

Swedenborgian Church
San Francisco, CA

Spiritual Message: August 21, 2005

“Practicing the Divine Path, A Universal Teaching”

Purpose of the Masters’ Incarnations

May we begin by observing that Christ did not go through the sublime drama of his life merely to provide sermon material for generations of preachers and their Sunday audiences? But, he lived, died and was resurrected as an inspiration to others to live a divine life and attain in themselves the same experiences of God and the afterlife.

Likewise, all the saviors of the world: Lords Buddha, Krsna, Mahavira, Zoroaster, Mohammed, the Jewish and Chinese prophets and sages... did not come to foster inimical doctrinal divisions; and,... their teachings should not be used toward that end!

Universal Teaching

I think that it is something of a misnomer even to refer to the New Testament as the “Christian” Bible, for it does not belong to any one sect. Nor, does the Torah, the Koran, the Buddhist commentaries, the Vedic and Hindu sacred literature etc. Truth is meant for the blessing and upliftment of the entire human race. As Christ Consciousness is universal, so does Jesus Christ belong to all (as does the enlightenment of the Buddha’s wisdom, of the ancient Chinese sages, the revelations to the prophets of the Old Testament, to Mohammed, to Zoroaster, and so forth.

There is but one, universal Truth... taught by all the sages of our human past. Therefore, it is time to put aside our sectarian animosities and acknowledge this Universal Teaching or Dharma. (Dharma is a Sanskrit word meaning “universal law” or simply “path” or “teaching.”)

Parliament of World’s Religions & the United Religions Movement

This notion of inter-religious perception and coexistence is not new. Though understood by all saints and sages of the past, it was first glimpsed by many of us, in contemporary times, at the Parliament of the World’s Religions held in Chicago in 1893. By present day standards of fair representation of delegates, it might have been wanting. But, in terms of what actually happened, it was truly remarkable. Nothing like it had ever been seen before on a global scale: Religions coming together with a bold agenda for themselves and for the world! It was, as a local representative to its centenary in 1993 and a guiding leader in the United Religions movement, William E. Swing, Episcopal Bishop of California, who called this event a “mountaintop experience without out a mountain”... because a living, interfaith substructure did not yet exist.

Inter religious interaction was almost unheard of in 1893! More than a hundred years later, however, the picture has truly changed. International and local interfaith organizations have produced a growing infrastructure of many gatherings and voices.

In the 1960’s we experienced ecumenical dialog between Protestants and Catholics as a consequence of Pope John the 23’rds encyclicals of Vatican II. By the 1986, Pope John Paul, the 2nd, had invited many religious leaders to Assisi, and they had begun to pray for peace together. Married couples of different religions were discovering how to live together, and mixed-faith families became self-conscious realities. Interfaith chaplaincies emerged in jails, hospitals, and on college campuses. Scholars of religions attempted to give definition to the inevitable theological challenges. A mountain then did rise up from the valley floor!

So, what is this sense of transcendent unity that has in the last century brought many of us to at least consider a common understanding? The Path: the Summan Bonum. The inspirations and messages of all true past saints, prophets and avatars are the summan bonum of the way to God-realization. We honor the diverse expressions of truth flowing from the One God through the scriptures of the various emissaries. All these scriptures have the same threefold aspects of meaning: material, mental, and spiritual. They are divine wells of "living waters" that can quench humanity's thirsts of body, mind and soul.

Let's look at a bit at each of these aspects of all great teachings... Physical Teachings The material meaning of the Great Dharmas emphasize their value as applied to physical and social well-being -- the essential laws of right living (the codes of conduct). They are the scriptural commandments... be they the Eight-Fold Path of the Buddhists, the Yamas and Niyamas (the things to do and not to do) of the Hindus, or the Ten Commandments of the Judaic-Christian tradition. They are the base code of ethics and right living; and are often extended to hundreds of specific prescriptions for righteous living. These codes of ethics and general morality are merely, however, the first level of soul mastery. We may call them the material or physical level of spiritual mastery, (not yet encompassing much psychological nor spiritual significance, however.)

