

Close to the Edge

A Lyrical Analysis by Gregory Dietz

While perhaps not Yes's most beautiful song about God or Self-Realization (that would be *Awaken*), *Close to the Edge* (CttE) is their best combination of focused musicality and an articulation of both the sacred and the mundane aspects of the spiritual journey. This is not solely a heavenly ecstatic union, but rather a fully human experience of enlightenment as much about the often painful process of purification (of our own poisons & pains, or sins) as it is about states of transcendence, bliss and insight.

Before we look at the lyrics it goes without saying that the music in CttE is superb, but what makes this piece unique among Yes's classic epics is the presence of drummer Bill Bruford and the precision and economy he brings to the band. In later works Yes would often be accused of padded, overblown songs that sometimes meandered into self-indulgence. While this is debatable, it is impossible to slander any piece of Yes music during Bruford's tenure with this label, including this their longest piece to date.

By rock music standards of course CttE is overblown (clocking in at over 18 minutes), but this view is superficial and does not stand up to scrutiny when we consider the song contains four distinct movements (and is relatively short compared to similarly structured pieces in classical music) and contains no extended solos. Prior to CttE, all rock songs of similar length (few that there were) were little more than excuses for the band to perform solos or "jam." This is also true of most extended pieces in the Jazz genre.

To get a sense of the compact and tight music on display in this piece, we need only look to the Introduction. In just over three minutes, the musicians are able to convey our evolution from the fabled "garden paradise" of nature, through the strife of man-in-the-world to finally the spiritual call of, and our tuning into, the Divine - which is hard to hear among the musical chaos but is beautifully expressed by lead singer Jon Anderson's two short injections of "ahhhh's" during the intro.

[By contrast this musical parsimony, after Bruford's departure, would be virtually non-existent on their next album - *Tales from Topographic Oceans*.]

As a piece of music, CttE is focused, complex, evocative and sublime and can provide many hours of listening pleasure without ever knowing or caring about what the lyrics mean. But to anyone familiar with esoteric religion and the writings of mystics throughout history, the lyrics of CttE open up a world of rich, poetic beauty that puts this song in a category only ever before achieved by opera, and as a single composition (in contrast to, for example, *The Who's Tommy*) was unprecedented in rock music.

To many, the lyrics in CttE sound cryptic and even nonsensical, and to anyone not familiar with the spiritual journey, they are. But Jon Anderson obviously understood this journey and sought to express it in metaphorical language (as is typical, even necessary, in spiritual writings) that was both descriptive and redolent. And I believe he was also attempting to combine his poetic expressions with the music in

a way that would facilitate a mystical experience for the ripe listener. Whether or not he achieved this ambition is both speculative and subjective, but I believe it is possible.

The question is how did he do it and was it coherent? To determine this I will offer my opinion of what each line means and after that will leave it to the reader to decide for his or herself.

[Before we look at each lyric it is important to keep in mind that throughout Anderson's career, he has shown a remarkable gift for using words that fit the music. They may not always capture precisely what he's trying to say, but in terms of how they sound (including how many syllables they contain) they work perfectly.]

Part I – The Solid Time of Change

The first two lines of the song are perhaps the strangest and most shocking (as well as the most criticized).

"A seasoned witch can call you from the depths of your disgrace. And rearrange your liver to the solid mental grace."

A seasoned witch is simply meant to convey any spiritual master who possesses the skills to guide (call) a spiritual seeker. This could be anyone from a church leader to a Zen teacher, but seasoned witch is a vivid and powerful image that grabs our attention.

The depths of your disgrace calls to mind everything from man's fallen nature to our own individual sins or failings. For eastern religions, this is taught as the (toxic) accumulation of karma, and it makes sense Anderson had something like this in mind in line that follows. The liver is the physical organ for filtering toxins and when we are overloaded with them it does not function optimally. To "rearrange your liver" suggests getting it to work better or optimally so that we may absorb the "divine nourishment" or (solid mental) grace. "Solid" and "mental" suggests something that, while perhaps only present in our consciousness, is nevertheless real.

"And achieve it all with music that came quickly from afar."

This line clearly states Anderson's belief in the power of music to touch the divine, or even that music is inherent to the divine, though it may also be that "music" is simply another word that fits and is meant to stand in metaphorically for any spiritual catalyst (which can be perceived in an instant and as if from "distant" spiritual realms – i.e., afar). It is worth noting that in some spiritual traditions there is a

primordial sound (music) in the spiritual realms and even different tones & frequencies of music pertaining to the various levels of celestial kingdoms (e.g., seventh heaven).

“And taste the fruit of man recorded losing all against the hour.”

If there is a metaphorical meaning to the first part of this line, it’s a bit obscure next to the obvious allusion to recorded music (i.e., listen to this recorded music and “taste” the divine). However, if a comma after “man” is appropriate, this may be a reference to recorded time (history) and that our fixation with time and our achievements (fruits) throughout time can keep us from experiencing (losing all) the eternal Now.

