

Flowers for Algernon

Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon* started off as a science-fiction short story (1959), and then a novel (1966). Although the book has often been banned from libraries in the US and Canada,¹ it is regularly taught in schools around the world² and has often been adapted for television, theatre, radio, and as the Academy Award-winning film *Charly* (1968) and a TV movie, "Flowers for Algernon" (2000).

The ideas for *Flowers for Algernon* developed over a period of 14 years and were inspired by various events in Keyes' life, starting in 1945 with Keyes's personal conflict with his parents who wanted him to be a doctor, but he himself dreamed of becoming a writer. This is a familiar Buddhist theme: Siddhattha's father wanted him to take over the throne, but he saw life as it is, and became the Buddha.

Keyes felt that this difference was driving a wedge between him and his parents. This led him to wonder what would happen if it were possible to increase a person's intelligence. In 1957, Keyes had a pivotal insight while he was teaching English to students with special needs. One of them asked him if it would be possible to be put into a regular class if he worked hard and became smart.

Keyes also witnessed how another learning-impaired student dramatically regressed after he was removed from regular lessons. Keyes noted, "When he came back to school, he had lost it all. He could not read. He reverted to what he had been. It was a heart-breaker."³ This was like the young Siddhattha's first of the first of 4 sights (an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a holy man), that spurred him in quest of the liberating truth.

In the novel, Charlie Gordon, 32, suffers from phenylketonuria⁴ and has an IQ of only 68. He is a menial worker at a bakery. Eager to improve himself, Charlie attends reading and writing classes at the Beekman College Center for Retarded Adults. His teacher is Alice Kinnian, a young, attractive woman.

Two scientists at Beekman are working on a brain operation to raise intelligence. They have already worked on a mouse, named Algernon, whose intelligence increased dramatically. Upon Alice's recommendation, Charlie is chosen as the first suitable human subject. The operation is a success, so that within three months, Charlie's IQ reaches 185.

However, as Charlie's intelligence, education, and understanding of the world around him increase, his relationships with people deteriorate. His co-workers at the bakery, who used to amuse themselves at his expense, are now scared and resentful of his increased intelligence

¹ "[The 100 most frequently challenged books of 1990-1999](#)," ALA.org. Also Cheryl Hill, "[A History of Daniel Keyes' Flowers for Algernon](#)" 2004:7-9.

² Daniel Keyes, "[Frequently Asked Questions and Updates](#)", 2010.

³ Emily Langer, "[Daniel Keyes, author of the classic book 'Flowers for Algernon,' dies at 86](#)". *The Washington Post* 18 June 2014.

⁴ Phenylketonuria (PKU) is a genetic disorder in which the body cannot process part of a protein called phenylalanine (Phe) (found in almost all foods). If the Phe level gets too high, it can damage the brain and cause severe intellectual disability. Pearl S Buck's book, *The Child Who Never Grew* (1992) is a moving account of the effects of PKU on her daughter, Carol. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1682478/pdf>.

and persuade their boss to fire him. This sounds very familiar: when Siddhattha turned to the middle way, the 5 monks thought that he was being luxurious. They ganged up and deserted him just before he awakens to be Buddha.⁵

One night, at a cocktail party, a drunken Charlie angrily confronts his scientific mentors about their condescending attitude toward him. Charlie also has a troubled romance with Alice. Unable to be intimate with those whom he loves, Charlie falls for a purely sexual relationship with Fay Lillman, a vivacious but promiscuous artist in the neighboring apartment. (This is the episode that attracted challenges of being banned from libraries and the school curriculum.)

In the Buddha's life, this episode appears early in his youth. He is provided with all the pleasures of youth, and soon surfeits of them. Ironically, this experience actually prepares him to react traumatically at the 4 sights, and, following the example of the fourth (the holy man), he himself renounces the world (external reality) to seek what is within himself. This is a sort of "return journey," so familiar in ancient stories of cultural heroes.⁶

Charlie does his own researches and discovers a flaw in the theory behind the scientist's intelligence-enhancing procedure. It could eventually make him revert to his previous state. His conclusions prove true when Algernon starts behaving erratically, loses his own enhanced intelligence, and dies.

Charlie meets his parents to mend their long alienation. His mother, down with dementia, recognizes him, but is confused. His father, who had long left the family, does not recognize him when he visits him at his worksite. Charlie is only able to reconnect with his now-friendly younger sister, who has previously hated him for his mental disability, and is now caring for their mother. Charlie promises to send her money.

