

The precious words within are more than inspiring. They are, according to author Richard Hooper, "signposts along the road to lead us home." And what is most amazing is how similar the spirit of the words of these four great masters truly are. For example, here they are on compassion.



"Blessed are the merciful, for they will achieve mercy."

Jesus

"Practice gentleness, seek truth, give up anger, do not slander and have compassion for all things. Be gentle, be modest, be useful to others. All these things belong to the one who wishes to see me."

Krishna

"When you see yourself in others, it is impossible to hurt anyone else."

The Buddha

"Compassion and mercy bring victory. Heaven belongs to the merciful."

Lao Tzu

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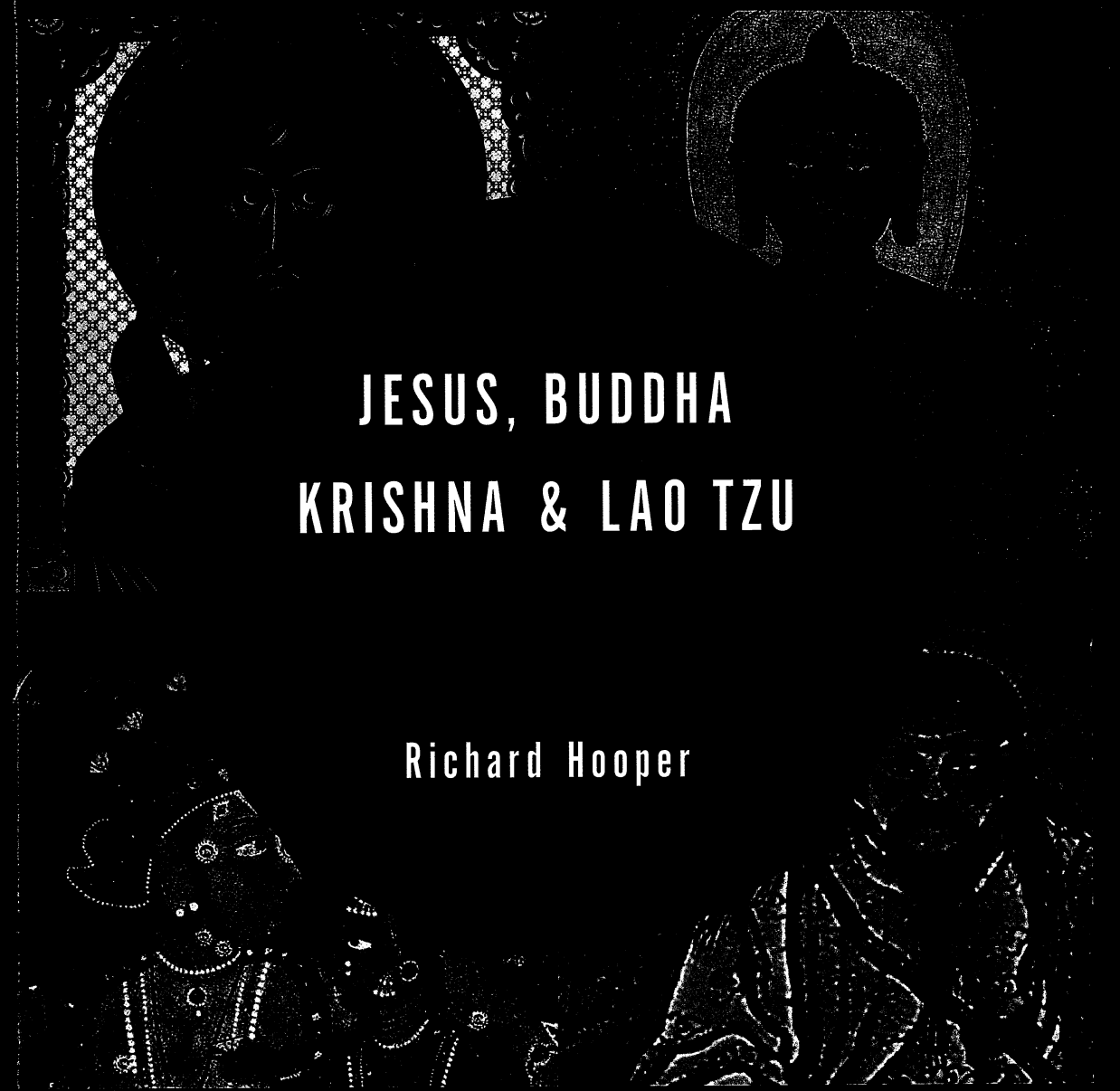
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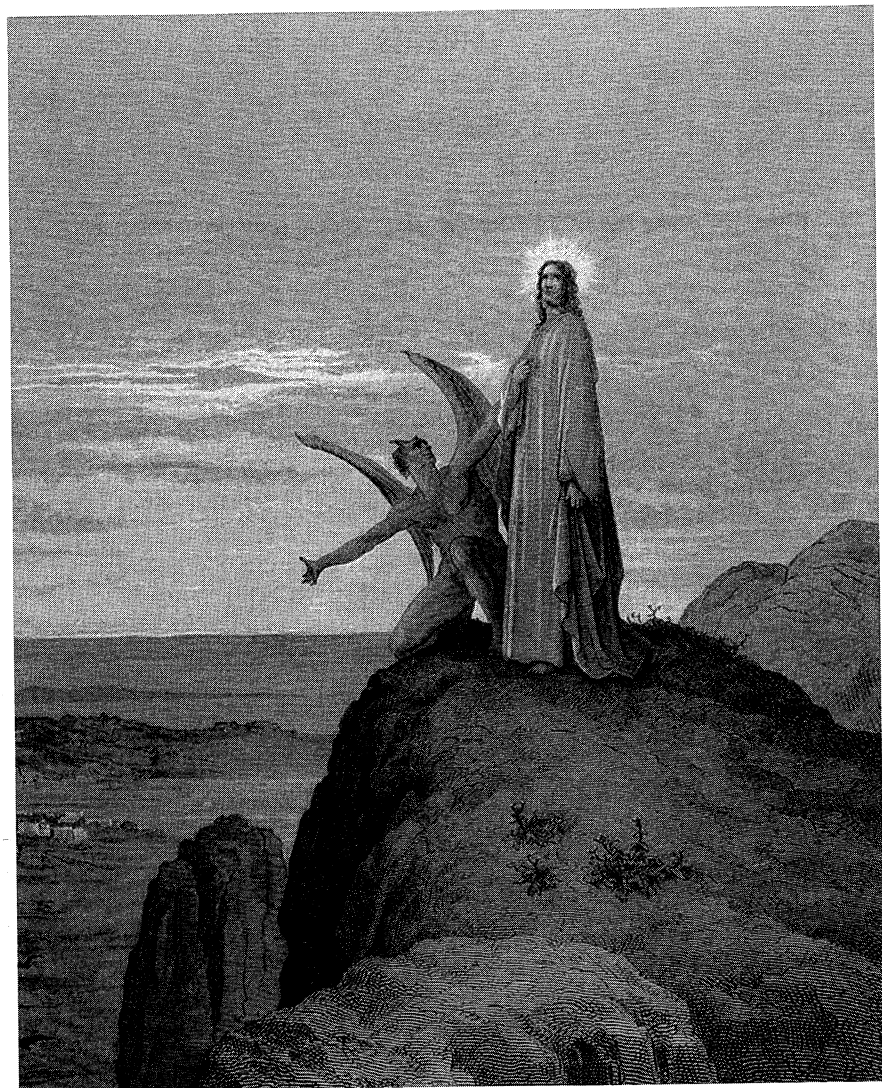
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JESUS, BUDDHA, KRISHNA & LAO TZU

JESUS, BUDDHA KRISHNA & LAO TZU

Richard Hooper





Introduction



*If the doors of perception were cleansed,
everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.
For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things
through narrow chinks of his cavern.*

—William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

THE MYSTICAL IMPERATIVE

The story goes that, after his enlightenment, Siddhartha Gautama—the historical Buddha—was walking down the road when he met a fellow traveler. The other man perceived a great radiance emanating from Siddhartha, so instead of asking, “Who are you,” he asked, “Are you a god or a divine being?” “No,” answered the Buddha. “Are you a shaman or a sorcerer?” “No,” answered the Buddha. “Are you a man?” Again the Buddha answered, “No.” “Well, then,” the man said, “what are you?” The Buddha answered, “I am awake.” And, indeed, this is what “Buddha” means: one who is awakened.

