

# Is There a Western Path to Enlightenment?

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## Thoughts to Ponder At the Beginning:

Recognize what is in your sight, and that which is hidden shall become clear to you. --  
*The Gospel of Thomas*

You don't need to be helped any longer. You've always had the power to go back to Kansas. -- Glinda the Good

## Prelude

*Variations on a Theme* by Eric Satie

## Lighting of the Chalice

## Opening Words

Come into this place of peace and let its silence heal your spirit;  
Come into this place of memory and let its history warm your soul;  
Come into this place of prophecy and power and let its vision change your heart. --  
William F. Schulz

## Hymn #103 "For All the Saints"

## Unison Affirmation

## Welcome and Announcements

## Story for All Ages

*The Judgment of Paris*                      adapted by Doug Muder

Once upon a time the gods were planning a big party, and one of them said, "Whatever you do, don't invite Eris. She's the Goddess of Discord and she always makes trouble."

Well, Eris wasn't supposed to hear that, but she did. And she said, "They're worried about me causing trouble, are they? I'll show them what causes trouble."

So she sat down and created the Apple of Desire, which was made of gold and was the most beautiful thing in the whole world. Just looking at this apple made you want to have it and keep it for your own and not share it with anybody. And she put an inscription on

the apple, which said, “This belongs to the most beautiful goddess.”

Well, the day of the party came and Eris didn’t get an invitation, so she waited until the music was playing and the party was going really strong. And she stood outside the door and rolled the apple in.

As soon as the gods and goddesses saw the apple, everybody wanted it. But then they read the inscription and knew that the apple should go to the most beautiful goddess. But who was the most beautiful goddess?

Athena, who was Goddess of Wisdom and should have known better, grabbed for the apple and said, “It’s mine, because nothing is more beautiful than Wisdom.”

Then Hera grabbed the apple away from her and said, “I’m the Queen of the Gods, and nothing is more beautiful than Power, so the apple belongs to me.”

And Aphrodite tried to take the apple, saying, “I get it, because I’m Goddess of Love and nothing is more beautiful than Love.”

They kept pushing and pulling and grabbing the apple away from each other, and the whole party was about to turn into a riot, when Zeus, the King of the Gods yelled for everybody to be quiet and sit down and stop fighting over this apple. And everyone said, “OK, then, *you* decide who gets it.”

Well, Zeus took one look at Athena and Hera and Aphrodite, and he knew he did *not* want to get into the middle of this. So he said, “I know a handsome young man named Paris. He’s a good judge of beauty, so why don’t we let him decide.”

So that’s what they did. They went to see Paris and Zeus gave him the apple and told him to give it to whichever of the three goddess was the most beautiful. That’s how Paris came to hold the world’s first beauty pageant. He put the goddesses through an evening gown competition and a talent competition and a swimsuit competition, and Paris kept making up more and more events, because he was really enjoying being the judge of three goddesses, and he didn’t want it to be over.

Finally Athena realized that the only way this was going to end was if one of the goddesses bribed Paris into giving her the apple. So she said, “If you give the apple to me, I can make you the smartest person in the whole world.”

Paris thought that sounded pretty good, and he was about to give Athena the apple when Hera said, “If you give me the apple, I can give you a kingdom and make your armies unbeatable so that you’ll conquer the whole world.”

Paris thought that sounded *really* good, and he was about to hand the apple to Hera when Aphrodite said, “If you give me the apple I can make the most beautiful woman in the world fall in love with you.”

And Paris said, “I don’t know. King of the World has a real ring to it.”

But Aphrodite said, “Look.” And she showed Paris a vision of Helen of Sparta, the most beautiful woman in the world.

Well, Paris took one look and said, “Here’s your apple.” So Aphrodite transported Paris

to Sparta and made Helen fall in love with him, and they ran away to the city of Troy, where Paris' father was king.

Now, by choosing Aphrodite, Paris did exactly the same thing the goddesses had done: Namely, he saw something he wanted and just grabbed for it without stopping to think. He didn't think about whether it might be wrong to make somebody fall in love with him, or what might happen next.

One of things he didn't think about was that Helen was already married to a powerful king. And the brother of the powerful king was an even more powerful king. Between the two of them, they raised a huge army and went off to fight a war to get Helen back.

It was a terrible war. It lasted ten years and in the end Troy was burned to the ground. Paris got killed, and even the three goddesses didn't come out ahead, because some of their temples were destroyed in the fire. So this story doesn't have a happy ending for anybody, except maybe Eris.

