

Chapter 1. The Truth that Makes You Free

If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.

— Jesus of Nazareth

When Jesus told his followers, “the Truth will make you free,”¹⁰ some objected that they had never been slaves to any man. Jesus, however, made it clear that the freedom he was talking about was not political but spiritual. It was freedom from sin and, by implication, sin’s wages, which are suffering and death.¹⁰ But that’s not all. On other occasions he assured them that not only was it possible to become free of suffering and death, they could also attain the kind of real, abiding happiness we all dream of, for as he told the Samaritan woman he met at a well,

Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.¹¹

Most Christians down through the centuries have interpreted such teachings to mean that if you believe Jesus is the Son of God, and you lead a good life, then after you die you will go to heaven where there will be no more suffering and no more death. But this is not the only way these teachings have been understood. Christian mystics have insisted that if you really knew the Truth Jesus was referring to, you would become free of suffering and death and find eternal happiness right now, in this very life. Thus, the fourteenth-century saint Catherine of Siena exclaims:

Oh, how blessed is this soul who while still in her mortal body enjoys the reward of immortality!¹²

And here is how the thirteenth-century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart describes such a person:

This man lives in one light with God, and therefore there is not in him either suffering or the passage of time, but an unchanging eternity.¹³

Similarly, the seventeenth-century monk Brother Lawrence says this of himself:

Even if I were capable of suffering, it would be from not having any suffering at all. ... My tranquility is so great that I fear nothing.¹⁴

Now such claims sound so incredible that we are apt to dismiss them as being, at best, wild exaggerations or, at worst, the ravings of religious lunatics. The trouble is, Christian mystics are not the only ones who have made them. In fact, virtually identical testimonies have been given by mystics of all the great traditions. The majority of Muslims, for example, hold beliefs about a post-mortem existence similar to those of Christians. But the Sufis maintain that you don't have to wait until after death to enter paradise, because, as Ibn al-'Arabi explains,

The Paradise which is pre-destined for those who will come to it in the next life is before your eyes already, this very day. ... You are there now ... but you do not know it.¹⁵

So, too, the thirteenth-century Jewish Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia writes,

When the imaginary, lying apprehension is negated, and when its memory is razed from the hearts of those who feel and are enlightened, death will be swallowed up forever.¹⁶

In the East, of course, death is not seen as a one-time event. According to the Hindu tradition, the individual soul or *jiva* is born and dies again and again, until it finally accumulates enough good *karma* to attain *moksha* (liberation) from this whole miserable cycle of reincarnations. Hindu mystics, however, have always insisted that there is a way to become *jiva-mukta*—that is, one who is liberated in this life. Thus, we read in the Upanishads,

When a man knows God, he is free: his sorrows have an end, and birth and death are no more.¹⁷

Attainment of liberation (*nirvana*) from cyclic existence (*samsara*) is also the goal of Buddhist mystics. The Buddha himself summarized this in his Four Noble Truths, which constitute the basis for all the rest of his teachings. These are as follows:

1. Life is suffering.
2. Suffering has a cause.
3. Suffering can be ended.
4. There is a path to the end of suffering.

And finally, here's what the legendary Taoist sage Chuang Tzu says of someone who has become one with the *Tao*:

A man like this rides the clouds and mists, straddling sun and moon, and wanders beyond the four seas. Even life and death have no effect on him!¹⁸

So while the very idea that suffering and death can be abolished and abiding happiness attained in this life seems absurd on first hearing, the fact that so many

mystics from such vastly different times, places, and cultures have attested to just this possibility should give us pause. Perhaps, instead of dismissing their claims out of hand, we should dig a little deeper to see just how they could actually be true.

What Causes Suffering

Let's go back to the Buddha's Second Noble Truth which states that suffering has a cause. Because if suffering has a cause, then it seems reasonable to suppose that, by eliminating this cause, we can eliminate suffering.

Now normally we think that the cause of our suffering lies outside of ourselves in the things that happen to us. Consequently, we keep trying to alter our external circumstances. To fend off poverty, for instance, we try to accumulate wealth. To avoid illness, we take vitamins, go on diets, and try to exercise more. To alleviate loneliness, we work at maintaining relationships with family, friends, and lovers. To escape boredom, we watch TV, go to movies, or attend sporting events. But suppose that, in adopting these strategies, we are only addressing the superficial causes of suffering and not its root cause. Suppose the root cause of suffering lies not in the external world, or even in our physical bodies, but within our own hearts and minds.