According to the Gospels of the *New Testament*, much the same thing happened in the case of Jesus. Siddhartha was tempted by Mara, the Evil One, and when he achieved victory over all temptations, he instantly “woke up.” The story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness is almost a carbon copy of the Buddha legend. Jesus, like the Buddha,

was victorious over all the temptations presented to him by "Satan," and in the moment of his victory, he was utterly changed. As he walked by the seashore, fishermen saw his radiance, dropped their nets and followed him. As he walked through pastures and fields, farmers let go of their plows and followed him.

As with the Buddha, everyone who met Jesus knew he was no ordinary man. What made these two men special? For one thing, they both had profound wisdom. But their wisdom was unlike others because it came, not from intellectual reasoning, but from direct awareness of the Absolute. Jesus and the Buddha were mystics. Their teachings carried the weight of authority because they came from the source of being itself. Their personal wisdom was not the result of religious belief or faith, but came from a place of *gnosis*—knowledge. Both Jesus and the Buddha were plugged into "the Source."

A century ago William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* observed, "... mystical states seem to those who experience them to be states of knowledge. They are states of sight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect . . . and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for aftertime."¹

The Gospel stories about Jesus, for instance, claim that those who heard him were amazed that he spoke with "authority," not like the priests or the other teachers of his day. Had Jesus not had charisma, wisdom, and *knowledge*, it is highly doubtful anyone would have remembered his words.

People who met the Buddha knew immediately that he had had some profound experience, and that the experience had altogether altered him. Like Jesus, when the Buddha spoke, people listened because they recognized his words as coming from somewhere other than the intellectual mind. They seemed to come from the Source of understanding itself.

I first read the words of Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* some forty years ago. At the time, I was still very much a committed and believing Christian—heading to seminary after college. Yet I found myself fascinated with Krishna's words in the same way that I was with Jesus'. Those words didn't seem to agree with Christian dogmas but, for

¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Collier Macmillan, New York, 1961, p. 300.

me, they had the ring of truth. When I later read the teachings attributed to Lao Tzu in the *Tao Te Ching*, I had the very same reaction. The interior heart of understanding can recognize "truth" in an instant.

Even though these teachers represent four different world religions, I believe their teachings have a great deal in common. Could it be that their teachings represent four slightly different paths to the same destination? Each of these masters claimed that their teachings came from personal experience of ultimate reality, so we might expect their teachings to be similar. Certainly their teachings carry the weight of authority—in our day, as well as theirs.

If the words of certain teachers move us, and if we were to examine our thoughts while reading them, what often strikes us most is not that these teachers are telling us something new, but that they are reminding us of something we already knew but, perhaps, had forgotten. It is as if we had always known these truths at some deep level, so we respond with, "Aha!" "Yes, of course. I knew that all along." These teachers reveal the truth that has always been within us.

But the teachings that come from those in touch with the Absolute still have limitations. Mystical insight has the nature of ineffability. Direct awareness of Ultimate Reality—and for our purposes we will assume that's what it is—can never be adequately communicated in words. James says of the mystical experience, "The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words."² The most any mystic can do is to convey approximations of his or her experience. Teaching, therefore, often takes the form of negation: "Not this, not that."

² *Ibid.*, pp. 299-300.



Certainly history has had many mystics who didn't try to communicate their understanding to others. Others have tried and failed. In the case of Jesus, for instance, the canonical Gospels make it clear that even his closest disciples didn't "get it" much of the time. Teachers may do their very best to convey mystical insight using parables, dialectic, symbolism, and other forms of wisdom teaching, but in the end, the words will always fall short of the reality. So the words of even the greatest teachers are, at best, no more than road signs on the path to understanding. They are, more often than not, cautionary: Yield; Watch for falling rocks; Slow down, you're going the wrong way.

Every true teacher knows that all those who follow them must seek enlightenment through their own personal efforts, in their own individual way. The teacher can give advice, prescribe methodology, and steer the student away from unproductive paths, but in the end—everyone is on their own.

This is the limitation of organized religion as well. Once the teacher is gone, all bets are off. Religious devotees have a tendency to codify their teachers' wisdom, but in doing so they turn living truth into a pale transparency of itself. The moment anyone's teachings become packaged for mass consumption, the essence of those teachings are lost to one degree or another.

Official canons, while important, can often short circuit the effectiveness of a spiritual path, and even create deception. Certainly this happens when the teacher is elevated to divine status and worshiped as Truth itself. This is why Buddhists say such things as, "Do not seek the Buddha, seek what the Buddha sought," or, "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him."

Jesus told his followers that the answer was within *themselves*: "If those who lead you say the Kingdom of heaven is in the sky, then the birds of the sky will get there before you do. If they say it is in the sea, then the fish will beat you there. Rather, the kingdom is within you..."³ Every teaching, every word—no matter how profound—is only a guidepost along the way. Every seeker is a pilgrim, and every pilgrim travels alone.

³ The Gospel of Thomas, 3a.

THE VALUE AND LIMITATION OF WORDS

Nevertheless, I think teachings are important. They guide us and inspire us, and they represent humanity's common effort to seek knowledge. Ultimately—and I think most teachers would agree—the teachings are more important than the teacher. That's important to mention here because *the words attributed to Jesus, Krishna, the Buddha, and Lao Tzu did not necessarily originate with those men.*

Of the four, only Jesus and the Buddha are considered to be historical figures. As an avatar, Krishna (Hinduism considers the Buddha and Jesus to be avatars as well) is the mythical incarnation of Ishvara—a personal deity who, in turn, is an emanation of Brahman, the ultimate Godhead. And while there is a "history" of the Chinese sage, Lao Tzu—a name that simply means "old master"—most scholars do not take it seriously, and believe the *Tao Te Ching* was written anonymously.

In fact, all the texts that we will consider here were written anonymously. The Gospels, for instance, have no authors' names attached. These works were simply attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John by Christians at a later date as a matter of Christian tradition. Moreover, Jesus spoke in Aramaic, and all of the books of the *New Testament* were written in Greek.

In the case of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, none of his actual words remain. Siddhartha spoke Ardhamagadhi, and none of his sayings are preserved in that form. All that remains are translations of the earliest Buddhist canons; and since Buddhism, like Christianity, began as an oral tradition, the Buddha's actual words are lost to us.