Because she had made her point. She proved to the gods that nobody makes trouble for you. You make trouble for yourself when you grab what you want without thinking.

**Hymn #190 "Light of Ages and of Nations"**

### **Readings**

Our readings today are from two Romans. The first is from the Stoic philosopher Seneca, who had one of history's most difficult and thankless jobs: He was supposed to teach moderation and self-control to the young Emperor Nero.

A couple of things about this piece surprised me. The first is how contemporary it sounds. Reading Seneca is more like getting advice from your uncle than like studying an ancient philosopher. The second surprising thing was that the practice he describes here is very similar to something that my wife and I had been doing for years anyway, without realizing that it was a couple thousand years old.

"The mind must be called to account every day. This is what Sextius used to do: at the close of the day, when he retired to his nightly rest, he used to pose questions to his mind: 'What fault of yours have you cured today? What defects have you resisted? In what way are you better?'

A person will cease from anger and be more moderate if he knows that every day he has to come before himself as judge. What therefore is more wonderful than this habit of unfolding the entire day?

How fine is the sleep that follows this acknowledgement of oneself, how serene, how deep and free, when the mind has been either praised or admonished, and as its own hidden investigator and assessor has gained knowledge of its own character?

I avail myself of this power, and plead my case daily before myself.

When the light has been removed from sight, and my wife, long since aware of this habit of mine, has fallen silent, I examine my entire day and measure my deeds and words. I hide nothing from myself. I pass over nothing. For why should I fear anything from my own errors, when I can say, 'See that you don't do that again, this time I pardon you.'"

The second reading is from the Skeptic philosopher Sextus Empiricus. In this piece he describes the typical experience of a student in a Skeptic school. One of the things I want to point out to those of you who know something about Buddhism is how easy it would be to turn this into a Zen story.

Sextus says that the typical student comes to philosophy believing that the way to relieve his anxiety about life is to find out the Truth. But instead, as he studies the divergent "Truths" proposed by various authors ...

"He falls into uncertainty, seeing the equal weight on both sides of each question. Being unable to sort this out, he suspends judgment; and as he is suspending judgment, there follows, coincidentally, freedom from anxiety. ...

The Skeptic's experience is, in fact the same as what is reported about the painter Apelles.

For they say that as he was painting a horse, and trying to represent the foam on its coat, he was so unsuccessful that he gave up and flung at the picture the sponge he had been using to wipe the paints off his brush. And the sponge made the effect of the horse's foam.

So, too, Skeptics used to hope to get free from anxiety through sorting out the discrepancies in impressions and thoughts; but proving unable to do this, they suspended judgment; and as they were suspending, freedom from anxiety followed as if by chance."

### **Meditation**

I'd like to do something a little bit different with the meditation. There's an experience that a lot of people have had, and it goes by many names, but I call it *epiphany*. It's going to turn out to be important later on in my sermon.

What I'd like to do now is to describe a situation in which you might have experienced an epiphany yourself. If my description causes you to remember something, go with it; and if not, try to imagine what such an experience would feel like. After I've finished my description, we'll sit quietly for about a minute, so that you can really get the taste of the experience. You can close your eyes if you like. And naturally, if you just want sit quietly and think about whatever you want, that's OK too.

Imagine, or remember, some major life decision: whether or not this is the person you want to marry; whether you want to have children; whether to take that dream job that

makes you leave all your friends; whether or not you can retire now. Something that's not easily reversible. Something that's too big for you to see all the consequences.

And, for a while at least, you don't know what to do. Some of your friends give you advice, but none of it is compelling. You make your two lists of reasons why you might do one thing or the other, and it doesn't help. You don't know what to do.

And then something trivial happens. You hear a song on the radio. You pick up a book that you haven't looked at in a long time. Somebody says something unimportant that reminds you of something else. And suddenly you know what you're going to do. In an instant you go from indecision to complete certainty, without being able to explain exactly what changed.

You go back to your two lists, and the reasons to do the other thing still make a certain kind of sense, for someone else. But not for you. Being the person you are, there is only one thing you can do.

That moment of instantaneous knowledge welling up from the deepest part of yourself, that's an *epiphany*. Let's sit with that experience.

### **Sharing of Joys and Sorrows**

Diogenes the Cynic was famous for living a simple life and having as few material possessions as possible. According to legend, he once came to a stream, pulled his trusty old clay cup out of his pack, scooped up some water to drink. While he was there, a boy came up to the stream and began drinking water out of his hands.

