

Reading: Gen 2:16-17

Then Yahweh gave the man this admonition, ‘You may eat indeed of all the trees in the garden. Nevertheless, of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you are not to eat for on the day you eat of it you must surely die. [Jerusalem Bible]

A Happy Fault: Original Sin through a Buddhist Lens

Presentation at First Unitarian Society—June 25, 2023

I bet you’ve wondered why I chose this reading for my sermon. You might well have thought, “Original sin? Are you kidding me? I don’t believe in that silly Adam and Eve story.”

On the surface, the Genesis story does seem ridiculous but a closer look reveals a profound truth about human consciousness and the cause of suffering.

The story begins with a blissful life in paradise. But then something happened. Against divine warning, as the reading today states, Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and this brought suffering into the world. Bliss followed by suffering appears in a baby’s development. The fetus most often experiences a blissful state in the womb when united with its mother. But once it’s separated from her at birth, it suffers and even cries on its first breath.

The tree of knowledge of good and evil is a metaphor for becoming conscious of the separation between things. It’s called dual consciousness. Experiencing things as other can easily bring suffering. It creates longings for what you don’t have. It produces differences and divisions. It can readily pit one group against another—whether it be parent-child conflicts, disagreements with others, racial tensions, ideological differences, income gaps, or territorial disputes. Dual consciousness also brings good experiences such as falling in love or forming

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deep friendships. However, if you think about it, you’ll realize that they are rewarding because you feel a connection with these precious ones, thus overcoming the dual gap.

The Buddhist First Noble Truth states “Life is dukkha.” This usually translates as suffering, dissatisfaction, anxiety or disappointment. Who of you has not experienced these

discordant feelings? Dukkha's root meaning is a cart with a poor axle hole. Driving with an off-centered wheel causes a bumpy and disagreeable ride. Yes, life in general is a bumpy ride. Even if things are going well, there's always an underlying sense that they could end at any time.

According to the Second Noble truth, the cause of this discomfort is craving—for pleasure and once experiencing pleasure for it to last. You may also crave becoming something you are not—a false identity so to speak. Any identity whether it be a parent, athlete, a helper, or even a spiritual person is not who you are because you are much greater than that. You may also crave that a difficult or unpleasant experience end. Craving is mostly mental. Simply dropping your thoughts around what you crave alleviates a lot of the angst.

Eckard Tolle's duck story brings home this idea. Two ducks bump into each other, forcefully flap their wings to release the built-up energy, and swim away. Humans would add the commentary. "I don't believe he did that. He came within five inches of me. He thinks he owns this pond. He has no consideration for my private space. I'll never trust him again," (A New Earth, 138.) This can go on for days, even years, but we do this all the time. It's a challenge to notice your thoughts around a situation and work to release them.

Both the Judeo-Christian and Buddhist traditions say life today stems from something gone awry—the wheel is wobbly, paradise is lost. Duality whether—eating from the tree of good and evil, or mentally craving for something outside you—is the culprit. Both traditions

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claim that returning to—or reaching—a nondual state, whether it be nirvana (Buddhist) or union with the divine (Christian), alleviates suffering.

Why has it been set up this way? I like to quip that I would do it differently. I've always been struck by the declaration in the Easter Vigil Service which states, "Oh happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam which gained for us so great a redeemer." Hmm. Why is original sin a happy fault and a necessity?

Original sin or dual consciousness is a happy fault because it helps you to become more aware and to build your spiritual muscles. You are not conscious of light until you go into the dark and back to light again. You are not really conscious of health unless you've been sick.

Seeing things as separate brings greater awareness through contrast. Secondly, by struggling against and overcoming life's challenges, you build your spiritual muscles, just as overcoming lethargy through activity builds your physical muscles. In confronting struggles, you may learn compassion. Until my son was in the hospital with septic shock, he never felt much compassion for others who were ill. Now he does. If you're criticized, you have the opportunity to go inside and feel your inner strength, thus lessening the blow.

You might say that's all well and good but wouldn't it have been hypothetically better for all of us if Adam and Eve obeyed the rules and stayed in paradise? But that's like saying, wouldn't it be better to be a fetus in the womb rather than a wise, conscious person? Some days you might say yes, let me go back into the womb where all my needs were met, but most likely you would—at least eventually—choose to grow and develop and that is done through contrast.

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The American Zen-trained spiritual teacher, Adyashanti, interprets the first two Noble Truths this way: personal suffering is caused by wanting things to be different from the way they are, by arguing with what is, and by trying to control reality. [Falling into Grace, 37-45] How many times have you wanted things to be different from the way they are? Who wants illness, conflict, death, wars and global warming? How many times have you railed against or got upset about situations you can't change? Examples are dealing with difficult family members, rain on a planned picnic day or government disfunction. How many times have you tried to control others so you'd feel better? I know a man who wanted to change the behavior of all the people in his office—an impossible task—rather than looking within himself as a way to create a better work environment. These three causes of suffering stem from dual consciousness—reality now vs wanting something different, you arguing over and against what is, and you imposing your separate will on what is.

How then, do you pursue the goal of unitary consciousness so you don't have to suffer so much? Any experience of connection—however brief—eliminates duality and its consequent suffering. Something magical happens when you momentarily form an affinity with another

person, when viewing nature, or savoring something. For example, I savor quietly sitting and eating a small piece of dark chocolate each day. It brings me much more pleasure than eating it quickly while thinking of something else.

Practicing mindfulness whether in meditation or your daily life greatly brings connection. Everything comes together when you are totally in the present moment. Thinking about what could, should or did happen drops away. I notice how everything—even inanimate objects come alive and sparkle when I concentrate on the present moment. Have you thought

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about being in the present moment when doing the dishes, taking a shower, really listening to someone or walking in nature? I heard the story of a monk who became enlightened when seeing light reflected off a wet dish. I think of this when doing the dishes. Even though I haven't become enlightened, it still helps me come into the present moment.

Of course, love is the connector par excellence. It brings us unitary bliss—even if temporarily—that we experienced in the womb only now with greater awareness. Savoring your connection to those you love helps create oneness. Hugging and kissing are great connectors!

Wouldn't it be wonderful to dwell in this unitary consciousness all the time as the mystics do? Do they suffer? The American spiritual teacher, Gangaji in her book, *Just Like You*, says it well:

Moments of discomfort and unhappiness come, but those moments are always on an ocean of love and peace. The moments pass, but the ocean of love and peace doesn't go anywhere. I know it is bottomless. Endless. Limitless. I know it to be who I am. (p. 138)

Even with moments of discomfort, Gangaji experiences a limitless underlying love and peace that permeates her whole life. She has reached paradise, but not as an ignorant person like Adam or Eve, but as a wise, totally conscious Self. Yes, dual consciousness is a happy fault because with work it leads us toward unitary consciousness, toward bliss.

What then are the take-aways from this presentation? First, you may realize that there's more to the Judeo-Christian tradition than previously thought. Second, when you delve

deeply into the spiritual teachings of the world religions by stripping away the rituals, dogma, and folklore, you begin to find similarities among them. This always brings me comfort. Maybe

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there's some truth to certain teachings if many traditions say the same thing. Third and most importantly, you might want to follow some of the suggested practices to reach unitary consciousness, even if only briefly, so you don't have to suffer as much.

Closing Words

In closing, I'd like us to do a practice given by Thich Nhat Hanh

Breathing in, I calm my mind and body

Breathing out, I smile (turn up the corners of mouth)

Dwelling in the present moment,

I know this to be a wonderful moment.

Yes, all of us gathered together in a sacred space is a precious moment. Feel the connection,