When Mountains Cease To Be Mountains:
Divine Love and the Sanctification of Desire

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I. Introduction

Why do we embark on the spiritual path, and where does it lead? These are the questions I would like to take up in my essay today. To investigate them, I believe it will be helpful to weave together three sayings from three different spiritual traditions, each of which speaks to these questions in its own way. My hope is that, by putting these sayings into dialogue, we can use them to illuminate one another.

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 are once again mountains.**

I think it will be profitable to examine this Zen saying together 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 manifestation arise from the same source.**
> **This source is called darkness.**
> **Darkness within darkness.**
> **The gateway to all understanding.**

Finally, I would like to 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.[1]

II. Mountains are Mountains

Let us begin, then, by considering our Zen saying: "Before you embark on the path to enlightenment, rivers are rivers and mountains are mountains." What does this mean?

Perhaps one of the first things to 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 mountains. There is Mt. Everest and Mt. Washington and Mt. Kilimanjaro, and many more. On what basis, we might ask, do we call all 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 up into groups of named particulars, where the names give us the meaning of the particular. Thus, though we may never have had a direct encounter with 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*: "The *unnamable* is the eternally real. Naming is the origin of all particular things."

But the *Tao Te Ching* takes us one step further in suggesting what motivates us in our acts of naming: "Free from *desire*," it declares, "you realize the mystery. Caught up in desire, you see only the manifestations."

The mystery referred to here, of course, is the mystery of the unnameable Tao. The manifestations, then, are the particular things given form through our acts of naming.

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 order the world into named particulars that we can then analyze, manipulate, predict, control, and employ to achieve our desired ends. Our desires define the world.

In *Being and Time,* the philosopher Martin Heidegger provides a phenomenological analysis of this process. 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'."[2]

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: why do we embark on the spiritual path at all? What induces the spiritual aspirant to seek something beyond this commonplace world – to seek enlightenment, liberation, salvation? To consider this question let us turn to our third passage, from the Gospel of Matthew.

III. 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. That we struggle to save our lives implies that the world of our commonplace desires is not only a world of promise, but also of peril. 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 reduce our lives to cinder. Our world of named particulars is a double-edged sword. It can satisfy our desires, but can quash them as well; it can help us secure ourselves, but can also destroy us.

And there is some very bad news to be had in this regard, says Jesus: "Whoever would save his life will lose it." Our commonplace desires are destined for ultimate frustration.

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

There is a basic incommensurability, these traditions tell us, between our commonplace desires for permanence, security, safety, love, and the world of fleeting, unreliable, threatening things. Whoever would hope to save his life through commerce with these fickle, fleeting, things, they tell us, is on a fool's mission.[3]

It is in response to this incommensurability that many set out – like Gautama – 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 and entering upon the spiritual path, Siddhartha responds: "It is not right to obstruct a man who is trying to escape from a burning house."[4] 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).

IV. 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."

We can shed some light on the meaning of the second part of this Zen saying by turning again to the *Tao Te Ching*: "Free from desire," says the *Tao Te Ching*, "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 what we have been discussing we can make some sense of it.

If there is a basic incommensurability between our desires and the 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. Soren Kierkegaard, in his book *The Sickness Unto Death*, 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."[5]

Such despair arises upon the painful recognition that the world upon which we had pinned our ultimate hopes will not suffice to fulfill them.

We might understand the darkness of which the *Tao Te Ching* speaks, then, as the cognitive darkness that comes from no longer defining the meaning of the world by these desires. To the extent that our understanding of the world had its roots 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. Thus we enter into "the mystery": Mountains cease to be mountains and rivers cease to be rivers.

This cognitive darkness is accompanied by a new mode of spiritual awareness. The desires that divide the world into named particulars also divide us *from* the world of named particulars, a world we construe and experience as standing over against us, as the *object* of our desires. As the Taoist master withdraws from separative desire he or she also overcomes the *divide* between self and other that desire sets up. Awareness of the Tao is awareness of a basic Unity overriding separation. The darkness of the Tao, thus, is not a darkness of privation and angst but of wholeness and peace. Entry into it marks the end of the battle between self and other.