We know somewhat more about the words of the historical Jesus, but not nearly as much as most Christians think. The four canonical Gospels were written by Greek speaking Christians, and the dates of their composition date between 70 C.E. and 120 C.E. None of the Gospel authors were eye-witnesses to the life and teachings of Jesus. It is also unlikely that they even knew any of the original eye-witnesses since they wrote their Gospels long after Jesus' disciples would still be alive, and they wrote them far from the land of Palestine.

Most of what appears in the canonical Gospels is Christian mythology, not Jewish history. Ancient mythologists (and that includes Hindus, Buddhists, and Taoists) thought nothing of putting their own words into their teachers' mouths, and in the case of Jesus, they made him a Christian retrospectively. The historical Jesus did not believe himself to be the Messiah, or son of God, as is borne out by the earliest "source" gospels.⁴

Certain groups of *New Testament* scholars, such as the Jesus Seminar, suggest that as few as 18 percent of all the words attributed to Jesus in the canonical Gospels actually came from him, and even these are probably not in their original form. In the case of the apocryphal and Gnostic Gospels, the problem is even more pronounced.

In spite of all this, those who invented the words attributed to Jesus, Krishna, the Buddha, and Lao Tzu believed that they were writing *in the spirit* of these great teachers—which is to say, the anonymous authors of each text believed that their teacher would have said these words had he been given the opportunity.

The ancient mythologists were anything but literalists, believing that the words they put in their teacher's mouth were *true*, even if they weren't *historical*. And perhaps this is a good guide for the reader as well. If the words in this book have the ring of truth, then it probably doesn't matter *who* originally said or wrote them.

WISE MEN FROM THE EAST

I have wanted to present a comparison of Jesus' teachings with those of the Eastern masters for a long time—in fact, ever since I was introduced to Eastern philosophy in college. As a young man headed to seminary after graduation, I wanted to know what the teachers of other religions had to say, so I took a major in Eastern and Western philosophy. Though I didn't know it at the time, I had set myself on a path that would eventually lead right out the back door of the Church. Yet my disagreements with "orthodox" Christianity began as a child.

⁴ Two source Gospels, the Gospel known as "Q", aka the *Synoptic Sayings Source*, and parts of *The Gospel of Thomas* were written as early as 50 C.E., and show no evidence of "Christian" teachings.

I recall one night—I was about twelve years of age—when the pastor of our church was talking to our youth group. He was telling us that anyone who did not believe in Jesus would not go to heaven, intimating that they would go to that *other* place instead. This statement shocked me.

I raised my hand and asked the pastor, "Do you mean to say that even someone living in a faraway place like India, who has never even heard of Jesus, will go to hell because they don't believe in him?" To my utter amazement, the pastor answered in the affirmative.

I couldn't believe my ears. I knew I was just a kid, but I thought that this was the dumbest thing I ever heard. I respected the pastor and believed that he must be in contact with truth at some level, but in this case I knew in my heart that he was wrong. Since I believed in Jesus, I also believed in his Father—who Jesus described as a God of love and compassion. So I chose to believe Jesus rather than my pastor because I could not accept that a loving God would be so unfair as to actually send people to hell for no good reason.

Many people who are interested in Eastern philosophy have probably had similar experiences while growing up in the Christian Church. Their own personal disconnects may have caused them to start questioning the dogmas of the Church, and whether or not Christianity really reflects the teachings of Jesus. Many people may sense that the religion *about* Jesus is quite different than the religion *of* Jesus.

Such criticisms of Christianity are hardly new. Ever since the Enlightenment, thoughtful Christians have been asking whether the teachings of the Church have any real relationship to the man upon whom the Church was supposedly founded. In 1884, Leo Tolstoy published a book titled *My Religion*, and his words probably reflect the views of many former Christians:

From my childhood, from the time I first began to read the *New Testament*, I was touched most of all by that portion of the doctrine of Jesus which inculcates love, humility, self-denial, and the duty of returning good for evil. This, to me, has always been the substance of Christianity; my heart recognized its truth in spite of skepticism and despair, and for this reason I submitted to a

religion professed by a multitude of toilers, who find in it the solution of life—the religion taught by the Orthodox Church. But in making my submission to the Church, I soon saw that I should not find in its creed the confirmation of the essence of Christianity; what was to me essential seemed to be in the dogma of the Church merely an accessory. What was to me the most important teachings of Jesus was not so regarded by the Church... What I found most repulsive in the doctrine of the Church was the strangeness of its dogmas and the approval, nay, the support, which it gave to persecutions, to the death penalty, to wars stirred up by the intolerance common to all sects; but my faith was chiefly shattered by the indifference of the Church to what seemed to me essential in the teachings of Jesus...⁵

Tolstoy's disconnect with the Church began to form in his mind even as a child. This is not surprising since children can be quite sensitive to hypocrisy. Tolstoy speaks for many of us who have left the Church, but have *not* turned away from Jesus. While the Church may have been found wanting, Jesus still speaks to the ages.

As the age of unbelief dawned in the West, a wave of exotic religious ideas from Eastern religions began to wash up on the shores of Europe and America, giving Christians and former Christians the chance to compare the teachings of Jesus with the teachings of Eastern religions—especially Hinduism.

Theosophy became a major Western philosophical movement during the nineteenth century, and many, if not most, of its ideas were drawn from Hinduism. Karma, reincarnation, and the study of the chakras of the human body all came to the West via India during the nineteenth century. The translation of Hinduism's most sacred text, the *Bhagavad Gita (The Lord's Song)* into English during that century even influenced such great authors as Emerson and Thoreau.

A second wave of Hinduism washed ashore when Swami Vivekananda established the Vedanta Society in New York in 1894, and Paramahansa Yogananda founded a yoga institute in Los Angeles in 1925 (which would later become the Self-Realization Fellow-

⁵ Count Leo N. Tolstoy, *My Religion*, London, Walter Scott Publishing, pp. 2-3.

ship.) The teachings of Shankara and Ramakrishna, the Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali, all became established—albeit in a small way—in Western culture.

The path was thus prepared for yet another invasion of holy men from the East beginning in the 1960s. The Maharishi Mahesh Yogi popularized the practice of meditation, and counted as his early disciples such entertainment luminaries as the Beatles, Clint Eastwood, Mia Farrow, and Merv Griffin. Swami Satchidananda gave the invocation at the Woodstock Festival in 1969. Swami Muktananda, Krishnamurti, Sri Chinmoy, Satya Sai Baba, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, Eknath Easwaran, and a host of other Hindu teachers all had tremendous influence on the Counter Culture movement of the 1960s and '70s.

Arriving during this same time period, in much smaller numbers, were the missionaries of Buddhism. The great Rinzai master Soyen Shaku introduced Zen Buddhism to America in 1893. The Zen authors D.T. Suzuki and Shunryu Suzuki Roshi provided the foundation of Zen thought for thousands of readers during the twentieth century. The Tibetan Buddhist lama, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, along with many other lamas, popularized Tibetan Buddhism in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century. It would be hard to find anyone in the West today who has not at least heard of the Dalai Lama—the world's foremost ambassador of good will. The West has also produced its own "Eastern" teachers: Alan Watts, Ram Dass, Richard Baker Roshi, and scores of others.

