

22 Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Here I comment on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. I do not pay attention to subgroups within them. I do not assess weirdoes and terrorists. I assess along my standard lines: the message of Jesus mixed with practicality and Western values. All three religions have to respect the message of Jesus as much as their core tenets. I see no hard problems for any, in theory. Modern believers in all three religions already have adopted much of Jesus' message and Western values. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have more problems getting along with each other than with assimilating the message of Jesus. Because of current problems between the West and Islam, most of the chapter is about Islam. I write for moderate reasonable people who do not force ideas on anybody. Much of what I say about one religion applies to the other two. I don't usually point that out.

Not Jews, Christians, Muslims, or any subgroup in them, literally follows all the words in the basic text of their religion (Torah, rest of Tanakh, New Testament, or Koran). Every group selects passages to support its current ideas and skips passages that make problems. No group has a direct line to God and knows exactly the one-and-only Word-and-Will of God about everything important. No group knows the Word of God to the exclusion of others. Even when groups cite passages that seem clear, we should not take their view at face value. The Tanakh, New Testament, and Koran are self-contradictory and contradict each other. God does not insure that any passage in any book is correct for all times in all places just because (1) the passage supports your ideas, (2) God would not lie to your group, and (3) God watches over your group. We must read the texts to make up our own minds, find the best truth, avoid bad people in each religion, and be clear about principles. These points are so important that I repeat them.

PART 1: Similar Problems.

Following Jesus' Message; Jesus as God.

Keep in mind my disagreement with Orthodox Christianity. In Orthodox Christianity, Jesus is important because he is God and he saves people directly through his Birth, Death, and Resurrection. His life and teachings help his mission. To me, his message is more important than mere facts of his Birth, Death, and Resurrection even if he is God and was resurrected. Christians should accept Jesus' message along with his identity as God but they don't always do that. They substitute difficult doctrines and odd acts of worship for following Jesus' message. Read Wayne Meeks for a view that is accessible, orthodox, and scholarly. Read from the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church, or from the Heidelberg Confession for Protestants.

The content of Jesus' message is not a problem for Judaism and Islam to accept. How enthusiastic they have to be is not a topic I go into much. They have to take it as seriously as anything anybody ever said in their religion, including Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Elijah, Paul, and Mohammad.

The major doctrinal problem in Judaism and Islam with adopting the message of Jesus is Jesus as God. Judaism and Islam cannot accept Jesus as God. Because the message of Jesus does not depend on

him as God, I see no reason why Judaism and Islam can't accept the message. People should stop getting stuck on Jesus as God and instead should consider his message. Jesus is not only a Christian prophet; Jesus is a prophet of God for all people.

Jesus' message was basically Jewish, modified to include others. Although not apparent now, Jews and Muslims share much background. The shared background of Judaism and Islam accords with Jesus' message. Political relations with Christians led Jews and Muslims to reject the message not due to its content but because it is part of Christianity. I hope Jews and Muslims can ignore the issue of Jesus as God, and then assess the message correctly apart from any ties to Christianity's claim that Jesus is God. If so, they might give a more objective useful assessment of how to apply the message in modern times than Christians have done so far.

Jews and Muslims don't have to solve their disputes before they consider the message of Jesus. Jews might have to accept Jesus as a Jewish prophet, which they can do easily enough if they do not have to worry about Jesus as God. Muslims already accept Jesus as a prophet, so I do not see any conflict with Muslim traditions as long as Muslims do not dismiss Jesus as "only a Christian thing".

Following the message of Jesus does not require that you give up all the practices, beliefs, and markers of your own native religion. I would be sad if people did that. I would be sad if Jews gave up yarmulkes, Muslims gave up praying several times a day, and Christians gave up pseudo-Christian holidays such as Christmas. I love Christmas and many non-Christians love Christmas.

Whether Jew, Christian, or Muslim, rather than worry about your identity, get your principles and priorities straight. Think about what you see clearly and what blinds you. Think about how to live in the modern world so you keep religious integrity but also so you are a helpful citizen. Think about how you might best use your time and energy. Get rid of what is misleading and bad. Decide what is important. Then do it. Think seriously about the message of Jesus and the core tenets of your religion. If they are compatible, as I think they are, then think how to merge them and how to live accordingly. After you give a can of food to the community food bank, if you want to light a candle to Mary, say a prayer of thanks to Allah, or thank Yahweh you were allowed to do a good act, then go ahead. Most Jews, Christians, and Muslims already do this.

Not All About You; Not About Going to Heaven (A).

This section and the next raise problems in exegesis that I have avoided throughout the book. The basic point here is simple: The world is not all about you. Stop thinking the world is all about you. In particular, stop thinking the world is all about how you get to heaven. Instead, think about how to be a good, decent, useful person. If you need to think the world is about something, it is about the Kingdom of God.

The relevant passages are Matthew 22:37-40 from the New Testament. Jesus references Deuteronomy 6:15 and Leviticus 19:18. The first reference that begins "You shall love the Lord your God" is a famous powerful key statement in Judaism, and Jews often repeat it. The ideas are clearly stated in the Koran. I doubt Jesus said everything in the New Testament that is attributed to him but I am sure he said all this below.

“You shall love the Lord your God
With all our heart,
And with all your soul,
And with all your mind.’ (from Deuteronomy)
This is the greatest and first commandment.

And a second is like it:
‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ (from Leviticus)

On these two commandments hang
All the law and the prophets.”

I left out Jesus’ statement about loving your neighbor as yourself from my list of points from Jesus in the first chapter of this book because it leads to the confusions listed below. I don’t explain it much here, and I don’t explain why it is hard to follow. Use common sense. It is an ideal toward which we work. It guides and inspires us. Evolution made sure we cannot follow it fully. God does not expect us to follow it fully. God is happy when we try hard.

To love your neighbor as yourself is to see people as persons; follow the Golden Rule; follow the idea that rules apply equally to you, kin, friends, enemies, “them”, and everybody; and follow the rule of law.

“Neighbor” means everyone, including non-Jews. Jesus likely did mean it inclusively to encompass even non-Jews but not as inclusively as later Christians taught. Jesus aimed at Jews and tolerated non-Jews happily. Later Christians aimed equally at Jews and non-Jews. Christians eventually aimed at non-Jews and excluded Jews. Hopefully modern Christians include everybody equally.

The advice that “love your neighbor, it is not all about you” raises problems.

First, it is hard to understand and impossible to follow. Evolution made sure that we don’t entertain ideas like this very often or very much and that we don’t act on them except rarely. We can’t get a good feel for loving our fellow as much as ourselves. I don’t explain much more.

Second, if we take “love your neighbor, it is not all about you” seriously as a realistic goal that we have to reach or else we are bad people, then we get flummoxed and paralyzed. We don’t do much good. If we want to get anything done, it is better to see this as an unreachable ideal than as a necessary goal.

Third, you are not part of a giant collective totalitarian state, theocracy, or bad version of the Kingdom of God. The fact that the world is not all about you does not mean it is all about the state, an ethnic group, a religion, a church, your socio-economic class, your family, the Caliphate, or the Communist collectivity. Do not lose yourself in a group or dogma. You individually are important. I have stated the importance of individual persons often. You have to find a correct balance between you as individual and the secular-religious-political-and-kin institutions that you are in.

Fourth, God still cares about you as an individual. God cares about all the individual sparrows and so he cares about you. You matter. To God, you, and all individuals, are what it is about. You can believe that God cares about you and still understand that the world is not all about you personally.

Fifth, the fact that the world is not all about you, and you should act in accord with what the world is all about, does not mean all you must force yourself to act like a sickly sweet do-gooder. You help the world when you are yourself, when you do what you are good at, even when you are a little irascible, and when you make the world more interesting. You love your neighbor when you give him what you are and what you are best capable of, and so give what you can give most of. You love your neighbor when you do the most good not necessarily when you do stereotyped good. If you devote yourself to others, and only help the world, that is great; but not everybody can do that or should. To love your neighbor as yourself is not to lose yourself in an ecstasy of warm feelings unless the feelings lead you to do good things following the Golden Rule and “applies equally”.

Sixth, the statement implies that, if you don't love yourself very much, you don't love your neighbor very much either. Lack of self-respect is lack of respect for others too. You are one of the people in the world; you are a neighbor to all other people; you are a neighbor. They should love you as much as they love themselves. You are as worthy of their love, just as they are as worthy of your love, because God loves us all. They won't succeed at loving you as they love themselves, no more than you do. You do still have to try to love them even if they don't fully love you or even if they hardly love you. To say this is not again to make you “first among equals” and selfish. To say this is not to deny good people who spend their life in service. It is the other way around. When you see that everyone is in the same boat, including you, you are more likely to be good to other people. If you have done bad things, or feel bad, I know how you can have little self-respect but still respect others. If you are depressed, then take care of yourself first until you are better, and don't worry. If you can, accept that God loves you and forgives you. Take seriously that you too are one of the neighbors too, and act accordingly.

If you see that you are one of the neighbors too, you still matter, you cannot fully succeed in loving your neighbor as yourself, but you can try, then you are more likely to do some good than if you try to reduce yourself to a bitter servant in a vain attempt to love your neighbor fully. The little bit of good that you really do is more important than the great good that you dream you could have done.

Seventh, to love God does not excuse doing any bad things to anybody. You do not love God and do not love your neighbor as yourself if you do any bad things to anybody. Zealotry is bad.

Not All About You; Not About Going to Heaven (B).

This section shows how we can stretch scripture to get what we want. I hope that I don't stretch it so far that the scripture breaks.

Eighth, to me, Jesus' statement makes clear that the world is not all about you and therefore not all about you going to heaven. Jesus did not worry much about heaven. Loving your neighbor, seeing that the world is not all about you, is a higher goal than going to heaven. Because the lower goal gets in the way of the higher goal, it is best to forget the lower goal. Focus on the higher goal, loving your neighbor. What I say here of heaven is as true of the goal of “getting saved”. If you worry about getting saved more

than about your neighbor and of following Jesus' message then you will fail at all. Think first about being a good person and about your neighbor; heaven and salvation will take care of themselves. What I say is also true of getting "enlightened" from Buddhism although I don't push the point.

Some Jews, most Christians, and most Muslims, think religion is all about believing something, and-or doing some things, so you go to heaven. Even without Jesus' statement above, taking "go to heaven" as your primary goal is a big mistake. Religions that teach "go to heaven" as the primary goal are wrong. To take "go to heaven" as the primary goal leads us to think of ourselves first, leads us not to follow Jesus' message, and so leads us not to love our neighbor as ourselves. To do good things to gain a benefit for ourselves is a mistake even though we do good things and even though what we want for ourselves is a good thing such as heaven. Even if we take heaven to mean "closer to God" it is still a mistake to take that as the first goal. Rather, just love God, love your neighbor, do good, be decent, and let heaven take care of itself.

Jesus clearly puts "love God" and "love your neighbor" before going to heaven. To put heaven above them is wrong. If you think you can declare some doctrine or perform some act and so get to heaven, then you think the world is all about you, you do not love God fully, you think first of yourself, and you do not love your neighbor as yourself. If you love your neighbor so you can go to heaven, you do not really love your neighbor as yourself. It is a contradiction to try to love your neighbor so you can go to heaven. You can't do it. This is the mistake of "Pascal's Wager" from the chapter in this book on codes. Worry about loving your neighbor first and then worry about heaven later. To say this is not to offer you another doctrine to declare; I offer you some observation and some advice.

I have said we meet God after we die, not that we go to heaven for sure if we follow a particular doctrine, do particular deeds, or go to a particular church. I have said we should act well for its own sake without worrying about our talk with God and without worrying about heaven. This is like the athlete or dancer doing the best he-she can right now without worrying about anything else.

It is natural to want to succeed, do well, avoid badness (hell), and get a reward (heaven). It is natural to want all that for family. When Jesus says to love your neighbor as yourself, then it is natural to try to love your neighbor as yourself so you can go to heaven - regardless of the contradiction. God does not burn with fierce anger toward people who mistakenly use "going to heaven" as the highest goal. Because it is so natural to seek heaven, hard to love our neighbor as ourselves, and natural to pursue the contradiction of loving our neighbor so you can go to heaven, then trying to go to heaven is not necessarily a horrible mistake. God understands. Unless the mistake of "going to heaven" leads you to act badly, act selfishly, or condemn others, it is not necessarily a horrible mistake. It can lead us to act well, and, in that way, it can be a good mistake. Sadly, many of us would not follow Jesus without the temptation of heaven. As with other natural mistakes, especially those mistakes that cause little damage, God is not too harsh with us about this one.

Don't worry about you personally going to heaven. Worry about doing what God and Jesus want.

If you really want to do well, without thinking you will go to heaven as a result, then practice thinking about doing well without thinking about heaven. Practice helps. Practice enacts good faith. Practice thinking the world is not all about you even though you still matter. Practice thinking other people matter as much

as you. Practice thinking “what should I do?” on the basis that other people matter as much as you do, on the basis of ideally loving everybody as you love yourself, and on the basis of knowing you are one of the neighbors too. You can’t fully succeed but such practice can clear your head and make you do better.

When people stop thinking the world is all about them, and stop thinking religion is all about how they can go to heaven, then they are much more likely to follow the message of Jesus.

If your religion does not teach you that the world is not all about you, if your religion does not teach you to love other people as yourself, if your religion does teach you the main goal is heaven, then your religion is wrong and misleading. If your religion does teach you those things, then it does not teach you to follow the message of Jesus, and you are not likely to follow it. My assessment applies to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, and all religions.

Luckily, all major religions leave ample room to stop thinking it is all about you, stop thinking it is all about going to heaven, start loving your neighbor as yourself, and start following the message of Jesus. Try to see the teachings of your religion in that light. If you cannot see your religion in that light, then you need to change it or leave it.

Fallible Founders.

Hopefully I made clear I think Jesus was a man and Jesus made mistakes even about some important spiritual points such as the existence of the devil and the rapid coming of the Kingdom of God. Religions have no trouble seeing the key people of other religions as merely human and fallible, even when the other leaders were inspired by the Holy Spirit. Religions have no trouble even seeing the key people in other religions as false prophets or demons. Religions cannot see their own prophets as merely human and fallible. Religions insist not only that their founders were infallible in some situations when they were inspired by the Holy Spirit but infallible generally. Certainly Christians see Jesus that way, and, despite Mohammad being clear he was only a man and so fallible sometimes, Muslims see him as an infallible constant representative of God. Even Jews see their major prophets that way. It is inconceivable that anything attributed to Moses in the Torah or to a major prophet in the Tanakh might be merely human and not fully true all the time.

Of course, I think this attitude is entirely wrong. We have to accept that even the most important people in a religion are merely human and might have made mistakes. Even the most important people let their personal desires shape what they said in God’s name. We have to assess what prophets said against our best ideas of what God is, what the world is, and the best morality. We do not have to be slaves to some clever theology, or even to common sense, but we cannot be slaves to dogma either. Yes, I know this attitude opens the door to subjectivity and to conflicts but that is the price we have to pay for inching closer to the truth and for applying God’s ideas of “best life” to our times.

The idea of each religion that its own founders are utterly infallible and god-like is a major hurdle to each religion accepting the teachers of other religions and seeing the truths of other religions. Rather than look at the mainline teachings of another religion, religions attack the prophets of other religions and defend their own prophets. Only if religions first accept that their own prophets are fallible can they get beyond

this petty attack on persons and get on to messages. Only if religions accept the huge chunk of wood in their own eyes can they get over the tiny speck of dust in the eyes of other religions.

To attack the prophets of other religions while insisting on the absolute god-like infallibility of your own prophets is a version of "us versus them". It is idolatry in the service of group conflict. Get over it by accepting the fallibility of your own prophets and looking for the best message everywhere.

Religions defend the infallibility of their founders as a way to defend the whole religion. Take our religion as a whole or leave it. This attitude makes sense in the light of human evolution and the importance of religion in group life but we can no longer afford this luxury. If you want to take what is good from another religion while leaving what is bad, you have to see that good and bad are mixed in that religion. If you see that, you have to see that the prophets of a religion are fallible, are not infallible. If you can see a mix of good and bad, truth and mistakes, in other religions, you can see it in your own. Only if you can see it in your own can you see it in other religions. If you want other religions to take what is good from your religion, you have to allow that not all of your religion is perfect. If you allow that not all of your religion is perfect, then you have to allow that your prophets were not totally infallible and god-like. You have to allow that they were human speakers. Only in that way can the good truths of your religion go to other people and the good truths of other people come to your religion.

Jesus, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Mohammad, the Buddha, Confucius, and Chuang Tzu were all fallible and made mistakes. Get used to it. Get on to better things.

If you really just can't let go of the idea that "your guy(s)" was infallible and god-like, if letting go makes your stomach hurt, then you have a hard job. You have to see through a thick hedge to get glimpses of truth on the other side. You have to try harder. God (Dharma, Tao, or Heaven) wants you to see the truth no matter what religion it is in. You have to try hard about this issue because God wants you to try hard.

Special Relation to God.

Most religions start within particular ethnic groups, and ethnic groups often think of themselves as having a special relation with the deity, for example Yahweh, or with the supreme principle, such as Dharma. The special relation is only between their group and God (Dharma), so that no other group can have this relation or can have a similar relation that is just as good. Europeans and White Americans think only they can be true Christians, American Blacks think only they can be true Baptist Christians, Indians think only they can be true Hindus who know the full Dharma, Arabs think only they can be true Muslims, Chinese think only they can be true Taoists, and the Thai think only they, the Ceylonese, and maybe the Japanese can be true Buddhists. In theory, the close relation can grow outside the original ethnic group by conversion. In fact, people in a religion still tend to be of one ethnicity or nationality and they still have trouble believing anybody of another ethnicity or nationality can be a true follower.

Judaism is more stringent than other religions in its exclusivity because, from the start, Judaism always openly stressed a close relation between God (Yahweh) and a particular ethnic group. People could convert to Judaism, and would be accepted as a true believer in Yahweh. Eventually they would become Jews too. But only as Jews that people could have a close relation with Yahweh and be a true believer.

Nowadays, Jews do see that Christians and Muslims try to have a close relation with Yahweh, but their own history has told them that this is a tricky situation. Historically speaking, at best, non-Jews can only have a derivative second-rate relation with Yahweh, and they only follow a lesser version of the Law that reflects their secondary status. This is one thing that Jews, and all religions, have to change. Jews can change this idea of strong exclusivity without giving up on the idea that once-upon-a-time they did have one kind of unique relation with God and while accepting that now they have another unique relation with God. The present unique relation of Jews with God does not prevent other people from having their own fully satisfying relation with the one-and-only same God.

First Christianity, then Islam, took up the Jewish attitude of ethnic exclusivity, and turned it against their rivals. For Christians, only Christians can have a true full relation with Yahweh, and it has to be through Jesus. Jews lost their close relation with Yahweh when they rejected Jesus as God. For Muslims, only Muslims can have a close relation with Allah (God), and it has to be through Mohammad. Jews and Christians lost their relation when they rejected Mohammad as the last and greatest prophet. Muslims resent the Jewish and Christian attitude that Muslims cannot have a close relation with Allah. Muslims see the Jewish and Christian attitude as selfish idolatry that tries to usurp God for the idolaters, and that places a wall between God and most of his creation. You don't have to be a Jew or Christian to have a relation with God (Allah). I disagree with the Christian and Muslim interpretations. They are not unique and special, other groups are not bad, and other groups are not barred from a close relation with God. When Christians and Muslims put themselves in a special place, they practice the same kind of idolatry of which Muslims accuse Christians. I agree with the Muslim interpretation when it seeks links between God and all his creation.

The badness of unique exclusivity gets worse when combined with the idea of ethnic group as nation. As with most peoples of the world, Jews (Hebrews) were not only an ethnic group, they were also a political military nation. Jews (Hebrews) had a relation with Yahweh not just as an ethnic group but also as a political nation that had policies and fought wars. Yahweh made not only Jews (Hebrews) prevail but also made the state of Israel (including Judah) prevail. When Christianity and Islam took up a unique relation with God, they took up nationalism too. At various times after Israel, various nations in their turn claimed status as the "New Israel". One nation claimed to be the favorite of God, the instrument of God, and to represent God on Earth. Sometimes this nation was France, Britain, Germany, Spain, the United States, Iraq (Babylon), Egypt, Iran, or as I wrote, ISIS. Other ethnic groups and nations make this claim too in their own way as when India thinks of itself as the one nation that has a true relation with the Dharma and represents the Dharma on Earth.

This is all wrong now. No ethnic group, nation, or religion has a special relation with God. God cannot be reserved for one ethnic group, religion, or nation. What matters are your ideas, your relation with God, and your acts. You have to build a good relation with God. If you have good ideas about God, then you likely have a good relation. If your group has good ideas about God, then people in it likely have good relations. If you have bad ideas as part of your religion, ethnic group, or nation, then you will have trouble with God. You cannot think you have a close relation with God just because you are a Jew (religious), Christian, Muslim, Jew (ethnic), Israeli (nation), European, Arab, Turk, Persian, Malay-Indonesian, or American. Believing you have a special relation with God because of your ethnicity, religion, or nation is a bad idea that blocks a good relation with God.

The Jewish attitude about a special relation with God played a big part in history and in the development of good ideas about God. It played a key role in Jewish survival. Unfortunately, I cannot tell that good story here. Christian and Muslim take-over of the attitude also played big parts in history. Sometimes in this chapter I return to the attitude of having a close relation with God.

If a special relation of Jews with God remains, and I hope it does, it consists of Jews serving as moral and political examples to the world. I go into this topic more below.

Religion in the Modern World.

The biggest impediment for Jews and Muslims to following the message of Jesus in the modern world is not theology, it is the modern world. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all were built in a pre-modern pre-industrial world of kings, soldiers, peasants, merchants, crafts people, priests, thieves, bandits, distinct class society, magic, superstition, spiritual heroes, divine mediators, demons, no science, no modern scientific engineering, and no capitalism. The ideas of the major religions fitted life then. To adopt Jesus' message for the modern world means to give up ideas that sustained Judaism, Christianity, and Islam for many hundreds of years. That is hard. Some Jews and Muslims reject Jesus' message as a way to reject the modern world and the West without necessarily rejecting Jesus as a prophet. Some Jews and Muslims reject Jesus as prophet so as to cling to old ways, not because of anything intrinsically in Jesus' message.

Conservative Christians have the same problem but inverted. They want to accept some of the modern world such as their place among the wealthy and secure, but they refuse to accept other parts such as the problems of capitalism, decay of nature, and "handwriting on the wall" of biology and machines. They cling to a past in which they were the center of society, and use Christian dogma to do so.

Some confused believers have a similar but more sympathetic problem. They do not in principle reject the modern world, but the modern world is confusing, indecent, and often painful. They yearn for better and simpler times, and for order. They yearn for the decency that is so hard to find now. They turn to what seemed to work in the past even if they know now is not the past. They turn to what seems like solid basic principles even if those don't work now. It is hard to fault them. We all do something similar when we watch reruns of "Andy Griffith", "Seinfeld", or "Friends" on TV.

To the overly Conservative Jews, Christians, and Muslims, I don't know what to say other than "get over it". I say the same thing to the confused Christians but with less nastiness. In the end, you must accept the modern world or else your DNA and your culture will be kept in tiny bottles in museums. When you do get around to dealing with the modern world, you must deal with its institutions including the ideas of Jesus and the West. That task is much easier if you accept the large background that you already share with Jesus as a Jew and with the West as a close neighbor. It is much easier to accept the modern world if you see you can add to it. Christians have not come up with all the good ideas already and have not solved all the problems already. The modern world needs your help. The modern world needs your help to make pluralistic democracy work, regulate capitalism, save nature, figure out gender, and to control biotechnology and artificial intelligence as they expand.

A Few Words on Terrorists.

Some Christians and Muslims act much harsher. I am not sure about Jews because I don't know Jewish subgroups well enough. If what I say applies to some Jews, then think about it. The old order supported some groups more than others, such as men over women, wealthy stay-at-home women over women who had to go to the fields or shops, rich over poor, old over young, owners over workers, owners over people with an education, and clans over small working families. People who stand to lose, and people who fear they might lose, sometimes violently resist change and they use religious ideology to support their violence.

These are the terrorists. Terrorists recruit from among people who fear the new world, are victims, and are deeply confused. The losers don't even have to be outright poor; they only have to be comparative losers to other people around them or in media fantasy life. Terrorists recruit from among the people who have some education but can't find a job, or from among able bodied fairly smart people who don't see why they can't make a living. It doesn't matter if some Christians are the ones who make life hard for other Christians, or some Muslims are the ones who make life hard for other Muslims. Terrorists recruit from among people who fear and who have a hard time; terrorists recruit by blaming it not on their fellows of the victims who hurt the victims but by blaming the "others". White Christians blame Muslims, Jews, Blacks, and Hispanics; Blacks blame Whites, Hispanics, and Asians; and Muslims blame Christians and the West. It doesn't matter that some terrorists use modern media, they still live in an idealized past. They still think that stories of a good godly affluent world where everybody had land or a job, everybody respected God, and everybody was modest, are true. The best antidote to the mistakes is honesty about both the good and the bad, and facing up to real problems.

Some terrorists might not personally stand to lose from the new order and might even stand to gain, such as well-educated and professional people who become terrorists. Apart from Osama Bin Laden, the Bin Laden family owns a large construction firm and they are successful good peaceful Muslims. Osama was not a victim of the modern world; he simply wanted to remake it in his idealized image. I do not here go into the motives of the terrorists who might have been able to make it in the modern world but chose terror instead. They enjoy using other people and they are adept at the media and ideology. They gain by manipulating ideologies of a great past and of an ungodly present. Again, the best antidote is the full truth and facing up to problems.

Western Institutions.

For nearly 2000 years, the West carried the message of Jesus and the seeds of key institutions but did not fully develop the institutions, such as full rule of law, public education, democracy, citizenship, and science. The West did have important institutions such as partial rule of law, charities, and education through churches. So it is possible to carry the message of Jesus without fully developing the good institutions that are its flowering. Even so, the important institutions could not have developed without the message of Jesus, and I see them as a natural extension of his message. I use them as standards for the good realization of a good religious message. I do so although I have serious misgivings about the success of populist democracy. If you hear the best message from God, then you will work to develop and sustain these institutions in the modern world, with allowances for your culture, society, and history; if you do that, then you have heard the best message from God for our times even if you do not know that it

came from God; if you do not do that, then you have missed the best message from God, or you do not take it seriously. It is selfish to use the institutions of my civilization to assess others but that is what I do, and I can only be honest about it.

Doing Good; No Religious Pyramid Schemes.

In other drafts of this chapter, the material in this section quickly ballooned, so I mention only the key points. I will take up the topic elsewhere.

I devalue religions if they are little but pyramid schemes. Religion should have a message other than “we are good guys; they are bad guys; join us good guys”, “God loves us more than anybody else”, or “we will win because God loves us more than anybody else, so you should join us”. It is not even enough to say “If you join us, you will feel great joy in the love of God, especially if you go out and get other people to join and feel great joy, and so on”. Every religion says that, and they can’t all be right. Also, that is what people say when they want others to take drugs or join a cult. An example of a pyramid scheme you can see on TV is: “Giving to us is the same as giving to God, and, if you do that, you will get rich, so give to us first”. You should never do bad things to show that you are more than just ecstatic and that you have a positive agenda from God.

Only in hard times, when religion is a tool to keep a group alive, can you rest with “this is what we believe because we are who we are”. Jews had to do this to survive, and it was good then. Sometimes groups of all faiths have had to do it. Even then, you should not use religion to do bad things.

If you join the good guys, if you are part of the one true religion of the one true God, you should do good things and avoid bad things. Being a good guy has to have a point. You have to act, not just to sustain your own group but to do good things. If you cannot act, or are not sure what to do, at the least, you can change your character. The message of Jesus, combined with realistic practicality and Western values, is a clear statement of good things to do. Your religion does not have to adopt Jesus as its leader but your religion should offer a program along the lines of his ideas.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims in most of the world now do not need religion merely to survive. They are secure enough. So all three religions need to offer a positive message of what their religion is all about; they have to offer a positive agenda for how believers can make the world better. Jews, Christians, and Muslims have to assess to the message of their religions about what good to do in the world other than to convert others to their religion. If their religion does not offer a positive constructive message of what good to do, then they have to change their religion, or, if their religion will not change, they have to leave. Luckily, mainstream Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all (tacitly) accept a message along the lines of Jesus’ ideas, and they can promote a positive program along the lines of Jesus’ message. That is how I evaluate them.

I do not deal with Bad Subgroups here.

Some bad subgroups within the major religions do not offer any real message, or offer a bad message. “If you really know God like we do, you should hurt the other people who don’t hold us to be the only true representatives of God.” “The act that confirms your belief is forcing your belief on others, and so on”. It

is up to good members of a religion to suppress bad groups. If they don't fight bad groups, they are at fault equally. See the movie "Judgment at Nuremberg". That is all I need to say.

God's Will versus Principles.

I said what follows in the chapter on Legalism but I don't mind repeating it here.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims all claim to know God's Will. They cite passages from the Tanakh, New Testament, or Koran to support their claim. Passages within the books, and between the books, do not all agree, and so major religions disagree on God's Will. This alone is enough to show that they do not automatically know God's Will. We have to evaluate what they claim as God's Will not only on the basis of passages from their holy books but on other standards. Even when all the religions agree on their idea of God's Will, cite passages in support, and cite similar passages, we should not simply accept their claim to know God's Will. We still should apply other standards.

The other standards are the best moral ideas, especially the ideas of Jesus combined with practicality and Western values. Those standards prevail over any claims about God's Will. If any group claims to know God's Will but its idea of God's Will does not go along with the best moral standards, then we can reject its idea as the basis for personal action, for policies of the state, and as God's Will. If Jews, Christians, or Muslims say it is God's Will that modern democracy extend voting rights to everybody who is mentally competent regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, and religion, then we can believe them, tempered by practicality. If Christians say it is God's Will that women, gays, and people of European descent may not vote now because they did not have rights to participate in the old Temple at Jerusalem, then we should not believe them. If Christians or Muslims say Jews do not have the right to vote because Jews have lost their special relation to God and only Christians and Muslims now have that relation, we should not believe them. If Jews say only they know the Will of God, and only they have the rights of full citizenship, because only they had a special relation with God, and only with them has that relation go on to the present day just as it was in the time of King Solomon, we should not believe them.

Just because the religions all agree on God's Will, and their idea of God's Will goes along with the best moral principles, does not mean we have to accept a particular policy in a modern state on the basis that it is God's Will. If all three religions agree it is God's Will that we can take slaves, then we should not believe them. We offer particular policies because they go along with the best moral principles. God's Will did not necessarily originate the policy and does not necessarily have anything to do with it. If we also want to think that God is behind good policies that are based on the best moral principles, that is a naturally human way to think and I have no problem with it.

Relying on good moral principles can take "God's Will" out of the picture. If action is based on moral principles regardless of God's Will, then we don't need God's Will. Logically, strictly speaking, that might be true. But, in practice, we need a source of good ideas about how to live, and the great religious texts are the best source. It is important for people to think they act not only in accord with logic and morality but also with God's Will. Logic alone cannot provide us with all the morality that we need, and logic alone cannot settle problems in morality. For the full base of our morality, we go back to the major traditions that gave us our morality to begin with. To settle issues, we also go back to them, and we try to get the different traditions to agree. When morality and God's Will agree, and receive support from the Tanakh,

New Testament, and Koran, then I am happy to think I go along with God's Will when I go along with moral principles. Maybe that is how God expresses his Will these days. I have no trouble with invoking God's Will sometimes as long as it is invoked properly.

We need nudges in particular directions sometimes. We do not want to stone all adulterers and thieves. We need to know what to forgive how much. If the holy books of different religions all agree, then great. If they disagree, then we have to think hard and refer back to basic best moral principles often. Hopefully, when we reach agreement, believers can think they follow God's Will through the process by which God revealed it to them in such cases.

You are not doing God's Will if you follow every commandment about prayer, food, fasting, the Sabbath, clothing, marriage, sex, and cleanliness, or if you get angry at enemies, and you do not follow the ideals behind Jesus' teachings. You are not doing God's Will if you are a silly legalist, or use God's Will to vent your hatred, and so do not follow Jesus' teachings.

God's Will can serve as the basis for a system that eats the world, and it does so in Christianity, Islam, and some types of Judaism. I originally wrote this chapter with a part on that topic but then I took it out because of the length. I put those comments on the Web separately.

External Worship; Old Warnings are Still True.

To do what God taught is far more important than to worship externally. Even self-validating experience such as ecstasy in the glory of God or participating in the sacraments is merely external worship, and, if that is all you do, that is not useful and that displeases God. External worship of God can get in the way of the message by letting us focus on acts that have little to do with the message so we can feel good about ourselves without doing much real good. We feel good about formal external worship but overlook true worship (sin of omission due to misguided worship).

Going to church, synagogue, or mosque every week, or every day, is not enough. Keeping the holidays is not enough. Praying daily, or five times daily, is not enough. Venerating great prophets, Jesus, or Mohammad is not enough. Venerating priests, rabbis, or imams, is not enough. Keeping the day of a special saint is not enough. Keeping all the commandments is not enough if that is all you do, you do it from duty alone, or you do it from fear of hell. Having a personal relation with God is not enough if you don't also make yourself useful. Making the pilgrimage to Mecca is not enough if it doesn't change you and lead you to be useful. If you light a million candles to Jesus, Mary, or a Saint, but never give a can of food to the food bank, then you have wasted your time and resources. If you put on a funny hat or sing a throbbing song, that devotion does not necessarily make you right with God. God does allow for limitations and mixed motives.

Worship of God can get in the way of the message by getting us to act not in accord with the message, or even act against it, but still feel good about ourselves (sin of commission due to misguided worship). If you defeat religious foes at the muzzle of a gun, or with legislative conniving, and then install tyranny, you have defeated God and goodness. If you act on zealotry instead of helping people, God will judge you harshly. If you waste time harassing people who do little harm so you can feel self-righteous, such as by harassing gay people, God will harass you and do you little good. If you crusade for social programs but

don't understand the real impact of the programs, you have wasted your time and hurt people. If you blow up a school bus in the name of God then God will condemn you when you die. You would be better off starting a school for children of any faith.

Our minds, and science, are a gift from God just as much as any scripture is a gift. If you refuse science because you worship dead scripture instead of the living God and his works, if you deny evolution and climate change, then you have refused God, the prophets, Jesus, and Mohammad.

When you worship externally, you worship an idol, and you worship badly, even if the idol is beautiful. Bad worship stands in the way of good worship. Idol worship blocks the way to God. Good worship is following the message of God and accepting his gifts of heart, mind, and spirit.

I cannot say what is enough. You have to work that out with God. We learn what God wants us to do from his prophets. Prophets disagree. We have to pick the ones that we consider most important. Our pick should be guided by widespread standards, such as by social justice, the need for social order, and by the objective morality of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" and "applies equally to everybody". We can reject parts of a prophet's message that we do not like while still keeping other parts that we do like if we do so in accord with deep principles and if we act sincerely. This is what I have done explicitly in this book. I ask believers in other religions to do the same, and to be sure they are explicit about what they do.

Focus on What is Important.

I know external signals, such as hats, beads, and prayer poses, can be key for believers, and external signals can teach ideas such as the relation of people to God. I know believers judge on the basis of external signals, and keep aloof or come together according to external signals. I don't care about that. I care about ideas of self, world, God, prophets, relation to God, justice, the message of Jesus, general attitude toward life, general attitude toward modern life, and the typical character of believers. In belief about God, the three religions are nearly identical except for the question of Jesus as God. I think the three religions can overlook that difference. The three religions differ in some features of personality and attitude. External signs of worship are much more about personality and attitudes, and about ethnic-religious affiliation, than they are about real points of belief.

Overall Right.

Jesus was not right about everything. No prophet in any religion was always right about everything. The Buddha was wrong sometimes. Mohammad was petty and spiteful sometimes. To see what God wants, you have to get over the idea that a particular prophet was always right. You have to read as much from all the prophets as you can, then make up your own mind about the core message. After you have read them all, you have to go back again and sort through them again so you can assess each prophet in the context of all and in the context of what you think is the core message. You have to be willing to let other people know what you are doing, and take the consequences if they disagree with your search or your conclusions. You cannot let people stand in the way finding out what God had on his mind. If you hold narrowly to any one prophet, you put a human being before God. God doesn't like that. You don't have to be a rebellious "bad boy" or "bad girl" to do this. You don't have to deliberately break rules to get free.

You just have to use your mind. When other people use their minds, don't stand in their way. Don't try to force them to believe that your prophet was the one and only prophet who was always right and who was always right because he-she spoke for God.

PART 2: Judaism.

Jews in the West already have accepted Western values and the ideas of Jesus without accepting that Jesus is God. They have accepted the ideas with little problem, and have been leaders in spreading the ideas around the world. Jews have lived the ideas. Jews are outstanding community leaders, citizens, and professionals. When Jon Stewart of the Daily Show came back from spending the summer of 2013 making a movie in the Middle East, despite stressing how much he loved the experience, he also made a point of how much he is a Westerner and shares Western values.

Jews are prominent in the entertainment industry. I do not argue here about the extent of their presence and whether it is good or bad; for this book, I don't care (I don't care that Italians dominate wine making or Germans beer making). As artists, directors, producers, and critics, Jews have promoted the best values of Western culture and have promoted the values of Jesus. A glance at credits for the best movies and TV shows indicates how Jews have contributed to spreading good Western values including the message of Jesus. Movies such as "White Christmas" owe a debt to Jews; Irving Berlin wrote the title song, really believed in Christmas as a vehicle of good values, and was a good Jew. Adam Sandler's "Hanukah Song" is both a lot of fun and a true glimpse at what Jews have contributed. His movies promote the values of Jesus because they promote the best values of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; see "You Don't Mess with the Zohan". In 2013, in disgust over squabbles about saying "Merry Christmas", Jon Stewart said Christmas is the best holiday ever for everybody – everybody. If all this is how Jews accept the message of Jesus and act on it, then I am fine with it.

(Just to salvage some PC: many ethnic groups now play a large part in Western media and in bringing good ideas to the world. My wife and I love Thai or Greek names in credits. Chinese kung fu movies promote good ideas such as individual freedom combined with patriotism, as in "Hero" with Jet Li. Hindu ideas imbue Star Trek and Star Wars, and Hindus contribute to the production of good movies. Hindu actors are fairly common. I don't have to dwell on the "Harold and Kumar" movies.)

I do not know much about divisions in Judaism and about groups in Judaism. If particular groups have ideas and acts that allow members to overlook the message of Jesus or get them to act badly, then other Jews have to re-evaluate those groups. Decent Jews within Judaism should chastise groups that act badly. If groups in Judaism do not act in accord with the message, do not act in accord with the spirit of the Law rather than its letter, and do not in accord with Western values, then I hope they change. I leave this to Jews in general as long as their minority groups do not harm greater society. I apply the same standards to all religions.

The prophet Isaiah said Israel (Jews) one day will lead the world morally, and will set the example for how to live with God, even if Israel does not dominate militarily or politically. If Jews lead the world by teaching God and the prophets, including Jesus, through the media, that is a wonderful fulfillment of the prophecy. I can think of few better ways to fulfill the prophecy.

Jewish history and theology as presented in the Tanakh is not literally the truth, and most educated Jews know this. In this respect, average Jews are ahead of average Christians. Jewish scholars lead the way in finding the facts of Jewish history and finding relations between the facts and the Tanakh. Christian scholars pioneered this effort, and many still are in the forefront, but it seems the average Christian has not caught up with scholarship as much as the average Jew has. Any scholarly version of the Tanakh from the Jewish Publication Society has essays and references that will lead an interested reader to know more. Jews have to interpret the historical facts, and what is written in the Tanakh, in light of the relation of Jews to God. As far as I can tell, Jews seem to embrace this task. I look forward to ideas from Jewish scholars on these issues.

Historical facts, and discrepancies between historical facts versus what is written in the Tanakh, concern not only Jews but also Christians and Muslims. Jewish history and Jewish ideas are the basis for those religions too. As facts come up and ideas change, Christians and Muslims have to listen to what Jews think, and they might have to change their own ideas. Christians and Muslims in general have not fully felt this issue about real history and have not fully felt their obligation to Jews, although some scholars do know. I hope all three religions can communicate on these issues and come to accords. Many Christian scholars have helped in this research. Some modern Muslim scholars are working toward finding facts but I am not familiar enough with their work to assess them or cite them.

Jews do not proselytize much. Other people come to Jews asking to convert. Jews do not look down much on people who do not seek them out and who do not convert. Judaism is not a religious pyramid scheme.

Most modern Jews accept that a person can follow the same God as Jews without becoming a Jew. I am not sure if some modern Jews reject this position. I don't think Jews who allow this position think a non-Jew follower of God is less in the eyes of God. If they do, they are wrong. I do not know how a non-Jew follower of God stands in the formal theology of particular Jewish groups. I don't think they worry about it too much. Jews usually do not condemn non-Jews, especially not to hell. Jews do sometimes look down on non-Jews but every religion looks down on others, and Jews are not worse in this regard than people in other religions; in my experience they are somewhat better. At least some Jews do think they are closer to God than people of other religions. I am not sure if this attitude is general in Judaism. Again, other religions, especially Christianity and Islam, feel this way, and Jews are no worse than them. Jews have an explicit basis in their history and theology for this feeling while Christians and Muslims do not have an explicit basis for their feeling of superiority. As far as I can tell, this feeling does not cause Jews to act much differently than believers in other religions, and so is not much of an issue. Jews do not expect to rule the world militarily. They do not expect to rule the world as a theocracy.

It would seem that being a Jew carries no special benefit and often carries a big burden. Then why go on as a Jew? The biggest reason is the same reason that people of all ethnic groups continue in their ethnic group. They are born into that group, have ties to the group, find their greatest success through their ties to their group, and enjoy life in the group. Maybe the closest comparison is with the British or Irish. The second reason is that Jewish identity and Judaism are a great benefit in themselves. However you see the idea of a "chosen people of God", Jews have a great history and have added greatly to humanity, truth, and morality. Jews continue to do so. For most Jews, it is satisfying to be a Jew regardless of the risks.

A fair assessment of any religion would require describing the contributions made by believers. I can't do that here. I do have to mention a few contributions by Jews even if I don't do so for other religions. From the Jews, we got ethical monotheism, the idea of a single God for whom moral conduct is important. Part of ethical monotheism is social justice. In addition to Greeks and Romans as a source for the idea of the rule of law, from Jews we got another important source. For Jews, the Law of God took precedence over any particular human ruler. Because of the firm grounding of this idea in one ethical God, among Jews, the idea held steady over centuries even when similar ideas broke down in other cultures such as among Greeks and Romans. Because of Jewish constancy, this idea became a big part of Western institutions, and then spread around the world. The constancy of the Jewish idea of rule of law, and the idea that law comes out of the deep nature of reality (God), contributed to Western science. Jews did not have science as we know it, and science can be credited primarily to the West, but I think science in the West could not have developed without Jewish ideas of God and law.

Although modern Jews seem to accept that a person can follow the Jewish God without becoming a Jew, I am not sure they can accept the idea that there were (are) prophets other than the standard prophets as given in the Tanakh. I am not sure how they assess John the Baptist. They cannot accept that Jesus was God. To deny that Jesus was God is not the same as denying he was a prophet. I think most Jews could accept that Jesus was a prophet, and Jews could contribute to assessing his message for our world, if Jews could do so without also implying Jesus was God. Even after 2000 years, Jews shy away from Jesus entirely because of the idea that he was God and because of his central role in Christianity. Jesus is Christian "property". Jews can act on the basic message of Jesus without saying much about Jesus the prophet, and so they just leave the issue alone and they do what is right. I wish Jews could explicitly assess the message, and comment on Jesus as a prophet, without worrying about the whole issue of Jesus as God. Some few Jews have done this.

I do not know how Jews assess Christian figures such as Paul, Francis of Assisi, or Martin Luther. Some Christians who were otherwise great thinkers were still anti-Jewish (anti-Semitic), such as Martin Luther, and I do not expect Jews to embrace them. Officially, Christians do not accord saints the same status as the Tanakh prophets, so it is unreasonable to ask Jews to accept Christian figures as full-blown prophets. Christians do accord prophet status to the writers of the New Testament, especially to Paul, but I see little point in arguing over whether we should see Paul as we see Isaiah or Elijah. Read the Christian greats, get what they have to say, and then assess their ideas rather than their status.

I do not know how modern Jews see the great figures of other religions. I doubt that officially Jews can accord them the same status as prophets in the Tanakh. I think most modern educated Jews still could assess their message, accept the good points, and reject the bad points. I have known Jews who have read the Buddha, have gotten a lot from him, and have not subverted their Jewish identity.

I accept Mohammad as a prophet. As far as I can tell, Jews either ignore his status as a prophet or deny that he was one. Despite the fact that Mohammad explicitly said he was only a human, Mohammad is a more difficult issue even than Jesus because, unlike Jesus, Mohammad was not Jewish, Mohammad did not come from Jews, and Jews like cannot accept the Muslims ideas that Mohammad was the greatest and last of all the prophets. Mohammad did accept Jewish ideas but that fact does not necessarily make him a prophet in Jewish eyes. I doubt Jews could accept Mohammad as a prophet soon because of the

current animosity between Jews and Muslims. Mohammad came after the classic Tanakh prophets. Thus Mohammad is disallowed the status of prophet in the same way that even great rabbis who came after the Tanakh are not called prophets. I am sorry a mere “side” issue, the animosity between Jews and Muslims, however otherwise important, can block Jews from assessing Mohammad on the basis of his relation to God alone.

I see Mohammad as a prophet of God (Yahweh and Allah), and I see the great figures of other religions also as prophets of God. I can do this because I do not expect prophets to be completely right about all important issues. I expect prophets to have partial accuracy and partial truth. I have to assess the value of particular prophets, and I have to pick among prophets for particular issues. I can accept that task. I do not accept Mohammad as the last and greatest of prophets – I am not entirely sure what that title for him could mean. I tend not to think of great Christian thinkers and “saints” as prophets, with the possible exception of Saint Francis of Assisi. I am not sure why. I do not think of every adept thinker in other religions as a prophet. I do not think of Nagarjuna from Buddhism as a prophet. I don’t know about Mencius of China. I am not sure how to draw the lines between prophet, theologian, saintly person, good guy, philosopher, original thinker, and somebody who has good ideas about God without being special otherwise. It seems easier to focus on ideas and actions rather than on persons.

I do not follow Jewish Law such as the dietary rules. A person doesn’t have to follow all the Jewish Law to be a good follower of the Jewish God. Apart from the official declaration by Christianity at about 50 CE about freedom from the food laws, I am not sure when in history it became possible for a person to follow the Jewish God but not to uphold all points of the Law. Jesus would have insisted that I do follow all the Law or at least that I follow a modified version of the Law for non-Jews (“Noah” Law). The early Church changed Jesus’ position, exempting non-Jews from nearly all Jewish Law, to allow people like me to join; so by default I go along with the position of Christianity.

I insist on two differences. First, the Christian Church derives the change directly from Jesus, and this idea of the Church is false. The Church itself made the change so it could seek converts. The Church recognizes the roles of Peter and Paul in the change, and that is true enough. I am not sure I approve of the Church’s motives but I am glad it exempted followers of Jesus from some points of the Jewish Law such as the dietary rules. The Church did not exempt followers of Jesus from main points of the Law that exemplify the Spirit of the Law such as worshipping one God, telling the truth, helping, and being kind. In both ways, the Church did the right thing regardless of any side motives.

Second, in denying the Jewish Law, the Christian Church took on for itself the role of the New Israel, and said that Jews had lost their traditional relation with God. As far as I can tell, Muslims did the same later to Jews and Christians. I reject the idea of a New Israel and reject that Jews have lost their traditional relation to God. There always has been only one Israel, there is only one Israel, the one Israel has been represented by Jews, the one Israel always has been represented only by Jews, the one Israel is now represented only by Jews, and the one Israel will be represented only by Jews into the foreseeable future. Other groups based on nation, ethnicity, religion, gender, society, and politics, including Christians and Muslims, should stop pretending to be “the now New Israel”, the current chosen people of God.

Exactly what it means for the modern world that there is one Israel, and the one Israel is only Jews, I don’t know, and I don’t guess much. My best guess is that it is a burden of moral leadership on Jews.

Jews have to show us what it means to be a good person and good citizen in the modern world. The special relation of Jews and God does not mean I have to become Jewish to follow God. It does not mean I have to go along with all actions by the modern political state of Israel. It does not prevent other nations and other groups from guiding the world in moral, political, and ecological action for a time and over some issues. It does not prevent other groups from having a close relation with God, seeking God's guidance, and doing God's work. Jews are like Bach or The Beatles. They are the one talent that you have to listen to and come to grips with even if your own music is quite different. That is what Jesus is like too. Unlike Bach and the Beatles, the Jews are still making music, and we still do well to listen.

PART 3: Christianity

Adopting the Message of Jesus.

It might seem odd to weigh how much Christianity follows the message of Jesus but that is the issue with formal Christianity and zealous Christianity. Followers lapse into mere external worship or into using the idea of God's Will to assert their own will. People do not have to be horrible hypocrites to overlook the message in favor of external worship or self-service. Simple garden-variety hypocrisy does lead people to overlook the message, and people in formal Christianity and zealous Christianity too often are too hypocritical. Usually politics, wealth, and power get in the way, and people interpret the religion so they can pursue self-interest without worrying about the message. This result has been so often described and criticized that I don't go through it here. This problem is not limited to Christianity. Few religions follow the message of their leaders. The problem is sharpest with Christianity for me because I promote the message of Jesus.

People argue whether formal Christian dogma helps Christians overlook the message of Jesus and helps hypocrisy. Was Christian dogma built so as to help people avoid Jesus? The fact that Christians insist on worshipping Jesus as God makes it easier to overlook his message in favor of empty external worship. You can focus on the idea that his dying somehow mysterious saved you while not dealing with poverty or loneliness. I doubt theologians deliberately built dogma so as to allow people to overlook the message of Jesus. I think the early Church did not intend to allow loopholes for inaction except as it wanted to avoid open conflict with Rome. Rather, the doctrine accidentally allows a big evasion for Christians, and Christians have been eager to use the evasion. Many Christians do not use dogma to avoid the message of Jesus, and many Christians give time, money, bodies, and heartache to help other people and to make the world a better place. The hard work, and big hearts, by Christians in the South of America, often astonishes me.

Whether official Christians really follow Jesus largely will be a numbers game. Can enough Christians follow the message of Jesus to make Christianity a religion about the message of Jesus? Is it enough if one-quarter of Christians put the message first? What if one-quarter of Christians put Jesus' message first but another one-quarter dig in their heels about doctrinal issues and spend the energy of faith forcing other people to think as they do and to fight about issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and helping nature? As of 2014, I cannot say. I hope it turns out well.

Christianity as Devotion.

People in state societies need a personal god who is both human and divine, and who can serve as a bridge between the two worlds. They need a Nice Mother, Big Brother, Big Sister, Young Uncle, or Young Aunt, who can help them with God the Parent. Their attitude toward the god savior is devotion. They worship the god savior, and he-she intercedes on their behalf. People usually have only one chief god savior, or have one chief figure of each sex, but that does not stop them from having a lot of lesser intermediaries too. The obvious figures in formal Christianity are Jesus, Mary, the Saints, and the great thinkers in particular sects such as Luther, Calvin, and Wesley. I have already discussed this trend for Christianity in “Jesus for Most People”, and so I don’t go into it much here. The parallels in other religions are devotion to the bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism and devotion to Krishna or to other avatars and gods in Hinduism.

Just because a religion features this pattern does not mean the pattern is not true. The real question is whether the god savior in any particular religion is real and true. I think the god-savior pattern is false for all religions, not just because it is a common human pattern but because it is false. The answer is “no” for all religions, and so it is “no” in Christianity too. I don’t sift through the evidence here.

The next question is whether devotion to a god-savior gets in the way of being a better person or helps. Surprisingly, devotion often helps. It is one big way that people get in touch with the ideals of prophets such as Jesus, the ideals of institutions such as the Christian Church, or from literature such as in the Mahabharata. Devotion also helps keep people out of mischief. On the other hand, devotion can cause great damage, as when it limits the spiritual growth of individuals or leads them to do bad things such as bomb a church. I cannot guess at the overall balance of good and bad due to devotion.

Some people can never get beyond devotion. People who can get past mere devotion have to consider their response to people who can’t get past it. Harangue and “atheism for everybody” are not often good responses. Telling them that they are stupid and mired in superstition is usually just cruel, and often is not exactly true. Maybe the best responses are to make sure good ideas are easily available, and to help people who show promise of getting beyond mere devotion. In other words, the best response is calm freedom of thought.

Christian Pyramid Scheme.

Christians proselytize, and have since Jesus was alive. In part, proselytizing is how the Christian Church always has grown, and proselytizing is an explicit policy of the Church. Jesus wanted to make a new society in old Israel, he began a movement to do so, and he recruited Jews into his movement; so he supported some proselytizing. Proselytizing is not necessarily bad. It depends on if there is a point other than merely recruiting more members to have more self-validating experiences to recruit more members, and so on. If the Church has a good point other than self-validation and self-growth, then recruiting new Christians can be good. As long as the Church aims ultimately at the message of Jesus, and beyond mere self-validation, then it is good to seek new followers of Jesus. People benefit from the message of Jesus, and they benefit other people when they act on the message of Jesus.

Sadly, the Christian Church too often lapses into a self-validating pyramid scheme. The Church offers such self-validating experiences as love from God, justification, salvation, “getting right with God”, “having a personal relation with Jesus”, and “saving souls for God”, as rewards. Members seek more members

by offering them self-validating experiences. Some recruits have such experiences, and then recruit other people. Whether the experiences are real, valid, and make a person feel good, is beside the point. There is nothing wrong with seeking love from God; people feel good when they feel God loves them; and they should feel good. The point is that these experiences do not inherently lead people to follow the message of Jesus. When you feel that God loves you personally, you should do something good about it to the extent that you can. If people do not follow the message of Jesus as a result of strong experience, but only revel in a self-validating experience, and they seek to recruit other people to the good experience regardless of what people do afterwards, then something is wrong. This is what the Christian Church too often did. This is empty worship. This is a Christian pyramid scheme.

Before the reader gets upset, I repeat that you need only do something on the basis of Jesus' message if you are able to do something, and you need only act to the extent of your abilities and situation. If all you can do is revel in God's love because you are too sick, too depressed, or in prison, then revel in God's love. If you can't do more because it is just not in you, then don't agonize. If you can't do anything more because your society has no serious problems and other people don't want you meddling in their lives, then just take care of your own business. If you can do nothing for another person other than say God really does love that person, then do that for him-her. If all you can do for society is explain to individuals that God really does love them, then do that. If you can do more, then do more.

You cannot do anything bad in the name of God just to prove you have faith, and so to avoid the feeling that you have fallen into a pyramid scheme. You cannot become a zealot. You cannot start hating other people. You cannot even do something good if the only reason that you do it is to validate your faith, especially to avoid feeling you have fallen into a pyramid scheme. If you "find God" and then suddenly decide you personally are going to end all abortion, you need to slow down. If you "find God" and then decide you are going to burn all idols or expose the Roman Catholic Church as evil, then you need to slow down. Consider what you think is best and then do that.

These remarks apply equally to Islam, so please keep them in mind for that part of the chapter.

Avoiding Counter-Productive Over-Sensitivity.

Christians are funny about the balance between official dogma versus acting on the message of Jesus. As befits, Christians often are the most Jesus-like people in the world, and often act on his message. I cannot imagine the charities of the United States, and the good work Americans have done around the world, without Christianity. I am stunned by how much the average Christian will dip into his-her wallet to help disaster victims that he-she has never seen except on TV. As long as nobody raises the issue of Jesus as God, or raises points of dogma such as infant baptism or the Chair of Peter, Christians act on the message of Jesus without worrying about who they help or why they help. If somebody does raise issues of dogma, then suddenly Christians get upset and drop the ball. They act like PC zealots. They suddenly think points of dogma are far more important than following the commands of the man who is God. Where before they helped everybody, now they find reasons to help this person but not help that person. This attitude is contradictory and counter-productive, but it is what it is.

This is why I prefer to avoid points of dogma as long as good work is going on. If you have to discuss dogma, wait until the good work is done, and preferably wait until Christians raise the points themselves in the evening after work. If they ask in midstream, then tell the truth, but try not to be obnoxious.

Christians, Muslims, and Hindus are notorious for disputing about small points that seem silly to others. (In my personal experience, Buddhists and Taoists don't do this as much.) So, eventually, if we hang around them, we might get in a dispute over dogma, and the dispute might interfere with good action. What then? Do what you do whenever you meet feisty people with whom you have to work: Avoid fighting as much as possible and instead divert attention to the more important tasks at hand. Try to push argument off until later. If you promise to debate later, then really debate later so they don't try to bring up the arguments while you have to work. Make sure they understand there are more important tasks and that you won't be diverted.

PART 4: Islam.

Personal Plea.

I repeat parts of this plea below. I assume any reader knows enough about Islam so I don't have to go through all the basics right away; I cover some basics below. "Allah" is the same as the Jewish God and Christian God. Muslims accept the Jewish and Christian God although they often overlook that the Jews introduced him. Muslims accept the Jewish prophets. They accept that Jesus was a great prophet. They do not accept that Jesus was God. In the beginning, Muslims did not impose Islam on anybody except local Arabs. Once, Muslims led the world in science and good government. Because of all this, Muslims could be in a special position to do two tasks to help the world, if they put their minds to it.

