

Enlightenment: Myth *and* Reality

- an imagined dialog in four parts -

by

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Part Two

Following Monday morning

Stephanie: You may be right about seeing religion as a crutch, Paul or at least some parts of religion but I can't help thinking that you're talking mainly about the theistic traditions Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Very little of what you have said seems to apply to my own faith Zen Buddhism. Zen strikes me as more psychologically sophisticated than the others in that it doesn't call for the naive faith in father figures or an afterworld that you find so objectionable. I don't know ... I may be kidding myself. Do you consider my faith in Zen delusional? (*smiling*) Do you think I'm just another sickee?

PB: (*chuckling*) Hmmm. You do look a bit pale. Maybe we should check your temperature.

Brian: (*turning to Stephanie*) I don't think Paul would go that far. After all he told me earlier that he practiced Zen meditation for most of his adult life. Didn't you, Paul?

PB: I did. And I agree that Zen avoids some of the most child-like features of the theistic religions. But Buddhists still take *refuge* in the Buddha, most of them believe in reincarnation, and even in Zen there are spooky creatures known as *hungry ghosts* who have to be appeased by anyone traveling the path to Enlightenment. And there is no question that Zen addresses many of the same existential issues pain, fear, lack of meaning, purposelessness, and so on as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

Stephanie: But what makes Zen special for me is its insistence on pointing to the Truth the deepest Truth about life. And it provides a way ... a path that can help you make that discovery for yourself.

PB: No question about it but I think many individuals are drawn to Zen for less noble reasons. In my own brush with fellow students at the Zen Center in Rochester, New York, I found that most of them had major psychological problems they hoped to resolve through meditation. I know that was true for me. When I first read Alan Watts' The Way of Zen, I was fired up by the promise of escape from the clutches of ego. Zen offered total release from the anxiety that had tortured me for years. At my first sesshin in Rochester I told the Roshi Philip Kapleau that I was afraid of being evaluated. He responded: "There is no self there to be evaluated, Paul." How soothing were those words. I really didn't understand what he meant but the prospect of shedding my self altogether was intoxicating. Without question, the lure for me, at least originally, was the promise of peace deep peace.

Stephanie: I know what you mean. I have several friends in my own Zen group who have recently lost loved ones a child in one case, a parent in the other. But there are others in the same group who seem to have come in search of something deeper. They all seem frustrated with a life that is superficial, a life that slides along the surface and has no roots. They may not know what they are looking for, but they sense that there is something deeper to this world and they want to find it.

PB: And Zen can provide those answers at least it appears that it can. The answers most adepts seek have something to do with certainty. Uncertainty makes us anxious; it is frightening to think that life has no purpose or that our presence on this planet is little more than an accident. Like all religions, Zen attempts to dispel that uncertainty. It promises us that if we are willing to practice diligently, we can eventually penetrate the surface of things and grasp the essential truth of existence. And that truth will dispel all doubts about the meaning of life. The certainty it promises, moreover, is not that of simple knowing of knowing *about* things, how they work, how the world got to be what it is today. The certainty that Zen offers us is much deeper it is a *felt* certainty rather than an intellectual one.

Stephanie: Exactly. Over the centuries, Zen, like any other religion, has been loaded up with all sorts of supernatural trappings that offer relief from the fear of loss, of death and so on but at its core, Zen is a direct path to the Truth a path to Reality.

PB: I agree that it promises certainty but I'm not so sure we can ever know the Truth or Reality. I don't think it's possible to look at the world without having our eyes, ears, brains, and thoughts get in the way of what we experience. We see the world *through* these human eyes. A fly has very different eyes and presumably sees something quite different when it uses them. It sees a different

version of Reality. The culture we assimilate as children is another thing that gets in the way of knowing what is ultimately real. We can't suspend everything we have ever learned but we probably should if we want to get an unbiased view of the world. Over a generation ago the physicist Werner Heisenberg made the astonishing claim that you can't know what is going on inside an atom because every time you go to measure one of the particles you change it. What he's saying is that you can never know Reality.

Stephanie: But he's talking about the sub-atomic world not the world we live in day by day.

PB: Yes ... but I found the same to be true in sociology..... which *does* deal with this perceivable world. When you're conducting a door-to-door survey, your very presence, your manner, your speech are all bound to influence the other person's answers. Because of that influence, you can never be sure what the respondent really thinks or feels about the subject at hand. As in the case of measuring sub-atomic particles, whenever you attempt to assess a person's opinions, you change the very thing you want to measure. No matter how hard you try, you can't get around it. So I think we have to forget about knowing Reality. It's beyond our grasp atomically, sub-atomicallyanywhere you look.