Thus, a critical distinction must be made between the despair of which Kierkegaard speaks and the darkness of which the *Tao Te Ching* speaks. The latter is the healing of the former. The person of Kierkegaardian despair is still immersed in commonplace desire, but has come to see the world as standing in radical opposition to those desires. The Taoist master has transcended opposition altogether and entered upon a new possibility of being. Thus, the darkness into which the master enters is not a terminus but a passageway. It is the darkness of the womb, pregnant

with the possibility of new life, a new *kind* of life. It is a darkness – 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.

V. 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 finite individual. It refers, rather, to the mode of spiritual realization that Jesus exemplifies – a mode of realization to which we are *all* called.[6] Thus Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, writes: "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 which Kierkegaard speaks and the darkness of the *Tao Te Ching*. What has been crucified, as Paul tells us, is "the flesh," by which he means 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. As we extinguish our attachment to our separative selves, so we open ourselves to the unity and love that is God. Thus, the death of spiritual crucifixion, is, again, an entry into the womb, giving rise to new life: "If we have died with Christ," writes Paul, "we believe we shall also live with him" (Rm. 6:8).

We "live with Christ" insofar as our will and desires transcend the bounds of finite self-interest – the bounds of "the flesh" – and come into alignment with the unitive "interests" of God. Whereas each of us, rooted in our separate lives, desires our separate good, God, as the root of *all* life, desires the good of all. To desire the good of all is the meaning of agapic love. To lose one's life for "My" sake, then, means to undergo a transfiguration, a divinization, of desire itself; a transformation from a life centered in one's separate self, to a life centered in the unity of God.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, writing about this in the context of Jewish spirituality, expresses the same idea this way: "The heart must be filled with love for all. The love of all creation comes first, then comes the love for all mankind. . . "[7]

It is this shift in consciousness, and in the desires that shape consciousness, to which all the great spiritual traditions point us, in their distinctive ways. The implication of all of these traditions is that human desire, in its untransformed state, is but a nascent and inchoate thing, straining beyond itself to realize its divine potential. Indeed, we might recognize this very straining to result in the "dukkha" – the anguish and despair – of which both Buddhism and Kierkegaard speak. Human desire is cramped and frustrated when restricted to finite life. It achieves liberation only as it becomes rooted in the divine life – the Life that embraces all life. 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 them. Again, in the words of Kook: "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."[8]

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 world is

now illuminated by the light of God, or of the Tao, or of Nirvana – there are many ways of referring to it – but it is, at base, the light of divine love, called *agape* in the Christian tradition, *metta/karuna* in the Buddhist tradition, *chesed* in the Jewish tradition.

This light of love *reconstitutes* the world of named particulars. Through this light we see the world in its *consummate* meaning – a meaning still defined by desire, but now desires shaped by agapic love itself. The bodhisattva of Buddhism, the saint of Christianity, the zaddik of Judaism, are those whose activities within the world, and whose understanding of the world, are infused with *divine* desire – the desires that arise from the universal love that proceeds from the God of all.

Thus the spiritual path, though leading us *through* the darkness, does not terminate *in* the darkness. The spiritually realized person returns to the world of named particulars with a new buoyancy and resolve: rivers are once again rivers and mountains are once again mountains.

Yet everything has changed.

[1] Mt. 16:35.

[2] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962), 100.

[3] 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).

[4] Ashva-ghosha, *Life of the Buddha*, trans. by Patrick Olivelle (New York: New Yourk University Press, 2009), 141.

[5] Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hing and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 59.

[6] 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*, 202.)

[7] Abraham Isaac Kook, "The Moral Principles," in *Abraham Isaac Kook, Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 135.

[8] Ibid.