

JESUS AND THE BUDDHA

ECKHART TOLLE was born in Germany, educated in England and lives in Canada. His book *The Power of Now* explores the freedom that lies in breaking free from the imprisonment of our rational selves. Sebastian Moore explains why he sees it as an immensely important work.

I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN TOUCHED and moved by one of the line-drawings in the Good News Bible. It features the Crucified and two men who have just faced him and are striding vigorously on, out of the picture, leaving behind two heavy bundles. They saw, they responded, and let their burdens fall, and went on with their life, walking on air. How does that image speak? It features a man transfixed in one of the direst torments ever devised by tormented man to preserve all he knows of order, and men joyously putting off, dumping their burdens, moved by something that happened to them as they saw the man on the cross. How on earth does this work? How does the sight of the transfixed, of the finally burdened one, get them to dump their burdens?

The classic answer is that he took their burdens on himself. I can't fault that, except that it doesn't help me with my burdens; so it's a short-cut. It's an example of what the focussing people call process-skipping.¹

So now, for the process! To exemplify our burdened state, let me quote for you the following description, by Eckhart Tolle, of the experience that transformed his life. Here is how he introduces his book, *The Power of Now*.

THE ORIGIN OF THIS BOOK

I have little use for the past and rarely think about it; however, I would briefly like to tell you how I came to be a spiritual teacher and how this book

came into existence.

Until my thirtieth year, I lived in a state of almost continuous anxiety interspersed with periods of suicidal depression. It feels now as if I am talking about some past lifetime or somebody else's life.

One night not long after my twenty-ninth birthday, I woke up in the early hours with a feeling of absolute dread. I had woken up with such a feeling many times before, but this time it was more intense than it had ever been. The silence of the night, the vague outlines of the furniture in the dark room, the distant noise of a passing train - everything felt so alien, so hostile, and so utterly meaningless that it created in me a deep loathing of the world. The most loathsome thing of all, however, was my own existence. What was the point in continuing to live with this burden of misery? Why carry on with this continuous struggle? I could feel that a deep longing for annihilation, for nonexistence, was now becoming much stronger than the instinctive desire to continue to live.

'I cannot live with myself any longer'. This was the thought that kept repeating itself in my mind. Then suddenly I became aware of what a peculiar thought it was. 'Am I one or two? If I cannot live with myself, there must be two of me, the 'I' and the 'self' that 'I' cannot live with.' 'Maybe', I thought, 'only one of them is real.'

I was so stunned by this strange realization that my mind stopped. I was fully conscious, but there were no more thoughts. Then I felt drawn into what seemed like a vortex of energy. It was a slow movement at first and then accelerated. I was gripped by an intense fear, and my body started to shake. I heard the words 'resist nothing', as if spoken inside my chest. I could feel myself being sucked into a

void. It felt as if the void was inside myself rather than outside. Suddenly, there was no more fear, and I let myself fall into that void. I have no recollection of what happened after that.

I was awakened by the chirping of a bird outside the window. I had never heard such a sound before. My eyes were still closed, and I saw the image of a precious diamond. Yes, if a diamond could make a sound, this is what it would be like. I opened my eyes. The first light of dawn was filtering through the curtains. Without any thought, I felt, I knew, that there is infinitely more to light than we realize. That soft luminosity filtering through the curtains was love itself. Tears came into my eyes. I got up and walked around the room. I recognized the room, and yet I knew that I had never truly seen it before. Everything was fresh and pristine, as if it had just come into existence. I picked up things, a pencil, an empty bottle, marvelling at the beauty and aliveness of it all.

That day I walked around the city in utter amazement at the miracle of life on earth, as if I had just been born into this world.

For the next five months, I lived in a state of uninterrupted deep peace and bliss. After that, it diminished somewhat in intensity, or perhaps it just seemed to because it became my natural state. I could still function in the world, although I realized that nothing I ever did could possibly add anything to what I already had.