Mental Teachings

The mental interpretation explains the applications of Christ's (and other Divine spokesperson's) teaching for the improvement of man's mind and understanding -- the development of his intellectual and psychological faculties, his thoughts and moral values. This is the second level of human effort toward perfection or Christ Consciousness, the path of "Right Thinking," as the Buddhist's put it. Spiritual Teachings The third part of universal dharma is the Christ Consciousness itself, the path to perfection, divine realization, enlightenment, heaven or,... however one wishes to put it... It is the spiritual practice for which all saints, sages, buddhas and divine incarnations took physical birth to show us by their own example how to achieve perfection. Although the material teachings of Right Thought are necessary for a balanced, God-centered life... it is the practice that God-sent- emissaries intended as of the most supreme importance.

Even the most ethically and mentally pure of us may fail to make a true success of life without spiritual achievement. Rather, it is the person of spiritual attainment who scientifically achieves all-round success -- which means to be happy, healthy, intelligent, contented, and truly prosperous... with the blissful, all-fulfilling wisdom of God-communion.

Achieving Perfection Through Scripture

How do we achieve this state of perfection?... Well, our sacred scriptures give us the scientific path. The Bible, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Qur'an, for example, contain this science of the good life, the eternal principles of truth and philosophy of living that make life beautiful and harmonious. According to the culture we are incarnated into, we have at our disposal a culturally relevant path or dharma to follow. We are born into a particular culture... its particular history, language, mores etc. and have at our disposal culturally agreeable spiritual forms and teachings.

Currently, however, our age is a bit more complicated. We live in an increasingly global and interdependent society that makes widely known to all... everything from market forces to esoteric spiritual information, practices and teachings. We have at our disposal, so to speak, other cultures' paths of perfection -- their teachings and their masters ... and they may now be our guides as well!

The Truth Common to All

Therefore, as we in this privileged age may now not only distinguish between merely theoretical religious belief of one religious practice and another, we may identify the universal truths common in all -- the practical application whereby we may build our lives in accordance to the Divine Plan.

We can and must then supersede the orthodoxy of religion and its limiting confines of a particular culture's belief system and engage ourselves in actual practice which... we soon find is cross-cultural and universal. We must rise beyond dogmas and the human limitations of established culture and see that which is the Common Teaching for us all. In the process of achieving this universal consciousness (and the brotherhood which comes with it), we must acknowledge the difference between religion and philosophy. For example, a belief-based religion with spiritual goals versus... a secular humanism or a secular spirituality with a more existential finality as its philosophy. In fact, there is a vast difference between theoretical, belief-based religion and, philosophy.

Theory vs. Practice

If we look at philosophy, practically speaking it may be divided into three parts: ethics, psychology and metaphysics -- corresponding to the material, mental and spiritual interpretations of scripture which I have mentioned earlier.

Ethics in philosophy is the scriptural truth as applied to the material life; it sets forth the science of human duty, moral laws and, how to behave... how to get along in society.

Psychology, the truth applied to mental well-being, teaches us how to analyze ourselves... for no spiritual progress is possible without introspection and self-study by which we must find out what we can correct in ourselves and become what we should be.

Metaphysics are the truths pertaining to the spiritual dimension of life -- it explains the nature of the superconscious state of humankind and, the science of experiencing it.

These three, taken together and put into practice with faith in a divine order and direction, constitute religion. The ethics, psychology and metaphysics of the Bible, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Qur'an, the Buddhist Canon, rightly interpreted, coincide in every respect.

The Transcendent Unity of Religion

In grad school at GTU, in Berkeley, during the '70's, I came across the Fridjof Schoen's paradigm of the Transcendent Unity of Religion, in a book entitled the same. Schoen's model would suggest that for most of us, our consciousness lies at the base of a pyramid -- observing only the minor differences of dogma, ritual, language and attire. However, as we refine our spiritual consciousness and, we therefore ascend this pyramid, we experience a transcendence or a universality of the spiritual path.

The clergy, monastic, hermetic, yogic adept, avatar and incarnational realms ascend to the pinnacle of transcendence... the One, Ineffable Unity of all! Soon in this accent we no longer are separated by the petty differences of form and dogma. And we ultimately achieve the Christ Consciousness, the experience of enlightenment, the spiritual marriage with the Divine.