To see how this might be the case, suppose you woke up one morning to find your car had been stolen during the night. This would probably cause you a good deal of suffering. If you didn't have insurance, it would put a sizable dent in your pocketbook. And even if you did have insurance, you would still be faced with the inconvenience of having to make out a police report, file an insurance claim, and shop for a replacement.

But now, suppose you woke up one morning to find your neighbor's car had been stolen. Would that cause you the same amount of suffering? Almost certainly not. If you were acquainted with your neighbor, you might spend a few minutes commiserating with him or her, and you might also be a little concerned that such a theft had occurred so close to home. But chances are you wouldn't experience anywhere near the degree of suffering you would if your own car had been stolen.

What a comparison of these two scenarios demonstrates is that it is not the bare fact of a car being stolen that causes you to suffer, because in both cases cars were stolen. The real cause of your suffering is that you have formed an attachment to your car. But if your neighbor's car is stolen, it causes you much less suffering, because the only attachment you have to your neighbor's car is a vicarious one, based on whatever bond of sympathy you two share. Moreover, if you picked up the newspaper and read about a car being stolen from someone you had never met, you might fret for a moment about the crime rate going up but, aside from that, you wouldn't experience any suffering at all. Why? Because

you have formed no attachment whatsoever to a car that belongs to a complete stranger.

Then why do we get attached to things in the first place? If you examine your own life, you will almost certainly find that you only get attached to things you desire. To give another example, let's say you are a coffee lover who stumbles across a beautiful old coffee mug in an antique store. Even though it is quite expensive, you decide to splurge and buy it anyway. From then on, every morning you sip your coffee from this mug, and over the years you build up a very strong attachment to it. One morning, however, you drop the mug and it shatters into a dozen pieces. No doubt, losing that mug would cause you considerable suffering.

But now suppose that your aunt Tilly gives you an ugly green soup tureen as a wedding present. Most of the time you keep it hidden away in a closet, bringing it out only on those occasions when she comes to visit. Then suppose one day the tureen breaks. Not only would that not cause you any suffering, you would probably be glad to be rid of it.

So, what's the difference between these two scenarios? In the first one you had an intense desire for the coffee mug, but in the second you had no desire for the tureen. Consequently, when the mug breaks you suffer, but you experience no suffering when the tureen breaks.

Notice, also, that an attachment can be based on an *aversion* which, although it may have a different feeling-tone, is actually a kind of negative desire. Thus, to have an aversion for sickness is really the flip side of having a desire for health. If you didn't care whether you were healthy or not, getting sick wouldn't cause you any suffering.

Now all this may sound pretty obvious—especially when we are dealing with simple desires, aversions, and attachments involving only material objects. Still, it is important to understand clearly that *we only suffer when we are attached to something, and we only get attached to things that we desire*, because this same principle applies even in the most complex situations. For instance, you may be stuck in a marriage you feel has stagnated. Part of you dreams of getting a divorce and starting a new, more rewarding life. But another part of you is still attached to the safety and comfort that your marital routines provide. In this kind of situation, your suffering results not from any single desire or attachment, but from being caught in a whole web of conflicting desires and attachments.

What's more, desires and attachments don't always involve possessions or people. They can be more psychological in nature. For instance, many people are attached to mental images they have of themselves. In such cases, suffering arises when there is a discrepancy between a person's self-image and how their lives actually unfold. If, say, you are attached to an image of yourself as being inordinately good at your job, then chances are that whenever you make even

some minor mistake you will suffer inordinate humiliation. The point is, no matter how complex our lives become, whatever suffering we experience can still be traced back to some form of attachment which, in turn, is always based on some kind of desire. If there is no desire, there can be no attachment, and if there is no attachment, there can be no suffering.

But although suffering depends on desire and attachment, the presence of these two factors alone is still not sufficient to guarantee that suffering will actually arise. There is something else that we must take into consideration—something which is built into the very nature of the world—and that is that everything is impermanent. If things were not impermanent, then the fact that we desired and formed attachments to them would not be a problem. We could just go on accumulating all the things we wanted without ever experiencing any suffering from their loss. As we all know, however, this is not the case. Cars, coffee mugs, jobs, people—everything we desire and get attached to eventually breaks down, wears out, and ceases to exist.

Moreover, not only are all the things we desire and get attached to impermanent, but we, ourselves, are impermanent. We, ourselves, are doomed to die someday. Therefore, even if it were possible to get all the things we ever wanted, and even if it were possible to hold onto them for as long as we lived, in the end we would still have to forfeit them at the time of our death. It is not just that we get attached to things we desire that causes our suffering, but also the fact that all these things are impermanent.

