

Regaining Our Enchantment with the Sacred and Divine
Koji Dreher 5/31/2014

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Hi! Good morning. Is it morning? Yeah. I'm going to have more water, because I tried to make tea but there wasn't any hot water so I'm uncaffeinated and might be relaxed or something. I don't know. I hope not!

Okay. So I wanted to play a short game called True or False.

First question is: True or False, the Buddha said "I teach only two things, suffering and the end of suffering."

(A few people in the audience say true)

No. He never said it.

(Someone says false, and there is scattered laughter.)

Yeah, he never said that. Facebook says he did, my aunt's facebook wall says he did -- but he never said it. A lot of my Buddhist teachers said he did, too! Umm, not this one (referring to Kosho), this one's smart. But yeah, that's one of the things that we've made up. Not all of us, but -- our cultural inheritance is kind of -- well, it's not all of us, and I don't feel so identified with this, but I have the markings of a member of the empire, of a colonizer, you know? Those that like to take things from other people and improve them or reinterpret them for themselves. So a lot of the Buddhism that we received early on, a lot of the early translations, came from the late 1800s from a Pali text translation society, and those were all English academics with backgrounds in theology, and they decided what English words different Sanskrit words meant. So sunyata meant "the Void" with a capital V -- or emptiness; they decided that dukkha meant suffering. And we get a certain interpretation of a tradition that is beyond binary thinking and binary terms, if that makes sense. Does that make sense? So that's one of the things that we have to deal with in going beyond being a dilettante in this practice. Figuring out if we should take the sutra in English at face value.

In any case, it would be a lie to say that the Buddha only teaches these two things. There are these large books of what he did teach -- it was more than two things. A lot more than suffering and the end of suffering.

So here's another one: "There is no self" -- True or False?

(Someone says True)

True? You think the Buddha says there is no self? Does that mean no-self? Well, it's referring to "non-self" -- saying that the five aggregates are not the self. Never made the leap to say that there IS no self. But that's a big things that we -- well, we get a lot of flak in Buddhism for being kind of negative in saying that there is no self, which when you are a binary thinker that means that we do not exist. Or, for example, that "life is suffering" -- the first Noble Truth -- the Buddha never actually said that. The word dukkha, which means suffering, is a compound word: 'akkha' means space and 'du' means obstruction. So life feels like "obstructed space" -- discomfort or alienation. And specifically there is a hole in the wheel the axle goes through and if that space is obstructed then the wheel doesn't roll smoothly. So instead of saying that life is suffering the Buddha actually said your life is like a wobbly wheel! It changes things.

Your form, your sensations, your perceptions, your mental formations, and your consciousness are not your self. Different than "there is no self"!

I think a lot of us maybe, if we're "converts" or whatever -- which we don't usually even make that leap -- got disenchanted or burned somehow in our religious or non-religious upbringing and it brought us here. Or curiosity, sometimes curiosity, or sometimes intense longing, which can be problematic sometimes -- to need too much. Need too much from something. And we don't want to make the same mistakes that we did so a lot of us don't really want anything to do with "God". So Buddhism is really safe because it's like an atheistic religion, right? That's not true either.

So just to recap: Buddha taught more than two things, it's not that there is no self, and suffering is not a word that was ever spoken by the Buddha. Or a word that meant suffering, in the context I'm talking about here anyway. Maybe he stepped on a rake or something. So, I want to present an alternative framework for understanding what we take this tradition to be -- a lot of times, at least on my part, without trying really too hard to figure it out. And out of necessity, out of mismatch or out of the discomfort I felt with my experiences, I tried to find out more.

