a different kind of labelling with the compulsion to take a photo to share with others. And in the process the beauty of the flow is lost.

William Blake, the English poet and mystic, understood this well:

“He who binds to himself a Joy,  
Doth the winged life destroy;  
But he who kisses the Joy as it flies,  
Lives in Eternity's sunrise.”  
William Blake

And to complement the English poet William Blake, the great Scottish poet Robert Burns captures something of the elusive beauty of change that can't be grasped or controlled:

But pleasures are like poppies spread,  
You seize the flow'r, its bloom is shed;  
Or like the snow falls in the river,  
A moment white—then melts forever;  
Or like the borealis race,  
That flit ere you can point their place;

Or like the rainbow's lovely form

Evanishing amid the storm.

(Extract From Tam O'Shanter)

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The process of labelling, of capturing something, or trying to fix something, with a word or collection of words, becomes a grasping, a desire in some way to control what is happening. Instead of allowing oneself to be part of something much more, we instead strengthen the hold of the ego.

From a different angle, Alberto Manguel, the Argentinian writer, in his book 'A History of Reading', offers an interesting observation on words and the art of translation.

He describes how in 1836 the German scholar Alexander von Humboldt suggested that each language possesses an "inner linguistic shape" which expresses the particular universe of the people who speak it.

In principle, this would imply that no word in any given language is exactly identical to any word in any other language, seemingly rendering translation a very difficult if not in principle an impossible task.

In a way, our language becomes the limit of our universe.

Nevertheless, Manguel argues, the act of translation can still open us to a sort of parallel universe, another space and time in which the text can reveal other, extraordinary possible meanings.

Manguel concludes:

"For these meanings, however, there are no words, since they exist in the intuitive no man's land between the language of the original and the language of the translator."

Sitting in a café in Paris, with copies of both an original set of poems by a French woman Louise Labé and Rainer Maria Rilke's translation of the poems into German, Manguel explains the effect upon him, the reader:

The reader (I am that reader, sitting at my café table with the French and German poems open in front of me) must apprehend those words intimately, ***no longer through any explicatory language but as an overwhelming, immediate, wordless experience that both re-creates and redefines the world, through the page and far beyond it ...***

Manguel, Alberto. A History of Reading . Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

In the context of the signless, music and the composition of music, in particular the music and the art of composition of Arvo Pärt, offer some revealing observations.

Pärt spent years in Estonia learning the complex technicalities of composing music. And yet many of his most liked compositions are simple, so simple that on one occasion he remembers, the players and singers had great difficulty in relating to what was there before them on paper and performing what was written. Nevertheless, despite the absence of the usual directions and complexity, his music moves people, to an extent they find difficult to express in words.

One music reviewer wrote this:

“... because the pieces are so simple, there is some grumbling in classical music circles about Pärt’s work. He’s not serious, he’s conservative, etc. I didn’t care about any of this when I first heard these recordings, and I still don’t. Pärt’s compositions split me open like I was an oyster, and the way they did it was by exploiting the simple harmonies of ancient western music, the kind of dignity and stateliness that I associated with the music of the church as I first heard it. I can’t fully explain what it is about this simplicity and tonality that was so moving to me. And I’m not sure I want to.”

Rick Moody, *On Celestial Music, and Other Adventures in Listening* (New York: Little, Brown&Co, 2012), 278.

Another reviewer describes the impact of a concert in New York:

“In this modern day and age, we shy away from discussing certain topics, such as religion. Arvo Pärt continues to speak about it for us in his music. What is most significant is that he does it without an agenda, without being pushy, **often even without words**, yet the meaning remains clear. Transcendence is possible, despite the fact that the shape it takes varies from individual to individual. Tonight, the chances are that we all experienced our own form of spiritual enlightenment, and not one walked away feeling indifferent.”

Sasha Drozzina, “The Music of Arvo Pärt at Koerner Hall,” <http://bachtrack.com/review-toronto-arvo-part>.

And where does this power to give people a glimpse of the transcendental come from? It comes out of a wordless silence.

Describing the process that encompasses both the signless and emptiness gateways, Pärt says this of his creation 'Te Deum':

"I had to draw this music gently out of silence and emptiness."

Bouteneff, Peter C.. Arvo Pärt: Out of Silence . St Vladimir's Seminary Press. Kindle Edition

From interviews with Arvo Pärt, Peter Bouteneff writes this:

"The composer sees himself as a midwife, birthing a living being out of the womb of quietness. The Te Deum belies just such a process: it begins nearly imperceptibly and ends almost as gently. But in this work, as with other tintinnabuli compositions, the genesis in silence characterizes the whole, through hushed and loud passages, simple and busy ones ...

As Pärt said in an interview over twenty-five years ago, ***"Before one says something, perhaps it is better to say nothing. My music has emerged only after I have been silent for quite some time. Literally silent. For me, "silent" means the "nothing" from which God created the world."***

Bouteneff, Peter C.. Arvo Pärt: Out of Silence . St Vladimir's Seminary Press. Kindle Edition.

Staying with the importance of the wordless I'd like to add something from another, very different musician, Nick Cave.

As you may be aware, a few years ago, Nick Cave's son Arthur tragically died. In a recently published interview he tells of the first occasion when he ventured outside into a public setting after Arthur's death.

"There's a vegetarian takeaway place in Brighton called Infinity, where I would eat sometimes. I went there the first time I'd gone out in public after Arthur had died. There was a woman who worked there and I was always friendly with her, just the normal pleasantries, but I liked her. I was standing in the queue and she asked me what I wanted and it felt a little strange, because there was no acknowledgment of anything. She treated me like anyone else, matter-of-factly, professionally. She gave me my food and I gave her the money and – ah, sorry, it's quite hard to talk about this – as she gave me back my change, she squeezed my hand. Purposefully.

It was such a quiet act of kindness. The simplest and most articulate of gestures, but, at the same time, it meant more than all that anybody had tried to tell me – you know, because of the failure of language in the face of

catastrophe. She wished the best for me, in that moment. **There was something truly moving to me about that simple, wordless act of compassion.**”

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2022/sep/11/nick-cave-on-music-grief-and-spirituality-faith-hope-carnage>

In English the word ‘moving’ can mean physically moving and in the process changing position, and it can mean moving in the sense of a deepening shift in emotional state. Words and language are not always needed to convey meaning. A simple, physical, wordless action can mean so much more. The signless speaks.

To finish, I’d like to encourage you, when appropriate, to practice letting go of the urge to label or name things, and instead simply to be aware of, and to lose yourself in the flow of change.

Autumn is here and with it the opportunity to watch the emerging, beautiful colours of leaves as they die and drop from the trees to the ground.

Winter is coming, and with it the prospect of log fires and night skies lit up by the aurora borealis.

Losing yourself whilst observing the changing autumn colours of leaves, or whilst watching the dancing flames of a log fire, or whilst watching the flickering, changing colours of the aurora borealis in the night sky, is to experience the signless gateway to liberation.