Stephanie: But Zen points to something beyond what we get through either our senses or our intellect. What I have been taught is that in Enlightenment we awaken to the Reality that *underlies* the phenomenal world. The Heart Sutra which we recite every morning at sesshin says that in the Nirvanic state there are no images, no thoughts, no feelings, no colors, sounds or smells nothing that the mind can take hold of. It is a world beyond this physical one. It includes the physical but goes beyond it to include the spiritual as well.

Brian: Yeah, but Steph we still have to use our brains don't we? And the structure of those brains can influence what we experience, right?

Stephanie: Perhaps. Maybe we can never know Reality directly because our brains get in the way, but wouldn't you agree, Paul, that in Enlightenment we come closer to what is real than we do using our ordinary senses and mind. Doesn't Enlightenment tell us more about the *fundamental* nature of the world than we can learn from either science or philosophy?

PB: It certainly appears to tell us more. My own experience bears that out. But given time to reflect on what I "saw" at the time of my own brief awakening, I have come to challenge the interpretation I initially gave to it. I'm not sure anymore that Enlightenment is what we have all been led to believe it is.

Brian: Pardon my ignorance, but what did you *see* in this Enlightenment experience? What's so great about it? Does it even have a name?

Stephanie: Some traditions call it Nirvana; others call it the One or the Absolute. In Zen we call it the Buddha-nature since it is the essence of everything that exists.

PB: Watts gave up trying to find a name for it ended up calling it "IT."

Stephanie: (*turning to Paul*) What would you call it?

PB: If pressed to give a name

Stephanie: (*smiling*) I'm pressing

PB: I would call it the Undifferentiated.

Stephanie: O.K. I've heard the term before. Now wouldn't you say that when a person experiences the Undifferentiated, she is seeing into a new, grander world a world that transcends the ordinary samsaric world of things a world that includes both physical and spiritual realmsthat includes every *thing* that existsand yet paradoxically has no things in it?

PB: I certainly would have agreed with you 35 years ago when I joined the Zen Center in Rochester..... or even ten years ago when I had the experience I just alluded to.

Brian: But you came to have doubts, you said. You no longer go to the Center for retreats?

PB: I stopped going 30 years ago but continued to meditate on my own. I still do zazen occasionally but I no longer consider myself a Zen Buddhist or anything else for the matter.

Brian: What led you to give up Zen?

PB: Thanks to a little aging, a little maturing, I got healthier. I slowly gave up my neurotic obsession with success and with it most of the anxiety that had dogged me ever since graduate school. From this new vantage point I began to see Nirvana and the inner peace it promised as an escape from the pain of everyday life. I began to see that the longing to lose oneself in the One can be, for some people anyway, an escape from the pain of being a subject confronting the rest of the world as object. And we all know how much pain life can throw at us. As

the sutras tell us, Buddha traced that suffering first to desire and then beyond desire to ignorance to our false and stubborn insistence on the separateness of the self and the objects of our desire. In my own case, the cessation of pain brought a dwindling of my interest in Enlightenment and the peace of mind it promises.

Stephanie: (*frowning*) You seem to have been attracted to Zen for the least important reasons. You were looking for a pain reliever the spiritual equivalent of Valium. I don't suffer from such anxiety..... never have. What draws me to Zen is the hope of awakening to my True Self to what I really am beyond what you see when you look at me or what I see when I look in the mirror. Yes, I look forward to greater peace, more vivid sensations and less of that inner chatter that wastes so much of my mental energy. But the real draw for me is the prospect of getting beyond this trap of seeing myself as an outside observer, separate from everything I see. I don't want to stay on the outside looking in. I want to wake up to the fact that I *am* the picture..... not someone looking at it. In Enlightenment, one finally sees that or at least that's what I have been told.

PB: I don't think we're that far apart on this matter, Steph. (*smiling*) May I call you Steph?

Stephanie: Sure. Do you have a nickname?

PB: Nothing I can reveal in polite society.

Stephanie: (*giggling*) Maybe when Brian goes to the bathroom?

Brian: Ahem. Can we get back to business here. Paul, it seems from things you've said that you had the same interest as Steph in getting beyond yourself, so to speak. Am I wrong?

PB: No. You heard correctly. Relief from pain was what got me in the front door but the promise of losing my self in the Oneof discovering a trans-individual identity..... soon became my overriding concern.

