

A Realistic Spirituality

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In the zazen posture, your mind and body have great power to accept things as they are, whether agreeable or disagreeable. — Shunryu Suzuki, Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind

Ancient Witness: Matthew 5:43-45

Today I want to talk about spiritual realism, about the path to awakening that comes by embracing the world as it is.

In Buddhism, nirvana or enlightenment means *seeing things as they are*.

Walpola Rahula, who was a Buddhist monk and Professor of History and Religion at Northwestern University, explained the importance of this realistic point of view:

Buddhism is neither pessimistic nor optimistic. If anything at all, it is realistic, for it takes a realistic view of life and the world. It looks at things objectively. It does not falsely lull you into living in a fool's paradise, nor does it frighten and agonize you with all kinds of imaginary fears and sins. It tells you exactly and objectively what you are and what the world around you is, and shows you the way to perfect freedom, peace, tranquility and happiness.

I'm talking about a spirituality that is not mere optimism; not the belief in a utopia, but one that sees the darkness, acknowledges the suffering—the negative emotions of fear, sadness and anger caused by our illusions and our attachments. A spirituality drawn not by a hope of utopia or a perfect world but by a realization of something *already* here.

Don't get me wrong; we have lots to be concerned about. We have a desire for lots of transformation of the way things are: Global warming, institutional racism and police violence, economic inequality (Jimmy Carter observed a few years ago that we don't live in a democracy anymore but an oligarchy. Our elections and policies are dominated by wealth and power.) And we are living in the midst of a global pandemic. And so our spirituality doesn't deny the darkness and harsh aspects. We don't hide from them. It's important to acknowledge and to work to correct. And it's important to acknowledge our complicity and inadequacy—our less than perfect devotion. *But we don't stop here!*

We don't stop with a spirituality that is either falsely optimistic or pessimistic. There is a spirituality that sees and affirms liberation, healing, freedom and beauty.

In the I Ching it says,

It is only when we have the courage to face things exactly as they are, without any self-deception or illusion that a light will develop out of events, by which the path to success may be recognized.

Jesus, it seems to me, also demonstrated a realistic spirituality. He said that sometimes bad things happen. Sometimes children are born blind, for example. That's the way it is. There will always be poor among us—no utopia, no perfect world. The rich will be so encumbered that they won't wake up or change—as likely as a camel walking through the eye of a needle. The rain falls on the just and the unjust; the sun shines on the good and the bad. It just happens that way. And the problem, he said, is that we have eyes, but do not see; ears and we do not hear. See or hear what? Reality! Things as they are.

Because that is what spirituality is—*contact with Reality*.

And by Reality, I mean an unfiltered encounter with the world just as it is, direct contact with reality, accepting things as they are. This awareness is beyond thought and words and brings healing, peace and true happiness. And this Reality is experienced in the present moment. It involves dropping attachments, not fighting or resisting what is. The problem is not the evil and the pain in life, but *our reactions* to it.

Tathata, which means "suchness" or "thusness," is a word sometimes used primarily in Zen and Mahayana Buddhism to mean "reality," or "the way things really are." It's understood that the true nature of reality is ineffable, beyond description and conceptualization.

Tathata is the root of *Tathagata*, which is an alternate term for "Buddha," and it was the term the historical Buddha used most often to refer to himself. The awakened one is the one who has contact with reality, the way things really are.

It happens through dedicated spiritual practice and a dedication to change one's perspective, through attentiveness to reality and an examination and reflection about this thing called "I." It's not about a pain-free life. Rather, there is a kind of liberation from suffering *in the midst* of the suffering. There are brief moments of deep relief—fleeting but lasting.

After years of spiritual practice and reflection, Thomas Merton had such a moment. He was in downtown Louisville and he wrote:

*Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts,
the depths where neither sin nor desire can reach,
the person that each one is in God's eyes.
If only they could see themselves as they really are.
If only we could see each other that way,
there would be no reason for war, for hatred, for cruelty ...*

When we have pure, direct contact with Reality, we experience the Most Real, which is a unity, oneness, an unknowable mystery that some call God, manifesting itself as love.

The late Joseph Campbell talked with Bill Moyers in an interview. He said,

There is a magnificent essay by Arthur Schopenhauer (“The Basis of Morality”) in which he asks, how is it that a human being can so participate in the peril or pain of another that without thought, spontaneously, he sacrifices his own life to the other? How can it happen that what we normally think of as the first law of nature and self-preservation is suddenly dissolved?

In Hawaii some four or five years ago there was an extraordinary event that represents this problem. There is a place there called the Pali, where the trade winds from the north come rushing through a great ridge of mountains. People like to go up there to be their hair blown about or sometimes to commit suicide—you know, something like jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge.

One day, two policemen were driving up the Pali road when they saw, just beyond the railing that keeps the cars from rolling over, a young man preparing to jump. The police car stopped, and the policeman on the right jumped out to grab the man but caught him just as he jumped, and he was being pulled over when the second cop arrived in time and pulled the two of them back.

Do you realize what had suddenly happened to that policeman who had given himself to death with that unknown youth? Everything else in his life had dropped off—his duty to his family, his duty to his job, his duty to his own life—all of his wishes and hopes for his lifetime had just disappeared. He was about to die.

Later, a newspaper reporter asked him, “Why didn’t you let go? You would have been killed.” And his reported answer was, “I couldn’t let go. If I had let that young man go, I couldn’t have lived another day of my life.” How come?

Schopenhauer’s answer is that such a psychological crisis represents the breakthrough of a metaphysical realization, which is that you and that other are one... Our true reality is in our identity and unity with all life. (The Power of Myth, p. 110)

No one was more aware of this underlying unity with all things—of reality as it truly is—than Jesus of Nazareth, who was also willing to give himself up for others. But for this awareness, our illusions must fall away, just for a moment. As Anthony de Melo said,

When your illusions drop, you’re in touch with reality at last, and believe me, you will never again be lonely, never again. Loneliness is not cured by human company. Loneliness is cured by contact with reality.

Friends, what liberates us, heals us and frees us is direct, unobstructed contact with Reality, in which we experience the Most Real, the Unity, the Oneness, the unknowable Mystery that some of us call God, manifesting itself as love.