Now, normally we don't like to think about the fact that everything is impermanent, and we especially don't like to think about our own impermanence. One reason for this is that there doesn't seem to be anything we can do about it. "Okay," we might say, "everything is impermanent. That's just the way things are. So I might as well try to make the best of it. *Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die*, as the old saying goes."

But is impermanence really the root cause of our suffering? Because if it is, then, given that impermanence is an unalterable fact of our world, there is simply no way to end suffering, and attain true, abiding happiness in this life. The mystics, however, claim that our suffering has an even deeper cause—one that is not quite so obvious, or perhaps we should say one that is so obvious we habitually overlook it. And since this is where the mystics' teachings start to depart from the way we ordinarily view things, let's hear what they themselves have to say. Listen, for example, to the Hindu sage Shankara:

The ego-sense is deep-rooted and powerful. ... It creates the impression that "I am the actor, I am he who experiences." This impression causes our bondage to rebirth and death.¹⁹

And you'll find this same teaching given by mystics of all traditions. Here's how the twentieth-century Tibetan Buddhist master Bokar Rinpoche puts it:

The fundamental dysfunction of our minds takes the form of a separation between I and other. We falsely grasp at an "I" on which attachment grafts itself at the same time as we conceive of an "other" that is the basis of aversion.²⁰

Likewise, the Christian author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* writes,

Every man has plenty of cause for sorrow but he alone understands the deep universal reason for sorrow who experiences *that he is*.²¹

The contemporary Sufi master Javad Nurbakhsh sums it up this way:

As long as you are 'you', you will be miserable and impoverished.²²

According to these mystics, then, it is not the simple fact of impermanence that causes our suffering. In order for suffering to occur, there has to be some self to experience it. If there were no self, there would be no suffering. If, for instance, you were to drop this book on the floor, it wouldn't experience any suffering. In fact, there is nothing you could do to this book—cut it, burn it, tear it apart—that would cause it to suffer in any way. And why? Because you are quite certain the book has no self. Consequently, although attachment, desire, and impermanence are all important contributing factors to the generation of suffering, what the mystics say is that, at an even deeper level, suffering depends on the presence of some self, capable of being a suffer-er.

But while the presence of some self may be crucial to the experience of suffering, is it really its root cause? Because if it is, then again there doesn't seem to be anything much we can do about it—except perhaps commit suicide. And even if suicide could put an end to suffering (which mystics of all traditions emphatically deny), this still cannot bring us the kind of true abiding happiness that mystics claim it is possible to attain. Therefore, we have to dig deeper and ask this: does suffering have a cause even more fundamental than the experience of being a separate self—a cause which perhaps we can do something about? And, of course, the mystics' answer to this is yes. Here is how the first-century Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna explains it:

The root of suffering is clinging, the root of clinging is craving, and the root of craving is ignorance.²³

Notice that the first part of Nagarjuna's statement recapitulates what our own analysis has already revealed—namely, that the immediate cause of suffering is clinging (attachment), and that this, in turn, is based on craving (desire). But then he goes on to say that craving is based on ignorance. In other words, the only reason we desire and get attached to things is because there is something of

which we are ignorant. And once again, you'll find this teaching in all mystical traditions. Thus, Shankara writes,

The mind is filled with ignorance, and this causes the bondage of birth and death.²⁴

The thirteenth-century Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi also insists that our suffering is based on ignorance, or heedlessness as he calls it, and illustrates this with the following metaphor:

Up to your knees in the stream's water, you are heedless of yourself and seek a drink from this person and that.²⁵

And, of course, when Jesus declares that knowing the Truth will make us free from suffering and death, he is implying that our ignorance of this Truth is what causes us to experience them.

How Ignorance Can Cause Suffering

Now, to claim that ignorance is the root cause of all our suffering may sound strange, so let's take a moment to see how ignorance can be the cause of any kind of suffering. First of all, we usually think of ignorance as the absence of some type of knowledge or skill. For instance, in our culture, if a person lacks an education, it is very difficult to get a well-paying job. But when mystics talk about ignorance, they mean something a little different. As Shankara says, this kind of spiritual ignorance "fills our minds." In other words, the problem isn't so much that we lack knowledge, but that the knowledge we do possess is in some way false and so deceives us.