I knew, of course, that some profoundly significant had happened to me, but I didn't understand it at all. It wasn't until I had read spiritual texts and spent time with spiritual teachers, that I realized that what everybody was looking for had already happened to me. I understood that the intense pressure of suffering that night must have forced my consciousness to withdraw from its identification with the unhappy and deeply fearful self, which is ultimately a fiction of the mind. This withdrawal must have been so complete that this false, suffering self immediately collapsed, just as if a plug had been pulled out of an inflatable toy. What was left then was my true nature as the ever-present I am: consciousness in its

pure state prior to identification with form. Later I also learned to go into that inner timeless and deathless realm that I had originally perceived as a void and remain fully conscious. I dwelt in states of such indescribable bliss and sacredness that even the original experience I just described pales in comparison. A time came when, for a while, I was left with nothing on the physical plane. I had no relationships, no job, no home, no socially defined identity. I spent almost two years sitting on park benches in a state of the most intense joy.

But even the most beautiful experiences come and go. More fundamental, perhaps, than any experience is the undercurrent of peace that has never left me since then. Sometimes it is very strong, almost palpable, and others can feel it too. At other times, it is somewhere in the background, like a distant melody.

Later, people would occasionally come up to me and say: 'I want what you have. Can you give it to me, or show me how to get it?' And I would say, 'You have it already. You just can't feel it because your mind is making too much noise.' That answer later grew into the book that you are holding in your hands.

Before I knew it, I had an external identity again. I had become a spiritual teacher.²

I would advise you to read this more than once, and slowly. If you feel you want to read it slowly, you're probably on the way. For the story is taking you in to something in yourself that is certainly there and certainly never faced as Tolle faced it. Thinking that I am my mind — which I am not — I see as me the thing my mind calls my life, which is a whole nest of problems (bad karma?) Since all this, my mind tells me, is me, to let go of it is to cease to exist, an unbearable option. Under the pressure of a more-than-natural (supernatural?) impulse, I do let go, and this plunges me into an original nothing out of which the more-than-natu-

ral force draws me into being for the first time so that, awakening to the sweet song of a bird, I am ravished, and find that my life is a song of praise. From being a problem, my life becomes a song of praise.

Let me say that I have never, in three-score years of adult life, read such a powerful account of supernatural transformation. The discovery Tolle made is that I can stop thinking and still

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exist. I can dis-identify with my mind which I think of as me so that I cannot (I think) stop thinking and still exist (are you listening, Descartes?). He found that he *could* stop thinking and that then love flowed in and carried him, so that he could only be in love. Abbot Chapman³ made the same discovery: I can stop thinking, and 'focus' on 'nothing-in-particular' which, he says, 'is God of course.' (That was sixty years ago, before the word 'God' became almost unusable in an explanatory context.) Abbot Chapman once said laughingly to E.I. Watkin, 'my friends call me a Buddhist!'

But the self-burdening process that Tolle brilliantly made formal and allowed to be undone in him does not stop at the individual. On the contrary it starts there, as a virus that reaches out into the whole of society. The desire he experienced to end a life that he had come to find unbearable, this desire works itself out on others, whom we scapegoat. The nearest most of us get to the suicidal option that he confronted is to destroy others who, in an infinite variety of ways, most of them undetected, represent to us the unbearable thing in ourselves. Tolstoy's hero, in *Resurrection*, asks his question of all the universities, 'what entitles one part of society

to imprison, flog, and kill another part?' The answer is 'nothing', but the question needs to be changed, slightly, into 'what is the mechanism at work that accounts for the crucifixion of society's victims?' And then the answer is René Girard's: scapegoating. 'Scapegoating and victimization is the natural follow-through of the self-loathing that Tolle had the privilege of formulating and transcending.

Scapegoating is this follow-through, because desire, which is what 'moves us about our day', feeds on models, and we are such models for each other. This modelling, when it does not make for life and growth, generates the envy whose corporate prosecution in scapegoating, creates the punitive systems of the world. Jesus is the universal scapegoat, because he is the Son of God, and it is against God, the God deemed responsible for what we call our life (though it is nothing of the sort, as Tolle saw) that our scapegoating is ultimately aimed. He lives out the perfect-model condition to its ultimate conclusion, which is his death at our hands, the 'final solution' — if I dare borrow this dreadful phrase — to our self-created human problem.

