

From Buddha to Swedenborg: Conversion, Salvation, and Enlightenment

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Readings:

Psalm 37:1-9

Psalm 46

Luke 1:62-80

Heaven and Hell: 598

I recently saw a book that had a title something like How to Preach to a Pluralistic Congregation, a congregation with members who have different ideas about religion and spirituality. My first thought was, “This is a good idea.” I quickly discovered that the approach being suggested was to “generalize” certain ideas about God, or religions to “soften them up” before bringing on the more correct “Christian” perspective. I have no doubt that one reason for this approach is that many church leaders are finding that what they consider a “Christian” message to be losing ground to other spiritual perspectives and disciplines like Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Sufism, and Islam. Many people have been wounded spiritually, and they place the responsibility for this wounding on their strict Jewish, Protestant, or Catholic heritage, a heritage that contains rules, expectations, discipline, or a concept like the Trinity that they resist so strongly there is almost no hope of understanding their own spiritual tradition. Another complication is that our seeking has spawned an industry of comparative approaches to spirituality and in the self-help/psychology/religion/spirituality section of bookstores like Borders you can see books with titles like: Zen for Jews, Christian Buddhism or Buddhist Christianity depending on which direction you are coming from.

If you are a seeker, there are some pitfalls in finding your spirituality in this menagerie of ideas, but I don't think there is any real danger if your intention is to discover what your place is in this world, and I would encourage anyone to jump in and swim around, try things out. I'm sure there are people with different ideas in Christian churches, but personally I don't think churches, or Christianity in all its different forms, has anything to worry about by inviting a process of experimentation and discovery.

With all of this in mind I would like us to take a very brief journey through several spiritual traditions and ideas and see what they have to say. There are several people important to this journey, some you know well, some you may not know very well at all, and perhaps one or two you have never heard mentioned before.

The first person I would like to mention is Peter Kingsley, a man I met at a conference three years ago. What he has to say about history is important, as is his own story. Some people would describe Dr. Kingsley as a scholar, though I think he would describe himself as a mystic. He received his Ph.D. from the University of London where he studied ancient Greek philosophy and he has written several books. *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic*, published by Oxford University Press, plus *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* and *Reality*, both published by Golden Sufi Publishing in that bustling Northern California metropolis of Inverness, CA, current residence of our own pastor, Rachel Rivers. He was a Warburg Scholar, which says quite a bit if you are familiar with the name, and his academic credentials are astonishing.

Dr. Kingsley made an interesting discovery some years ago that has become quite controversial because it turns upside down one of the foundations of western civilization. While studying "On Nature," a poem by Parmenides, he discovered that the poem was

incorrectly translated and that the mistaken translation had been passed down for many years. You are never popular when you come along and reveal to people that one of the cornerstones of their work needs to be replaced. Now, normally, the incorrect translation of a poem is not too earth shaking, unless the poem happens to be one of the early texts used to justify the use of reason and logic, but as Dr. Kingsley has shown, this philosopher-writer was also a magician, a healer, a prophet, in short more like what we would call a shaman, and, heaven forbid, he wrote about his philosophy in poetry!

Why is this important? Parmenides' teaching poem was mistranslated as "if you press my words into your crowded brain," but the corrected text reads, "if you press my words down underneath your dense-packed diaphragm." The language, in part inspired by agricultural metaphors, as Dr. Kingsley shows, is closer in meaning to the "Parable of the Sower" by Jesus, where the words, or seeds, of Parmenides are inhaled in such a way that they can transform you. To make a long story short, Parmenides taught that there is an intuitive process, a process of incubation and stillness that precedes the use of a divine tool like logic. A parallel in the Judeo-Christian tradition is "Be still, and know that I am God," from Psalm 46. Parmenides also said among other things: "the world is one being" and "nothing comes from nothing."

One of the reasons for this process of knowing, the process of incubation and stillness taught by Parmenides, is to recognize and understand the illusory world we live in. Things are not what they appear to be. The world of the senses is unreliable, and the more you use the senses to investigate and understand, the more you will fall into the trap of believing what is false, even to the point where science, as Peter Kingsley says, becomes a fragile mythology of the moment.

This misunderstanding of Parmenides and other pre-Socratic Greek philosophers is important when we look at early Christianity. When Christianity spread through the Levant, the eastern Mediterranean, it encountered Greek philosophy. Much of what happened in the early church the first few centuries after Jesus was in response to various Socratic, Platonic, Aristotelian or other forms of philosophical thought, and this encounter of faith and reason, the world of senses versus the world of revelation, is an active engagement still going on today in the debate about intelligent design and evolution.