This is something we can experience in everyday life. Suppose, for example, you have a severe stomachache. You go to the doctor who runs a series of tests. In a couple of days the results come back, and the doctor informs you that you have incurable cancer. No doubt, this would cause you a tremendous amount of suffering. You would be overwhelmed by a host of horrific emotions—shock, grief, anger, fear.

Now, suppose a week later the doctor calls back and says there has been a terrible mistake. Your test results got mixed up with someone else's. You don't have cancer after all! The only thing wrong with you is a little indigestion caused by eating too much Polish sausage. Imagine the relief you would experience. In an instant all your suffering would vanish, to be replaced with feelings of elation, joy, and bliss! And why? Simply because you learned the truth about your situation. What had caused your suffering wasn't anything real to begin with. It was only a delusion that had temporarily filled your mind.

This scenario comes much closer to what mystics mean when they say that ignorance is the root cause of suffering. Not only do we fail to recognize the truth of our situation, but we are actually deluded by false knowledge—or, better yet, by false perceptions, because this kind of ignorance is not just conceptual. It involves a complete misapprehension of ourselves and the world. And what exactly is the nature of this misapprehension? It is that our experience of being a separate self—which as we have just seen is a necessary condition for suffering—is, in reality, a delusion. According to the mystics no such entity really exists.

In Buddhism, this is summed up in the teaching of *anatta*, which in Pali literally means *no self* (*an* = no, *atta* = self). Here's how contemporary Buddhist scholar Walpola Rahula explains it:

According to the teaching of the Buddha, the idea of self is an imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality.²⁶

Likewise, Shankara declares that

[The appearance of] an individual soul is caused by the delusion of our understanding, and has no reality. By its very nature, this appearance is unreal. When our delusion has been removed, it ceases to exist.²⁷

Ibn al-'Arabi agrees:

Know that you are an imagination, as is all that you regard as other than yourself an imagination.²⁸

And St. Catherine of Siena writes,

In self knowledge, then, thou wilt humble thyself; seeing that, in thyself, thou dost not even exist.²⁹

It is important to note that when mystics claim that there is no self they are not saying that such things as thoughts, memories, emotions, sensations—all the phenomena which most people think of as constituting themselves—don't appear in consciousness. What they are saying is that the boundary which encloses these phenomena and marks them off as a separate entity has no true existence. It is an imaginary creation, much like the boundaries which separate one country from another. We humans find it useful to draw such boundaries, but this still doesn't make them real features of the terrain. They are imaginary lines which we project onto our environment. And, according to the mystics, the same thing applies to the boundary we draw between self and world. It, too, is very useful but no less imaginary than, say, the border between the United States and Canada.

It is our ignorance of this fact, then, that gives rise to the delusion that some self actually exists. And when we believe that a self actually exists, we identify with everything inside the boundary which defines it—i.e., all the phenomena that constitute a body-mind. But if I am identified with a body-mind, then when the

body-mind is hungry, I feel hungry. And when the body-mind feels pain, I feel pain. Likewise, the body-mind's emotions are experienced as my emotions, so when fear or sorrow arise, they become my fear and my sorrow. And when confused or disturbing thoughts are present, then I feel confused and disturbed. In other words, because we believe we are a separate self, we take all these phenomena personally. We experience them as happening to some *one*—some victim who suffers as a result.

So to sum all this up, what the mystics claim is that, although the immediate causes of our suffering are the self's desires for and attachments to ephemeral things, the root cause stems from our ignorance of the fact that, in reality, no such self exists! Consequently, in order to be free of suffering, what we need to do is dispel our ignorance, for as Shankara says,

As long as we perceive things falsely, our false perception distracts us and makes us miserable. When our false perception is corrected, misery ends also.³⁰

And the way to correct this false perception is, as Jesus said, simply to Realize the Truth of our situation. Here's how Bokar Rinpoche explains it in Buddhist terms:

What is suffering? What is death? In reality, they do not have any existence. They appear within the framework of the manifestations produced by the mind wrapped up in an illusion, just as they appear in a dream. ... In the emptiness of mind, there is no death. No one dies. There is no suffering and no fear.³¹

Or as Javad Nurbakhsh says so succinctly,

Because the sufi has no self, there is no pain for him to bear.³²

But this is only half the story—and the negative half at that! It only tells us how suffering can be ended. It does not tell us anything about the mystics' second, more positive claim—namely, that we can actually attain the kind of true, abiding happiness we all long for so deeply. To find out how this could be possible, we have to ask a different question: if we are not separate selves, then who or what are we really? Because what the mystics also claim is that knowing who or what we really are is the key to discovering this happiness.