As Charlie regresses intellectually, Fay becomes scared by the change and stops talking to him. However, Charlie musters enough emotional maturity to have a brief but fulfilling relationship with Alice, who stays with him until his mental regression causes him to finally order her to leave. Despite returning to his former self, he still remembers that he was once a genius. He cannot bear to have his friends and co-workers feel sorry for him. So he goes to live in the State-sponsored Warren Home School, where nobody knows about the operation. In a final postscript to his writings, clearly addressed to Alice, he requests that she put some flowers on Algernon's grave in Charlie's former backyard. The story ends here.

A good book or movie can be appreciated from a number of angles. As practising Buddhists, we naturally would see Buddhist values or some spiritual vision that reminds us of the Buddha's teaching, and inspires us with Dharma joy, that propels us further on the path to self-awakening.

A colleague of Charlie's constantly makes fun of him, and his other friends just look on curiously and laugh at him when he messes himself up with a "Charlie Gordon." They all laugh at him, and he himself thinks that this is because they like him, and so he feels great about it.

⁵ See Reflection, "Leaving church," [R364](#).

⁶ On the return journey, the hero's quest, or monomyth motif, see James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, NY, 1939: 581 & J Campbell, *Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Princeton, 1949:30 n35. Classic examples of "return-journey" myths are *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* of the ancient Greeks and, of course, the Buddha story.

Isn't there a Charlie Gordon in us, when we know very little about Buddhism? So we ask around; we go to talks. People tell us all kinds of things about Buddhism, most of which are not helpful at all, not to say, confusing and superstitious. In the talks, the speakers tell us imaginative stories about Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, demons and many things which the speakers themselves have neither seen nor experienced.

Then we laugh because someone thought what the speakers say is funny. Or, we simply laugh, too, because other people laugh -- like Charlie's colleagues. Otherwise, we might look silly or feel silly. Anyway, it seems to feel good and safe in a crowd. We even think what we hear in a crowd is good and true. In fact, we do learn a lot from such talks: we are filled with what the speakers teach.

Then, when we have filled ourselves with the teachers' talks, we begin to feel that our teacher is the best, surely he must be enlightened, even an arhat. We cannot help but think that everyone else is wrong. So we avoid old friends, even loved ones. It's often interesting today to how we seem to be more tolerant of other religions, but less tolerant of other Buddhists! However, when occasionally common sense speaks to us, we feel something is wrong, but we feel helpless about it anyway. So we keep to the crowd.

Then, we face problems ourselves. Our friends tell us, "It's all right! Others also face that kind of problem," or "It's karma! Deal with it." They don't really know or care about how we feel. When we go to the Buddhist speakers for help, they are often so "busy" that it's very difficult to actually even meet them. And when we do meet them, they just don't seem to know how to really listen to people and their problems. They seem to be good speakers, but poor listeners, even poorer helpers. Some might try to be Zen-like (whatever that means), and ask us, "Where's your problem? Show it to me!"⁷

At one point in the 2000 movie version, Charlie tells one of the scientists, "You know what it's like hearing your old self talk back to you? It's like hearing someone you thought was dead, or worse, someone you knew never existed... Normal...it's just all that I wanted to be. Now that I'm smart, even normal smart, I'll still be different. I don't know which is worse: to not know what you are and be happy, or to become what you've always wanted to be and you feel like you're alone." This is close to the Buddha's experience during his 49 days of solitary meditation right after his great awakening, when he seems to hesitate to teach the Dharma to a world drowned in ignorance and craving.⁸

This is like we want to look for the Buddha's true teaching in the suttas and meditations on the breath and in lovingkindness. We feel calm and happy, but we notice that many others around us are not really calm or happy. Sometimes, we feel as if we do not know who our true friends really are, such as when we hear people say they are in difficulty, but no one is really helping them. They must really feel lonely.⁹

⁷ See Reflection, "The Dharma is still with us," R28, in [Simple Joys 1](#), 2008, 13.5

⁸ On [the 7 weeks after the great awakening](#), see [SD 26.1 \(5\)](#).

⁹ If we feel this way, it helps to reflect on the Buddha sitting radiantly alone under the Bodhi tree: see "Leaving church," [R364](#).

Charlie goes to see Alice, his mentor, and tells her how upset his intelligence is making others feel foolish so that they hate him, and so alienating himself. Alice says, “Your heart’s got to catch up to your head. If you can learn to see people with your head and your heart, you’ll be surprised at what you find.”

This is like in early Buddhism: we need to balance our practice. The head and the heart must be in harmony. The calm of breath meditation should be brightened with lovingkindness. The radiance of lovingkindness should be tempered with the breath, so that we do not blind others with love’s light, but that it shows them the right way.¹⁰

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¹⁰ On a balanced meditation practice, see Reflection, “Meditate naturally,” [R300](#).