That we live in a world of illusion is also one of the central teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism and much of what Buddhism teaches about the elimination of suffering has to do with eliminating our illusory attachments to the sensory world.

Now we are going to go part way around the world to China and Hung-jen, the 5th Patriarch of Chan Buddhism (or Zen Buddhism; from *The Zen Doctrine of No-mind* by D. T. Suzuki). Hung-jen decided that to name his successor, he would have all of the members of his Zen order compose a *gatha* (which is like a verse or poem) expressing their view on Zen. He would then use the *gatha* to determine his successor, the 6th Patriarch.

Shen-hsiu, the master of the school, where Hung-jen taught, wrote:

This body is the Bodhi-tree
The mind is like a mirror bright
Take heed to keep it always clean
And let not dust collect upon it. (p. 17)

While everyone admired this, a lowly worker in the school (in some stories a janitor, other stories a gardener) said, in contrast to Shen-hsiu's lines:

There is no Bodhi-tree
Nor stand of mirror bright
Since all is void,
Where can the dust alight? (p.22)

This verse was composed by Hui-neng and he became the 6th Patriarch.

The story is from a book called *The Zen Doctrine of No-mind* by D. T. Suzuki. In this book several other ideas of Hui-neng are presented:

- 1) Zen discipline may thus be said to be nothing but a series of attempts to set us absolutely free from all forms of bondage. (p. 27)
- 2) When you cherish the notion of purity and cling to it, you turn purity into falsehood...Purity has neither form nor shape, and when you claim an achievement by establishing a form to be known as purity, you obstruct your own self-nature, you are purity-bound. (p. 27)
- 3) [With the idea] “from the first not a thing is”... all the logical and psychological pedestals which have been given to one are now swept away from underneath one’s feet and one has nowhere to stand. And this is exactly what is needed for every sincere Buddhist to experience before he can come to the realization of the Mind. The seeing is the result of having nothing to stand on. (p.26)

It is worth mentioning to you that Suzuki chooses to capitalize the letter “M” in “Mind” since Zen Buddhism considers the idea of God to be somewhat like a relic of religion, another idea that must be abandoned in order to get to the essence, or “spirit” of things. In fact, he calls Zen “the spirit of all religions,” a claim also made by Islamic mystics for Sufism and he also says, “Zen is the spirit of a man.” (from *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, by D. T. Suzuki)

I chose the stories of Empedocles, Parmenides and Hui-neng in part because they are not “Christian” and in part, because they are not the normal stories or parallels that are drawn between Christianity and other forms of spirituality. Most writers focus on things like the Sermon on the Mount by Jesus and specific sayings of Buddha. While this

road is important, I feel there is an underlying perspective of Christianity, Buddhism, Zen, and Ancient Greek Philosophy that is related to how we “see” or how we are “aware” that is just as important and often overlooked. It is this underlying “way” that I think is very spiritual and mystical, and important.

To use a Buddhist metaphor, I have filled your cups with a lot of tea. Let’s look at a few of these parallels.

The universe:

Parmenides: “the universe is one being”

Swedenborg: “There is one human God from whom springs all else. All powers of human reason join together and center, so to speak, on the existence of one God, the creator of the universe.”

Hui-neng: “As long as there is a dualistic way of looking at the universe there is no emancipation.”

Creation:

Parmenides: “nothing comes from nothing”

Swedenborg: Everyone who thinks in the light of clear reason sees that the universe was not created out of nothing, since he sees that something cannot be produced from nothing.

On attachments and desire:

Hui-neng: Zen discipline may thus be said to be nothing but a series of attempts to set us absolutely free from all forms of bondage.

Swedenborg: It is slavery when evil desires and falsities predominate, freedom when affections for good and truth do so (i.e. predominate). As long as he is in a state of slavery, a person never perceives what his situation is.

Hui-neng: When you cherish the notion of purity and cling to it, you turn purity into falsehood...

Swedenborg: The proprium of man consists in loving himself more than God, and the world more than heaven... The good which man does from the proprium is

not good, but in itself is evil, because it was done for the sake of self and the world.

On awareness and “seeing.”

Peter Kingsley presents a challenge: “If you want to keep a grip on what you think you already know you will have to dismiss what I say.”

Hui-neng: The seeing is the result of having nothing to stand on.

Swedenborg: But for all that they are told, the illusion of the senses prevails with very many people - that things really are as the eye sees them.

There is more.