Taoism—a Chinese philosophy that dates back thousands of years—did not send its missionaries to the West, but its influence has been felt nonetheless. Most Westerners are primarily familiar with ancient Taoism through two books: the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Tao of Chuang Tzu*. But Taoist principles are also found in the oracle, the *I Ching (The Book of Change)*, in the practice of Tai Chi Chuan, in acupuncture, and in Chinese medicine. The symbol of the Tao—the yin/yang—can be seen virtually everywhere in the United States, and with "the Force" of *Star Wars* fame, movie producer George Lucas popularized the science fiction version of Tao.

If the old religions of Western culture have failed to provide meaning for many people today, can Eastern religions do any better? Only time will tell. To date it seems that their

primary influence has not been in the form of establishing outposts, but in influencing non-traditional movements, which have repackaged Eastern philosophy to fit a different time, a different land, and a different culture. Certainly the New Age movement is chief among such repackaging centers, and has all but become a religion in itself.

As the New Age movement has evolved (some would say, devolved) since the 1970s, much of it has often wandered off into realms of new mythologies, superstition, and the occult. In spite of this rather discouraging trend, many "new age" principles are firmly founded on the basic insights of Eastern philosophy. This new religious culture in the West has made its own contributions as well. While classic religious texts produced by the religions of the East are not read by most people today, most Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist teachings in the West in our present age come from Western authors who, while being directly influenced by Eastern religions, have reformulated ancient truths for modern times and Western sensibilities. Even those books written by Buddhist monks, Tibetan lamas, and Indian gurus are written to appeal to the modern—Western—reader. It would seem that in every age, that which is old must be made new again.

Of course, few spiritual insights are ever *really* new. The anonymous author who called himself "the Preacher" addressed this in the Biblical book of *Ecclesiastes*:

What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new?" It has been already, in the ages before us. There is no remembrance of former things, nor is there any remembrance of later things yet to happen among those who come after.⁶

The Preacher was a pessimist perhaps, but he had a point. Science has the potential to change our worldview, but there really isn't anything new under the sun when it concerns religion, philosophy, and metaphysics. Every insight has been revealed before by someone, somewhere. And while it is often helpful to reformulate age-old teachings, it is also useful to reread the classic texts of religion, which are themselves the product

⁶ *Ecclesiastes* 1:8–11.

of numerous sages over great spans of time. For some readers, the wisdom of the ages makes the most sense coming in the words of the original masters, hence this book.

EAST MEETS WEST

When comparing the insights of different teachers we find either similarities or dissimilarities, or a combination of both. Dissimilarity is to be expected and is easily explainable: different teacher, different religion and culture, and different periods of time.

Similarities, on the other hand, often do call out for an explanation. How is it that two teachers who lived during different eras, in countries widely separated, and whose religions and cultures were quite different, make almost identical statements about spirituality and the meaning of life? Immediately the historian and the theologian will suspect a causal link. One philosophy or religion must have influenced another. More often than not, these suspicions turn out to be correct.

There is no question that Hinduism was the foundation for Buddhism. Siddhartha Gautama was born in India, and Buddhism in the beginning was considered just another Hindu sect. For the first two hundred and fifty years of its existence, Buddhism's influence was strictly limited to the borders of India. By the time of its first missionary success in Ceylon, around 240 C.E., Buddhism had already broken down into a number of sects. Each sect produced new literature, and the words of those texts were attributed to the historical Buddha.

Buddhism and Hinduism certainly had some influence on Greek philosophy, and Greek philosophy, in turn, influenced first century Judaism, early orthodox Christianity and Gnosticism. But Buddhism and Hinduism may have had a more direct influence on Gnostic Christianity.

More than thirty years ago, Elaine Pagels in her seminal study, *The Gnostic Gospels*, asked whether Gnostic Christianity might have been directly influenced by these two Eastern religions:

Could Hindu or Buddhist traditions have influenced Gnosticism? The British scholar of Buddhism, Edward Conze, suggests that it had. He points out that

"Buddhists were in contact with the Thomas Christians (that is, Christians who knew and used such writings as the *Gospel of Thomas*) in South India." Trade routes between the Greco-Roman world and the Far East were opening up at the time when Gnosticism flourished (C.E. 80–200); for generations, Buddhist missionaries had been proselytizing in Alexandria. We note, too, that Hippolytus, who was a Greek speaking Christian in Rome (around 225 C.E.), knows of Indian Brahmins—and includes their tradition among the sources of heresy. . . . Could the title of the *Gospel of Thomas*—named for the disciple who, tradition tells us, went to India—suggest the influence of Indian tradition? These hints indicate the possibility, yet our evidence is not conclusive. Since parallel traditions may emerge in different cultures at different times, such ideas could have developed in both places independently.⁷

Only time will tell if scholars can tease out more evidence of direct influence. But while there are shreds of evidence suggesting a possible connection between Hinduism and Buddhism and Christian Gnosticism, there is not even a hint of evidence that Jesus himself was influenced by either of these two Eastern religions.

WAS JESUS INFLUENCED BY HINDUS OR BUDDHISTS?

Jesus was, of course, a Jew, but since he challenged the priesthood of the Temple, as well as many of the norms, customs, and laws of Judaism, we naturally wonder if he was influenced by philosophies and religions other than Judaism. During the time of Jesus, Judea/Palestine was rife with sectarian movements, as well as religious philosophies that had their roots in the Gentile world. So Jesus may have been influenced by any combination of those influences.

Because John the Baptist plays such an important role in the canonical Gospels, scholars have long taken it for granted that Jesus had been John's disciple prior to the beginning of his own ministry. John, however, was a messianic and apocalyptic preacher

⁷ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, New York, Vantage Press, 1989, p. xxi.

who believed the end of the world was at hand. For John, repentance was the necessary response to the coming Kingdom of God, since only the righteous would be saved.

Jesus, on the other hand, did not believe the world was about to end⁸, but taught that the Kingdom of God was here and now. While John called for repentance and a change of behavior, Jesus taught that people just needed to perceive reality with new eyes. If they could alter their perception, Jesus knew, they would see that God was everywhere, most especially within themselves.

If Jesus had been a disciple of John, then the two men may have split over disagreements on such issues. In that event, they would have been teachers in competition with one another. But there is also the possibility that Jesus was never personally associated with John at all, and that the Baptist tradition was fused with the Jesus tradition after the Baptists joined the Jesus movement when John was beheaded by King Herod. It is equally possible that Baptists (who were messianists) had no association with the Jesus people either, but joined Paul's Messianist (Christian) movement years after the death of Jesus. In this event, the Christian authors of the Gospels—who wrote much later still—combined the two traditions in their mythological stories about Jesus and John.

Over the years, a host of people outside the Christian academic community have suggested that Jesus may have been an Essene, or that John was an Essene, or both. But there is no real evidence to suggest such a connection. There are some similarities between the Essenes and John, but that does not hold true for Jesus. Jesus' teachings were incompatible with those of the Essenes—or those sectaries of Qumran that people assume were Essenes.

There is evidence for yet another possibility: the canonical Gospels often referred to Jesus as "the Nazarene." The Church—and most scholars as well—have always claimed that the title, Nazarene, indicated that Jesus had come from the town of Nazareth in Galilee. But there are some scholars who now contest this assumption and suggest that there was an actual Jewish mystical sect known as the Nazarenes, and it is even possible that Jesus was the leader of this sect.

⁸ The Church has always taught otherwise, but recent work on the source Gospels of "Q" and the first layer of tradition in *The Gospel of Thomas* show that Jesus was not an apocalyptic preacher like John.