Jesus our victim is raised from 'the dead', *Sheol*, the dumping-ground of our victims. This raising is the action of God which is experienced as supernatural, nature-bursting, in the encounter with the risen Jesus. And don't forget that the Gospel's primary witness to and explicator of the risen Jesus is Paul, and what he as Saul saw on the Damascus road led him to dump the biggest self-made burden ever devised, the Law. Paul fits very well into my simple bible line-drawing: Paul walking on air and saying, of the Law, 'that's all rubbish now as far as I'm concerned!' (Phil 3:8) The

biggest bundle in that picture is marked 'The Law.'

This gives us the following fascinating conclusion. Tolle interprets his experience in Buddhist terms. It is, for him, 'the end of suffering', which, he brilliantly points out, is a double negative and means the end of the unreal problem we all create for ourselves by identifying, each, the 'I' (Gendlin's 'the person behind the eyes looking out') with 'all that', what I call my life. He lets 'all that' go and becomes, at first, nothing, till the power at work in him brings him to what St John calls birth from above. Now the fascinating thing is, that whereas conventional Christian thinking would see the Buddhist 'end of suffering' as the antithesis of what Christianity offers, the fact is that the most articulate scriptural Christian witnesses the Jesus-effect as a dumping of the biggest burden ever devised, a burden far worse than any that the Buddhist could know, since it was the result not only of human creation but of misuse of something divinely given. Jesus does bring about the end of suffering as 'our problem'. If 'my burden is light' does not mean the end of the heavy burden of suffering, what does it mean?

So the difference between the Buddhist and the Christian response to suffering is not that the Buddhist ducks it while the Christian faces it. The difference is only that what Buddhist Enlightenment understands, superbly, in terms of the individual confronted with desire and the suffering it engenders, the Christian understands in its fully worked-out social political form. But the core is the same. The better the Christian understands himself, the closer he comes to the Buddhist, and

vice versa.

The Christian has the huge advantage that for him or her the human problem is dramatically worked out and superbly tackled in its mature political form. But this very advantage conceals a corresponding disadvantage: that the very thoroughness of the Christian solution obscures the essence, so that Christianity has come to be understood as saying that suffering is a good thing — the huge Christian 'miss' that is as good as a mile. A miss that misses Paul! For the most daring things Paul had to say about Christ, that 'God made him sin for us so that we might become in him the righteousness of God' (Rom 8:3); that God, with the crucifixion, 'condemned sin in the flesh' (2 Cor 5:21)⁶ are spelling out all the way the consequences of Jesus handling the human problem in its full political horror. Yes, such is our myopia that Jesus on the cross is everything we try to get rid of in ourselves. 'For us', Jesus is 'evil.' He was executed, at the Chief Priest's recommendation, as the most dangerous disturber of the peace. Yes, Jesus does carry to the grave the self we create and fear and hate and destroy. Analytically this is Buddhist. It is the overcoming of the human illusion. Let me take this a little further.

Jesus represents what we see as the worst of us, so we do to him what we want to do to this worst of ourselves. But he lets us! Nay he encourages us! And after the deed is done, he is there for us on the shore, shouting, 'Have you guys caught anything?' At this we are caught in the love behind his strategy. Now Tolle, too, is caught by love. It is the same love. The only difference is that in the case of the crucified-risen one

the drama of desire is acted-out in its fullness, social, political, historical, and *there* comes to a denouement with divine love.

Let me be autobiographical here and say that it was only after I had 'lived' — after my half-hearted manner — the nocturnal crisis of Eckhart Tolle, and begun to learn my own dumping action, that I recalled that line-drawing and how much it had moved me, and faced the fullest and most daring Pauline statement of the mechanics of the Redemption, and saw the luminous correspondence of Christ with the Buddha. I have spent years contrasting them, saying that whereas Buddhist Enlightenment is the end of desire, Christianity is desire's fulfilment. Not so quick now! For until I have experienced desire as producing, as its puppet, what I think of as myself, I cannot see what Jesus does with desire. He suffers its worldwide social outcome as, with nothing less than the power of God, he opens the way to live without, or at least, with less and less of, the human illusion. How many Christians are able to say that this is what is meant by his 'opening the gate of heaven'?