Before explaining the two tasks, I give some background. Muslims have to assess what Islam is all about in the modern world. In the world of Mohammad, Islam was all about carrying the idea of one moral God to people who did not have that idea. Islam was all about converting Arab people from bad polytheism to moral monotheism. Islam was not about forcibly converting all non-Muslims. In the modern world, Islam cannot be about converting polytheists and ignorant people to one moral God because all people already know about the one moral God and everybody can make up his-her own mind. Islam has to be about more than saying set prayers five times a day, covering hair, making the modern world safe for traditional families, or shoving the world back into the past. As a good Muslim, you have to figure out what more Allah (God) wants of you, you have to be able to explain it to other people, and you have to do it.

If Islam is about making the world better, about leading modern people to live in the modern democratic capitalist world in a Godly way, then Islam has to come to grips with the message of Jesus and Western values. If Muslims wish to help people to live better in the modern world, they will lead people along paths similar to those pointed out by Jesus. This does not mean Islam will turn into formal Western Christianity. That would be sad. In following the correct path, Muslims should not worry about being absolutely distinct from all other religions and about being strongly Muslim. They should worry about the correct path even if it resembles the teachings of Jesus and even if Westerners also walk it. Whatever Muslims figure out as the positive message of Islam, they need to explain it to other people clearly, with as much rationality, and with as little magic, as possible.

After moderate Muslims have figured out what Islam is all about now, then I ask they turn their minds to two important tasks.

First, Muslims could assess the message of Jesus in light of human nature, practicality, the modern world, and modern values. They can look at God, Jesus, and the modern world, and can tell us what they see. They can do this because they are not automatically committed to the idea that Jesus is God but they are committed to many points of his message because Mohammad was committed to many points of Jesus' message. They can be more objective than can Christians. We need not accept every point Islam has to say on this topic, but it would be useful to hear an objective assessment by believers.

For reasons described below, Mohammad had to worry more about the relation of ideals to practicality than early Christians had to. Mohammad knew the message of Jesus, and Mohammad's version of blending ideals and practicality is an outstanding version of blending the ideals of Jesus with practicality - even if that was not Mohammad's primary intent. Mohammad's blending of ideals and practicality, and the blending of the Muslim leaders who followed him, was the basis for great Muslim states later. Then Islam fell away from Mohammad's blending of ideals and practicality. The blend that extreme Islam offers now is bad. Mainstream Islam can find another blend of ideals and practicality that is more suitable for the modern world than what we see in Islam now. As mainstream Islam does so, it will meet the ideals of Jesus and meet modern practicality. Islam again can comment on the ideals of Jesus and practicality. Doing so would be a great service to the world.

Second, from the order found in the world, Muslims can assess evidence for the existence of God. They can be scientists, do good science, and then they also can tell us what science might say about God or cannot say. They can make clear what God and belief tell us that science cannot. They can contribute to both science and theology. This is what Islam did in its great days.

To be clear about what Islam is all about now, to assess Jesus, and to assess relations between God (Allah) and science, Muslims have to accept science, evolved human nature, history, the modern world, and religious scholarship. They have to return to their original values as those values make sense in the modern world. They have to return to the ideals and spirit of Mohammad. They have to give up fake bad fundamentalism that is not really founded on Mohammad, and they have to give up any fundamentalism that goes against the realities of science as given to us by God. They have to give up fake bad ideas even if some zealot can find some basis in the Koran or Hadith (Sayings of Mohammad). They have to give up theocracy. They do not have to give up the idea that some nations can be Muslim nations as long as those nations also respect general ideas of freedom and allow full freedom of religion. I think decent Muslims really can do this.

Islam did not begin as legalistic ideology, fear, superstition, oppression, reaction, and guerrilla war. That is what Mohammad fought against. Islam did not develop as legalism. It did not use the letter of the law to replace the spirit of the law. Mohammad fought that too. Islam began as the religion which converted Arabs away from superstition, fear, bickering, jealousy, and oppression to greater understanding of God and to goodness. Mohammad made laws to promote the goodness of Allah, not to oppress believers, or to force believers to act as instruments of oppression. Mohammad always followed the spirit of the law. The law should serve people, not people serve the law. Mohammad would hate oppression of women, denial of science, denial of fellowship with all people, hyper-legalism, and hyper-Muslim fundamentalism.

Those trends return to old bad dark anti-Muslim superstition over the light of Mohammad. Mohammad would condemn people who pervert the enlightened Islam that he taught. Modern enlightened Muslims need to reclaim their own religion. In doing so, they do not need to wage open conflict against bad fundamentalists. They can reclaim Islam by teaching good Islam, with science and fellowship, to children and neighbors. They can reclaim Islam simply by explaining it to good non-Muslims who will listen. Most good Muslims already follow this path but are too afraid both of other nasty bad Muslims and of non-Muslims to say so.

Mohammad's Task.

It helps to understand more about Mohammad's task. Mohammad was an Arab born among Arabs in the area that is now Saudi Arabia. Christians and Jews also lived among the Arabs. The Arabs of his time and place did not worship a single God (Allah) but curried favor with many gods and spirits, some of which were similar to good nature spirits, some simply spirits, and some rather bad. The Western name for them now is "genies" or "Jinn" or "Djin". Different Arab groups, including large families, each had their particular spirits much as Christian villages and guilds had their patron saints. Groups were divided and at war. Banditry was common. Arabs were illiterate, did not know the Jewish Tanakh, Christian Bible, or Greek thinking, and did not value education. Groups used their allegiance to particular spirits to bolster allegiance to the group and to bolster group competition. Arabs were easy prey to outside powers that were united; see "Lawrence of Arabia". Arabs were superstitious backwater clannish warlike country folk who denied the value of then-modern life and resisted then-modern ideas.

Mohammad's task was to get Arabs to worship the one true moral God and to follow his ways, and to stop worshipping other spirits and following their ways. The one true moral God was the same one true moral God of the Jews and Christians although Arabs call him Allah. Mohammad denied that some spirits were real, he did accept the reality of demons, and he said Arabs should not worship spirits even if the spirits were real and somewhat powerful. When Arabs were united in worshipping the one true good God, they would also unite among themselves, stop killing each other, cooperate, foster economic development, and modernize. It is not clear that Mohammad wanted a single large Arab state but it is likely he would have approved it, and that did happen after he died. Mohammad did not "keep women in their place" but fought for rights for women, as much as he could get in the society of his time, including property rights, personal rights, and education. Women supported him and he them. Mohammad was a modernizer who brought modern ideas and values to the backwater Arabs.

Mohammad fought against ignorance, illiteracy, superstition, prejudice, squabbling, and division. He fought against the superstitious religion of the countryside and against the urban clan-gangs that kept Arabs apart. Mohammad promoted learning, knowledge, education, and discussion. He promoted a rational religion based on one true good God. He was a great man.

I believe many practices and beliefs that we see now among poorly educated Muslims and confused Muslims are the same mistakes that Mohammad fought. Some Muslims have gone backward and so betrayed Mohammad. Muslims who promote strife are like the polytheistic idolatrous anti-modernist Muslims that Mohammad conquered. Mohammad would condemn them now as he did in his time. He would fight against them now, and would fight for rational modern worship of the one true God as he did then. Mohammad would promote education for women and promote the modest presentation of women

in public life. He would promote the role of women in commerce and politics. He would call for public schools and hospitals. He would condemn people who denied education to any child including girls. He would condemn bad people who kill innocents.

It might help Buddhists to think of Mohammad's task as much like the task of the Buddha, to bring good ideals, reason, modest practicality, reason, peace, and the light of the Dharma to people in superstition, war, and darkness.

Partial Synopsis through Some Useful History.

I elaborate on the ideas above, and I repeat parts of this synopsis below as needed. Mohammad lived from about 570 to 632 CE (AD). He began his career in middle age. His name means "praiseworthy". Mohammad succeeded amazingly well at his task of teaching Arabs about the one true God, bringing them away from superstition, polytheism, and strife, and bringing them into the then-modern world. Mohammad could not read or write but he listened well and spoke well. Mohammad knew of the Jewish Tanakh and Christian New Testament, likely fairly well. He had Jewish and Christian kin and teachers. Mohammad got his idea of the one true moral God from Judaism and Christianity directly, and, likely, indirectly from Greek thinkers. That does not mean he was nothing in himself. He added ideas and he added the vigor that comes of a clear direct relation with God. He did not think his one true moral God differed from the one true moral God of Jews and Christians, or, maybe, differed from the one true moral God of philosophers. In Mohammad's view, the religion of God that he offered was another branch of the same underlying basic religion as Judaism and Christianity. I think he would see Judaism, Islam, and Christianity as less far apart than Roman Catholicism and Calvinism, perhaps only about as far apart as Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Lutherans.

Mohammad did not strongly dislike all yearnings of the human heart and did not dislike all other religions. Mohammad understood love, emotion, the need for family, desire for wealth, and desire for power. His belief was for normal people who felt as he did, and wished to seek normal human satisfactions within the approval of God.

Mohammad strongly disliked only polytheism, magic, superstition, squabbling, and banditry. He actively fought those and their supporters. Mohammad tolerated other religions as long as they did not fall into polytheism, magic, and superstition. Mohammad appreciated other religions that focused on one God, even if the one God was not exactly as Mohammad saw him. After him, Islam supported a great growth in philosophy and science, which confirms that Mohammad tolerated philosophy based in the idea of one God. Mohammad did not accept the Christian Trinity, and feared that this idea lapsed into polytheism; but that did not lead him to denounce Christianity or to see it as other than a sister religion of the same one true moral God. It is not clear how Mohammad might have seen the apparent polytheism of Hindus and Buddhists because Buddhist and Hindu adepts are not really polytheistic; they allow the mistaken idea of many gods out of kindness to the simpleminded masses; at heart they believe in one Mind behind the world. I think Mohammad would have encouraged Muslims to teach Hindus and Buddhists through argument, but not by the sword.

Early in his career, Mohammad and his followers had some trouble with some Jews but not with all Jews; I relate a few details below. That trouble did not make him think the Jewish God differed from Allah. It

did not blind him to the fact that ideas about the one true moral God originated with Jews. The trouble that Mohammad had with one group of Jews did not mean Islam and Judaism as wholes were at odds. It did not mean Muslims-as-a-whole and Jews-as-a-whole were angry at each other. The problem that one group of Jews had with Mohammad did not convince Jews-as-a-whole that Mohammad worshipped a different God or that Mohammad's students were bad people. Until about the middle 1800s, Christians were usually more of a threat to Jews than Muslims, and Christians hurt Jews more than Muslims did. When Spain was under Muslim rule until about 1490, Muslims usually treated Jews well; when Christians conquered Spain after 1490, sometimes they persecuted Jews. Most of the atrocities of World War Two were carried out by Christians or by people who recently had been Christians. Except for incidents, until the time of all the fighting over Israel, I cannot think of situations in which Jews-in-general and Muslims-in-general had to be enemies.

Early in his career, Mohammad was persecuted by other Arabs. Other Arabs tried to kill him several times, and they killed some of his followers. The trouble with some Jews came because some Jews helped the Arabs who tried to hurt him. To support himself and his followers, Mohammad briefly raided some caravans (as far as I can tell, mostly caravans that did business with the people that tried to kill him). Mohammad was not a warlord or general bandit. In his raiding, Mohammad was less warlike than Joshua, the namesake of Jesus, or David, who overthrew Saul.

As a result of Mohammad's troubles, he learned to blend ideals and practicality. Mohammad's blend of ideals and practicality was not to put all ideals under practicality, and so kill off ideals; and it certainly was not to put everything in the light of "us versus them, and we must kill all of them". It was a blend of ideals and practicality that tried to preserve ideals and fellowship as much as possible in the real world. The leaders who followed Mohammad understood the need both for ideals and practicality, and continued to find a good blend of ideals and practicality.

Within a hundred years of Mohammad's death, Islam had taken over most of the Arab world including the Semitic non-Jewish (Arab) people outside present day Saudi Arabia, especially Babylon (Iraq) and Egypt. After about 900 CE (AD), Islam had spread into Iberia (Spain and Portugal) and came into conflict with Christianity. In a famous war, the Franks stopped Islam at the Pyrenees Mountains between Spain and France. Islam took some areas of southeast Europe such as Bosnia. When Christianity grew strong after 1100, it fought Islam, as in the Crusades. If Mohammad were alive then, I think he would not have seen this fighting in terms of Christianity and Islam as distinct religions fighting but in terms of regional politics subverting religion. Christianity and Islam still would be two branches of the same religion.

Both Christianity and Islam waxed and waned in power. Since about 1800, Christianity has dominated. Islam feels Christianity looks down on Islam both as a religion and civilization, much as people in the South of the United States feel that other people look down on them. Christianity does not treat Islam as a sister religion of the same one true moral God but as a deluded heterodox deviant from true culture and true religion. Muslims feel much like oppressed minorities do everywhere. This leads to a constant chip on the shoulder of some Muslims, and sometimes to fighting.

Beginning in the late 1800s, Christians and Jews began to ally sometimes, even if there still were horrible episodes of anti-Semitism such as the Holocaust. The alliance of Jews and Christians, combined with the

decline of Islam, made the Muslim position seem worse to Muslims. The rise of Israel in 1948 seemed to confirm their fears.

Muslims resisted what they saw as Jewish and Christian attempts to overwhelm them. They fought back both directly and by reshaping their societies. Muslims adopted an attitude that Jews and Christians often adopt too, an attitude rooted in the Tanakh. They tried to be “ultra-strict” so God would look favorably on them and would give them back power, wealth, autonomy, and leadership. They overdid it. For them, “fighting back” came to include strong intolerance of other religions; intolerance of ideas associated with non-Muslim cultures even if those ideas are correct, such as science; rigid worship; bizarrely strict rules based loosely on old customs; forced observance of worship and rules; oppression of their own people; and especially oppression of women; and violence toward other religions, other people, and Muslims who disobeyed. Mohammad would not approve. When Muslims found wealth in oil, some Muslims used the wealth to fight Jews, Christians, and the modern world with violence. Some Muslims took the wealth in oil as a sign from God that they were on the right track and should go on even more strictly.

The rational response for any beleaguered minority is to build its economic, legal, and education bases, as Jews did in the United States, and as China has done since adopting limited capitalism. In the modern world, over the long run, education and business are more powerful than bombs. Most Muslims know this, and have worked toward this end. In the West, we do not see these Muslims but see primarily the Muslims that cause trouble. Muslims that are working toward economic, legal, and education advances are hampered by other Muslims who are reactionaries.

The vast majority of Muslims are like the vast majority of people in all religions. They use their religion to give meaning and guidance in life. They get along with neighbors. They want nothing more than family success. To find family success in the modern world, they need education, jobs, fair business practices, good government, and useful ideas about gender. They are happy to let other people do the same as long as other people do not oppress them.

Islam is not a “sweet” religion as are idealized (but not real) Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Islam is “not sweet” in the same way that Christians in the American South are not sweet even though they are Christians. Islam blends ideals with practicality, and acts vigorously. As with Jewish prophets for many centuries, Mohammad was vigorous, energetic, and staunch when fighting polytheism, superstition, and magic. I don’t know if, after about 1800, the vigor that Islam had shown when fighting superstition and polytheism was turned against Christianity, Judaism, and the modern world. If so, that was not correct. If some Muslims turned the old fight against superstition into the modern fight against Christians, Jews, the West, and the modern world, that attitude does not infect Muslims in general. To turn the old fight against superstition into a fight against the modern world is to go back into the bad superstition against which Mohammad originally fought. If some Muslims have an “attitude problem” then most Muslims are working to change their bad attitude into something better.

Muslims have to decide what the message of modern Islam is. They have to compare the message of modern Islam to the message of Jesus and to modern values with roots in the West. The message of modern Islam cannot simply be “One God” or “God is Great” because nearly everybody in the world now knows that idea; and everybody has decided either for it or against it. Islam cannot be about controlling women and children, or about preserving honor. That message is not unique to Islam, and, in its strict old

sense, the reactionary message is now wrong. Islam cannot believably assert that “God loves Muslims best” or “Islam will rise again because God loves us best”. Islam needs to stress a positive message of good acts. Islam does not have to invent something new or radical. Islam can look to its past for ideas about science and good government. Islam can promote good modern values and promote its version of the ideas of Jesus without demeaning Islamic history or Mohammad. They need to do this not mostly for non-Muslims but more for their own young people and for the future of Islam.

For the hundred-plus years since the discovery of oil in the Middle East, Muslims nations have not used their wealth to govern well, institute working democracy, educate their people, develop economically, develop commerce, and promote science. If Muslims wish to show the superiority of Islam, rather than use their wealth for the police and the military, to keep their own people in line, and to glare at Israel, they need to build good nations. Especially they need to promote science, research, and development. They need to promote working democracy. That is what impresses the world. That is what will show the world that Islam clears people’s heads and gives them a good relation with God. If Muslims want to frost the cake, they can use their scientific knowledge to make high-quality goods that people want to buy instead of all the crap that floods world markets – they can become the 1980s Japan or 2000s Apple of modern capitalism. I think Mohammad would want Muslim nations to show the superiority of a good relation with God through the example of good government, good science, and good production. If Muslims cannot show they can live well by instituting workable democracy and promoting real science, then other people will take that as a sign that Islam is not the religion of God.

Despite the real differences that have developed over time, I still believe Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are sister religions of the same one moral God. I believe they were originally basically tolerant, especially of monotheism. I regret what happened to drive them apart and to divert them from the original tolerant vision of Mohammad. They could easily foster the tolerance needed for pluralistic democracy. They do not need to believe exactly the same dogmas to get along with each other well enough.

More Background.

Always when writing about Islam to Americans, you have to review some basic facts. This need arises not because all Americans are willfully ignorant (too many are) but because some Muslims are fighting the West, and some Americans resent all Islam; so it is best to be clear.

The word “Islam” means “submission”, specifically “submission to Allah-God”. A “Muslim” is a person who submits to God. “Allah” is the same God as for Jews and Christians. A “Muslim” is not just a follower of Mohammad but, more importantly, a person who submits to God. In terms familiar to modern Christians, a Muslim accepts God and has a personal relation with God. A Muslim not only accepts God but accepts all the prophets of God as well. Islam reveres prophets highly. A Muslim accepts the messages of all the prophets. To submit means not just to worship externally, blindly, and stupidly but to worship with your intelligence and courage too. Good Muslims follow not only the formal words of the prophets but also the direct gifts of God: intellect, imagination, and heart.

Islam accepts the Hebrew Torah (first five books of the Tanakh) and most of the Tanakh as the word of God. I do not know how much of the Tanakh that Islam accepts. Islam altered the Tankah a bit from the original Hebrew version. So did Christianity. I don’t go into details here. Islam accepts the basic story of

Jesus, and so accepts some of the New Testament. I don't know how much of the New Testament it accepts. Most Muslims know the story of Jesus and they accept him as a prophet, but I doubt they have read the New Testament, and they would not accept passages that refer to Jesus as God.

Islam has two major scriptures of its own, both stemming from Mohammad: the Koran and the Hadith. Muslims consider the Koran to be the literal word of God, closely inspired (directly spoken) by the Archangel Gabriel to Mohammad. The Koran is about as long as the New Testament. The Hadith are sayings of Mohammad that are not in the Koran. Mohammad did not write anything. After hearing from Gabriel, Mohammad then recited the Koran to other people, who wrote it down.

Mohammad did not speak the Hadith the same way that he spoke the Koran, with the intent of having it written down. Other people wrote down from memory various bits of what they heard Mohammad say, and then those sayings were collected after his death. The Hadith is quite large, depending on what is included; Muslims in Thailand had a set of 10 volumes. Several selections have been made; please look on the Internet for the latest selections. The Koran is like the Torah while the Hadith is like the Mishnah or Talmud(s). The Koran is like the New Testament while the Hadith is like the collected works of the early Christians Fathers. Most of the Hadith probably was not spoken by Mohammad but was added by later people. It is hard to decide what was spoken by Mohammad and what was not. Muslims know this problem, and take it into account. For issues of practical life, Muslims more often refer to the Hadith than to the Koran. When a point is clear in the Koran, the Koran always has precedence over the Hadith. The Hadith serves as the basis for Muslim law. Muslims debate over the Hadith just as Jews do over the Mishnah, Talmud(s), and their commentaries. The Koran and Hadith serve as the basis for a life of study and for an occupation just as Christian and Jewish scriptures do. I have read the Koran and selections from the Hadith in English translations.

Besides the Koran and Hadith, Islam developed a long tradition of law, more like English common law than Jewish Holy Law or Roman Catholic Canon Law. Muslims try hard to base points of law in the Koran or the Hadith. Some of this legal tradition is called "Sharia". This legal tradition is more often the basis for practical action than the Koran. The Koran always dominates the Hadith, and the Koran and Hadith always dominate merely human legal tradition.

Muslims call Mohammad "The Prophet" to stress that he is the most important and the last in the line of prophets that began with Abraham. To Muslims, he is the most important prophet, and most important person, in world history. In practice, most Muslims consider him the only prophet and-or the only prophet they need to listen to. They are wrong. Mohammad was not the only prophet, the last prophet, or the only prophet that Muslims need listen to. Even if Mohammad was the greatest prophet, Muslims and all people still have to pay attention to the other prophets. Mohammad would not have looked at himself as "the one and only and greatest", any more than Jesus or Moses did. Mohammad respected other prophets. Educated Muslims know this. I don't know what Mohammad thought of great Christian saints; I think he respected the teachings of Paul from the New Testament. I don't know what Mohammad would think of prophets from outside the Jewish-Christian tradition, such as the Buddha and Chuang Tzu. People of nearly all religions make the same mistake with their founders as Muslims do with Mohammad: Christians look only to Paul, Buddhists look only to Siddhartha Gautama, and Confucians look only to Confucius or Mencius.

Christians are often surprised to hear that Muslims revere Jesus as in the same rank as Abraham and Moses, second only to Mohammad. Muslims do not accept that Jesus was God. Muslims accept that Jesus will judge all souls including theirs. Muslims understand the message of Jesus when they have heard it but not all Muslims have heard all of it or have heard it taught sympathetically. Muslims know of the accord between the ideas of Jesus and of Mohammad when they have heard both. They follow Jews, and Mohammad, in rejecting that any human could be God. Muslims also respect John the Baptist as a prophet. Muslims also revere Mary, much more than Protestants but maybe not as much as some Roman Catholics.

Muslims are sometimes surprised, and some will be offended, when I say the teachings of Mohammad are not really new, any more than were the teachings of Moses. As with Jesus, the difference was more in urgency and in how the teachings founded a way of life than in any new ideas. Mohammad would not be surprised to hear this; indeed, I think he would be happy that he “merely” continues the tradition of the one true moral God. Mohammad brought the ideas of the Jews and Christians to the Arabs. Mohammad was outstanding as a teacher, organizer, leader, and soldier. He was like Moses, David, or Martin Luther. Mohammad followed the Jewish prophets with the addition that he accepted an eternal afterlife, heaven, hell, and that Jesus would be the judge on the final day. Mohammad taught the ethical monotheism of the Jews: There is only one God; God is good; and God gave us rules to help us live well in accord with his ideas of living well. Muslims get their “kosher” (“halal”) food and the idea of the Sabbath from Jewish tradition. Muslim men are circumcised because Jews are (Jews got it from Egyptians). Muslims have internalized the idea that, if we follow the rules of God, we will live well, and our people will do well, even in competition with other people.

Christianity, Islam, and the Jewish Prophets.

The stories in the Jewish Tanakh, the Christian Bible, and the Muslim traditions about the prophets and about history after the prophets, are not literally true even if the stories have a basis in fact. Jewish interpretations have to take precedent. Christians and Muslims can differ from Jews but only if they explain clearly why and how, and give solid evidence for their differences.

Muslims and Christians differ from Jews in how they see some Jewish prophets and how they see Jewish history. Muslims and Christians both have distorted Jewish prophets and Jewish history to serve their ends. They sought a version of the prophets and of history that would bolster their ethnic-religion identity, in particular to show they had become favorites of God. Christians sought proof in the Jewish prophets that Jesus was God and that he was the foretold messiah. Muslims sought proof that their history was as long as the history of the Jews, and that they were as much a special people of God as were Jews or Christians. I do not give further details.

Muslims and Christians need to reverse this distortion even if to do so erodes their old claims. Muslims and Christians need to admit that the founding prophets were Jewish, and need to accept that Jewish ideas of Jewish prophets are the baseline for further understanding. This does not mean Muslims and Christians may not differ from Jews, but they need to be more honest about differences. Muslims and Christians need to admit ways in which they differ from Jewish interpretations of the prophets and Jewish history, and should return to the original Jewish prophets and history when possible. If they cannot return to the original Jewish prophets and history, they need to state clearly their own message, how it differs

from the message of the original prophets and history, and why they hold their version. They have to say why the original prophets were wrong. You cannot use a version of the prophets and of Jewish history to justify your need for a distinct identity and for ethnic-religious superiority. It is wrong to use the prophets and history to lie even in a good cause. You must take the prophets at face value regardless of what that implies for your particular religion, and then go from there. I do not follow the original prophets closely, yet I say so when I deviate from official doctrine, and I say why. For example, unlike standard Christian dogma, I do not believe the original prophets foretold Jesus and foretold that he was the Messiah that would save Israel and the world.

After Christians and Muslims are clear about their message in relation to the original Jewish prophets, then they need to assess their own message in the light of modern science and modern ideas about history. Reassessing in the light of modern science and ideas about history might cause Christians and Muslims to rethink their relation to the Jewish prophets and Jewish history. I know it is hard for Muslims and Christians to accept that Jews have precedence. Even so, accepting that Jews are the foundation is necessary as part of the truth of Islam and Jesus, and as part of truly submitting to God.

At the same time, Jews and Christians have to accept that Mohammad was a prophet of the same God that they worship, as important in his own way as Moses and Jesus. When Mohammad spoke of serving together as brothers and sisters under God, he spoke with the same authority as any prophet. This does not mean Jews and Christians have to accept the mistaken Muslim attitude that everything Mohammad ever said came directly from God and has the same authority as God. Mohammad erred as much as any prophet erred.

Ideas and Attitude.

In reading about Islam and in reading Muslim history, it is easy get a feeling for a distinct Muslim identity, attitude, and personality. All religions have both ideas and attitudes. I focused on ideas in this book. Here I have to switch over to attitudes, a topic at which I am inept. We need answers to the questions below. We can't get simple straight answers. I do some speculating and I call on enlightened Muslims for help. Critics of Islam, such as Christopher Hitchens, argue there is a general Muslim character, it is bad, it determined Muslim religion, it is not compatible with modern life, and Muslim character cannot be changed to make either the character or the religion compatible with modern life. The Muslim character is so nasty that any truths in Islam have been so distorted by the Muslim character as to be hopelessly lost. I think Hitchens is wrong, but the answers cannot come from me. If Muslims want a better image of Islam to prevail, they have to make one and explain it.

It helps to think of the same problem in Christian terms. Christianity in the different regions of the United States is not the same. Christianity in the "Bible Belt" is not the same as in the West, Mountains, or High Plains. Even in the "Bible Belt", Christianity differs between Midwesterners and Southerners. What is important in regional Christianity has more to do with regional history and culture than with dogma in the Bible or official pronouncements from churches such as Southern Baptists or Lutherans of the various synods. It is hard to separate the essence of Christianity from its particular regional versions. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are each regional versions of faith in the one true moral God.

We do not expect all versions of Christianity to foster one and only one kind of character, and we enjoy a little variation as long as the variation is not harmful and the variation is basically true to what most people see as the essence of Christianity. Irish Roman Catholics, French Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Amish, and Scottish Methodists are acceptable even though they foster different people and appeal to different passages of the Bible. If one version of Christianity developed that was fierce, and neglected the ideals of compassion in favor of anger, dominance, reaction, and oppression, we would likely call that version not true Christianity even if it cited reams of Bible passages. To people outside fundamentalism, that is what fundamentalism looks like. To people outside Islam, that is what Islam looks like, and has looked like for a long time. It seems as if a bad character overtook Islam early in its history and has shaped it ever since regardless of what Mohammad wished.

I think that assessment is wrong. Islam began much like Judaism in the times of Moses, David, and Solomon, when Israel was a local national “contender”, and Muslims nations originally were like Judah when it was resisting Roman power. Islam always will have that attitude as part of its character and its relation with God. But, like Judaism, Islam also had other sides such as we see in Isaiah, Ezekiel, Micah, and the Minor Prophets. Those prophets stress good acts, justice with a good spirit, and compassion. The other sides usually are stronger. Which prevails depends on circumstances. Sometimes the fierce side of Islam prevails for a long time, as it has since about World War 2. If the fierce side prevails too long, and is too irrational, then it is not true Islam, any more than some fierce Christian sects are not true Christianity, such as White Power Christianity. It is up to Muslims to show non-Muslims all the sides of Islam, and it is up to Muslims to criticize the fierce side of Islam if it betrays the greater true Islam. It is up to us to listen to reasonable Muslims. If fierce irrational Muslims prevail, then it is reasonable for non-Muslims to fight them, just as the United States fights White Power racists and terrorists.

Ask these questions:

Is there a distinct Muslim character that was established at the start of Islam and that has remained fairly constant through Muslim history?

If not, how has Muslim character been shaped over history, and what is it now?

How have Muslim ideas affected Muslim character?

How has Muslim character affected Muslim ideas and the interpretation of Muslim ideas?

Are Muslim ideas and Muslim character sometimes at odds? Because Muslim ideas are largely true, if they are not sometimes compatible, that means Muslim character should change.

Is Muslim character compatible with modern institutions such as democracy and a secular state?

If not, can Muslim character change to be compatible?

Are Muslim ideas compatible with modern institutions?

Do Muslim ideas actually encourage modern institutions when rightly understood?

Can Muslim ideas help to find a Muslim character for modern times? If so, then this Muslim character would be in line both with the truth of Islam and with modern times.

Is Muslim character compatible with the message of Jesus?

Are Muslim ideas compatible with the message of Jesus?

Can Muslim ideas help mold Muslim character to make it compatible with the message of Jesus?

Mohammad as Not Inerrant.

Mohammad was clear that he was only a man. All men are fallible. Muslims should not take Mohammad as infallible, which means they should not take all the Koran as the transparently clear infallible Word of God. Of course, not only Muslims, but also Jews and Christians, do take their holy texts as transparent to themselves and as totally infallible. In theory, all the Koran was dictated to Mohammad by the archangel Gabriel. In one of the parts (“sura”) of the Koran, Mohammad comments at length about inheritance of cattle. At the time, Mohammad was having trouble with some kin about the ownership and inheritance of cattle. Mohammad abused his authority as a prophet of God to settle the trouble in his favor. He might have actually heard a voice telling him what was later written in the Koran, but that does not mean I need to meekly accept that the whole Koran was the word of God and is infallible. Mohammad did what many inspired religious people do. This little episode does not invalidate the Koran as a whole. Most of the Koran is beautiful, and we still can take that as seriously as anything in any other religious texts. This little episode does mean that we need to use our God-given sense of judgment about the Koran and all religious texts. I do this with the Tanakh and New Testament as well.

In case Muslims think I am picking on Mohammad and the Koran only, the Tanakh Book of Joshua is a manual on how to commit genocide and torture. The historical books of the Tanakh often are no better. The Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament was not written by Paul, and it contains bad anti-Jewish (anti-Semitic) ideas that served as the basis for Christians hurting Jews. So do many of the stories in the New Testament although often the anti-Jewish sentiment is hidden. We can't take this material at face value as the inerrant Word of God. All the holy texts have passages that serve more as warnings of what not to do than as true words of God.

Jesus was a man. Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha and Mohammad both insisted they were not gods but only people. Yet Christians worship Jesus as God, and Buddhists and Muslims revere Siddhartha and Mohammad so much that they effectively worship Siddhartha and Mohammad as God. That is bad idolatry. Muslims do not avoid idolatry just because they do not make images of Mohammad. The best cure for this bad attitude is to take a long close hard look at everything the founders said, and then think what might not be true, or what might even be petty and vindictive. If we are to use our religions best, as God intended, to find full truth and face up to problems, then we have to begin with the fact that founders really were only people.

More Lessons from Mohammad's Trouble with the Enemies from Mecca.

Shortly after Mohammad fled Mecca for Medina, his enemies at Mecca tried to kill him, and they put a bounty on his head. They used contacts at Medina to try to kill him. As Mohammad had done with the cows, Mohammad heard from God that it was alright to fight his enemies and the enemies of Islam. (I have forgotten the exact passages in the Koran and so do not cite it here.)

Muslims since have interpreted this situation in two distinct ways. One, the situation validates the right of Muslims to protect themselves as persons against unjust aggression and validates the right of Muslims to protect Islam, other Muslims, and Muslim nations, against persecution. This interpretation is like the Christian and Buddhist idea of “just war”. Two, the situation teaches Muslims to strike non-Muslims, start aggression against non-Muslims, and forcibly convert non-Muslims. In effect, the situation urges Muslims to conquer as much of the world as they can, always in the name of Allah. This idea goes far beyond the Christian and Buddhist idea of a just war.

Just because Mohammad heard from God as a result of his trouble with enemies from Mecca does not invalidate the relevant passages in the Koran or necessarily invalidate either interpretation. We have to assess the situation, the resulting passages, and the interpretations, for their truth and their application regardless of where the passage came from.

I approve of interpretation One and condemn interpretation Two.

The problem is that the two interpretations can blend into each other in practice. It is easy to say that you are acting on the basis of One while in effect acting like Two. Claim self-defense to hide aggression. Not only Muslims do this, but people of all religions and nationalities claim they act only in self-defense even while they kill and persecute others. In these cases, we have to look behind the public interpretation to judge according to actions.

I don't know if Muslims are more prone than other groups to claiming One while acting Two. I don't know if Muslims are more prone than other groups to claiming Two outright. Critics of Islam say that Muslims claim Two, or claim One but act like Two, far more than other groups.

I don't know if the attitude of Two became a part of Muslim “culture” early on, has always been a big part of Muslim culture, and surfaces easily when Muslims get the chance. Critics of Islam claim this as well.

I think Mohammad meant interpretation One and would dislike interpretation Two. Even when he pushed the idea of one moral God onto Arabs, he meant interpretation One. He did not mean interpretation Two. Mohammad did not convert people by sword. Mohammad did not look for trouble. He responded with force when he had to, and only then. Within a few decades after Mohammad, Muslims did conquer other Arabs, and so did slide into interpretation Two. Interpretation Two lingers in the background of Muslim culture, but it does not usually dominate. Interpretation Two comes out when Muslims feel pressed and insulted. Unfortunately, Muslims have felt pressed and insulted for over two hundred years. Even then, most Muslims know that interpretation One is better, and that interpretation Two is wrong and dangerous. Self-righteous belligerence is not more natural to Muslim culture than it is to Christian culture – and some self-righteous belligerence is natural to both. Once we know the story of Mohammad, his troubles, and his statements, then we can better understand Muslims and better talk to them.

If any religious group, including Muslims, persists in interpretation Two, that is, persists in self-righteous belligerence, then, like Mohammad, we have the right to oppose them. Some Muslims now think the West persists in self-righteous belligerence against all Muslims. It is up to Westerners and enlightened Muslims to get the truth across that this is not so.

(1) Muslim Character and Mohammad's Message.

The question of Muslim character and its relation to the message of Islam is important enough so that I comment more on it in this section and in the next few numbered sections. I repeat from above. If you get the idea already, you can skip these numbered sections.

Like Abraham and Moses, Mohammad's people were animists, and were divided into quarreling groups. Like Moses uniting the Jews, Mohammad united the Arabs and strongly guided them into accepting one good God. He did this in the face of fierce opposition, including episodes of treachery and attempts to murder him and his followers. If he were a Jew fighting Rome, Mohammad would have been revered as were the Macabbees. If Mohammad were a Christian leading a Church in the early Roman Empire, or an early missionary to heathens, he would have been revered by Christians as a great saint like Paul or Patrick. Because of Mohammad, the Arabs united in spirit and in body, and spread ethical monotheism around the world. Muslims spread ethical monotheism around the world first, faster, and farther than did Jews or Christians. Muslims spread the worship of Yahweh-God-Allah around the world first, faster, and farther.

The situation of a prophet always colors his-her message, and the way that followers understand his-her message. Sometimes this works out well, and sometimes not. Mohammad faced a different situation than Jesus and the early Christians. Mohammad faced a situation more like Joshua and the leaders of Israel (the Hebrews) as they conquered the "Promised Land". His story is more like Deuteronomy, Kings, and Chronicles than like Exodus or Matthew. He reminds me of David. He had severe practical problems of survival that he had to solve. He had to defend against enemies and had to fund his movement. When his people were in dire financial straits, he fell back on the time-honored trade of raiding caravans just as David turned to banditry when he was in need. Mohammad was an outstanding leader-administrator-politician and a good military leader as well. He learned to combine the ethical teachings of Judaism and Christianity with the practical needs of his time and place.

Mohammad died while Islam was still limited to the area of northern and western Arabia. Wherever his followers took his ideas, they faced violent attack from animists. They met force with force, and they were amazingly successful in battle and in winning over people. Just as a Jews or Christians did, they said their success came from God's help and from the hunger of people to know the one true God.

Contrary to widespread misunderstanding now, early relations of Muslims with Jews and with Christians were not bad. They recognized each other as "kindred spirits" of the same tradition ("people of the Book"), and often they lived and let live. Most of Mohammad's problems were with non-Jews and non-Christians, particularly animistic Arabs. Mohammad did have trouble with one group of Jews early on. Unfortunately, that set a bad precedent, and the precedent has been grossly over-magnified since the conflict over the modern state of Israel. Muslims and Christians did not have big conflicts until Muslims began to make inroads on Christian kingdoms, in particular in Spain, Southern France, and southeastern

Europe. Those problems were more properly about political power than religion. Conflicts between Christians and Muslims did not get bitter until the Christian Crusades after about 1150 CE. I do not tell about the early conflict with Jews, or later conflicts with Jews and Christians, and of how conflicts soured relations over time.

Mohammad certainly heard the message of Jesus and took it to heart. One of his key early teachers was an uncle-in-law who was a Christian monk (I am not sure of the details despite having tried to find out). It seems Mohammad tried to implement the message of Jesus in his early attempts to be friendly with rival families, merchants, ethnic groups, and religions, but was stymied by their bad behavior toward him. As a result, Mohammad had to modify the message of Jesus with what he learned of practical real life. In this, according to Muslim tradition, apparently the archangel Gabriel guided him.

Maybe due to its start, Islam is not a “sweet” religion like idealized unrealistic Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism. Islam knows of sweetness but insists on reality and vigor as well. It is more like the religion of the prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, who knew of sweetness but who also knew the need for commitment and vigor. When Islam had to struggle, it adopted a warrior stance easily without losing sight of social justice or of sweetness. The warrior stance persists in Islam, Muslims turn to it readily, and they use it intensely.

It is not clear if the warrior stance adopted by Islam is in line with the original vision of Mohammad or is a distortion of his vision. I believe it is an addition, a moderate distortion that seemed reasonable at the time. Later, it could become more a liability than an asset. More important than this question, Muslims need to consider if they can find a vision that is both in line with God’s intent and allows them to live in peace with other people in the modern world. If the original vision of Mohammad is not in line with God’s intent now, then Muslims have to change.

Throughout Muslim history, the vast majority of Muslims have not been crazed desert warriors bent on conquest and domination. Throughout Muslim history, the vast majority of Muslims have not carried a grudge against the West, anybody else, and everybody else. Even though militancy and commitment were big themes in the early days, they were never the only themes, and usually were not the dominant themes. Muslims always also stressed peace, compromise, reconciliation, reason, science, and seeing the heart of other people. In many places, in many times, the other themes dominated militarism. The other themes can dominate in Islam now as in the past. David was a usurper, murdered his king, might have arranged for the murder of his best friend Jonathan, murdered many other people, killed a man to get his wife, and had a horrible family life himself; but that beginning of Israel in David did not determine the tone of all Jewish life and religion. Mohammad was as upright as David; so a few militant events in the early life of Islam have not absolutely determined the character of Islam. The vast majority of Muslims have always been what the vast majority of all people in state societies have been: farmers, herders, fishers, house holders, merchants, officials, husbands, and wives. Muslims now are the same. The vast majority of Muslims that I have met in the West are business people seeking to make a better life for their families just like the vast majority of everybody else.

When the Jews conquered ethnic groups in the Promised Land, the conquered people either assimilated, or submitted totally, or the Jews killed them. When Muslims conquered, usually they did not force people to become Muslims, although they did sometimes. I don’t know if they did so more than Christians. Islam

never had anything like the Christian Inquisition. Muslims allowed conquered people to keep their own religion, with some provisions, the most obvious of which is that non-Muslims paid higher taxes. Most people in conquered nations converted to Islam so as to pay lower taxes, and then their children adopted the new religion of their parents and the dominant religion of the conquerors. Islam grew more through clever fiscal policy than through forced conversion.

When Americans think of Mohammad, they think of a crazed desert warrior. He was not. Mohammad began as a successful urban businessman, something like George Romney or Mitt Romney. He was not a bandit. He had an intense religious vision. At first, he did not want to publicize his vision. He was like many non-religious American business people who do well and then "find God". He was a businessman who also had an aptitude for religion, politics, and local warfare. He was more like Harry Truman or Dwight Eisenhower than like Genghis Khan. He was not a dictator like Hitler or like the Emperor on Star Wars. He was more like a good prince with religious convictions, such as the Buddhist Warrior King Asoka or Henry of France.

Within two hundred years of Islam conquering the Middle East, Islam had become one center of learning in the world with China and India. Islam was far ahead of Christianity. Without Islam, the West would have lost most of the work of Classical Greece and Rome, including most of Aristotle and much of Plato. We would have lost science, mathematics, and political science. "Algebra" is an Islamic term.

Most Muslims I have met seem like Americans who are good upstanding members of the Republican Party. Muslims are especially like Southern Republicans. Muslims go to Mosque regularly; work hard; are conservative in politics, dress, and family; work in skilled labor, business, or professions; want their children to marry well; want their children not to experiment too much in school; are not pacifists; accept the need for military solutions; support a strong military; and dislike programs that enable the poor. If American Republicans could accept that Jesus was not God, they would make good Muslims. If Muslims could accept that American Republicans mistakenly think Jesus was God but otherwise do no harm, they could accept American Republicans as Muslims in good standing. If Muslims became slightly more liberal on social issues, they would also make good members of the Democratic Party. Ironically, much the same can be said of conservative American Jews; the only major difference is the question of Israel.

(2) Muslim Belligerent Character.

Nothing is in Islam to prevent it from getting along with the modern world and with other religions and ideas. Nothing is in the start of Islam that forces it to take a stance against the whole rest of the world now. Islam could become a source of learning and science again. There have been events in recent history that have driven a wedge between Islam and the West. It helps to explain. I am not sure if the breach can be healed quickly enough. I hope so.

I stress again that the vast majority of Muslims do not have a grudge against the West, Western values, Jesus, his message, or even Jews. The vast majority are not belligerent. The vast majority of Muslims already have begun to adjust to the modern world, including the values of democracy and the message of Jesus. Most Muslims make excellent citizens and contribute to the economy. Problems lie with some groups of Muslims, in the gap between them and the modern world, just as it does with some Christians and with racial supremacists. Of course, it only takes a few rotten apples to spoil the whole barrel. So if

enough Muslims cause trouble, it could spoil the situation for all Muslims. This is possible. I hope it is not true. From what I have seen, it is not true. There are so many more good Muslims than bad Muslims that all of us should operate on the assumption that good Muslims vastly outnumber bad Muslims, just as good Christians outnumber bad Christians. Jesus, Mohammad, and most kind Jewish leaders of the past would want us to think that way.

The Islamic world has a serious case of “past glory blues”, much as do Greeks, Italians, French, Irish, the British, Chinese until recently, Indians, and Southern Americans. See the early movies of Bruce Lee to see how this blues plays out in a non-Western case or see the movie “Ip Man”. People who live in past glory learn about great kingdoms of the past, and think somehow it should be like that now. They are like America looking back to the 1950s and 1960s. They do not know that most past glory is imagined and unrealistic. They do not see past problems. People who live in past glory tend to be bitter about present life. They find someone else to blame for not having yesterday’s imagined glory. They blame whoever is in power regardless of facts, just as American Southerners blame Yankees and Liberals, and American Southerners never see their own disadvantage as arising out of their own culture. Muslims feel they do not get enough respect. The West, including Russia and the old Communist empire, is in power. So Muslims blame the West for the missing glory of Islam. They blame Western values for undermining the values that God gave to Muslims, and that would recover glory for Islam if only Muslims would live up to the values. They take whatever action they can to build up their own values and to knock down the power and values of the usurper enemies.

There is some basis for Islamic anger at the West but it is not enough to justify hatred. There is some basis for the feelings of American Southerners toward Yankees and Liberals but not enough to justify their hatred. For at least 200 years, Westerners have dominated Muslim nations and have taken the resources of Muslim nations without just compensation. Muslims control the greatest oil reserves in the world but the Muslim people have hardly benefitted from this wealth.

A big reason for lack of Muslim development is that, about 250 years ago, Muslims turned their backs on Western science (which once was Muslim science) and on capitalism despite good evidence that science and capitalism were the “wave of the future” and despite the fact that Muslim nations had the knowledge, people, and resources to have made the shift. By clinging to old ways of life then, Muslims doomed themselves to clinging to old ways of life now. China did the same thing for a while. After China got over its ideological indulgences, it recovered dramatically.

Another source of Muslim disadvantage is that, for 200 years, Muslims have been ruled by despots. Their despots have done what all despots do regardless of religion or culture. Rather than use their resources and power for the progress of their people, they invest in a strong military and they give their people something to hate as a way to channel outward the frustrations of the people. Despots hurt the people. Even before the rise of Israel in 1948, Muslims leaders indulged in Western comforts at the same time that they blamed the West for looting their countries. The degenerate leaders of Egypt before the rise of Israel are a clear example. After the rise of Israel, Muslim despots had a tailor-made scapegoat for the frustrations of the people and the stagnation of the country. Even given that Muslim nations have not gotten a fair price for their resources, there was more than enough wealth to build the country and to bring it to modernity if the wealth had been used for education, science, and commerce rather than for the military. Even when wealth was used for some education, as when students went to Western schools to

get degrees, there were no jobs on return because there was no capitalist and commercial infrastructure. The “Arab Spring” of 2011 and 2012 began when a man in Tunisia with a college degree had to sell oranges on a street corner to make a living, and a crooked police officer shook him down hard. Some Muslims with moderate power suppressed other Muslims with less power, and used them as tools in the ploy of using Israel as scapegoat; see the movie “Syriana”. As usual, the West supported despots when it served the short-term interests of the West, adding another valid reason to be angry at the West. Even now, there is great danger that Arab leaders will not use the new energy of freedom to lead their countries to progress but will return to militarism and using Israel as a safety valve.

As always during social changes, some groups benefit while other groups lose. Within Muslim nations, these groups stand to lose: men who have held power a long time; younger men who want to hold power someday; political despots; families who control resources; families who control power; young men with no jobs or resources and so no way to get a start in a new economy; and young men with little education and little hope of getting a job in a new economy. People think they can keep power if they can stop, slow, and limit changes. People think they can control power if they can control symbolic changes such as in movies, TV, and popular music. Too often, control of power becomes control of women, girls, young people, and schools. If power groups can make the nation look as it did a hundred years ago, they think they can keep out the modern world and can maintain power. They hurt people who change, in particular they hurt girls and women. This behavior has little to do with real Islam. This behavior is all about fear of change and fear of losing power. Conservatives of all religions, twist their religion to serve as the charter for the old ways and against the new ways. They twist their religion to serve as a charter for killing people who allow change. They twist their religion to serve as a charter for dominating women and schools. Not all Muslims are like this. The very large majority of Muslims want change if change is done at a pace they can deal with. People want hospitals and schools if they can also control drugs and promiscuity. But even the large majority of Muslims fear the violent aggressive minority, and so the violent aggressive minority makes all Muslims look that way.

Contrary to another Western misconception, not all ideas and values that come out of the West are all good. Even ideas that are good in the proper context in the West can be bad outside the proper context. Moral relativity and Romantic inversion can be useful in the West but bad if taken literally. The idea that a woman has a right to walk around naked without getting assaulted might be theoretically true, and might make sense as a discussion point in a Western college classroom, but it is nonsense in the real world and dangerous. Democracy makes sense when people have the right economic base to support it and the right relations with neighbors but democracy does not make sense where people are hungry, ignorant, and beset by enemies. If people adopt the wrong Western values, those values can hurt the country far more than help, as happened in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, in Burma (Myanmar), and in North Korea. People outside the West have to choose which values to accept and how to accept them. If given enough time and help, they usually make good choices, as in South Korea. In the short run, and without help, they get confused, as happened in Russia after the fall of Communism. When confused, they make bad choices such as falling prey to simplistic materialism and consumerism. When confused, and when bad choices backfire, people reject all Western values, all modernization, and all change. This rejection happened in only a small minority of Muslim nations but it happened enough to cause a problem, as in Egypt and Afghanistan.

In a world of expanding capitalism and consumerism, ideas about a modern life often come far ahead of actual economic development; what used to be called “modernization without development”. People want cars, computers, electronic pads, smart phones, cameras, cable TV, air conditioning, lots of other toys, and a cushy job with security and benefits, before the economy has the infrastructure to give everybody a job in which they can earn those rewards. People want to live like the people in American movies and TV ads, and they get angry when they can’t. They think the West is withholding it from them and cheating them. In fact, they are partly correct, but only in small part. Mostly their bad leaders are cheating them out of it. Regardless of the cause, they get angry at Western culture, and they react by reinforcing their traditional values. They do this even when their traditional values could not possibly provide the base for an economy that can give them what they want.

Violence and hatred beget violence and hatred. Once begun on a path of violence and hatred, it is hard to stop. In the short run, violence and hatred provide a lot of satisfaction and make up for a lot of other needs. In the 1970s, several groups of Americans started down a path of violence and hatred, and many people in those groups still wander that path. I have heard hate in the sermons of Black preachers, the rants of Whites looking for better jobs, and the well-reasoned but false attacks of educated women on men. You can still hear ill-disguised racial hatred in sermons on TV. Black culture in America since the 1970s has been ruined by hatred and violence; the legions of dead and jailed Black youth can serve as my evidence. Many Irish can testify to the persistence of hatred and violence. Muslims started down a path of hatred and violence, and many Muslims remain on the path. The conflict with Israel has done a lot to keep them on the path but it did not alone create the path and it alone does not keep them on the path. Despite Islam’s militant beginning, hatred and violence are not endemic to Islam. I think they are against the spirit of Mohammad and the spirit of Islam. The vast majority of Muslims do not walk the path of hatred and violence. Yet hatred and violence persist.

Whether Muslims more than other people tend to oppose change with violence, and tend to form groups that oppose change with strong violence, I am not sure. The above points tend to lead a large proportion of Muslims to oppose change and to oppose change with violence. The real question is what enlightened Muslims and enlightened citizens of a greater world should do, and that question is beyond the scope of this book.

(3) More on Attitudes.

After the terrorist attacks of 9-11, Americans called on Muslim clerics to condemn hatred and terrorism. Americans condemned Muslims for tolerating hatred and for not condemning it. In fact, many Muslims, including many Muslim clerics, did condemn hatred and violence. They do not tolerate it. They stress being good citizens of their countries, including the United States, and they oppose Muslim extremists. I would guess that Muslim clerics in America have done a better job of opposing hatred and violence than the clerics of most other religions. I have heard racism in the sermons of White and Black American preachers, and Christian Americans do not condemn them enough. Americans don’t hear the sermons of Muslims who have adapted to the modern world and who condemn violence. I wish there was a way to broadcast the sermons of Muslims in the same way as of Christians and sometimes Jews. I hope the non-Muslim Americans who have Muslim friends and who know of the vast majority of good Muslims go out of their way to tell other Americans about good Muslims.

Muslims and non-Muslims have to compromise on mutual tolerance of some rude behavior. Westerners do not notice, but, when Muslims protest a slander on Mohammad, the Koran, or Islam, they rarely burn the New Testament, the Tanakh, or any religious text. They never burn Jesus in effigy. Muslims respect religion, religious people, and religious texts. Muslims do unto others as they would have others do unto them, and as they think all people should do unto each other. Muslims do burn symbols of political and economic power, and symbols of values with which they disagree, such as flags, secular effigies, banks, fast food restaurants, bars, and hotels in which guests shamelessly under-dress.

I condemn the terrorist attack of 9-11 but I need to point out: The attack was not meant to kill as many people as possible. If the terrorists had wanted merely mass death of Americans, they would have flown a jet into Michigan Stadium ("the Big House") on football game day with Ohio State. The attack was aimed at the key financial center of the world (World Trade Center), the key military center of the world (Pentagon), and the key political center of the world (White House). Muslims who fear modern life see those centers as the weapons of oppression not just against themselves but against non-Western non-capitalist non-Communist peoples.

Non-Muslims, especially Westerners, should see the Muslim point of view, about bad institutions that hurt people. Muslims believe it is wrong to make images of people, especially important people. It is a form of idolatry that can lead to wrong belief. It can divert attention away from God. Non-Muslims should respect this. Don't make an image of Mohammad. Don't desecrate Mohammad or the Koran. Give Muslims the same respect that they give us. Give them the same respect that you want, and you would like to prevail for everybody. That is what Jesus taught. When Westerners make fun of Mohammad or the Koran, they should expect vigorous legal peaceful protests.

At the same time, Muslims must understand that Muslim values do not prevail around the world. Part of Western democratic values is that people have a right to be stupid, and they often use that right. People have a right to make images of anything, to make fun of anything, and even to denigrate anything. Even when people in general disagree with somebody who makes fun of Islam, that foolish person still has the right to say and act. Muslims can enforce strong laws of religious respect in their own countries but they cannot enforce such laws outside their own countries, and they cannot take vengeance against anybody outside a Muslim country. They simply must endure. If Muslim residents in a non-Muslim country cannot endure, they must leave that country rather than break its laws. Sometimes real progress comes through letting fools do what they must so that better people always have the right to speak too. This fact is painful, but it is true, and must be endured. I hope Muslims take comfort in the fact that the large majority of non-Muslims in the West disagree with offending Mohammad and the Koran.

Part of modernization is the freedom of girls and women. It is not possible to run a modern economy without women participating in the workforce. When women work, they have their own incomes, and they have a big say, often the dominant say, in their sexual lives, reproductive lives, and family lives. It is not possible to allow women to work without also allowing them power, and it is not possible to deny women work. So, women will have some power. Women will have economic, political, and personal power. When women have power, women, like men, do foolish things. Women will have times of excessive sexuality and of promiscuity. Most adolescent women go through that as a short phase, and it is not too severe. Women then stop on their own because they find the right path for themselves. Women do not stop mostly because men force them to stop. Men cannot stop it by severely punishing girls who go to

school. Men cannot stop it by punishing women who flirt, wear skirts above their ankles or knees, wear make-up, go out socially, have boyfriends, or drink. It is not against the basic ideas of Islam to give women the same freedom as men. It does not destroy a woman's soul if she makes a mistake, and it does not destroy her family.

The best thing Muslim parents can do is the best thing parents all over the world already do: Set a good example. Teach by example. Enjoy life without hurting yourself and without hurting other people. Teach your children to enjoy their lives in the same way. Show your children see what happens when other children go to excess or when they act stupidly for too long. Don't worry that your children will pick up bad examples from what you show them. Try to make sure your children see a variety of successful children, including children who are successful in traditional ways and children who are successful through imagination and creativity without hurting themselves. Do not admire bad role models, such as profligate men or terrorists. Do admire good role models such as stay-at-home fathers. Make sure all your children get the best education for their ability. Do not smoke at all and, if you drink, drink only moderately. Just as some men are lost, some women will be lost. Accept the loss of some women as the price to pay for the great gains of women as a whole, including all of your daughters.

Islam should not be the religion of bitter men, clinging to an imaginary past in which they had glory and power, and oppressing women so as to make themselves feel better. Mohammad limited the power of men while expanding the power of women. Mohammad protected women against men. Mohammad respected the judgment, intellect, and business ability of women. For a man to protect a woman does not mean to own her. Now it means to encourage her in her responsible freedom. Mohammad did not make men the owners of women; he made men the friends of women. Women supported Mohammad. Mohammad listened to women. Mohammad recognized women in business. He gave women a sure share of inheritance, a large portion for the times. He limited the number of wives that powerful men could have; contrary to false Western ideas, he did not encourage men to take many wives and to use women. Mohammad understood the value of an education because he did not have one. Mohammad would want women in this world to be educated, take up professions, and contribute to modern life.

This paragraph will offend Muslims. I think Greeks and Roman Catholics worship Mary and some of the saints, and their worship amounts to idolatry. I suspect that some Jews worship the Torah, the Talmud, and other texts to the point of idolatry. I don't make a point of this because mostly I don't care and there is not much I can do about it. I spend my time on better things. In the same way, I think many Muslims respect Mohammad, the Koran, and even the Hadith, to the point of idolatry. They worship Mohammad, the Koran, and the Hadith. Some Muslims seem to respect great figures of Islam to the point of idolatry. They let worship get in the way of the message. I know all Muslims learn that Mohammad is not God and that it is a sin to worship him. Even so, too often, they do. They do the same to the Koran. Mohammad was only a man, and he was wrong about some things. The Koran is only a book, and it is wrong about some things. Mohammad put passages in the Koran about his wives and cattle that could not possibly be relevant to the glory of God; he put them in so that he could use the glory of God to support him in his family quarrels. Jews should accept the flaws in their prophets, and often do, but not always. Christians should accept the mistakes of Jesus, and almost never do. Muslims should really and deeply accept the humanity of Mohammad, including his faults. When Muslims accept this about Mohammad, they will become better Muslims in the way that Mohammad originally intended. When religions accept the

humanity of their founders, they are far less apt to quarrel, especially about trivial things such as bad cartoons and bad movies.

Bad Self-Validating Experiences.

Now we return to material that is not repeated and that you should not skip.