“And assessing points to nowhere leading every single one”

Perhaps a reference to the journey not leading anywhere in particular other than where you are and have always been – the divine may seem at first to be far away but it really is not. But before most spiritual seekers come to realize this, they undertake many external journeys on their quest.

“A dewdrop can exalt us like the music of the sun.”

Quite possibly the most beautiful line in the song and brings to mind Blake’s Auguries of Innocence, specifically the first four lines. Anyone who has ever gazed in wonder for more than a few seconds at the sublime beauty of a flower will relate to this. Also, Anderson often uses the word “sun” as a metaphor for God or Divine Source, all of which ties in nicely with the preceding lines.

“And take away the plain in which we move and chose the course you’re running.”

The sudden experience of enlightenment (e.g., satori) – which can happen the instant one looks at a dewdrop – will momentarily take us out of our daily, mundane life (plain); a life that is often a rat race (i.e., running) existence of our own choosing where we spend most of our time going after things we think will make us happy, but which rarely do in the long run.

“Down at the end, round by the corner. Not right away, not right away. Close to the edge, down by a river. Not right away, not right away.”

All references to “down at the end” or “by the corner” or “close to the edge,” etc., are Anderson’s way of saying we need to move to the periphery of our lives to get closer to the spiritual realm (i.e., we need to step away from the daily noise, concerns, and trivialities to make room for a perception that is as yet unknown to us). The reference to down by a river is particularly interesting in that it calls to mind Hesse’s novel Siddhartha (a book Anderson mentioned was an inspiration for the song) where the protagonist finally achieves full enlightenment when he takes up a life next to a river.

The “not right way” line alludes to our desire to hold onto our old lives (the mundane & profane) and that spiritual awakening can happen in fits and starts. It reminds us of St. Augustine’s line “God grant me chastity, but not yet.”

“Crossed the line around the changes of the summer. Reaching out to call the color of the sky.”

There comes a time on the spiritual journey where there’s simply no turning back. Even if one decides to stop you will still be forever changed. The “line” that is crossed comes after particularly powerful peak experiences often involving intense light (summer?) or insight into the nature of reality (i.e., change). It’s tempting to cling (reaching out) to the peak experience but if we simply allow it to flow we will...

“Passed around a moment clothed in mornings faster than we see.”

... pass through the experience, which feels like a rebirth or dawning of a new day (i.e., mornings) quickly and move into the next stage of enlightenment.

“Getting over all the time I had to worry. Leaving all the changes far from far behind.”

We learn to let go of our fear (i.e., worry) and desire to hold onto or solidify what is always changing, while recognizing that change is constant and will be fundamental to the spiritual journey (i.e., far from far behind).

“We relieve the tension only to find out the master’s name.”

When we truly let go (i.e., relieve the tension) at this stage we can see the true nature of our guide.

"Now that it's all over and done. Now that you find, now that you're whole."

It is our true nature as well, which is our oneness with Reality (or God) and we realize we're complete or whole.

Part II – Total Mass Retain

"My eyes convinced eclipsed with the younger moon attained with love."

Having seen into the nature of our object of contemplation, which can be anything from our breath to a candle flame to the image of our spiritual guide (i.e., master) or a new and spontaneous manifestation in our mind's eye (metaphorically represented here as "the younger moon") and which we penetrated with intense love and awareness, we are now convinced of our path.

"It changed as almost strained amidst clear manna from above."

But change is always operating and we are still called (by the "manna" from above) to continue on. In eastern practices these last two lines seem to be analogous to the movement from the 1st to the 2nd Jhana.

"I crucified my hate and held the word within my hand."

Hate (aversion) is one aspect of our ego and it must be left behind if we are going to remain in contact with the spiritual power (i.e., the word) guiding us on our journey.

"There's you, the time, the logic, or the reasons we don't understand."

There are many other aspects of our ego and our attachments to the world of form (and time) including all our ideas that make up what we think of as our Self. Only by continuing on will we come to understand all the reasons why we don't see (i.e., understand) our true nature all the time.

"Sad courage claimed the victims standing still for all to see."

After our initial vision of the divine (i.e., 1st enlightenment experience) the real work of purification begins. During this process we will confront all the "dirt on the window" (psychological pain and ego attachment) obscuring the light of God from shining through. It will take courage but also an acceptance of what arises and the ability to watch it with detachment (thereby letting it go). Those who cling to it or try to ignore it will stay stuck and fall victim once again to the ego or small self.

"As armored movers took approached to overlook the sea."

The stormy sea of our psychological pain will be guarded by the "heavily armored" ego. It doesn't want us to look at this vast and largely unconscious reservoir (i.e., sea) let alone with the detachment and accepting attitude necessary to make it tranquil (purify it).

"There since the cord, the license, or the reasons we understood will be."

The path is ultimately the reason we're here and we've come this far because we feel the tug of the cord attaching us to the Source. We do not need permission to embark on the path to the Source; we already have it (license). We are worthy.

"Sudden cause shouldn't take away the startled memory. All in all, the journey takes you all the way."

Along the path we are going to be constantly startled and shaken out of our old way of seeing the world. The cause of this can often be sudden but if we remember the ground of our being and not get distracted from our path it will take us all the way to the Source.

