

Restaurant at the End of the World

Flannery

Religions of the East 161, Period 4

5 June 2014

Scene 1

Three men arrange to meet at a restaurant for a little conversation. This restaurant lies outside of the concept of time. It is a place where the beginning and the end are indistinguishable, and as such, it is a place that exists beyond logical thinking.

Swami Vivekananda awaits his gentlemen, and finally,

Enter GAUTAMA.

VIVEKANANDA: Hello my dear Siddhartha, I have found this perfect restaurant for us to experience. It is the only place where we can all exist without the constraints of time. I truly look forward to conversing with you. I hope to hear great and wonderful things regarding our differing philosophies.

Enter LAOTZU.

VIVEKANANDA: Good. We are all here. Shall we order first?

The waiter enters and they order their food.

GAUTAMA: Does this restaurant really exist?

LAOTZU: Well, why not? [What is reality anyway?]

[1]

VIVEKANANDA: Well, let's "contemplate" this. I believe that every form of reality is essentially the same, in that they all come from the common essence that is **Brahman**. I believe that Brahman is one, but people call him by many names. There are many deities, but they are simply masks of the true God. As an example of this, imagine an ocean. We differentiate between bodies of water, but all bodies of water ultimately share a common essence. There are **many paths to the one**. This essence is eternal, and it is infinite. Brahman can only be revealed through contemplation. The ultimate reality within is called the **Atman**, and it is the ultimate reality that is understood through personal contemplation of the self. The ultimate reality that is understood through the contemplation of the universe is called Brahman. These two concepts are in reality one and the same. They are both Brahman, which is the source of all things, including existence, and the universe itself. It is the divine essence that pervades all aspects of reality. Brahman can be represented through deities, the main three of which are **Brahma** the creator, **Vishnu** the preserver, and **Shiva** the destroyer. These three deities are all forms of the ultimate reality. You are a part of God, and God is a part of you. Therefore, **Tat Tvam Asi**, God is you. We believe that the material world is what is real. This belief of **maya** is mistaken, because there is only Brahman.

LAOTZU: Well, to me, **the Tao** is the way, but ultimate reality is too vast. It cannot be contemplated, but one can have an **intuitive** and experiential understanding of reality. I believe that the Tao can be observed through its manifestations in nature and life. Any living thing has Tao **flowing** through it. This cannot be seen visibly, but the Tao is powerful and pervasive in every aspect of reality. The Tao is made of two opposite forces. These are **Yin and Yang**. The Yin represents the passive, weak and feminine. The Yang represents the active, strong, and masculine. I do not imply that the Yin is necessarily a bad thing. Rather, these two forces complement each other. As I have said, **long and short, high and low can be known only by comparison**. One can observe the Tao, but it cannot be understood through intellectual understanding. Words can only point us in the direction of the Tao. Its understanding is intuitive, **the best instruction is not in words**. The Tao is simply in the background, and it waits to be found. When you seek the Tao, you find it.

GAUTAMA: Yes, but all you experience in nature is always changing. I think that the ultimate reality is change and **impermanence**. Here, look at my glass of water. The ice in my glass eventually melts and becomes liquid water. That fish that you are eating, Lao Tzu, was once alive. You are going to eat that, and it will become a part of you. I believe that there is no underlying essence of all life. The true reality can be understood through experiences that are gained via meditation. I believe that the deities and rituals of Hinduism are ineffective. I believe that one must determine their own beliefs. There are three marks of existence that I have discovered to describe the nature of reality. The first mark of existence is **anatta**, meaning no-self. There is no reality within the self. What we call the self is, in reality, constantly changing and developing through time. We are not the same entity as we were some time ago. Our state of mind is also changing, along with our bodies that replace themselves. The second mark of existence is **anicca**, meaning impermanence. Nothing is permanent. As I have said, **all created things perish; he who knows and sees this is at peace in a world of pain. All existing things in this world are unreal; he who knows and sees this is beyond the thrall of grief**. The third mark of existence, **dukkha**, means suffering. This is a natural result of anicca and anatta. [Dukkha is the human condition.]

GAUTAMA: You may be enjoying the fish that you are eating, but you must realize that the fish suffered while dying to allow you to eat it. That, my friends, is the human condition, dukkha. This is the state of suffering. Dukkha means “a wheel off its axis” or “bone out of socket”. This is caused by our **tanha**, selfish desire, and our attachment. We suffer partly because life’s good times are quickly proven to not prevail. When I was a young prince, I saw **four sights** that brought me to awareness of the human condition. These sights were an old man, a diseased man, a corpse, and an ascetic. In those moments I

[3]

knew that I, too, would become these things. There are two different types of people in the world. These are people who are sleepwalkers, and those people who live with intention, and are conscious and awake. When we die, I believe that a transfer of energy takes place, from one body to the next. This energy is not unchanging, however. It is an active process of change.