“Jihad” does not mean primarily “Holy War” or “War against unholy enemies”. “Jihad” means “strenuous focused effort toward an important goal or cause, hopefully with God’s help”. A person can conduct a jihad to cure cancer or poverty. A person can treat winning the World Cup for his-her country as a jihad. “Jihad” can be given as a name, given in hope that your child excels, just as “David” means “beloved of God” or “Richard” means “person of correct rule”. A jihad can be a self-validating experience.

The problem with Muslim attitudes against modern life is they support self-validating bad experiences and self-perpetuating bad religious pyramid schemes. This is a problem not only with Islam but with many modern religions which offer a strong self-validating experience with which believers can oppose the uncertainty of modern life. From the 1960s through the 1980s, American Christian groups that offered a big self-validating experience of justification, salvation, finding God, feeling God’s love, and having a personal relation with God, provided a safe haven for confused young people who could not deal with the freedom and insecurity of modern life. This is a big reason why ordinary people see Muslim fanatics and Christian Conservatives as much the same. Both use self-validating experiences as the basis for bad religious pyramid schemes.

When self-validating experiences lead to terrorism or bad government, as in both Islam and America, then they are bad and should be condemned.

Malcolm X.

“The Autobiography of Malcolm X” is the story of a Black Man in America in the 1940s through 1960s, mostly around Detroit. This book influenced me greatly. I strongly recommend it as giving excellent insight on all the issues of this chapter.

Malcolm starts as a petty crook and drug user. He grows embittered. He goes to prison. He discovers an American Islamic movement aimed at Black People, called “Black Muslims”. The Black Muslims are not orthodox Muslims, but they are close enough to the spirit of Mohammad and Islam so Malcolm learns a lot. He learns to get over bitterness, to fend for himself, to stop relying on White people as though he were still a slave, to look critically at how the economy and society works, and to work in the community to make a better community and better world. For a long time, he got energy by hating White people and by blaming them for Black problems. He blamed Blacks who were lax or collaborated with Whites. Malcolm mistakenly thought that problems of economy, society, and history were primarily race problems. All these ideas became self-validating experiences that fed the dark side of the Black Muslim movement.

Eventually Malcolm saw that Black problems depended on race conflict but were not at root race issues but problems of economics, society, politics, and history. Malcolm became unhappy with the image of both Black people and White people that was given by Black Muslims. Malcolm went on the pilgrimage to

Mecca ("Haj"). While there, he saw Muslims of all races and nationalities. He saw all kinds of people getting along under their submission to God. The experience transformed him. He saw the unity of all people under God. The experience clarified for him race relations and root problems in the economy and the greater society. Malcolm never gave up being a vigorous focused person. He exemplifies jihad. He remained a strong good Muslim. His pilgrimage became a different self-validating experience that undid the badness of earlier self-validating experiences, and turned them toward good. I think Mohammad foresaw that the pilgrimage would have this effect on people, and that is one reason why Mohammad instituted the pilgrimage.

When Malcolm returned to America, he did not stop scolding Whites and Blacks when he thought they deserved it. He did stop preaching racial conflict, and instead attacked problems at their root. He always insisted on the virtues that he had learned as a Black Muslim. He cooperated with White people when they worked to help Black Community self-reliance and really helped improve it.

His new stance alienated him from traditionalists within the Black Muslims. Shortly after he changed his approach, reactionaries in the movement murdered him.

As far as I am concerned, Malcolm exemplifies what Muslims can be. He was working his way toward a critical but successful life in a modern society. Instead of rejecting society, Malcolm worked to make it better. Malcolm discovered, on his own, the message of Jesus, and the accord between the message of Jesus and the teachings of Mohammad. He found the inevitable implications of the teachings of all the prophets. I don't care if Malcolm would have put it in those terms, and I don't care if he would have left out Jesus and the Jewish prophets. The substance of what Malcolm did and what he learned are in line with a practical application of the message of Jesus.

Repeat My Pleas.

Because Islam accepts Jesus as an important prophet but does not hold him as God, Islam is in a unique position to assess the message of Jesus for the modern world. Islam can assess how much practicality, and what practicality, we have to take into account. How do we blend ideals and practically? Islam can tell us how decent people can cope with indecent people. Islam can tell us what to do about the flaws of capitalism without making either poor people or corporations clients of the state. Islam can tell us how to run capitalism without allowing business to rule the state. It can tell us how to help the planet as much as it now can be helped.

Islam began as a champion of science and reasoning. I do not guess here how some groups in Islam fell into hating science and reason, and why they believe in dogma that is obviously false, such as against evolution. As an early champion of science and reasoning, Islam sought for signs of God's activity and his presence in the wonders of his creation, in the stars, the Earth, biology, mathematics, and reasoning. Islam can do that again. Smart Muslims have a chance to be world leaders in science, and they have a chance to be world leaders in seeing God through science. I don't mean they should irrationally see God in every star, galaxy, and sea urchin. That would be silly, and a disservice to God. They should find out what can be explained by natural law, and they should speculate on implications. They should consider if the evolution of sentient-moral-aesthetic beings implies God even if it does not prove God. How are natural laws set, and why they are they set as they are? As machines become smarter, how should we

relate to them? What happens when most people are conceived and gestated in bottles? What happens when we play with DNA? Islamic literature, religious and secular, is full of natural signs of God. Few of these signs would stand up to the scrutiny of a modern skeptic but some would stand up to the scrutiny of a modern seeker who accepts circumstantial evidence. Many would still inspire a modern believer and bring joy to modern believers. Muslims have a lot to contribute to modern science and philosophy if they allow themselves to step fully into the modern world.

PART 5: My Non-Conversion.

When I explain the role of the Jews in my belief, Christians and Muslims ask me why I don't convert to Judaism. When I explain my respect for Mohammad and Islam, Jews and Christians ask me why I don't convert to Islam. I have reasons. (I have had atheists yell at me for not converting to formal Christianity). First, Jesus remains the main giver of the message for me. Second, Jews, standard Christians, and Muslims do not find my beliefs acceptable. Third, I don't accept some of their ideas and attitudes, such as overlooking Jesus' message. Fourth, I don't want to follow some of their practices. It is fine if Jews and Muslims circumcise boys and eat "kosher" ("hallal") but I don't want that, any more than I want to follow all the standard Christian holidays and customs. Fifth, and this might be a fault on mine, I don't like formal institutions. I would chafe at their authority. Sixth, I love some aspects of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, and I want to feel free to continue. My beliefs are fine for me, I share them with many enlightened modern people, and I think I am a true follower of Jesus. As long as nobody fights to convert me, I am happy to let things stand.

23 Theravada Buddhism

All material in all the chapters on religions is my opinion. The material is not an official description of any religion. I love Buddhism but disagree with it. If you wish, you need read only Parts 1 and 2 at first, about 50 pages. You will miss the in-depth commentary on Buddhism and its relevance to modern life but you will not miss much that you need for later chapters. The last part of the chapter, Part 7, about 50 pages, is optional as well. So this chapter is not nearly as long as it seems.

One person, Siddhartha Gautama, titled “the Buddha”, began Buddhism about 600-543 BCE in the area around Nepal. The Buddha died in 543 BCE. Buddhist calendars begin with that year.

Indian religion at that time centered on ritual. Brahmins were strong ritual priests, like some Christian bishops, heads of mega-churches, and Muslim clerics. Brahmins and rulers together formed a system that dominated society. Buddhism partly was a revolt against the Brahmin order and against irrationality, ideologies of superstition, glamour, ritual, magic, and the supernatural.

Other stances also arose distinct from Brahmins. Here are two: (1) The “Upanishads” are essays about spiritual life (“oo” as “woo”, “oo pahn i shahds”). The name means something like “writing from the forest” and refers to people who lived apart from society. The Upanishads teach: (A) all beings are similar or identical (“you are that”), so we are not different from other people or animals; (B) each sentient being is an eternal soul-self (“atman”); and (C) we should feel compassion for all. The Upanishads show the mix of inspiration and logic that is typical of India. Hindus developed many systems based on the insights of the Upanishads. Their importance is huge.

(2) Jainism (“jine” like “pine-ism”) is austere and reverences ALL LIFE. Jains are vegetarian and pacifist, like some Vegans. They strain water before they drink so as not to kill any bugs. They merge individual humans into Life. To me, unofficially, they imply that humans are Life’s way of knowing itself. We are special only because of that; in modern terms, they minimize “species-ism”. The Jain sense of Life is like the idea of Life that Jedi masters use to explain the Force but the Force is all good. Jainism remains a small distinct religion mostly inside India.

Always some people have a “Jain character” or “Upanishad character”, or both, even if neither society nor formal religion make a place for them: God is Life, The Living God, love people and nature, God is Love, hurt nothing, animals are like us, all people are our kind and our neighbors, we should be glad to sacrifice for them, God has a plan, all things have a place in God’s plan, and we all do God’s work. Both tempers can add to good versions of Theravada, Mahayana, Hinduism, and all religions.

Already in the time of the Buddha, ideas similar to those from the Upanishads and Jainism were used to begin a system in which eternal soul-like selves were a part, the system supported them, they supported it, it lived through them and worked through them, they did its work, and the system was holy and joyous. Only a few people can see the system as a whole. Still, you can participate fully, be fully realized and

fully justified, by doing your role-duty in this life or by being devoted to a major character in the system such as a god or the God. Indians are great at mixing vast inspiration with logic.

The Buddha presented his ideas partly in contrast to ideas from the Upanishads and Jainism and partly in parallel. He taught compassion and morality – monks strain water. He rejected (a) any eternal soul-self and (b) the relevance of a world system of which each soul-self is a part. He did not reject such a system in principle, he simply denied it was finally relevant, and he ignored it. Except for Dharma, he would have rejected depending on a Big Principle, not even Life, and would have rejected merging people into Life, Dharma, Mind, Emptiness, Love, or any Big Idea. Buddhism also is both inspired and logical.

On the Net, find Cynics, Stoics, Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, and David Hume. Aristotle's "Ethics" is great. Aurelius was a Roman Emperor, like the old good emperor in the movie "Gladiator". These people were not exactly like Siddhartha but close enough to make both similarities and differences worth knowing. Keep them in mind also for the chapters on Taoism, Zen, and Confucius.

Buddhism has two-and-a-half big schools: (1) Theravada ("ter-ra va-da", "Elders' way"), (2) Mahayana ("ma-ha ya-na", "bigger vehicle"), and (2.5) Vajrayana ("vaj-rai ya-na", "lightning diamond way-vehicle"). Vajrayana came from Mahayana and is usually linked to Tibet. I don't write about it. Theravada likely is closest to the original ideas of the Buddha but other schools dispute the claim. Theravada is mostly in mainland Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka (Ceylon). Mahayana likely came after Theravada, maybe 200 years after the Buddha. The forerunners of Theravada and Mahayana split officially around 250 BCE at a meeting in India. Mahayana is all over the Far East, and it is what most people think of as Buddhism. I lived in a Theravada nation, Thailand, and am closer to Theravada in spirit, so I am biased. Mahayanists call Theravada "Hinayana", meaning "smaller vehicle", to put down Theravada in contrast to Mahayana. Please do not use "Hinayana" for Theravada. Mahayana gets its own chapter.

Much of what I say about Theravada applies also to other religions and to mysticism. I do not point out similarities, the differentiating "spin" that religions put on similarities, or how similarities remain despite spins. Keep this chapter in mind for later.

Sanskrit is the traditional high language of India, like Latin in the Roman Catholic Church and old Hebrew in Judaism. Pali came from Sanskrit and is close to it. Already at the time of Siddhartha, Sanskrit was old and Pali was spreading, like the English of Chaucer first and then of Shakespeare. I don't know if the Buddha used Pali. Until about 200 years after the Buddha, little was written. People memorized. Some old texts were in Sanskrit but most were in Pali. Nearly all texts relevant to Theravada are in Pali. Many Sanskrit and Pali terms are in daily languages of Buddhist areas just as Greek and Latin terms are in languages of Europe and the Americas. "Nirvana" is Sanskrit, "Nibbana" or "Nippana" is Pali, and "Nippan" is Thai after Pali. The word checker on my computer recognizes Sanskrit but not Pali, so I use Sanskrit even though almost all Theravada is in Pali.

My terms do not match exactly with Buddhist terms although they are not far off. In this book, it is an error to "get hung up" on formal terms. If a basic idea in a religion cannot be said in natural language then feel wary. Sometimes I mention a term because you will meet it in other reading.

Theravada canonical texts are collected in a set called the “Tripitaka” (Pali: Tipitaka). It means “three baskets” for three major fields and texts: (1) Sutras, including sermons and explanations; (2) Codes of Conduct for monks and lay people, that is, Buddhist ethics; and (3) Buddhist view of mind, body, life, perception, and being. For lay Buddhists, “sutra” can be a catch-all term for all official texts. Rather than explain the status of a text, not relevant here, I too use “sutra” for a canonical or important text. “Sutra” in Pali is “sutta”. A sutra is like a chapter in the Tanakh, New Testament, Koran, or like the Bhagavad Gita. Most sutras begin with “The Buddha said” and claim to be verbatim copies of sermons by him. There are so many texts, they are so long, and disagree enough, not all could be exact direct copies of his words. Buddhists know this. I don’t know which words likely are his and which not. Buddhists know Part Three of the Tripitaka came after the Buddha but still accord Part Three high status, like the Hadith in Islam. Mahayana accepts Theravada sutras but reinterprets them. Mahayana has sutras that Theravada does not have and does not accept as canonical even if held highly, such as the Lotus Sutra. Mahayana has sutras written in local languages such as Tibetan and Chinese. Mahayana stresses its texts that are not shared with Theravada such as the Lotus, Heart, and Diamond Sutras. As in all religions, both Mahayana and Theravada teachers select whole sutras, and passages, that help them and hurt foes. I do not cite any passages but do adapt lines. Some teachers are so influential that their work is effectively canonical (Buddhaghosa and some Zen masters).

PART 1: BACKGROUND IDEAS

“Buddhists think” and “Buddhism says” refer to fairly astute people. I do not refer to folk Buddhism unless I say so. “Dogma”, “doctrine”, “orthodox”, and “official” do not mean arbitrary rules but mean standard respected teachings. Dogma and doctrine are not propaganda. No term disparages.

The Dharma.

I do not define karma. The common idea of karma is not exact but it is close enough. This chapter does not need a long or precise definition of Dharma or “the Dharma”. The Dharma is the basic stuff, doing, being, life, mind, self-knowing, sociality, morality, and spirituality of the universe. Dharma is how it all works at the most basic and pervasive. Cause-and-effect is one mode of Dharma but only one. Dharma is physics, life, sociality, and morality, but more too. Dharma is the regularity and liveliness of the world if liveliness is not merely an evolved delusion but is fully true. In my view, Dharma would be like the mind-behind-it-all that I call “God”. Followers of Dharma think of it not as god but as supra-personal.

“Dharma” also means knowledge about the world and it means wisdom. The world has order, so we can grasp the order, and sometimes can say it. When people say “study the Dharma” they can mean to learn Buddhism, Hinduism, and wisdom. Buddhism and Hinduism call themselves “the Dharma”. They are the Dharma making itself known to its creation and known to itself in its creation. This use is similar to the idea that to read the Bible or Koran is to learn the mind of God and those texts are the Word of God.

Puzzles of the Dharma.

The puzzles here are all aspects of one puzzle: “Why is there evil?”, and “Why is there so much evil?” All religions face the problem, all offer solutions, and no solution satisfies me. Max Weber wrote short clear books describing the major religions by how they respond to evil, how their responses make them distinct,

and the results on society of being guided by a particular view. Keep in mind the points here for some puzzles mentioned below and for chapters on Mahayana, Taoism, and Hinduism.

(1) Many people tacitly assume that Dharma and Nature are the same. The Nature that people have in mind is Romanticized Nature of TV ads and shows for children, not the real nature that scientists study. Dharma, Romanticized Nature, and real nature are not the same. Even Max Weber mistook Dharma for nature and thought religions based on Dharma have as a main goal “back to nature”. Don’t make that mistake. Think out relations of Dharma and real nature.

(2) Real nature has quite a bit of violence, and, to me, has some badness and even some evil. To make real nature and Dharma the same, you have to accept that nature, and so the Dharma, intrinsically have violence, some badness, and maybe some evil. Nature-Dharma is not all-and-only “you are that”, love, compassion, and one harmonious system. Most believers in Dharma want Dharma-Nature to be all about goodness and light regardless of how it seems.

(3) Regardless of nature, or any association between Dharma and nature, Dharma is not all goodness and light. Dharma accepts violence, badness, and even evil. Followers of Dharma have to explain this dark aspect of its character. Even if the badness is only an illusion in the long run, apparent badness is real enough for most people during their lives, and it has to be taken seriously.

(4) People want the good light-filled part of Dharma to win in the long run. So, one side of the Dharma has to be pitted against another side of the Dharma, and one side has to defeat the other side. You have to split Dharma, allow for a long conflict, and make one side win. Even if, in the end, the light side and dark side reunite, splitting and conflict are true for the long time in which we live particular lives.

(4A) One way to win is to make victory happen along with conflict, at the same time, all the time. If victory is not a distinct event, as in the Second Coming, then it must be mystic, everywhere, all the time. Some people see the whole story including conflict as the victory, as in “the journey is the destination”. Splitting is merging and merging is splitting. The never-ending moral wrangles of humans do keep us engaged and occupied.

(5) Some people dwell on the Dark Side of the Dharma and think they serve the Dharma when they seek power and do dark deeds. They are confused and wrong, and should be opposed.

(6) It is easy to turn the drama of Dharma into the interplay of good and bad, and to think good and bad need each other. This way of thinking almost does not occur in Theravada although some individuals in Theravada do think this way. I consider it wrong, for which see Part One of this book. Some Mahayana and Hinduism developed this view.

Widespread Then-New Ideas from about the Time of the Buddha.

About the time of the Buddha, a set of ideas appeared from Italy through India. It is not clear where they began and if they began together. The ideas spread because they make sense of the world, of badness, and different life situations such as lord and peasant, rich and poor, healthy and sick, weak and powerful, and lucky and unlucky. The ideas fit well in mature agrarian (farming) stratified (class) states, conditions

common when the ideas spread. The ideas showed up in Buddhism, Hinduism, Gnosticism, Platonism, and Neo-Platonism. The set resembles variations (C) and (D) of the “many lives” stances described in the chapters in this book on Issues.

-Many particular lives are unfair. Good people get no reward; bad people live well.

-Much about life is hard, unpleasant, and unavoidable, such as disease, getting old, hunger, political disappointment, love, children, etc.

-Life changes. Life is unreliable. What is here today is gone tomorrow. A river changes course. A tree dies. The crops fail or we have a bumper crop. Kin and friends die. Ideas about the gods change. The government changes policy, causing changes in business. One ethnic group rises up while another falls down. One religion rises up while another declines.

-Much in life is so changeable and so unreliable as to be an illusion: security, happiness, good relations with neighbors, friendship, and even good relations with kin.

-Even concrete aspects of life such as your body, even recurring aspects, such as the coming of the seasons, have much about them that is unreliable and illusory.

-What is obvious about life cannot be fully real. There must be something underneath what we see that is more real. What is underneath might generate what we see but the two are not the same.

-Even though what we obviously see is changing, unreliable, and illusory, it is still appealing, and people still commit to it. The changing, unreliable, and illusory world can be a lot of fun.

-We need to wake up to the unreliable and illusory nature of this life. If possible, we need to wake up to what is really real beneath. We need to stop clinging to what is obvious, and instead wake up to what is more real.

-Indians called the unreliable, changing, and illusory world “samsara” or “maia”. They called waking up “release” or “moksha”. We now call it “enlightenment”.

-Although we are individual human beings, still we are much like other people and other forms of life. In the words of the Upanishads, “you are that”. The proper attitude when we realize how much we are like others is empathy and sympathy, kindness, and being helpful.

-People should seek enlightenment. They should seek it much more than any worldly success, even family success, even more than conquering the whole world.

-Understanding the world might require long hard work. There might be a process of “ascending” to a full understanding of life’s secrets and to fully waking up.

-Not everybody can awaken in his-her present lifetime.

-If we allow that people are reborn and have more than one life, we can solve many problems. If we allow that having many lives forms a system, we can solve even more problems.

-Rebirth solves problems of bad luck, unequal social situation, unequal wealth, unequal power, unfairness of all kinds, the fact that good people don't seem to get rewarded, the fact that bad people don't seem to get punished and might even prosper, and badness.

-Rebirth solves a problem that affects awakening. If a person does not awaken in this lifetime, he-she will awaken in a future lifetime. There has to be a way that spiritual progress and spiritual regress in this lifetime can carry over into future lifetimes,

-Rebirth also causes problems. Indeed, it is a major problem. To be reborn into a series of illusory, changing, unreliable, unfair lives is a bad thing, even if many of the particular lives are good. When a person wakes up, he-she ceases to be reborn; he-she ceases to participate in the whole system of many lives. To cease being reborn entirely is a good thing.

-This point is unclear and will be contradicted below: A person might awaken to the idea that particular lives are unfair, unreliable, etc. but not awaken to the idea that all lives, and the system of multiple lives, are undesirable. That person could accept rebirth as a good thing without seeing it is also a bad thing. If a person wakes up to the fact that the whole system of rebirth is undesirable, he-she would also have to realize that all particular lives are undesirable even if some are superficially enjoyable.

-While it does not always seem so, and while any particular lifetime might be poor, the world as a whole is moral. The world as a whole rewards good and punishes bad. The world as a whole supports spiritual striving and spiritual achievement. This is part of the reason why we feel that we are like other sentient beings and like all life, "you are that".

-The system of rewarding good and bad, in this lifetime, and in future lifetimes, is called "karma". Karma extends not only to explicitly moral deeds but to all deeds of all kinds. Karma responds to what kind of occupation you have, whether you act diligently or not, whether you are aware of nature, etc.

-The system as a whole is called the "Dharma" or the "Dharma". The role that any person plays in the system is also called the "dharma" of that person. The fact that a person is a teacher or a farmer is the dharma of that person.

-This point might have arisen about the time of the Buddha but more likely a few hundred years later in Hinduism. To keep the system going, each person should carry out his particular dharma (destiny, duty, role) correctly. For any person to do that, all others need to carry out their dharma correctly too, even most bad guys. We need each other, need society, and need some bad guys. This is the big lesson of the Bhagavad Gita, and one big lesson from the "Spoon River Anthology". If you are a farmer, farm; if a householder, see to your family; if a warrior, fight; if a ruler, rule, if a holy person, seek release; if a thief, steal; and if an egomaniac intent on taking over the world, sincerely try.

The Following Points are Important in Mahayana and Hinduism.

-This point might have arisen about the time of the Buddha; likely it was developed after him; I doubt the Buddha held exactly this view but he might have held something close: If you keep in mind the above points, carry out your Dharma-karma, and set your mind to spiritual growth, then you can enjoy this life to the extent it allows, and this life can be graceful or worthwhile, at least in passing.

-The following points likely originated after the Buddha, and certainly were developed after him.

-Although any given life might not seem worthwhile, there is a system. The system has mind-like being. The system is overall moral even if it allows some immorality. The system overall is good and worthwhile. Although it might not seem that some particular life is worthwhile, the system of lives as a whole is good, worthwhile, and even joyous. Each life is worthwhile in that context.

-We are part of a system that is bigger than us. Just because we are part of a system, we are important too. We are the system working out its way through us. This one reason we feel "you are that". If we feel our life right now is not worthwhile, we are wrong because we do not see our life in the whole system.

-All lives have some suffering and some lives have a lot of suffering. That is too bad but it is not the great tragedy it seems. The joy of future lives can more than make up for suffering now. Especially the greater joy of the system of many lives dwarfs the suffering of any one particular life.

-Suffering is something that pertains to particular lives, not to the system as a whole. What appears to be suffering is an illusion. It is only a transient part of one particular life. It only arises because lives are one aspect of the system and not the whole. The joy of the system is the true reality while suffering in any one life is only a passing part of the total joy.

-The system never appears as a whole all at once. It only shows in particular lives in particular situations. Even so, there really is a system, it really is big and important, and it makes each particular individual big and important too. It makes each of us big and important too. So, there is no real difference between particular individuals and the system. The system is the individual lives that we obviously see because that is all we can ever see of the system. If we look hard enough, we can always seem the system in all individual lives. There is no difference between daily un-awakened life and awakened life. If the system is "God", then you are God too. If you are a part of God, then the whole system is God.

-When you see the relation between yourself and the system, you do not merge into the system and you do not disappear somehow. Instead, you become part of the system in a deeper better way. You help other people, and other life forms, to realize the same ideas and feel the same feelings.

The Wheel of Dharma-Law-Karma-Life.

-From "Jack and Diane" by John Mellencamp:

"Oh yeah, life goes on
Long after the thrill of livin' is gone"

The cycle of birth-death-birth-etc. is called the “Wheel of Dharma”, “Law”, “Karma”, or “Life”. Now, we glamorize, Romanticize, and extol the Wheel. Listen to “Proud Mary” by CCR; I bought a cereal called “Dark Cocoa Karma”; and you can get a credit score from “Credit Karma”. In Mahayana and Hinduism, the Wheel became good as the Great System of Dharma-Karma, Emptiness, or Buddha Mind. That was not original. Originally, life on the Wheel was not good and it was not worthwhile. Listen to “Do It Again” by Steely Dan. To live here again and again is not worthwhile; it is suffering. The Wheel is the Cross on which we must be nailed over and over again. Life on the Wheel is like being trapped inside the Matrix, Walking Dead, Breaking Bad, Orc town, a sappy tear-jerker movie, TV show about conniving, or plot-free action movie, forever. People want off. To get off, it helps to see that life on the Wheel is not worthwhile; if you do not see that life is not worthwhile, then likely you can’t get off. To get off the Wheel means no rebirth. Recall, in India, spiritual success is called “moksha” or “release”.

This was the view of life in the milieu of the Buddha. Life is not worthwhile. The Buddha offered his ideas as a way to get off the Wheel of Dharma-Karma-Law-Life. The Buddha did not offer his ideas primarily as a way to make the Wheel better and so make life worthwhile; making life better in some ways is good but not key. When the Buddha taught how to defeat suffering, I think he meant that as a step toward seeing that life is not worthwhile and so getting off the Wheel. To get off the Wheel did not mean to find a secret way that made it all better or find a secret view from which we could see it had really been great all along. All that came later after the Buddha.

I differ from official doctrine. Buddhism stresses suffering instead of not worthwhile life, and says it cures suffering. Buddhism now does not deal with whether life is worthwhile and it does not refer to the Wheel. In contrast, I think suffering is only a way to see that life is not worthwhile. Really, suffering is not the main issue. To stress suffering without asking what it means, without seeing implications of suffering, became a way to avoid dealing with the bigger issue of worthwhile life. I don’t know what Siddhartha thought. Buddhists feel I distort Buddhism. Because I differ from doctrine, I return to this issue often. I do explain official doctrine also. Please be patient.

Repeat: The World is Intrinsicly Moral.

In religion based on Dharma, the world is intrinsicly moral. Morality is in the nature of Dharma’s world. All relations between sentient beings and the world are guided more by morality than by chance, physics, chemistry, psychology, and biology, including relations between sentient beings and: sentient beings, animals, many plants, environment, nature, big features of nature such as the oceans, and social groups. You feel the effects of your deeds, and others feel the effects of your deeds, according to morality more than according to results for wealth, power, sex, family success, or any worldly success. The Dharma can support neutrality and chance, and can support various characters, including some bad characters, but, in the end, good is more important than neutrality or badness, and good wins. Accident or badness might win in the short run but good always wins in the long run.

The Dharma might enjoy some badness, and the Dharma tolerates a lot of badness, but the Dharma likes goodness more. You can get short term benefit from acting badly, but, in the long run, you do better by acting morally and by going along with the Dharma and its world. Bad guys might be needed to move the plot along and to make life more interesting but they are still bad and the good guys still win. Mahayana and Hinduism can get confused on the need for bad guys to move the Dharma plot and they can excuse

or even extol bad guys too much. Yet even in Mahayana and Hinduism, good is still better than bad over the long run. Badness is another level of control that lets people think they are superior but really it only keeps people deluded, on the Wheel, and confused. Rebellion is really only more servitude and deeper servitude. To succeed in a Dharma system, eventually you must be good. If you go against Dharma by acting badly, you will fail. You will fail not only in the moral terms intrinsic to the Dharma but in all other ways including mundane ways. Whether life in the system (on the Wheel) is worthwhile or not worthwhile, whether you want to stay in the system or get off, you still have to be good eventually.

Two Important Contradictions, a Crucial Choice, and an Implication.

Contradiction (1): (A) On the one hand, Dharma and its world are good and satisfying, and you must go along with Dharma. “Must go along” is fine because the world is good. Going along is fun. Violence, hurt, badness, and even evil are only temporary and might be mere illusions. They make the world more interesting and help the plot along – think of TV such as “Animal Kingdom” and “ Fargo”. People want to stay on the Dharma world for a long time, many lifetimes, maybe forever. (B) On the other hand, the world also is painful, hard, tedious, annoying, beset by suffering, often bad, and often evil. Life is not worthwhile. The world is hurtful enough, and satisfactions cannot make up for badness, so people want off the Dharma system. People want off the system in this lifetime if possible or in a lifetime soon. They don’t want many lifetimes. People want to go against Dharma and its world system.

Which is correct? There is no clear answer.

People in a Dharma system try to have both at once. Most attempts don’t make much sense; at times, attempts to get both are sublime; often, attempts are sublime but false; and often they are silly nonsense. Too often the nonsense sounds sublime and people can’t tell the difference.

At first, “get off” prevailed; and likely it prevailed at the time of the Buddha and Upanishads. Afterwards, the following prevailed, especially in Mahayana and Hinduism: “The world is good and is really secretly joyful; apparent suffering is a clever disguise and it actually increases long-term joy; everything is as it should be; especially everything is as it should be if you do what you were meant to do; so do that”.

In Theravada, “get off” should prevail, but Theravada followers resist this view and they look for ways to get around “get off” and to have successful happy lives. I comment more below on this contradiction and on the desire for a good life.

Choice: Followers of the Dharma face the four issues listed above. In addition, followers of the Dharma have to choose between (A) Go along with the Dharma, stay in its world system, try to find success in its terms, and try to find secret joy, OR (B) Reject the Dharma world system and try to get out.

People who choose (A) can also (A1) choose a secret Dharma system or (A2) can find joy without such a system. Few people try to find contentment in the Dharma and this life (A2) without also finding a system to magically secretly resolve all the problems (A1). If you choose (A) in any form, you are almost doomed to find some sort of magic system (A1).

Sometimes people start out by thinking they can eventually find a version of (A) if they apparently start with (B), with apparent rejection but really with underlying acceptance (A). They get confused between (A) and (B). I think most Buddhists are confused this way, even many monks.

Regardless of love it or hate it, the Dharma and its system is all there is. Whatever you do is rooted in the Dharma, including your desire to get out of the Dharma world.

Contradiction (2): People who want off the world system have to use Dharma to overcome Dharma, like using Nature against Nature. The Dharma has to permit people who want to reject the Dharma world to get off the Dharma world. At least, Dharma has to provide them with the tools to do so. Dharma has to provide people with the tools to overcome itself and-or go against itself.

It is useful to look at these situations from the view of someone who wants to get off the world system and so to see only one big problem: being stuck in a system where life is not worthwhile and having to use the tools of the system to get out of it. This is the situation in Theravada. This should be the situation in Mahayana and Hinduism as well but they try to escape the bind.

Implication: Whether you choose to stay on the Dharma system (Wheel) or get off, you do not choose only for yourself, you judge the entire system and implicitly choose for everyone, especially when “you are that” is an integral part. If you say “the Dharma system is good for Sally but not Bob”, you really don’t say anything. If it is good for Sally, it is good for Bob and everybody. Bob might not see it is good yet, but, in a few lifetimes, he will. If it is bad for Bob, it is bad for Sally and everybody. Sally might not see it is bad yet, but she will. You can’t hedge or have it both ways. Either the whole system is worthwhile for all or not worthwhile for all. People in Dharma systems don’t like getting cornered but this choice is a clear implication of a Dharma system.

Contradictions bolster systems that eat the world, especially bolster the hole at the center, and especially through nonsense that seems sublime. Logically, a contradiction can support any nonsense. In “2001: A Space Odyssey”, the computer “Hal” went crazy because he faced contradictory tasks. People go crazy too and they take up more bad ideas that make it all worse.

The Buddha and Awakening.

“Buddh” (“bood” like “food”), means roughly “active mind” or “awakened mind”. “Buddha” is not a name but a title, like “Christ” (anointed person), “The Christ” (one particular important anointed person), or “Lao Tzu” (wise old man). “Buddha” means “awakened person”. “Buddhism” is “the way for people who seek to wake up or are awake”. The founder was “The Buddha” (one particular important awakened person), named Siddhartha Gautama, of the Shakya Clan (also sometimes spelled “Gotama”).

Technically, anybody who awakens is a Buddha. However, Buddhists tend not to say that. Christians do not say “David, a Christ” although David was a key anointed person. Christians keep the term “Christ” for “Jesus the Christ”. Likewise, Buddhists keep “Buddha” not for anyone but for “Siddhartha the Buddha”, and often call him “The Lord Buddha”. Only a male human may awaken and be a Buddha, for reasons that I do not go into. If the sexism and species-ism offend you, ask a Buddhist or Hindu.

“Buddha” also can refer to a person who is central in the great Dharma system, comes along every few thousand years, comes to teach and to awaken people, has amazing powers, helped make the world, continues to make the world, embodies the system in him-her, and embodies cosmic principles such as Compassion. The system and its virtues are incarnate in him. This Buddha would be like The Christ if The Christ came every few thousand years. This Buddha does not figure much in Theravada but does in Mahayana where Siddhartha is one appearance of this Buddha. Each appearance of this Buddha is like a Hindu avatar such as Krishna. I don’t use this Buddha here. The only relevant Buddha in Theravada is Siddhartha Gautama, and he came only once.

Siddhartha was the son of the prince of a small state in the area around Nepal, likely the eldest son and heir of his father. From his clan name, Japanese and Tibetans call him “Shakyamuni” meaning “jewel of the Shakya” or “sage of the Shakya”. As a youth, Siddhartha’s parents married him to a woman of similar rank. By then, Siddhartha already doubted normal life. The couple had a son, who Siddhartha named “Rahula”, meaning “fetter”, “tie that binds us to this world”. When Siddhartha was twenty nine years old, one night he snuck out, leaving his wife, child, parents, palace, duties, and privileges. His wife and son would have a good life even without him. Siddhartha had to “figure it all out”. He lived in the forest, and trained with teachers, for six years. Training included severe asceticism such as fasting and hard yoga. Siddhartha advanced quickly at first, then bogged down, and finally he felt disappointed with the teachers, ideas, and practices. He left the teachers but stayed in the forest, and he taught himself. He had his own ideas, with his own regimen, which was moderate yet firm. His techniques allowed his body and mind to reassert their natural vigor. He found what he wanted. His mind became fully active and he “woke up”. He explained his ideas, and soon got students. Students became a movement. Soldiers, aristocrats, merchants, and crafts people joined because he denied the final authority of ritual and Brahmins, urged individual people to run their own lives, and supported autonomy. At the request of followers, Siddhartha set up an order. He lived over eighty years. Eventually peasants, workers, and other commoners joined the movement. Siddhartha became “the Buddha”. I do not tell more of the story. The ideas count. The book “Siddhartha” by Herman Hesse is a good fictional account of a man like the Buddha, with the same name, set in the same time and place. Hesse is too Hindu but that should not corrupt innocent minds too much. The movie “Young Buddha” is fun, and you can learn about Indian-Buddhist-Hindu ideas from it, but it also clings to Hinduism too much; it makes the Buddha into an avatar.

After awakening, Siddhartha liked to call himself “(the) Tathagata”, which means roughly “‘thus gone’ person”, or “‘thus arrived’ person”: a person who no longer holds to this world yet who is deeply present. Fans of jazz used to call a musician “gone” who knew the music well, lived for music, and put the world apart: Bix Beiderbecke, Lester Young, and Charlie Parker. Rockabilly fans said “real gone cat”: Carl Perkins, and Jerry Lee Lewis. Look up the “Real Gone” music company on the Web. I guess “Tathagata” also means “person simply fully here without pretence, obvious for all to know”. In American idiom: “real up-front simply honest integrated whole person with no pretense, posing, or guile”. Siddhartha strikes me as a simple decent person who sought a way so other people could be simple and decent too. Jesus, Mohammad, Chuang Tzu, Confucius, Francis of Assisi, and likely Moses, were much like that.

Nirvana and Enlightenment.

A person who is “awake” is also “enlightened”, also called “Nirvana”. One likely root for “Nirvana” is “snuff out” or “extinguish” as with a candle. Suffering, wrong ideas, desires, and clinging all totally end for an

awakened person. He will not be reborn and so snuffs out when he dies. Another likely root for “Nirvana” is “cool down”. A person cools down by ending the same things. The fire stays warm enough to maintain life until life ends naturally. The person does not freeze into a block of inert numb ice.

Western people, and even Buddhists, wrongly say you “reach” Nirvana or “achieve” it. Nirvana is not a place, condition, situation, attitude, or thing. You do not reach any place or achieve anything when you “reach” Nirvana. You simply wake up. Westerners say Buddhists “seek enlightenment” as someone seeks a bargain. That view is misguided. Suppose you have a sweet taste in your mouth so you can’t taste properly, you think food is better than it really is, and you can’t stop eating. You are a “junk food junky” as most of us are “life junkies”. Then the sweet taste goes away, and you taste normally, so you can taste food as it is, including good flavors and bad. Food is not nearly as sweet as you had wrongly thought. Now you can judge food and can control eating. You choose adeptly what to eat, can stop when you are as full as you wish, and know eventually you will get tired of eating. Your taste buds and mind are now properly awake. If all your friends still have the wrong overly-sweet taste, you could not explain; they can’t “get it” until they too lose the wrong taste. You have not achieved anything and are not in a special state. Maybe you are where you should have been all along. The same thing happens when we see life properly and are not obsessed with life and the things, ideas, relations, and attitudes in it.

PART 2: MY SYNOPSIS

Material here rests primarily on my view about worthwhile life and not on ideas of suffering although I do write about suffering. I repeat ideas and I cannot present the ideas serially.

The Core Insight: Life is Not Worthwhile.

Basic Buddhism is simple. What is taught as Buddhism usually is not basic Buddhism. Almost all of that came later. What came later is not always wrong or worse, it is just not the original idea. Much of what came later, especially in Mahayana, was reasserting of ideas which likely the Buddha had purged. What happened later was similar to what happened to Jesus when he became the One Divine Cosmic Christ and Christians made elaborate theology to make sense of that role for a real historical person. The drift went further in Mahayana than Theravada, and in folk Buddhism than thoughtful Buddhism. You have to decide what Buddhism is true Buddhism and what is best regardless of whether it is true Buddhism.

The core insight: Each single life, and life overall, is not worthwhile. This life now is not worthwhile. Your life is not worthwhile no matter how much you think it is and how good it seems. When you know life is not worthwhile, you can let go, and wait to die. You will not be reborn. You must act morally always. People who see all this wait calmly. This is the whole message. All else is added.

Even if there is a system of many lives, the whole system is not worthwhile. Even if you have good lives in the future, those lives are not worthwhile and the system of many lives is not worthwhile. Even if you fully get all the points from above, this life now is not worthwhile and any system of lives is not worthwhile. Even if good wins in the end, your life, all lives, and the system, are not worthwhile. Maybe especially if good wins in the end, because there is no real risk, life is not worthwhile.

Below, I mention the roles of desire, clinging, stickiness, struggle, suffering and wrong ideas in how we come to think life is worthwhile when it is not. Ideas about these factors can help us see that life is not worthwhile but ideas about them are not needed if we simply see directly that life is not worthwhile. You do not have to get rid of all wrong ideas (mental defilements) and think perfectly to see directly that life is not worthwhile; you simply see it directly.

We mistakenly persist in thinking life is worthwhile even in the face of good evidence it is not. Buddhism explained why people mistakenly think life is worthwhile. Some Buddhist explanations anticipated ideas from the modern theory of biological evolution but I cannot go into that topic much here.

People dislike the term “not worthwhile”. It is not as harsh as it sounds, there is no better way to say the idea in any language that I know about, and the term does make us consider basic issues. It does not mean “life is miserable” or “life is disgusting”. Don’t get annoyed until you have read more.

Until Buddhism settles whether life is worthwhile, both before and after awakening, I doubt Buddhism can: (a) bridge the gap between thoughtful deep Buddhism versus folk Buddhism, (b) bridge the gap between Buddhism based on awakening versus Buddhism based on karma and charisma, (c) take out enough of the irrationality, magic, superstition, metaphysics, and glamour that it has accumulated, (d) be rational enough in the ways required of modern life, and (e) re-see itself to serve as the basis for good modern life in modern states. Neither Theravada nor Mahayana now measure up. (No religion can take out all irrationality etc. and be perfectly rational, nor should it; all religions could do better.)

You can think of “not worthwhile” like this although I ask that eventually you get over thinking of it like this: Life is a giant “con”. The Dharma cons itself and cons us. The Dharma does this to amuse itself. Our life amuses the Dharma and keeps it from going crazy. All our running around, and even striving for wisdom, adds to the Dharma game. It is time you grew up, woke up, quit enabling your own confusion, and opted out of the con game. You lose nothing by giving up rebirth and life, and you avoid a lot of running around and suffering, for yourself and others.

Regardless of what the Buddha thought about whether life is not worthwhile or suffering besets life, I take the central issue of this chapter to be whether life is worthwhile. The Wheel is a way to focus attention on the issue of worthwhile or not worthwhile life. I take Buddhism to be really about not worthwhile life even if Buddhism says it is about suffering. Even if Buddhism really is about suffering only, does not engage the issue of worthwhile life, and I am wrong, I still use Buddhism to think about whether life is worthwhile, and to think how to make life more worthwhile. The issue of worthwhile life is deeper, prior, and more important than the issue of suffering. Even if, by Buddhist standards, I am wrong to focus on worthwhile, my ideas bear on the Buddhist use of suffering, so the material in this chapter is still worthwhile.

Suffering and the Orthodox View.

At its base, Buddhism offers Four Truths about suffering. Almost certainly the Truths come directly from Siddhartha. The Truths are the bedrock of all official Buddhism of any school. All Buddhist schools must begin with their view of the Four Truths. The simple question whether-life-is-worthwhile-or-not-worthwhile gets confused because Buddhism now does not simply say life is worthwhile or not. Buddhism now starts with the Four Truths to build attitudes about life that suit practitioners. Often what is supposedly built on

the basis of the Four Truths essentially ignores the Four Truths or contradicts them, usually in an effort to make life worthwhile.

(1) Suffering besets life. Suffering is the first problem of life. Suffering puts its stamp on all of life and on all that we do, think, and feel. We need to cure suffering. We need to cure suffering before we can do anything else effectively. Even if curing suffering does not by itself solve all other issues, we cannot see what is really important or not important, and cannot make any progress on what is really important, until we deal with suffering. If we do deal with suffering, then likely we will make progress toward dealing with what is really important.

(2) Suffering has causes. The closest cause of suffering is clinging; desire causes clinging; and wrong ideas enable desire. Although not the only wrong idea, the root wrong idea is that some things in the world are permanent and so can serve as the source of permanent full satisfaction, especially the wrong idea that our self is eternal and can serve as the source of permanent full satisfaction.

(3) The causes of suffering can be ended (defeated), and so suffering can end. Buddhism can end the wrong idea of permanence, end other wrong ideas, end desire, end clinging, and so end suffering.

(4) The Eightfold Path of Buddhism is the way to end suffering. The Eightfold Path is being right in all of these: (a) Views (accept the Buddha's teaching); (b) Thought; (c) Speech; (d) Conduct; (e) Livelihood; (f) Effort (hard work, diligence, and little lapsing); (g) Mindfulness (intent, focus); and (h) Concentration (meditation and other ascetic-like practices, like yoga with meditation, done in Buddhist style).

The term for suffering is "dukkha" or "dhukkha" ("doo kha", like "Count Dookoo"). Some Buddhists insist no translation of "dukkha" is adequate, all translations are misleading, and writers should use "dukkha" until readers get a sense for it not limited by their own language. I get the point but to do that would lead to dozens of foreign technical terms, so I don't. Religion needs to be said in natural language. If religion requires special terms, something is amiss.

In orthodox Buddhism: (A) To end suffering is the central problem and key to all other issues. Once we end suffering, other issues should fall into place or not matter. If we don't end suffering, we can't really get our lives on track. (B) But, to end suffering, we need to end wrong ideas and desire-and-clinging. So, really, to end wrong ideas, desire-and-clinging becomes the key, often displacing suffering. See Part 3 here. (C) But, then, to end wrong ideas, and desire-and-clinging, Buddhism uses methods and ideas, what I call "Aids". Aids displace the need to end desire-and-clinging, and become more important even than the goal of dealing with suffering. So, now, using Aids becomes the real key and the real focus of Buddhism. See below and see Part 7 here.

Even monks and adept lay Buddhists often fall into obsession with suffering, wrong ideas, desire-and-clinging, and methods. This stance raises some contradictions. Notice that the question of worthwhile life is gone, the Wheel is now gone. Yet the Four Truths strongly imply "life is not worthwhile" both before and after defeating suffering, before and after awakening.

Not all Buddhism really does center on the Four Truths even if all Buddhism must begin with them, no more than all Christianity centers on the moral teachings of Jesus. Schools in Buddhism use suffering as

entry to other issues that they think more important. After paying lip service to suffering, schools jump it and forget it. Theravada sticks more to the issue but even it uses suffering as entry to other ideas and to practices. Mahayana puts suffering in the context of a great Dharma system, suffused by joy, in which the issue of suffering is only the first step toward seeing the big system, and in which system the issues of suffering and not worthwhile life disappear.

Introductory books on Buddhism often give background that includes the Wheel and its lesson that life is not worthwhile. Books include supporting ideas such as about Samsara and Maya (we don't see life as it is but instead see it in ways that keep us overly engaged and wrongly engaged). The books quickly move to the Four Truths and books drop the Wheel and "not worthwhile" although they bear on suffering. The books then also effectively drop the problem of suffering to focus on related issues of desire-and-clinging and Aids. The issue of not worthwhile life and its relation to suffering and awakening gets lost. When you read about Buddhism, be aware of these transitions and overcome them.

"Suffering" might once have been a way to face the issue of not worthwhile life but now is not. In theory, suffering is the key problem by itself. In practice, one or more Aids become the main focus.

It would be good to know fully what Siddhartha thought about the Wheel and about not worthwhile life, especially what suffering and the Four Truths implied for worthwhile or not worthwhile life. It would be good to know fully what Siddhartha thought was the fruit of not suffering, and what we should do after we end suffering, especially whether life becomes worthwhile after suffering. It would be good to know if the Buddha thought the end of suffering allowed people to make up their minds whether life is worthwhile or not. It would be good to know if the Buddha thought people who were free from suffering would know what to do with life after suffering, including acting to make life more worthwhile. It would be good to know if the Buddha thought that to end suffering and to awaken were the same. I don't know any of that. Modern Buddhism does not say officially although individual Buddhists and Buddhist schools have their own opinions.

I don't know if the Buddha assumed that people accepted "life is not worthwhile" as background, and he offered the Four Truths as what to do next. I don't know if the Buddha decided the issue of worthwhile or not worthwhile life was not important due to the need to end suffering; if we should deal with suffering first and then the issue of worthwhile or not worthwhile life would take care of itself. I don't know how focus got away entirely from not worthwhile life and got entirely onto suffering, desire, clinging, and Aids. Think about all this yourself.

I think Buddhism strongly implies life is not worthwhile both before and after ending suffering. To end suffering, a person must, at least for a long time, leave ALL normal life. After a man has fully defeated suffering and fully awakened, then he waits to die and he is not reborn. To stop all suffering, and to awaken, you have to be willing to let go of all desire, including the desire for life. To let go of the desire for life, you cannot think life is deeply worthwhile. Schools differ, but mostly a man who has fully defeated suffering and is fully awake cannot lead a normal life. The Buddha did not lead a normal life after ending suffering and awakening. All this goes along with the idea that the Wheel is bad and we should seek release. To end suffering in the Buddhist way does not defeat suffering in the sense that life becomes happy and worthwhile despite the usual problems, as a Christian or Muslim says defeat of evil makes life

worthwhile. Instead, the end of suffering in Buddhism reveals life was not worthwhile before and is not worthwhile even after.

Standing outside Buddhism, ranking its priorities, I think seeing life is not worthwhile is more important than seeing how suffering permeates life – contrary to official doctrine. The issue of suffering is only a way to see that life is not worthwhile. It is an Aid.

Buddhists sense this problem of not-worthwhile-life behind the official problem of suffering and the official Four Truths, and this lurking problem about not worthwhile life makes Buddhists uneasy. People like a religion that says “we can remove suffering” but don’t like a religion that says life is not worthwhile even without suffering. People want the end of suffering to make life abundantly worthwhile. That is a reason why Buddhism after Theravada got away from suffering even if it paid lip service to the issue of suffering. Theravada seems to avoid any implications of the problem of suffering for not worthwhile life. The focus of Theravada only on suffering is, ironically, a way to avoid implications of suffering for not worthwhile life. It is like steadfastly focusing on the pain of a broken leg instead of on the broken leg.

Beginners in Buddhism also sense this problem, sense there is no response to it in official Buddhism, and so get uneasy. When they first hear about the end of suffering, they think that is great and expect the end of suffering to give a much improved life. Most Buddhism is sold in the West through much improved life. Then new Buddhists sense that suffering never really gets solved, and, even if it did get solved, life would not be better. But no Buddhists will tell them for sure. They feel cheated. So they get more anxious, that is, add to their suffering.

Is suffering the most important issue? Does the end of suffering do everything that we need done? Does the end of suffering remove other questions? Does the end of suffering make life that was not worthwhile into worthwhile life? Did the Buddha intend to make the problem of suffering a way to see the problem of not worthwhile life or did he avoid the issue of worthwhile life? Did the Buddha think that ending suffering would turn a not worthwhile life into a worthwhile life, even if the Buddha expected awakened people not to live normal lives and to die away completely? Did the Buddha think ending suffering allows people to see clearly and so make up their own minds about worthwhile or not worthwhile life, what to do in life in general, and the Wheel? Did followers of the Buddha shift attention away from implications of suffering for not worthwhile life, and instead focus on suffering, because they wanted to avoid the bad feelings that are raised by “life is not worthwhile”? Did Buddhism get stuck on suffering and lose its original focus on how to get off the Wheel? Did misguided focus on suffering then lead to the metaphysical speculations of Mahayana and Hinduism? These questions have no sure answer.

I believe the Buddha used “end suffering” as a way, an Aid, to help people think better; and, when people think better, he expected they would see life is not worthwhile, not go back to normal life, and so get off the Wheel. The Buddha did not think to end suffering makes life worthwhile. Thinking better does help us solve other problems and does, ironically, make life more worthwhile even if not fully worthwhile. The Buddha’s followers then focused entirely on suffering and overlooked the issue of not worthwhile life, and Buddhism got stuck on suffering while overlooking the original deeper prior issue of not worthwhile life. I cannot prove my guesses. Buddhists disagree with me.

The basic idea behind suffering and its defeat is not hard to get but is hard to do. The difficulty led to the basic idea being raised to the key, being covered in metaphysical awe, and surrounded by sticky opaque confusing Aids.

The ideas that (a) we suffer because we expect too much and (b) we can get past most suffering, are not only in Buddhism: A person lives long enough, gets knocked around, loses a few, wins fewer, so he-she finally sees with fair clarity, sees what is important and not, chooses important, lets go of not-important, with no regrets, and gets on with simpler better life. The world does not come to an end. Most of life falls into place, and past concerns don't seem important. A person does not have to see with perfect clarity and consistency, only well enough. A person does not end all suffering but does overcome it enough to keep a fairly clear head and to stay mostly in control. Commonly, the newly-wise person gets on with a more moderate life and more effective life.

In what I think was the original Buddhist version, the newly-wise person sees life is not worthwhile and lets go of it all. In one official Theravada view, the newly-wise person sees that all life, even family life, is beset by suffering, and lets go of it all. In another quasi-official Theravada version, the newly-wise person now controls suffering and so goes back to limited but real participation in the world with family life and business. In a Buddhist version common to Theravada and Mahayana, a person is now in total control of suffering and the world, and goes on with anything in life including family, business, career, and politics.

Buddhism asks for a reckoning with life deeper than most of us think possible. Try to imagine that deep reckoning. Buddhism would be valuable if it only led us to this reckoning and had no other benefits. The orthodox view of the reckoning is "mastery of some Aids, total mental clarity and consistency, total control of desire, total end of clinging, and total end of suffering". I think the original answer was "now I see that life is not worthwhile". I think both answers are wrong.

As naturally evolved creatures, we lie to ourselves a horrendous amount, mostly so as to succeed in this life. Our lying brings suffering to ourselves, other people, animals, and nature. The deep reckoning that Buddhism offers can help stop most of the lies, and can help you act better to you, everybody, and all. It cannot make you or the world perfect.

You need to decide what suffering is, what it means to manage suffering, what it means to end suffering in the Buddhist way, if humans can end suffering the Buddhist way, and if that is the same as awakening.

The Irrelevance of a Big System, Big Idea, Gods, Merging, or Anything Similar.

As far as I know, Siddhartha never said there is a Supreme God, Big Principle, or a few gods, and never said there is not. He said they are not relevant. Siddhartha knew that both Brahmanism and the then-incipient-Hinduism had many gods, the gods were important to people, yet belief in gods often misled people, belief in gods was not relevant to awakening, and relying on gods kept people from awakening; but Siddhartha didn't argue against the gods. He ignored them. I don't know if he would say Dharma is not relevant in the same way, and I let Buddhists decide.

If you can manage suffering, decide whether life is worthwhile, and act well, then why do you need a big System, a big Dharma system, Big Principle such as Life, need God, or the gods; and why do you need to

merge with them, serve them, have them guide you through life, or follow them? Do they need that from you? If you can't manage suffering, decide about life, and act well, then what good comes of God, Big Idea, etc, and what good comes from to believe, merge, serve, or follow?

If believing etc. helps you to manage suffering, decide about life, and act well, then fine; but the important part is to manage, decide, and act well. If believing etc. does not lead you to manage, decide, and act well, then you have gained little and given little. Once you are comfortable with managing suffering, have decided about life, and act well, then hopefully you will see that is what counts and you don't need the others. The others can work well as temporary steps but they are not the enduring platform on which to live properly. You can learn to live well without them.

If believe, merge, serve, or follow get in the way of manage, decide, and act well, then stop. If belief in God or a Big Idea leads you to think poorly, such as by seeing the Devil everywhere, you should revise your belief or stop entirely. You should not condone other people who let belief etc. get in the way, such as terrorists. If you can point out the error of their ways without getting you and all-your-neighborhood killed, then you should do so.

This stance that we don't need the gods or a Big Idea leads us immediately to see we don't need magic, superstition, metaphysics, glamour, fortune telling, grand ideologies, and most "isms" including atheism, modern academic fads, and the ism that we don't need isms; this stance shows us that they get in the way and they actively hurt; and this stance leads us to shun them. We help the world when we debunk them. We help individual people when we lead them away from such misleading bad practices – as long as they don't get angry, get more confused, and lash out.

This stance is much like the stance that I offered in Part One of this book where I stressed that we should do the right things for the right reasons (even though we will be assessed in the end).

This attitude toward the gods, Dharma, Big Ideas, merging, etc. is similar to an attitude that developed in Classical Greek philosophy and among Cynics and Stoics. They also promoted managing, deciding, and acting well, and denied the relevance of gods, big ideas, merging, etc. Unfortunately, especially in Neo-Platonism, people reverted to believing in, serving, and merging with the Good and God, but that did not erase the previous insights.

How does my stance differ from atheists who also promote acting well, deny the gods etc, and point out that thinking about the gods etc. often hurts acting well? See the chapter on atheism in this book. Briefly, atheists believe so strongly in Justice and morality that they raise them to the level of the supernatural but they also deny they have allowed the supernatural and they will not see the implications for allowing even a little supernatural. If you believe in acting well, you must accept that your belief in acting well invites the supernatural and it opens the door to belief in God. Belief does not necessarily lead to abuse. Belief in one good God does not require that you believe in angels, demons, ghosts, magic, etc. and it does not require you to do bad things. It should require rationality and good behavior. Atheists believe we cannot think well until we erase the idea of God from our minds and so they waste a lot of time and effort fighting an idea that has a tenacious evolved basis. I believe we can think well if we accept God and even if our ideas have an evolved basis and are not fully accurate.

How does Buddhism differ from atheism if Buddhism also stresses the importance of acting well and it fears that focus on gods or big ideas leads to confusion and bad acts? Like all Dharma-based systems, Buddhism accepts intrinsic morality. Dharma is supernatural even if it is known only through its natural effects. Unlike atheism, Buddhism does not deny the gods, or their ties to morality, it only says the gods are ultimately irrelevant to the quest to manage suffering etc. and are ultimately irrelevant when you have managed suffering etc, and have learned to think well. You need not waste time and need not confuse yourself by arguing against gods. To focus on that leads to confusion, error, waste, and bad acts. When you have managed suffering, then you can speculate, if you want. I think Siddhartha thought most people wouldn't care much about the gods and Big Ideas after learning to manage suffering. Buddhism allows in only as much supernatural as it needs for intrinsic morality and cause-and-effect, and then it disdains and so effectively banishes all the rest.