When I started -- well, so I grew up Catholic, and I went to Catholic school and stuff, and I was pretty enchanted by it all. You know, like holy water -- what a cool thing holy water is. Like when you're a kid, you walk in and there's this marble bowl and you can stick your finger in it. And I remember doing it while being held -- my mom holding me up and over the thing and I'd get holy water and put it on myself. Such a beautiful thing to do. And then has anyone ever been to a place with a giant pipe organ? And heard that? It's pretty, pretty awesome! Or just the architecture of a really nice church. When I moved to San Francisco to live at the Zen Center, I started going to Grace Cathedral because they sort of had something that we didn't have. I could go there, it's just this giant Episcopal cathedral and I'd be awe-struck. It's heavily based on Notre Dame, in Paris. There's a labyrinth in it because Episcopalians can dabble in paganism and stuff. Kind of the best of both worlds. Like Catholic ritual is not paganism. And Gregorian plainsong? The Gregorian chanting? I think it's one of the most awesome things that humans have ever come up with. Or Russian Orthodox chanting is really really beautiful.

You might have a memory, if you grew up in any kind of religion -- like Southern Baptist -- or whatever, that when you were young is was a bit evocative. You know, when you hear that stuff from when you were younger you can be like, "Yeah, too bad all that other stuff happened -- because this song is really good!" And they hate gays, or whatever. How do both of those even -- well, it's a shame, because that's a really good song! I feel the same way about hip-hop -- you're like "yeah!" and then you listen to the words and it's like "Oh, Jesus! Such misogyny!" I can't...but the groove! And the misogyny! It's really difficult, you know? So we can feel that way about our religion.

But that beautiful music and the art and stuff comes from some place beyond a logical, dogmatic, or doctrinal kind of place, you know? Not much in the doctrine about what the music is supposed to sound like that so it can actually come from your heart. Or from your experience. So we might have some fond memories and then, maybe trauma, or something, at some point. And I felt that way -- kind of how I got into Buddhism was that I was a punk rocker and there was this band Shelter and they were Hare Krishnas that did punk rock music. It was really cool! I still have the t-shirt, the logo is an eight-spoked wheel with fire! At the end of the CD they would have Kirtan music -- a form of call and response Hindu Bhakti devotional music -- usually with a harmonium, a little keyboard with bellows, and a two headed drum, and little finger cymbals and stuff like that. It's like mantras of devotion, call and response style, and it's really cool. And they jump up and down and stuff, and sing, and their practice is to love God. That all sounds really neat but then you read about them and discover that they hate gays too! What is going on with this?

So it's very difficult -- when I first got into Eastern religion, usually the version that we get are in these Western, liberal circles, so they kind of clean it up -- they erase all the parts where they say offense things and say it's really good. "Yeah, they're atheists, yeah, Buddhists don't believe in God so you don't have to worry about that." When I was first getting interested in this stuff it was kind of a lumped thing -- Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, it was all kind of this one thing that was mysterious and interesting. And I had this vague notion of a more accurate presentation of divinity. A less threatening, less male/knowledge/doctrine oriented version of divinity. So I was enchanted by that and then I got really into Zen and I lived at practice centers and did urban and rural formal training for pretty much all of my 20s. And over time, in studying Buddhism as it was presented to me, in this kind of liberal, mostly Caucasian, Western way, and in studying the philosophical systems, I lost that enchanted feeling with this thing called "sacred" or "divine." I mean, I think a year ago, I said something like "What the hell are people talking about when they say divine? That has nothing to do with Buddhism!" And it all got dried out -- it got zapped out. That kind of enchantment. You know, "That's not really realistic" or it's the "opiate of the people." It has nothing to do with Buddhism! And so forth.

You might not have had that experience, and you're lucky if you didn't. But I talk about what happened to me and hope that it has something to do with somebody else. That's all I can offer.

So I was jealous over time of people that have a devotional life or a relationship with something called sacred or divine. How did I lose that? Even the way we talk about it, when you learn Zen stuff, they call everything "the forms." When you learn how to do a prostration, they call it "the forms." This is the form of how you bow. But...it's bowing! It's a devotional process -- it's not merely a form, it's not etiquette training, it's not walking with a book on your head. You know? It's a pouring out of yourself, to something else. Sort of. Not really something else, that's binary thinking. But all the little things that we do are like this. "We're going to do service now where we chant to all Buddhas in the ten directions" -- here's "The Form." Like we sterilize it like it's etiquette -- short-circuiting the heart connection to these ancient, devotional practices that we are doing.