"As apart from any reality that you've ever seen and known."

And the spiritual realm is not the world you've been living in and think you know. In fact it cannot be "known" in the conventional sense of knowledge (i.e., it is ineffable). It is a reality that must be experienced.

"Guessing problems only to deceive the mention."

Along the way we will face many obstacles but they are largely of our own making. The ego (because it doesn't want to die) will attempt to deceive us, especially through pride, fear and doubt. If we stay focused on the path we can trick (deceive) the ego's talk (mention) instead of being snagged by it..

"Passing paths that climb halfway into the void. As we cross from side to side we hear the total mass retain."

If we can do this we will not get stuck "halfway" up the mountain. We may get diverted here and there (cross from side to side) for a time but the constant call of the Source (total mass retain) will lead us on.

"Seasons will pass you by. I get up, I get down."

As in the previous line, the journey is not a straight line. There will be times of bliss and rapture (I get up) and times where the poison and pain of a lifetime comes into conscious awareness (I get down). It is a purification process that involves a continuous arising and passing away of states of consciousness.

Part III - I Get Up, I Get Down

I see this section as both a description of the intermediate stages of the journey (where our poisons are cleansed, our consciousness is purified, and our ego or small self is ultimately destroyed) and as a lament on the failure of organized religion to lead us to God. Will save a more detailed analysis for later.

Part IV – Seasons of Man

“The time between the notes relates the color to the scenes.”

It's possible to see this line two ways. First, as a property of physics, colors have different frequencies (occurrences per unit of time) so different frequencies, or time between occurrences (i.e., notes) are literally different colors. The second and more likely answer is that awakening to spiritual realities (i.e., enlightenment) happens in the space between what we normally perceive with our senses; which can be everything from our thoughts to sights to feelings and in this case, musical notes. When we pay attention to the emptiness and silence between what we observe (which is pure consciousness) we begin to relate to the world in an entirely different way.

“A constant vogue of triumphs dislocate man, so it seems.”

But we cannot pay attention to these spaces when we're solely focused on our day to day concerns, especially when they involve worldly success and our desire to be esteemed by others. The dislocation these conflicting goals create is suggested by many spiritual teachers including Jesus's famous line in Matthew 6:24.

“And space between the focus shape ascend knowledge of love.”

Anderson is reminding us again (as he did two lines ago) that it is the space between what we sense that contains all the spiritual knowledge.

“A song and chance develop time, lost social temperance rules above. Ah, ah... ah, ah.”

This “song of songs” (our connection to the Source) will develop, albeit through much trial and error (i.e., chance) as we progress along the spiritual path, and the higher we go the greater our states of ecstasy and happiness. “Lost social temperance” is an interesting choice of words in that it alludes perhaps to the temperance movement that sought to restrict alcoholic beverages, which, the negative aspects of alcohol consumption aside, does provide a temporary “drunken ecstasy.” Anderson seems to

suggest that our higher states of consciousness necessitate our leaving behind all socially imposed constraints on our mind, with the “ah, ah’s” once again representing the ecstasy of these higher states.

“Then according to the man who showed his outstretched arm to space. He turned around and pointed, revealing all the human race.”

The spiritual master (ultimately yourself) is showing you that you are one with everything (i.e., space) and that enlightenment (which is latent within “all the human race”) is boundless freedom.

“I shook my head and smiled a whisper, knowing all about the place.”

And when we reach the end of the spiritual journey we realize (with a smiling & nodding sense of “of course!”) that the end goal has been with us all along.

[If there are any lines in the entire song that could serve as a catalyst for a profound religious experience, I believe the next three are it.]

“On the hill we viewed the silence of the valley.”

The vast sea (or valley) of our psyche is now tranquil and we are no longer at the mercy of our desires, fears, traumas, or anything else that would give rise to compulsions, suffering, or separation from the divine. We can rest in the Source at will.

“Called to witness cycles only of the past.”

This line captures the entire goal of the spiritual journey, which is not to “achieve enlightenment” since, like happiness, that is a byproduct of other intentions/actions. Rather, we are called to observe (witness) the workings of our own mind and experience the seemingly endless cycles of suffering and serenity that are now, at the end of our journey, behind us (the cycles).

"And we reach all this with movements in between the said remark."

As he did in the lines above ("The time between the notes..." and "And space between the focus...") Anderson is reminding us once again that the journey takes place in our own minds, and specifically in the empty space between our own thoughts (i.e., words or "remark").

[This next section is a review of only the unique lines in the closing chorus.]

"Now that it's all over and done. Called to the seed, right to the sun. Now that you find, now that you're whole."

We were called to look inside ourselves to the core of our being (the seed) which now, at the end of our journey we realize is identical to the Source or God (again, Anderson uses "sun" as a metaphor for God often) and thus we know beyond all doubt that we are whole*.

*It's worth noting that Anderson's use of the word "whole" will have a profound double meaning in a verse on their next album, Tales from Topographic Oceans – "we fled from the sea, whole" – but a review of that album will have to wait for another time.