Seeing this, Diogenes threw his cup away and said, "What a fool I've been all these years, lugging around that useless object."

Some of you may have noticed that you've been lugging around some useless pieces of green paper. We're going to pass a basket around now so you can throw them away.

### **The Offering**

#### **Sermon "Is There is Western Path to Enlightenment?"**

There's a classic story that gets acted out in reality every few years. It goes like this: A young adult (typically male) grows up in the center of civilization (typically England). He has a certain measure of success and comes to be quite proud of himself. And then he goes off to an apparently backward part of the world (typically India), where he finds ancient teachings that wake him up spiritually.

In my formative years, this was the story of the Beatles going to study with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. If you're younger than I am, or just more up to date, you may have been reminded of Alanis Morissette, who went off to India a few years ago and came back so

enlightened that she was cast as God in the movie *Dogma*. Older people may know yet another incarnation of the story, and I suspect that it goes back to Kipling or even earlier.

Originally, I think, the point of the protagonist leaving his wealthy, civilized homeland was that before you can learn anything important you have to get away from the place where you think you know everything already. But in my generation, growing up at a time when Christianity seemed hidebound and Humanism was turning its back on matters of the spirit, the story seemed to be saying something different: It was saying that the West is not spiritual.

At that time, many of us didn't interpret this story metaphorically, as saying that the Beatles had to escape their own idolization before they could find God, but literally, as saying that if you want to be enlightened, you have to go to India. Or Nepal. Or Tibet. Or you have to bring one of their teachers over here, so that you can study with someone who has not been corrupted by this materialistic, mechanistic Western culture. In other words, you have to get out of the shadow of science before you can see the light.

Like many people, I internalized that message, and that has led to a schism that has been with me most of my life. On the one hand, I am a lover of Western culture and a practitioner of Western rationality. My first intellectual hero was Socrates, and the ancient Greeks have been special to me ever since. When it came time to choose a career I became a mathematician – which is about as far as you can go with rationality.

On the other hand, I am a spiritual seeker. I want more out of my religion than just an ethical philosophy and a program of social action. And because I believed that the West was unspiritual, I have looked just about everywhere but here: Buddhism, Hinduism, Paganism. I've read the books. I've dabbled in the practices. And yet I've never been able to make a full commitment to any one of them.

It has taken me decades to understand why: As much as I admire and even envy some of the Eastern or indigenous religions, I am a Westerner. The West is not just where my body happened to be born. It is the home of my soul.

And yet I am not a Christian. The issues that move me have little to do with the cosmic drama of sin and redemption. I value much of what I find in the Christian tradition, but it seems every bit as foreign to me as the Diamond Sutra or the Tao Te Ching. In spite of my Lutheran upbringing, my spiritual roots are on the Humanist side of the West, not the Christian side.

Realizing this has forced me to take another look at the whole question of whether the rational, scientific West can be spiritual. In other words: Is there an authentic spiritual path within the Western humanist tradition?

An aside: If this were just my personal question, I don't think I'd be preaching a sermon about it. But I think this is an important question for Unitarian-Universalism. When I look at the denomination – at, say, the letters column in *The World* or the online discussion groups or the talks at General Assembly – I see a split very much like the split that I see in myself. On the one hand we have the Humanists, who identify strongly with the West, but not with spirituality. On the other hand we have the Buddhists, Hindus, Pagans, and New Agers, who identify with spirituality, but not with the West.

What's missing in this picture is the center, the glue that holds everything together. If we can't find that center, I think that in the long run the denomination is in trouble. That center, I think, needs to be both spiritual and Western.

At this point, a good Westerner be asking: "What do those words mean?" As my old hero Socrates said, "The beginning of wisdom is the definition of terms."

Well, *Western* is easy for me to define to my own satisfaction: The West is the cultural tradition that descends from the ancient Greeks. For me to be satisfied with the Westernism of a spiritual path, it would have to be comfortable with both the humanism and the rationality of the Greeks. It would also have to find at least some of its heroes and prophets in the Western world: people like Socrates or Emerson or Bertrand Russell.

OK, but that was the easy one: What about defining *spiritual*? Everybody knows you can't define *spiritual*. In fact, a lot of people believe that it doesn't mean anything at all, that it's just a catchall term for whatever irrational things people want to do or think or believe. I find, however, that if I only have to please myself, I don't have any trouble defining *spiritual*. Here goes: A path is *spiritual* to the extent that it increases the amount of epiphany in my life. *Epiphany* in turn, is defined by experience: I can point at experiences of epiphany, which is what I tried to do in the meditation.