Why do I accept the supernatural? Again, see the chapter on atheism. I accept that morality allows the supernatural and accept that even this small amount of the supernatural through morality leads naturally to thinking about God. God ties it all together well without leading to bad ideas or bad behavior. I accept God even though the basis for the idea of God evolved. A general drift toward morality and acting well is not enough. We need some specific ideas, and those specific ideas have to serve as the basis for good institutions. We got them from Jesus. Jesus believed in God and his ideas are rooted in his belief. Now that we have them already, we can derive Jesus' ideas without God but that trick seems artificial and false. We might as well respect his belief in God when we respect his ideas even if we don't adopt formal Christianity and we don't believe Jesus is God. I believe in his ideas and his God. Stressing morality while denying the supernatural, and accepting the supernatural without seeing the implications, especially for a mind behind it all (God), is contradictory enough to lead to confusion, errors, waste, and bad acts. I think I, and other people, think better and act better because we accept the supernatural and believe in God – but not because belief in God scares us – that would be worse.

I think Buddhists would say much the same about the Dharma. You think and act worse if you deny it and think and act better if you accept it and try to go along with it.

Also close to Siddhartha's stance about not needing gods etc. is the stance that we don't have to believe Jesus is God to follow him. We don't have to decide whether he is God or whether he rose from the dead. His divinity is ultimately irrelevant to his moral message. If his moral message does not stand on its own then his divinity will not make it do so; and, if his moral message does stand on his own, we should follow it whether he is God or only human. It helps to give the matter hard thought and it helps to decide; but you don't have to decide; and, if stress from deciding makes you confused and act badly, then don't. Part of my love for Buddhism comes from this overlap in stance.

Does my stance conflict with Buddhism? Yes. I do not seek perfect harmony between my ideas and Buddhist theory. I am more interested in how well Buddhists act, and, in that, they do well. Accepting the idea of God can help us think clearly as Buddhists wish to think clearly and to act well as Buddhists wish to act well. Accepting God can help avoid "mental defilements" such as confusing success in an Aid with awakening, overlooking the issue of worthwhile life, and stressing total victory over suffering rather than merely managing it.

Is there a link between accepting the supernatural (in my case, through goodness) and seeing that life is worthwhile? I think so. Is there a link between avoiding the supernatural and avoiding the question of whether life is worthwhile? I think so too. Any link is not cut-and-dried; for example, agnostics avoid making up their minds about the supernatural yet likely most think life is worthwhile (agnostics seem not aware that stressing goodness implies the supernatural). Here it is not worth going deeper.

Buddhists need to consider what it means to live in a Dharma system in which the Dharma is intrinsically moral. What kind of supernatural is the Dharma? What do the goodness and the supernatural status of the Dharma imply for worthwhile life and suffering? What does Buddhist stress on goodness imply for any supernatural? Does even that little bit of supernatural open the door to God as long as the idea of God is not abused? Do we need to be honest about morality and the supernatural, if being honest about morality and the supernatural leads to better thinking, and not being honest leads to worse thinking?

Put Theravada, Aristotle, Cynics, Stoics, some Taoism, Zen, and Confucius all in one group as holding the stance described above about the irrelevance of gods, big ideas, etc. to acting well and thinking well. Put Mahayana, Hinduism, some Taoism, most Confucianism, atheism, and nearly all theism in another group that requires gods, big ideas, devotion, some merging, etc. If I could not have my stance, and I had to choose between groups, I would quickly choose Theravada, etc. I feel no wavering. I love the stance of original Buddhism that we don't need the gods, magic, superstition, or a big idea. It makes Buddhism hugely charming.

Buddhist Aids, with some Assessment.

Buddhist Aids include practices such as meditation and chanting, and include ideas such as Dharma, karma, cause-and-effect, dependent origination, nothing is permanent (what begins also ends), confusion (mental "defilements"), a mind free from defilements (clear consistent thinking), empty mind, compassion, cooling, non-self, morality, bodhisattva, suffering, stickiness, clinging, desire, letting go, the Middle Path, the self is not an enduring transcendent integrated soul, Emptiness, Buddha Mind, and Joy. I consider all the Four Truths to be Aids. Aids have a place in Buddhism similar to Christian ideas and practices such as prayer, liturgy, sacraments, Grace, God's Will, Works, Justification, Heaven, Salvation, Incarnation, and Crucifixion. Buddhist Aids tend to be more rational. Most schools of Buddhism have similar Aids but differ in which Aids they stress. See Part 7 of this chapter.

Most thought and effort by Buddhists is in Aids rather than directly on suffering or awakening, as most thought and effort by Christians is in church, prayer meetings, liturgy, Heaven, works, cultivating faith, etc. rather than directly on doing what Jesus asked, on doing the right things for the right reasons.

You do not need any Aid to awaken if you can simply see life is not worthwhile or is beset by suffering, and you can defeat desire-and-clinging. Aids can help us to see how the world works, and that helps us to see life is not worthwhile or is beset by suffering. Still, you do not need any Aid if you can simply see that life is worthwhile. I am not sure if that stance is orthodox Buddhist doctrine. If, in contrast, you see directly that life is worthwhile, you can still use Aids to help you see better how the world works and how to make the world more worthwhile for yourself, other people, and nature.

Buddhist Aids can help much but they also are a great danger. People get lost in an Aid as if it were the real religion, thus miss the real idea, hurt self, and hurt others. They mistake means for end. Sublime appealing nonsense from contradictions in Dharma mixes with Aids to make both even more dangerous. Buddhist Aids now cause more harm than help much as do ideas and practices in Christianity. (This is how Protestants see Roman Catholic practices such as the Rosary, devotion to Mary, and sacraments. This is how Roman Catholics see Protestant ideas such as a personal relation with Jesus, knowing the exact moment of personal Salvation, seeking Grace, and obsession with Baptism.)

I think the idea of suffering and of overcoming suffering was originally an Aid but got raised to the status of the main point, and this confusion causes damage.

Despite any danger, here are a few good Aids that everyone should know:

(1) Aristotle in Greece lived about 150 years after the Buddha. Both extolled the value of the Middle Way or Middle Path. As Americans have learned since the 1970s, usually extremes are wrong no matter how right they seem; the best way is the middle; we must compromise in real life; and, without the middle, we stall, bite throats, and die. Seeking the middle does not mean you compromise goodness away. Uptight moralists are as bad as self-indulgent immoralists that use relativism as a tool. Terrorists are committed to extremes and are dead wrong. The real Middle Way requires experience, thought, and heroic effort more than any extreme. The Buddha's idea of the limited self is an example of the Middle Way.

(2, 3, 4) Cause and Effect, Dependent Origination, Impermanence: Almost everything that is, is because of causes (the only exceptions are Dharma, maybe awakening, and maybe some free will (free choice)). Almost everything also has effects. Almost everything is both effect and cause. Almost nothing makes itself, causes itself to be. Everything depends on other things to come into being and to stay in being. As long as its supporting causes keep it going, it is; when they stop, it stops. "Whatever has a beginning has an end". Everything has a beginning except Dharma, so everything ends except Dharma, including souls and the world. Almost everything comes from several causes and effects, from a nexus; and everything goes away when its nexus goes away. Think of rain-and-wind storms, fog, gardens, forests, prosperity, conflict, tantrums, love, family, your country, your religion, or scientific research. Cause and effect also hold sway over our self, mind, ideas, and attitudes. We feel pain, and we suffer, because of causes. We can manage pain and suffering partly by managing the causes of conditions and partly by managing the causes of attitudes. We make spiritual progress if we put ourselves in situations conducive to it, including those that affect ideas and attitudes. We should avoid situations that hurt progress or lead us backwards. We can adjust causes so we have fewer bad things to cling to and we are less likely to cling in bad ways.

(Light affects our eyes to help cause the effect of seeing red. So the mix of light, eyes, brain, and mind, causes the effect of seeing red. The origination of seeing red depends on the prior origination of light, eyes, brain, and mind. When causes of seeing red are gone, then seeing red is over too. All the same is true of you-as-a-being-person, of your mind and its contents including feelings, and of your suffering.)

We cannot change the world simply by changing our attitude; we cannot take away all suffering simply by ignoring it or "rising above" it. We do not unilaterally control the world. The idea that we control the world through our attitude ignores the totality of cause and effect, dependent origination, and impermanence. It

is a common mistake in Buddhism. I think some texts are clear that it is a mistake and caution against it but I do not cite examples.

We do have enough free choice so we can work toward goals and succeed. We work with the world toward goals. Buddhism does not solve the problems of evil or free will anymore than any other system but it does well enough and does better than most.

These ideas are well-known in Buddhism and can help us avoid trouble:

(A) The Buddha insisted we think for ourselves and make up our own minds. We should accept nothing on authority alone, not even his authority. If we do not think out an issue for ourselves then we will not believe conclusions and will not live them. The Buddha would understand people who think it is better to be honest atheists than to believe in God from fear of Hell, hope of Heaven, or social pressure; or to be honest rascals than to force sweet goodness. You can never be bad. The Buddha liked logic, reasons, insight, and argument. Not all people are smart enough, think fast enough, or have the aptitude, to think out all of life and religion from scratch. We have to rely on some authorities. That is alright. Do the best you can. Back up if something feels wrong. Learn from people who do think well. That I should make up my own mind and I can disagree with the Buddha gave me in comfort in writing.

(B) “That topic does not lead to edification”. The Buddha disliked questions about heaven, hell, salvation, spiritual power, angels, demons, luck, etc. because they did not help people see how the world works and did not help people make progress. They are beside the point, distractions, wastes of energy, and traps. Keep to the point, which is to end suffering and get off the Wheel. Don’t confuse yourself and others by secretly lusting after some vain supposedly smart triumph.

Buddhism looks at the world with what we now call a “scientific attitude” or “rational attitude”. It explains spirit and spirituality rationally. It explains the mind scientifically. Buddhism accepts that we choose and change, so it is not reductionist like simplistic materialism. It is not pop psych. Buddhism avoids magic, metaphysics, empty ritual, glamour, mysticism, spiritualism, and “airy fairy”. Those are not useful and can be bad traps. I doubt the Buddha would enjoy most “New Age”. Good Taoism and good Zen are similar to Buddhism but are not scientific in attitude.

In Greece, about the time the Buddha explained his stance, science, logic, math, and philosophy arose. Ideas of the Buddha did not come from Greece or vice versa. Good ideas can develop independently. This parallel is a reason why Buddhism gets along well with modern science.

Mixing “Think for Yourself”, “You are Responsible”, and “No Gods, Big Systems, or Big Ideas”.

When you think for yourself, you are responsible for yourself. You don’t need big ideas etc., and they get in the way of self-responsibility. Even if you don’t think for yourself, you are responsible for yourself, your ideas, your acts, and what flows out of your acts – but that is another topic.

When you add “no gods, big systems, or big ideas” to the fact that people are responsible for themselves, then you see that people, we, are responsible for nearly all the badness and evil of the world. The Devil, Mara, Chance, Nature, Science, etc. are not responsible. We are. No excuses. “The government” is not

responsible because, in the democratic world, we are the government. We can put some blame on the economy because it runs partly on its own apart from us; but, even so, if we wished, we could figure out the situation and do something. We can put part of the blame on crazy groups such as terrorists, bigots, and political idiots; but, again, even there, we could figure it out and do something about it.

Buddhism certainly makes clear that people are responsible for their own attitudes and “hang-ups” but it does not always stress that humans are responsible for big outside problems. Buddhism does stress that we should not use gods, systems, etc. as excuses. I stress this logical implication of Buddhism because it goes along with what I said in Part One of this book and I like backup. We do the damage and we are the only ones that can fix the problems. We cannot blame god, the devil, our religion, another religion, religion in general, secularism, or atheism.

Of course, humans can also take credit for much good, and I am happy with that as well. On the small scale of interpersonal relations, business, and doing our job, usually we do more good than harm.

What a Buddhist Awakens to, with Some Assessment.

Oddly, what happens after the defeat of suffering is not clear, and what a person awakens to is not clear. The lack of clarity in each area reinforces the other, and the confusion makes a difference. I deliberately omit considering whether awakening is conditioned, that is, caused, and whether it is chosen.

(1) As far as I can tell, officially: To end suffering is to awaken; and to awaken is to end suffering. That is it. Nothing else is needed. All Buddhists have to deal with this identity between not suffering and waking up in some way, even if they think awakening requires more than simply the end of suffering.

I think orthodox Theravada Buddhism says that to-awaken and to-fully-defeat-all-suffering are closely tied or identical. If you awaken, you defeat suffering, and vice versa. To awaken this way, you do not have to deal with the question of the Wheel or the question of not worthwhile life.

I am not sure if to defeat all suffering automatically results in your mind becoming active in a way that it could not be active before. I can imagine defeating all suffering and still not being awake but that seems odd. So it seems reasonable to say that to defeat all suffering awakens the mind.

I can easily imagine having an active awakened mind and yet not defeating all suffering. I do not mean merely pain, I mean suffering. So, even if defeating all suffering would awaken the mind, we do not have to defeat all suffering to awaken the mind. I am not sure Buddhists would count this awakening as true Buddhist awakening but I count it as awakening enough.

I do not believe we can defeat all suffering, for various reasons, but mostly because we evolved and our evolutionary history set some limits for us. If we cannot defeat all suffering, then we cannot awaken in the stereotypical Buddhist way. Yet some people do seem to awaken enough. Buddhists need to think about this result. Luckily for me, I think we can awaken enough without totally defeating all suffering.

(2) Some Buddhists say: When you end suffering, you awaken; then you can decide about life and figure out what to do; you can decide to be a regular person again if you wish, even if the Buddha didn't.

Whether life is worthwhile or not does not play a role in scenario (1) or (2). The second version is not far from the official orthodox version but I can't say if the two are the same. It depends on what you may do after you awaken. You may not do just anything.

(3) Some Buddhists, especially Mahayanists, say: When you awaken, you see you did have to master suffering but suffering is not really that important; the great Dharma system matters. Really, you awaken to the great Dharma system. Some Mahayanists continue: After you can handle suffering, then you can do whatever you wish; likely you will wish for a successful human life; in pursuing that, you also will help the great Dharma system much like a deer, tiger, or buffalo.

(4) Some Buddhists say that mastery of desire-and-clinging is waking up and vice versa.

(5) Some Buddhists continue: To stop suffering and defeat desire, we need to stop clinging to the world. People have many useless or harmful desires, and people cling, because they do not see clearly, they are confused; their minds are "defiled". To stop desire and clinging, we need to see consistently and clearly. If we see clearly and consistently, we will stop clinging, stop useless and harmful desires, and stop suffering. Here the focus is on getting rid of mental defilements and so seeing consistently and clearly. So, to see clearly and consistently, not cling, not have useless desires, and not suffer are waking up; and waking up is to see clearly and consistently, not cling, not have useless desires, and so not suffer. The exact relations between not clinging, not having useless desires, seeing clearly, getting rid of mental defilements, and waking up are not clear. It is not clear if you can have one without others, or which causes which.

(6) In practice, most Buddhism says that mastery of an Aid, such as meditation or the theory of cause-and-effect, is waking up, and vice versa. (a) We should use Buddhist Aids to understand suffering and to awaken, (b) and-or we cannot awaken unless we are adept in some Aids, (c) and-or we will become adept in some Aids when we do awaken, (d) and-or to awaken and to become adept in some Aids is the same thing. For example, if you fully know the idea of impermanence or are fully adept at meditation, then you are awake, and vice versa. I am not sure about official dogma for relations between Aids and awakening. Buddhists might aim to awaken by use of Aids, or might not think that far ahead and simply practice Aids because the Aids are meritorious in themselves. The large majority of Buddhist practice is not done not through thinking about suffering or about worthwhile life but through Aids.

(7) In some Theravada, but mostly in Mahayana, especially Zen, Buddhists say to appreciate Emptiness, Buddha Mind, or Empty Mind (Free Mind, "mind of a baby") is to wake up, and vice versa. You came from Emptiness or Mind, you are connected to that even if you don't know it, you will return to that, and likely you will issue forth again. I consider all these ideas mere Aids, and dangerous. You will meet them again often if you read more about Buddhism.

(8) I am not clear on this point. Buddhists sometimes talk about awakening, and the end of suffering, as if it (they) means to be suffused with Dharma, like mystics feel suffused with God, Holy Spirit, or something similar. I am not sure how this view differs from (7). I do have mystic feelings but still I am not sure how Buddhists feel suffusion. Buddhists can talk as if they feel suffused by Dharma even when they are not fully awake or suffering is not fully ended, much as some Christians are "taken up in the Spirit" even when

they are still sinners. Intellectual Buddhists often disdain such feelings but there is precedent for them in the sutras, and even intellectual Buddhists, and monks, feel a bit happy with themselves when they have the experiences.

(+) Sometimes Buddhists say that awakening is to see the importance of good behavior, of compassion, promoting goodness and avoiding badness, and doing your duty. Most people are so numb to their own selfishness that to see we should act better is life-changing, an awakening. Likely, a person does need to awaken this way before he-she can awaken in the ways listed above. There is precedent in the sutras for waking up as moral waking up. Moral waking up might lead quickly to one of the other ways of waking up listed above. I put simple decency, honor, the Golden Rule, and being a useful person, in the foundation of what I wish people to wake up to; see Part One of this book. But, in Buddhism, moral awakening is not the key central important waking up that the Buddha had in mind and that most Buddhist adepts have in mind. Something more is needed. What? Why?

I dislike all the numbered options, and disagree that: suffering is the pivot of life, the defeat of suffering is the first goal of life, we need to end suffering to think clearly enough, and awakening is the same as to end suffering. Some schools substitute other ideas, such as Empty Mind or Buddha Mind, for “end suffering”. Those other ideas are supposed to be the same as awakening. I deny those versions as well. I am not interested in setting what awakening is for Buddhism; I am interested in making up my own mind about awakening, managing suffering, and worthwhile life.

I think: Originally, Buddhists learned life has suffering and that desire-and-clinging make suffering and-or add to suffering. The suffering from desire-and-clinging likely is more than innate suffering and it is what matters. Suffering-apart-from-desire-and-clinging, desire-and-clinging, and suffering-due-to-desire-and-clinging all cloud our minds. After a Buddhist has reduced suffering to a manageable level, he-she can think more clearly. When he-she can think more clearly, he-she can decide if life is worthwhile. Then he-she awakens to: (a) Life is not worthwhile before and after waking up. (b) We can stop the bad effects of not-worthy life simply by thinking more clearly, seeing that life is not worthwhile, and not desiring-and-clinging. (c) We cannot make life worthwhile by not desiring-and-clinging or by waking up. (d) We should always act morally. Full waking up comes in seeing life is not worthwhile. I explain later how not desire-and-clinging goes with seeing that life is not worthwhile. When a Buddhist sees all this, he-she waits calmly to die and is not reborn on the Wheel. Seeing the roles of desire-and-clinging and suffering was a step on the path to waking up; it is not waking up itself. The idea of suffering originally was an Aid.

(If you think life is not worthwhile, likely you suffer; so sometimes people think that to end suffering also means automatically to solve the problem of worthwhile life and make life worthwhile. It is a clever trick but does not hold up. To see life is not worthwhile is not necessarily to end suffering. To end suffering does not mean also to solve the problem of worthwhile life and to make life worthwhile. We do not end suffering so as to make life worthwhile. Even after suffering, the issue of worthwhile life remains. The question of worthwhile should be decided before dealing with suffering.)

You should decide what Buddhists wake up to and what happens then. Buddhists should give people a clear idea of what they wake up to and what happens. Buddhists should do this even if words cannot get across the fullness of awakening and even if words mislead. Getting some clarity is worth the risk. You

should be ready to ask Buddhists what they awaken to and what happens. Ask about relations between awakening, suffering, and Aids.

Not being clear about what we awaken to is a case of the “hole in the center” that I described in sections on “systems that eat the world” in chapters on issues. Other sources contribute to the hole in the center. Below I describe other sources and the results of having a hole in the center.

Hopefully Typical Buddhist Behavior.

Ideally, when a person feels fully that he-she follows Jesus, he-she should love neighbors and treat them better even than him-herself. That rarely happens. Instead, what Christians do depends on their local culture (English Christians act differently than Spanish Christians); particular Christianity (Calvinists act differently than followers of Saint Francis); historical, economic, and social situation (English Christians in 1000 AD acted differently than English Christians in 1950 AD); and on Christianity in general (Christians really do try to follow the Golden Rule, follow “applies equally”, and build good institutions). It is almost impossible to separate out distinct contributions. The same is true of Buddhism, so I don’t try. I give a few ideas of how pretty-good-but-not-ideal Buddhists might act. Enough real Buddhists act well enough to add to Buddhist charm.

After you take seriously that life is not worthwhile or suffering besets life, and before you awaken, what do you do or don’t do? You don’t indulge. You don’t seek mere pleasures. The antidote to suffering and to “not worthwhile life” is not kicks. You don’t hurt any person, any animal, or nature. You also don’t deny yourself reasonable human joys as long as you don’t get them in a bad way. You don’t add to suffering, yours, of anyone else, of any animal, any community, or nature. You don’t break the law. You don’t break morality. You don’t act above anyone or above nature. You don’t act “above it all”. You don’t act haughty, a spiritual lord. You don’t act with feigned indifference as if immune to human feelings, as if you were in total control. You don’t treat other people as animals because they have not achieved your lofty sensibilities. You do not seek to make or to store “merit points” or to give them to others. You do not support divination, mysticism, superstition, magic, glamour, irrationality, or pointless metaphysics. You don’t go against other religions or other believers without strong cause.

You do have a sense of other people and other beings, as in the Upanishads and Jainism. You act with compassion, as in the Upanishads and Jainism. You act like the Buddha acted in his relations with other people, government, and nature. You try to ease all suffering. You explain and educate without holding yourself above. You contribute to community and good government when it does more good than harm. You help religious institutions such as temples and monks. You help educational and medical institutions. You reduce your belief in magic, mysticism, superstition, and metaphysics. You try to be gracious, calm, patient, and accepting, again without holding yourself above. You think how to be a good citizen and then you actually do it. You learn from others. You learn how to think, reason, and assess. You may engage in ardent discussion about religious ideas with Buddhists and non-Buddhists as long as you don’t cling to such discussion. You don’t live a normal successful life because your greater sense of morality and of others prevents you from full normal competition and full success.

What do you do after you awaken fully? That is not clear. Mostly you do and don’t do as above although you limit the scope of your public action. You can try to emulate awakened people but Buddhism has not

had many clear-cut cases of real awakened people, other than the Buddha, to use for examples, and few people expect to be just like the Buddha. You do prepare to die and to go away completely. You cannot live a normal life, and mostly you shouldn't want to.

If all this sounds like good Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Confucianism, it should. This is what people stress when they see similarities between religions. It is definitely worth appreciating this similarity as deeply as you can for as long as you can. It also implies that you don't need to wake up in the Buddhist way or appreciate suffering in the Buddhist way to act well. Taoism is a bit distinct but the difference is not very important here.

Two differences between Christianity versus the religions that came out of India (Theravada, Mahayana, and Hinduism): (1) Indian religions stress abstract Compassion while Christianity stresses specific rules such as the Golden Rule and "applies equally", and (2) Christianity developed specific institutions to carry out its ideas. I defer more on this issue to the chapter on Hinduism.

Brief Assessment, Mostly on Worthwhile.

It is important to make up your mind whether life is worthwhile or not regardless of what you think about suffering and regardless of your interest in any Buddhist Aid.

I decided life is worthwhile. I disagree that life is not worthwhile. Nearly each life is worthwhile and life in general is worthwhile. Some lives are so painful or bad they are not worthwhile but that does not thwart my general assessment. I can manage suffering well enough and I can think clearly enough. I am not perfect at either task. I don't have to be. I get better sometimes. I appreciate help.

Life is worthwhile just because it is. God or the Dharma might have made life worthwhile but that doesn't matter. What matters is that life is worthwhile regardless of how it got that way.

We evolved to think life is worthwhile whether it is or not - but life is worthwhile anyway. We cannot use evolution to discount or credit the idea that life is worthwhile or to discount or credit alternatives. We have to judge the idea on its own merits, and, on that basis, I judge that life is worthwhile.

Life is worthwhile not because of any system. Life is worthwhile not because we will be reborn, and, on average, life in the system is good. This life is worthwhile not because it gives us the chance to awaken and get off the Wheel.

Look at this life right now for what it is. Decide about that.

You do not have to judge the universe, or anything in it, to decide if life is worthwhile. You do not have to avoid judging the universe, or anything in it, to decide. You do not have to avoid moral, social, political, gender, religious, or ethnic judgment to see whether life is worthwhile.

The universe can be dismal or great, or you might not be able to judge whether the universe is dismal or great, and life can still be worthwhile. You can be celibate, shy, gregarious, sad, in pain, have children or not, succeed or fail, and life is still worthwhile. Life as a whole is worthwhile even if no particular activity,

relation, cause, person, institution, or thing in life is worthwhile on its own. Despite being able to manage suffering, still sometimes you will fail, and yet still think life is worthwhile - and life is worthwhile is despite your failure and despite what others will take as your rationalization.

My view is not the same as "Say 'yes' to LIFE". It is not New England Transcendentalism, westernized Jainism, westernized Hinduism, New Age, or American booster-ism.

Rather than think with perfect clarity and consistency, we should strive to think well enough. Rather than fully overcome desire, clinging, and suffering, we strive to manage them. This approach is more in line with real naturally evolved people than is ideal Buddhism. This approach goes with the morality of both Jesus and Siddhartha. It allows us to use ideals without letting ideals thwart real acts and their benefits. It is on the Middle Path. See Part One of this book.

You do not need a Big Idea, Big System, or Big God to decide whether life is worthwhile and in particular you do not need a Big Idea, System, or God to decide that life is worthwhile. They do not automatically make life worthwhile and the lack of them does not automatically make life not worthwhile. If you decide they do not exist and-or are not important, the lack does not automatically make life not worthwhile. Your life can be worthwhile with no system of Dharma, karma, Wisdom, or God. Those things can embellish a worthwhile life and can give it direction but they are not necessary.

Decency and doing the right things for the right reasons are part of what makes life worthwhile but they alone do not make life worthwhile and the lack of them alone does not have to make life not worthwhile. Fighting for them can make life more worthwhile but not to fight for them does not have to make life not worthwhile. Some people don't have it in them to fight, the meek, but that does not mean their lives are not worthwhile. I think: To love decency and do the right things for the right reasons helps greatly to keep our hearts-and-minds focused on worthwhile life; and God helps us to love decency and to do the right things for the right reasons, helps us to see life is worthwhile, and helps us to make it so. Simple decency, simple rightness, God, and worthwhile life all go together for me.

Some people, without God, a Big Idea or Big system, get lost and despair. If they cannot give up those things, as I cannot give up God, that is fine, but the people have to recognize that life can be worthwhile just because it is. Ironically, the insight makes God, Idea, and System even better.

You can have a worthwhile life if you are an eternal soul-self (atman). You can have a worthwhile life if you are not an eternal soul-self but are merely a temporary self (an-atman). You can have a worthwhile life whatever God decides to do with you after you die. You can have a worthwhile life if God assess you after you die. You can have a worthwhile life if God does not assess you after you die. You do not need to be an eternal soul-self, a temporary self, be judged by God, not be judged by God, be reborn at God's grace, or vanish entirely after God assesses you, to have a worthwhile life or to make up your mind if life is worthwhile.

All these situations are irrelevant to a choice about worthwhile life. So, make up your own mind, adopt ideas accordingly, and act accordingly.

You should think about what conditions might make life not worthwhile. Then think what your ideas show about how you see worthwhile life.

(One logical option is to think life is not worthwhile but to do the right things for the right reasons, and-or act as you should, and-or do your duty, and-or do what God wishes, and-or do God's (Dharma's) work, anyway. Here is not where to go into that option. It is odd to think a person could do the right things for the right reasons etc. and not think life is worthwhile, even if the world stinks. Some Christians seem to screw themselves up into something like this stance but often it is a dour cover, as in "The Scarlet Letter" and other critiques. Some Buddhists say this is the right stance but they don't really believe it and they are not as dour as Christians.)

Siddhartha the Buddha wished people to give up depending on gods, systems, and big ideas. I do not know if he avoided the issue of worthwhile life and focused on suffering so as to get people to give up depending wrongly on gods, systems, and ideas. I strongly suspect so. If so, Siddhartha got confused and he threw out the baby with the bath water. To grasp worthwhile life, people do tend strongly to err by misusing gods, systems, and big ideas. But it is possible to handle the question of worthwhile life and not to fall into the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas, especially if we are warned in advance and we monitor our minds along the way. That is a better path than focusing on suffering so as to avoid the issue of worthwhile life so as to avoid the traps of gods, systems, and big ideas. If Siddhartha the Buddha had stayed focused also on worthwhile life, and did not look primarily in terms of suffering, he could have seen how to find worthwhile life without also falling into the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas. Buddhists do not like me to imply that Siddhartha was imperfect. (In fact, avoiding the issue of worthwhile life to concentrate on suffering opened the door wide for Mahayana and Hinduism which brought with them, in many-fold, the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas. If Siddhartha had foreseen this turn, I am not sure he would have avoided the issue of worthwhile life to focus entirely on suffering.)

Although I disagree (a) with the basic stance of the Buddha that life is not worthwhile; (b) with the basic stance of Buddhism that life is about defeating suffering; and (c) with the idea that we must end suffering to find a worthwhile life; still (d) I learned hugely from the Buddha, from his issues, methods, and from Buddhism. If Siddhartha intended his ideas to help us to more freedom so we could decide for ourselves, then, in my case, he succeeded. Other thinkers helped too.

Buddhists need to ask if their approach as-a-whole implies that life is not worthwhile. What are the roles of suffering and overcoming suffering in not worthwhile life or worthwhile life? Buddhists need to consider if they wish to stay with the view that life is worthwhile or they should change it. Mahayana and Hinduism changed this view quite a bit. Modern Theravada in practice also changes it quite a bit.

I doubt Buddhists can take care of suffering until they have at least a strong working conviction that life is worthwhile or not. How they see suffering and handle suffering depends on that choice.

In fact, nearly all Buddhists, including the large majority of monks and adept lay people, think their own lives, and life in general, is worthwhile. They find meaning and satisfaction in life just as other people do. They do not seem to see or to accept that the Buddhist emphasis on suffering and Buddhist view of what happens after awakening strongly imply life is not worthwhile. They accept the Wheel and its implications as part of Buddhist history and as background but then ignore it. They avoid the question. Some monks

and lay people assume that, by following Buddhist practice, they are justified, or will be justified, and so they do not have to face the issue of worthwhile life. This approach is a bit hypocritical but not more so than contradictions in other religions such as Free Will versus Grace in Christianity. Not dealing with the issue of worthwhile life, acting as if life worthwhile, but following doctrine that strongly implies life is not worthwhile, does put a contradiction deep in Buddhism. For myself and my curiosity, I wish adept monks and lay people would face the issue of worthwhile life, and face the implication of the Four Truths for worthwhile life, and would come up with Buddhist ideas. This resolution might not be possible as long as Buddhists hold to standard interpretation of the Four Truths.

If Buddhists decide life is worthwhile, they can use many parts of Buddhism to make life better and more worthwhile for self, all people, and nature. Buddhists do who stress the common morality that Buddhism shares with major religions, ideals such as not being selfish and the Middle Path, already do that. It is what Buddhists do when they seek Buddhist reasons for ideals such as gender equality, democracy, fair economies, justice, diversity, education, and science.

In my view, what happens after we see that life is worthwhile? What then? What do we awaken to and what do we do? See Part One of this book. If we decide that life is worthwhile, regardless of Buddhist teaching, because of Buddhist teaching, before awakening, or after awakening, then we have to decide what to do. I think we are led strongly to something like the ideas that I gave in Part One. Buddhism is congenial with the ideas of Part One, especially if we ignore God. But I think we are not led inevitably to the ideas of Part One, so here is not the place to discuss how strongly we are led to those ideas and to discuss relations of Buddhism, awakening, and worthwhile life to those ideas.

Buddhists tend to say that, after awakening, then “We are free and we can do whatever we want as long as it is moral, including going back to the farm, market, town, family life, sex life, and political life where we can use ourselves as examples of the Dharma”. That is not what the Buddha did and not what other awakened Buddhists did. So the saying amounts to a superficial defense of normal competitive life with striving for success, and it avoids deep real issues. Buddhists are not clear how awakened people should act, and this lack of clarity has caused some problems.

Buddhism has ethics like the ethics in other major religions including Christianity. Buddhists know right from wrong. They respect moral people. Buddhism knows the Golden Rule, “applies equally”, rule of law, citizenship in democracy, pro-active helping, and community responsibility. It did not stress them in the past and did not develop them until recently. The Buddhist stress on suffering does not promote the good ideas and, I think, retards the development and appreciation of them. Still, Buddhists now do know the value of the ideas and try to make good modern states based on them. Buddhists are moral.

Despite the fun, insights, and benefit from Buddhist Aids, all that we could ever gain from Buddhist Aids, including the idea of suffering as an Aid, is little compared to what we gain from deciding whether life is worthwhile. You are better off to give up Aids entirely if they get in the way of deciding the issue. Careful use of Aids can help you to decide but there is so much danger in Aids that you must be ready to give them up if you begin to lose your way.

Awakening makes sense as a strong version of “coming to my senses” but not as the big boom that most Buddhists, even monks, think of. That idea of awakening causes as much harm as the idea of salvation

does in Christianity, Islam, and some Mahayana, and Hinduism. You are better off not thinking of that kind of awakening at all but instead simply working to be a better person.

Other religions have problems with worthwhile life and try to avoid the problems. In Christianity, we get abundant life once we are saved by Jesus; so what did we have before? Do people who are not saved really have a worthwhile life? Christians don't treat them as if they did. In Islam, life is worthwhile after you submit to Allah and to the local Muslim clerics. Was life worthwhile before? Do non-Muslim infidels have a worthwhile life? Do people who will not go to Muslim heaven have a worthwhile life? Do women have a worthwhile life? In both Islam and Christianity, is life a gift from God and so worthwhile before you are saved? In Hinduism and Mahayana, in theory, people have worthwhile lives because they are part of a system and only for that reason; in theory, because everybody is part of the system, everybody has a worthwhile life; but the people high in the system, the ones who should know better, certainly don't treat the low people as if low lives are worthwhile. Do Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Sunnis, Shiites, Buddhists, Hindus, Taoists, and Confucians all live equally worthwhile lives?

Taoism, and some Zen, insists life is worthwhile, especially if we find the Tao and learn how to live along with it. Taoists do not dream of overcoming suffering; they do manage suffering well without awakening in the Buddhist way; in some Taoist stories, Taoists live well despite suffering and they do not have to end suffering to live well; you do not have to defeat suffering to live in accord with the Tao and to have a worthwhile life; and no Taoist ever enjoys suffering. Taoists do not imagine forcing thought to conform to clarity, consistency, and purity; yet they think well enough. Except for a few odd individuals, Taoists do not think any single normal person can wake up to know the full Tao but are happy with insights that allow them to go with the Tao and enjoy life. My view is similar to Taoism and Zen but is not exactly like either. I like the blend of Taoism and Buddhism that Zen tried to make.

Brief Assessment Continued: Human Nature and Modern Life.

Evolved humans are by nature imperfect. We see the world with bias, and we lie even to ourselves. We desire and cling. We cannot think with perfect clarity and consistency. We cannot be simply whole and fully integrated. We cannot be perfectly moral. We can get better and likely can get good enough.

All religions go against evolved human nature somewhat. At the least, they ask us to be more moral than we are comfortable with, and more than we can usually do. Sometimes they ask a lot, far more than any evolved being could give. Few of us can love enemies or even love our neighbors a little bit, let alone as much as we love ourselves.

To end suffering, Buddhism asks for a lot from evolved people. Buddhism wants to use nature to negate nature or, at least, overcome it. To end all desire and clinging is beyond us. People cannot stop suffering as Buddhism wishes them to stop. Buddhists had to reinterpret original ideas from Siddhartha quite a bit to make a version to serve as the basis for the daily life of peasants, merchants, soldiers, and politicians. Buddhists have to think if the original ideas of Siddhartha are reasonable. Buddhists have to think if pure Buddhism, the ideas of Siddhartha, alone can serve as the basis for normal life for evolved humans in any era but mostly in modern times. I doubt it.

All major religions handle the problem of rising above evolved human nature by saying obvious evolved flawed human nature is not our real nature. By following a religion, we go from obvious evolved flawed human nature back to our real much better nature. In Christianity, the work of Jesus returns us to the original grace of Adam and Eve. In Islam, faith in God does that. Mahayana, Taoism, and Zen say we are really in Emptiness, Buddha Mind, or Tao, and that to awaken is to see that. I think Siddhartha did not want this “out” and he accepted that real human nature is flawed. He insisted we could rise above it anyhow. In rising above our obvious (evolved) nature, he insisted we do not return to any big system. He insisted the normal human self is not eternal and perfect. I agree that we are flawed but disagree that we can rise above it totally anyway. Questions about original human and returning to purity remind me of the movie “Dr. Strangelove”, which shows what happens when we believe too much in purity, keeping it, and getting back to it. On the other hand, don’t Romantically wallow in impurity as a new kind of purity.

Theravada waffles. It cannot accept an eternal-soul-self-with-a-big-Dharma-system, as in Mahayana or Hinduism; but it also does insist real human nature is much better than corrupt obvious evolved human nature, we can get back to the ideal, to return is to awaken, and to awaken is to return. I am not clear about what Theravada Buddhists think our true nature is but it is something like being suffused with the Dharma. When we are suffused with Dharma, we awaken, and, when we awaken, we are suffused with Dharma. Theravada wants to have the cake of purity-of-nature and eat it too. In doing so, it opens the door to little-eternal-self-in-big-eternal-system. There is no point reviewing various schemes.

Brief Assessment Continued: Why Bother?

If I disagree with the core idea of Buddhism, expressed either as “not worthwhile” or “beset by suffering”, then why did I write and why should you read? I disagree with many of the ideas described in this book but I still wrote about them and it is still worth knowing them both for content and to get along honestly with believers. (1) As I said at the start of the book, I do care about doctrine but I care more about what people do. As long as people act well, I care more about that than details of belief. Buddhists generally act well. At the least, they seem less prone to war and terrorism than followers of the major God-fearing religions and Hinduism. (2) Buddhism fosters a great attitude toward truth and life. Buddhism is sane, even-minded, open-minded, quiet, dignified, and graceful. Sincere Buddhists are among the most sane and helpful of people. Particular people in other religions approach Buddhist grace but not always as result of their religion. (3) It is a joy to study its ideas and ways even when I disagree. (4) Buddhism is among the most forgiving and tolerant of religions, more so than most Christianity. (5) Buddhism has beneficial practices. We can gain from the practices even if we don’t know the ideas behind the practices or even if we disagree with some ideas. It does help to know Buddhist ideas behind practices, and why you agree and disagree. (6) Buddhism has ideas that go well with science. (7) We gain when we face ideas that we don’t agree with. (8) We gain when we decide issues, decide through sound thinking, and we commit. Buddhism helped me to see the importance of worthwhile life and suffering. (9) As Jesus said: “By their fruits you will know them”.

Brief Assessment Continued: Suffering and Worthwhile Life.

At the risk of boredom, it is important to get clear about suffering because I disagree with Theravada and because differences between Theravada versus Mahayana-and-Hinduism pivot on issues of suffering, worthwhile life, and the value of a system. While paying lip service to suffering, in fact, Mahayana and

Hinduism get around it so as to make life worthwhile in the context of a system. Officially, Theravada insists suffering is the main issue; if we deal with that, we deal with all; but, in practice, Theravada does not focus on suffering either. We cannot see how Mahayana and Hinduism grew unless we appreciate Theravada insistence on suffering. I disagree with Mahayana and Hinduism too.

Also, a good look at suffering can help undo any bias I have due to my view based on worthwhile life. We need confidence in what Siddhartha had in mind by his stress on suffering so we can feel confident about how we see suffering and worthwhile-or-not-worthy. Buddhists should think about what Siddhartha had in mind because they often approach suffering with formulas rather than think about what suffering meant to Siddhartha, means to them individually, and what role it plays generally.

I don't overlook suffering or make light of it. Suffering does permeate life, erode quality of life, and attack relations with people, nature, and God. It blinds us to simple truth. I know all the kinds of suffering that Buddhists refer to. I have not left out anything. I know suffering that comes from the self, desire, other people, society, limited resources, the state, and the bad breaks of the world. I know suffering that can be helped by managing personal desires and suffering that can be helped only by working on problems of the world. The Buddhist idea of suffering is important and is largely accurate, more so than ideas of most other religions and philosophies. Suffering deserves to be an important Aid. Suffering is a start in getting at worthwhile life. But the Buddhist idea also is dangerous. It is too easy to fall into the idea and too hard to jump out of the hole once in it.

Again: The idea of suffering reflects original ideas about how bad is the Wheel of Dharma-Karma-Law-Life but suffering was not the basic idea. The original point was that life is not worthwhile. Originally, the idea of suffering helped people see that life is not worthwhile and so get off the Wheel. A shift from "not worthwhile" to "suffering" causes confusion (mental defilement), causes clinging, gives rise to objects of clinging (suffering and the war on suffering), and causes damage.

Again: In Buddhism, the focus is on suffering plain-and-simple without much thought for what suffering implies. Life is beset by suffering and Buddhism defeats suffering. That's it. Likewise, the focus is on methods to overcome suffering, on Aids, without much thought for what that implies about worthwhile life. To defeat suffering is to wake up and vice versa. To become adept at an Aid is to wake up. It is all about suffering and Aids. If suffering once did reflect the Wheel and the lesson of not worthwhile life, the idea of suffering used in Buddhism now does not show up like that. Now it is dogma that suffering sours life, we should overcome suffering, Buddhism has the tools, to overcome suffering is to wake up, and that's it. We might, or not, remain on the Wheel after we do overcome suffering.

Again: I am not sure, in doctrine, of the exact relation between waking up and overcoming suffering but I think anyone who has overcome suffering is awakened and vice versa.

Again: I think the following ideas imply that life is not worthwhile. Even separately they imply that life is not worthwhile but together the implication is strong. "Suffering besets life. A huge goal is to overcome suffering. To end suffering, at least for a long time at first, we must withdraw strongly from ALL normal life. After we end suffering, we are not reborn again on the Wheel. After we end suffering, we do not go on with normal life as a normal person." To end suffering, we have to be able to let go of all, including life. To let go of life means not to hold on to the idea that it is worthwhile. For Buddhism to hold the ideas

but not deal with their apparent implication about not worthwhile life is odd and does not make my mind any clearer and does not lead me to end my suffering. To focus on suffering without also considering worthwhile life leads to confusion over what desires and clinging to end, overcome, let go, or hold.

(1) Key Point: All lives have some suffering, and some lives have much suffering, but most lives are still worthwhile, and most lives were worthwhile in the time of the Buddha. Suffering in itself does not make a particular life not-worthy unless the suffering is great. A life can be worthwhile with much suffering or, if badly misused, not-worthy with little suffering. The big majority of modern lives have more hope and contentment than suffering except in horrible places. Even there, most people still have some hope and joy to pierce the suffering.

(2) Key Point: The issue of worthwhile life is deeper and more important than suffering. We can see suffering in terms of worthwhile-or-not-worthy-life but cannot see worthwhile-or-not-worthy-life in terms of suffering except for a few bad cases that do not change the basic judgment.

(3) Key Point: If we think life is worthwhile, we can handle much suffering and can learn to think clearly enough; if we think life is not worthwhile, suffering is not really that important. You can lead a worthwhile life if you do not totally defeat suffering but you only think well enough and only manage suffering. You can lead a worthwhile life if you do not awaken in the Buddhist manner but you only have some good insights, think well, and act well.

(4) Key Point: Once we see that the issue of worthwhile life is more important than the issue of suffering, we can still accept that we need to manage suffering, bad thinking, desire, and clinging. We can see that we need to manage rather than end them. We can accept the use of some Aids. But we take a different attitude toward suffering, desire, clinging, thinking, Aids, defeating, ending, and managing.

Again: I doubt a person can manage suffering without first choosing whether life is worthwhile. Making that choice clears your head and allows you to work on suffering. Not making that choice keeps your head muddy and interferes with managing. If, while learning to manage suffering, you change your mind, that is fine, and you do have the ability to do it, but you should first take a stand. Even if you choose wrongly at first, the clarity of mind is worth the risk. To be honest, I doubt you can really manage suffering unless you see that life is worthwhile. But Buddhism likely disagrees with me.

Again: Siddhartha the Buddha wished people not to depend on gods, systems, or big ideas. To keep people away from the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas, Siddhartha might have focused on the end of suffering and so overlooked the issue of worthwhile life. The issue of worthwhile life tends strongly to the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas, and it was worth avoiding the issue, important as it is, so as to avoid the errors. I understand his tactic but disagree. To focus on suffering does help to avoid the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas but it also overlooks the issue of worthwhile life. To do that is to give up too much, to throw out the baby with the bath water. If the issue of suffering distracts entirely from the issue of worthwhile life then more is lost than is gained by defending that way against the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas. Unless the questions of worthwhile life and suffering are posed together, and answered together, then too much is lost. I believe we can pose them together without falling into the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas. If we do not, we practically demand compensation through the mistakes of Mahayana, Hinduism, cosmic Christianity, Islam, and other such big religions.

Again: Naturally evolved people do suffer but we are not “born to suffer and to endure suffering”. Nor can we reasonably expect to escape suffering entirely. To live is to desire, strive, and cling, and those lead inevitably to some suffering. Still, life is not a “weepy” movie in which we revel in misery. Suffering is not the central fact of life or the key to life. We do not control life if we defeat suffering, if we make it optional, or manage it. Like pain, suffering is one part of life among other parts; we have to accept that; and we have to manage suffering as well as we can with the tools that nature gave us. Some Christians and some Buddhists revel in suffering. The opposite error, in Buddhism, is that we can we make evolved humans fully consistent, clear in thinking, and so free from all suffering, fully able to make suffering optional or to end it. Buddhists use nature to negate nature. I say, as evolved beings, we can get more adept at thinking but we cannot get fully consistent and clear at thinking, and we can get more adept at managing suffering but we cannot totally overcome suffering through better thinking or any other common natural way. We can get morally better as people but we cannot be perfectly moral and so totally overcome suffering. We can manage suffering most of the time. We can get better at thinking, more moral, and more adept at managing suffering. That’s all. It is enough. If ever we do totally end suffering, we lose so much of what is human and good that the end result is dubious. We have to work with what we evolved, and we can. Buddhism acts much of naturally evolved beings. Usually Buddhism can adjust to go with naturally evolved real humans.

In Buddhism, to end suffering, we remove the causes of suffering. We end suffering partly by removing false ideas of the self and so by not desiring and clinging as a result of false ideas of the self. We help to end suffering by removing the false bolstered idea that all selves, and my particular self, are eternal simple unified soul-things. Yet to see you are not an eternal soul-self (atman) does not necessarily end suffering. You can see with clarity and fullness that you will end completely someday and yet still suffer. Atheists might be absolutely sure that they will end someday, and might even strongly reduce desire and clinging, yet still suffer. Some scientists see clearly that the evolved self, at least on this world, is not the simple ideal soul-self of most religions yet the scientists still suffer. Especially since about 1850, I think some painters and sculptors – Impressionists, Pointillists, Fauves, Cubists, Abstractionists - have seen clearly both that the self is not the ideal soul-self yet still some self persists, but the artists suffer. The idea of the limited-but- still-present-self and his-her relation to the world runs through the work of James Joyce and maybe of some writers after him. The Buddhist idea of non-self (an-atman) or limited self is not the necessary and sufficient key to end all suffering (or even to make us all not selfish and helpful).

To know deeply that we are caught in cause-and-effect does not necessarily remove suffering or give us the tools needed to remove suffering. A scientist can deeply know the cause-and-effect of a tsunami but still truly suffer when his-her entire family and-or village is wiped out by one.

Much suffering does come from ourselves; we do enable our own suffering. But not all suffering comes from a mistakenly bolstered idea of self, from mistaken ideas about the world, or from mistaken ideas. Some suffering comes from the world and it is not under our control. We cannot end all suffering simply by changing our attitude or by using dismissive phrases such as “it’s not a big deal”, “nothing is that important in the long run” and “it’s nothing because it will pass”. A cancer patient truly suffers even if he-she manages suffering, and it is nasty to say he-she suffers only from a bad attitude. A twelve-year old forced soldier, or ten year-old victim of gang rape, truly suffers, and it is nasty to say otherwise. If they could have removed the causes of suffering, they would have; but some causes we cannot control. If

they could entirely forget and let go, they would, but some things we cannot erase. That is part of what evil is. Maybe God can turn every evil into a greater good but we can't. We can manage even such suffering sometimes but it is mistaken to say we can turn it into not-suffering with an "attitude adjustment". We can reduce suffering by seeing that we desire security, safety, continuity, and freedom; but even if we control those desires, we still suffer because of what happens in the world. Not to see this is deliberate blindness, deliberate bolstering of self into more than it is; and it purposely overlooks Dharma, cause, effect, and dependent origination. Someone who suffers because he-she did not get a well-deserved promotion, or did not get well-deserved recognition, should work more on him-herself than on the world but it is not true of all cases. That some real suffering is of the world, and we can't change this fact with a mere attitude adjustment, is a big theme of the novel "Catch 22" by Joseph Heller. We're not all totally crazy. Sometimes it really is them.

We cannot end suffering by not making value judgments, by not judging the world. Moral relativism does not end suffering. We can see that bacteria do not mean to kill us when they invade our blood but we still suffer and so do our friends and kin. We can see that good sometimes leads to bad ("Scarlet Letter") and bad sometimes leads to good (Batman movies and revenge movies) but that fact does not mean we can end suffering. Right and wrong can add to suffering – when robbed, we feel not only loss of goods but also feel wronged - yet they do not alone make suffering. Being too moralistic does add to suffering and we are better off by not being very moralistic. But neither fact means no moral judging would remove all suffering. Most animals do not judge the world and I doubt they have the idea that they are eternal souls yet they still suffer and no attitude adjustment could change that. A world without any judging at all would still have too much suffering.

I do not misunderstand suffering and so err about sources of suffering and removing suffering. I do not confuse suffering and pain. People who think we can remove suffering with a better idea of the self, by knowing cause and effect, changing self, changing attitudes, or not using moral judgment, misunderstand the world and fool themselves about suffering. Buddhists misunderstand suffering and fool themselves. Even the Buddha himself, if he thought like this, misunderstood suffering and fooled himself. Sometimes the fooling is deliberate in service to an ideology.

Don't go overboard the other way by blaming the world, or "them", for all your suffering, as in the modern style. Don't demand all your rights without any responsibilities, including your right not to suffer. You still cause most of your suffering, you still make others suffer, and you should work mostly on yourself. The proper response to the suffering from the world is to work hard to make the world better. To do so, you need to know what really causes suffering and what really works to cure it.

(Since the 1960s, a Thai Theravada monk, Pali: Buddhadasa [Thai: Phuthahaat], and some other Thai Buddhists, have accepted that an individual alone does not control all suffering. The world does add suffering apart from the desires of an individual. The world adds suffering through harm to nature, and through economy, politics, society, and culture. You-as-an-individual might defeat your own personal suffering, even that portion caused by the world apart from you, by controlling desires and clinging; but you also have to see that suffering has various causes and some lie outside you. I think this approach is more consistent with basic Buddhist ideas of Dharma, cause-and-effect, and dependent origination. This approach potentially is a big development. Still, I am sure that Buddhadasa and most Buddhists would disagree with me about worthwhile life, suffering, and awakening. As Buddhists are finding out, seeing

that the world causes suffering is hard enough but figuring out what really to do is even harder. It leads easily to problems of desire and clinging for individuals who otherwise mean well. I wish them luck. We need the help. See below, especially Parts 3 and 4.)

We can learn much from a battle with suffering but we lose more than we gain if we let suffering become the whole war. We need to put suffering in the context of “(not) worthwhile life” and we need to think what suffering implies.

As Buddhism now presents suffering and ways to battle it, Buddhism implies life is not worthwhile, at least before a person defeats suffering. Nearly all of us live in a cloud of suffering. So Buddhism implies that normal human life is not worthwhile. Buddhism is not clear what happens after a person defeats suffering but, to me, Buddhism implies life is not worthwhile even then. Few people defeat suffering. By the time a person has defeated suffering, often he is too old or too far from normal life to return to normal life. When people defeat suffering, they do not go back to normal life but stay retired, as did the Buddha. After they defeat suffering, they do not go on to more rebirths that are happy but they die out and are not reborn. All this implies getting off the Wheel and implies life is not worthwhile.

Buddhism says people cannot achieve secure real happiness in life because life is beset by suffering. The reasons that cause suffering also insure we cannot hold happiness; lack of happiness and suffering are two aspects of the same problem. Happiness serves as a good case for seeing the pervasive effects of suffering. Here would be an apt place to go into the issue but it takes too long. See (A) of Part 3 of this chapter.

The idea that we must totally overcome clinging and suffering is a negative absolute, like iconoclasm (no pictures, statues, or relics; not much literature, movies, or TV) or like abstinence from sex and alcohol. It is not a positive absolute like “love your neighbor”. It can put on heroic dress but it is still an absolute and still negative. I am wary of absolutes, especially negative. It is better to manage clinging and suffering as we manage pictures, words, drugs, and sex. If you feel you must totally defeat clinging and suffering, go ahead; but don’t think other people must follow; then, when you think you are done, you must overcome the suffering that you feel from clinging to the need to totally overcome clinging and suffering.

People dislike the idea that “life is not worthwhile” and don’t want it as the main message of their religion. Getting around the problem of “not worthwhile life” was a big way that Mahayana and Hinduism overtook original Buddhism. In them, “overcome suffering” sounds happier, focused not on the defeat of suffering but on how to make a better happy world for ourselves. Mahayana and Hinduism used that view of “end suffering” to veer away from Theravada into making a joyful Dharma system of which all of us are small permanent parts (atman) and into which we merge.

I don’t know if the Buddha originally said we have to control suffering to be free to handle life properly, to decide if life is worthwhile, and see what to do. If the Buddha originally stressed suffering as Aid rather than the main focus, I don’t know if he or his successors moved it from Aid to main focus. If the Buddha did not originally face the issue of worthwhile life, and did believe that a focus on suffering is all we need, then I disagree with the Buddha. I can still assess these issues and still assess Buddhism if I disagree. It is still worth deciding if life is worthwhile, and still worth using Buddhism to do so.

It is almost impossible to think well, perform well artistically or athletically, compete, or fight, if you are too tense. Yes, energy helps, but tension hurts. Likewise, we have to relax to make lasting changes in our lives and to advance spiritually. We need energy, drive, and nerves but tension is a killer. We need to let go of some suffering so as to think more clearly and let go of more suffering. Letting go of some suffering and thinking clearly can make a reinforcing process. I am sure the Buddha had this effect in mind when he wished us to end suffering. But, I think, and I am almost certain Buddhism teaches, the Buddha had more in mind when he offered the Four Truths and he wanted us to end suffering. He had in mind the kind of deep reckoning with life that I described above.

We have to let go of some suffering to relax to let go of more suffering. To decide if life is worthwhile, it helps to manage at least some suffering first. We face an old chicken-and-egg problem. Just as judges, lawyers, actors, mechanics, programmers, gymnasts, martial artists, and musicians face and solve this problem, so can spiritual seekers. People solve chicken-and-egg problems all the time. Sometimes, as in Zen, you need a hard knock to get you going, but you can do it.

When we decide that life is worthwhile or not worthwhile, we have already more than taken the first step. Already we have gone a long way toward managing suffering.

We all think our ideas are the correct ideas and are the ideas that everybody should care about. Maybe I make the Buddha an advocate of my ideas because I hold him in high regard and I want him to be on the right track. Maybe I think he really did hold ideas similar to mine and I care about truth. Maybe I try to use his prestige to support me regardless of what official religion says, even if the official religion is tried-and-true and almost 2600 years old.

Regardless of the past, right now we have to face that (a) how Buddhism sees suffering and deals with it implies that life is not worthwhile, and (b) the issue of worthwhile or not worthwhile life is deeper, prior, and more important than the issue of suffering. There is no getting around this issue by saying we have to deal with suffering first. We need to decide about worthwhile life. We have to deal with worthwhile life first before we can adequately deal with suffering.

Brief Assessment Continued: “I Teach only Suffering and Release from Suffering”.

The Buddha said something like “I teach only suffering and release from suffering”. He meant that he did not speculate in metaphysics, theology, pointless ethical dilemmas, politics, and economics. He wanted people to focus on one big task and to get that done. Unless suffering is greatly reduced, people cannot think well enough to do anything else properly.

As far as I know, the Buddha deliberately did not say what happens after the end of suffering. He thought we would be better people but did not specify better in what ways except morally.

(1) By not specifying what happens at the end of suffering and beyond, the Buddha allowed people to imagine whatever they wished, imagine whatever they thought fulfilled Buddhism regardless of Buddhist teachings or whatever fulfilled their desires regardless of Buddhism. People gladly did so and still do, usually with the magic, glamour, metaphysics, and mysticism that the Buddha disdained. People have determined imaginations.

It is easy to make the Buddha mean “life is worthwhile, especially after a person ends suffering”. I think most Buddhists make that jump. I ask Buddhists not to jump. I think the Buddha would want you not to jump, at least not until after you had ended suffering and thought more. Hopefully the end of suffering frees you enough so you can make up your own mind about worthwhile life. I repeat: the general drift of early Buddhism, and the milieu in which it came, imply life is not worthwhile even after the defeat of suffering. The Theravada and Zen way of saying not to make this jump is to say that Buddhism offers nothing, that you gain nothing from it (with no metaphysical implications of the term “nothingness”).

(a) Some Buddhists take the saying to mean that, once we get rid of suffering, and we awaken, we can take on our full human nature, our full Dharma nature, and we can handle anything that comes our way, including vexing metaphysical, moral, and practical issues. (b) Some Buddhists think that, when we end suffering, we are suffused with Dharma (Emptiness, Buddha Mind). Dharma works through us, and we do the work of the Dharma in its world. (c) We succeed in all ways.