All of this is guesswork at best. We actually know almost nothing about Jesus' early influences. In the earliest narrative Gospel, *Mark*, Jesus just suddenly appears on the scene in the company of John the Baptist. Since the author of this Gospel was a Greek-speaking Gentile, probably writing from Rome some forty years after the death of Jesus, he apparently felt no need to invent an early life of Jesus. All that mattered to him was what Jesus did during the single year of his ministry.

Neither was the author of John's Gospel—written much later—compelled to invent an early history of Jesus. But the authors of *Matthew* and *Luke*, writing near the end of the first century, wanted to tie Jesus to Israel's prophetic history. To do this, they had to create fictional stories based on biblical prophecy. Those stories, like Luke's story of Jesus being presented at the Temple at age twelve, are myths, not history.

The general public, unfortunately, does not read the work of biblical scholars; therefore, the average reader has the tendency to interpret the Bible as if it were literal history. As a consequence, various people outside academia during the nineteenth century began speculating about what Jesus might have been doing during all those "missing" years (between the ages of twelve and thirty) prior to beginning his public ministry. Surely he hadn't gained all his wisdom from Judaism; he must have traveled to faraway places like India and Tibet where he studied with Hindu gurus and Buddhist lamas.

Such speculation, initially, was the result of various English and American critics of orthodox Christianity who had begun to adopt Eastern philosophy for the first time as a result of the first wave of Indian gurus coming to the West during the nineteenth century. Strongly influenced by Hinduism, new American movements such as the Theosophical Society, founded by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky in New York in 1875, began considering the possibility of a connection between Jesus and Hinduism.

Anne Besant took up the cause when Madame Blavatsky died, and the Society spawned spin-offs like the "I Am" movement founded by Guy Warren Ballard, later taken to new heights by Mark and Elizabeth Claire Prophet, who founded Summit Lighthouse. This organization, along with later movements such as the Self-Realization Fellowship founded by Paramahansa Yogananda, all had a vested interest in establishing a connection between Jesus, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

Such organizations became easy prey for charlatans who manufactured fictional stories about Jesus having traveled to India and Tibet. The best known of these stories was told by Nicolas Notovitch—a Russian Jew who converted to Greek Orthodoxy. In 1887 Notovitch wrote a book titled *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ*, in which he included a legend about a man known as Saint Issa. As the story unfolds, it turns out that Saint Issa was really Jesus, and this Jesus had gone to Tibet to study with Buddhist lamas—or so Notovitch claimed.

Shortly after Notovitch published his book, the great Orientalist Max Muller, along with other scholars of his day, took it upon themselves to debunk Notovitch's story and expose it as a hoax—which indeed it turned out to be. For those who are interested in this drama, I have included an analysis of the whole affair in an appendix at the back of this book.

Suffice it to say that if Notovitch had known the first thing about Buddhist history, he would not have invented his Saint Issa hoax. Jesus could not have studied with Tibetan Buddhist lamas for the very simple reason that Buddhism didn't reach Tibet until *six centuries* after Jesus' death. Had Jesus gone to Tibet, he would have discovered, not Buddhists, but shamans and practitioners of Bon, the indigenous religion of Tibet—which worshiped a pantheon of spirits, and practiced animal—and sometimes human—sacrifice.

Had Jesus actually gained his wisdom from Eastern gurus, he would be a much less imposing historical and religious figure. It is Jesus' uniqueness from all other teachers that has always made him important. Jesus, while being a mystic, was not a quietist, as the Buddha and most mystics are. He was a social revolutionary as well as a spiritual one. He stood up to the hypocrisy of those who publicly made a display of their religion, and he challenged the social order—the inequities of Jewish society.

This book, however, is about similarities, not differences. And Jesus' similarities to other great religious figures, like his social criticism, probably came naturally—not as a result of being indoctrinated by wise men from the East. Consider this: If Jesus was an enlightened being—which I like to think he was—would he not have taught many of the same things that Krishna, the Buddha, and Lao Tzu did? If Jesus tapped into the

Source of Being itself, how could his teachings not have similarities to the teachings of other enlightened beings?

What impresses me the most about Jesus as a person who "woke up" is that he tried to explain his mystical insights to people who didn't have the slightest idea of what he was talking about. The Buddha was fortunate enough to "wake up" in India—the most mystically oriented culture on Earth. When people met him after his enlightenment they would say, "Congratulations, we knew you could do it!" When Jesus woke up in first century Palestine, he must have looked around at his situation and thought, "Uh-oh."

Certainly Jesus could have kept his new mystical understanding of reality to himself. Had he done so—had he just enjoyed his private bliss in the Kingdom of God—he might have lived to a ripe old age, and died a peaceful death like the historical Buddha. But Jesus was passionate and felt compelled to share his wisdom with as many other people as he could reach. This meant that he had no choice but to try and explain himself within the doctrinal and social confines of a religious culture that was completely unfamiliar with, and mostly antagonistic to, mystical insights about reality.

While Siddhartha Gautama was supported by a community of mystics, many of those who Jesus talked to thought he was either crazy, or blasphemous, or both. His own family rejected him and thought him demented. Most of Jesus' disciples, while obviously charmed by his charisma, often didn't understand what he was talking about. In the end, one of them betrayed him, another denied him, and the rest deserted him in his greatest hour of need.

Whatever Jesus' influences were, his teachings are often startlingly similar to those of the Eastern masters. Marcus Borg is one Jesus scholar today who sees those similarities clearly. In his book, *Jesus and Buddha: The Parallel Sayings*, Borg has this to say:

... the cumulative product of my thinking and experience is the conclusion that Jesus and the Buddha are the two most remarkable religious figures who have ever lived. Moreover, there are striking similarities between them. I have sometimes said that if the Buddha and Jesus were to meet, neither would try to convert the other—not because they would regard such an effort as hopeless, but because they would recognize one another.

... Jesus and the Buddha were teachers of wisdom. Wisdom is more than ethics, even though it includes ethical teaching. The "more" consists of fundamental ways of seeing and being. Wisdom is not just about moral behavior, but about the "center." The place from which moral perception and moral behavior flow.

Jesus and Buddha were teachers of a world-subverting wisdom that undermined and challenged conventional ways of seeing and being in their time and in every time.

Their subversive wisdom was also an alternative wisdom: they taught a way or path of transformation.⁹

Another Christian who was aware of this East/West connection was the great Catholic monk and mystic, Thomas Merton. Much of his life was dedicated to finding the similarities between Western and Eastern monasticism and mysticism. He traveled extensively in Asian lands, had a special affinity for Buddhism, especially Zen, and wrote *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. In his final work, *The Asian Journal*, Merton expressed his love for Eastern religions and expounded on the importance of the sacred Hindu text, the *Bhagavad Gita*. As for the ancient teachings of Taoism, Merton wrote his own translation of *The Tao of Chuang Tzu*.

There have also been many Hindu and Buddhist teachers who have approached the subject of commonality between Jesus' teachings and their own. One such contemporary teacher is the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, who wrote *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, and *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*. It is worth noting that the Introduction to *Living Buddha, Living Christ* was written by Elaine Pagels, and the Foreword by the Catholic monk, Brother David Steindl-Rast.

ONE REALITY OR TWO?

