

## **When Mountains Cease To Be Mountains: An Interreligious Meditation on the Sanctification of Desire**

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### **I. Introduction**

What is the relationship of human desire to divine love? This is the question I would like to explore in this essay. Divine love is said to embrace all and seek the good of all, whereas human desire is focused on the particular interests of the particular person whose desire it is. Yet many spiritual traditions tell us that human desire realizes its true aim only when elevated into the life of the divine. How may we understand this?

I'd like to explore this question by weaving together three spiritual sayings from three different spiritual traditions, each of which speaks to it in its own way. I believe that, by putting these sayings into dialogue, we can use them to shed light on one another and on our subject as a whole. In this way, also, we see how interreligious dialogue can help us deepen our theological reflections.

### **II. Three Sayings**

The first saying I'd like to consider comes from the Zen tradition. I've heard various formulations of it, but I'll express it this way:

**Before you embark on the path to enlightenment rivers are rivers and mountains are mountains. When you've made some progress along the way, rivers cease to be rivers and mountains cease to be mountains. But when you've finally arrived, rivers are once again rivers and mountains once again mountains.**

Let us examine this Zen saying in association with the first stanza of the *Tao Te Ching*, which reads (in Stephen Mitchell's translation):

**The Tao that can be told  
is not the eternal Tao.  
The name that can be named  
is not the eternal name.**

**The unnamable is the eternally real.  
Naming is the origin  
of all particular things.**

**Free from desire, you realize the mystery.  
Caught up in desire, you see only the manifestations.**

**Yet mystery and manifestations  
arise from the same source.  
This source is called darkness.**

**Darkness within darkness.  
The gateway to all understanding.<sup>1</sup>**

Finally, let us put both of these sayings into dialogue with a pronouncement by Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew:

**Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever will lose his life for My sake will find it.<sup>2</sup>**

### **III. When Mountains are Mountains**

We will begin, then, by considering our Zen saying: “Before you embark on the path to enlightenment, rivers are rivers and mountains are mountains.”

One of the first things we might note here is that the words ‘mountains’ and ‘rivers’ are plural. To recognize that mountains are mountains is to recognize, at the same time, that there is not just one mountain, but many. There is Mt. Everest and Mt. Washington and Mt. Kilimanjaro, and many more. On what basis, we might ask, do we call these disparate things by the same name: mountain?

The answer, of course, is that the act of grouping together diverse phenomena under common terms is basic to human cognition. Our minds quite naturally divide the world into groups of named particulars, where the name gives us the meaning of the particular. Thus, though we may never have been to Mt. Kilimanjaro, by knowing that it is a “mountain” we already know something about it. The name tells us the meaning of the thing.

Before we embark on the spiritual path, says this Zen teaching, we live in the world of named particulars, and we take for granted that the meaning of the world corresponds to the names we apply to it.

We find this thought echoed in our passage from the *Tao Te Ching*: “Naming is the origin of all particular things.” We understand things in accordance with the names we give them. But the *Tao Te Ching* takes us a step farther in suggesting what motivates us in our acts of naming: “Free from *desire* you realize the mystery. Caught up in desire, you see only the manifestations.”

The mystery referred to here is the mystery of the Tao, which *cannot* be named (“The *unnamable* is the eternally real”). The manifestations, then, are the particular things that stand out from the matrix of our experience through our applying names to them. These particular things receive the names they do, says the *Tao Te Ching*, because they are objects of our desires.

Implied is that the named particulars into which we divide the world are, in some sense, *reflections* of our desires. Our desires cause us – indeed, perhaps force us – to carve up the world into named particulars that we can then analyze, manipulate, predict, control, and employ to achieve our desired ends. The world we look upon in ordinary experience, thus, is but a reflection of the desires through which we look.

In *Being and Time*, the philosopher Martin Heidegger provides a phenomenological analysis of this process of desire-infused naming. In what he calls our “everyday” mode of understanding,

he notes, we see the world as a collection of things useful or not for our purposes. The uses to which we put things and the desires we have in relation to them give us their meaning. Thus Heidegger writes: “The wood is a forest of timber, the mountain a quarry of rock; the river is water-power, the wind is wind 'in the sails!'”<sup>3</sup>

Before we embark on the spiritual path, says our Zen saying, we live in the world of our commonplace desires, and these commonplace desires give us the meaning of the world.

But we might now ask: What induces the spiritual aspirant to seek something beyond this commonplace world – to seek enlightenment, liberation, salvation? Why does anyone seek to transcend this world of commonplace desire?

To consider this question let us turn to our third passage, from the Gospel of Matthew.