I doubt the Buddha meant those. I don't think he meant the end of suffering to be the gateway to all kinds of other success and fulfillment. I doubt he expected awakened people to be suffused with Dharma like mystic candles. Buddhists need to seriously consider why they want so much from the end of suffering. What did the Buddha want people to do after they had ended or strongly reduced suffering? Zen is a little more limited in what it expects.

I do think the Buddha wished to reduce suffering to allow us to think more clearly, if not perfectly, and so to be better all-around people, to live gracefully what is left of our lives, and be prepared to die gracefully when it time. I think he also meant the end of suffering to open our eyes that life is not worthwhile. To really end suffering, we have to be ready to let go of life too, all life, and we see so when we get near the end of suffering. We do not let go of something that is intrinsically worthwhile when we let go of life. To see that life is not worthwhile enough to hang on to is all, and it is a lot.

It is worth wondering why the Buddha thought that ending suffering was sufficient. Sufficient for what? What does the end of suffering do for a person? What did Siddhartha want us to do after we had ended our own suffering?

(2) We can take the Buddha to mean “the end of suffering” is a self-validating experience sufficient in itself that requires no other explanation, clarification, justification, or comparison. When it happens, you get it; it is valuable-in-itself; and that is that. So stop the chatter and get to work, especially by meditating. I think Siddhartha did mean it this way, just as other religious teachers intend to lead us to their versions of self-validating experiences.

Also as with other religious teachers, Siddhartha meant his version of a self-validating experience, “the end of suffering”, to be the most important self-validating experience, the one-and-only gateway to other such experiences, the best gateway to good experiences that are not self-validating, and he meant it is intrinsically good and leads only to goodness. (You might have other self-validating experiences later but Siddhartha kept that possibility out of this discussion, likely largely to avoid magic etc.)

A certain amount of awe comes with self-validating experiences. The companion awe leads believers to add mysticism, etc. to the lore of the self-validating experience. Siddhartha did not do that, and warned against it. Yet followers did so anyway and continue to do so. The false awe-and-lore takes the place of the real self-validating experience. It sustains and channels people to the bad use of Aids.

The awe warns us to be careful with all self-validating experiences. Self-validating experiences tend to create their own self-validating worlds, to live at the heart of systems that eat the world.

There are many self-validating experiences, and not all are good. Some preclude others while some can go along together (“God loves us all” and “So you’ve made your first kill now”). To evaluate “the end of suffering” as a self-validating experience I would have to put it against other self-validating experiences and other similar strong experiences. That is beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, I simply state some opinions.

-It is hard to shed all magic etc. once it attaches to the lore of the self-validating experience. I doubt that all but a few quite adept Buddhists can do shedding this now. Shedding accumulated magic etc. likely is the hardest task on the road to the end of suffering. Other religions suffer from the same problem.

-Buddhists believe, or wish to believe, that “the end of suffering” goes along with experiences such as had by the followers of Jesus, Chuang Tzu, and Mohammad. They would like to see all core self-validating experiences in all good major religions as pretty much the same.

-I doubt they are all the same. You have to think about what each religion says about big self-validating experiences, compare experiences and religions, and choose which experiences to work for. Because they are self-validating, it is harder to compare than you might think. To know them, you have to get into their world, then it is hard to get out, and comparison is next to impossible. It can be done. You have to learn how to get in deep enough and then get out – as in the movie “Donnie Brasco”.

-On the whole, when done the traditional Buddhist way, the process that leads to “the end of suffering” is good and so likely “the end of suffering” is good too. Even if you do not totally end all suffering, still the process is good. The idea of “the end of suffering” can be abused, but you have to work at abusing it, so I don’t take that up here.

-I doubt people can have an experience of “the end of suffering” as glamorized in Buddhism. People can have the experience of being able to manage suffering, as I describe elsewhere. They are not the same. I don’t know which the Buddha had in mind. If he had in mind a huge self-validating experience that ends all other concerns, as in magic Buddhism, I disagree with him. If he had in mind a huge self-validating experience qualitatively unlike simply managing suffering, or if he thought people in other religions could not have his experience, I disagree with him.

-As with other self-validating experiences, you have to look past the Buddhist self-validating experience. Then what? What do you do next? Siddhartha does not say. What happens next is important in itself. Also it “works backward” to affect the validation of the self-validating experience. If what happens next is bad, useless, or nothing, then we likely self-validating experience was not really so self-validating after all. It was phony, or, even if real, not so important.

-If what happens next is as important as the self-validating experience, or more so, then why worry over the self-validating experience? Why not just do what happens next? Why not work on that? You are as likely to have a good self-validating experience by working to do the right things for the right reasons as by going directly after the glamorized self-validating experience.

-Even if the Buddha meant "end suffering" to be an entirely self-contained self-validating experience, the context of his life and thought, the fact that the experience is about suffering, the attitude that Buddhism takes toward normal life, that fact that people who have ended suffering withdraw, and other factors that I have mentioned, all indicate life is not worthwhile. So we have to take "end suffering" in the same context and assume it also implies life is not worthwhile. This result conflicts with self-validating experiences from other religions and with my insight. So even if "end suffering" is self-validating, it is not self-contained, we have to put it in context, and we have to think about what comes after "end suffering".

Brief Assessment Continued: Possible Overlap, with Fun Excursions.

The topic in this section is a hypothetical way to reconcile (A) life is not worthwhile on the Wheel and so we should strive to get off the Wheel with (B) this life is worthwhile. Do not seize on this idea in the wrong way. I do not know this idea from any particular work that I recall but my memory is poor and I am not the first to think of it. The point here continues from the section immediately above.

(1) Suppose life is not worthwhile as long as we suffer enough. Most people do suffer enough to affect their lives, and their thinking is so confused, so their lives often seem not worthwhile. To reduce, or end, suffering in one particular life can make that one life worthwhile even if it does not make all lives worthwhile. To reduce or end suffering can help one person think better, and so make his-her one life worthwhile. When I reduce suffering in my own one particular life, I do not have to aim to make all my future lives worthwhile and the lives of all other people worthwhile. We do not aim to be reborn many times with our newfound worthwhile life, so all our future lives will be worthwhile. We do not find our way into a great system just because now we see that one life is worthwhile. We simply accept that one life now is worthwhile while it lasts, do what we can while we live, and die when the time comes. If there is anything more, we don't worry about it or expect more. While alive, we treat this life as worthwhile, and treat all life as potentially worthwhile, which means we try to be useful, caring, and thoughtful. It does not mean we are successful in normal life or as a mystic.

(2) We can combine (a) making one particular life worthwhile through reducing or ending suffering with (b) not-worthwhile-life while still on the Wheel.

(2A) My one particular life is not worthwhile until I end my suffering; when I do end my suffering, my one life is worthwhile. To end suffering gets me, and only me, off the Wheel of rebirth. To end suffering for one life does not change the Wheel so life on it is now worthwhile generally for all life. To end suffering in one life now does not mean he-she who ends suffering must have good lives for all the future without any suffering. To end suffering does insure that the person who ends suffering is not reborn. Not to be reborn, not to be reborn on the Wheel, was a big goal of Buddhism. To end suffering, and not be reborn, come together and cannot come separately. To end suffering, to make this life worthwhile, and not be reborn, all come together and cannot come separately. This is one reason why the Buddha insisted the

self is not eternal. In contrast, to be reborn must mean more suffering, and must mean that lives still on the Wheel cannot be fully worthwhile. Rebirth, suffering, and not worthwhile life also come together.

(2B) To make life worthwhile, you have to end suffering. If you end suffering, you also die completely with the end of this life; you are not reborn. So, to make this one life worthwhile is also to insure your life does not go on past this lifetime. There is no way to make any life worthwhile, to get off the Wheel, and insure that any life goes on forever. To make any life worthwhile is also to make sure it ends. We have to accept a final end to this life so as to make sure this life is worthwhile. Yet even if this life must end as a result of being worthwhile, and I don't make any other life worthwhile, it is still worth ending my suffering and making my own life worthwhile.

Because to end suffering and make life worthwhile leads to the final end of a person, it is easy to think a person is punished for ending suffering and making life worthwhile. In contrast, people who fail to deal with suffering and so make life worthwhile get rewarded with more life. It seems the people who succeed at ending suffering and making life worthwhile are the ones who should get more life while those who fail should die completely. But that is not how the Wheel works. This result only makes sense if unexamined normal life on the Wheel is not worthwhile. This is another reason people want off.

It is also natural to think: If one person can make it, why can't everybody? Rather than force the one good person who "makes it" to vanish into total oblivion, why not keep him-her around to help others? If possible, keep him-her for many lives. That is part of compassion too. He-she would like staying around to help, and everybody would like it. This idea was one of the founding ideas in Mahayana, was the basis for the bodhisattva. Yet the Buddha did not teach this option, even if the Buddha did stay around and teach after he awakened and before he died.

Mahayana and Hinduism strove to arrange things so that to end suffering does makes life worthwhile and more abundant for the person who ends suffering but also to end suffering does not end the Wheel even for the person-who-ends-suffering-and-so-makes-his-her-life-worthwhile. Mahayana and Hinduism strove to incorporate the feeling above about staying on due to compassion. The way to do all this is to make the Wheel not a place of suffering but a place that is worthwhile and joyous. To end suffering in this one life and to make this life worthwhile leads to better life on the Wheel for the person who ends suffering and it leads that person to see all life is good on the Wheel even for people who appear to suffer and who do not see that their lives are worthwhile. It leads an adept person to see that even people who think they suffer do not really suffer. It makes the Wheel a big joyous system. The adept person sees all people do lead worthwhile lives but not for the silly reasons that they fool themselves with such as family, fame, success, etc. but because their lives add to the one big joyous system. As with Jesus in Christianity and Mohammad in Islam, heroes who changed the world, saved the people, and made life worthwhile and abundant, the arrival of one person, Cosmic Buddha, who ended his own suffering and made his own life worthwhile, also changed the lives of all people so they could make their lives worthwhile on the Wheel. Another reason Siddhartha, the merely real Buddha, insisted the self is not eternal was to forestall this kind of error and confusion.

(3) (more like 2A than 2B) To see your life as worthwhile even if other lives might be confused, even if you end completely, even without heaven, is like how David Hume, a famous atheist-or-agnostic, saw his life. Hume did not totally end suffering. He died in pain from illness although that does not necessarily

mean he suffered uncontrollably. He did manage suffering well. He died feeling his life was worthwhile even though it ended in pain and ended completely. This stance is close enough to what I have in mind with “life is worthwhile” so I don’t split hairs. This stance shows a good attitude. I hope the Buddha had something like this in mind. Many people in all religions and in atheism come to see this stance. This stance is not a big cosmic bang as most Buddhists see awakening but it does change lives.

I, Mike Polioudakis, do try to manage my suffering but that is not what makes my life worthwhile. I do accept a final end but I do not think my acceptance also conquers my suffering while I am alive or also makes my life worthwhile. My life now is worthwhile because it is, whether it ends at death or goes on. If my life were not worthwhile, if I could not end suffering, that situation would not make me continue in future lives, on the Wheel. If I do succeed in managing my suffering, my success does not necessarily lead to my having many future lives in which I help other people. Nearly all lives are worthwhile although people are ignorant, foolish, confused, and suffer. Lives are not worthwhile because they are in a great system. Few people will be reborn, on the Wheel or off. We are not not-reborn because our lives are worthwhile or because we end suffering. We just end; we just are not reborn. Still, I respect people who see a link between accepting a final end to their own life, working to end suffering, making their own life here-and-now worthwhile, working to be useful, and working to make the world better.

People suffer largely because they are ignorant, wrong, desire, and cling, but not entirely. Much suffering is real and comes because the world is just like that. Much suffering is self-enabled but not all. Much is caused by the world including human-made situations.

The Buddha might have had something in mind like the view in the numbered paragraphs above. If he did, then largely I agree. We have to reduce suffering before we can come to our senses and can see. I disagree that we have to totally defeat suffering to make this life now worthwhile while it lasts. I hope the Buddha had this view in mind and I wish he had been clear that he had this view in mind.

This stance does not have much support in sutras. Sutras say “end suffering” without saying what that implies for worthwhile or not worthwhile life and without being clear on what next except no rebirth. I can find passages to support the stance as I can find passages that say something else. I don’t know where the preponderance lies, and, because I am not a Buddhist theologian, I don’t have to declare definitely. The main drift seems to be: In the time of the Buddha, people feared life was not worthwhile but strove to make it so in wrong ways. They often acted out of fear, ignorance, blindly, foolishly, and selfishly. The Buddha offered a cure for suffering as a way to get people to handle life gracefully while here, not have future lives, accept that life is not worthwhile, and to die gracefully when the time comes. I write this chapter mostly on the basis of that premise.

Even if the Buddha had in mind that the end of suffering can make a particular life worthwhile, what I write in this chapter is still valid because it confronts issues that Buddhists and all people need to confront.

If you think ending-suffering-does-make-at least-this-one-particular-life-worthwhile is what the Buddha really had in mind, you should work out the implications for Buddhism. The implications do not support what most Buddhists see as Buddhism but they do support other good ways of life. They do not support Mahayana or Hinduism. This chapter, and Part One of this book, can help you work out the implications.

Brief Assessment Continued: Rationality, Wisdom, Unstated Premises, and Confusion.

Any faults described in this section belong not only to Buddhism but to all religions and ideologies, and usually affect them more than Buddhism.

(1) Buddhism is rational in a simple easy-to-follow satisfying appealing way. Buddhism offers a limited set of simple obvious premises such as the Four Truths, and it reasons clearly from them to conclusions that make sense even if, like me, you don't agree fully. The average Buddhist seems amenable to reasoning; and I love that effect of Buddhism on people. Basic Buddhism is not complex as are ideologies that try hard to be rational. It is not like Thomas, Spinoza, Luther, Calvin, Kant, Hegel, systems theory, or Post Modernism. The simple rationality of Buddhism is a great and deserved part of its charm.

Buddhism does have complicated sutras and individual writers such as Buddhaghosa; but you don't have to read those, and, if you do, conclusions are clearly stated and you may decide for yourself.

(2) Still, Buddhism is not strictly rational and only rational. Buddhism puts rationality in service to Wisdom ("panya"). Logical argument leads you up to conclusions, but you cannot always step into conclusions using mere logic alone, sometimes you need an intuitive leap. Always conclusions should serve Wisdom. Sometimes you have to look beyond mere logic to Wisdom. You should not go against logic if you can help it, but, if you have to leap logic to serve Wisdom, do so. In Zen, logical points are not intended to be satisfying, and sometimes they are annoying, but they should let you leap. The Four Truths get us to see we need to cure suffering, and open us to the right methods. Putting rationality in service to higher truth should not offend you. It is the rock of faith-based religion. Staunch atheists put rationality in service to their values. Almost all Western philosophers use rationality to serve Wisdom and some are clear about doing so. Plato is logical and he is clear that he uses logic to serve Good, where "Good" plays the role of Wisdom. A country song is not about the story but about Wisdom. Without the Wisdom behind the song, few people care about the tremendous rational craftsmanship.

What is the Wisdom that rationality serves? Part of Wisdom is to end suffering but there is more Wisdom than simply the end of suffering. With Wisdom, you should be able to see directly the truth of the Four Truths, the power of desire, and the value of various Aids. Hopefully this chapter will give some insight. You should read more Buddhism to get more insight. I would guess that Wisdom is what you see after you end suffering. I think we also gain much Wisdom along the way to the end of suffering. Compassion, the non-self, and "don't be selfish" are part of Wisdom.

Where does Wisdom come from if not through rationality? Wisdom does come through rationality in that rationality leads us up to Wisdom, and, in most cases but not all, reason is the best way there. Rationality is not sufficient but helps. Wisdom comes through proper meditation. Wisdom comes through example by monks and other adept people. In the case of Zen, it comes through a knock on the head or escaping traps. I would guess that much Wisdom comes after a person defeats suffering. I hope most people don't have to wait for the total end of suffering to get some Wisdom. I hope much Wisdom comes when we learn merely to manage suffering, desire, and clinging.

How can we be sure Buddhist Wisdom is the correct and best Wisdom, especially since rationality is not enough by which to assess Wisdom? Briefly, we can't be sure of Buddhist Wisdom any more than we

can be sure of Wisdom in any other religion or ideology. Because rationality is not the sure-and-only road to Wisdom, because Wisdom is beyond rationality, we cannot be sure any proposed Wisdom is truly wise. Still, again, "By their fruits you will know them". The best way is to get a fair sample from each of several religions and ideologies, without getting lost in any, then think, consult, and take the best. When people do this, they tend to credit their own native religion or ideology with having had the best Wisdom all along even if it did not, but that is part of human nature, and one lesson of Wisdom as yet unlearned at the time. I do not consider claims of divine revelation to be a sufficient guarantee of Wisdom, especially when one claim contradicts another claim, some claims are used to discredit others, and claims are used to enable "us versus them". God might have given us some bits of Wisdom but we still have to assess those much as we do Wisdom from Buddhist sources.

Does Wisdom necessarily imply a great system of which the individual is a small but still important part? To Mahayana, Hinduism, much Zen, and most Christianity and Islam, it does imply this, but Siddhartha disagreed. As far as I can tell, he avoided this issue as not useful and as potentially a severe distraction. It is better to concentrate on the end of suffering, on Wisdom that we gain while we work to end suffering, and on Wisdom we gain when we end suffering. Then, if we still care, we can decide if Wisdom needs such a great system. I think effectively Siddhartha denied a great system.

(3) Buddhism has some premises that it does not state clearly. Usually Buddhism does not intend to hide any assumptions but it simply overlooks making all assumptions explicit. Usually the premises come out so clearly, without being stated explicitly, that there is no problem. For example: (a) the world is sticky, (b) wrong behavior occurs always-and-only due to wrong ideas or "mental defilements", (c) right ideas can completely push out wrong ideas, (d) correct action automatically follows when right ideas push out wrong ideas, and (e) a natural (evolved) human is able to think with full clarity and total consistency. Sometimes premises are not clear such as that life is not worthwhile or is worthwhile. To go through the assumptions even of Theravada would require a book so I don't try. I do try to be as explicit as I can but I am sure that a few ideas got by me. When you read Buddhism, think what ideas have been taken for granted without being stated, and then assess those ideas.

Western science tries to bring all assumptions to the fore, and it does amazingly well, but it is not perfect, and it always has background assumptions such as about cause-and-effect, the rationality of the world, the ability of the mind to know the world through rationality, and no magic. Science still does the job that it claims to do in approaching truth, and does the job better than any alternative, so we should consult science first. For us in our age, the road to Wisdom goes through science even if the road does not stop there. I think Buddhism would agree.

If you must reveal the assumptions of a living person, leader, or school do so politely. While in grad school, I worked through the assumptions of ideas in anthropology, such as systems theory, evolution, social structure, structuralism, and post modernism. Once, during his class, I badgered a teacher about his assumptions. The teacher gave me a distressingly low grade.

When the real goal is Wisdom rather than mere rationality, tacit assumptions often play a big supporting role yet stay hidden. People who use the grandeur of the universe or of mathematics to speculate about order and God use tacit assumptions but we can see the assumptions and we forgive them because we share in their wonder. What are the tacit assumptions of super hero stories, what is the main goal, and

how do tacit assumptions serve the main goal? You can ask the same of any work of literature. If you love to read, you can see how Plato's assumptions about Being and Good shaped all his dialogs but only gradually came out as his work went along. Atheists assume Justice is so important that effectively it is really supernatural although they never say so and hate to have it pointed out.

(4) The mix of seeking Wisdom, using rationality to serve Wisdom, and unstated assumptions, invites magic, metaphysics, mysticism, and glamour. In this mix, even rationality can serve magic, glamour, etc. Examples from the West include metaphysical-mystical Neo-Platonism, how Greek philosophy was used to serve mysticism and Christianity, Romanticism, and Post Modernism. In Buddhism, the best examples come from Mahayana but folk Theravada is full of solid cases such as the dominance of karma, karma is simple bookkeeping, and the great charisma-grace of religious and political leaders. Donald Trump would be called a bodhisattva or a "chakravartan" (world conqueror).

The mix also bolsters the hole in the center of systems that eat the world and it bolsters the systems. It gives the systems pseudo-logic, pseudo-gravity, and provides them with methods to handle evidence so evidence only supports them and never denies them. How all this happens is beyond the scope of this chapter but it is worth saying that it does happen. Buddhists hope this bad result does not happen in Buddhism but it does happen as when Buddhists says life is dominated by suffering although, to me, it is clear that suffering is one big component in life but not the dominant component.

Brief Assessment Continued: Personal Responsibility.

"With great power comes great responsibility". "Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Thai Buddhists told me the Buddha offered the best system for individuals while Jesus offered the best system for societies (Chinese would say Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu for individuals and Confucius for society). Buddhists did not tell me how to blend the two.

Theravada Buddhism seems selfish. You take care of yourself, and that's it. The Buddha told people to look after themselves, warned that nobody else could save them, and they could not save anybody else. Buddhism urges Compassion, Buddhism follows the Dharma in morality, the Buddha did condemn selfishness, and Buddhist monks generally are among the kindest people you will ever meet; but still Buddhism comes across as selfish. Individuals end their own suffering without worrying about others, worrying about world issues, how they added to problems in the past, what they add now, how to help, and how to help without hurting their quest to help themselves. Many individual Buddhists do not follow this pattern but the attitude pervades Buddhism and it leads to a real difference between Buddhists versus people of other religions. With the rise of modern concerned Buddhism, Buddhists are finding a better balance but the tension remains.

Selfishness and self-centeredness are mental errors, they are "defilements", and they lead to desire and clinging. Compassion is important. Morality is an intrinsic part of a Dharma world, and morality inherently includes consideration of other people and nature. How do these ideas square with "saving yourself is most important" and "save only yourself"?

Much of folk Buddhism relies on the natural need for people to help others, to save them if possible, even at the expense of self. Thus people think in terms of merit points and people transfer points to parents, children, and kin. Beginners in Buddhism sense tension between saving only self versus compassion and the power to act for others, and they get confused.

The problem of selfishness is compounded because humans have much power and humans bear much responsibility. Only if we have power over the causes of our suffering can we alter those causes and so save ourselves. Only someone who feels responsibility for past deeds and toward others has the moral sensibility to succeed in Buddhism, at ending suffering. If we have power over self, we have at least some power over the suffering of others. Through misusing their power, humans cause most of their own suffering. Humans cause most world problems. So we bear much responsibility to our selves, other people, and the world.

Power leads to abuse, even power over self and power to help others. We do not have complete power, not even over self. Seeking more power than proper leads quickly to abuse of what power we do have. We should not seek complete power over ourselves or others even if we intend to use power well. We should seek wise use of power, which includes limiting it.

Yet, in Buddhism, the ability to end my own suffering is an absolute power. As such, it directs attention away from relations between self and world entirely to myself. Responsible modest use of power is hard if you obsess over your salvation.

The ability (power) to end our own suffering is not exactly the same as the power (ability) to help other people and help with world problems. To say we can do one fully but cannot do the others, or we have no duty to do the others, is legitimate in theory. But it is also a little “flaky”, self-indulgent, and suspect. It might be right but it still has a bad feel. Can the two abilities be entirely different? Although one power might be full and the other limited, we can still abuse either or both.

From what I have seen, Buddhists are not more selfish than people in any other religion, and seem a bit less selfish and more inclined to sympathy and helpfulness. The calm and the understanding of human weakness that come with Buddhism make up for the selfishness of “save yourself and don’t worry about anybody else”. But the ultimate tension remains.

You cannot save someone despite themselves but you can help, especially if they want to get better; this is true in all religions; and Buddhists help when they can. You can compare Buddhists to other religions on this basis, and Buddhists come off well, but still there is a difference in feel.

If individual Buddhists should look to themselves first, cannot save the world, and have no responsibility to the world, then gods and demons rule the world. So, in that case, people should worry more about their relation to gods and demons than about ending their suffering. Folk Buddhism and superstition are more correct than the teachings of Siddhartha. In any religion, to focus entirely on the self is to open the world to gods and demons, and is to deny personal human responsibility generally. Selfishness and even well-intended self-ness spawn demons; and demons spawn selfishness and bad self-ness. Gods and demons are part of the corruption that comes with seeking absolute power even over merely the self. On the other hand, if you do not want gods and demons to rule, do not want to make a peace with demons,

think people cause most problems, or think that God gave us stewardship, then you personally must take responsibility. I think a large necessary part of taking responsibility is helping others and nature, and that includes more than saving only yourself.

I doubt Buddhists really can totally control even their own suffering. The fact that Buddhists cannot totally control even their own suffering is not an excuse to concentrate even more on the self to the exclusion of others but should lead Buddhist to think about their relation to the world and how to help. If you cannot fully control even your own suffering and you cannot control the suffering of others, then we are all in the same boat, and what helps them helps us and vice versa. We are not exactly the same as them but we are close enough. Then we see that humans do have responsibility for the world, and the demons don't matter. Accepting both limits on the ability to save the self and as much responsibility as possible can be a way to vaporize demons.

Two lessons of dystopias such as "1984" and "Brave New World" are that we cannot totally control the self or society, and too much society is bad. Movies about computers taking over the world carry on the themes. One lesson of modern "dystopias" such as movies and TV about zombies, apocalypses, and vampires, and TV shows such as "Breaking Bad", "The Sopranos", and "Game of Thrones", are that too much self is bad, and we cannot fully control and-or assert the self. Too much self becomes a demon; too much society makes us all demons. All the genres teach that we have to take responsibility for our self without asserting too much self, and we have to take responsibility for society and to help society without letting society eat us. We have to accept the limitations of self and society, we have to learn how to assert the self properly, and we have to find the right balance of self and society. No modern political ideology and no religion, traditional or new, tell us how to do that. Political ideologies and religions err in their own ways. Neither Christianity nor Buddhism tells us what we need to know, and each errs in its own way.

I think Siddhartha understood these issues well enough for his times, and he offered his idea of the finite temporary self as a way to head off some problems. But, as developed in Buddhism, and as understood now, Siddhartha's idea of the finite temporary self does not head off problems well enough. I don't know if the idea can be grown to do so. I don't know if such a development would be a "return to the Buddha".

The fact that not all suffering is caused by us as individuals, or even by humans, makes the issues harder but does not take away the central problem.

Buddhists may not rely on a shallow forced external calm demeanor as a way to confront their personal responsibility and world issues. Buddhists may not use that false smug façade as a screen behind which really to be selfish.

One reason that Mahayana displaced Theravada is because it (seemed to) offer ways to blend dealing with individual salvation and dealing with world problems. The biggest way was through the person of the bodhisattva, like the Christ. You cannot truly defeat your own suffering until you defeat world problems. You have to work on them together. The Mahayana way does not work but it is hard to fault Mahayanists for trying and it is easy to see why Mahayana would appeal to people who felt compassion and wished to help the world as well as save their own limited temporary self. Mahayana appeals to people who

understand the power and responsibility that go with the idea that we can end suffering, wish to use the power correctly, and wish not to abuse ability.

My solution to these issues is in Part One of this book and my solution is represented in this chapter by the idea of “managing”.

It might be that, ultimately, individual Buddhists do have to reject helping the world in favor of ending their own suffering. Maybe Buddhists do have to be selfish of a kind. If so, Buddhists must clarify this stance and all the implications.

Other religions have versions of these issues even if other religions accept limits on the human ability to control self. A fun adept look at this problem is the movie “The End” starring Jay Baruchel with a big all-star cast. Do we act selflessly to seem good and so really serve-ourselves-and-go-to-Heaven or do we really help others, even at our expense, because that is the right thing to do? Supposed Christians deny global climate change, deny they can do anything, and deny personal responsibility; yet they expect God to take them (and family) to Heaven because they go to church. Because Taoism does not accept any need to help the world, its dilemma is like Buddhism. But the versions in other religions are not at issue here and do not lessen the problems for Buddhism.

Brief Assessment Continued: Hole in the Center and its Effects.

Holes in the center are one way that a system eats the world, and they cause problems. In Buddhism, some sources for a hole in the center are:

- (1) Theravada Buddhism is not clear about what people awaken to.
- (2) Theravada Buddhism is not clear about what it means to end suffering.
- (3) Buddhists are not clear if life is worthwhile or not; are not sure of relations between worthwhile life and suffering; and not sure of relations between awakening, suffering, and worthwhile life.
- (4) Modern Buddhists overlook the original lessons about the Wheel of Dharma-Karma-Law-Life and its implication that life is not worthwhile.
- (5) In practice, Buddhists believe that life is worthwhile despite that “life is beset by suffering” implies life is not worthwhile and despite that the Wheel (and so the Buddha) taught life is not worthwhile. Buddhists do not accept that to overcome suffering also reveals that life is not worthwhile.
- (6) In practice, Buddhists really work to make their own life worthwhile on their own terms despite doctrine about suffering or worthwhile life. They avoid questions of worthwhile life and suffering, that is, they avoid issues at the heart of their religion. They work against ideas at the core by seeking a worthwhile life and by seeking it in terms other than sanctioned by their religion. This stance is a normal human reaction but it is also a contradiction.

(7) Buddhism is not clear about what it means to end desire and end clinging. Buddhism overlooks that we cannot end all desire and clinging, such as to the Dharma. Buddhism is not clear about all relations between desire, clinging, and suffering.

(8) Buddhists focus on sub-goals, Buddhist Aids, rather than focus on awakening by seeing that life is not worthwhile and-or by overcoming suffering. The focus on Aids lets them work on their own lives and lets them avoid issues of suffering, worthwhile life, and awakening. The focus on sub-goals can be an evasion of the original issues of the Wheel in Buddhism, that is, of worthwhile life.

(9) Buddhists should work to awaken in this life but few try, not even monks. Instead, Buddhists put off awakening until "next life". Buddhists can put off the core religious goal in a way that Jews, Christians, Muslims, and even Taoists and Confucians, cannot. The core goal of the religion is gone from its center. In its place, Buddhists put many sub-goals from base selfishness up to high sub-goals such as meditating. Even when Buddhists use high sub-goals, the center is still empty. I am as sick of hearing "God willing" (Allah, Eloi, Yahweh, Heaven) as of hearing "next life".

(10) "End suffering" is presented as a self-validating self-sufficient experience, and it is given as if nothing else is needed and nothing else reasonably follows. This presentation seems intended to thwart magic, metaphysics, mysticism, and glamour yet, paradoxically, it clearly invites magic etc. to fill in the void of what it means and what happens next.

(11) Buddhists explain awakening negatively by what it is not rather than give a positive sense of what it is. They do this with other ideas too such as suffering and Aids. Other religions use the negative way. Saint Thomas Aquinas liked it. I use it. The negative way can be a good tool and sometimes it is the only way. But used carelessly, it allows people to fill in whatever they want for what is supposed to be left over after taking away, including prattle, metaphysics, mysticism, magic, glamour, and hokum. Try defining a bird or dog by what it is not, then use your imagination to fill in what it might be after you have removed what it is not.

(12) Seeking after wisdom, assuming wisdom is beyond rationality, still using rationality to seek wisdom, and opaque assumptions. Magic etc. come of this practice.

(13) Adept good people are punished with the end of their good lives life while inept and-or bad people are rewarded with more life.

(14) Buddhism teaches Compassion, yet the good adept people do not stay around through many lives to teach the inept and-or bad people to be better and get better. Buddhism wants everyone to succeed but it does not keep around the best tool, adept good people, to make that happen.

(15) The tensions over self first, helping self, responsibility to others, over power, responsibility, and limits of power.

The effects of these causes are as below. I do not dwell on common problems of Dharma-karma-based systems such as accepting, rather than fighting, socio-economic class, poverty, sexism, ignorance, bad government, magic, metaphysics, mysticism, glamour, and superstition.

Most Buddhists either don't know the role of "life is not worthwhile" in Buddhism or refuse to consider its importance; a contradiction. This attitude would be like Christians insisting that Jesus is fully divine but has nothing to do with God or the Holy Spirit. Sometimes in literature, TV, and movies, the role of "not worthwhile" rises to the surface when someone who has suffered bitter defeat runs away to be a monk or nun – but that "out" is only a literary device, and still even literate smart people will not face the idea.

Theravada Buddhism invites other Buddhism such as Mahayana, invites Hinduism, and invites poor ideas and practices to co-exist with it such as magic, metaphysics, divination, and spiritualism. Such ideas and practices cannot be removed from Buddhism and these ideas and practices almost necessarily have to play a large role in folk Buddhism. As long as Buddhism has a hole in its center from the above causes, I don't see how Mahayana, Hinduism, and bad folk Buddhism can be avoided.

Buddhism, Theravada and Mahayana, suffers from hypocrisy, sometimes bad hypocrisy, and suffers from a malaise that feeds on hypocrisy. Buddhism-in-spirit is no more hypocritical than other religions, usually less. But common Buddhism, even with smart people, is as hypocritical as other religions, and Buddhists feel hypocrisy more because Buddhism prides itself on logic, consistency, coolness, and objectivity. I found even smart and successful people in Buddhism suffer from unease, an affliction that puzzled me until I understood better the contradictions in Buddhism.

I never stopped feeling annoyed at the magic, superstition, and divination in folk Buddhism although I did learn to get along with it. I feel the same about magic, superstition, and TV evangelists in Christianity. I feel much the same way about worship of saints, Mary, relics, and religious leaders.

Focusing on Buddhist Aids can make Buddhists daffy. Focusing on Aids makes them like Hare Krishna chanters at airports and not like Christmas carolers. It is like Christians morbidly worried over Works, Grace, Faith, Justification, and Salvation rather than just doing the right things for the right reasons, doing what Jesus wants. It is like being stuck saying the Rosary forever or stuck praying with your hands in the air forever. It is like trying to "beat the system" in Las Vegas; you might learn about some math but you will have a poorer life and you will get a bit wacky. The fact that prestigious Buddhist Aids are part of the hole in the center allows Buddhists to gloss over the hole and daffiness, and that makes everything worse in a feedback loop.

Recall comments above on Aids about reintroducing metaphysics, mysticism, spiritual ascent, and hidden knowledge. These trends reinforce daffiness and feelings of spiritual power. These ideas and feelings push out better ideas and feelings. They enable people to use the Aids to seek power instead of seeking to awaken or seeking simply to do good. They encourage the worst of folk Buddhism. The effects were stronger in Mahayana but are strong enough in Theravada.

A hole in the center allows not only bad non-orthodox thoughts but good thoughts of all kinds, orthodox and not. Buddhists use the freedom allowed by the hole in the center to cultivate motifs that most people find good such as tolerance and help. Buddhists try to make life more graceful. The hole in the center can help in cultivating good ideas such as Mindfulness, the limited self, honesty, and helping. This I enjoy among Buddhists all over. This is how most people think of Buddhists.

What Buddhists do in practice to make their lives worthwhile depends in part on teachings that go along with Buddhism, such as compassion, but mostly on values and ideas of their particular culture apart from Buddhism such as social ranking, proximity to power, and making sure you come out alright. Some ideas that go with Buddhism are almost unique to it such as the stress on cause-and-effect and the idea of not-self. Most of the teachings that go with Buddhism are not unique to it such as the stress on mental clarity. Not-unique ideas are not less good – kindness, clarity, and the Middle Path are good. Not-unique ideas enrich Buddhism and Buddhists. The mixing of ideas from Buddhism with ideas from local culture does make it harder to assess Buddhism. It is not clear how much uniquely Buddhist ideas affect the search for worthwhile life in Buddhist countries, and I cannot go into that query here.

The hole in the center erodes the basis for a good political state and dealing with nature. It undermines the basis for rule of law and good institutions.

Brief Assessment Continued: Religion, Culture, Good Ideas, and Good Institutions.

All religions wish to be the basis for a society, and, when big enough, the basis for a state. Theravada Buddhism did serve as the basis for societies and states but not by using only Siddhartha's ideas of suffering and awakening. It relied heavily on ideas of karma, merit, and what Westerners might call Grace or Charisma. That kind of Buddhism has little to do with the original ideas of Siddhartha, is a grandiose version of folk Buddhism, and is more like Hinduism than like original basic Buddhism. Here I don't worry about Buddhism and the state. I say a little more in Part 4 of this chapter. Mahayana did not have to develop Buddhism to serve as the major basis for society or a state because, almost everywhere Mahayana grew, Confucianism already did that fairly well.

Buddhists now wish to make Buddhism the basis for a modern state, democracy, development, social justice, and good relations with nature. I wish Buddhists well. But the original ideas of Siddhartha cannot alone serve as the basis. I don't think he meant them to. I hope modern Buddhists can merge the ideas of Siddhartha with ideas of a good state from elsewhere without falling back into karma, merit, Charisma, grandiose folk Buddhism, and a Buddhist version of Hinduism.

Christianity and Buddhism are systems that eat the world, with holes in the center, but Christians made great institutions such as rule of law, science, democracy, and education while Buddhists did not. It is easy to praise or blame religion but religion alone is not the key. Rather, cultures-and-societies are more important. (The people in) Cultures-and-societies use religion to rationalize what they wish to do for their own reasons. Religion added to differing drifts of East and West but it did not cause them. Religion now would not stop any cultures from making good institutions if the people set their minds to do so. People can adopt good ideas and institutions if they wish. Buddhism can help. (I lump South Asia in the East although most of the obvious dominant motifs in South Asia came from Indo-European culture.)

Then how can Buddhism help make good institutions and a good modern state? Buddhists have to accept that the ideas for good institutions and a good modern state do not come intrinsically, directly, inevitably, and only out of the original ideas of Siddhartha. The basis for good institutions and a good modern state have to be added to his ideas. Christians had to add ideas of the Greeks and Romans to Jesus to make Western civilization, good institutions, and good states. Jesus' ideas alone are not enough. Buddhism helps because, like Christianity, it can recognize and accept a good idea when it sees

one, and nothing in Buddhism is against the ideas and institutions needed for a good modern state. Much in Buddhism, such as rationalism and the idea of being helpful, can support a good modern state.

Buddhists should not worry about borrowing ideas. They have to borrow. Everyone has to borrow, and societies do it all the time. The Greeks borrowed geometry from the Egyptians and the alphabet from the Phoenicians. Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos all added to Buddhism to make distinct ways of life although each boasts that it got its distinct life directly and only from first principles from the Buddha. Buddhists should not worry about total originality and about getting everything directly from first principles from the Buddha. They should worry that they borrow only good ideas and use them well. They should pick the best from the Buddha and make sure that what they do borrow does not go against that. When they do this, they can bring Buddhist identity into the modern world and still preserve their own basic cultures and national identities.

Originally, Buddhism denied the system of rulers and Brahmin priests. Buddhism insisted people could and should take care of their own spiritual business and general conduct. But modern Buddhists love to explain how Buddhist ideas are closely tied to governing, Buddhism validates the state, the state supports Buddhism, they need each other, ritual is a big part, and it all needs monks. If a modern Buddhist dislikes the current state, he-she explains how it goes against his-version of idealized Buddhism, how his-her idea of a good state goes along with his-her version of idealized Buddhism, and how his-her type of Buddhism supports his-her idea of a good state. In effect, Buddhism and the state are one again as Brahmins and the state once were one. "Déjà vu all over again". Buddhist argument about close relations between Buddhism and the state is not useful anymore than arguments for a close relation between Methodist Christianity and the state. Buddhists need to see what they do, and, in this case, need to go back to the idea of Siddhartha that identity between state and religion is not the highest goal.

Brief Assessment Continued: Enough Good-Enough Adept-Enough People.

If Buddhism waits until enough people have awakened and have defeated suffering before it can build a good government and tackle world issues, it will fail. If Buddhism waits for enough people to awaken-enough-and-act-well-enough-through-working-on-the-defeat-of-suffering, it will fail. If Buddhism waits for enough Buddhists to master an Aid well enough, such as Empty Mind, before it can build a good state and tackle world issues, it will fail. Likewise, if Christianity waits for enough Christians to be surely saved so they can build good government and tackle world issues, it will fail, and it has failed. If Christianity waits for enough people to act well enough because they "see the light", "fear the Lord", "love the Lord", deeply want Heaven, and want to do good in His Name, then it will fail, and has failed. The same is true of all religions. In a state with many religions, all of them combined will not do the job.

We need enough good-enough adept-enough people, soon, to build good institutions and tackle world issues. We don't have that. We won't get it by going through religious and moral revival first. We can use religious ideas and institutions, and should, but that won't be enough and we can't wait for religion to do the job. We must rely on general education in morals, character, and reasoning, and on the natural, biological, and social realms. We must be honest about the historical role of religion in giving ideas and goals but we have to go regardless. Religions need to think not only how they can save people from sin and suffering but also how they can assist in this task even if they do not dominate the task.

Few places in the world have brought good quality realistic education to the majority of their citizens and the United States is not one. It is worth inquiring why we failed but here is not the place for the inquiry. Mostly the citizens have themselves to blame. Bad leaders helped.

Brief Assessment Continued: What is Unique about Buddhism?

No major religion was unique in its time except maybe Hebraic ethical monotheism when it first arose, and none is really unique now. Then why do people insist their religion is unique and why do they resist other religions so much even when the moralities are so nearly the same? How do differences between ideal religion and practiced religion affect attitudes? To answer, and to assess Buddhism on the basis of the answers, is a topic outside this book. The most commonly cited unique feature for Buddhism likely is the non-absolute self. I invite readers to list key features of their religion without thinking if the features are unique and to list key features of a rival religion. Focus on behaviors such as the Golden Rule and Compassion more than on dogma such as “there is only one god”. Make a list for your ideal religion and one for your practiced religion. Make both lists for the rival religion. Compare the lists. Make sure to compare your ideal to their ideal and your practiced religion to their practiced religion. When you know enough about Buddhism, add it to the exercise.

Brief Assessment Continued: Success in Buddhism.

Very few people can succeed by Buddhist standards, can totally end suffering and fully awaken. It might seem odd to have as the one-and-only goal(s) of a religion a task at which exceedingly few people can succeed. It is not so strange. People can succeed partially in lesser ways than through full awakening and totally defeating suffering, and those are good goals in themselves, such as acting morally. I explain a bit more in Parts 3 and 4. People in Mahayana and Hinduism have the same problem because they too are based on a Dharma system in which the total end of suffering and full awakening is the supreme goal(s). They too have in-transit goals similar to Theravada; Mahayana and Hinduism use savior figures; and Hinduism allows other ways to succeed well such as devotion, asceticism, intellect, and wisdom. Christianity and Islam do not allow a human ever to succeed on self merits, people can succeed only by the Grace of God, and God need not give His Grace; so it might seem those religions are gloomier than Buddhism. But, in those religions, people also can succeed on lesser levels, and, in the end, God does seem to give Grace much more than people feared. Judaism, Taoism, and Confucianism stand apart somewhat, and there is no point in reviewing them here.

I don't know how to address whether Buddhism is more or less gloomy for the average not-so-adept Joe and Jane than, say, Christianity. Some people who get the ideas of suffering and of awakening might be discouraged just as Protestants get discouraged when they get the ideas of Fallen Humans and Original Sin. Augustine, Luther, and Calvin could be “real downers”.

Still, there is a difference between the ultimate goal of Buddhism versus the ultimate goals of a religion like Christianity (following Jesus' teachings). The provisional goals of Buddhism, such as good conduct and success in meditation, certainly are good but they are not the final goal and are not lesser versions of it. In following Jesus, only one person could completely love God and neighbors but provisional goals are similar to the ultimate goal and are lesser versions of it, such as forgiving people and following the Golden Rule as much as possible. The final goal of loving God and neighbor is an unreachable ideal but it is an

ideal that gives real guidance. In Buddhism, the final goal remains unreachable and does not really guide intermediate goals. Intermediate goals are not lesser versions of the final goal. The relations between ultimate goal, ideal, intermediate goals, and real, differ in the different kinds of religions. One reason that Mahayana and Hinduism overcame Theravada is their variety of intermediate goals that make sense on their own without much reference to the final goal. It would take too much space here to go more into how differences play out. Given that most people don't worry much about this issue, intermediate goals are similar for all religions, and are worthwhile on their own, this chapter is not the place to dwell on the topic. I come back to this topic in other writing.

Suffering versus “Not Worthwhile”, Buddhist Aids, and the Self; See Parts 3 and Part 7.

Here I should comment more on suffering and “not worthwhile”, and defend my use of “not worthwhile”. That takes too long. I put more material on this topic at the end of the chapter. It is easy to convert what I say below about “not worthwhile” to “suffering”, so, if you wish to use “suffering”, do so. You can benefit from the material in this chapter whether you see in terms of “suffering” or “not worthwhile”.

PART 3: DESIRE, CLINGING, STICKY LIFE, NOT WORTHWHILE, AND AWAKENING

This part of the chapter looks at Buddhist ideas that are relevant to everyone. Buddhism excels at these issues and gives its greatest benefit by making us look deeply at life through these issues.

We need to see that we do desire and cling and we should let go of many things. We also need to see what we wish to hold, to what extent, how, and why. We need to feel the depth, diversity, and tenacity of clinging before we can manage it. We need to think what makes life worthwhile, what hurts worthwhile life, what might make life not worthwhile, and what makes needless suffering. How could smart Buddhists say life is beset by suffering and imply life is not worthwhile? Seeing their view is better than retorting “Damn, life is worthwhile” or shouting “God said creation is good, so it is, including all life, including mine”. What do we all wake up to?

For the topics of awakening and “not worthwhile”, I present material mostly negatively. I give ideas about awakening and “not worthwhile” and then show how Buddhist ideas have to go beyond those. I challenge Buddhists: “You, an adept Buddhist, thought that was how Buddhism saw awakening and-or suffering. But you are wrong. So what does pure real full Buddhism say? What is Buddhism really all about?” Non-Buddhists have to think why the idea that I critique is not enough, think what idea might be correct, or see if there is no correct response in your frame. Siddhartha wanted us to think for ourselves and here is a good place to start.

I apologize that the detail can get annoying. The detail is not as important as what it points at, which is “What kind of life does Buddhism aim for?” I can't get directly at life for Buddhists without going through all the detail first. A Buddhist can't decide what kind of life is possible without deciding first what desires to keep or defeat, and how to handle which desires.

Even after the detail, this book can't get at the best life for a Buddhist. That is another big topic, it would need a work itself, and likely it should be done by a Buddhist. If I did it, I would not do it from a Buddhist

view but from the stance given in Part One of this book. My view would give Buddhists material to fight with me but it would do little good.

Instead, please ask yourself often what kind of life Buddhists could live given what the detail here implies about what they aim for, what they have to give up, what they can keep, and how to give it up or keep it. What kind of life would a dedicated Buddhist live? No more than most Christians, most Buddhists don't live dedicated to religious ideals but instead seek success in this world, and seek a rationale for success. The rationale should act to keep them within bounds of decency and within some (but not all) bounds set by their religion. What kind of rationale can Buddhism give for a normal successful life in this real world, within fairly decent limits, a rationale that takes into account evolved human nature, and accepts needs for family, religious activities such as ritual, religious power, competition, capitalism, the state, modern plural states, many states in one world, differences in wealth and power, and the needs for material well being, progress, justice, social justice, to keep the environment, the influence of distinct cultures, and the need to keep some distinct cultures? Other religions have to do the same.

(A) (1) Wrong Ideas, Impermanence, Desire, and Clinging.

From my version of the Four Truths from above, pretty much in accord with official doctrine:

Truth (2) Suffering has causes. The closest cause of suffering is clinging; desire causes clinging; and wrong ideas enable desire. Although not the only wrong idea, the root wrong idea is that some things in the world are permanent and so can serve as the source of permanent full satisfaction, especially the wrong idea that our self is eternal and can serve as the source of permanent full satisfaction.

Truth (3) The causes of suffering can be ended (defeated), and so suffering can end. Buddhism can end the wrong idea of permanence, end other wrong ideas, end desire, end clinging, and so end suffering.

It looks as if we should begin with wrong ideas about permanence-and-impermanence, then move on to other wrong ideas, before we tackle desire, clinging, and suffering. We should see better the roles of knowing, permanence, and impermanence. Some teachers do take this path. In the West, Socrates and Plato took this path (via Knowing, Being, and Becoming). It is not the best first path. It is better to go into desire and clinging first. I hope to go more into this topic in other writing. Here I give enough to let you feel better about going to desire and clinging.

-The problem of impermanence usually is tackled with the "picking apart" that I described in an earlier chapter. Those methods, and the results, are easily abused. They have to be handled with care, and that careful handling takes a lot of space.

-Different things are (a) impermanent or (b) durable in (1) different ways and (2) different degrees; and the differences matter. If you leave an orange outdoors, it degrades faster than a car and in different ways. If you leave an orange or a child in a car on a hot day, similar things happen but the difference matters. If an orange gets a moldy spot, you throw it out; if your body gets a moldy spot, you go see a doctor; if your mind gets a moldy spot, what do you do? The impermanence of a chance for sex is not the same as the impermanence as an almost-car-accident, and which is more important depends on age.

-If a monk gets sick, he-she sees a doctor. The visit can cost the temple support group a lot. The money might be better spent on a young healthy replacement monk. Why does any monk go see a doctor? Why not just let nature take its course and, in case you die, be reborn again?

-Buddhists disdain everything impermanent, which means almost everything except maybe the Dharma: Everything impermanent is misleading more than truthful, and so bad more than good. This attitude is part of the general stance that life is not worthwhile. I disagree. Impermanence is not always the enemy. Some impermanent things are useful and even help spiritual advance. Your mind is not forever but, when the Buddha says to think for yourself, he seems to agree with the Jefferson Airplane: "Your mind's guaranteed, it's all you'll ever need". A good teacher is not forever but he-she can mean the world to a student. A copy of the Tripitaka is not forever but every temple should have one. The sutras from the era of the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama are not forever, will be lost, and will be replaced by sutras of another Buddha, which in turn will be lost, etc. Your body must wear out but we all have one and should care for it. Without it, we could not awaken. Helping a child cross a swollen stream brings up many impermanent things but the task is still worth doing. Jesus might not appear on every planet with sentient beings. It is wrong to rely on these things absolutely but not wrong to rely somewhat, to gain what they can give, as long as we keep perspective.

The key is not to deny all impermanence or deny all that is less-than-absolute but to learn what is useful, how useful, how not useful, and to use properly what is given to us. This stance is harder than simply denying all impermanence or non-absolute.

The glib Buddhist attitude that all impermanent things are bad effectively blocks this better attitude about usefulness. I doubt Siddhartha had this glib attitude against all impermanence. Buddhists should ask how Buddhism got this glib attitude and why they keep it. Much the same happened in Greek philosophy and in some Christian and Muslim theologies in the battle between being and becoming and in ideas of the Fall and Fallen Bad World. This glib attitude invited some good Mahayana and Hinduism, those that accept and correctly use some impermanent things, but also a lot of bad Mahayana and Hinduism.

-Some durable recurrent things are bad and are not the platform on which we wish base progress: pride, greed, anger, lust for power, lust for sex, selfishness, etc. Welcome to the Dark Side.

-People know quite well that what-they-use-as-the-basis-for-satisfaction is not permanent but they do it anyway, such as with house, car, job, fame, and family. They are not fully ignorant in the Buddhist sense but they still do it anyway.

-People know some things are permanent but do not use them as the basis for living and satisfaction, such as logic and rationality, the findings of science, the Dharma, God, Grace, Love, Compassion, and Justice. They are not fully ignorant in the Buddhist sense but they still not do it anyway.

-As Socrates, Plato, Paul, Augustine, Aristotle, and Hume saw, and every parent sees, knowledge alone is not enough, not even clear knowledge of permanence and impermanence. It takes more. I do not guess here what more it takes and how to get that across.

-People over-commit in a way beyond the irrationality inherent in the thing itself, such as by being a fan of sports, fashion, art, politics, glamour, romantic love, or religion.

-People under-commit given the temptation inherent in the irrationality of the thing but still cannot let go fully in the way that Buddhism needs, such as with politics, family, job, romantic love, and religion.

-"Do it anyway" and degree of commitment are not a matter merely of knowledge, of good ideas and bad ideas, of mental clarity and mental defilements.

-People sometimes do act appropriately on the basis of the permanence or impermanence of an idea-or-thing yet they are not awake in the Buddhist sense. People can kick a bad kid out of the house but that does not make them awake. People can work for a corporation without loving the corporation because, in the modern world, they cannot make a living by begging or out in the forest, but that does not make them awake. People can love art to the extent that it adds to their life and to the extent that it is a great legacy of humanity, and only to those extents, but that does not make them awake. People know some political causes are ridiculous and can't last but support them anyway to the right extent. People can act aloof and act as if not enticed by desire and clinging but that does not mean they are awake.

-No naturally evolved sentient being can think with full clarity and consistency and no such being can be entirely integral and consistent. We cannot entirely get rid of all wrong ideas and we cannot entirely get rid of all wrong ideas with roots in mistakes about permanence and impermanence. We cannot get rid of all wrong ideas enough so that we can get rid of all desire and clinging. In contrast, we can think well enough to manage as I describe below but still we cannot think with perfect clarity and consistency. If Buddhism requires perfect consistency and clarity, and that seems to be its claim, then people can never succeed in getting rid of all wrong ideas and can never wake up in the Buddhist sense. If Buddhism requires perfect clarity and consistency, then it is wrong. I think some people, but not all, can think well enough and can wake up enough.

-The large majority of Buddhist texts do mention impermanence before getting on to desire, clinging, and suffering; but they make only a perfunctory ritual nod to be orthodox, and what they say is not helpful and can be confusing. They too see the real first problem as desire, clinging, and suffering but they do not actually say so.

If Buddhism could mix its ideas of human nature with scientific ideas of evolved human nature it could strengthen arguments about impermanence, all other wrong ideas, desire, clinging, and suffering. It still might not succeed perfectly as it wishes or as I wish.

It is still worth thinking about permanence, impermanence, right ideas, wrong ideas, desire, and clinging even if permanence and impermanence are not alone the key to right and wrong ideas and right and wrong ideas are not alone the key to desire, clinging, and suffering.

(A) (2) End Clinging and Overcome Desire.

To awaken, we must end suffering. To end suffering, we must end-or-overcome clinging. And, to end-or-overcome clinging, we must overcome-or-end desire.

Buddhism is not entirely clear what desires and clinging we should defeat and what we may hold on to. This issue is not a mere game because, for example, while we might let go of watching TV, we cannot let go of the Dharma, Buddhism, Wisdom, all compassion, logic, science, or the idea of temporary person (an-atman). Other religions tell us to let go of desires, material things such as wealth, attitudes such as hate, and ideas such as “we are better than them” or success; but they never tell us to let go of wisdom, morality, compassion, the Golden Rule, prayer, devotion, God (Allah), nature, integrity, or spontaneity. Confusion over what to end, what to hold, how much to hold, and how to hold, is bolstered in Buddhism because it focuses on suffering and does not come to grips with the issue of worthwhile life yet Buddhism strongly implies life is not worthwhile. If Buddhism were clearer about issues of not worthwhile life and the relation of not worthwhile to suffering, Buddhism would be clearer about ending, overcoming, letting go, and holding on to desires and clinging.

We desire, and cling to, not only material things but also to ideas, feelings, and attitudes, especially ideas and attitudes such as power, love, success, help God, help Dharma, find the Tao, serve Heaven, the Four Truths, art, do not cling, end desire, end suffering, awaken, and “I am a smart astute skeptical guy”.

“End” and “overcome” are not the only approaches to desire and clinging, and they are not hard-and-fast techniques. They represent attitudes-and-methods to take toward desire and clinging. The material here should suggest variations that you can use.

(A) (2) (A) I do not define desire here. To “cling” to something is to keep it in the back of your mind, think of it often, think about it from time to time, wish for it, feel life would be better with it than without, want it whether life would be better with it or without it, depend on it, or depend on the wish for it. You don’t have to be a fiend. Most people cling to hundreds of things without knowing it. A grudge is clinging but so are: kissing mommy goodnight, love, loving art, loving order, science, and giving to United Way.

Desire and clinging are similar but not the same. To cling is not to desire-a-desire or we get a strange loop, and, besides, they feel different. Because they differ, we have to use different techniques to handle them. Because they are similar, the techniques overlap and we can easily get confused, so we have to be as clear as we can. For instance, it is hard to draw a sharp line between love versus the usual clinging that comes naturally from love; but it is easy see that some love runs over into bad clinging and even into obsession. It is harder to see that ALL love causes clinging, so it is almost impossible to separate love from clinging and good-love-without-clinging from bad-love-with-too-much-clinging.

Nature gave us many desires and nature usually made sure we cling to them, as for example for wealth, family, a good reputation, community, power, to uphold morality, to have relations with spirits, and to seek deep ideas such as awakening.

(A) (2) (B1) End. Think of desire and clinging as idea-attitude. To end an idea-attitude is to stop it, not feel it if possible, and never to act on it. To end might entail not thinking about it at all, effectively to erase it from our minds. We can do this with some ideas-attitudes such as desire for goose liver spread but it is much harder with others such as for basic food, shelter, friends, affection, and security.

(A) (2) (B2) Overcome. To overcome is not always to end. “Overcome” does not mean that we never feel an idea-attitude or that we erase it from our sensibilities and minds. We can overcome the desire for, and clinging to, fashionable clothing but that does not mean we erase the idea of clothing from our minds and that we never buy new pieces when old ones wear out. We can overcome desire for friends and we can even end clinging to friendship but it is hard to entirely erase the idea-attitude of friendship and never to act on it. “End” is stronger than “overcome”. “Overcome” is stronger than “control”.

(A) (2) (B3) I would guess that both to overcome and to end is to think-feel-act so that an idea-attitude-thing does not lead to suffering. If an idea-attitude-thing does lead to suffering, we have not ended it or we have not sufficiently overcome it. This definition is fine in theory but it doesn’t give us what we need. We need to know how to deal with clinging and desire so they don’t lead to suffering. That is hard. It takes work and experience.