If we are not careful, and we place reason before our faith, if we look for an objective reality outside of us that somehow confirms our knowledge we can fall deeper into the illusion and, in effect develop a form of Christian agnosticism which says something like: “I like what we think Jesus said, he seemed like a good guy, but there is no solid evidence to prove what people believe, we can’t really know.” In my opinion that is really a choice not to know. As Suzuki says, “Even the reasoning facility (in Zen) is not considered final or absolute.” I want to return to the second part of the title of my sermon to give my interpretation of what these teachers are saying about conversion, salvation and enlightenment.

What is conversion? Conversion is the change that occurs in a person when they understand that things are not what they appear to be; when a person realizes that there is a oneness in creation and a purpose that is spiritual; when a person leaves behind the idea that this is just a physical world that can only be understood through the senses and/or reason; when a person understands they are already in a state of grace. For some people that spirituality and purpose come through Christianity, for Zen, I think it

would be fair to paraphrase Suzuki by saying, “The spirit (Zen) of a man is what un-self-consciously experiences the Universe (God), with a capital “U.”

What is salvation? Salvation is not being saved from physical death, it is not being saved from worldly enemies, it is not being saved from the judgment of God, though it might include these. Salvation is when a person becomes free of the misunderstandings and constructions of the false being that grows up inside us in response to the illusions of the world. [repeat previous sentence?] The primary characteristic of this false being is its proclivity to own things and attach itself to things, both material and psychological. These attachments and properties the false being owns or acquires, as the Buddha taught, become the source of suffering and fear.

What is enlightenment? What I want to share with you is very simple, and it is so simple that if you think too hard you will miss the point. If you get it, you can walk out of here today completely free: It happens when you get out of the way.

Remember Hui-neng:

Since all is void:
Where will dust alight?

One of the important differences in the two *Zen gathas* is that the mirror in the first one implies there is an object, and I think you could also interpret that as an identity, that interferes with the experience.

Several quotes from Swedenborg:

As regards enlightenment, all enlightenment is received from the Lord; it comes by way of the good present in a person, the exact nature of the enlightenment depending on the nature of that good there. (AC 4214)

And what is so amazing, the nature of each person's enlightenment is determined by the nature of his affection for truth, and the nature of his affection for truth is determined by the good present in his life. (AC 7012)

As few know how the case is with the influx of Divine truth and with the consequent enlightenment with man, something may here be said about this. That no good of love and no truth of faith are from man, but that they are with him from heaven from the Divine. (ref. #?)

Inflow, a word Swedenborg uses that I would call the power and consciousness of God, inflow, is not complete without the empty place where “dust cannot alight.”

Once you are out of the way, where you attribute all that is good and true to God, all that is good and true flows through the “void” described by Hui-neng.

Once you are out of the way, and once you are practicing the precepts of faith, of love and truth, then the other characteristics of enlightened wisdom come in to play. You understand the causal relationship between the interior and exterior worlds, you understand why intention is so important, you do not mistake your own personal revelation for some kind of external authority, you understand that the intellect and reason are used in service to faith, love, truth. The intellect cannot take external data or knowledge and put love, wisdom, and truth inside a person, nor can the intellect use reason to create faith and love. The true sign of enlightenment is contained in the quote from Gandhi: “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” If you want to be enlightened then get out of the way and let all the good and true of God flow through you. Don’t try to own it.

Look at the world around us: the Middle East, our government, the media, our institutions of law enforcement and justice, our schools and churches:

In the words of Swedenborg: “Most people believe that the enlightened consist of those who are able to reason about what is good and true, or about what is evil and false, and that the measure of their enlightenment increases in direct proportion to their growing ability to speak about those things with greater precision and accuracy, and at the same time to back up what they say with many facts, and also to make their assertions

ring true by the use of comparisons drawn mainly from sensory evidence and by the use of other convincing ways of presentation. These **reasoners** however, in spite of all their mental and perceptive ability, are incapable of being enlightened at all. The reason why they are able to reason about the things mentioned is that they do have a capacity to know them but no desire to practice them, a situation in which, as anyone can see, no enlightenment is present.” (AC 4214)

There is sacred purpose inherent in our lives and it is part of our very own Judeo-Christian heritage, and if we forget it we can import every other spiritual tradition in the world, but nothing will make up for the dying, shriveling spirituality that is a consequence of a failure to do good.

Thank you.

Links and notes for those wanting more information:

<http://www.peterkingsley.org/>

[D. T. Suzuki](#)

For similar ideas in Judaism discussed in this sermon see Martin Buber’s books on Hasidism and Gershom Scholem’s books on mystical Judaism (including Kabbalah).