#### **IV. Whoever would save his life...**

“Whoever would save his life will lose it,” says Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, “but whoever will lose his life for My sake will find it.”

Let’s begin by focusing on the first part of this saying: “Whoever would save his life. . . “

Implicit in this statement is the recognition that life is a struggle. The world of commonplace desire is not only a world of promise, but of peril. It is not only an enticement, but a threat. Yes, the river can provide water power, but it can also overflow its banks and drown us. The mountain can provide minerals, but it can also erupt in volcanic fury and ravage our homes. Our world of named particulars is a double-edged sword: It can offer the satisfaction of our desires, but can quash them as well; it can help us secure ourselves, but can also bring us to ruin.

And in this regard there is some very bad news, says Jesus: “Whoever would save his life will lose it.” Our commonplace desires are destined for ultimate defeat.

We find a similar idea expressed in the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. Life is *dukkha* says the First Noble Truth – it is troubled, anguished, disturbed, conflicted. Why? Because of the nature of our desires, says the Second Truth. We desire permanence, stability, security, safety, but the world through which we hope to satisfy these desires is, by its very nature, ephemeral, unreliable, frustrating, dangerous. We desire the fullness of life, but are confronted with the inevitability of death.

Legend has it that Buddha set off on his own spiritual journey in response to the horror he felt over the deterioration and decay to which ordinary life is subject – upon seeing the ravages of old age, sickness, and death.

These spiritual traditions tell us that there is a basic incommensurability between our commonplace desires for permanence, security, safety, love, and our world of fleeting, unreliable, threatening things. Whoever hopes to save his life through commerce with these fickle fleeting things, they say, is on a fool's mission.<sup>4</sup>

In response to this incommensurability many set out – like the Buddha – on the spiritual path. In Ashvagosha's *Life of the Buddha*, the imperative to pursue spiritual liberation is likened to the need to flee from a burning building. When his father tries to stop him from abandoning his life of princely luxury to enter upon the spiritual path, the future Buddha responds: "It is not right to obstruct a man who is trying to escape from a burning house."<sup>5</sup> St. Paul, in his epistle to the Romans, likewise cries out: "O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rm. 7:24).

Commonplace desire and finite life are on a collision course, say these traditions. To achieve peace we must somehow resolve the tension to which this conflict gives rise.

## V. When Mountains Cease to be Mountains

Let us return to our Zen saying: “Before you embark on the journey to enlightenment, rivers are rivers and mountains are mountains. But when you have made some progress along the way, rivers cease to be rivers and mountains cease to be mountains.”

How does it happen that “mountains cease to be mountains”?

We can gain some insight into this by looking again at the *Tao Te Ching*: “Free from desire, you realize the mystery. Caught up in desire, you see only the manifestations. Yet mystery and manifestation arise from the same source. This source is darkness. Darkness within darkness. The gateway to all understanding.”

This is an odd passage. We do not generally associate understanding with darkness. And yet in the context of our discussion we can make some sense of it.

If there is a basic incommensurability between our commonplace desires and the finite world of named particulars through which we seek to fulfill them, then spiritual liberation will require – in its first instance – a stepping away, a withdrawal, from immersion in these commonplace desires and the commonplace world they define.

We must come to see the ultimate inadequacy of the life of commonplace desire. In his book *The Sickness Unto Death*, Soren Kierkegaard associates this phase of the spiritual journey with despair. He writes: "If repentance is to arise, there must first be effective despair, radical despair, so that the life of the spirit can break through from the ground upward."<sup>6</sup>

Such despair arises from the painful recognition that the world upon which we had pinned our ultimate hopes will not suffice to support them. Faced with such despair, we are confronted with a choice: We can continue in this life of despair – a life that finds expression in cynicism, self-deceit, misdirected rage, unbridled ambition, escapism, violence, hedonism – or we can seek to

refocus the desires that give rise to despair. The spiritual endeavor begins in earnest when we choose the latter course.

We might understand the darkness of which the *Tao Te Ching* speaks, then, as a *cognitive* darkness – a darkness that comes from no longer defining the meaning of the world by our commonplace desires. To the extent that our understanding of the world was based in these desires, the world now goes dark. We no longer know what to *make* of it (quite literally). We can no longer *say* what it means. We see the insubstantiality of the ‘names’ through which we had hitherto understood it. Thus we enter into “the mystery”: Mountains cease to be mountains and rivers cease to be rivers.

And yet there is a critical distinction to be made between the despair of which Kierkegaard speaks and the darkness of the *Tao Te Ching*. The latter is a development from out of the former. The Taoist master understands what the despairing person does not *yet* understand: that this darkness is not a terminus but a passageway. It is the darkness of the womb, pregnant with possibility. It is a darkness – so the *Tao Te Ching* tells us – that is “the gateway to all understanding.”