It's not like that in Asia. It's not this sterilized, secularized, psychology kind of thing. Largely. I think it was like that in little pockets of northern India in 1000 maybe, but generally it's pretty religious stuff. Hmm.

So what is it about that devotion thing? My partner, Michaela, who is also a Zen priest, works with juvenile offenders in Jefferson Parish, LA, which is right next door to Orleans Parish. And Jefferson Parish is the first place in Louisiana to have a "restorative justice" program for juveniles, which she basically created. And she's also on the Orleans Parish Prison Reform Coalition (OPPRC). New Orleans is the only city that calls their city jail a "prison." The new one they are building has about 3000 beds! I forget what the statistic was but an absurdly large amount of black men in New Orleans have been incarcerated at one time or another. And, like, drug charges. So you have white frat kids doing drugs and black guys doing drugs and which ones get arrested, which ones go to jail, and so forth? How does that manifest in the city?

So Orleans Parish Prison is pretty awful, and it's privatized -- well, not privatized but there are contracts for different things so the sheriff gets money in proportion to the number of people that are incarcerated. That's pretty common around the country, actually. So there's an incentive to arrest people, essentially. And all of the people that are on the Reform Coalition are lawyers and nuns. Isn't that interesting? Religious people and law people -- that's it! And theistic religions -- Michaela is the only Buddhist. So what is it about believing in God or something that makes you care about how people are treated? What makes it so easy? So obvious?

Getting back to Buddha, in the early teachings he was a bit more -- all the things that we pegged on him, kind of wrongly pegged on him as being atheistic or his teaching that "there is no self" -- these come from him being very "non-speculative." So he did the non-speculative thing rather than saying "here's how it is." The Buddha actually wasn't very metaphysical -- all of the Buddhist metaphysics and philosophical systems came after Buddha died. He didn't really get into that. There's this bit in the early suttas where Vacchagotta the Wanderer asks the Buddha point-blank whether there is or is not a self. The Buddha remained silent, which means that the question has no helpful answer. As he later explained to Ananda, to respond either yes or no to this question would be to side with opposite extremes of wrong view. Some have argued that the Buddha didn't answer

no because Vacchagotta wouldn't have understood the answer, but there's another passage where the Buddha advises all of the monks to avoid getting involved in questions such as "What am I?", "Do I exist?", "Do I not exist?", and so forth, because they lead to answers like "I have a self" or "I have no self," both of which are a thicket of views, a contortion of views that get in the way of awakening.

So unwilling to say that there is or isn't a self, in the Udana Sutta, he says "Oh monks, there is an unborn, undying, unchanging, uncreated." Sounds like something that the Buddha that I was taught about wouldn't have said.

So what does this Middle Way thing really mean? To not be nihilistic and not be eternalistic. To have there be not necessarily an entity that is a creator, but also not total happenstance.

The former abbot of Soji-ji in the 70s, Keido Chisan, was having a conversation with somebody and he said, "My good man, don't you realize that there is something that is beyond the opposites?" Beyond the opposites. Sounds like Dogen in the beginning of the Genjo Koan when he says, "As all things are buddha-dharma, there is delusion and realization, practice, birth and death, and there are sentient beings. As the myriad things are without an abiding self, there is no delusion, no realization, no buddha, no sentient being, no birth and death. The buddha way is, basically, leaping clear of the many and the one; thus there are birth and death, delusion and realization, sentient beings and buddhas."

So there's an aspect of "is", an aspect of "isn't", and the Buddha way is leaping clear of the many and the one. "Leaping clear of the many and the one."

"My good man, don't you realize that there is something beyond the opposites?" And then the guy says back to him, "Oh, no, I'm not going to believe in a God." Keido Chisan says, "You're not required to, but there is a third position." And Chisan's disciple says, "You're not required to believe in an entity, but there is that which is unborn, unchanging, undying, and in that place, one can take genuine rest and there one can get beyond the opposites."