(A) (2) (B4) To stop an idea-attitude-thing from leading to suffering, sometimes we have to end it but we don’t always have to kill it and delete it. We have to take a different approach to specific different desires and specific different instances of clinging. Hopefully looking at a few cases can give us an idea.

(A) (2) (B5) Different schools of Buddhism stress different ways to end and to overcome desires and clinging. We have to learn about the approaches and what schools say. I don’t go into details but you have to know some background.

(A) (2) (B6) Buddhism as-a-whole is not clear if we should end desire-in-general and clinging-in-general or overcome desire-in-general and clinging-in-general; and Buddhism is not clear which desires to end or overcome and what clinging to end or overcome. Buddhism is not clear what end and overcome mean; different schools have different ideas. Especially when Buddhism advises merely to overcome rather than end, it is not clear what “overcome” and “end” mean and is not clear how to end or overcome.

(A) (2) (B7) Often in writing you see “let go”. “Let go” seems to lie between “end” and “overcome”, seems more effective than both, like a magic middle. “Let go” has much value and I do get around to comments on it. But “let go” is not a magic answer. To appreciate the value of “let go”, we have to go through “end” and “overcome” first. When you get comfortable with “end” and “overcome” then “let go” makes more sense. “Let go” is more like “overcome” than “end”. If it helps, think of “let go” as a variant of “overcome” and vice versa. If you want a mental workout, wherever I assess end or overcome for a case of clinging or desire, try applying “let go” to see how it works or doesn’t work.

(A) (2) (C1) Clinging. Simplistically, in theory, Buddhism might advise that we end all clinging, end many desires but not all, and overcome the desires that we cannot end. In practice, it is hard to end all clinging, so we have to merely overcome some clinging; and it is hard to overcome many desires without also ending them, so we have to end many desires. It is hard to tell which is which.

Some Buddhism becomes “end all desire and end all clinging” – likely not possible. Some Buddhism becomes “overcome both desire and clinging” – likely not effective enough. Much Buddhism becomes an unclear mixture. Zen, likely due to Taoist influence, says “Trust your own judgment about what to end and overcome, and how to end or overcome, but do end most clinging and do overcome most desires”. I like that.

(A) (2) (C2) In theory, end all clinging. Clinging is bad. Not only in theory but as a matter of obvious fact in real life, clinging leads to suffering. In practice, the line is not easy to draw and some clinging is not so bad. Buddhism insists we feel morality and act morally. It is hard to do that without clinging. Buddhism insists on compassion, and it is hard to do that without clinging. The Buddha taught for about fifty years, and all Buddhists would say he did it without clinging, yet I am not sure. Monks teach lay people, and I doubt all monks do so without clinging. There is nothing wrong with a monk doing a bit of science but most scientists cling to their work. Monks extol monks who are experts in the scriptures and in Buddhist theory but I know from direct observation that people cannot become experts without clinging. We want doctors, teachers, journalists, and priests to be dedicated. Of course, most clinging is bad, and it is still worth trying to end as much clinging as possible. But to try end all clinging is to cling to the idea of end-all-clinging, and we don't want that either.

(A) (2) (C3) As it is hard to end some clinging – compassion - also it is hard to overcome some clinging without ending it. It is hard to be involved in love or politics without clinging. You cannot have a child without clinging. Clinging to political positions causes much damage in the world. It is almost impossible to really believe in a religion without clinging, even Buddhism. It is hard to muster just the right amount of belief in Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, to be a good believer, without also clinging to the religion and its comforts, and so opening the door to disdaining others and causing harm. Yet should we end all religion, whether God exists or not, the Dharma exists or not, because religion must cause more harm than good? Do we foster political anarchy (a position to which people cling) because politics and political positions cause much of the damage in the world?

(A) (2) (D1) Desire. What would happen if we ended nearly all desires? People would not be Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Muslims, or Hindus. People would not support democracy. Nobody would learn Buddhist texts. People would forget about the Buddha and Dharma. Nobody would meditate. People would not bother with families. People would be neither very friendly nor at all abusive. Nobody would do science. We would revert to a haphazard gathering of wild food for a living. Even in the all-natural world, nobody would bother to look at a beautiful sunset and likely nobody would be sure if it was beautiful or only rosy colored. Some people might think this would be a good world, but they would have to give up that opinion and that desire too. Many desires are useful, not only for life, but for supporting the kind of world that Buddhists, even the Buddha, want. Even some good desires with attendant clinging are useful, as when people ardently meditate and study the scriptures.

(A) (2) (D2) In theory, we can desire something but not cling. On a hot day, we can desire an ice cream cone; but, if we don't get the ice cream right away, and we are able to not fret about the lack, not take firm steps to get ice cream, and forget about the desire fairly soon, then we can have the desire but do not cling to the desire. It is not clear if this action-attitude ends clinging, lets go of clinging, or overcomes it.

(A) (2) (D3) So, it seems we should overcome desires so we use them but we do not cling through them. In some cases we might be able to overcome desire but not end it and not cling through it. We can put off the desire to drink water, urinate, or serve the Dharma, but we might not be able to end it. If we can put off desire enough, we might be able to overcome-or-end any clinging that comes of the desire, such as the need to drink only cool well water or build a monastery with a stupa (pagoda). It is not clear if this attitude-action is to overcome the desire but I think so.

(A) (2) (D4) INTERLUDE: The desire to end all desires is a desire. In fact, it is obsessive and compulsive in a way that most normally human normally problematic desires don't come close to. It is near insanity. Of course, it is self-contradictory. Its self-contradiction is related to the logical issues that I discuss below under "let go of letting go".

More than a logical puzzle, it is a real problem that Buddhism has to deal with and that all seekers have to deal with. If we end the desire to end desires, does that mean we have to fall back into the whole sticky icky world with all the mistakes and pain that we tried to leave? Are we doomed to fail? Some schools of Mahayana and Hinduism seem to say so, and then make this apparent failure into a greater success (as God makes evil into greater good) by making this particular falling back into the world part of the great joyous Dharma system.

Or, can we end the worst desires but keep the best desires, such as compassion, in the right amounts? I think we can cope. Is coping what Siddhartha tried to teach? Likely, but I can't argue this view against 2500 years of Buddhism. All religions teach some coping, which is why I suggested Classical Stoics and Cynics. Coping is part of managing. To overcome bad desires, and control even most good desires, is part of managing. Managing is a lot harder than it sounds. It is as hard as trying to end all desires but, to me, it is a lot saner.

Trying to end all desires, or even strongly overcome all desires, supports the implication that life is not worthwhile. Shifting to cope, firmly overcome, and manage, does not have to make life worthwhile but it does help. Managing makes it easier to accept that life is worthwhile and to work on making life more worthwhile for us and others.

Jesus knew the allure and value of ending desires when he pointed out that lust begins in the mind, and, to be pure, we would have to clean our minds. He also knew to scrub the mind was impossible for mere humans, and he advised ways to deal with bad thoughts and to prevent bad acts. I suspect Siddhartha the Buddha had pretty much the same ideas but they got out of control.

(A) (2) (E1) To overcome desires without ending them is good in theory but hard in practice. It is hard to merely overcome a desire without eventually having to end the desire. It is hard to end being moralistic, feeling superior and telling people what to do, without also ending morality and simple moral judgment – especially for beings in which morality evolved. The cases in which we can merely overcome desire and do not need to end desire likely should NOT set the pattern for general strategy about desire. In the case of ice cream, even if we avoid clinging now, desire might give rise to more clinging later that we cannot end, let go, or overcome. That is one reason why ice cream trucks make regular rounds. "It is easy to say but hard to do".

Some desires we might be able to end such as the desire to murder someone who wronged us. Even with these desires, more likely we overcome rather than end entirely – dreams of revenge linger on for decades. Desire is like that.

(A) (2) (E2) If we cannot end a desire, we don't have to act on all desires. We really don't have to murder a bad person who wronged us. We don't have to embezzle even if we would not get caught. We don't

have to seduce anyone. We don't have to eat junk food. Inaction on desires might be to end, let go, or overcome clinging and desire.

(A) (2) (E3) Trying to end clinging without also ending or nearly-ending desire is like telling an alcoholic to have only one drink or a smoker to have one cigarette. Clinging and desire don't work that way. When a problem is out of hand, it is better to forbid than to say "only a bit". When we forbid, and the forbidding works, it is not clear whether to call that result "end" or merely "overcome". Mohammad forbade alcohol and human images, and some Christians ban alcohol, icons, movies, and singing. Buddhist monks may not drink alcohol, have sex, marry, or have children. In the normal human condition, it is easier (a) to get rid of the desire and its objects entirely, to successfully forbid desire, than (b1) first to overcome clinging and then (b2) indulge the desire only to the proper non-clinging extent. Eventually, Buddhists get around to "end or nearly-end desire" even if they also teach to end clinging or overcome clinging.

(A) (2) (E4) We can't end all desires, and we can't overcome some desires without ending them. What to do?

Buddhism is not clear on these situations yet the points cannot be overlooked. The training needed to deal differs with situations, the chance of success differs, and the kind of possible success differs.

Buddhism tends to say we should end nearly all clinging; and I agree. But the need to end clinging is not definite, and to end clinging is hard, so we might end most clinging but need only to overcome some other clinging. Buddhism varies on what to do with desire. I think, mostly, Buddhism says to overcome desire; but some Buddhism also says to end all desire. In theory, Buddhism is clear that we need to end suffering. But, to end suffering, first we must deal with clinging and desire, and uncertainty about doing those tasks makes Buddhism also uncertain about suffering. That strikes at the heart of Buddhism.

Some Buddhism says "End all clinging, end all desire, and so end suffering". Some Buddhism says "You may desire anything as long as you do no harm and don't think about it too much, as long as you do not cling hard. Merely overcome even clinging. Not to harm, and not to think too much, is to overcome, and to overcome is all that is needed to end suffering". Most Buddhism is a mix in between.

(A) (2) (E5) Think about what it means to end desire or even to merely overcome desire. We are not logical machines destined to think with perfect clarity and consistency. We are not slaves to emotions either. Nature gave us many of our desires. To end a naturally-based desire means to go against nature in a harsh definitive way. Once you cross that line, you can't go back. It changes us in a deep way forever. Even to overcome a naturally-desire does much the same. We do have to control most of our desires most of the time, even naturally-based desires. We cannot give in to hatred, revenge, and the urge to pee anytime anywhere. But if we take out all the desires that nature gave us, or all the desires that are based on the desires that nature gave us, we have little left. Likely, we won't know what to do with what little we do have left.

Most people want to keep a fair amount of evolved human nature (natural nature). That does not mean you keep it all. It does not mean you don't end some parts and overcome other parts. We do have to end some clinging and desire, and overcome some clinging and desire. We have to let go of some parts of natural nature.

Likewise, keeping a lot of natural nature does not mean you have to see yourself and natural nature as part of a giant beautiful Dharma system in which the bad secretly supports the good and it all works out well in the end. Natural nature is not necessarily secretly all joy. Don't make a "rebound" mistake when you reject the rejection of natural nature.

What does Theravada, Mahayana, or Hinduism really want you to be like? Think about what to end or overcome and why. Think about what to keep and why.

(A) (2) (F) All this uncertainty causes confusion and some damage. Likely you are confused and bruised. I try to lessen confusion but I cannot take it all away because confusion is in the subject.

I get tired of writing only "end" and "overcome". Because they overlap, I can use similar words that imply both, such as "defeat" and "conquer", and sometimes I can use them as synonyms, without making more confusion and damage. When I need to be more precise, I am.

(A) (2) (G) Advice: Before you try to end clinging, think through problems of suffering and worthwhile, and think through your desires in light suffering and worthwhile - what you might hold on to and let go of. When you have better ideas about those, then you can work on clinging and you have a better chance of success against clinging. When you think about suffering and worthwhile, also think about desire, even if desire is not the main inquiry.

(A) (2) (H) The usual term for clinging is "attachment" but, in my English, "attachment" is neutral, clinical, polite, dry, high, and far. "Clinging" is closer and wetter. "Attachment" has technical meanings from psychology and biology that could cause confusion. In the Thai version of Pali, the usual term for both the relation of clinging and object of clinging is "kilet" ("gee" as in "go", "ee" as in "bee", and "late", so "gee late"). "Kilet" can mean anything from consistent interest to full-blown obsession. It can also mean a strong desire. There is no point going through the many Pali terms and I am not an expert anyway.

(A) (2) (I) I do not say whether to end desire and clinging, or overcome, is to suppress them. Buddhism is not clear. Buddhism is clear that, when fully successful (awake), we should never feel suffering even if we feel the conditions that lead to suffering such as missing a friend after he-she dies. To see Buddhist ideas primarily in mental ways, in terms only of psychology, leads easily to errors. Sheldon from TVs "Big Bang" correctly complained of this view when Amy held it. Also, "suppressing" raises issues about mental health, especially in the modern age when we are supposed not to suppress anything, and those issues are not useful here, so I avoid them.

(A) (2) (J) When you read enough Buddhism, you might see that Theravada tends to say on "end desires, and clinging automatically is not an issue" while Mahayana tends to say "end clinging and automatically you can overcome desires". The distinction is not sharp. Both schools try to handle both desires and clinging, and both schools pretty much teach the defeat of desires and clinging. Both schools teach both end and overcome although I have not detected typical patterns (I have not looked hard).

(A) (2) (K) Humans evolved desires and clinging. Desires and clinging are natural. The Dharma gave us desires and clinging. As noted in Part 1 of this chapter, to end-or-overcome desires and clinging is to use

nature against nature, Dharma against Dharma. Smart people in Dharma systems say it is not to use Nature-Dharma against Nature-Dharma but to use Dharma to fulfill Nature-Dharma, to realize its highest potential. I don't think that is what original Buddhism had in mind. Also, using Nature-Dharma against Nature-Dharma is related to a logical problem about "let go of letting go" that I note below. These issues get worse when we recall that our desires evolved and are part of our deepest nature. I don't belabor any of this because it takes too long and is not needed here. I do point the issues out because they are fun to think about and because they show up in various guises in further reading.

(A) (2) (L) My response to all this is "manage", which is like a mix of overcome, end, and "let go" but does not require the full success of any. I work with desire, clinging, end, overcome, let go, and defeat as best I can. My stance is like Taoism and Zen but not exactly like either. I say more about manage below. I do not say much because this chapter is not really on that subject. The first Part of this book gives my idea of manage. Use and channel your evolved nature. Do the right things for the right reasons. Jesus told you what those are. Work hard to make the world better. Be decent. Make good institutions. Trust God.

(A) (3) More on Desire, Clinging, Balance and Imbalance, and Manage.

Buddhism becomes: to awaken, to end suffering, we have to defeat all desires. So, one of the highest-level goals of Buddhism becomes to defeat desires. Although not explicitly in the Four Truths, tradition adds: To defeat desires, end clinging. So, to end clinging and awaken, we use Aids such as meditation, and must become adept in using some Aids. That is how many laypeople and monks present Buddhism, as seeking to defeat all desires, as having the means to defeat all desires, and as dwelling in the means. But, Buddhism is not clear if defeat means to overcome or end; not clear what overcome or end mean; and it is vague about how to defeat, overcome, or end desires, despite definite techniques. The lack of clarity causes confusion.

I disagree with Buddhism that ending desire is effectively the highest goal by leading to all other goals. Instead, I think we need to manage desires, and we manage desires to make worthwhile life more so and to better work hard for the world. "Overcome", "end", "defeat", and "manage" have much in common but they are not entirely the same.

We cannot end all desires or even all clinging, yet Buddhism says that we do have to end all desires and clinging to end suffering and to awaken. I think (a) confusion over suffering and awakening, and (b) not coming to grips with the issue of worthwhile life, (1) lead to confusion over the teaching that we have to end all desires and clinging, and (2) blind Buddhism to the desires and clinging that it does keep. This, in turn, opens the way for Mahayana and Hinduism and for confusion in Mahayana and Hinduism.

Reminder: "Desire" includes not only obsessing over a job or a car but also the need for water on a hot day, the wish to see a particular person, the wish to see a particular show on TV, love for art, ideas such as triumph of democracy and awakening, attitudes such as irritability and compassion, emotions such as love for family and hate of "them", the search to end clinging, seeking to end desire, seeking to awaken, seeking to follow the Dharma, hopes, and dreams. Often desires have objects such as the family that we love and to wake up. Even irritability has a kind-of object in that we wish to be left alone or wish to bite somebody's head off. It is useful sometimes to think of desires in terms of their objects.

(1) People have desires given to us by evolution, as for air, water, food, shelter, clothing, sex, mates, family life, some wealth, some power, friends, community, and links to spirits. (2) We can abuse natural desires by (a) doing them too often or too seldom or (b) doing them too much or too little, (c) so they are out of normal healthy balance with other desires and activities. (3) We can learn desires such as for success in a profession, a big asset portfolio, success as a monk, awakening, or salvation. (3a) Some learned desires have a firm natural base such as interest in pretty people. (3b) Some desires might have a basis in evolved nature but seem fairly independent such as desires for a tattoo or to make a scientific contribution. (4) As with natural desires, we can abuse them by (4a) doing them too often or too seldom or (4b) doing them too much or too little. We can go crazy over pop music, money, fashion (“The Devil Wears Prada”), or cornering the market on oranges (“Trading Places”). Some learned desires are fairly reasonable, we do not go crazy over them, and we fit them into our lives, such as the need to care for a lawn or to see a stage play. (5) Some desires are good or bad, regardless of their closeness to nature, how much they are learned, or their role in balance or imbalance. How much and how often we do them might make some difference but not enough to consider here. We must stress the good and reduce the bad. (6) Some desires are so bad and so aberrant that all religions and penal codes descry them, such as serial child molesting. I don’t consider them here.

Badness such as clinging comes through desires but some good things come through desires as well, often indirectly, but just as surely. We learn lesson through what we get that we weren’t looking for, and what we learn indirectly often is more valuable than the object of the desire. Put aside the movies and TV, and think how much young people learn when they buy their first car, especially, in the old days, when it needed work. People learn when they buy a house, especially if it needs work. People learn when they take care of a child even as a babysitter. People learn when they get a job with real responsibilities for property, life, and other people, even small responsibilities. People learn from disappointments from the objects of desire, as when a beloved old car finally dies. We learn to let go of desires but we also learn how to better manage some of the desires that we hold on to.

In the modern world, few of us have a good balance in our desires, so we don’t lead satisfying worthwhile lives as a result of a good balance. We are too far from nature and human nature. We compulsively do things to make up for emptiness such as binge TV or treat ourselves. Few of us are fiends obsessed and warped by desire, and so do harm, like a serial killer or rapist. Most of us live in a cloud of befuddlement, out of balance, compulsively seeking treats, compulsively pursuing a few juicy things such as success or romance, not treating other people and nature as we should, not being good citizens, with gnarled minds, doing more harm than we can admit. We all need to do better.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, teach us to accept most desires that have a fairly firm link to evolved human nature, are moral, and not far out of balance. They teach us to be moderate so we keep a healthy balance and our minds are clear enough to connect with God and to make us good neighbors. They also teach us not to be entirely natural but to depart from nature and rise above nature: “Thou shall not covet thy neighbor’s wife or other stuff” (the sexism is deliberate). They teach us to suppress bad desires even if those are natural such as to steal, gossip, and kill. No religion is purely natural.

In theory, Theravada, Mahayana, and Hinduism teach us to get away from nature entirely and to escape the Wheel by overcoming or ending all desires including all natural desires. In practice, they leave that goal for an indefinite “later time” and instead they teach people to defeat their desires. Still, they never

entirely abandon “end or overcome all desire” as the highest goal. They treat all desires, natural or learned, in balance or out, as if those desires were among the desires that drive us out of balance, drive us half-crazy, or make us fiends.

Don't brush off Buddhism and Hinduism as silly and don't embrace deistic religions as if they are all for nature and all for balance. Buddhism certainly knows a good healthy natural balance from an unhealthy unnatural obsessed imbalance. Achieving a good healthy natural balance is a huge intermediate step on the way to final release, like the Buddha giving up harsh asceticism and letting his own natural vigor re-assert. It is on the Middle Way. In practice, Buddhism seems more likely to lead to good healthy natural balance than most deism. That is why, despite the dogma of “no desires at all”, Buddhism is charming and it appeals widely. Deistic religions can get crazy and lead people far away from nature and healthy balance. To me, John Calvin and Calvinist schools seem unnatural, bent on suppressing normal healthy desires, obsessed, out of balance, and near crazy.

While, in practice, the Dharma-based religions allow for keeping many desires and for finding a balance among desires, even so, they are not clear about ending desires and about balance. Lack of clarity makes confusion and contributes to the hole in the center of a system that eats the world.

No religion has a magic formula, or even a magic hallowed code, that says unerringly which desires, in which amounts, how often, we should pursue, and which we should overcome or suppress. Especially no religion has a formula for the modern world. All religions give good advice; and some codes, such as the Ten Commandments and the sayings of Jesus, still have great value. Simply mouthing “The Middle Path” does not do the trick but it can be a good place to start. All religions give bad advice and bad codes. When modern people find a pattern that suits them, often they can't tell if the pattern fits with the spirit of their religion or any religion. This gap leaves us open to anxiety and to control. It is worth thinking about you own desires and pattern of acting in light of your religious convictions, if only to reduce anxiety and make you less vulnerable to stupid ideas and bad people. Don't think the end of the world is nigh if your pattern does not mesh perfectly with some religion.

Likely the strongest example in recent art of bad desire, bad balance, clinging, struggle, and suffering is Gollum from “Lord of the Rings”. We find it hard to accept that Gollum is not a total aberration but is an extension of natural tendencies. Gollum is what happens to people trapped in a sticky world; caught in desire and clinging; mind defiled; twisted horribly; and suffering. Each of us is like Gollum in our ways. Recall “you are that” from the Upanishads. Even good Frodo falls victim. We are like Gollum not only in obvious addict-like clinging to power, wealth, sex, serving God, Dharma, the Tao, and magic rings, but in many smaller ways such as in loving sport, wanting a nice backyard, wanting to look good, loving family, and wanting our party to win always. Seeing Gollum as a logical yet perverted extension of nature and seeing our own self as like him is not a hammer seeing every issue as a nail. It is not an overstatement. It is not seeing the world as a sour melodrama of clinging and suffering. It is partial waking up, seeing what is really going on with ALL of us more than we had imagined. We are all Gollum-in-the-making. After we see, then we have to figure out what to do, and then actually do it. Buddhism sees the Gollum in all of us and wants to lead us away from that.

The orthodox Buddhist view is based on suffering and strongly implies that life is not worthwhile. In that view, a person must defeat all stickiness, desire, and clinging so as to defeat suffering and succeed, to

awaken. A person needs to end all mental defilements and needs to think with perfect consistency and clarity to end suffering and to awaken. To make sure you never are Gollum, you have to end not merely excess or imbalance but use a purified intellect to defeat all desires. The Buddhist ideal is “anti-Gollum”. The Buddhist ideal does not follow the Middle Path; it goes to one extreme to defeat all desire.

In my view based on “life is worthwhile”, in what I call “managing”, a person need not overcome all desire totally but needs only to manage stickiness, desire, clinging, etc. well enough. A person need not think with perfect clarity and consistency but only well enough. It is not easy, it is hard. My ideal is less anti-Gollum and more like Tom Bombadil, although I do not aim for the perfection of Tom Bombadil, his ability not to desire or cling to even absolute power. (Tom Bombadil is not the anti-Gollum any more than he is the anti-Gandalf, anti-Frodo, super-Frodo, anti-Sauron, or super-Sam.)

You can gain from this chapter whether you think in terms of overcoming-ending or merely managing, you think of an ideal mind free of all defilement or an evolved mind well skilled, and think in terms of suffering, not worthwhile, or worthwhile.

Regardless of overcome or end, in Buddhism, you may not have any desires for anything immoral or harmful to people and nature. If you want to awaken soon, then Buddhism also disallows sex. Buddhism disallows family because family needs a high level of commitment and participation. Buddhism disallows other interests that quickly lead to obsession and over-indulgence, such as politics, even if through them you might do some good. Buddhism is wary of art for the same reason even though art also does a lot of good. Although Buddhism seems to allow some desires, in fact, still the ideal seems to end-or-overcome any-and-all desire.

Buddhism allows different attitudes toward desire for people of different “grades” of spiritual achievement and striving. Monks hold higher standards than lay people. Even so, it is not clear to what standards monks are held, to what standards what grades of lay people are held, and why. Desire can be an all-bad word, a half-bad word, or a merely natural word.

A common Buddhist reply to “which desires and clinging, how much, and what to do” is simply meditate. Stop all this jabbering. Stop seeking formulas – “that topic tends not to edification” - and do something proven. This advice actually does work well, about half as well as Buddhists wish. If you meditate at least fifteen minutes per day, you do reduce many desires, get rid of others, develop some good desires, and find a more healthy moral beneficial balance. All the people who do yoga-with-some-meditation or who take “mindfulness” courses can testify that it works. But meditation is not the whole answer. Even if you simply sit quietly for 15 minutes daily, you would gain much the same benefit. If you sit for 15 minutes a day and do nothing but think about your desires, you would gain much the same benefit. If you chant 15 minutes daily, likely you would improve. Despite claims that special techniques of Theravada, Mahayana, and Hinduism differ much, in fact they are much the same. Yet the outcomes, what people see, feel, and wake up to, differ. What people get out of meditation depends a lot on what they expect and on what teachers and fellow students tell them. I think the result depends more on that than on the actual techniques. So I doubt meditation alone is the answer even when it comes with correct teaching. In any case, it is not the answer in this book, and, here, we have to use our minds to see what is right. We have to find the correct teaching. This is one lesson from the Buddha leaving his meditation classes and teaching himself.

The desire to defeat desires, and confusion over what it means to defeat desires, leads to bad attitudes among Buddhists. Buddhists, including Mahayanists, think that to defeat desires leads to a person who is cold, haughty, indifferent to the world, above the world, and above other people. In this mistaken view, a spiritually advanced person becomes repressed, fairly nasty, and a master of passive aggression. Of course, the perpetrator denies that he-she is like that. While Buddhists understand this perversion, and condemn it, still, when they want to act Buddhist, this is how too many act. Without doubt, Buddhism and the Buddha would deny this use of Buddhist ideas and would advise these people to “knock it off”, grow up, and get better.

Deistic religions have the same attitudes toward human nature, human quirks, and sin. They offer many ways to control troublesome quirks and sin. Most ways don't work well and many lead to bad attitudes typical of deistic religions.

This confusion in Buddhism over which desires needs what treatment leads to many special terms for desire, attitudes, and objects of desire. Buddhists like special terms because the terms give Buddhists a feeling of precision and the terms makes it easier for Buddhists of one school to argue with Buddhists of another or with non-Buddhists. I do not deal much with terms here. I do discuss a few below.

For convenience, here I give one attitude as the standard view but allow for variations. I adhere to what I think was the original view of Buddhism shortly after the Buddha – I don't know if this was the view of the Buddha. The ultimate goal is to defeat ALL clinging and desires. If necessary, you should be able to starve. End all clinging, not merely overcome. Ultimately, you need at least to overcome all desires. In practice, you have to end most desires too. You may feel a few desires such as for air, water, and the Dharma. You may act on simple natural desires such as for food, water, and basic shelter as long as you do not cling. Seeking any particular food is wrong. Until you can do better, you may have some bad thoughts such as about triumph over a foe but may not act on them; and, in the end, you have to end such thoughts too. You must to let go of (end) many natural desires such as for family. Eventually you must end links to family too. You may have friends as long as you do not think of them much or often, and you can do without them in case they go away or die. You do not seek balance (balance is a desire) except perhaps a simple balance made of only a few basic desires. Only this way can you end all mental defilements, think with full consistency and clarity, overcome suffering, and awaken.

I disagree with this stance. I advise readers to seriously think through their opinions on desire, acting on desire, and managing or controlling desires.

When you read a text in Buddhism or any religion, ask what the text thinks about: desire, natural desire, learned desire, good desire, bad desire, acting on desire, ignoring desire, letting desire go through you, not feeling desire at all, clinging, the balance of desires, and letting go of desires. Ask what the religion wants as the final goal with desires and what it allows for most normal people in the meantime. One text can have multiple views. Then decide for yourself.

(A) (4) Life, Stickiness, Desire, Clinging, Not Worthwhile, and Suffering.

Recall Gollum from above and that he is an extension of normal natural life with normal natural desires. How do we live without becoming Gollum? Can we live normally without becoming Gollum?

To live normally is to desire. In the orthodox view, as long as you live, until you have conquered suffering and awakened, you must still desire, and nearly all desire goes inevitably to clinging, mental distortion, more desire and more clinging. Even desire for normal natural things such as family and friends usually is bad because it leads us to cling and leads to a muddled mind. As long as you do not see that life is not worthwhile, desire cannot end. In my view also, you cannot live, and you cannot think life is worthwhile, without desiring. Much of what you desire is harmful but not all of it. You need to sort out what you can reasonably desire without causing too much confusion and harm, and you need to let go of the rest. In both views, even if you are not aware you desire, as long as you think life is worthwhile, you must desire. In the orthodox view, that is bad. In my view, that can be good as long as we learn to want less and want reasonably.

The Buddhist term that I render “desire” is usually translated “hunger” or “crave”. It can also mean “have a strong appetite for”, “wish for”, or “want”. The term can be used for sex drive, drive for power, etc. The phrase for “obtain the object of hunger” is to “eat” the object, so that a woman who seduces a man can be said to “eat” the man; she does not roast him and devour him in forkfuls.

The Buddhist terms remind us that already we are using metaphors. Buddhist terms are biased toward seeing normal natural un-awakened relations with the world as aberrant and harmful; we “crave” water, love, and wisdom rather than simply “thirst” for them. More usefully, the Buddhist terms reminds us that hunger can be put off for a while but always returns. No matter how we stuff our bellies on Thanksgiving, we will be hungry again on Monday. No matter who we have sex with on Saturday, we fantasize again on Sunday. No matter who pledges love to me on Monday, and how ardently she pledges her love, I wonder again by Tuesday. We are never satisfied. The terms also remind us of close links between body and mind. We think of hunger as from the body but also it is guided by the mind, and is of the mind too. We thirst for water, wisdom, and security. People that crave chocolate have bodily and mental addiction. In Buddhist mythology, people who crave strongly in this life, after they die and before they are reborn, go for a while to a hell where they crave always but can never be full, like Tantalus; they are called “hungry ghosts” or “praet”. The term “praet” also applies to living people who crave power, sex, wealth, fame, success, justification, salvation, heaven, be a hero, to save all the unborn, save nature, save “my people”, be a bodhisattva, awaken, etc.

The average life is not a rancid cloud of perverted craving but it is lost in stickiness, desires, and clinging anyway. Buddhism seeks not only to save (awaken) abject sinners but more to save (awaken) average people who do not even see how lost in desire and clinging they are. To see desire and clinging among common persons, we can use strong-but-still-mostly-sane cases such as of shopping addiction or sports addiction. We should not rely on obvious crazy clinging, such as by Kim Jong Un (North Korean dictator in 2017). You personally need to feel how much you desire, strive, and cling, how much it shapes your mind, how much it channels your life, and how much of it is not necessary and harmful. Then you need to manage or to stop altogether.

I use “desire” because “desire” gets across the ideas and it reminds that I am not using official Buddhist terms. “Hunger” and “crave” suggest all naturally-based desire is wrong, perverted, and bizarre addictive

disease. Both terms imply we cannot have reasonable natural desires, all natural desires are necessarily harmful. A person can be retrained not to desire harmful things but a person cannot be retrained not to crave air, food, and water unless he-she is willing to die. We learn most desires but we do not learn most hungers. We do learn most cravings but not all learned desires are cravings, for example, desire to vote. People see that many desires are not addictive hunger-driven mad cravings. They wrongly think: "I am not caught up in stickiness, desire, and clinging; I am not confused; I am stronger than what Buddhists say; all is right with me; and Buddhism is silly." We need a term to see that most people are lost in vainly chasing swollen natural desires and silly desires without implying all of us are fiends. It is better to use a modest term than to use a strong scary term that overstates and so gives people a false out.

I assume the orthodox Buddhist view based on suffering implies that life is not worthwhile, and I take "life is not worthwhile" to be the Buddhist view. I assume "life is not worthwhile" is implied by the meaning of "desire" that I gave above, and vice versa. They go together. I use the idea of "not worthwhile" more often than the idea of "suffering" but I still intend "not worthwhile" to refer to Buddhism. When I want to stress my view, I say so.

All desire, even reasonable desire but especially too-strong desire, leads to thinking life is worthwhile, and thinking life is worthwhile leads to desire. To desire and to think life is worthwhile is to cling and is to fall into the stickiness of life. They all come together. This insight is basic. This idea is true in the Buddhist view and my view. Buddhists think it must be bad while I think some of it is alright.

When we think life is worthwhile and we mix up our desires with worthwhileness, then our desires become too big and entrenched. We need to reduce desires and clinging by reducing the link between them and the feeling that life is worthwhile. In my view, we need to see that life is worthwhile without using that as an excuse to desire too many things too hard. We need to use that as a basis to manage rather than as a basis for error.

We can have strong desires and strong clinging, and then convince ourselves that life is worthwhile as a way to justify our obsession. In art, people who are obsessed with power feel their lives are worthwhile, regardless of others, as a way to justify their greed, such as Voldemort. It might help to think of ordinary lives as weaker versions. In my view, we need to make the sufferer see life is worthwhile apart from his-her desires, and he-she can find the true worthwhileness of life only by giving up wrong desire. That is what literary heroes do, as when Luke Skywalker saved his father but not the Emperor.

We could get people to stop desiring and clinging if we convinced them life is not worthwhile. Buddhists may do this if they really think life is not worthwhile, if "beset by suffering" makes life not worthwhile. If you do not believe that life is not worthwhile, then telling people life is not worthwhile as a way to get them to stop clinging is dishonest and dangerous. If we do believe life is worthwhile, it is better to accept what we believe, and then find a way to desire properly and to hold properly without going too far and without clinging harmfully. All the same is true of suffering.

People overlook that life is "sticky" and we cling to it. "Stickiness" is to get involved, often more and more involved. An old term for having a romantic attachment was being "stuck" on a person, as in "George is 'stuck' on Sally". Another old term for a romantic attachment is "involved". We call romantic relations "an attachment". A funny TV show in 2016 was "My Crazy Ex-Girlfriend". We say that life "sucks us in". You

can recall for yourself the line from “The Godfather”. In a TV ad from in 2015, a young man out with his buddies at a party sees many attractive young women and says he will never commit to only one, but he does and they marry; the couple sees other couples with kids and says “we’ll never have any kids”, but they do; they say “we’ll always live in the city, never in the suburbs”, but they move; they say “we’ll never buy a minivan”, but they do; after the angst of the first child, they say “we’ll never have more children”, but they do. People start out watching one football game in college and stay lifelong fans even if they don’t really get the game and they don’t really enjoy the game more than alternatives such as watching movies. People take a path in college, such as anthropology, and stay on it all their lives even though they don’t get nearly as much satisfaction as they hoped and they never really try alternatives. People buy a house in one school district and that is their lives, and the lives of their children, for thirty years. We roll a dice or deal some cards, and it is five hours later. We pick up the first beer and it is a six pack later. We open a bag of chips and suddenly it is empty. All life is like this. In the novel “Light in August”, William Faulkner described how life easily traps us: a man has to care for a pregnant woman although he is not the father but just because she is Life and Life needs tending. Once you’ve made the first kill or the first save, it’s all over.

To desire is to cling. To desire and to cling are to fall into the stickiness of life like a fly on flypaper. To desire food, water, and shelter is to cling to them. Even when what we desire is normal and good, to desire is to cling and to fall into the stickiness of life. To desire an apple is to cling to the apple even after we have eaten the apple and are no longer hungry; we remember the apple so we can think of it again when we get hungry, think about what temporarily allayed our hunger, and go find another apple; and that is to cling to the apple. To love a person is to desire the welfare of him-her, and that is to cling and stick. To desire social justice is to cling and to stick.

Life inevitably is a struggle. Clinging is a struggle, even when successful. To struggle is to cling even if we are not aware that we cling. If we desire food, we have to struggle for food. In our past, the idea that life was desire, and desire was struggle, was more obvious when we had to go out every day to look for food, and when we had to fight other beasts. Even now, if we think a little, it should be clear that we have to struggle through “the daily grind”, and we have to compete to get and hold a job, because we desire. Even if we make a good salary, going to the grocery store is a struggle, a truth about which many funny TV sketches have been done. We desire and we struggle because we live and because we think life is worthwhile. With every breath we take, every swallow of water, every bite even of veggies, every time we walk on the lawn, we kill thousands of small life forms – or else they would kill us. We have to struggle to live and killing is part of struggle.

Because life, desire, and struggle come together, other ways to say “life is not worthwhile” are: “life is not worth the struggle, bother, fuss, or aggravation” and “life isn’t worth the candle”. This view does not mean life is a torment and we should kill ourselves. It only means there is no sure pot of gold at the sure end of a sure rainbow. Nor is looking for the pot of gold better than finding the pot of gold; the journey is not the destination. Even if we find a rainbow, an end to the rainbow, and a pot of shiny metal, often the metal is only glitter. Even if the gold is real, soon gold runs out and we want more. There is no end to struggle, clinging, and stickiness. For elusiveness of pots and gold, see the old Disney movie “Darby O’Gill and the Little People” starring young Sean Connery. It is good family fun.

Desire, clinging, and struggle lead to fear and suffering. Even if this life seems happy, even if right now we have a lot, life is still fraught with fear and suffering. At the least, like dragons and Sith, we fear to lose what we have. We fear other people. We suffer when we do lose even small things. We need not suffer great loss, such as death, for us to be haunted by fear and suffering. When we fear, we cling harder and we desire more. Then we fall into a vicious circle, the Wheel, out of which it is hard to climb.

Even when we think we “see through life”, even when we see life is unfair, illusory, changeable, painful, a struggle, and often not very real, we wrongly cling to life. We think life is worthwhile. We struggle against the results of our own mind. We allow one part of our mind, irrational hope, to dominate our whole mind. We cling to aspects of life, such as family, friends, wealth, power, goodness, fun, career, etc. because we think those are worthwhile. When we think parts of life are worthwhile, we think all of life is worthwhile. When we think all life is worthwhile, we think parts of life are worthwhile, even when, as in business, love, and family, often they are not. Buddhism offered insightful accounts of why we cling, and how, many of which insights anticipate modern ideas from evolutionary theory.

Life, desire, the mistaken idea that life is worthwhile, clinging, stickiness, struggle, fear, and suffering all come together.

In Buddhism, the best antidote to this complex of mistakes is to see that life is not worthwhile. We can undo this complex of mistakes by focusing on any component but the most direct and total way is to see directly that life is not worthwhile. As long as we think life is worthwhile, we can rationalize other aspects in this complex of mistakes. If we think life is worthwhile, we can rationalize stickiness, clinging, desire, struggle, fear, and suffering. Once we see life is not worthwhile, all aspects in this complex fall. If we do not see that life is not worthwhile, we err. The idea “life is not worthwhile” best conveys the totality of Buddhist thinking. Orthodox Buddhism picks apart the complex of errors by starting with suffering and desire but it stops short of explicitly saying life is not worthwhile.

It does help to see that suffering is anti-desirable; it hurts. The only way to end suffering is to see that life is not worthwhile. To see life is not worthwhile, it helps to see the roles that desire, stickiness, clinging, and struggle play in leading us to think life is worthwhile.

Rather than cure this complex of mistakes only by seeing that life is not worthwhile, orthodox Buddhism also says we can (1) think with total clarity and consistency, so see that life is beset by suffering, and so totally conquer all suffering. We conquer suffering by conquering clinging and desire. I suggest we can (2) think well enough and thereby managing desire, clinging, and suffering. Option (1) is harder and less accurate than simply seeing life is not worthwhile, and likely it would lead us to see life is not worthwhile in the end. You might as well see life is not worthwhile from the “get go”. So option (1) often amounts to seeing directly that life is not worthwhile. Option (2) is hard, takes much practice, is not guaranteed, and takes constant work, but it can succeed. We can learn to let go of a lot of stuff, think well enough, and manage our lives, if we put our minds to it and we have help. Option (2) is not as metaphysical and glamorous as option (1) or as Mahayana is but I prefer it. Again, I don't know what the Buddha did or what he would advise.

(A) (5) More on Not Clinging and on Letting Go.

Rather than say all the time “end clinging and overcome desire” it is easier to use one phrase, so usually I choose “let go”. Besides convenience, “let go” fits with how people see Buddhism now, and I like the idea of “let go”. “Let go” is like “just walk away” but it happens not only on the obvious level such as walking away from a relationship or a damaged car but also in your mind and your self.

In using the phrase “let go”, we are tempted to forget the variety of things that we have to let go of, forget we cannot approach each sticky desire the same, and that the world is sticky in itself. So “let go” is not a simple single “attitude adjustment” by us. Please don’t forget.

Ideally the largest time-and-effort spent on Buddhist Aids is on learning to see how we are caught in a sticky world, see how we cling, and learning to end clinging, defeat clinging, or to let go (in practice, the largest time-and-effort likely is for mental-spiritual power). I think the original intent of the Buddhist Aid “suffering” was this, learning to see how we are caught and learning to defeat clinging. Aids of cause-and-effect, dependent origination, “whatever has a beginning has an end”, learning to see satisfaction is limited, and the limited self, are all aimed at seeing stickiness, clinging, and how to let go. Learning to let go is a big deep art. It is valuable in itself, and in learning how to manage, regardless of awakening. Learning Buddhist Aids so as to learn how to let go is well worthwhile.

Not to cling, to “let go”, is not like giving up something for Lent and it is not like Muslim Ramadan. It is not giving up on the world in the usual sense of having been defeated by the world. It is not giving up one thing to get another, even better, thing, like an athlete giving up parties. It is more like these: (a) You are a good golfer but now you are 40 years old, and you realize you are never going to win the Masters’ Golf Tournament. You are fine with that. (b) You go to China for a vacation where you eat real Chinese food. You know that, where you live, you will never get food like this again. You savor what you had and then give it up. You are fine with that. (c) You work for a big company or for the state. You know you could start a business, succeed, make a name for yourself, and maybe a small fortune. But you also see the toll it has taken on others. So you give it up. You are fine with that. (d) Your children are smart enough easily to go to a good state college but the children of your neighbor are smart enough to get scholarships to Ivy League schools. You are fine with that. (e) Your “ne’er-do-well” sad-sack brother wins the Lotto for 276 million dollars. You and your kids will see only a dribble. You are fine with that. (f) Your daughter gets knocked up by a loser. You learn to live with it and to make the best of it. (g) You are out for a long walk in the country and the rain pours. In your head, you hear the Beatles’ song “Rain” and you finally really get it. (h) You finally accept that mass populist democracy is failing. (i) You see that your religion does not have all the final truth, even if it might be better than other religions. (j) You see that whoever you held as the highest and most holy, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammad, Chuang Tzu, Confucius, Moses, or Krishna, is not really a supreme being with unlimited powers.

In most cases above, people can be “fine with that” because they got what they could out of it, and, on the whole, they gained more than they lost. In Buddhism, letting go is not like that. It is not giving up something because you got what you could out of it, or because, by giving it up, you gain more than you lose. You just give it up. You just let go. You don’t worry anymore about where the balance falls, about gains and losses, costs and benefits. In Western terms, by letting go, you gain freedom, and in Taoism, you gain by living in accord with the Tao, but in Buddhism, you don’t even think in those terms. You just give it up. The time for it has come and gone, and now it goes. Yes, you can. Some Buddhists might say you lose the world but gain the Dharma, like Taoists gain the Tao, but, I think, “pure” Buddhism would

not even seek this bargain. You can say what you give up held you back so you must gain more than you lose when you let it go, but that view really distorts what happens. You can say you gain final release, but, since you would be dead and totally gone at the end of such a lifetime, it is odd to say that you gain something. You can gain some peace during what remains of this lifetime but, if that is primarily why, then you still cling to peace, you won't get peace, and you need to let that go of striving for that kind of peace too. Just let go.

Again: "Just let go" is much easier if you also see life is not worthwhile, and much harder if you can't see life is not worthwhile or you insist life is worthwhile. The same applies to learning to manage what we can properly hold on to from what we should let. "Just let go" and "not worthwhile" go well together and they do not go well separately.

In Buddhism, one of the hardest things that people have to let go of is the idea that they are an eternal soul-self. They have to let go of that idea of the self so they can see that their own self comes into being, holds together, and goes apart, like many other things of the world, like an elephant or an ecosystem. You need to practice on letting go of other things before letting go of the mistaken idea of the self as an eternal soul-self. See Part 7 below for more on the self in Buddhism.

Using "let go" opens the door to bad thinking and to abuse. It can become a source of confusion or "mental defilement". "I have let go", "I will let go", or "I can let go of whatever I wish whenever I wish" becomes a bad excuse. By simply saying "let go", we forget that not all clinging and desire are the same, that we have to approach different cases of clinging and desire differently, and sometimes "end" is better while sometimes "overcome" is better. We get sloppy and make needless hurtful mistakes. We think we end-or-overcome clinging and end-or-overcome desire when all we really do is gloss over them. They are still there. We still desire and cling but not we cover it over with another layer of desiring and clinging. We think we have let go because we have a phrase but really we hold on harder than ever. "Let go" has become a magic phrase, and that use is an abuse. It is always a good idea to check "let go" by thinking through the case in terms of end, overcome, desire, and clinging. Only after you have become adept at end and overcome in many cases can you relax when you use "let go".

Even if, like me, you think life is worthwhile and do not accept Buddhist ideas about not worthwhile life and suffering, it is still worthwhile to see the reality of stickiness, desire, clinging, and the suffering that they bring. It is still worthwhile to manage. Buddhists Aids help. Buddhism can make a worthwhile life even more worthwhile through managing stickiness, clinging, desires, and suffering.

(A) (6) More on What to Cling to and What to Let Go of.

This section does solve the title problem but it might help some. For what I think we should hold on to and what let go of, see Part One of this book.

Evolved nature guides humans to hold on to some things and let go of others depending on the situation; yet that is precisely what Buddhism wants people to rise above. Virtually all religions and philosophies say hold to some things hard (God, Justice) and let go of others sometimes (Pride). Even hedonism says hold to pleasure and let go of pain. Virtually all schools differ from simple nature or they would not be needed – even Taoism is not only natural. How does Buddhism differ? What makes Buddhism distinct?

This question is hard to answer and I don't give a firm answer here. Again, you have to read and decide. Ask some Buddhists.

Buddhism does not advise that we stop breathing, stop drinking water, or stop eating until we die. It does say a monk should be willing to starve to death if nobody gives him (now her) food. Nobody can let go of morality. Breathing, drinking, eating, and morality can be enjoyable. Buddhism differs on whether it says we should try to breathe, drink, eat, and act well without the joy – some schools sprinkle ashes over the food of monks to cover any possible good taste to which monks might cling. Buddhism does not advise that we never talk to other humans or we could not teach. Buddhism used to advise men monks almost never to talk to women.

Once we open the door to as little as the good taste of water or the incidental joy that comes of doing the right thing, it seems as if all else might come rushing in but usually that is not the case. Instead, simple things such as breathing, eating, drinking, talking, and acting well give seekers practice for what might be too sticky and so should be let go right away and what might be used to benefit in modest doses. Practice on simple things shows that anything might be a problem. It does not show that we can deal with everything if only we are adept enough – some things remain too dangerous regardless of skill level such as family and power. I don't go into specifics or methods.

This step forward still does not show how Buddhism differs from other disciplines except it shows that, in ideal Buddhism, unlike Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, we should be willing to let go of anything if need be. Everything is a candidate for “too sticky” and for letting go. As monks practice Buddhism, in fact most monks do eventually try to let go of everything except bodily functions and needed social functions. Lay people are not expected to let go of that much but they are expected to understand deeply the idea of letting go and to see how theoretically it could apply to anything.

Practicing on simple things also teaches another important lesson: If we are careful, we can enjoy some things while they last, if we don't expect them to last longer than their natural length, don't expect them to be more enjoyable than they usually naturally are, and don't take steps to make them last longer or make more joy than their natural span and strength. If you have to breathe, sometimes you might as well enjoy it – meditation uses that tendency to advantage. As long as you know you do have to let go and you do actually let go, then go along with what comes your way.

In theory, as I understand theory, monks and lay people differ this way: Monks should plan nothing that leads to enjoyment for the enjoyment while lay people may, can, do and should plan. In practice, even monks do some planning as when they plan to learn Pali so they can read Buddhist texts in the original languages. Monks plan for fewer things than do lay people. Except for religious devotion, the level of planning by monks to sustain something desirable is much less than among lay people for most things in their lives such as house, car, and entertainment, and the level of planning by monks should dwindle as the monk's career goes along. While lay people may plan, they should learn not to plan too much and not to expect too much. For that, they can get the help of experienced and good-minded monks.

Now we have a range of possibilities:

(1) Let go of everything.

- (2) Be willing to let go of everything or be on the verge of letting go of everything.
- (3) Enjoy things as they come, as long as you take no current steps to extend or enhance.
- (4) Let go of conventional useless morality but keep real useful morality.
- (5) Enjoy things as they come, as long as you don't plan to extend or enhance.
- (6) Plan to extend or enhance as long as nothing is immoral, most of the joy is in normal human things such as family, and you are sure you won't fall into anything like lust for power.
- (7) Plan to extend or enhance but have confidence on your ability to step away even from things such as wealth, sex, and power.
- (8) You may plan for normal modest human activities such as career and family but you must stay away from ways that suck you into pride, power, and lust such as politics, business, academia, media, art, and administration.
- (9) Participate in responsible professions even if they are tempting and sticky because the world needs responsible smart people to guide it.
- (10) Let go of morality of as much real morality as you wish.
- (11) Go ahead and enjoy all aspects of the world as much as you want without regard to morality, or enjoy morality too if that's what "gets you off".
- (12) Force the world to give you what you desire for as long as you desire.

Most people, including most Buddhists, are not sure where Buddhism lies for whom. Different schools of Buddhism give different answers. Mahayana accuses Theravada of pushing everybody toward (1) and it claims to lie somewhere about (3) to (5). Theravada says that Mahayana actually falls somewhere along (6) through (11) because the temptation is too great and the world too sticky. Some Mahayana monks are allowed to carouse, have sex, and have families. Westerners think Buddhism falls somewhere along (3) or (4), and many Westerners would like to do that too, but few people ever achieve it. All abbots of big monasteries dabble in (6) and (9) whether they know so or not.

I often stress that we should manage life, clinging, and suffering rather than forcibly let go. Managing lies in the range of (3 to (9) most of the time, but can go to (2) or (1) if conditions get bad.

In Part 2, I mentioned that happiness is a good test case to understand how suffering afflicts life, and the "ins and outs" of clinging and letting go. Here would be the right place to take up that question again but I delay the topic until after dealing with a few more issues.

(A) (7) Really Letting Go in Buddhist Style.

Religions say we are too caught up in selfishness and worldly affairs but they offer little by way of what to do other than platitudes, good wishes, and ritual. Christianity offers a great general frame in the Golden Rule but few specifics about how to quit selfishness. In contrast, Buddhism offers specific effective ways. I do not describe them here. The release we get from Buddhist methods not only can help us to awaken but makes us better persons and helps make the world better. The methods are among Buddhist Aids and so have risk but, used adeptly, they are worth the risk.

Everybody knows we are caught up in worldly affairs such as materialism, party politics, ethnic strife, and religious competition. We all know we are greedy. We like power, wealth, sex, booze, drugs, and media too much. We have the disease of gadgets such as cars and cell phones. We compete with neighbors. We are fashion slaves or we despise those who are fashion slaves – too often both.

Yet we do not see how we are also caught up in deeper self-ness. We think we really do deserve a break today and every day ten times a day, and we will take it regardless. Fine things exist, and other people have them, so I deserve fine things and I will get mine, if not for me, for my kids. I am the one-and-only exception to every rule. We excuse every grab because others are ahead of us and they are getting theirs so we should get ours. They made me do it, over and over again. Too often we are bad Sheldon. We think there is a level of wealth and power above which you “make it” and don’t have to worry, and we will do almost anything to get there. If I can’t get there myself, I make sure my kids get there and other kids remain below mine in comparison. I don’t make any of the above mistakes, I am a good person, I help others less able than me, and I am proud of it.

Even if we really aren’t selfish, we hold mistaken ideas such as: truth is always beautiful, if it is ugly it isn’t the truth, if it is too beautiful then it isn’t the truth, people show character in their faces, the world will turn out well in the end, it isn’t the end if it hasn’t turned out well, good guys will prevail, goodness will win just because it is good, bad systems are innately self-destructive, and bad guys all get theirs in the end either here on Earth or later in Hell.

Buddhist methods can lead us to these gritty levels and can make us confront ourselves. That is hard but is worthwhile. People who extol “mindfulness” are pushing in the right direction. Few religions other than Buddhism have Aids that work as well at this task.

Maybe the ideal is to blend Buddhist self-examination techniques with Christian-style morality. Taoism, Zen, and martial arts offer similar techniques but that is another topic.

(A) (8) What Happens, or Doesn’t Happen, When We “Just Let Go”.

In most religions, good things happen when we “just let go” in the right ways and right amounts. We see things that make life better. The world really was worthwhile all along but we did not see how worthwhile because our fear and ignorance blinded us. We become better. I do not list the good things that happen. “Islam” means “surrender (to God)”. Christianity teaches “just let go” in “trust God”, “love God”, “love your neighbor”, “cast your bread upon the waters and it will return to you many fold”, and “seek and you will find, knock and the door will open”. Learning to let go and to manage suffering lets us see more clearly,

think more adeptly, notice more good things in life, and make life more worthwhile. I don't think it makes life all wonderful.

In Theravada Buddhism, when we let go, the world does not get a lot better, get worthwhile. Usually we do become better individual people, we help others and the world, and we enjoy more honestly what is truly joyful – but we do not make the world worthwhile. We do not see that the world has been worthwhile all along but our fear and ignorance had blinded us. We see more clearly the same old beset-by-suffering pain-filled not-worthwhile world. Most Buddhists dislike that letting go does not reveal the world as better in the same way other religions say so. Buddhists have developed similar ideas of how letting go does make the world better, even make it worthwhile, or how letting go allows us to see it had been worthwhile all along. A key idea of Mahayana is that the world was deeply worthwhile all along; in fact, the world is full of magic that we can see and use only when we let go. The difference between Buddhism and other religions over letting go, matters. Think about implications of the difference between original Buddhism, what most Buddhists want, and what other religions say.

(A) (9) Trust the Dharma.

The real Buddhist version of letting go might not be “stop clinging” but “trust Dharma”. Buddhists believe the Dharma will help them if they act morally, study sincerely, listen to authorities, and practice diligently. They will make progress and they will be useful. They are as correct as are believers in other religions who think God, Tao, or Heaven will help them if they are sincere etc. I cannot argue against this belief because I share it: the world likely was set up so this belief is mostly true. We do get better when we try. In this sense, Buddhists do get a lot when they “just let go”. I like that.

Theravada Buddhists still don't get a world full of joy, Dharma, love, shiny magic, and realized embodied metaphysics (Jesus, often Mohammad, Great Buddha, bodhisattva, or avatar). Theravada Buddhists still don't solve suffering this way although they can seem to dispense with it. Mahayanists think they do get joy etc. and do miraculously overcome suffering but they are mostly wrong.

Trusting the Dharma can make us think more clearly and reduce suffering, so we can then think yet more clearly and reduce suffering even more, and so on; and this process seems to dissolve the problem of not worthwhile life. If we trust Dharma, life becomes worthwhile enough and we need not worry more. “Trust Dharma” can help with clear thinking, ease some suffering, and make life more worthwhile but it does not solve the problems of suffering or whether life is worthwhile. I don't go into detail why.

“Trust the Dharma”, if taken too far, stops being traditional Buddhism. Rather than using the ideas and methods of the Buddha to overcome suffering. “Trust Dharma”, becomes more like trusting God, Tao, Heaven, Dharma in Mahayana and Hinduism, Emptiness, or Buddha Mind, or like devotion in Hinduism. Buddhists who have a strong attitude of “trust the Dharma” can seem more like deists, etc. even when they use Buddhist Aids and Buddhist rhetoric. They do not see that they have veered from traditional Buddhism. A strong attitude of trust easily merges with magic, bad metaphysics, superstition, astrology, and bad elements of folk Buddhism. It can be hard to tell if a person trusts Dharma or trusts magic, spirits, astrology, his-her own pride, etc. Other religions have the same problem with simplistic trust and devotion. “Trust the Dharma, a lot” might be alright and it might even be better than traditional Buddhism

but it is not traditional Buddhism. A little of “trust the Dharma” is quite good but more is too much - a case of the Middle Path even with core ideas.

(A) (10) Let Go of Letting Go.

The material in this section runs up against a logical problem that you should not get “hung up” on. The logical problem is not simply a fun game but also introduces a real issue. It came up above in the issue of the joy in knowing there is not satisfaction in life, and it comes up again later.

To think clearly, you have to stop clinging. You even have to let go of cherished ideas such as trusting to the Buddhist “church”, the monkhood, and you have to let go somewhat of doctrines such as Dharma and karma. If you still cling to them, they become mere rule-based dogma and obstacles in the path.

Eventually, you have to see that “letting go” is a mere rule-based dogma, and you have to let go of letting go. If you stick to letting go then you cling to letting go and you can’t let go. “Let go” becomes a mere rule-based dogma, an object of clinging itself, and an obstacle. Stop clinging to not clinging. End the desire to end desire. Seeking to not suffer makes you suffer.

Clever people often see that, after you let go of letting go, then you have to (3) let go of (2) letting go of (1) letting go, and so on. Don’t worry about this infinite fall too much. After the first two levels (let go of letting go), then more levels don’t matter.