VIVEKANANDA: Yes, the spirit and energy of the person is transferred, but I think that the individual is created again. The individual is created again and again, after every death, from the essence that is Brahman. It is the debris of the ultimate reality that is God. The Atman itself is the eternal part of you that exists in an ocean of Brahman. We exist as an extension of Brahman. You are in samsara, the “wheel of rebirth”, until you return to the ultimate reality.

LAOTZU: Yes, I agree that there is energy inherent in every person, but unlike you, Gautama, I believe that there is an essence in the individual. I believe that this essence is the Tao. I believe that the Tao creates us in a state that is perfect, good, and pure. This state is the state of **P'u**. It is the uncut tree, the uncarved block. It is the intention of the Tao. In the state of P'u, we are perfect. Society molds us after birth, and we become less happy and powerful because we are not in as great of a harmony with the Tao.

VIVEKANANDA: If we are already born perfect, then why do we need to live through our whole life and become less happy and perfect? [What is the purpose of our existence?]

[4]

They pause while the waiter refills their glasses. Vivekananda slowly starts to say,

VIVEKANANDA: I think the purpose of our existence is ultimately to follow the **dharma**, which is God's plan, and achieve **moksha**, liberation, from the cycle of samsara. However, I believe that achieving liberation is a process. One does not immediately achieve liberation, rather, one must learn to appreciate liberation through one's life experiences. When one experiences both good and bad things, one comes out of the experience with the new desire to achieve liberation. There are four main **purusharthas, or the four wants** of humanity. The purushartha is a deliberate pursuit of the attainment of a goal. These purusharthas are Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha. Artha describes desire for money, possessions, prosperity, and material wealth. Kama describes desire for pleasure in the five senses. Moksha is the final want of mankind, and it is supreme tranquility and the highest bliss and liberation. Dharma is the source of meaning for life. It means “to bear or carry” the weight of society. It is the moral virtue and set of rules that holds the universe together. Dharma involves upholding society, and it moderates and regulates the artha and kama, providing moral regulation and sustaining society. It involves helping society by fulfilling social requirements, rituals, and ceremonies. The

concept of dharma is exemplified in the **Bhagavad-Gita**, when Arjuna, a prince, must do his sacred duty as a Kshatriya, a warrior. Each purushartha can teach an important lesson, and as such, it is important to use the purusharthas for spiritual advancement. Since the ultimate purpose of existence is to achieve moksha, it is important that one follows a path to moksha that is in accordance with their talents. The previous three purusharthas concern themselves only with the world of samsara. The truest purpose of existence is to attain moksha, which is infinite being, infinite awareness, and bliss. All rivers lead to one ocean.

GAUTAMA: I also believe that we exist to attain **enlightenment**. The purpose of our existence is to become awakened through introspection and thus end suffering. By following the teachings of the dharma, we can achieve nirvana. It is important to perfect our Buddha nature and become perfect in our **compassion** toward other living things, and become compassionate as well toward society. We are focused on our own dukkha, and do not realize that our own suffering is dwarfed by others'. To end suffering, one must follow **the Middle Way**. This is moderation in the body, as well as in the mind. I have found the **Noble Eightfold Path** to lead to **nirvana**. It is an ongoing process that comes from the concept of the Middle Way. One must practice right views, intentions, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and meditation. In **meditation**, one will eventually reach tranquility and nirvana through stages of meditation. However, I believe that one must find their own path, and this is simply one way to achieve enlightenment that I have found. It is prudent to practice right association, meaning to associate with other enlightened people.

LAOTZU: I think that nirvana sounds like separating yourself from everything. I think that the purpose of our existence is to be in complete harmony with the Tao. One of the important aspects of being in harmony with the Tao is **wu-wei**. This means inaction, yielding to win, and supreme activity and relaxation. It is in accordance with the natural law. I believe that to be in harmony, one must allow the Tao to act. Instead of striving to control, as Gautama has said, one must allow the Tao to act. One must **be like water**, because it is soft, yet it can carve the hardest rock without acting. As I say, **he who is not a competitor, no one in the whole world can compete with him. It is important to not overdo things.**

LAOTZU: Well, we may have some differences and maybe we agree on some other things, but this dinner and the meeting were really enjoyable.

The waiter brings a check.

GAUTAMA: Yes, I enjoyed the conversation with both of you, enlightened ones.

VIVEKANANDA: Well, I think we should make this a ritual and meet every hundred years to celebrate our acquaintances. This dinner is on me.

WAITER: I'm glad you all had a good time and enjoyed your meal. I have enough food for thought. Maybe next time I will join you.

END