In that place one can take genuine rest. There's a bit of a difference, you know. There are lots of different kinds of Buddhists. Not all of them did the same practice, not all of them had the same experiences, not all of them have the same personalities and propensities. So when you look at the literature, there are some -- they call them Panditas -- and a Pandita might be someone a little different than a yogin or a meditation practitioner. Panditas spend a lot of time writing and writing philosophical works. And thinking about things. And the more thick philosophical things you read the less you hear about this this unborn, undying kind of thing. But when you hear these kind of simple yogis talk about their experience, they do kind of seem to reference this eternal thing a bit more, as a felt presence. Buddha as a felt presence. Not a historical figure but as a felt presence -- the awakening principle itself as a felt presence. To rest in. Tibetan

Buddhists talk about the ground of being -- primordial Buddha as the ground of being. To rest in.

And then this emptiness thing, sunyata -- that's pretty straightforward, right? Lack of stuff. Emptiness. But emptiness, sunyata, in the Buddhist sense, means empty of something that was never there. Empty of the imagined. So what isn't imagined isn't empty. Existence is empty of your imputation of essence -- that's coming from your own karmic mind-stream. I don't know if that makes much sense, and I'm not going to explain it thoroughly today, you have a lifetime, right? At least.

B. Alan Wallace, who is very trustworthy, says "The essential nature of the whole Samsara and Nirvana is the absolute space of the Tathagata, the absolute space of the 'womb of the Tathagata.' But this absolute space is not to be confused with the mere absence of matter, rather this absolute space is imbued with all the infinite knowledge, compassion, power, and enlightened activities of the Buddha. Moreover, this luminous space is that which causes the phenomenal world to appear and is none other than the nature of one's own mind, which by nature is clear light. Samantabhadra, the primordial Buddha, whose nature is identical with the womb of the Tathagata within each sentient being is the ultimate ground of samsara and nirvana and the entire universe consists of nothing other than displays of this infinite, radiant, empty awareness."

It almost sounds like religion. So "abiding in the ground of being" -- and this notion of sacred or divinity, I mean, what's the difference, really? Maybe it's just an attitude? What's the difference between sacred and not-sacred? Sacred just means you love it more, you know? That it's potent for you. So to get all smart and know that "nothing's sacred" is -- alright, great! Enjoy your life without anything sacred. But you can bring your life to light with the notion of sacredness.

And there are systems in place within our practice that take use of this, you could say, "pragmatic necessity" of divinity to act as a counterpoint. This is what tantra and chanting and devotional practices are. When you take everything away and you have this sunyata thing, it's like okay, things don't exactly exist as you think they do, and you're kind of left with nothing. I always had this "grass is always greener" thing -- you know? I had a hard time settling into where I was. And then when you start to lose that grass is always greener thing, you just kind of have...dead grass. (laughter)

But devotional practice -- as you are losing the "God" of your own views -- to have an idea of complete love and perfection that you reach out to emotionally, it takes your difficult messy karmic disposition, takes it out of you, and gives it this breath of perfection and gives it right back to you. This is the core of what tantra practice is. You have a perfect being that embodies some perfect aspect of awakening -- say, different deities for compassion or wisdom or wrathful wisdom, things like that, and you take your energy from you, send it and it gets purified by your own notion of perfection and love. Because you are creating it within yourself. From your own end you are creating these positive qualities. Because the "womb" of the Tathagata exists inside of you. Or "the Kingdom of God is at hand" or inside of you -- that's probably one of those wrong -- it

sounds too good to be in the accepted gospels, right? It's probably in one of the "bad" gospels like the Gospel of Thomas or something. Kingdom of God is inside of you.

So there was this period -- it's not like Buddhism existed in a vacuum. Buddha existed within the context of vedic culture and yogic culture, and they were all kind of flourishing around each other and they totally borrowed from each other. So Hindu Vedanta -- Hinduism doesn't really exist per se, it's like a term invented to describe "everything that wasn't Muslim." Basically. It's like "Indian religions" are called Hinduisim because they're from the Indus Valley. You know, Hindu. It's a Persian word, actually. They didn't name themselves that. And there's so many facets of them -- there's Brahmanical, priestly Hinduism and yogic Hinduism, and then Buddhism which is so darn similar. When you read the Vedanta people talking about, "Well, Buddhism's really wrong because they think there's no soul and here's our description of what the soul really is." My reaction has always been, "This is just semantics, you guys!" You can research that yourself if you want.