Where does this gateway lead? What is the nature of the understanding it yields?

Let us return to our passage from the Gospel of Matthew.

## **VI. For My Sake**

“Whoever would save his life will lose it,” says Jesus, “but whoever will lose his life for My sake will find it.”

Much depends on how we read the word “My” in this passage. I suggest that the “My” here cannot refer to Jesus of Nazareth as a single individual. It refers, rather, to the mode of spiritual

realization that Jesus exemplifies – a mode to which we *all* are called.<sup>7</sup> Thus Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, says: “I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives within me” (Gal. 2:20).

The “crucifixion” of which Paul speaks may be compared to both the despair of Kierkegaard and the darkness of the *Tao Te Ching*. What has been crucified, Paul tells us, is “the flesh,” i.e., the life of commonplace, worldly, desire. The image of crucifixion is an image of anguish, surrender, and final death. But the death of spiritual crucifixion, like the darkness of the *Tao Te Ching*, is not a terminus but a passageway. Christ is crucified *in order* to be reborn: “If we have died with Christ,” writes Paul, “we believe we shall also live with him” (Rm. 6:8).

The Christ with whom we now live is one whose desires transcend the bounds of finite self-interest and align themselves with the *desires* of God. God’s life, as the life of *all* life, comprehends all, seeks the good of all. Hence God’s desire is desire for the good of all. This is the meaning of agapic love. To lose one’s life for “My” sake, then, is to undergo a transfiguration of desire itself; from *self*-centered to *love*-centered desire.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, writing about this in the context of Jewish spirituality, expresses it this way: “The highest of all loves is the love of God, which is love in its fullest maturing. This love is not intended for any derivative ends; when it fills the human heart, this itself spells man’s greatest happiness. The heart must be filled with love for all. The love of all creation comes first, then comes the love for all mankind. . . .”<sup>8</sup>

It is this shift in consciousness, and in the desires that shape consciousness, to which all the great spiritual traditions point us. They teach us that human desire, in its untransformed state, is but a nascent and inchoate thing, straining beyond itself to realize its divine potential. Indeed, it is this very straining that results in the “*dukkha*” – the anguish – of which Buddhism speaks.



Human desire is cramped and frustrated under the confines of finite life. It achieves liberation only as it breaks free of its finite bonds to connect with its divine roots. In *this* way, our desire for permanence, stability, security, love, is finally satisfied – not through rearranging the ephemeral things of the ephemeral world – but through resting in the Eternal that transcends and supports this world. This is what brings, in Paul’s words, “the peace that passes all understanding.” In this way, we *save* our lives.

## **VII. When Mountains are Once Again Mountains**

This shift in consciousness yields a new understanding of the world of finite particulars, an “enlightened” understanding. Thus, we emerge from the darkness into a new light, the light of God, or of the Tao, or of Nirvana – there are many ways of referring to it – but at base, it is the light of divine love.

This light *reconstitutes* the world of named particulars. Through it we see the world in its *consummate* meaning – a meaning still defined by desire, but now desire unshackled from its finite bonds, desire for the good of all. The bodhisattva of Buddhism, the saint of Christianity, the zaddik of Judaism, the bhaktic of Hinduism, are those whose understanding of the world, and activities within the world, are infused with *divine* desire – desire that proceeds from the universal love of the agapic God.

Thus, the spiritual path leads us *through* the darkness but does not leave us *in* the darkness. We return to the world of named particulars: Rivers are once again rivers and mountains once again mountains.

Yet everything has changed.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Mitchell, *Tao Te Ching* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Mt. 16:35.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962), 100.

<sup>4</sup> In his first epistle, John expresses it this way: “Do not love the world nor the things in the world. . . For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever” (1 Jn 2:15-17).

<sup>5</sup> Ashva-ghosha, *Life of the Buddha*, trans. by Patrick Olivelle (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 141.

<sup>6</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hing and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 59.

<sup>7</sup> The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner presents this understanding of Jesus. He writes: “This union [of God and Man in Jesus] is distinguished from our grace not by what has been offered in it, which in both instances, including that of Jesus, is grace. It is distinguished rather by the fact that Jesus is the offer for us, and we ourselves are not once again the offer, but the recipients of God's offer to us.” *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. by William V. Dych (New York: Crossroads, 1990), 202.

<sup>8</sup> Abraham Isaac Kook, “The Moral Principles,” in *Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence, the Moral Principles, Lights of Holiness, Essays, Letters, and Poems*, trans. by Ben Zion Bokser, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 135.