While Christianity has its failings, were it not for that religion, virtually none of Jesus' teachings would have survived. The world would never have heard of him because the early Jesus movement built around his teachings disappeared after 70 C.E. when Jerusalem was

⁹ Marcus Borg, *Jesus and Buddha: The Parallel Sayings*, Berkeley, Seastone/Ulysses Press, 1997, pp. v-vi, viii.

destroyed by the Romans, and the Jews were forced into exile in the first great Diaspora. Ironically, it was the religion *about* Jesus that preserved the religion *of* Jesus.

Jesus was not a Christian, however. Contemporary *New Testament* scholars argue that Jesus never identified himself with God, nor did he think of himself as the Messiah.¹⁰ They insist that such notions sprang from the faith of later Christians who gradually began to think of Jesus as a divinity.

Most scholars consider Jesus' "I am" statements in *The Gospel According to John* to be the words of the Christian author, not the words of the historical Jesus. But Jesus the mystic might have said words very similar to these, and those words may have been misconstrued. Is it not possible that Jesus said something like "I and the Father are one," and meant it in the same way Krishna did?

The numerous "I am" statements from the Gnostic Gospels can only be understood properly by realizing that the speaker (or author) is merely channeling the voice of God. Certainly the Gnostic Christian who put the following words into Jesus' mouth understood Jesus this way:

I am the Light above everything; I am the All; all came forth from me and all has returned to me. Split the wood and I am there. Lift up the stone and you will find Me there.¹¹

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna teaches Arjuna, "Tat tvam Asi," "Thou art That." Atman (the Self, or soul) *is* Brahman (God). The being-ness of the individual is inextricably connected to "Being" itself. Since the essence of the individual, the Self or Atman, is divine, it is also immortal. While the physical body and one's ego-identity are subject to birth, decay, and extinction, nothing can harm the Spirit within. This Atman, this Self, is never born, thus it can never die. Jesus said much the same thing: "Fear not those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul." (*Matthew* 10:28; *Luke* 12:4)

¹⁰ One reason for this is that in the two earliest "source" Gospels (the *Synoptic Sayings Source* and the earliest layer of *The Gospel of Thomas*) Jesus makes no references to himself.

¹¹ *The Gospel of Thomas*, 77.

But, the Semitic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—do not believe that we are part of God. Indeed, such an idea is the ultimate heresy. Since Jesus was a Jew, any claim that he might have made that suggested oneness with God would have been considered blasphemous. Judaism did not accept such a premise two thousand years ago, and it does not accept it today.

In modern times, the case for the Jewish rejection of monism was made clear in *I and Thou*, a book written by the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber in 1958. Buber's point of view was exactly the opposite of Krishna's. Buber insisted that there were not one, but two realities in the Universe: God, and God's creation. By their very nature, Buber argued, these two realities could never be one and the same. No part of God's creation could *become* God. And while we—part of God's creation—could have a *relationship* with God, we could come no closer to Him. *I and Thou* could never become *I am Thou*.

Monism and dualism represent two mutually exclusive, fundamentally incompatible, cosmologies. Certainly there have been mystics in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam who have experienced a personal identity with the All. But in order to avoid charges of heresy, they walked a very fine line when attempting to communicate their mystical insights within the confines of their religion's dogma. They had no choice but to hide their monistic insights within the language of dualism.

EASTERN PHILOSOPHY AND Gnostic CHRISTIANITY

If Jesus was not directly influenced by Eastern philosophy, there is the strong possibility that Gnostic Christianity was. Although the Gnostic Gospels are full of strange cosmologies and life-denying philosophy, it is still possible to recognize the influence of the Eastern worldview.

In the Gnostic Gospels the historical Jesus is somewhat irrelevant, just as he is for Paul, the self-proclaimed apostle of Christ. Here, Jesus is always to be thought of as the Christ, the avatar of God who came to awaken humanity from its sleep, not the flesh and blood teacher from Galilee. All the dialogue that takes place between Jesus

and the disciples in the Gnostic Gospels takes place after the crucifixion. This is not the historical Jesus speaking; this is the risen Christ. Here, Jesus is more of a spiritual presence than a physical one.

Except for specific sayings in *The Gospel of Thomas*, the Gnostic Gospels do not help us understand who the historical Jesus was. The Gnostic Christ is like the Hindu Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*—a mythical avatar through whom the Godhead speaks. It is God who, time after time, in countless forms, through countless ages, reveals Himself in flesh, or in the appearance of flesh—and walks among us.

I am in everything. I uphold the heavens, I am the foundation which supports the planets, I am the Light that shines everywhere, that gives joy to souls. I am the life of the world: I am the sap in trees, and the sweet water that lies beneath the children of matter.

—The Manichean Psalms

I am the origin of all things. In me the whole universe originates and dissolves . . . All this is strung in Me, as a row of jewels on a thread. I am the wetness of water . . . the radiance in the moon and the sun . . . I am the sweet fragrance in earth, and the brilliance in fire am I: the life in all beings.

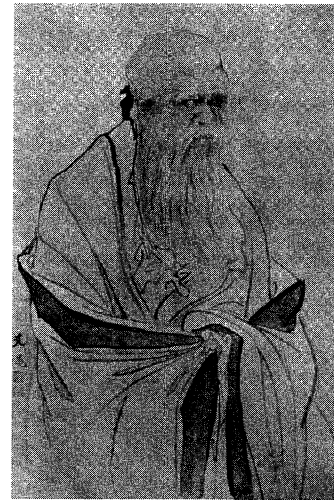
—*Bhagavad Gita*

The Gnostic Jesus teaches many of the same things that Krishna does: The world is an illusion. All created things are impermanent, so being attached to them is pointless. The purpose of life is to attain knowledge (gnosis), an experiential realization that the Self that lies within us all is truly divine substance. Atman is Brahman. The Self is God.

For orthodox Christianity, the human condition is due to original sin. For Gnostic Christians, the human condition—including disease and death—is due to ignorance: ignorance of one's own divine nature. Thus, the Gnostic Christ did not appear on earth to save humanity from sin and death. Christ came to dispel ignorance and illusion, and to lead those who had awakened back home to God.

Like Krishna, Christ taught that humanity's ignorance and alienation from the All was the result of attraction to, and desire for, the impermanent pleasures of the material

world—something the historical Jesus taught as well. The way out of this dilemma is in renouncing the world of impermanence, dedicating one's life to the job of attaining gnosis, and unifying and purifying the Self within.



The Gnostic Christ (and the historical Jesus), like the Buddha, like Krishna, like Lao Tzu, taught that all material things are impermanent—whether they be riches, or one's own body. Attachment to that which is impermanent causes suffering. Give up attachment and suffering ceases.

Like Lao Tzu, the Gnostic Jesus taught that the created order was manifested in pairs of opposites: yin and yang, light and darkness, good and evil, life and death, love and hate, male and female. This Jesus taught that, in order to attain unity with God once more, it was necessary to unite the opposites—within and without, above and below. A single, spiritual, eye must take the place of eyes. The masculine and feminine aspects of the individual must be united into a single, androgynous, Being. According to the Gnostic interpretation of the Genesis creation story, Eve's creation from Adam's rib was a metaphor for the split within human consciousness. The Gnostic Christ taught that gnosis and inner harmony—reentry to the Garden of Eden—could only be achieved by reintegrating our masculine and feminine natures.

At least some—perhaps all—of the various schools of Gnostic Christianity believed in reincarnation. And there is no question that they all believed that the soul was immortal. But the most important parallel between Gnostic Christianity and Eastern religions is the emphasis upon attaining enlightenment in this lifetime. The great quest of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Gnostic Christianity is to seek and find the means for liberating oneself from the bonds of the material, illusory, world.

