

When God walks away

A good Buddhist meditator is able to see Dharma or true reality in any religion that is worth the name. More exactly, if we understand our own minds, seeing it with joy and clarity, then we are likely to be able to understand religious experience in any good form.

Conversely, it might be said that even if we do believe in such ideas as God or spirits or some form of high Being or Beings, we might not really be able to understand our own religious experience. We might even mistake it for something else, and try to interpret or appreciate it in terms of how we have been raised and conditioned culturally, socially and religiously.

Such a blinkered way of seeing the light can be awesome or fearful, especially when we look directly into the light and is blinded by it instead of looking where the light shines to see true reality and liberating truth. Religion can be as liberating as it is imprisoning, especially if our interests are more worldly than spiritual (as in the case of most religious groups today).

One of the most remarkable of religious texts of the West that describes a personal religious experience is the “Dark Night of the Soul,” by St John of the Cross (16th-century Spanish poet and Roman Catholic mystic).¹ For those familiar with Buddhist meditation, however, the experience described therein clearly suggests a prelude to dhyana (*jhāna*), a state of profound meditative bliss and clarity.²

A Christian in 16th century Europe coined the term *the dark night of the soul*. This phrase refers to an experience when God (or what is believed to be a supreme being) appears to remove the “sense” of his presence from a believer’s life. Or, poetically, it seems to appear to a believer that his God has walked away from him.

The dark night is when a God-believer feels as if his God has thrown out the moral compass from his life. The Christian, for example, *feels* as though his God doesn’t exist. For such a believer, this is of course an experience of awe and trembling. We feel as if all our good and faith have been abandoned, and we are left, as it were, to our own devices.

Those of us who have tried to meditate on our own (without a proper meditation teacher) often report feeling peaceful generally. At some point, however, we are terrified when we feel as if we have stopped breathing or we feel “nothing.” We fear that we are at the threshold of some suffocating terror, or that death itself would come to us.

The reality is that we might have come to a point when our breath is so subtle that we are beginning to experience a higher level of peace, but lacking the wisdom or vocabulary for such a profound experience, we simply do not know what to make of it. In so doing, we have prevented ourselves from going any further, so that we are overwhelmed by the terror on account of our own ignorance.

In the case of the “dark night,” however, this is neither a dry spell nor a punishment. It feels as though “God” has left. We might simply feel a profound vacuum since we can make no sense of what is going on. One vital point here is that we have allowed our *thoughts* to lurk in our meditation, and not let them go, so that we actually *feel* the bliss of being free from all our mind-made ideas.

In this connection, the value of learning and understanding the early Buddhist meditative texts are simply liberating, or at least, rewarding. They provide us not only with the accounts and vocabulary of such profound experiences, but also with how to make the best of them so that we are truly emotionally

¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dark_Night_of_the_Soul.

² See SD 27.5b (1.3): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/27.5b-Miraculous-stories-piya.pdf>

independent individuals, free of all beliefs and views. This is like looking closely at a sacred mountain or sauntering in the English Lake District, instead of only hearing or reading about them.

In the case of the God-believer who think that his inner consciousness of his God's presence is being swept away without warning, must desperately grasp at the straw of past faith. Otherwise, he might be deeply convinced that there is no God, and so become an atheist, which is of course another form of virtual reality.

There's nothing wrong with such an experience. Indeed, it might even be taken as a powerful hint at the nature of true reality. There is nothing fixed, permanent, or unchanging. Nothing exists in itself, but always relative to other things. Above all, it is how we think that makes it what it is, or what it seems to be. As we think, so we are – this is often what it is likely to be, especially in religious belief and experience.

God does not exist, cannot exist, simply because to exist means to be impermanent. Wishful thinking is a great creator. But we can never define anything into existence. We might imagine a unicorn or a rabbit with horns, but this does not mean that either exists.

On the other hand, we can see such imagination in a constructive way. We can see this as instructive or entertaining fiction. We can learn and enjoy such stories and creations. This is what literature, painting, music, poetry and the creative arts are about. They enrich our lives, even liberate us from our dark emotions. However, this does not make Jedi knights, or the Ascended ones, or Harry Potter more real.

A simile of the nose should help. In our daily lives, we are simply unconscious of its presence. However, when we have a nose itch, a nosebleed, a cold, or when we look into a mirror, we might notice it. Of course, the nose does not and cannot function by itself (nothing can). It functions in connection with our whole body – and mind. Indeed, it is the mind that makes us think of the nose as being more (or less) than what it really is.

Now, if we were to have surgery and remove our nose, we would certainly be aware that something essential is missing. Such an awareness might remain with us for quite a long time. This odd simile helps us understand the notion of “background consciousness” or “inner presence,” not of any being or entity (unless we have been conditioned to believe so or are compelled by some perceived lack or profound need in our lives).

The point is that if we are able to remove such a background consciousness or inner presence, we would have noticed it. This is like realizing how precious someone or something is when we have lost it.

For simplicity, let us say that this background consciousness or inner presence is simply our capacity for inner joy and clarity. This wonderful capacity is mostly undetected and unnoticed by us, no matter what religion we follow or none at all. We might catch a glimpse of this, say when we glance at the clear, moonless night sky, and feel the presence of countless distant stars so near, indeed, within us. It is a profound moving feeling that we never forget. It might even change our lives for good. Or, we would, at least, create something beautiful or joyful, such as Vincent Van Gogh's “The Starry Night” (1889).

We are unable to realize this inner joy and clarity for one simple reason: It's always present but it is *deep within us*. It is like our nose: it is always present with us, but we never really notice it. We have been breathing in and out through it all the time, but we rarely think about it.

Yet, on higher or deeper level, we can be deliberately enjoyed such peaceful joy and clarity. One great way (or even the best way) is for us to focus on the presence of the breath. We can now forget about the nose: it is the breath that really counts.

Words and ideas are useful insofar as they can liberate us from themselves so that we breathe the blissful peace of true reality. If words and ideas, gods and ghosts, horned rabbits and unicorns, are used to control others, then they ultimately become destructive and confounding phantoms, pushing away from us even the most profound of joy and light of the spirit. If we understand such ideas for what they really are, and let go of them, then we can see beyond our noses at the breathless sunrise.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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