Brian: You two will have to forgive this ignoramus who knows diddly about Zen but I keep asking myself why anyone would want to give up their sense of self. What's the point?

Stephanie: (*extending her hand*) You're not an ignoramus, Brian a little simple, perhapsbut that's one of your most endearing traits. Now and then, however, it does keep you from understanding the deeper issues.

PB: Let me try. Freud would have answered your question by pointing to our unconscious longing to return to the oneness of fetal existence to that state where the fetus (presumably) does not yet feel itself to be a separate being. He said as much in The Future of An Illusion. And there would appear to be more than a grain of truth in that theory. After all, we know from research by Piaget and others that it is a struggle for the toddler, around age one, to break out of that oneness and begin to see itself as someone separate from its mother.... first physically and then emotionally and even intellectually. This independence is all new and more than a bit frightening. As the child matures, it learns that being a separate self implies new vulnerabilitiesto getting lost, to being rejected, judged, punished, disagreed with, or sometimes just forgotten. For some, the differentiating process can be so overwhelming that it never gets completed leading to psychosis in adulthood.

Brian: So you're saying, or at least Freud said, that we all secretly want to return to life as a fetusto a time before we separated from our mothers?

PB: Yes. The wish may remain unconscious throughout life but it is there and it may be the real driving force behind our pursuit of Enlightenment and its promise of transcending the separate self.

Stephanie: That may be true Paul but it doesn't mean that the enlightened state is an illusion. It could mean that we are driven to seek that state by this wish to regress but end up discovering a genuine spiritual Oneness something quite different from what we might have had in the back of our minds originally. Either way, it's a long, hard process.

PB: Yes, and what makes it so hard to find that state of oneness whether you think of it as psychological as Freud suggests or spiritual as the Buddhists argue..... is the parallel urge to become more and more differentiated as one grows up. Jung called the latter process *individuation*. He contended that to reach psychological maturity we must develop our own preferences, opinions, values, and eventually our own identity. If we are to become healthy adults, we must learn to stand on our own two feet. So we have two powerful forces working simultaneously: on the one hand an undertow pulling us back to a state of oneness in which the awareness of a separate self is dissolved and on the other a fitful striving for an individual identity in which we see ourselves as unique and separate from anyone else. The conflict arises from the fact that even as we pursue our individuality, we continue (at least unconsciously) to harbor a desire to return to the oneness of the womb.

Brian: If this wish to return to oneness is unconscious, how do we know that it is there?

PB: Freud said that we see it in our dreams of self-dissolution or what he called the death wish. It shows itself as well in the oceanic experiences that most of us have had at some time. We see it most clearly though in religion, particularly in those mystical traditions that seek to bridge the gulf between self and world or self and other. He argued that the loss of self in mystical ecstasy may be dressed up as something more sophisticated, but can ultimately be reduced to a kind of regression.

Brian: So ... let me get this straight. He's saying that Enlightenment is nothing more than a return to the kind of "undifferentiated" feeling we had in the womb?

Stephanie: That's absurd.

PB: Perhaps, but reducing the experience of oneness to fetal regression needn't diminish the experience. Potentially it remains as exhilarating and transcendent as when we define it spiritually.

Stephanie: (*quickly*) But viewing enlightenment as a form of regression robs it of its real meaning. Seen through Freud's eyes or your eyes it is no longer a window looking out onto a deeper truth..... the ultimate Truth of existence. It's simply a recalling of what it's like to be inside your mother's womb. Sorry, Paul, but I don't buy that. Enlightenment is far more than that. It's an experience that adults have, not fetuses.

PB: You may be right Steph. I personally don't feel all that comfortable with Freud's analysis. It does sound simplistic and doesn't do justice to my own experiences. But I have come to agree with Freud about one thing. Enlightenment is not a spiritual experience in which we are presented with a vision of a world that transcends our own physical world. It is simply another kind of experience that individuals in a differentiated world can have. It may be rare but it is still explainable in scientific terms.....not necessarily Freud's terms but terms equally naturalistic.

Stephanie: (*sharply*) It sounds like you have your own version of reductionism! Well, go ahead. Let's hear it.

Brian: (*unbuttoning his jacket*) It's getting a little hot in here. Anyone ready for a break?

PB: I could use one. Can you stay for lunch?

Stephanie: I can't. Maybe we could come backif you see any point to continuing this discussion. I'm not sure I do.

Brian: I for one would like to hear what Paul says about enlightenment. And to hear about his own personal experiences.

PB: Can you return next Monday same time?

Brian: I'll be here.

Stephanie: I'll call you.

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