Such liberation in all traditions is not through grace, but through individual effort, and only through individual effort. While Gnostic Christians accepted the crucifixion of

Jesus, they gave no theological meaning to that terrible event—except in proposing that Jesus left his body and did not really suffer on the cross.

As for the resurrection of Jesus, Gnostic Christians considered it a spiritual, not physical, event. For the individual Christian, resurrection of the dead was not something that would take place at the end of time. Resurrection in Christ was something that took place here and now, a new state of consciousness that did not change when the physical body died.

For early “orthodox” Christianity, Gnostic Christianity was the ultimate heresy. And nothing would make an early Church father see red faster than suggesting that Jesus didn’t suffer on the cross. For Eastern philosophy and for Gnostic Christianity, suffering is a limitation and something to overcome. But for Christian orthodoxy, suffering is the *point*. Mel Gibson—a Roman Catholic—made that very clear in his movie, *The Passion of the Christ*.

This raises other questions: Can we consider Gnostic Christianity a valid form of Christianity? Could it claim the right to speak for Jesus in the same way orthodoxy could? Did it have any relationship to “original” Christianity?

It is important to understand that neither form of Christianity had much to do with the historical Jesus, or the original Jesus movement that formed around him both before and immediately after his crucifixion. This movement, with its headquarters in Jerusalem, died out after 70 C.E. After this date, only Christianity existed. Early Christianity was not one movement, but many. There were virtually hundreds of early gospels, and each of them represented a different form of Christian faith. Over time, however, only two forms of Christianity survived and battled for supremacy.

The Church has always taught that Gnostic Christianity was a late heretical movement, but scholars now know better. There is evidence in Paul’s letters to the Corinthians, Galatians, and Philippians that some of the Christians Paul refers to as “false apostles” preaching “false gospels” were actually Gnostic Christian missionaries. If this is true, then Gnostic Christianity developed at the very same time as Paul’s supposedly “orthodox” version did.

In addition, the *New Testament* book *Acts of the Apostles* contains references to the two original founders of Gnosticism: Simon Magus and Nicolas. In *Acts*, Nicolas

was one of the first seven deacons elected to run the financial affairs of the first Jesus community in Jerusalem. Simon Magus was a former magician, Christian convert, and mythological adversary of Simon Peter.

In addition to these references, there is also mention—in the form of a condemnation—of the Nicolaitans (the supposedly heretical sect founded by Nicolas)—in the *New Testament Book of Revelations*. While the stories themselves probably have little historical value, they prove that both orthodox and Gnostic forms of Christianity originated at the same time.

One further piece of evidence is worthy of note: *The Gospel of Thomas* (the full text of which was discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945) is generally considered a Gnostic Christian text. But it contains formerly unknown sayings that scholars are now certain come from the historical Jesus. It also contains *earlier versions* of sayings that have parallels in the canonical Gospels. This historical layer of *Thomas* is dated to 50 C.E., making it the earliest known Gospel, and contemporary with Paul’s letters—which are dated between 50 C.E. and 65 C.E.

Besides *The Gospel of Thomas*, there are other Gnostic and apocryphal texts attributed to the disciple Thomas, and scholars believe that they all originated within a community formed around Thomas. It is interesting to note that in Church tradition, Thomas was the disciple tasked with taking the Christian Gospel to India. This tradition seems to have some historical foundation since there are still traces of a Thomas tradition in India today. It is unlikely that Thomas himself ever traveled to India, but Thomas Christians did.

Because of such new discoveries many scholars are now making the argument that Gnostic Christianity can be considered just as original and just as valid as its orthodox cousin. In fact, had it not been for the fourth century Roman emperor, Constantine—who sided with the orthodox Church and persecuted Gnostic Christians out of existence—this mystical form of Christianity might still be practiced today.

How would our society differ today had this been the case? Would society be different if our culture and religion encouraged intuitive awareness instead of intellectual analysis? Would our nation’s foreign policies differ if they were based on a unified worldview instead of xenophobia and self-interest? And might our own lives be

different had we been encouraged from birth to seek God consciousness instead of worshipping a distant patriarchal judge of the universe?

Up until this point we've discussed the teachings of Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, and Lao Tzu only in terms of theology and philosophy—both of which are intellectual exercises which, in themselves, are empty of reality. Now let's look at them from a mystic's vantage point—as personal aspects of our own experience.

LET ME TAKE YOU HIGHER

... it is easier to sail many thousand miles through cold and storm and cannibals, in a government ship, with five hundred men and boys to assist one, than it is to explore the private sea, the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one's being alone.

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

While Christianity has produced its own mystics over the centuries, orthodox theologians have rarely placed any value on the contemplative life—and certainly not upon its perceptions of reality. They have somehow been able to “work around” all those teachings of Jesus that support a mystical worldview.

It doesn't seem to occur to the average theologian that his or her premises are based entirely upon intellectual concepts that are themselves a product of ordinary waking consciousness—as if this were the only valid form of consciousness. From that perspective, certainly, everything in the universe does appear to be separate and apart.

This self-imposed limitation leaves theologians with no other choice but to consider mystical insights, whether naturally or chemically induced, to be hallucinogenic. This is ironic given that mystics insist just the opposite: it is “normal” consciousness that produces an illusory world. What we know from modern science (or at least what science tells us) is that all forms of consciousness are the result of chemical interactions within the human brain. If “higher” levels of conscious—or altered states—are hallucinations, then so are our everyday thoughts!

Better living through chemistry is the order of the day. We take one pill to pump us up, another to calm us down. Overly anxious? Don't worry, we've got a pill for that. Depressed? Just take some of these and you'll feel happy again in about two weeks. Have a fear of flying? Ask the flight attendant for a couple shots of Jack Daniels and you'll love the experience.

Today, we think nothing of altering our brain chemistry in order to better cope with life. Yet our society has a taboo against doing the same thing for religious purposes. This attitude overlooks the fact that when it comes to consciousness—chemicals, the human brain, and religious experience have always gone hand in hand.

Many *New Testament* scholars, for instance, believe that the apostle Paul's out-of-body experiences were brought on by epileptic seizures—which, in turn, were brought about by chemical shifts within the brain. William James pointed out more than a century ago that even alcohol can induce mystical raptures.

Since human perception is dependent upon chemical reactions within the brain, we can never know—objectively—just what “real” reality is. We can never know, and certainly never prove, that our reality is the same as the next person's. We must, if we are honest, rephrase Descartes' famous dictum from “cogito ergo sum” to “cogito ergo sum—cogito”: I think, therefore I am—I think.

For now though, critics of altered states of consciousness argue that episodes of mystical awareness are either unnaturally induced—and, therefore, invalid—or are purely accidental—which also makes them invalid. But I think it is safe to say that those who make this judgment have never taken “a trip around the head” as Timothy Leary used to put it. It's not likely that very many scientists have ever had a mystical experience, with or without drugs. As human beings, we all seem to operate on the principle that only our own experiences of reality are legitimate, while the other guy's are delusional.

Those of us who were participants in the psychedelic era of the 1960s no longer look at reality that way. Because we took the Magical Mystery Tour, most of our lives were altered dramatically as a result. No, we didn't go insane or destroy all of our brain cells. Rather—and this is just a personal opinion—we simply became more perceptive human beings.