So, as we go within in prayer and meditation, seeking out a quiet space... we remove ourselves from the clanging and feverish world of activity and, of duality... that is, seeing the other as distinct from one's self and perceiving difference.

The Ongoing Presence of the Divine

On the subject of the presence of the Divine in our lives, I believe it is an erroneous assumption of limited minds that the Great Ones, in the upper realms of the pyramid, so to speak, such as Jesus, Buddha, Krsna and the other Divine Incarnations are gone from the earth when they are no longer visible to human sight. This is not so! When a liberated (enlightened, or spiritually perfected) master has dissolved his or her body into Spirit, they can yet manifest in form to receptive devotees during prayer, meditation or other reverie. For example, Jesus has appeared throughout the centuries since his physical passing, such as to spiritual giants as St. Francis of Assisi, to St. Teresa of Avila, and I am sure, to Emmanuel Swedenborg. This means that the Divine Presence has an ongoing role to play in the destiny of the world.

Even when masters have completed their specific role for which they took on a physical incarnation, it is the divinely ordained task, of some of these enlightened ones, to look after the welfare of humanity and assist in guiding its progress. The Buddhists have a term for these enlightened spiritual beings who remain spiritually amongst us in order to help us achieve our own spiritual liberation or mastery... bodhisattvas.

A Tibetan Buddhist Experience of the Ongoing Presence of the Divine

This summer, running from mid-June and until the 11th of September, there has been an exhibit at our city's Asian Art Museum of sacred relics and treasures from the Potala and Norbulinka palaces in Lhasa. In conjunction with the exhibit there have been many interesting events. One has been the creation of a sand mandala of the Bodhisattva Avolokitesvara, presumably a historical figure who, in the past has spiritually perfected himself and yet, forgoes nirvana or heaven in order to remain on the earth plane to help us achieve our enlightenment and spiritual perfection. One merely needs to call upon him (or her) [variously called Quan Yin in China, Kannon Bosatsu in Japan] for aid in our quest for perfection.

In the construction of the sand mandala, a symbolic representation of Avolokitesvara, the officiating lama invoked the deity into the actual marble and mineral-colored sand grains. The presence then, of the Divine, was fully in this geometric design... from the first day of the mandala's construction to the middle of the ninth day when it was "deconstructed" and swept up and then disseminated to the world by means of pouring the sand grains into the San Francisco Bay. (This is one way in which Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhists experience the ongoing presence of the Masters.)

The Religious Unity Movement and EEC Analogy

Returning to the theme of growing religious universalism and, despite continuing sectarian conflicts, we see growing global unity in many spheres of modern life, not just the religious.

In the political sector, we have seen, since 1957, decade by decade, an expanding European Union, for example. In a direction towards a single sovereignty, there are now 25 countries in this union, which eventually will have a single constitution. The time has come to ascend the pyramid and see beyond our different histories and ideologies toward the benefit of a borderless realm. With the physical unity of Europe, there is the promise of peaceful coexistence... in a world which has fought continuously amongst themselves for several thousand years. Now, this is great human progress! Continent by continent we should hope to see such continued union.

Likewise, in the realm of the spiritual, we see the rustlings of a "united religion"... not just an awareness among the mystics and esoterics in the upper regions of Schoen's pyramid but, of contemporary spokespersons and ordinary, progressive world citizens, Rev. Desmond Tutu, the South African, Anglican archbishop who was such an instrumental force in the peace and reconciliation of his former apartheid homeland has said, Our home is heaven where God is.

On earth we learn how to discover home, and each faith leads its adherents homeward. We must learn here how to live together with those with whom we will spend eternity. How can we arrogantly claim that ours is the only way and not learn to remove our shoes as we stand on what others consider to be holy ground, where they catch their glimpse of the Eternal, the Inscrutable, the Holy, the Compassionate, the Gracious One?

Interfaith Dialogue

While saints and sages throughout time have understood the intrinsic unity of all dharmas (as in the old axiom: "The paths are many, the Truth is one."), in modern times it was only at the end of the 19th century that forward thinking, ordinary world citizens grasped this possibility. We mark this moment with an event, a place and a date,... that Parliament of the World's Religions, held in 1893; and to what Bishop Swing called a mountaintop experience.