When you let go of letting go, you learn what you can let go of, what you can hold on to for a while, and what is dangerous to hold on to. You find your way among the scenarios mentioned above. In my terms, you learn to manage.

Here comes the logical fun: If you let go of letting go then you are likely to hold on to some things. So, if you let go of letting go, you don’t let go. And, if you don’t let go of letting go, you cling to letting go and you don’t let go.

You have to jump out of this level of mere logic and make up your mind what you need to do and not do. In this way, the logical problem is a useful “kick in the pants”.

You have to decide how much to let go and how much to let-go-of-letting-go and so-hold-to-something. I think we really do have to let go of “let go” as mere rule-based dogma and we have to get accept holding on to some things, at least for a while from time to time.

Letting go of letting go is not an excuse to cling on to everything we crave. It is not an excuse to get back to normal sticky confused often-stupid wasted life. It does not mean the sleeping life and awakened life are the same. It means we have to use our abilities to manage. We have to think what we really can let go of, what we might have to cling, what we wish to cling to, what dangers we put us in, and why. The same is true whenever we run into this kind of conundrum.

As mentioned, when people get the idea of letting go, and learn to let go of something, they feel really good about their new-found outlook, new-found skill, and themselves. I think these false joys add to the

idea from Mahayana and Hindu that the Dharma system is really joyous despite apparent hardship. Don't cling to this first step or to the joy. Don't be dour either. Take many breaths, and continue on down the road for a while. Letting go of both the over-joy and the reactionary stern dourness that comes with this first step can help in learning properly to let go of letting go.

Letting go of letting go does not mean you must convert to Mahayana, some kind of Hinduism, Zen, or any discipline that sees awakening to be the same as the ordinary world of stickiness, clinging, desire, confusion, and suffering. It does not mean the world of clinging must be deeply satisfying. It does not mean waking up is a mistake, and there is no point to struggle and to try to wake up. It does not mean life is worthwhile or not worthwhile. It means only that you are working toward a better healthier balance. When you are closer to that, then you can decide what to do next.

(A) (11) Mistake: The Joy of Renunciation.

Keep the idea of this section in mind for comments on the Dalai Lama, below, and for Mahayana in the chapter on it. Sometimes in Buddhism you hear a phrase similar to "what great joy to know there is no happiness in life". (A) When people first learn to let go, they feel contentment, peace, and joy, often much greater than the sticky icky jolt they got from whatever it was that they clung to and let go of. You get this feeling of joy not only from letting go as the result of studying Buddhism but from letting go due to following any religion or similar discipline; Buddhists know this and are fine it; they care more that you let go than that you let go as a result of Buddhism. Buddhists warn against this feeling as another form of stickiness and another object of clinging. They advise to let go of this feeling too when you can. (B) In addition to the first rush of joy, there is also contentment that comes when you have let go of many things and you feel fairly sure you can let go of anything that you have to, including this feeling of contentment. Ask Buddhists what to do. (C) The point here is not to pursue the joy of letting go in place of joys from clinging. Don't substitute one gigantic object of clinging for many smaller objects of clinging. Don't try to let go so as to get that big joy. Learn to let go because it is the proper thing to do. You can get incidental joy from Buddhism but Buddhism does not offer joy as its primary goal or as a large goal. Using joy as an enticement, no matter how well-intended, is a mistake.

This mistake is an instance of logical puzzles and in particular an instance of the artificial splitting that I describe below in connection with the Dalai Lama.

(A) (12) Mistake: How Much Happiness is Too Much?

A mentioned in Part 2, Buddhism says we cannot have enduring real happiness. The issue of happiness makes a good arena to look at suffering and letting go. The term for suffering is "dhukkha" while the term for happiness is "sukkha". For most purposes in Buddhism, the two are opposites. Problems with terms can confuse this issue yet I am not precise with terms. I follow my version of English, so "happiness" and "satisfaction" are similar enough.

(A) People look for satisfaction and-or happiness in life as a whole. (B) They also look for it from things such as a collection of cars, activities such as prowess in golf, status such as head of a business firm, relations such as love or family, and in power, wealth, etc. According to Buddhism, we can never get real satisfaction from life in general or from particular things. Impermanence, clinging, and suffering stop real

satisfaction. So we must stop clinging to these things and to life. Often Buddhism is correct. People look far too much for satisfaction automatically from life and from particular things. We are better off not to put much hope in satisfaction, especially from particular things.

Buddhism is not always correct. Most people do get satisfaction from life as a whole even if not from any one thing or set of things. Recall that I decided life is worthwhile. Worthwhile does not guarantee any satisfaction, and it does not say that life is worthwhile because of satisfaction, but it makes chasing some satisfaction a fairly reasonable activity. Rather than seize on any one limited thing in life as the source of satisfaction, and hope that we can expand that one thing to make all life satisfying, usually we are better off to make what we can out of what we get as we go along.

Some people do get satisfaction from life as a whole regardless of satisfaction from particulars. Some people do get satisfaction from particular activities, things relations, etc. I think most academics don't get satisfaction from their careers but some do, their satisfaction is real, and I am happy for them. Many teachers, police officers, fire fighters, doctors, lawyers, mechanics, farmers, and grocers get satisfaction from careers, service they perform for the general public, and service they give to individuals. People get satisfaction from a family even if not all the family members turn out well, and sometimes if none turn out well. Impermanence by itself does not necessarily destroy happiness. It only destroys happiness if we expect conditions to be permanent. Families, countries, and churches are not permanent yet people get satisfaction from them. I hope Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein got satisfaction from their lives despite disappointments and personal issues. You can get satisfaction out of service to God, Dharma, Heaven, Nature, or church. You can get satisfaction from following the Tao. Some of these might be permanent, and, even if they are not, we can still get real satisfaction from serving them.

Although it seems as if people do get satisfaction, Buddhism still insists we do not, we are deluded about happiness. Buddhism does a good job showing how the conditions that lead to happiness cannot endure and how people usually fool themselves. I don't go into details here; use your imagination.

I get the point from Buddhism, and Buddhism is right in many cases, but not always. Just as you can use your imagination to tear down satisfaction, so you can use it to build reasonable cases of limited but still real happiness. Then decide for yourself. Then think what your choice implies about worthwhile life and vice versa.

Don't disdain happiness while it is here. Be content to enjoy while it is here and let it go when it is gone. Don't try to prolong happiness beyond its natural size or natural time. You may plan to make conditions that lead to happiness as long as you know there is no guarantee and you do not think your planning can lead to more happiness and longer happiness than the natural duration. A lot of people already have this attitude. Even after reading a fair amount of Buddhism, I don't know if doctrine is in line with this attitude or if it disdains all happiness. Taoism is in line with this attitude and, as far as I can tell, so is Zen when it is not too fierce or too mystical. Mahayana and Hinduism try to expand happiness too much to make sure life is worthwhile. Sometimes Zen suffers from that Mahayana legacy.

(A) (13) Mistake: Suffering, Worthwhile, and Happiness.

Before we awaken, impermanence, clinging, and suffering erode happiness so we cannot have enduring happiness. Yet even after awakening, and we have seen past impermanence, and we have overcome clinging and suffering, we still do not have happiness and cannot get real happiness.

The reasons that cause suffering also insure we cannot hold happiness; lack of happiness and suffering are two aspects of the same problem. Most of what we think is happiness is a delusion caused by desire and clinging. We want particular conditions (happy family, wealth) to last forever so we can be happy forever through them. Buddhism reminds us that all things end but the Dharma, so, when we base hope for happiness on normal human expectations in the real world, we are doomed to disappointment and no real happiness. Most supposed happiness really is suffering already or is suffering about to happen.

We have to give up our human-but-wrong expectations, and so have to give up hope for human-style happiness. Life cannot be happy both (1) because of suffering and (2) after suffering is overcome.

To me, this situation suggests that Buddhism says life is not worthwhile. Buddhism says this situation only shows that life is beset by suffering and impermanence. To me, his situation also implies that the question of worthwhile is deeper than issues of happiness, unhappiness, satisfaction, and suffering. I see a logical problem that leads me to the question of worthwhile life. To be clearer about Buddhism and suffering, and for our own sake regardless of Buddhism, we need to decide about worthwhile life before we decide about happiness.

(1) As with suffering, worthwhile life and happiness are somewhat independent. Where they don't overlap, we can see directly that worthwhile is more important. Even where they do overlap, still we can figure out that worthwhile is basic. (2) When life is worthwhile, happiness is not as important as the fact that life is worthwhile, and the lack of big lasting happiness is not as important as that life is worthwhile. Life can be worthwhile even if we are not very happy as long as we don't suffer deeply. Worthwhile life does not need big constant happiness. Most people don't expect big constant happiness so as to think life is worthwhile. Most people don't expect big constant happiness. (3) If life is not worthwhile, then some happiness or some unhappiness is not as important as the fact that life is not worthwhile. Even a not-worthy-life can have some happiness. Life can be not worthwhile despite some happiness. (4) Some unhappiness does not by itself make life not worthwhile. Some happiness does not by itself make life worthwhile. Even a fair dose of happiness does not by itself make life worthwhile. Worthwhile life is worthwhile in itself, not primarily because of happiness. Not worthwhile life is not worthwhile in itself, not only due to lack of happiness or only through unhappiness. (5) Worthwhile life does not guarantee happiness. Not worthwhile life does not guarantee that we suffer or that we lack happiness. (6) We need to decide worthwhile life first. Then decide the roles of hope, happiness, unhappiness, satisfaction, and suffering in life.

We can be happy for a while if we don't expect situations to last, we don't expect happiness to last, and we don't expect huge happiness but only modest happiness suited to real life; that is, if we manage living. I don't know what Buddhism says about this alternative of limited happiness. People dream of forever big happiness but most people don't really expect to get it and so most people base real acts on temporary small happiness. That behavior too goes along with ideas about managing. I don't know what the real expectations and behavior of people implies for Buddhist ideas.

(A) (14) Some Managing Advice.

Even if you decide life is worthwhile, decide you can chase some satisfaction, and use “let go of letting go” as a magic formula, you still need to work on not clinging and on letting go, and you still need to not demand too much. The average person, even a really smart person, clings far too much.

Don't think the task is impossible. The fact that most things in life, and your own whole life, are transient does not necessarily mean there is no real satisfaction.

Most people get satisfaction from serving something that is good and that is bigger than themselves such as God or the Dharma. Even so, don't force yourself to serve an imaginary “bigger than me” just because I said so.

Usually people get more happiness when they do not aim hard at happiness but instead aim for other goals such as enjoying work, doing something useful, and a healthy family. Happiness comes as a bonus along the way, and it comes in the right amounts for the right duration. This is a case where we are more likely to miss if we aim right at the target and more likely to hit the target if we aim at something nearby. Do what works and is good.

(A) (15) Some More Words.

(1) The following is easy to say but hard to do: “Take it as it comes” and “let go”. Don't try to hold on to anything beyond its natural span and don't try to make happiness more than it is. Don't try to arrange the world so you have greater longer happiness than comes naturally. When something good comes along, welcome it. When the good thing is over, let it go. This idea is one key in what I call “managing”. I love this idea but I know I can't live by this idea alone.

“Take it as it comes” and “let go” is hard to do for three good reasons. (1A) People are not lower animals that take what food and sex come along and then walk on. People see ahead and plan ahead. Even some animals see ahead and might plan ahead. People plan for bigger longer happiness. That is part of our evolved nature. To go against that part of our nature is as much to go against the Dharma as to steal, lie, murder, and clench. “Only dead fish ‘go with the flow’”. Do you really want to base marriage on “take it as it comes and let it go when you feel like it”? The “plan ahead” part of our nature has to be worked into “take it as it comes” and “let go”. For all their wisdom, religious teachers such as the Buddha, Jesus, and Chuang Tzu never told us how.

(1B) Jesus said not to worry about tomorrow but he also told us to work hard for the Kingdom of God, not only for today, but to plan for tomorrow. He sent people out to work for the Kingdom of God. He set up an organization to help bring in the Kingdom of God. If you enter the monkhood, you anticipate working hard to make a better world. Part of our action for today and our planning for tomorrow is to work hard to make a better world. That is hard to do on the basis of “take it as it comes” and “let go”. This kind of planning for this kind of world also is a part of our natural evolved nature. There is no obvious solution to this dilemma. It helps to keep in mind that the ultimate fate of the world is not in your hands but in the hands of God or the Dharma. You still have to try hard.

(1C) Like it or not, big societies, the state, capitalism and big business, and self-government, are part of life now. There is no place to escape. For better or worse, we have to live in them. We might as well live for better. We can't do that with "take it as it comes". We cannot run democracy on the basis of "take it as it comes". When you have a problem, do you want officials to brush you off with "Let go, sad little aggrieved misguided ignorant being, and learn Dharma wisdom"? This issue was an argument between Taoists and Confucians in China 2500 years ago.

(2) Many Westerners believe Buddhism champions the idea of "take it as it comes, let go when it is done". People take this idea as the heart of Buddhism. I love the idea. I use it below. The idea does show up in Buddhist texts written clearly after the Buddha, especially in Mahayana texts. I wish I could declare that this idea is an obvious integral part of all Buddhism. But it does not show up in early texts, at least as far as I know. In early texts, you are more apt to read how sticky life is, how much suffering besets life, how hard it is to escape suffering, how transient happiness is, and how we should forget about any happiness and should work instead on escaping suffering. Again, this is one reason why I was led to contemplate "not worthwhile" and the relation between "not worthwhile" and "suffering".

We should not take this situation too far down any direction. We should not take it to mean that the idea was entirely absent in early Buddhism, that it appears only later, that it appears only in Mahayana, and that it was not a key part of the thought of the Buddha. We also should not take it as the hidden heart of real Buddhism that was so obvious and strong that early Buddhists did not need to write it down.

I learned this idea not only from texts but from real flesh and blood Theravada monks who had little to do ever with Westerners. Some were quite literate in Buddhist texts, and certainly did know of Mahayana texts, but I think they did not pick up the idea that way. Rather, it seemed to be a part of Buddhist oral culture that they had learned from other monks and that they were happy to pass along. Versions of the idea are part of Buddhist popular culture. These facts do not mean the idea was a part of early Buddhism from the time of the Buddha and has been passed along by word of mouth. These facts do not mean the idea was such an obvious integral part of Buddhism that the idea did not have to be written down. These facts do not mean the idea is far more important than "defeat suffering". They also do not mean the idea is mere fluff spun off as a shallow truism to make life more superficial and easier. There is real meat on those bones, and it takes chewing too. I think it is reasonable to associate this idea with Theravada and with Buddhism in general. Other religions are free to take credit too; I think Jesus and Chuang Tzu knew the idea and were quite comfortable with it.

As with all ideas, we have to assess "take it as it comes" and "let it go" on its own merits in the context of other ideas including "you may plan ahead" and "work hard for a better world". You have to do that. That is part of what the Buddha and Jesus wanted you to do.

(A) (16) Is Life Too Sticky?

Maybe the most classic and entertaining case of sticky life is Mowgli and the village girl in Kipling's great "Jungle Books". When all is said and done, is all this talking about trying to find a balance of what to keep and how much just silliness? Is life so sticky that we really can't play this game? Do we have to let it all go, including, maybe, Buddha, Dharma, the Sangha (Community of Buddhists), meditation, Compassion, the Four Truths, the Eightfold Way, Love, Beauty, and Hope? If we try to find a few things to hold, are we

doomed to recreate the whole sticky spider's web and get eaten by the giant spider of our own desires? There is a good reason why people forbid talk of religion and politics at gatherings.

Mahayana and Hinduism say "Yes, we are doomed to recreate the whole thing over and over in various guises but that is a really good thing. We are agents of the Dharma, doing its Will, and finding its Joy, through us".

Theravada says we must let it all go except for the Dharma, Buddha, Sangha, Four Truths, and Eightfold Path. You have to ask particular schools and people in Theravada what to hold on to and what to let go, and I suggest you do ask them.

Most people don't lead well-balanced well-ordered effective self-aware lives. Most people are caught up in silly desires with short satisfactions. Most people go through life from cling to cling. Most people are useful only because they are part of a social-governmental-economic system in which they help others by seeking their own benefit, as in capitalism, bureaucracy, and academia. Yet most people are not harmful either except when caught up in unusual selfishness or in "us against them" such as "end all programs except those that serve only us" or "our lives matter". Most people don't get so caught in stickiness that they recreate an evil-empire-of-the-spirit or an empty-desert-of-desire-mirages. Most people could do a whole lot better but they won't. The majority simply end at death. I think their lives and your life are worthwhile anyway.

Now, you decide. And cling, or don't cling, to whatever you decide. Or, don't decide, refuse to decide, and cling, or don't cling, to that. And see these choices as part of the stickiness of the world.

I think we can deal with sticky life even if we fail often and even if some of us fail completely. If we decide that life is worthwhile, as most of us do, then we also decide we can deal with sticky life. Then we need to decide what to do. I think we are led strongly to the ideas in Part One. If any religion, or any believer, decides he-she can deal with sticky life, and life is worthwhile, and he-she has to decide what to do next, then he-she has to think about the ideas in Part One too.

(B) Dharma as Law, Dream, Game, and More.

-From "I Fought the Law" by Sonny Curtis, sung by the Bobby Fuller Four, Lou Reed, and The Clash:

"Breakin' rocks in the hot sun
I fought the law and the law won
Y'know my race is run
I fought the law and the law won"

-Quoted by William Butler Yeats from an old play; also from the poet Delmore Schwartz:

"In dreams begin responsibilities"

-Recall from above from "Jack and Diane" by John Mellencamp:

“Oh, yeah, life goes on
Long after the thrill of livin’ is gone”

(B) (1) Dharma as Law.

Buddhism and Hinduism often call Dharma “the Law”. The Dharma does not control us absolutely but it does guide strongly. It is like “God’s Wish-Will” or a hard version of “the Tao” (see chapter on Taoism). The Dharma is like the rules of a play when you are in the play. It is the game we all play just by being. It is like “the system” that Americans rebel against or “the game” in “game of love”, “got to love the game”, or “hate the game, not the player”. We must work within the rules of Dharma. In Buddhism, cause-and-effect and Dharma are aspects of each other. For Law versus Love, see the movie “A Matter of Life and Death” starring David Niven.

Anyone who defies the Law comes to grief. Anyone who goes along with the Law likely succeeds. Even for people who see that life is not worthwhile and wish to escape stickiness, clinging, struggle, etc, it is better to go along with the Dharma and use it than to fight the Dharma by pretending that you can bend all to your will. People who try to bend the Law to their will end up serving time in bad lives, in Dharma prison, Dharma hell. “I fought the Law, and the Law won”. When people or even gods fight the Dharma, it defeats them and punishes them to get them to reform: “Breakin’ rocks in the hot sun”. This is part of the intrinsic moral nature of the world. Seeing that you cannot bend the Dharma to your will goes with seeing the limited coherence of selves; see below on self. Buddhism is not about being so free that you can do as you wish. Buddhism is not about knowing the universe so well, and being such a key part of it, that you can bend reality and can do as you wish, as in some versions of Mahayana. When you learn to use the Dharma to get out of a bad game, then you simply do not reappear: “Y’know my race is run”.

(B) (2) Dharma as Dream.

Everyone dreams of having his-her dreams come true. We think having our dreams come true means everything goes our way, troubles end, and bliss begins. In fact, that is not true. “Be careful what you wish for, you might just get it”. All dreams entail stickiness, clinging, striving, hardship, etc. A dream is not freedom but instead is responsibility, especially if it comes true, and more so when it includes other people. If we dream of a family, and get one, we soon learn “in dreams begin responsibilities”. If we dream of business or academic success, and get it, we soon learn the same. In teaching, we have to give grades, meet students, write proposals, kiss up to authorities, etc. Even merely having the dream leads to the responsibility to fight for the dream; see the movie “Breakfast Club”. All dreams, for lowest worm to highest god, entail binding responsibilities. If we want to get rid of binding responsibilities, we have to stop clinging to dreams. To stop clinging to dreams, we have to see that even realized dreams are not worthwhile. We use the Law to avoid clinging to dreams and to dreams-come-true.

One way to see the world is as Dharma’s dream. Dharma dreams the world into being and-or becoming. Even in Dharma’s own dream, in dreams begin responsibilities. You should think out what responsibilities the dreaming Dharma might have in a moral universe with much drama, moral dilemmas, and many kinds of needy characters. That thought can be a big step on the road to Hinduism. The Dharma itself has problems when it dreams the world. Buddhism is a way out of the dream problems of the Dharma. As

individuals within the Dharma dream, to get out of the dream problems of the Dharma, we have to go along with the Dharma. We wake up out of the Dharma dream by playing out the Dharma dream.

Buddhism is like old-fashioned blues without any upbeat hopeful ending, without the lingering sadness, and especially without lingering self-pity. It is not like raunchy or funny songs with a blues scale, rhythm, structure, or idiom, like Bessie Smith or Jerry Lee Lewis. It is not “blues inflected” “guitar rock” or “jam rock” from the 1970s or 1990s. It is not “New Age”. It is about facing sadness, not overcoming sadness so as to be happy. Like classic blues, Buddhism does not overcome tragedy and sadness but accepts them and endures until the game plays out, like “St. James Infirmary”, “Motherless Child”, or the versions of “Black and Blue” and “Shine” by Louis Armstrong. Buddhism is longing for Shenandoah and knowing you will never find it in this world but also knowing you can get by for a while on this side of the wide Missouri. It is like “Crazy” and “Walking after Midnight” sung by Patsy Cline or like half the songs of Hank Williams but without the self-pity. It is like Joni Mitchell if you overlook the lilt and listen to the words and where the music goes. Buddhism is about facing all inevitable sad bad things, accepting them, and then letting go. It is not about letting go so you can move on to better or so you can show the enigmatic smile from the novel “Siddhartha” or the movie “Being There”. You might enjoy the lilt from Joni Mitchell after you let go but you don’t let go just so you can feel the lilt.

(B) (3) Dharma as Game.

The Dharma made the game, started the game, and runs the game. Buddhists are in a Dharma game but they can’t escape without using Dharma. In Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition, God built the game and what God did was good until humans and Satan ruined it. It seems reasonable that what the Dharma did was good. The Dharma world does not have to be good in a conventional sense, conventional moral sense, economic, or simplistic sense, but still is good. The Dharma made the world sticky. The Dharma made you with desires, urge to cling, and so suffer, and it made you with your urge to stop clinging and stop suffering. So, it stands to reason that the game is good despite stickiness, clinging, and suffering or even because of stickiness, clinging, and suffering. The game does not have to be good for everybody all the time, just good overall. It seems contradictory, presumptuous, rebellious, ungrateful, spiteful, and selfish to reject the game, like rejecting God. Why not see that you are wrong instead of blaming the Dharma? You set yourself up to break a lot of hard rocks. Anyone who rejects the game puts him-herself above Dharma and so is caught up in the egotism and selfish clinging that the Buddha sought to cure. You try to use the Dharma as a tool to overcome the Dharma and merely that. You put yourself above Dharma when you reject the bounty of the Dharma. You seek to turn Dharma against itself so that, like a child, you can say “No” to all that your parents generously give you. This problem with Dharma is related to the logical problem mentioned above.

Buddhists know of these implications, and their responses help define schools of Buddhism. I cannot go into the possibilities here. Briefly, most Buddhism ignores the implications, and it repeats teachings about the importance of overcoming stickiness, desire, clinging, self, and suffering. It says: meditate and all will sort out. Buddhism says it goes along with the Dharma and does not use the Dharma for selfishness. I do not pronounce on this position. It is worthwhile to know Buddhist critiques of the game and the self, and to learn a little of meditation and “Buddhist Aids”.

On a more practical level, most Buddhists, including most monks, use the Dharma to bring out the best aspects of the Dharma and to suppress any possible bad aspects of the Dharma. They use meditation, study, and practice to make themselves kinder, mindful, aware of the ebb and flow of life, less selfish, and more moral while making themselves less hasty, less hot, less selfish, and less angry. They do not make an elaborate theory of why the Dharma has good and bad aspects, why they should favor good over bad, or why Dharma provides good tools for favoring one aspect of itself over the other aspect of itself. This stance by Buddhists might offer a hint why Jedi in Star Wars perpetuated a myth about ultimately merging the light side and the dark side.

Mahayana and Hinduism used this dilemma for their ends when they reaffirmed the system as a whole over the suffering of any particular individual in any particular situation in any particular lifetime. They urge people to embrace the system as a whole even if particular individuals have trouble in this life now. If the Dharma made you, it wants more of you than to reject the system that the Dharma also made. In Hinduism, the “more” that the Dharma wants is for you to do your social and cosmic duties, to keep the Dharma going, and so to make the world better in the way that the Dharma thinks is better. The avatar (Hinduism) or the bodhisattva (Mahayana) sometimes serves as the “chosen one, the savior” who unites the dark side and light side of the Dharma. I disagree with the uses by Mahayana and Hinduism even if I think life as a whole is worthwhile and we should all work to make the world better.

If you want to beat the system, the game, you don’t rebel against it. The game counts on rebellion and uses that to keep you playing. It is another level of control like “the One” in the “Matrix” movies, rebels and artists in Romanticism, or bad guys in Hinduism.

To beat the game, you play by the rules until you play out the hand, and then you simply stop playing. It is like the movie “War Games” with Allie Sheedy and Matthew Broderick. The only way to win the big game of “Global Thermonuclear War” is to play the little game of “tick tack toe” until you see it can never lead to victory within the game. Likewise, the big game can never lead to victory within the big game, and the only way to win is not to play.

Herman Hesse in “Siddhartha”, Rudyard Kipling in “Kim” and the “Jungle Books”, and the Mahabharata, all suggest the game is sticky. We cannot play only a little bit. Once we begin at all, we get sucked into it totally. Mahayana and Hinduism suggest, if we do accept the game wholeheartedly, that can be a very good thing. If we can’t see through to the goodness of the game, then the only thing we can do is opt out, refuse to play. On the other hand, I have suggested that throwing yourself into the game is dangerous and usually bad, and that we can play only a little if we manage well. We can’t commit to total victory, or we will be sucked down in a bad way. We do the best we can with what nature gave us. Hesse would say I am wrong and foolish, I am doomed to be sucked into the game totally, and, sooner or later, I have to stop playing and opt out. This is what Michael Corleone felt at the end of his life. You have to decide, hopefully before you get sucked in too far and before you opt out without knowing why.

Be careful. Often thinking you are opting out really is only another play within the game, and really you are falling farther than you can imagine. You do not let go of letting go (see above). I found the best way to let go of letting go is to play a little bit while always mindful that you can get sucked down the rabbit hole. You are less likely to get sucked in too far if you think it is all about worthwhile life and managing

than if you think it is all about the defeat of stickiness, clinging, and striving, and you act both as if life is not worthwhile and life is worthwhile.

(B) (4) Dharma Game is Not Worthwhile.

It might make more sense to say “the (Dharma) game is not worthwhile” than “life is not worthwhile”. After you decide if the game is worthwhile then you can decide about life. You can decide (a) the game is not worthwhile but life is worthwhile or (b) the game is not worthwhile and life is not worthwhile too. If you say the game is worthwhile, you almost have to say life is worthwhile. Smart people often wish to say the game is not worthwhile but life is worthwhile. The choice is not so simple. Settling up with the game is a tempting idea but it turns out to be an in-between step that it is best not to take.

Instead, start by deciding whether life is worthwhile or not. If you decide life is worthwhile, then you don’t have to worry much about the game. If you decide life is not worthwhile, you have also decided the game is not worthwhile and also don’t have to worry much about the game.

People wish to say life is worthwhile but the game is not. People cling to the game so they can conquer the game so they feel clever and strong. In contrast, they really get only extra unneeded steps and get caught in the trap of feeling clever and strong when they are not. The game wins. Trying to reject the game but embrace life is that higher level of control. To think about the game so as to reject the game is to cling to it, and the game wins again. The best way to reject the game is not to think about it much, not to play it. Go on with your life without referring to it.

(a) The kind of life that you lead when you decide life is worthwhile when you manage suffering and clinging, and (b) the kind of the life that you lead when you say the game is not worthwhile but life is modestly worthwhile, are (c) so close that it is not worth splitting that hair here. Splitting tempts too strongly to wrong ideas. Choose option (a) and you get (b).

Some people say they can’t decide if life is worthwhile without first deciding about the game. If you feel you must decide about the game first, then do so, but ultimately the important question is whether life is worthwhile, not the game. Regardless what you decide about the game, you also have to decide about life, and you might as well think about life while you decide about the game. You can take what I say in this chapter about worthwhile life and not worthwhile life as a way to see through the game so as to make up your mind if life-without-the-game is worthwhile or not, and then decide what to do. If you try that path, you had better go slowly and be careful.

The stance that life is worthwhile despite the game is similar to how good Classical Cynics saw the world and how David Hume saw it. They illustrate adept good people who avoid most traps.

(B) (5) Buddhism as Crazy Clinging; Let Go of All Striving.

Here is another instance of the logical problem mentioned above. Anything that sticks in our heads and we pursue, we cling to and are stuck on that thing. Sticking and clinging are obvious with obsessions such as wealth, power, sex, beauty, love, and smart phones but they are as true of everyday life such as success at work, a house, steady good job, food, etc. Yet Buddhists pursue advancement in Buddhist

prowess with zeal that would shame mad business people, buyers of cosmetics, politicians, academics, sports fans, and celebrity fans. Monks can let go even of basics such as steady food. They spend hours reading arcane sutras in foreign languages and meditating. They deny simple pleasures even in balance with reading and meditating. Monks dress funny. Buddhists obsess. They are stuck on, and cling to, ideas of awakening that are odd, against evolved human nature, unrealistic, and that they only dimly understand. They are lost in a way. Isn't Buddhist awakening a false idol of the sort that the Buddha warned against? To awaken, shouldn't Buddhists let go of awakening? If they don't let go of awakening, they can never wake up.

The simple answer might be part of the Middle Path. Buddhists can-may-and-should pursue awakening but not like crazy self-starving mortifying yogis or like crazy celebrity fans. That is one mistake made by the first teachers of the Buddha, before he was enlightened. True Buddhist seeking is not the same. It is more like how a champion pro golfer pursues golf knowing that there is an end to his-her career or like a mathematician pursues puzzles knowing that, once a puzzle is solved, it is solved forever.

Whether you find this answer satisfying depends on you. Because I am not a Buddhist, I don't have to say. Mahayana used this puzzle to say that normal everyday asleep life and awakened life are the same, and to put life into a big Dharma system. Hinduism did the same although with its own spin. Zen says you do have to pursue awakening with zeal at first but can-may-and-should let go later on when the time is ripe. Taoists disdain or ignore the issue.

I could easily use these dilemmas as a snide way to discredit Buddhism but that path is low. All ways of thought, life, and religion have dilemmas. They also have valid insights and they deal with problems that are not merely of their own making but are of the real world. They all have their own value. It is better to take on religions and other stances at their best terms fairly. You should think about these dilemmas to see how you would handle them.

My advice about not making awakening into a sticky object of clinging is the same advice that I give to Christians about Salvation, Justification, Grace, Works, and Heaven. Don't worry about Salvation and Heaven. God will assess you. If you worry about those, you will freeze up and screw up. Genuinely let go. Don't pretend to let go as a roundabout way to Heaven. Trust God and really let go. Be the best you can along the lines Jesus taught. If you can't let go and trust God, don't worry about that either but still be the best person you can along the lines Jesus taught. Buddhists should learn about awakening and value the idea but don't be trapped by it. Learn what you should do to be a better person and better Buddhist. Do that. If you do that, then you can let awakening take care of itself. Don't follow magic, empty rituals, or silly pursuit of external merit. Enjoy rituals if you can. Trust Dharma. My answer is like the Taoist and Zen answer. Many Buddhists do this already, more so than Christians.

(B) (6) Using Logical Traps to Our Advantage: "Manage".

This section recalls the logical trap from above. This trap is similar to other traps including a famous trap in formal logic called the "Liar's Paradox" ("I always lie"). It is similar to "damned if you do, damned if you don't" and to "Mexican Standoff". It is related to the idea that, if you push any idea to its limits, it becomes nonsense, and can become its opposite ("only a Sith deals in absolutes"). The material here is a taste of what Tao and Zen teachers do to get people to jump out of traps and to think for themselves. This might

seem like a silly game but it is more. These logical conundrums are signs to start thinking. You need to be ready for these games because Mahayana and Hinduism use them to make us think and use them to attack other religions, especially Theravada.

We want to not cling. If we cling to not-clinging, then do we not cling or do we cling? If we not cling to not-clinging, do we still cling or do we not cling?

To “reach Nirvana” we have to let go of a lot, maybe all. Do we also let go of reaching Nirvana? If we do let go, we never reach Nirvana. If we don’t let go, we never reach Nirvana. Choose. Then go through the same exercise with “awaken” and “get saved”.

The Dharma tells us that we have to let go. Do we also have to let go of the Dharma? If we let go of the Dharma, do we then have to stop letting go? If we stop letting go, can we go back to the Dharma? If we do not let go of the Dharma, we cannot fulfill the Dharma, and so we kill the Dharma. Most Buddhists abhor the idea of letting go of the Dharma and are quite uneasy with the idea that “let go” implies letting go of the Dharma.

“Fear nothing but fear”. If you don’t fear fear, then you will fear. If you do fear fear, then you will fear. Keep this problem in mind for material below.

“Hate nothing but hatred”. If you do hate hatred, you will hate. If you don’t hate hatred, you will hate. “Do everything in moderation”. If you do moderation in moderation then sometimes you will do too little and sometimes too much. If you don’t do moderation in moderation, you miss out on a valuable idea in life.

Pure rule of the majority soon leads to tyranny, which is the complete negation of democracy. Besides pure rule of the majority, we also need basic rules and the people have to follow the rules. Democracy can only exist when it is not pure democracy.

In human affairs, almost every big idea should apply to itself to some extent. This principle is similar to “applies equally” and “what if everybody did it?” or “what if nobody did it?” from morality. If an idea can’t apply to itself, you need to work on the idea until you can understand it better, see what is going on, and see some paths through the problem.

When we are near these logical traps, it does not necessarily mean something has gone so wrong that we are stuck in agony. It can be an opportunity. It means we have to use judgment. Usually it means we have to take from both sides according to what is best – the Middle Path. Step back. Think “outside the box”. See what you lose by clinging to one side. Think what you gain by taking from both sides. See if you can take good from one side without necessarily killing the other. As evolved sentient beings, luckily evolution gave us the ability to do all this enough. It might be one way we are superior to machines, at least for the next few decades. I call this skill “managing”. Some people call it “coping”.

If we let go of letting go, that means we do have to hold on to some things. So what? We manage. We cope. We choose what to let go of and what to hold. I prefer this option to being stuck trying to let go of letting go or trying to rationalize why we have to let go of everything but can’t.

Democracy has to be a mix of majority force and principles. So what? We can manage this situation if we try and we don't think we will get it perfect for every case for all time.

Even the Middle Path is not always the Middle Path, and sometimes the off-center is the Middle Path. When bullies find out that we compromise, they are quick to take advantage. Then we have to stand our ground, get tough, stick to our guns, find out what we believe in fight for that, and even have to get crazy. The rules in democracy are the residue of people sticking to their guns in the past. Then the good Middle Path includes residue from not the Middle Path, residue from the extremes. Of course, if we stick to our guns all the time then we get crazy and we are as vulnerable to bullies and crazy people of other kinds; and we are back to the obvious Middle Path. Yes, we can manage all this but it takes some experience.

Managing is a skill as hard and deep as letting go and it requires much more than clinging mindlessly to a mere dogma, to God, Dharma, Tao, or Heaven. It does not contravene faith.

(B) (7) Instead: Manage Clinging and Suffering, and Think Well Enough.

Dalai Lama (1): "Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional".

Dalai Lama (2): "The ultimate source of happiness is our mental attitude".

French proverb: "He (she) who fears to suffer, suffers from fear".

These lines are not quite the same as "let go of letting go" but are in the same family and they require us to think and to manage. They teach lessons. One undoes the others. The Dalai Lama is a Mahayanist (Tibetan) but that doesn't matter in this episode.

I revere the Dalai Lama, the idea in the first quote from him is valuable, and likely the Buddha had some idea like this in mind. I think the Dalai Lama had in mind something like that we can be angry, or even hate, but we don't have to act on anger or hate. This is a good idea, and it is about the best we can do with anger and hatred. Even then, the best is to manage, and we can expect to slip up sometimes. But desire, clinging, pain, and suffering don't work exactly like anger and acting on anger, and the difference makes a difference. If we err on how we treat desire, clinging, pain, and suffering, we will not be able to handle anger and hate, and we will act on anger and hate.

As a result, the quip is more clever than wise. It divides things that have much in common, so as to make a distinction sharper than it really is. It uses a small difference to make a metaphysical chasm. It asserts a qualitative difference between us and the world. Pain is in the world but suffering is only in us, not from the world. We control the world by changing our attitude; we can make it all better by changing our attitude. That is all we need to do. We are all-powerful. Quip (1) leads directly to quip (2). Both are false and dangerous. They imply that we have magical control of an illusory world, as in the story of Vimalakirti from Mahayana (see chapter). They support Mahayana, Hinduism, and Romanticism. The quips and the attitude overlook that the world is as real as we are and that we are in many relations with the world, ideas that are basic in Buddhism. The quips imply that people who "get it" are sharp and so the quips invite the smug end of thinking rather than the curious start of thinking. We have to accept that we are in

relations with the world, and we cannot make the relations entirely one-sided. We cannot merely win by totally overcoming suffering or by changing our attitude.

Although quote (1) uses the mild word “optional”, really it says we can and should defeat all suffering. It promotes a mere dogma, and so promotes bad clinging. This particular clinging has distorted Buddhism. What happens to suffering when it is fully optional? If so, then who opts to suffer, when, how much, or why? How do we decide which suffering to accept and which to deny? Only a crazy person would opt to suffer at all if he-she could avoid it. If taxes were fully optional, who would pay? In love, if heartache were optional, would anyone choose it? Does pain still have its sting if suffering is optional? What about life? Is life rotten before we find an attitude to make pain optional but “hunky dory” and is abundant fun after we find a way? Can you make suffering optional by popping pills and so changing your attitude that way? I disagree that we can defeat all suffering or that we should.

Sometimes pain is suffering. Often suffering hurts like “real” pain. Sometimes pain and even suffering are good. Some kinds of pain and suffering change us. We can learn to let go of some pain and some suffering but not all of either. We have to learn the difference. It takes more wisdom to do that than is implied in this quote. Think about caring for a spouse with dementia after you two have lived a long time together and have succeeded and failed together at many things, things that he-she might not remember but that helped people and helped nature. I challenge you to draw clear lines.

Compare: “I love him but I don’t love-love him”. “I love my country but I don’t love-love it”. “Buzzed is not drunk. I can drive buzzed”. “Everybody is multi-sexual so specific gender is optional”. “Reign is inevitable but democracy is optional (or tyranny, monarchy, Communism, fascism)”.

I think of managing suffering, managing clinging, and managing problems rather than overcoming them; and I think of thinking “well enough” rather than of thinking with perfect clarity and consistency. People who merely manage still feel some suffering; they cannot opt out of all suffering. Sometimes events and suffering defeat even a person who is adept at managing. People who think adeptly still err. People who merely manage have to accept some risk. My use of “managing” and “well enough” is on the Middle Path. Making suffering totally optional is not on the Middle Path.

Sometimes you have to let go of letting-go-of-suffering. People who dedicate themselves to eradicate suffering cling to suffering and cling to their clinging. They make suffering an object of clinging and they make letting go of suffering an object of clinging. People who fear suffering and so cling to suffering also cling to their fear and so cause themselves suffering. Instead, when we (1) manage clinging, we have to manage (2a) clinging-to-suffering and (2b) clinging-to-fear-of-suffering. To manage (2a) clinging-to-suffering and to manage (2b) clinging-to-fear, we don’t obsess over that extra clinging too; we don’t add another pain-suffering-fear-and-guilt on top of this pain-fear-and-suffering. Instead we find a way to live with it all. We follow the French proverb. We find a way to live with fear-of-suffering and suffering. We don’t banish all suffering and all fear. We manage most (nearly all) suffering and fear.

If by making suffering optional, the Dalia Lama meant that sometimes we have to let go of trying to control all suffering, that we can only manage suffering, then I agree. If by making suffering optional, he really meant get rid of all suffering, then I disagree. I think the Buddha and the Dalai Lama meant eradicate all suffering, so I disagree.

People who merely manage suffering accept that sometimes suffering overcomes us; and they are willing to take that chance as part of a worthwhile life. "Sometimes you get the bear and sometimes the bear gets you". People who are not content to merely manage suffering, people who wish to make suffering optional and to defeat it, are afraid that suffering will overcome them sometimes. They are not willing to take the chance. They fear suffering. They are willing to say life is not worthwhile in order to avoid the chance that suffering might sometimes overcome them. People who wish to defeat suffering (make it optional) cling to fear of suffering and do whatever is needed to service their clinging to a fear. People content to merely manage suffering also manage their fear and largely let go of that one fear. People who fear life also fear suffering and wish to end suffering so that they can control their lives. Apparently the Buddha feared suffering and he did what he had to do to avoid suffering including saying (implying) that life is not worthwhile.

In the Hindu epic poem the Mahabharata, and in "Siddhartha" by Herman Hesse, people who live normal lives also gamble in-and-with life while people who wish to end suffering refuse to gamble. A major hero of the Mahabharata, Yudisthira, had a gambling problem, and it started the story. In "Siddhartha", just before walking up, Siddhartha spent years lost in gambling. He only wakes up when he sees how sticky gambling and life are. People who do not fear life must gamble. People who do fear life will not gamble and they seek to end suffering so as also to end all risk. They fear suffering and gambling. The view in the Mahabharata and Hesse is ultimately wrong but it is useful here. If you fear suffering then you say that life is not worthwhile. If you say that life is worthwhile then you must risk some suffering and failure. Even if you manage, you still must risk some suffering and failure. You do not have to like gambling, in fact you can detest it, and I think most people who think life is worthwhile don't like gambling, but you have to be willing to take a chance. You have to choose.

As long as we are beset by suffering, we cannot think clearly enough and we cannot decide whether life is worthwhile. We do need to manage suffering before we can decide about worthwhile. To do that, we need to think more adeptly than most people think. We don't need to think with perfect consistency and clarity but only well enough. We don't need to completely overcome suffering but only to manage it. To manage suffering is not to make suffering fully optional. The Buddha gave us ideas and methods to think well enough (not perfectly), and to manage suffering enough (not overcome it totally), so we could decide if suffering is the main issue or worthwhile life is the main issue, and to decide if life is worthwhile. Even if suffering is the main issue, you still have to decide if life is worthwhile. Some people, even without much training, are close to being able to think well enough, and to manage suffering well enough, to decide. Even many non-Buddhists are not so far away.

You cannot conquer suffering until you can manage suffering well enough. When you manage suffering well enough, you will see that likely you can't conquer suffering completely and likely you won't want to. Clinging-to-conquering-suffering thwarts learning to manage suffering, and so likely thwarts conquering suffering. You cannot think with total consistency and clarity until you can think well enough. When you can think well enough, you won't need to think with total clarity and consistency, and likely won't seek it. Clinging-to-thinking-with-perfect-consistency-and-clarity thwarts learning to think well enough, and likely thwarts thinking-with-perfect-consistency-and-clarity. Conquering-suffering and thinking-with-perfect-clarity-and-consistency sound more like the wrong overly-strict teachers of Siddhartha than like his Middle

Path. Sooner or later, you have to trust your ability to manage suffering and to think well enough. If you can trust, you manage better and think better. See the chapters on Taoism and Zen.

If you think life is worthwhile, it is easier to manage pain and suffering. If you think life is worthwhile, you cannot automatically conquer pain and suffering. Those relations are fairly easy to see. I cannot figure out all the relations between worthwhile, not worthwhile, conquering suffering, making suffering optional, and before and after.

You cannot pretend to (seek to) manage suffering and to (seek to) think well enough and then leave the issues of worthwhile life and suffering hang. At some point, you have to say “enough” and then decide about suffering and about worthwhile or not worthwhile. Don’t evade. You can work on “suffering” and “worthwhile” both at the same time until you can see clearly enough, and then you must decide. Use Aids but don’t abuse them. Not to decide is more a betrayal of the Buddha than to disagree with him.

You guess what the Buddha decided when his mind cleared (enough).

(B) (8) Buddhism as Getting Free.

(A) While we suffer, we can’t think well; while we can’t think well, we suffer. The Buddha offered ideas and ways to free us from this impasse so we can think well and manage suffering. (B) Now that we can think straight and manage suffering, we can decide if life is worthwhile or not, we can decide about the game, and what to do with life. The Buddha freed us to decide. Buddhism is about getting free. I do not specify what kind of free. Buddhism is the only way to get free.

Some idea of Buddhism as getting free might have been important when people adopted Buddhism at its start. Buddhism gave freedom from the Brahmin-and-rulers system, and people then mixed up political-religious freedom with the kind of freedom described above. I don’t know.

This view of Buddhism as freedom is a step to Mahayana and Hinduism. Some Western Buddhists act as if this were their view of Buddhism, although they don’t say it clearly. “Buddhism as how to get free” appeals to Westerners and to modern people as economic and political freedom become more important. As far as I can tell, Western people did not lead Buddhists to see Buddhism in this way until recently, and the Western view was not important to Buddhists until recently.

Buddhism helps with freedom but I don’t like seeing it primarily that way. If life is not worthwhile, whether we are free does not matter a lot. We only need to be free enough to opt out. If life is worthwhile, then we should see that life can be worthwhile even if we are not fully free in all ways. We can be not-fully-free in some ways or even not-at-all-free in some ways. We can be working toward freedom. If we were not-at-all-free in any way, we couldn’t glimpse the ideas and ways of Buddhism. Here is not the place to wrangle over how free, and in what ways, we need to be to keep life worthwhile, or how we got enough freedom in the first place to begin Buddhism.

So, before we can assess this view of Buddhism, we have to deal with issues of worthwhile life, suffering, and the roles of worthwhile life and suffering in Buddhism. We have to think if Buddhism intended to say whether life is worthwhile, and we have to think how Buddhism focuses on suffering. We have to decide

if suffering is the main issue in life, and is correct to make it the main issue. Even if we think the Buddha really intended his ideas to make us free, Buddhism now does not see itself first that way. We have to deal with the terms in which the problem was originally given (Wheel) and the terms in which Buddhists see their religion (suffering and thinking clearly). If the Buddha intended to make us free, he intended to make us free so we could decide about suffering, the Wheel, and whether life is worthwhile. Freedom was a means at least as much as an end. We have to focus on the ends toward which freedom aims and not treat freedom and the one-and-only great-everything-in-itself self-justifying end that we tend to do in the modern over-politicized-over-populist world. This chapter is about the questions of worthwhile life and suffering rather than the question of whether Buddhism is all about freedom.

We are lucky to be at least partially free and thus able to decide well enough. Working on questions of worthwhile life and suffering first is necessary preparation for later thinking about Buddhism as freedom, and for getting free. Working on those questions first is more effective than directly going after the issue of Buddhism as freedom and better than directly going for freedom. We have to decide those issues to get free even if deciding them does not alone make us free.

(B) (9) A Common Practice.

You can pursue a version, even your own version, of letting go, not clinging, letting go of letting go, not suffering, making suffering optional, or managing, and call it whatever you want. Letting go of some things while valuing other things is common to all religions and philosophies. The distinction between what to let go and what to hold does not always coincide with the distinction between profane and sacred. Much of what all good major religions and philosophies advise us to let go, or hold, is common among them. People call it by different names. That coming together can be quite good.

(C and D) Avoiding Mistakes, and Thereby Sensing What the Idea is About.

People don't like the idea that life is not worthwhile. They want something more glamorous from the mind of the Buddha. They don't want to think the Buddha taught that life is not worthwhile. They want to think life only seems not worthwhile but they personally can awaken to a great truth that does make life secretly deeply worthwhile, even abundant and fun. That is what the Buddha secretly really taught. They want to think their own life is worthwhile even if the mistake-ridden miserable lives of most others are not. To hell with the stupid people who are still ignorant and still live in misery. All this thinking is natural but wrong. It leads people astray. It led people astray in Mahayana and Hinduism. I have to ease people into seeing the simple idea that life might not be worthwhile. The labeled and numbered sections do that task. I don't try to persuade you life is worthwhile or not worthwhile.

If it helps, think that life is unsatisfactory; "I can't get no satisfaction". Or, think that you have to be crazy to live in this world, wish to live here, or need to live here. Instead of crazy serial killers, we are all crazy serial lifers. It is better to be not-here-and-sane than to live like this even if life seems fun. Waking up is getting sane, ending the need to live crazy. C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, noted Christians who should value life, at times wrote as if life were a disease to get over or a bad dream to wake up from. If the other ways of seeing life as not worthwhile help, use them for now but later rethink in terms of worthwhile and not worthwhile.

It is easy to say life is a dream from which we need to awaken. Not all dreams are bad. We could live forever in a good dream. The dream need not be ours; maybe it is Dharma dream. We could be meant to live like this. This view is like Mahayana and Hinduism. The movie "Inception" plays with this theme, not always adroitly. Only if the dream is not worthwhile should we wake up. Eventually we need to see that life itself, the basis for any dreaming, the dream, is not worthwhile.

(C) What We Don't Awaken To.

Think about what Buddhism wants us to awaken to or what any religion wants us to awaken to. What is unique about what a religion wants us to wake up to? Much of what religions extol is common between them. People are often confused about what Buddhism wants us to wake up to, thinking it is something common such as deep compassion. By taking away what is common and by taking away errors, we get a better view of what the world is, what humans are, what Buddhism wants us to wake up to, and whether we really agree.

Waking up in Buddhism is not about seeing that life is crappy. For most people, life is not crappy, not even for women, men, gays, the working class, the beset middle class, true liberals, true conservatives, Christians, and Muslims. For many people now, with modern medicine, lots of food, entertainment, and the illusions of populist democracy, life is fairly good. A crappy life is not worthwhile but not because it is crappy. A good life does not become worthwhile because it is good. A good life still is not worthwhile. All life is inherently not worthwhile simply as life. A crappy life, and crappy things in life, can show that life is not worthwhile but they are not what make life "not worthwhile". Dwelling only on crappy things in your life, in the lives of some other people, or in most lives generally, can lead you astray and obscure that all life is not worthwhile. You mistakenly think: if you could get rid of crappy things, if I could live only with the good, then life would be worthwhile. That idea is false. You have to stop thinking in terms of crappy or good and have to start thinking about worthwhile or not worthwhile. This mistake about crappy life is similar to the mistake that life would be good if we could only overcome suffering.

Waking up is not about seeing that life is good or bad. Life can be good if you are not sick or old without a home and insurance. Even if life seems good, still life is not worthwhile. We notice life is not worthwhile when life is bad; but even when we do not notice, and even when we enjoy it, still life is not worthwhile. Pleasure can far exceed pain, we can do our duty, be a good person, make the world better, make great art, make scientific advances, find deep love, raise successful happy children, see cause-and-effect and dependent origination, or stop most clinging, yet life is still not worthwhile. Nothing inside life can make life worthwhile. Nothing outside life can. You can say it however you wish but get used to it.

Awakening requires not only seeing that life is not worthwhile but requires a little bit more. Some people glimpse that life is not worthwhile and they respond with anger, bitterness, and lashing out. Some people use "not worthwhile" as an excuse to do and take what they want. Such people do not see fully what "not worthwhile" means and so do not really let go of desire to make life satisfying on their terms. Residual clinging leads to bitterness etc. If they also let go of the desire to make life worthwhile, and fully accepted that life is not worthwhile, they would not be angry, bitter, hurtful, and selfish.

Even so, simply seeing that life is not worthwhile might not do the trick. We also need to see the value of morality, compassion, and acting well. We need to see the value in other persons. These things do not

go away when we see that life is not worthwhile; and we cannot properly see that life is not worthwhile if they do go away because we would lack full standards by which to see that life is not worthwhile. When we let go, we need to let go as a person, a self, and, if we lost morality, compassion, and acting well, we would not be full enough selves to let go properly. We can see that life is not worthwhile and still remain good persons who act well; we can only see that life is not worthwhile if we are ready to be good persons who act well. Still, we do need to see that valuing selves, morality, compassion, and acting well are not by themselves the same as awakening; we do need to see that life is not worthwhile, and that is the hard part; see more on the role of morality below and see more on the self below.

In Japan, a Zen Buddhist monk (I think the Sixth Patriarch) said something like: "Before I was awake, I was miserable. I was cranky, hated people, disdained everybody, deplored the ideas of others, and was never satisfied. Now that I am awake, I am still miserable etc". Seeing that life is not worthwhile is not the same as finding another source of joy and contentment even if seeing it does bring you some joy and contentment. Seeing that life is not worthwhile is not the same as transforming life into something that is worthwhile. It is not the same as putting you in a state of grace so now your life is worthwhile. You have to take good and bad, and have to let go of good and bad. Only now you can manage it.

Waking up in Buddhism is not about seeing that most of everyday life for most people is a quagmire of silliness, stupidity, selfishness, false goals, aimlessness, and mild immorality, and then rising above the foolishness of the apish masses. Waking up is not about seeing that most of life consists of small traps that steal intellects, hearts, and souls, such as cars, beauty, entertainment, success, and tiny victories. Many people in many religions, and many people apart from any religion, have those insights. They are true but not enough. We have to see that much but we also have to see more. It is unlikely that a person could awaken in Buddhism and not already have seen through the silliness of ordinary life to something more rational, ordered, decent, deeper, and dignified; but still that insight alone is not enough. You need to build on that insight.

Waking up in Buddhism is not primarily about seeing through all the silliness and traps and then settling in to a measured rational life in which you rise above most things to live as a wise person in the middle of a vexing world. It is not about being "the fool on the hill", the wise monk or wise nun who can find just the right word to say, the good teacher, music lover sitting down to booze and hip-hop, the one-in-a-million person who can read theology, a patient gardener, or Chauncey Gardner from the movie "Being There". Those paths usually are distractions. Once you have walked those paths for a time, you need to think what else Buddhist awakening might be.

Waking up is not about becoming a mirror for the universe, reflecting all its glorious diversity and unity, and sometimes reflecting it back in a better way.

Waking up is not about seeing morality and becoming a more moral person. It is not about becoming a good person. Morality is an intrinsic part of Indian thought, and so morality does play a role in Buddhism. Buddhism takes moral awareness for granted and asks what you should do. The universe is intrinsically moral. The Dharma is intrinsically moral and promotes morality. If you struggle against the morality of the world, you will go backwards. If you go along with the morality of the world, you are more likely to go forwards. If you do not see the value of morality and do not almost always act morally then you cannot awaken. But morality alone is not enough even if you never act badly, are a good person, and are pro-

active in morality. In Buddhism, it is not enough to work hard to make a better world. It is impossible that you could awaken if you were a bad person; but awakening is not primarily about being a good person.

People are so confused by morality, moral vigor, and apparent moral laxity in Buddhism that I return often to morality in Buddhism and repeat often that Buddhism insists on morality.

Awakening is not about seeing through conventional morality to deeper morality. It is easy to see through the hypocrisy, conventional morality, moral deception, and moral conniving that most people in the world live daily. It is easy to see through all that to deeper moral principles such as the Golden Rule and “don’t be a lazy leech living off state support (for individuals or business firms).” It is not hard to imagine a better world based on deep real moral principles. Again, it is unlikely that you could awaken if you did not have these insights but these insights alone are not awakening.

Awakening is not about seeing that good and evil are mirror twins that depend on each other. Not only is this insight wrong but it would not be enough even if it were true.

Awakening is not about getting beyond all morality, getting beyond good and evil, to something deeper and better (better in some non-moral sense). It is not hard to glimpse this possibility of getting past all morality; still it is wrong to think it is part of Buddhism and that awakening depends on this insight. Likely, it is necessary to see this possibility and see it is false, to awaken in Buddhism, but seeing this possibility is not the same as accepting the need to overcome all morality, and getting past this mistaken insight is not awakening. Even if some people do somehow get past all morality, and some smart people think you have to get past morality to be one of them, still, getting past morality cannot be the same as awakening in Buddhism.

Awakening is not having the ability, without error, to know what we can cling to and what we cannot. Awakening is not unerringly using “natural” or “moral” to decide what we can cling to and what not. To live is to face stickiness, desire, and clinging; we must cling to some things; so we have to choose; and choose wisely. Awakened and not-awakened people both have to choose. We have to: (1) distinguish between sticky things; (2) distinguish between what we can safely do, that is, almost-cling to, versus what we cannot do because it is too sticky; (3) be able to choose correctly; (4) be able to act on our choices. (5) We may use ideas of natural and moral to help. These tasks are part of one skill. This skill helps us to awaken before we awaken, and comes out of awakening after we have awakened, but in itself it is not awakening. For example, all desire, even for food, water, air, and to avoid extreme temperature can be clinging and harm the quest to awaken. Yet we all must eat, drink, breathe, etc. to pursue awakening; they are natural to a human; breathing is needed for meditation; breathing in meditation is not simply natural; but food, water, air, etc. need not be sticky clinging and need not lead to losing the way. We have to handle them wisely without clinging. Yet this ability is not the same as awakening. We have to forego other desires such as to be adored by lay Buddhists yet that ability too is not the same as awakening.