But then, as Tolle points out, not many of the world's Buddhists understand the Buddha's Enlightenment as for them.

Another important pointer to this meeting of Christianity with Buddhism is the fact that René Girard, who has done more for the doctrine of our salvation by the blood of Christ than any theologian, has an anthropology according to, which the ego is 'the puppet of desire', an anthropology that he shares with, or takes from (really, what's the difference?) Jean-Michel Oughourlian, psychoanalyst and total transformer of

Freud. 'The self as puppet of desire' sounds very Buddhist. It is also a major tool for a new Christian anthropology.

Things are coming together. Woe betide us if we don't see this! A coming together of world-religions is a major factor in world transformation.

One of the most Buddhist of Jesus' sayings is 'come to me, all who labour and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart, and you shall have rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.' (Matt 11:29) What makes his burden light? It is, that it is not his! As our model for being human, he is not enslaved by the mind that makes a person's life their problem. His mind is not his master, as ours tends to be, but his instrument, whereby he plans the campaign for the most radical revolution in human self-awareness that there has ever been or ever will be.

This piece of writing is a first attempt, necessarily untidy, to appropriate the experience and consequent teaching of Eckhart Tolle, whom I see as a prophet for modernity, chosen to suffer, in all its suicidal implications, the double Cartesian error 'to equate thinking with Being and identity with thinking' (his formulation p.12) On the brink of suicide, this man said No to this all-controlling lie of modernity, and surrendered as he was pulled into the night of God, out of which he woke to being and the song of a bird. On every page of his carefully crafted book, I am saying, 'Yes, I know this to be true', as I too let go of a past made tyrannical by equating it in thought with myself. Let me quote for you what a great Australian poet has said:

Beware of the past;
Within it lie
Dark haunted pools
That lure the eye
To drown in grief and madness.

Things that are gone,
Or never were,
The Adversary
Weaves to a snare,
The mystery of sadness.

Fear to recall
Those terrible dreams
That sickened the heart
Or tore with screams
The shocked affrighted air;
Nor let your mind
Turn back to feel
The cold remorse
Nothing can heal,
Whose wisdom is despair.

Abandon the past;
Whoever gropes
For comfort there
Will lose his hopes.
The cruel memories stand
Like stone-faced gods
Watchful and grim,
Row upon row —
But raise them no hymn,
No sacrificing hand.

Warning, by James McAuley

[* 'Condemned sin in the flesh.' From the Interpreter's Bible: Condemned sin is a bold expression which stresses the reversal brought about by God's action in Christ. It is now sin, not the sinful man (vs. 1) who is the prisoner being sentenced."]

Sentenced to what? Certainly to death. The implication (at least) is that God wills the death of Christ as the death of sin. So God underwrites our enactment of Christ's death as the supreme scapegoating whereby we get caught by

his love. This is going way beyond Paul, into my version of a *sensus plenior*. Tolle stood on the brink of moral suicide, and then was caught by love into the truth. But God, with his Son, allowed us to go through with moral suicide by killing his son, to catch us with his love at a deeper level. God is one huge step ahead of all his prophets.

Note from the dustcover

Eckhart Tolle was born in Germany, where he spent the first thirteen years of his life. After graduating from the University of London, he was a research scholar and supervisor at Cambridge University. When he was twenty-nine, a profound spiritual transformation virtually dissolved his old identity and radically changed the course of his life.

The next few years were devoted to understanding, integrating, and deepening that transformation, which marked the beginning of an intense inward journey.

For the past ten years he has been a counselor and spiritual teacher, working with individuals and small groups in Europe and North America. He has lived in Vancouver, British Columbia, since 1996. Through this book, his teachings become available to a wider audience for the first time.

Suggestions for further reading around the themes of this article are printed on page 46. Notes 1-6 refer to the books listed there.

The Wisdom of the Desert

"We cannot do exactly what they did. But we must be as thorough and ruthless in our determination to break all spiritual chains, and cast off the domination of alien compulsions, to find our true selves..."