This might not have been the case at all were it not for the fact that the psychedelic era coincided with an invasion of spiritual gurus from the East. Those who claimed that higher consciousness could be achieved *naturally* came to America at the precise moment the Counter Culture discovered marijuana, LSD, peyote, psilocybin, and mescaline. The combination of these two forces ultimately altered the face of Western religion.

During the 1950s, Western students and teachers of Eastern philosophy, such as Alan Watts, paved the way for psychologists like Richard Alpert to become Ram Dass during the 1960s. Ram Dass was able to communicate with an entire generation of spiritual seekers and make spiritual sense out of the drug-induced mystical experiences they were having, precisely because he, too, had experienced the same altered states of consciousness.

Dr. Alpert's scientific experiments with LSD at Harvard got him fired, along with Dr. Timothy Leary and Dr. Ralph Metzner. Alpert then went to India where he met his guru, Neem Karolie Baba, who gave him the spiritual name of Baba Ram Dass.

My favorite story in Ram Dass' classic first book, *Be Here Now*, was when Neem Karolie Baba asked the then Dr. Richard Alpert for some of his "medicine." Since the request was made through an interpreter, Alpert didn't understand what the guru wanted at first. Finally it became clear that the guru was asking for some LSD, which Alpert had with him. Alpert considered this an odd request, even a potentially harmful one. But the guru kept holding out his hand, so Ram Dass finally gave him a tab of the magical drug.

One serving was more than enough "acid" for a good, and usually safe, twelve hour "trip." But instead of swallowing the LSD, the guru held out his hand for more. Now Alpert really started to become apprehensive. What would happen if this guru flipped out? He would be to blame. Alpert tried to explain the situation through the interpreter, but still the guru was insistent, so Alpert gave him another dose.

Neem Karolie, however, indicated that he wanted even more. In the end, Richard Alpert gave the guru enough LSD to send him off into another universe with no return ticket. The guru smiled and popped the handful of mind-bending acid tabs into his mouth and swallowed.

Feeling extremely uncomfortable, Richard Alpert could only wait to see what would happen when the LSD (which takes about an hour to start working) took effect. An hour

passed, with no change. The guru just sat there in a lotus posture and smiled ("twinkled," as Ram Dass later put it). Two hours passed, three. Still, Alpert saw no change. Neem Karolie Baba never moved from his full lotus posture, and simply continued to "twinkle."

Ram Dass' point in telling this story was simply to illustrate that Neem Karolie Baba's consciousness was so much higher than ordinary consciousness, that even a handful of mind-altering chemicals had no effect on it. The answer to expanded consciousness, Dr. Alpert suddenly understood, was *not* to be found in drugs. Richard Alpert, former professor, former Jewish psychologist, became the disciple of a guru dressed in rags—and it changed his life forever.

Many, perhaps most, of us who experimented with psychedelic drugs during that era also turned to Eastern religions for answers. Why?—because those religions are all *about* altered states of consciousness. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam teach God, but Eastern religions teach God *consciousness*. The Counter Culture needed to understand the meaning of their drug-induced experiences. Synagogues, churches, and mosques offered no answers.

According to the drug cultists, men today are thirsting for the direct, personal experience of God—regardless of his actual nature. In other words, it matters not whether God lies within or without; in either case, men need and want a sense of direct communion with the ultimate source of their faith. The divine-human encounter is not found in church, where little or nothing is done to promote it. But it is found in LSD, the cultists believe. Thus LSD challenges the church to do as well and offer as much.¹²

It has been forty years since those words were written, and it is important to note that there is no longer an "LSD cult," if there ever was one. It did not take many young people very long to figure out that drugs were a dead end. What goes up must come down. If drugs couldn't maintain one's high, perhaps meditation and yoga could.

One did not need to have an experience of God to appreciate the value of altered states of consciousness. The first time I took LSD, I merely watched a sunset at the

¹² William Braden, *The Private Sea: LSD and the Search for God*, Chicago, Bantam Books, 1968, p. 4.

beach in an indescribable state of bliss. A sunset over the ocean is always a beautiful sight. This was something far better.

Back at home, the usual mess left by my roommates did not bother me at all. In fact, everything looked perfect just the way it was—not an insignificant revelation for an anal-retentive personality. LSD and marijuana taught me one important lesson: reality can be perceived on many different levels. Everyday consciousness is simply the default consciousness evolution hard-wired into our brains—no doubt because it ensures our physical survival. Otherwise, it is no better or worse than any other type of consciousness.

I first recognized altered states of consciousness some years earlier—and without the aid of drugs. If the experience I had then cannot be classified as mystical, it certainly qualified for what the psychologist Abraham Maslow called a “peak experience.”

I had taken a year off after my second year of college to earn enough money to continue, but also because my previous career goal had gone down the tubes. Suddenly, I hadn’t the faintest idea what I should do with my life. Worse still, I was pressuring myself unmercifully to figure it out, and quickly. But after half of this year had gone by, I still didn’t have a clue.

On this particular day, I was helping my parents by pulling weeds in their rose garden. My mind was dwelling on this life predicament, and I was feeling confused and rather despondent. Suddenly a voice came into my mind, saying something like, “You will serve Me for the rest of your life. You will be a minister to My people.”

I experienced no burning bush. I wasn’t blinded by the light. And I was fully aware that God’s “voice” was coming from some deep place within myself. Even so, it overpowered me. I had never before considered studying for the ministry. The thought had never entered my mind until this very moment. I didn’t think I was crazy enough to come up with an idea like this on my own, so whether it was God or my subconscious advising me, I was still incredulous.

The Voice persisted, but I told it in no uncertain terms, and in a dozen different ways, that it had the wrong guy. I wasn’t smart enough. I wasn’t holy enough. I wasn’t devoted enough, and on and on and on. But God, my subconscious, whatever it was, countered my every argument and excuse. I felt like Jacob wrestling with an angel.

Finally, I could resist no longer and simply gave up. I surrendered to what I considered to be God’s will. This complete letting go of my own will overwhelmed me with relief. I don’t know how long I knelt there in the dirt, sobbing, but it was quite some time.

Finally, the tears ceased flowing, I stood up, and the world was transformed before my eyes! Everything looked glorious and new, and I felt like I had entered the Kingdom of God. Of course I knew the world was no different than before, but my perception of it had changed completely.

I was low man on the totem pole where I had been working during this year, and I had to take flak not only from the boss, but from clerks and from customers as well—a perfect situation for someone with a generally grumpy mood and a critical state of mind. But now all of those negative traits suddenly disappeared.

For the next seven days, there was nothing but love in my heart and on my lips. Absolutely nothing bothered me. I was unable to become angry or upset or depressed—not even for a moment. As a consequence, every word that came out of my mouth, every action I took, came from a place of pure love. I had been transformed. I had achieved sainthood in the blink of an eye.

When I woke up the morning of the eighth day, however, Saint Richard was gone. And for the past four decades I have grieved over the loss of him. But even though I had fallen back to Earth, I now *knew* what Jesus meant when he talked about being born anew. I knew what he meant when he spoke of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom was not a metaphor, it was a *reality*. It was a state of conscious! Grace had allowed me to glimpse Paradise through a window. It was now up to me to find the door so that I might enter.

Many of us in modern times have taken similar journeys. Our paths have brought us together—to this very moment, when we hold in our hands some of the greatest spiritual wisdom the world has ever known. These words are more than inspiration. They are signposts along the road that will lead us back home.