Sixty years after that first Chicago Parliament, there came the intense dialogue between Christian communities during the Vatican II era, the like we had not seen for a thousand years. By the time of the centenary of the Parliament in 1993, local interfaith organizations were springing up everywhere and international, interfaith movements were producing a growing infrastructure.

These ongoing interchanges are not merely ecumenical dialogues amongst sects of the same faith but, often true attempts at bridge making across cultural, historical and religious divides. Jews meet with the Dalai Lama in Dharmasala, northern India; prelates of Eastern Orthodoxy meet with the Pope in Rome. Muslims meet with Hindus in London. And, Pope Benedict the 16th dialogs with rabbis this past week in Kohn. Google "interfaith dialog" and over 26,000 sites are referred. The age has arrived! Organizations, conventions, conferences, classes, institutes, scholarly dialogues abound. Thousand's of books and other publications have and are being published on this subject.

In the early years, the international interfaith organizations tended to stress what united religious believers... Now, with greater trust and knowledge, equal emphasis is given to appreciating the distinctive contribution each faith, and the various traditions within each faith, make for human awareness of the Divine.

While all efforts for interfaith understanding promote a climate of peace, some interfaith organizations have concentrated on encouraging religious people to be active in peace work. Religious leaders can play an important role in forming public opinion by insisting on the relevance of spiritual and moral considerations. They have helped to maintain public alarm at: the enormous stockpile of nuclear weapons that still remain in the post-Cold War world; the starvation of millions of people due to war, injustice and unfair patterns of international trade; torture and racism, universally agreed upon human rights infringements and,... threats to the environment.

Hans Kung, the German world religionist and philosopher, whom I had the privilege to meet and talk with a few years ago in Tuebingen... ends his book, *Global Responsibility* (1991), with these words:

No human life together (no peace) without a world ethic for the nations. No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions. On the individual level we already take for granted married couples of different religions, mixed-faith families, interfaith chaplaincies and, the Houston Smiths around the world attempting to give definition to the inevitable theological challenges. (The mountain that has risen from the valley floor.)

Practicing Interfaith Tolerance

And so, what does this mean to our individual and communal practice of the Divine, the summan bonum? Do we feel as comfortable theologically and culturally, if not physically, seated in zazen

as we are on these beautiful, century-old, oak and tule reed chairs. (Well, by this point in this service, they may not be so very comfortable but, they are beautiful!... [laughter])...

Are we as comfortable in Grace Cathedral, as we pray for the descent of the Holy Spirit, as we are in a Pentecostal tent meeting with the summoning of the Divine by the laying on of hands; at Ali's Tomb, at a Hindu satsang or, at a traditional Chinese funeral rite... should we ever find ourselves in any of these places or occasions.... Perhaps, more likely, a Mormon missionary or a Jehovah Witness at our door... or, a work colleague who has an appreciably different and assertive view of his faith and politic. It is our inner sense of union that must give tolerance to this diversity, wherever each of us might be on the pyramid of transcendence.

Discovery and History channels bring the diverse to our living rooms. How are we computing these images? Do we continue to see all this as them as opposed to us? Or, do we intuitively see our commonalities as physical and spiritual beings? I think, despite continuing sectarian conflict, we as a human community, are recognizing our spiritual commonalities, even if we don't pause to contemplate the philosophical, theological, cultural and political consequences of this.

As Europe works toward an "ideal society," so may all humankind work toward the awareness of the single Truth which underlies all religions and transcends all cultural and theological boundaries.

Prayer for Peace

It is difficult to evaluate the power of prayer, but certainly remarkable changes have recently taken place on the world scene since that first World Day of Prayer for Peace at Assisi in 1986. Now, each year, some people of all religions join in the Week of Prayer for World Peace and Understanding (this year held October 23rd to the 30th).

And so, may we end then with the Universal Prayer for Peace which many people recite on this occasion and, with which we may acknowledge our universal and common source and, destiny.

I will recite each of the four lines and you may repeat it with me, if your wish, after each line.

Oh, Lord,

Lead me from death to life, from falsehood to truth. (repeat) Lead me from despair to hope, from fear to trust; (repeat) Lead me from hate to love, from war to peace. (repeat) Let peace fill our heart, our world, our universe. (repeat)

Om, Peace, Amen

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