This definition brings another very Western notion into play: testability. If the purpose of spiritual practices is to increase the amount of epiphany in my life, then I can look at a practice and ask myself "Is this working?" I like that.

Now that we have some idea of what the question means, where would we look for an answer? I decided to look for my Western spiritual practice in the time when Humanism was born, a period that historians call the Hellenistic Era. It lasted roughly 600 years, about 300 BC to 300 AD, or from the time of Alexander the Great to the time when Christianity became the official religion of Rome. This period is fascinating because it resembles today in so many ways.

The Hellenistic Era began because the conquests of Alexander forced Greek culture to become cosmopolitan – this is when the term *cosmopolitan* was invented – and this cosmopolitan culture then became a rival to all the local indigenous cultures from Persia to Rome. The process of Greek culture usurping and assimilating local cultures was called Hellenization, and it was very much like globalization today, in both its good and bad aspects. Humanism, I think, was one of its good aspects.

Humanism developed because Greek philosophers were now speaking to audiences that included Persians, Jews, Egyptians, and eventually Romans, and so they had to change the ways that they justified their ideas. You couldn't base your arguments just on tradition, for example, because the people in your audience had many different traditions. You couldn't rely on religion, because your audience had many different religions. Instead, you had show how your beliefs and practices would lead to happier lives and better communities. You had to appeal to the common *human* interests of your audience. Hence, Humanism.

A lot of modern Humanism's specific positions go all the way back to this beginning. The Stoics, for example, envisioned a world government establishing peace, and taught that rehabilitation is better than punishment. The argument against traditional religion – that it panders to people's fear of death, and provides superstitions whose main purpose is to increase the power of the priests – goes back to Epicurus around 300 BC. I could go on, but my point is that this is not just a coincidence of labels. Hellenistic Humanists would still be considered Humanists if they walked into our church today.

Here's the punch line: The Hellenistic schools of philosophy were also integrated spiritual paths that contain most, if not all, of the spiritual ideas that people today think they can only find in the Eastern religions. And those ideas appear in a context that is surprisingly modern. These Greeks and Romans are writing to us from a world that is psychologically very similar to ours. These authors are facing the breakdown of tradition, the multiplicity of conflicting beliefs, the temptations of power and wealth, the desire to balance the personal with the political, doubts about the reality of the gods and the afterlife, and the need to find some kind of common humanity in spite of the differences of race, wealth, education, and social status.

OK. So who were they and what did they say? (This is the 600-years-in-five-minutes part of my sermon. A good reference is Martha Nussbaum's book *The Therapy of Desire*.) Hellenistic philosophy came in four flavors: Cynics, Skeptics, Epicureans, and Stoics. All four of those words still mean something in English, but you need to keep in mind that the English meanings of the words come from the Christian caricatures of the four schools rather than what the schools actually taught.

I've already introduced you to the original Cynic, Diogenes, whose philosophy was a radical critique of materialism and status-seeking. Skepticism was the Hellenistic world's version of Zen, and I think that some of the Zen ideas that Westerners find difficult are easier to understand in their Skeptic presentation. The Skeptics taught that by balancing



the arguments of one dogma against those of another, you can reach a state that transcends both belief and ignorance, an *informed* state of not-knowing. In Zen that would be called “beginner’s mind.”

Epicurus taught that unhappiness comes from having desires you can’t satisfy. And so his students studied desire and the modification of desire. He taught that natural desires like hunger and thirst are easily satisfied, but that society teaches us false beliefs that lead to desires that are never satisfied: desires for fame, for money, for status, for immortality, and many others. Epicureans learned to analyze their desires, to satisfy the ones that are easily satisfied, to stop trying to satisfy the others, and to search out the false beliefs that create unquenchable desires.

To me the most attractive Hellenistic school is Stoicism. Stoicism is a path of self-mastery, and is based on a practice of regular and rigorous self-examination. Like Epicurus, the Stoics say that unhappiness is unnecessary; that it comes from mistakenly fearing things that can’t be avoided and desiring things that can’t be attained. In addition, they stress the problem of attaching ourselves to things and to relationships that are impermanent – another notion you may recognize from Eastern religions.