At some point it was noticed -- and you see this if you look at Buddhism chronologically at the beginning of the Mahayana practice, we kind of got God back. We kind of got all of these deities to be devotional towards. Because it helps to be able to "hang the mind on a hook" -- ooh, that doesn't sounds good does it? But it helps to be able to have a focal point, otherwise you could just be "jellyfishy", you know? So sometimes we say that Zazen or Shikantaza is "object-less" meditation, but there's this aspect of it where you're resting in the ground of being. So it's different than "jellyfishy" where there's just the currents of your karma moving you about without any kind of effort or intentionality on your own, or any destination in mind.

I'm teaching in New Orleans now and the place is so new that all of the people there are new! Which is great! And it's like I learn how biased I am. I had this student the other day and she asked me "Okay, so that ground of being, that's the goal." And I say, "No, no, no, there's no goals." And then we kept going back and forth and I couldn't -- well it's just semantics, I'm indoctrinated to say that there's no goal. So I said it's more of an intention, and she just flatly said "All right. Oh, I get it, every time you say intention, I'll just think goal." So eventually I said, "Yeah, fair enough, maybe you're right."

So it's tricky -- every time we kind of fixate on something and think we understand what it's meaning it might not necessarily mean that. So "goal" -- maybe "goal" isn't disgusting. If you sit down with the intention -- I've done a lot of sitting with no intention, and you know what happened? Endless daydreaming. I don't think that is what we were prescribed to do. So when I sit down with the intention of having a "below the neck" experience, with the intention of "resting in the ground of being" -- yeah, that's fine, I'll take it. You can sit there and it's just the matter of the attitude to make you feel supported and make you feel safe. Because a lot of the root of our delusion is feeling threatened. The root of our separation and self-protection and ego-centricity is when we forsake our true selves in the name of "I" -- it's fear. When you come here -- when you came in here the first time, might have been today might have been a previous time, were you terrified of being judged? Afraid of being a beginner? Afraid of somebody needing

something from you that you can't give them or try to get you to think a way that you're unwilling to think? That's how we've "made it" to here, though -- if you're alive it means you are a descendent of people that were very good at looking after themselves.

But the shadow side of that is a heart that's maybe a bit closed off. Non-trusting. That keeps you from resting in the ground of being. You gotta feel safe to rest in the ground of being. And safety you can just give yourself -- take the notion of safety and send it into your stomach. It's yoga. So when you're sitting zazen does it feel like an endeavor? Did you take any kind of Protestant training that you received with you to "work hard for the Lord" and do this endeavor of Zen training? "I'm working on myself, this is self-improvement?" What's the difference between that and resting in the ground of being?

Dogen said that zazen is not learning meditation, just simply the dharma gate of repose and bliss. Something about sitting still and letting realization realize itself. To carry the self forward and experience things is delusion. To carry the self forward and "get enlightened" is delusion. To carry the self forward and "improve myself" is delusion. But resting in the ground of being. And letting your karmic knots unravel. And feeling safe. And every new activity is coming from that centered place. What a "goal!"

I think I'll stop there. Sounds like a good ending.

Oh, one more thing. So if you're sitting, feel free to feel held, because you are. Obviously, if you're sitting, you are. Feel free to feel the beginning-less awareness of the Tathagatas holding your face, you know, because they are! And it might work better than "I am doing object-less meditation" -- but then the trap of that is, like "I am going to let the Tathagatas caress my face while I meditate because that will produce better results."

It's so hard not to throw a gutter-ball. You know? It's so slippery. Correct understanding is a little greased in our minds so that we fall into assertion or denial. Falling into assertion...do you guys read the Trusting Mind Sutra? Falling into assertion you assert that the world is real, falling into denial you miss its deeper meaning. Make the hair's breadth distinction and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart." So what happens when heaven and earth aren't set apart?

I'll stop there. I'll be around if you want to talk to me. It's been really great to be here, and...do this stuff. I mean I don't like to tell you what to do, but I mean...doing it is so much better than not doing it. World of difference!