The Stoics are often misread as saying that the answer to the problem of *attachment* is *detachment* – to be cold and not care about anyone, and so avoid losing anything that matters to you. I read them as saying something that is both more subtle and more difficult: that we should accept and never lose sight of the fact that all relationships end, either in death or some other way. For a Stoic, grief is not something that hits all at once when a loved one dies; grief has been a part of the process of love from the beginning. *The Stoic never hides from the fact that ultimately he will lose everything.*

Epictetus uses a very evocative image; he says that we should enjoy the good things in life

“the way that a traveler enjoys an inn.” A person who has learned to enjoy life on these terms, the Stoics claim, has become like a god. Because he has already accepted whatever cards life may deal him, his happiness has moved beyond the sphere of Luck.

How does that happen? What makes it possible, the Stoics teach, is a tiny spark of divine wisdom that lies somewhere inside of each person’s mind. (You can take that metaphorically if you like.) But even though this spark is divine, it is still weak in the beginning. It still must be trained and exercised before it grows strong enough to take control of our lives. Otherwise, we are dominated by other forces: habit, appetite, mood, money, pain, media hype, or social status. In Stoic language, this kind of life is slavery, even if you are Caesar and able to indulge your every whim. Epictetus wrote: “No one is free who does not master himself.”

Enough ancient history. Last year I decided to take all this seriously, and did a Stoic

inventory of my life. It was humbling. Every day I asked myself, “How much of what I did today was the free choice of the best part of myself?” Inevitably, the answer was: not much. My actions did not come from anything like a sense of epiphany. Most of the time I was just reacting to whatever came up. And those reactions were the result of precisely the processes the Stoics had pointed out: fear of the inevitable, desire for the unattainable,

and the anxiety that comes from maintaining attachments while remaining in denial about the possibility of loss.

The most humbling realization was that I was not even the master of my own mind. Even in my supposedly “free” moments, my mind would drift to whatever issue was being hyped that week. It didn’t matter what I thought was important or what I wanted to think about. Elian Gonzales, the Microsoft Antitrust Trial, the New Hampshire primary – my mind was like a Muzak system where someone else was choosing the tapes.

Spinoza observed something similar: “Those who believe that they speak, or are silent, or do anything else from a free decree of the mind, are dreaming with their eyes open.” Ouspensky wrote: “Man ... is a marionette pulled here and there by invisible strings. If he understands this, he can learn more about himself, and possibly then things may begin to change for him.”

After almost a year of practice, I can report that I am learning more about myself and things are *beginning* to change for me. I have not achieved my godlike freedom yet, but more and more often now, I find that I can at least focus my mind on what *I* want to think about, things that I have decided need my attention, rather than whatever stray piece of garbage happens to wander into my head. That may sound like a fairly trivial victory, but it has been hard won, and I am proud of it. I have some hope that in the years to come I will be able to take more and more conscious control of my life, rather than just react to random circumstances.

Is this increasing the amount of epiphany in my life? Yes, I think is. I believe that my Western spiritual practice is working.

My point is not that you should all go out and become Stoics. My point is that there are deep spiritual resources in the West, in Humanism, in our own cultural traditions. We have no need to feel inferior on that account to India or Tibet or the Native Americans or anyone else.

Second, I urge you to look to your own culture first for spiritual practices. And if you don’t find something immediately at hand, look deeper into your culture’s roots before you borrow from somewhere else. Using another culture’s spiritual practices is a lot like speaking a second language: You can learn a lot by doing it, but you will probably always have an accent and you will never write good poetry. There’s nothing wrong with stealing

a few specific ideas and techniques, but if you can't explain the big picture of your practice without using a bunch of untranslatable terms from another language, you're handicapping yourself.

Finally, there should be no split between Humanism and spirituality, either in our churches or in ourselves. Spiritual seekers have no cause to look down on the Humanist tradition. And conversely, Humanists should not look on spirituality as a foreign invasion. It did not come into Unitarian-Universalism with the Buddhists in the 70s or the Pagans in 80s or the New Agers in the 90s. Spirituality is part of Humanism and has been for 23 centuries. If we have lost that part of our tradition, it is time for us to go out and reclaim it.

### **Hymn #135 "How Happy Are They"**

#### **Closing Words**

Epicurus taught that stories are like drugs: It's important to your mental health to take the right ones in the right dosages. And so I prescribe *The Wizard of Oz*, which teaches us that the most important leg of a journey of discovery is the trip home. And so, our closing words: [three heel clicks]: "There's no place like home. There's no place like home. There's no place like home."

#### **Postlude**

*Let It Be*      John Lennon and Paul McCartney