I make a point of the ability to live in a sticky world with managed clinging because: First, some people, including monks, think the ability to handle stickiness and clinging is the same as awakening, and I do not agree. Adept people in Hinduism and several schools of mysticism appear to manage clinging as well as Buddhists yet Buddhists would not call them awakened. Second, some people think awakening is the

same as not clinging at all, and I doubt that is strictly true. If we did not cling to breathing, we would die. Awakening goes along with correct management for the right reasons rather than not clinging at all. Even then, correct management for the right reasons is not exactly the same as waking up. The ability to manage clinging, to choose and act wisely, comes with awakening even if it is not same as awakening. Awakened people have a huge ability not to cling to anything – food and water – more than most of us can imagine, but few even of them can simply stop breathing or wish to. Even monks like to talk to anthropologists; and that is a form of clinging; but monks managed it for the best rather than gave it up entirely. Third, the ability to live in a sticky world without clinging does not mean we can do whatever we want. People in all religions make that mistake, as when some early Christians felt above Tanakh (OT) Law and civil law, and Paul set them straight. That stance is clearly wrong in Buddhism too.

For examples of the need to choose, manage clinging, and the role of natural and good, remember that nature can be abused, and natural and good do not always coincide, and sometimes we have to pick. Awakened people might, or might not, always choose correctly – they are more adept than “sleeping” people – but skill in making this choice is not awakening. Recall that breathing in meditation is not simply natural but also learned; we cling to it in learning meditation; yet it is useful; we need not cling to it so much that we lose the way; but, unless we are careful and lucky, we can cling to breathing so much that we do lose the way. Awakened people know eating one apple is alright while eating eight apples gives you a pain in the gut but that is not the same as awakening. We can be hungry and eat a single apple or eat an entire bag of junk food. Knowing the difference is not awakening. Awakened people know eating an apple fallen from an abandoned tree is alright but picking an apple from an owned tree without permission is not. Awakened people know that, for married people, having sex with a spouse is alright but having sex with a willing able 14-year old person is not. Such discriminations are not awakening. Awakened people know that squirrels naturally store up nuts for winter and people learn to store up milk in the refrigerator yet hoarding gold and clothes are wrong; but that discrimination is not awakening.

Friendship is natural; it can be morally good; it can be morally bad; it can be overdone or underdone; it can help with awakening or it can hinder awakening; awakened people can have friends if they do not fall into stickiness, desire, and clinging; the naturalness, morality, and stickiness of friendship all should be managed and can be managed.

Advanced people know both that (1) ANY desire and clinging can be misplaced and (2) some of what seems like desire and clinging can be rightly placed. Craving to eat an apple can be a source of clinging if we are in Antarctica. The desire to restrain a man can be NOT clinging when the man is beating a child – or the desire can be clinging if we also “get off” on violent domination. It is false that any desire can be passed through by an advanced Buddhist without clinging. With training, most desires can be passed through, so an adept person sometimes can do things that seem inherently sticky. Still, this skill and the freedom that goes with it are not awakening. Pride is natural and often good; to suppress natural pride is bad; but it is hard to feel pride and not cling. A great skill is to know the difference between modest honest helpful pride versus pride that leads to a fall. When you know, you do not put yourself in the way of temptation by engaging in activities that lead to pride.

But even knowing all this and being able to manage all this is not the same as awakening.

Gangsters, politicians, business people, lawyers, killers, criminals, and accountants can manage desire and clinging. They focus attention. They see cause-and-effect and dependent origination. Somebody called adept politicians “monsters of patience”. Adepts of other religions select and focus attention, see and manage cause-and-effect and dependent origination. The ability to manage does not mean anyone manages in a way that leads to Buddhist awakening. A Buddhist can find small differences in focus and technique to account for the shift but I ask you to look past finagling to get the point that managing desire and clinging is not the same as awakening.

Recall that a monk should be ready to starve if nobody gives food. Starving to death is not natural, and, mostly, even for a monk, not good. I think the Buddha gave this guideline because he wanted monks not to mistake skill in choices about natural, moral, desire, sticky, and clinging for awakening. He wanted all people to see such skill as leading up to, and coming out of, awakening rather than as awakening itself.

Awakening is not the same as feeling great compassion as in Jainism, and in some Islam, Christianity, Mahayana, and Hinduism. It is good to feel great compassion. I suspect it is not possible to awaken in Buddhism if a person has not sometimes felt great compassion. But feeling great compassion in itself is not awakening.

Awakening is not the same as being an un-selfish person, fully successful at unselfishness, and without mistakes at unselfishness. An awakened person likely often knows when to be selfish, self-interested, helpful without hurting self-interest, mildly altruistic, and strongly altruistic; but this ability is not awakening. Many people in many religions cultivate this ability and some people become quite adept at it but they are not awakened in a Buddhist sense. Moral atheists cultivate this ability but they are not awakened in a Buddhist sense. For more on un-selfish persons, see Part 7 below.

Awakening is not the same as the feeling of being a small person in a big world, and is not the same as feeling you matter anyway even if you are a small person in a big world. It is not the same as the Grand Canyon feeling. It is not the same as feeling the connections between everything in the world, how you are a little bit them and they are a little bit you, as in the Upanishads. It is not the same as discovering ecology, the environment, nature, and the cosmos. It is not the same as feeling that the universe will take care of you. It is not the feeling that you will take care of the universe and help the universe take care of other people and nature. Again, likely it is not possible to awaken in Buddhism if you have not felt these feelings but they alone are not yet awakening.

Awakening is not the same as seeing that your body-mind work the same way as the universe works, and seeing that the universe and your body-mind reflect each other. It is not the same as seeing the links between the micro-cosmos (your body-mind) and the macro-cosmos (the universe). It is not the same as seeing the universe working through you, using you to do its work. It is not even the same as seeing the universe working through all people, using all of us to do its work.

Awakening is not “mindfulness”. It is not social, humane, or cosmic awareness. Many books have been written on mindfulness since 1980, so see those. Mindfulness is similar to having a feeling for others, like compassion, seeing that others are real too, have feelings, and are sentient. It is empathy and sympathy. It extends to nature. It is seeing that your mind works the same way as the minds of other people, other

beings, and nature. It is using these insights for good. Likely it is not possible to awaken in Buddhism if you are not somewhat mindful but mindfulness alone is not awakening.

Awakening is not the same as success in meditation. Success in meditation can help with awakening but is not the same. Meditation is a tool, like aerobic exercise. It can be a goal in itself if you are satisfied with it as a goal in itself. But primarily, in the past, meditation was a tool to a greater goal, awakening. Unlike as with other insights mentioned here, it is possible to awaken without meditating. But meditating by itself without use for awakening is rarely harmful and it is usually helpful as long as we do not mistake the successes of meditation with the real goal of awakening.

Awakening is not the same as seeing that the world is caught up in cause-and-effect. These days, some scientists think they see the world as entirely a mechanism running on cause-and-effect (I doubt they do really see the world this way, but that is not relevant here). Seeing the world this way does not often lead these scientists to see the world as moral, see connections between things, see the stickiness of the world, see how people cling to the world, feel mindfulness, and feel compassion toward anything. Seeing the world in terms of cause-and-effect might lead to such insights but it might not. It might also lead to amorality and a deep numbness. It might lead to despair. As with meditation, seeing the world in terms of cause-and-effect can help to awaken but it is not necessary and it can be misleading.

If you want to use the idea of cause-and-effect to help awaken, keep in mind how the Buddha likely saw cause-and-effect. Here morality matters again. The Buddha saw cause-and-effect in the physical arena but that was not very important. The most important arenas for cause-and-effect were what we now call psychological and moral. If you do a bad act, you have to pay the price, and likely you will become more of a bad person. If you fear, you are likely to lash out. Fear turns easily into hate, hate turns easily into bad acts, and bad acts easily trap us in hate and bad acts; this is what the Emperor knew and he used it to manipulate Anikin Skywalker, not to liberate Anikin. In the movies "The Matrix", standard ideas about cause-and-effect are given by the character "The Merovingian" or "the Frenchman", who is also Hades or "the elder Satan". He does not use cause-and-effect for good. Simply seeing cause-and-effect alone is no guarantee the insight leads to goodness and awakening. We need more besides cause-and-effect or we need to introduce specific causes into cause-and-effect. Love is likely to break the cycle of hate and break the prison around us. This both the Buddha and Jesus knew, and many other religious teachers too. Cause-and-effect has to be used to good ends. Using it for good ends helps free us. Ultimately, knowledge of cause-and-effect is a great tool to help free us as long as we include in our view of cause-and-effect the right ideas-causes. The Buddha saw cause-and-effect in these terms. Usually cause-and-effect works to keep us in the silliness of everyday life; but, once we understand it, and if we are astute enough, we can use it to help awaken us.

Seeing that we are bound by cause-and-effect can help us see the ties between life, desire, clinging, striving, suffering, and disappointment, and so help free us. Seeing cause-and-effect also can lead us to see links between desire, striving, and joy, as when parents set up a college fund and eventually a child graduates. In Buddhism, that "good" outcome really is deceptively bad, so seeing cause-and-effect also can trap us. We can use ideas of cause-and-effect to advance toward awakening, but also we need to see beyond cause-and-effect, to see that life is not worthwhile despite some links between good things. Seeing cause-and-effect alone is not awakening but seeing cause-and-effect can be a tool on the way to awakening. I return to cause-and-effect below.

Awakening in Buddhism is not about becoming a decent person or simple good person. I think anyone who did awaken in Buddhism would be a decent simple good person, that awakening comes with simple good decency, but awakening is not the same as simple good decency. Even simple people, and decent people, “mistakenly” think life is worthwhile. Hopefully, I am in that group.

As a Buddhist meditates (including all austerities and withdrawals from the world), he-she increasingly sees that things are not as important as they seemed, that things come and go. He-she lets go, stops feeling attracted to the world, the world seems less sticky, and he-she stops clinging. Still, he-she does not let go of morality. He-she still has to see morality in interactions among sentient beings (relations among people) and still has to make moral decisions and do moral acts. He-she does not cling to the outcome of moral acts as before when moral sight was biased by worldly stickiness but he-she does not discard morality to become amoral or immoral. He-she develops better moral judgment and better moral action because he-she is not as biased and is not as manipulated by the world.

This moral acuity is not awakening. The better-moral-judgment-and-better-moral-acts of an advanced Buddhist are not the same as awakening. Likely moral acuity is necessary for awakening but it cannot be exactly the same. People who have not gone through Buddhist meditation, or any meditation, can have moral acuity as high as an advanced Buddhist. People who have gone through other forms of meditation can have moral acuity as an advanced Buddhist. I do not think there is any moral insight that a Buddhist can have that other people also can have, not even a fully awakened Buddhist. Even if there were some moral insight that a fully awakened Buddhist could have that other people cannot have, I think that moral difference still would not be the same as awakening.

Moreover, when a Buddhist does let go of the world, is not hurt by stickiness, and no longer clings, but still feels morality and acts morally, the Buddhist needs a set of moral principles by which to see, assess, and act. As far as I know, other than avoiding suffering, Buddhism does not have moral principles that are peculiar to Buddhism and that distinguish it from other religions such as Hinduism and Christianity. What are the principles by which an adept and-or fully awakened Buddhist acts, and what have they to do with awakening? I do not address these issues here because they are not addressed well in Buddhism. I urge Buddhists to adopt the moral principles in the teachings of Jesus mixed with practicality and Western values. In practice, that is what many modern Buddhists do. Adopting these principles does not betray Buddhism. Adopting these principles is not the same as awakening. But it is worth thinking about the relation of these principles to the insight and acts of an awakened person.

This paragraph won't make full sense until you know Taoism and Zen but it belongs here and I hope you keep it in mind for chapters on Taoism and Zen. Awakening in Buddhism is not simply acting naturally without pretense. It is not “doing without ado”. It is not finding that your inner nature conforms to the true nature of the universe, and then being able to go along with the true nature of the world simply by acting on your own true nature. It is not transcending conventional morality by linking your nature to the true nature of the universe. All this is a wonderful goal for its own kind of awakening, and it would be delightful if it could merge with Buddhism; maybe it did in Zen; but it is not original Buddhism.

Awakening is not the same as being a simple whole integrated person who has no contradictions and no guile, and who “speaks from the heart”. As I said in the chapter on evolved human nature, I doubt that

any evolved sentient being can achieve full simplicity, integration, and guileless truthfulness. Like many simply decent people and like many simply religious people, an advanced Buddhist is more simple and integrated than other people but that still is not the same as awakening. I don't know if a fully awakened person such as the Buddha is fully ideally integrated and I don't know if full simple integration is needed to fully awaken. Even if full integration and full awakening go together, I doubt they are the same. I also doubt it is worth considering deeply how they differ. If you pursue one, you will advance in the other even if you never fully achieve either.

Awakening is not the same as being a "real" person as opposed to a phony, pretender, or poser. You cannot awaken if you are a phony pretender poser, and you should be as real as you can, but awakening still is not the same. As with full integration, I doubt that an evolved being can be fully real and genuine. Awakening is not the same as being a real person in the sense that Americans wanted of their artists (writers, rock artists, hip-hop artists, actors, movie makers), politicians, friends, spouses, and selves after about 1960. It is not the same as a genuine person without false consciousness in Existentialism. If you pursue awakening, you will become more genuine just as you will become more simply integrated with less guile but they still are not the same. An American or European who met an advanced Buddhist likely would see the Buddhist as genuine, real, and not phony, but awakening and being fully genuine, still are not the same. You can pursue awakening and know nothing of the real-phony distinction even as you become more real through pursuing awakening.

The following issue is related to the idea that Buddhism uses the Dharma to overcome the Dharma. The formal exercises that lead to awakening, and awakening itself, are not entirely natural. They are based on the view that nature and the natural life are full of suffering (not worthwhile) and must be overcome. The goal is to leave the natural world. These days, not being all-natural seems like Devil worship; but it is not as bad as it sounds. Recall that nature is not all good and sometimes we have to choose not to pose, lie, steal, rape, or murder. ALL religions claim to overcome nature somewhat. The morals of Jesus come from evolved human nature but they are not simply natural and Jesus' followers to suffer a disadvantage compared to all-natural self-interested people. Often religions claim to fulfill nature or fulfill God's plan for nature. When religions seem to go against nature, they claim to really make us more-natural-than-nature, as, for example, with Christian ideas about birth control, abortion, and family, and with Christian policies that both condemn homosexuality and say it is really all right. Buddhism claims that awakening fulfills human nature by using Dharma to highest capacity. Mahayana and Hinduism enlarge this claim. They say an awakened person identifies with nature (Dharma) to carry on the Dharma program. I think original Buddhism cannot claim to fulfill nature and to identify with nature; I let Mahayanists and Hindus fight their own case. Original Buddhism is far enough from nature so Buddhists have to worry about the gap. You have to assess how important Buddhism's particular anti-naturalness is. You have to say if contradicting nature makes Buddhist awakening too amiss.

Buddhist morals and meditation techniques can enhance evolved human nature, becoming more alert and mindful is good if you don't wallow in it and don't force it on others, but the goal of escaping nature is misguided. Buddhist insights about the self, mind, and body are inspiring. Being able to see clearly nature and your own silliness due to your evolved nature is a great tool. Wishing to end suffering or make life worthwhile automatically by ending suffering are mistakes. Meditation does not necessarily awaken. Awakening is not seeing how the world makes suffering and, through that insight, automatically to escape suffering. We cannot end desire, clinging, and suffering entirely and still remain human. We can lessen

the worst, and we can help with some pain. We can choose and we can learn. Some of us can learn to help other people and nature. We are better off pursuing those goals. Buddhist methods and sensibilities can help. That's what most Buddhists who are good people do. Mahayanists and Hindus are wrong to claim that awakened people merge with nature (Dharma), or see that they already are at one with nature (Dharma), and thereby enhance its plan.

Many people, on reading the above mistakes about awakening, think: "Hold on. They are a good deal, better than straight Buddhism as Mike (Polioudakis) describes it. I would be well off, and likely satisfied, if I could awaken to modest morality, seeing cause-and-effect, compassion, mindfulness, spontaneity, simple goodness, simple decency, and managing desire and clinging. Surely this success would make life worthwhile after all. Maybe that is what the Buddha meant. Maybe getting rid of suffering through ending clinging is really only the biggest step in making life really worthwhile. To end clinging to bad things, so to remove suffering, is the big step toward being a good person and living a worthwhile life. Maybe Mike is wrong, so awakening in Buddhism really is about becoming a simple mindful good mildly aloof person and about seeing that my life and all life is worthwhile in that light." Most Buddhists think this way though they would not say so. Even most monks likely think this way. Buddhists might be correct that this is what the Buddha really intended; but I doubt it. Some mix of other ideas of awakening might be superior to original Buddhism. A mix of other ideas might be better than what now is taught as Buddhism. Still, awakening in the other ways is not original Buddhism. You have to decide. If you think these other ideas are superior to what the Buddha originally said, then you have to decide if the religion suggested by the other ideas is superior to the original religion of the Buddha or is superior to versions of common Buddhism.

I too admire these ideas. I hope anybody who awakens in Buddhism also would be a simple good decent mindful spontaneous useful caring helpful person. I don't like aloofness. I would add that you act as true to yourself as you can without hurting anyone, you not try to force yourself to be a goody-goody, but you do try to be good. Cultivating good qualities can help with awakening. I suspect anyone who claimed to be awake but did not show good qualities. Still, not any one of the qualities, nor any mix, is awakening in original Buddhism. Buddhist awakening is something else. Whether it is something more and better, or less and worse, you have to decide.

I especially like mixing morality with the Taoist-Zen sense of acting naturally. Zen followers tried to find the right mix of morality, spontaneity, and naturalness. They felt they could find it, and felt this mix was both true Buddhism and true Taoism. I think Jesus had this sensibility too. Jesus also had a tremendous sense of us as persons made by God relating to other persons made by God and relating to a beautiful world made by God.

Working through the possibilities, and seeing the contrast of these ideas with the intent of the Buddha, led me to see more in general; appreciate Buddhism and all religions more; and see the value of the ideas of Jesus mixed with practicality and Western values.

(D) (1) Life is Not Worthwhile: Avoiding Mistakes about "Not Worthwhile".

Everything that has a beginning has an end. You have a beginning and so you will end. Not just die from this life, but end. You are not an immortal soul-self. If you will end, why defer the inevitable, especially if

so much of life so has no purpose, and so much of life is empty, boring, often painful, beset by suffering, and not worthwhile? Why not seek a way to get out of this circle, to end the situation naturally in this lifetime? This conclusion does not mean life is devoid of all enjoyment and satisfaction but it does mean it all has to end. You can live with grace in this lifetime as long as you don't let yourself get lost again. Simply accept reality and deal with it by going along with the natural flow of things and doing what you need to do to end completely. (That we all began and all will end does not necessarily mean we all will awaken. That is another issue that I can't go into here.)

"Not worthwhile" seems like despondency, despair, defeat, and resignation. It is not. The blues has roots in despondency and despair but it also grows above those roots into a larger tree with large flowers and fruits, even if it does not become happy sing-along music. Despondency and despair are wrong ways to see the world, they are sticky, and they lead to clinging and suffering. "Not worthwhile" is what happens when you feel in your guts that you have watched too much TV and you turn the damn thing off for a long time; you decide to stop being a sports fan and you actually start living a real, more meaningful, and more satisfying life that includes people and movement; you finally give up on a bad love affair; you accept that politics stinks, even your party and its leaders can't get the job done, and you start looking for other ways to help. It is what happens when you, or a dear one, gets cancer, and you have to get past that badness to make something of what remains. With "not worthwhile", the arena is large, the whole world, but the feeling is the same. If you think of "not worthwhile" through these images, or similar ones, you will be more on the right track than if you think of it in terms of defeat and resignation.

Life is not "not worthwhile" because the world has fallen into sin and depravity as in Christian and Islamic stories of the Fall and Original Sin. Unfairness in nature such as cancer, and evil acts by humans such as terrorism and economic inequality, do make the world less appealing and can make life not worthwhile for some people. But, even if we cured all disease, made the economic system work fairly, and made all people act nicely, still life would not be worthwhile. Bad things make us more aware life is not worthwhile and make life less worthwhile but they alone do not make life "not worthwhile". Our situation in life and our intrinsic attitude toward life, its stickiness and our desire and clinging, make life not worthwhile. How this works out is best seen indirectly through re-reading mistakes about awakening from above and by reading more about "not worthwhile" in this section.

Life is not "not worthwhile" because we are bound by cause-and-effect. We cannot escape cause-and-effect but that in itself makes life neither worthwhile nor not worthwhile. Life might be worthwhile even in a web of cause-and-effect; life might be worthwhile for a spider if the spider could think. Life would not necessarily be worthwhile even if we could escape cause-and-effect as in fantasies of magic. Life might be even less worthwhile if somehow we could escape cause-and-effect. Seeing the extent of cause-and-effect helps you to see whether life is worthwhile or not. You have to accept cause-and-effect just as you accept breathing or the color red, and then decide.

Life is not "not worthwhile" because it is an illusion. Life might, or might not, be an illusion overall. Life could be full of illusion. Life could be free of illusion. In fact, evolutionary theory says we do not see the world simply as it is, and we distort so as to do better. So life does have some intrinsic illusion-ness. But, mostly, we do see the world clearly enough, and we can overcome many illusions.

None of this matters. We could see life clearly but still life is not worthwhile. If illusion is a problem, and we get rid of illusion, what we then see clearly is that life is not worthwhile; we do not see a better life, a good system of lives, or a way to make life worthwhile. Life is not “not worthwhile” because it is an illusion as in the movie series “The Matrix”. Life is not “not worthwhile” because it is a series of nested illusions. Life is not “not worthwhile” because it is a fun good illusion or a hurtful bad illusion. Life is not “not worthwhile” because it is a series of fun good illusions or bad hurtful illusions, or a series that is a mix. We could see through all that, even see through a series to the bottom, even find that the bottom is fun and interesting, and still life would not be worthwhile. We could defeat Agent Smith, make peace with machines, eliminate the Matrix, free all people, secure the future of Zion, and live within ultimate reality, and still life would be not worthwhile. We could see that life is a never-ending series of illusions with no bottom, some illusions fun, some illusions scary, and still life would not be worthwhile. We can be totally clear about life but still life will not be worthwhile. We can free ourselves of all illusions and delusions except the delusion that life is worthwhile, and still life will not be worthwhile.

Delusions can make it all worse, and usually do, but not because they make life hard, ugly, unpleasant, or a failure. In fact, illusions and delusions can make life happier and can help us achieve worldly success. Delusions make it all worse because they impede seeing that life is not overall worthwhile; so we have to get over them, usually one-by-one, until we see clearly. It is hard work to get over the illusions that go along with self, family, work, community, success, fame, etc. Even when delusions make life enjoyable, especially when they make life enjoyable, they are still delusions, cause us to cling, and so block seeing that life is not worthwhile. Especially when they work, it is hard to get rid of our delusions and illusions. Sometimes a few hard knocks help to open our eyes.

Some people say, “Yes life is a struggle, life is painful, and sometimes there is more pain than pleasure, but life is still overall worthwhile.” Below I agree with this idea; I say life is worthwhile overall despite the fact that much in life is bad. Buddhism says: This idea that life overall is worthwhile despite aggravations is typical of clinging to life. “Life is still worthwhile despite its aggravations” is something people say when they are still lost in the complex that includes the mistake that life is worthwhile. The only way to get over this mistake is simply to see that life overall is not worthwhile.

Some people say, “Yes, life is a struggle, the struggle is painful when we lose, and the struggle is painful even when we win, but the struggle itself is worthwhile. The struggle is worthwhile regardless of whether we win or lose. The struggle adds to life. Overcoming obstacles is part of life and adds to life. Even pain and suffering can add to life. The struggle can make us better. The struggle can be worthwhile because it is painful, not despite its pain. Thus life overall is worthwhile. Life overall is worthwhile partly because of struggle, and not despite struggle. What matters is not the game but how you play.” This attitude is heroic, and partly true, but it is still overall wrong. It is something people say from within the confusion of life, not from an objective assessment of life. This attitude is true in that we can gain from pain, and we should gain from pain when we can; but this outlook still does not make life worthwhile. This attitude is wrong if it says we can gain enough, through struggle, pain, and living, to make life worthwhile overall. In the end, what we should gain is the insight that life is not worthwhile.

Life is not “not worthwhile” because we are reborn or not reborn. The main insight of Buddhism does not depend on karma or rebirth. The ideas of karma and rebirth can make sense of inequality, and they can be used to support the Buddha’s message – I don’t do that here – but that is not necessary. The ideas of

karma and reincarnation also can be interpreted to make the fact that life is not worthwhile harsher and clearer: it would be horrible to be reborn over and over, blind to reality, sometimes enduring the suffering of this world, and forced to make up for previous bad acts. Recall that, contrary to Western confusion, this is how early Indians and Buddhists thought of the system of karma and rebirth; not as an adventure but as a wheel of torture; and they wanted escape it. The Buddha offered a way out. But the Buddha also offered a way out even if we live only one life. Listen to “Do It Again” by Steely Dan.

We could see that the point is the journey rather than any destination, or see that life has no destination and that not having a destination is alright, and still life would not be worthwhile. We could see that the point is to participate in the series of illusions rather than to uncover some mysterious truth at the bottom, and still life would not be worthwhile. We could see that life is a game that is fun in the play rather than is fun in the winning, and still life would not be worthwhile.

We could be the savior of this world (messiah), and still life would not be worthwhile. We could be the hero of a joyful system of many lives (bodhisattva or avatar) and we could save all people, and still life would not be worthwhile. We could see that we ourselves made life with its games and illusions, and still life would not be worthwhile. We could be the one God who made this world and all worlds, and life still would not be worthwhile. We could be the God who suffers and dies for everybody, and life still would not be worthwhile. We could be the God (bodhisattva) who leads all beings to grace and salvation, and life still would not be worthwhile.

Sometimes when people start to see that some aspects of life are mistakes, delusions, or not worthwhile, they begin to feel good. It feels good to see through the mistakes of life such as wanting a giant house, believing a political party, or allegiance to race. It feels good to see that large aspects of life are absurd and to see other people running around like idiots. When people see this, they feel they have figured it all out, and their particular life is worthwhile after all. If you can figure out what in life is not worthwhile – a lot – and figure out what in life is worthwhile – not much but quite valuable – and you feel good, then maybe your particular life is worthwhile after all. This idea is a mistake. Even when you see all the particular things that are not worthwhile, the absurdities and silly people, and you feel good, still life as a whole is not worthwhile. Half-smart people think they have gotten to a privileged place where they see through absurdities and silly people, and have found what is worthwhile about life, but, really, usually they are mired in some fairly silly ideology-fantasy of their own. You have to go farther, and, when you do, you will find that all of life is not worthwhile.

(D) (2) Life is Not Worthwhile: Not Caring.

Here is an old quip about Buddhism: “Don’t just do something, stand there”. Super villains cannot defeat super heroes one-on-one in combat. Instead, villains go after people that the hero cares about: romantic interest, parents, friends, co-workers, random children, or simply people in general. Caring makes us vulnerable. Villains say it makes us weak. It sucks us into the world. It makes us depend on the world even if we are super. Even when caring gives us great rewards, it also makes us sad; it causes suffering. Maybe we can see Buddhism a living out of the slogan “just don’t care”. On the other hand, Westerners believe caring makes us great, makes us human, and makes us who we are even if in some ways it also makes us vulnerable. Caring makes us strong. James Bond wins because a woman cares. John Wick wins because he has friends and he loves his wife and dog. Neville Longbottom and Harry Potter make a

point of telling Tom Riddle that they have friends who all care about each other, and they believe in good things, while he has nothing. The greatest speech in the “Lord of the Rings” movies is by simple Sam Gamgee about how some things are worth caring about and fighting for.

Looking at Buddhism through caring and not caring has pitfalls, especially for Westerners who now make so much of caring. When she was fifteen-years-old, my modern Thai niece replied to everything: “I don’t know and I don’t care” (mai ruu mai son). She turned out a useful adult. In our world now, “don’t care” sounds like a spiteful immature child. It sounds like a typical “me” person who cares only about career, “making it”, and markers of success such as trophy children and the latest phone. “I don’t care” sounds like a person who has been beaten by the world and is bitter but would care if he-she could get another real try. It does not sound like someone who has lived a bit, won a bit, lost a bit, and decided the game as a whole was not worthwhile despite some wins. “Don’t care” sounds mean, bitter, and spiteful rather than intelligent, thoughtful, the end of a line of serious thought, following the Dharma, and part of the Buddhist Middle Path.

In fact, Buddhists can care, do care, and should care. Buddhists just should not get lost in caring, and so get stuck in the world, and become overly vulnerable. Instead of saying “I don’t care” say “I don’t cling”. Not to care at all turns yourself into old rusty metal. But, in fact, you are not crumbly old rust or you would not know about Dharma and Awakening and you would not care about them and seek them. If you see a kitten up a tree, rescue it. Share your bowl with a bum who hasn’t eaten. Teach about the Dharma. Help a child with homework. Study math for fun. Explain to villagers why a dam across a stream might or might not work, and so save them effort and suffering in building it or not building it. Explain to all people why terrorism is horrible. An intrinsic part of the Dharma and the universe is morality, and morality implies some caring. As a good Buddhist, you have to act morally, and it is hard to act morally without caring a bit. When you do care a bit, you act morally as Dharma intended. They come together. The Buddha cared for all sentient beings and so taught the Dharma, that life is not worthwhile, and how to escape from suffering. Be ready to let go and walk away when things turn into a vortex and you feel sucked in and twisted. It is hard to care some yet not get sucked in but it can be done.

If you want to think about the issue in terms of caring, think this: “Life is not worthwhile enough so that I should risk caring enough to get permanently sucked in and forget myself but I may care up to that point”. Every time in this chapter you see “life is not worthwhile” you can think about the longer version.

To deliberately not care is a mistake about as big as caring too much. Deliberately not caring is a desire, clinging, and a way of getting stuck on an abstract dogmatic stance. It is caring in reverse. It comes too close to disdain, pride, and hate. Deliberately not caring takes a lot of energy that would be better spent finding the correct limits of caring and not caring.

“If you love someone, set him-her free”. The following view is somewhat misleading but can be useful. If you really care about somebody, you want him-her not to suffer, and you want the best for him-her. The best for him-her is to see how the world works and to attach (cling) or not attach (not cling) appropriately. “Perfect” would be awakening but we can’t do that for others. We can manage our clinging to the person so we don’t bind that person and instead we set that person free to pursue Dharma as fits him-her. In contrast, when we care a lot for a person and show it, we almost demand of the other person that he-she care for us as much. When we say “I love you”, we expect him-her to say it back, and feel it, or we get

angry. “Two and a Half Men” and “Big Bang Theory”, among other TV shows, had good episodes about what happens when a person does not say it back. Don’t put other people there. Don’t care for them so much (cling) that they have to cling to you or they feel guilty and confused. Care for them as much as you can to help them along the Dharma path. Any more is wrong for both of you. That much is best for both of you. If he-she really cared for you, wouldn’t he-she do the same for you? This is one version of a Buddhist Golden Rule. You don’t have to limit caring only to what sends him-her along the path, you can be nice to him-her and can share good times and common interests, even those that have nothing to do with the path, you can play golf or watch sappy movies together, you can talk about which candidate best, but not so much as to endanger the path for either of you. You should not force, or use guilt to force, a person to “be better” and “to reach his-her full potential” along the Dharma path or in other ways either. That is not really caring.

The idea of “caring” can highlight the contrast of Western with Buddhist. Westerners say the people and ideas that we care about are exactly what make life worthwhile even when they bring pain and even though too often they don’t work out. We think what we care about, who we care about, and how much we care, is what makes us distinct as a person and makes us valuable, and we think the same is true of all peoples. Caring matters, makes us people, and makes us distinct. Buddhists say even people and ideas are not worthwhile in that way, and caring for them does not make our life worthwhile or their lives worthwhile. Caring brings suffering and the suffering is not worth it.

Don’t dismiss the Buddhist view because the contrast is clear and because modern people have been trained to accept the Western view. Westerners repeat their point so often that it seems they are trying to talk themselves into something they secretly doubt. A flip of the TV remote reveals how often shows and movies promote caring. Even the violent movie “Predators” is about how caring is better than strategic selfishness and better even than strategic mere self-interest. In real life, how often does love win the day or does family really win? Wouldn’t it be better to care in the context of reality where the caring is much more likely to do good? Is caring really what it is all about, does caring really make us fully human, and does caring really make each of us distinct, unique, and valuable? Are we really that individually distinct and that valuable? Do we really make the world by what we care for and how much? That kind of caring seems, paradoxically, selfish.

Too much caring leads to religious fervor, nationalism, racism, sexism, terrorism, and us and them. Even too much caring for a person leads to political corruption and family corruption.

Despite the sense of the Buddhist stance, I still hold the Western position although softer than common. Caring is important, helps make us persons, and makes us distinct. Life is worthwhile and caring helps make life worthwhile. Western culture is going through a Romantic whirlpool of sticky clinging stupid silliness about emotions and caring. By putting too much stock in caring, we care wrongly and we hurt the ideas and people that try to we care for. The Buddhist view could help. You can still be a worthwhile useful person if you don’t have all the deep squishy family, friends, and causes that media glamorizes. Too often caring really is about me and not about them. The Buddhist idea of the limited self can help here if we think both of them and me in that way, and we live up to the potential of that kind of self rather than the super self of Western myths about caring. The Buddhist Middle Path is worth considering even for caring commitment.

(D) (3) Life is Not Worthwhile: Big and Small, Great Compassion, and Not Caring.

The feeling of “big and small” is two feelings: (1) We are all only small parts of a very much bigger whole. (2) Although we are only small parts, God (Dharma, Tao, and the Whole) cares about us and all the small parts, and God wants us to do well by his standards.

Recall that a feeling of “big and small” and great compassion often, paradoxically, comes with a feeling that somehow life and the world are not worth it. Someone who feels all of this still intends to care for people and nature but knows caring might not do the job. Someone who feels this way accepts and goes on anyway. My wife calls this mixed feeling the idea that God cared about us once but now God has left us to the squalor that we make here – maybe God finally shrugged his shoulders and left - we do deserve our fate even if it is sad. While this feeling might be related to the Jewish-Christian-Muslim idea of a fallen world, it is not the same as their idea of a fallen world. It is less dramatic yet sadder. I don't know why these feelings come together, but, if you know what I am talking about, you gain an insight into Buddhism.

Most people who have all these feelings together try to suppress the feeling that it might not all work out and try to foster the feelings of “big and small” and great compassion. Buddhists accept all the feelings, and instead see the message that it is not worthwhile even if it does work out. This Buddhist stance does not mean you stop caring within the right limits and does not mean you stop feeling. It does not mean you do not appreciate the whole and the Dharma. It means you see reality as it is, stop fooling yourself, and start thinking and acting accordingly. Unless you have had all the feelings in this way, it is hard to describe any more.

Most people do have all these feelings at some time in their lives. They nurture the feelings that their culture-or-religion tells them to hold onto and they suppress the feelings that their culture-or-religion tells them not to have. The next time this happens to you, if you are able, dwell on all the feelings for a while but not permanently. Don't suppress the sadness that comes with “big and small” and with compassion. Accept the feeling that the world went awry and won't work out. Think about what that outcome might imply. If all this frightens you, then stop right away.

(D) (4) Life is Not Worthwhile: Illustrations and More Explanation.

In the movie trilogy “The Matrix”, in movie two, the Architect (Dharma or God) gives Neo a choice. Neo can either (1) give up the woman he loves, Trinity, partly save the city of Zion, and so continue the game of the Matrix for one more round; or (2) Neo can save Trinity and win freedom, but very likely lose Zion totally, let the machines win, bring the demise of nearly all humans, impoverish existence for all survivors, and end a long-running somewhat mutually beneficial game between machines and people. Five saviors have come before Neo and faced a similar choice. Neo and his predecessors were groomed to choose to keep the game going by instilling in them deep love for humans. All Neo's predecessors chose to save Zion and continue the game. All five thought the game better than nothing, thought life worthwhile. All five clung to the game, seeing that as the correct moral choice between self versus others. All five struggled to a moral choice. Krishna urged Arjuna to choose likewise, and he did. All five predecessors acted like Mahayana bodhisattvas or like Hindu avatars. Unlike his predecessors, Neo chose to save Trinity and to assert freedom. The result of his choice, at first, seemed like disaster; but it ended well by saving Trinity, saving Zion, ending a bad game, and bringing humans and machines to accord. Through

struggle and choice, in the end we can have it all. This outcome is a common human fantasy. Now, in the West, this common human fantasy is tied with ideas about political freedom, wealth, patriotism, love for people, romantic love, and love for family. "Star Wars" teaches much the same.

As my wife, Nitaya, pointed out, unlike his predecessors, Neo did not choose to continue the game. He did not act like a bodhisattva or avatar. Neo acted somewhat like a Theravada Buddhist in not making humanity, life, and the continued game, an ultimate priority. Yet if Neo were a true Buddhist, he would not be in this situation to begin with. Neo did not care about the game as given to him but he still cared about Trinity and other particular people, and about people in general. If Neo were a true Buddhist and he was in this situation, Neo would not choose at all. Any positive choice implies life is worthwhile, and renews clinging etc. Neo would not save Trinity, Zion, the game, humanity, or the machines. He would not fight Agent Smith. He would not mistakenly think that choice-in-itself is moral glory or is glamorous moral victory. He would not glamorize struggle, morality, choice, or success. Neo would not heroically choose or refuse to choose. He would simply do nothing unusual, and so let the game play out and end. He would not see doing nothing as a glamorous moral choice either. If Neo did choose Trinity, and the result worked out well all around, Neo would not fool himself that anything had been gained. The Brave New World is not more worthwhile than the old. Neo would not let himself believe the Western fantasy that romantic love eventually wins everything. Neo would believe the common human fantasy that family and family love eventually wins everything. Neo would know that, even if the fantasies are true, their success leads to nothing worthwhile. If Neo chose to let Trinity die and so let Zion and the game turn through another cycle, Neo would not fool himself that anything had been gained. Few Buddhists could let go as in the choices above, after any choice, or with no choice at all. All Mahayana bodhisattvas and Hindu avatars would choose as did the heroes who came before Neo, as with Arjuna. I don't know what normal flesh-and-blood merely human Buddhists would do. Many Westerners think they would choose as Neo did, choose love, and so have it all at last, including freedom and prosperity.

By choosing "Trinity", the movies imply that by choosing God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and Western values, we get it all, including a glamorous identity as a moral romantic hero. This sounds like what I am saying. It sounds like my rejection of Buddhism and Hinduism. It is not. The Trinity of the movie myth is not the God that I believe in, and my idea of making the world better is not "getting it all". I insist we can't have it all, and we should not glamorize. I do not confuse romantic love with working hard to make the world better or with anything else. I do reject the idea that we are in a game, and that we should keep the game going. I do reject the idea that sacrificing ourselves or others to keep the game going is heroic, moral or, glamorous. I do reject glamorizing morality or indecency.

It is hard to see that life is not worthwhile, life is often painful, goals are often delusory, we cling to life with our delusions, clinging leads to suffering, and they all reinforce each other. This idea goes against what I have said all through this book about doing good and about working to make the world better. If you wish to go along with Buddhism, you have to see what it says and to overcome what I said.

Millions of years of evolution have channeled us to see life as worthwhile even when life stinks. Evolution made it hard to see life as not worthwhile, almost no matter how bad it is. Evolution made sure we almost always cling to hope. The fact that evolution leads us to think life is worthwhile does not, by itself, mean life is worthwhile or not worthwhile. Even so, we still have to evaluate the worthwhile-ness of life on its own terms. We have to override how evolution has channeled us to assess life as it is. The fact that

evolution led us to see life as worthwhile means we have to be careful to give full weight to the evidence that life is not worthwhile and maybe we have to discount some of the evidence that life is worthwhile. Buddhism accepts the natural tendency to see that life is worthwhile regardless of facts – another way in which Buddhism and modern biological theory coincide. Buddhism assessed the issue on its own terms apart from the natural tendency to see in rosy terms, and without reacting against the natural tendency, and Buddhism concluded that life is not worthwhile.

In the chapter on evolved human nature, I said that we do not see the world exactly as it is, some of our delusions are useful, we are contradictory, some of our contradictions are useful, and we can never get rid of all contradictions so we are one simple whole integrated being. We can get rid of enough confusion so we can see clearly enough to follow the Golden rule, “applies equally”, and rule of law. Buddhism seems to require us to get rid of all our delusions so we can see that life is not worthwhile. It takes a lot of clear minded integrity to see that life is not worthwhile especially if evolution is pushing hard to make us think life is worthwhile. Arguing this issue back and forth here is not useful. So I say you don’t have to be perfect in Buddhism any more than you have to be perfect in my version of following Jesus. Despite the push of evolution, we can be integrated enough to be clear enough to see that life is not worthwhile. This stance does not mean that intellect wins over emotion or vice versa. It only means we can see enough of what we need to see when we are ready to see it. I assume we evolved the ability to do this too, along with our delusions and contradictions. I do not make a big deal out of this evolved ability to overcome delusion and confusion such as by claiming that the Dharma (God) set up evolution so we would evolve this ability. Please keep these comments about integration in mind for remarks below about the self in Buddhism and in the modern theory of evolution.

The idea that life is not worthwhile is like the feeling we get when we have to wash the same dishes over and over again or wash the same clothes over and over again. It is like getting up every morning to go to work so we can buy food and pay rent so we can get up every morning and go to work again. There is no end to it. It does not get us anywhere. It doesn’t even move us forward; it just keeps us from falling back. Nothing is ever complete, finished, done, and accomplished. Even if we wash the dishes after a good meal with family and friends, and should feel satisfied, we still face the same old pile of dishes over and over again.

People think life would be worthwhile if they could be a hero, face constant adventures, face a few small defeats, but win overall, over and over, like James Bond, Matt Dillon, Jason Bourne, or Michael Westen. Evolution might predispose us to be fooled in this way but ultimately it is not true. Even that kind of life gets boring after a while, and usually sooner than we hope. The movie “Robin and Marion” makes this point, and I have heard that some brave soldiers say the same.

In the time of the Buddha, people did not have the chance to continually cure different diseases or hope to cure a big complex disease such as cancer once-and-for-all. We think that might make life worthwhile but don’t be so sure. If you are the one who does it, yes, you will feel good for a while. But, if you didn’t do it, somebody else would. Does the fact that you did it make your life worthwhile but make the lives of other people not worthwhile, even if somebody else would find the cures eventually? If somebody else does it but not you, does that make his-her life worthwhile but not yours? Don’t confuse getting a Nobel prize, fame, glory, or wealth with making life worthwhile.

You are bored watching TV all evening every evening. You decide to do something a little naughty, such as play risqué music, invite the person down the hall in for a drink, a smoke, or a pill, and maybe have sex. That is fun. You do it again. You go out to look for people who do the same thing. You do a little crime such as a drug deal or stealing. Life is fun again. But that lasts only for a while. Pretty soon you get tired of sex, drugs, rock and roll, hip-hop, music about righteous anger, and petty crime. Even if you escalate to bigger, you get tired of that. Many nights, now all you want to do is watch Nature, Discovery, or History on the TV. Eventually, you know in your heart that nothing will keep you engaged all the time every time, not even conquering the world.

Everybody once in a while gets the feeling of deep bone weariness with life. You would know life is not worthwhile if you took seriously that feeling. You do not have to be disappointed or hurt to have this feeling. Sometimes you just feel it from the center outwards. You might even feel it in the middle of a happy event such as a wedding. Evolution guards us from dwelling on those feelings and taking them so seriously that we use them as a turning point. In contrast, Buddhism insists those feelings are right, and Buddhism tries to get us to overcome our evolved programming to go on anyway despite what we can see is the truth.

Recall the chapters in this book on “Worlds”, especially the second chapter. There I described scenes of increasing boredom and of increasing helplessness with boredom. I reviewed techniques for fending off boredom, including the ideas of rebirth, life is a game, and losing yourself. The techniques might work for a while but ultimately they cannot stave off boredom. Not even The Game in the novels “Kim” (Rudyard Kipling) and “The Glass Bead Game” (Herman Hesse) can fend off boredom forever. Think of boredom as a proxy for “not worthwhile”. The moves that fend off boredom might make life seem worthwhile for a while but not forever. Eventually we see through all moves to the fact that life is not worthwhile. A merry-go-round can be interesting for a long time but it cannot make life worthwhile. The idea of not worthwhile is like a very deep qualitatively distinct unfixable kind of boredom.

Besides, even if life is not boring, even if life is fascinating, that still does not make life worthwhile. To a stoned person, reruns on TV are amazing but that does not make them worthwhile.

If you read enough fiction, eventually you realize there are no new stories, and more fiction is not going to get you anywhere. Even good stories get empty after a while. How many gangster or vampire movies can you watch? Fiction is not worthwhile. If then you go back to real life, after not long you realize most life is more boring than fiction. To make life more interesting, usually people turn to life that is dangerous or thrilling, or turn to the “underbelly”. Even then, after a shorter time than they feared, they realize thrill and danger too are empty. “The thrill is gone”. After that, there is little to turn to.

“Not worthwhile” means all the lessons from all the scenarios. It does not mean “boring and unlikely to pay off our investment”. It means pointless despite the fantasy, endless variation, and engagement. For a wonderful novel about this realization, read “Kim”.

Rebirth might solve some problems but it also creates worse problems. Rebirth helps keep people lost in the system. Understanding that life is not worthwhile gets us out of a system of rebirth. It does not make the system of rebirth more fun or make it worthwhile as a system.

The idea that we can keep dying and getting reborn, so stave off boredom, and so make life worthwhile, is probably a reaction to the idea that life is a delusion. This solution – rebirth to fend off boredom – is central in Hinduism and Mahayana. This solution is similar to the idea that God can lose himself in play and-or dreams, so enjoy himself, and so ultimately find himself in an even better way. I think the Buddha would have rejected this alternative and this view of God and the self. I don't know if this alternative was available in the time of the Buddha and that he did, in fact, reject it. If this alternative appeals to you, then you might disagree with the Buddha. If you prefer Mahayana or Hinduism to Theravada, then you should consider the role of this idea in your thinking.

The idea that God judges us after death does not make life worthwhile even if we expect that God will be kind to us and even if we hope that God allows us to try again in other lifetimes. No matter how well we do with God, no matter how many times we try, life is not worthwhile. God cannot make life worthwhile. God is fooling himself if he thinks he can make life worthwhile. We fool ourselves if we think God has made life worthwhile or can make life worthwhile. The ideas that God saves us, Jesus saves us, or we are justified by our faith in God and by following his Will, do not make Life worthwhile. The idea that we go to heaven does not make life worthwhile; even heaven gets boring; "Heaven is a place where nothing ever happens". Life is not a great-and-wonderful gift from God.

(D) (5) Life is Not Worthwhile: Life has no Meaning.

Life is not "not worthwhile" because life is meaningless although the lack of meaning in life can open our eyes to the fact that life is not worthwhile. For readers who recall high school "lit" courses, the idea that life is not worthwhile is like the idea from Existentialism that life is absurd. Recall Albert Camus' novels "The Stranger" and "The Plague". (In the movie "Life of Pi", while in "high school", the hero reads "The Stranger" in original French.) In "The Plague", a doctor fights the plague although he knows he does not make the life of anybody better, good people die who should live, stupid and bad people live who should die, and the plague will mutate to return over and over, so there is no end to it and nothing is ever finally done – in contrast to what Jesus said on the Cross. People who have the plague and people who do not have the plague make up ideas about why it has come and what life is all about, but the ideas seem silly. The challenge is to make meaning in the face of all this. Existentialists claim we can make meaning although life has no intrinsic meaning and life is absurd, and that this meaning makes life worthwhile. I am not sure Camus believed this. I do believe this. Buddhism does not. We can make up meanings, even real meanings, but that does not make life worthwhile.

At a first level, Buddhism is like the doctor when he feels life is absurd and all meaning is merely made up self-defense fantasy. We "see through" all meaning. We see that life is absurd. When we see through all meaning, and see that life is absurd, then we also see that life is not worthwhile.

In the movie series "The Matrix", ideas about the absurdity of life are introduced by the character "Agent Smith", especially when he opens his heart to Morpheus. The idea that life is absurd makes everything absolutely the same, and vice versa: "everything means less than zero". When Neo first defeated Agent Smith, Neo took meaning (purpose) from Smith's life. When Neo merged with Agent Smith, Smith got the power to make everything the same, to make it all him. Agent Smith must defeat Neo to reassure himself that he has found a new purpose in making it all the same. Without at least this purpose, Agent Smith cannot go on. Because Agent Smith cannot fathom the purpose-in-non-purpose of life, eventually he

must cease entirely. If the Merovingian is the old Satan then Agent Smith is the new Satan in which life has no meaning regardless of cause and effect or anything else.

Buddhism does not deny we can have real meanings or even that we can make up real meanings but it denies that meanings make life worthwhile; even real meanings do not fully make up for the plague. For Buddhism, life can have real meaning but life is still not worthwhile. To “see through” meanings can help us to see that life is not worthwhile but ultimately it is not necessary to see through all meaning. Some people assert their meaning cannot be “seen through”, debunked. For them, life is not absurd. People say this about family, love, God, religion, science, and country. Buddhism does not have to argue with them. It simply sees that life is not worthwhile even for people who make real meaning; these people only think life is worthwhile. Even when life has meaning that we can’t easily see through, and life is not absurd, life is still not worthwhile. Even a meaningful life is not worthwhile. “Meaningful” is not always the same as “worthwhile”. “Not worthwhile” is not exactly the same as “absurd” or “not meaningful” any more than “meaningful” is exactly the same as “worthwhile”. “Meaning” is a game that is played within the limits of the mistake that life is worthwhile, and, within those limits, meaning is fully meaningful. Once outside those boundaries, meaning is not wrong, it is irrelevant.

Stories like the writings of Camus help us understand these issues. For more stories, read excerpts from the “Lotus Sutra”. It is a Mahayana sutra (book) rather than a Theravada sutra, but still useful, and won’t cause much damage.

(D) (6) Life is Not Worthwhile: Not “Bleak House”.

When people begin to feel that life is not worthwhile, they can get despondent. It seems a bleak vision. But it is not nearly as bleak as the ideas below. The idea that life is not worthwhile is not the same as any ideas below. Unlike as with the ideas below, after we see that life is not worthwhile, we still have a lot of life to live and a lot of scope to live in. We can still be useful in life, enjoy life, watch, teach, have friends, do science, and make art, without thinking those activities make life worthwhile; and we don’t have to fall into clinging. This scope for modest living is part of what gives Buddhism its charm.

The idea that life might not be worthwhile does have benefits. It leads us to really think through whether life is worthwhile and what might make life worthwhile. It makes us think through the meanings that we others and that we make up. Thinking about whether life is worthwhile helps us make ourselves, much as confronting moral issues helps us make ourselves. Although life might not be worthwhile, life does not end right away as soon as we know that it is not worthwhile, and we should carry on well.

- Life is intrinsically meaningless
- Life is absurd
- We cannot give meaning to life
- All meanings are false and we should see through all meanings
- All life is bad delusion
- Because we are caught in cause and effect, we can have no choice
- Because we are caught in cause and effect, life is necessarily meaningless and absurd
- Because we evolved, life is necessarily meaningless and absurd
- We cannot see otherwise than as evolution programmed us, so life is meaningless and absurd

- Morality is a delusion and-or a tool for control
- There is no objective truth, everything is relative
- Life is disappointing
- Life is pain and suffering
- Even deep emotions such as love are delusions and meaningless
- Life is necessarily deeply boring (“ennui”)

(E) More Comments.

(E) (1) Letting Go, Again.

We can overcome the complex of mistakes. Because life is not overall worthwhile, we should not commit to it. We should see that life is sticky, that the stickiness cannot be avoided within a normal life, and so we need to avoid normal life with its stickiness. We should not cling to life or to any thing in it: material, mental, artistic, emotional, social, or spiritual. We should let life go on around us without clinging to it, we should wait to die, we should not fear, and be content when we do die. Not to cling is a way to see that life is not worthwhile. Seeing that life is not worthwhile is a way not to cling. Just as desire, clinging, and life push each other, so not clinging and seeing that life is not worthwhile help each other. Given how the mind works, usually we have to let go of some clinging first before we can see that life is not worthwhile. In practice, the two ideas often come together in small reinforcing partial steps.

At the same time, we should not commit against life because that is an indirect way of clinging too; killing yourself is an indirect way of clinging to life, especially in a system of many lives with rebirth. We should not kill ourselves. In a system of many lives, if we kill ourselves, we will be reborn, and then will have to go through it all again. Even if there is only one life, we should not get angry at life, or at least we should not stay angry.

It is fairly easy to stop clinging to obvious obsessions such as the White Whale in the novel “Moby Dick”. It is harder to stop clinging to more natural objects such as family. Letting go in Buddhism is not like letting go of the White Whale. It is more than simply working fewer hours at the job and so caring more about your family. It is subtler and harder. One lesson of “Moby Dick” is to look at many aspects of life as if they might be the Whale and to let go of them as we would the Whale. Letting go in Buddhism is more like letting go of the Holy Grail in the movie “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade”. Even things that seem good can be bad if we think of them too much and don’t think about other more important issues. “He chose wisely”. Yet, in Buddhism, everything in life is like that. We can only think properly if we let go of all particular things in life, learn to take issues as they come, and learn to put them down when we have disposed of them properly.

We should learn to accept thoughts, feelings, and actions, as they come, and then to let them go. If we learn to let go that way, we are ready to die at any time, and ready to wait until we die naturally.

It is impossible to see that life is not worthwhile, and to give up commitment to life, if you have a parent, siblings, spouse (partner), children, other family members, and friends, and you care about them. It is impossible not to struggle and cling if you have to tend other people. If you truly wish to wake up, then you must give up family life. If you have not married, don’t marry. If you do not already have children,

don't have children, and give up your spouse. If you already have a spouse and children, give them up. When the Buddha set out to find truth, he gave up his wife and child. It is true that his wife and child lived well at his father's palace, but he still gave them up.

It is impossible to see that life is not worthwhile, and to give up commitment to life, if you still want fortune, fame, power, glory, success, intellectual achievement, spiritual achievement, or a place in history. To seek those is to mistakenly believe they are worthwhile, and so to struggle and cling.

It is impossible to see that life is not worthwhile if you wish to serve people, do good, and make the world better. To vigorously seek goodness is to cling and struggle. At the same time, you may not act badly. You do not have a license to do what you want. You do not have a license to act badly. That is a worse form of clinging than moral action. Act with simple moral decency. Dogmatic morality and anti-morality are both forms of clinging and of thinking life is worthwhile. Moral action is better than immoral acting, but to cling to morality is still clinging and so is still bad. To cling to morality hides that life is not worthwhile. This clinging makes life sticky. You must be willing to give all that up. You might do good along the way but that goodness is only incidental.

It is impossible to see that life is not worthwhile if you care about anything, if, in Western terms, you care. You do not despise anything, and you might see the value of many things, but you cannot really care about anything, anybody, any god, or any cause. You can be a good person but not a caring person.

It is alright to have feelings and ideas. It is alright to enjoy your mind as it goes along. "Being dead to the world" is not the same as seeing that life is not worthwhile. You should not make your mind (self) "a pile of dead ashes". It is alright to act on some feelings and ideas, such as "I want to go pick an apple off that tree", or "I should tell my neighbor that his dog has ticks". The point is not to cling, not to commit, not to obsess, not to care, and so to see life truly. Once you have had a feeling or idea, and have acted rightly, then let it go. If you can't get the apple off the tree, don't worry about it. Some feelings or ideas you can have but should not act on, such as "I want to kill my neighbor because he throws cigarette butts on the apartment lawn". From an old story: A senior monk and his student came to a stream. The stream was swollen, and thus hard to cross. At the ford, a young woman waited, wishing to cross but unable. The elder monk picked her up, carried her across, and put her down. The monks walked on. Monks should not touch women ever. The younger monk was distraught. After an hour, he said, "Master, you carried that woman. You know touching women is forbidden. Why did you do that? What am I supposed to do now? Who am I to believe now? What am I to believe now?" The elder monk replied, "Are you still carrying that woman? I put her down long ago."

You may enjoy nature as long as you do not cling to it. You may enjoy beauty as long as you do not cling. You may enjoy art as long as you do not cling. You may enjoy science as long as you do not cling. You may enjoy theology as long as you do not cling. You should work for goodness as long as you do not cling. All this is hard to do. Many Buddhist monks have gotten lost in clinging to natural beauty and-or theology.

Not clinging is not the primary end. Not clinging is not an end in itself. Do not cling to "not clinging". Not clinging is a way to overcome desire and stickiness, see clearly, and see that life is not worthwhile. After you see that life is not worthwhile, then you stop clinging automatically. Life is no longer sticky. You no

longer desire. It sounds like a trick to say “stop clinging to not clinging” but, once you see the ideas and practice them, it does not seem like a trick, and it does not seem like a contradiction.

Once you begin to let go of things in life, you might feel much better. This is not your goal, although you should not reject it. You should not mistakenly think, because you feel better due to Buddhist ideas or techniques, that, in fact, life is worthwhile. You should not mistakenly think you can conquer stickiness, suffering, and clinging. To do so is another form of stickiness, clinging, and suffering. Sometimes people feel tremendous joy at realizing life is not worthwhile. That is not the goal either, and to seek that joy is another form of stickiness and clinging. Either to pursue or to reject the feeling that comes with letting go is itself another clinging. Accept what satisfaction or dissatisfaction comes your way as a result of your quest. Many people feel joy but not as they expected, not as in religious ecstasy, and not as in therapy.

Recall the monk in medieval Japan who said: “Before I was enlightened, I was miserable. I was cranky, hated people, etc. Now that I am enlightened, I am still miserable etc”. You have to take the good and the bad, and let go of the good and bad.

You may not commit any crimes or immorality. You are not above the rules. Freedom from mistaken ideas is not the same as not being bound by rules. Breaking the rules will not set you free. You cannot steal and then say “Oh, I put that down long ago”. You need not worry about rigid moral rules or arbitrary moral conventions but you do still have to be moral and you still have to respect the sensitivity of others. Moral rules still apply to you. Buddhism is quite strong morally without clinging to conventional morality or false uprightness.

As with all Indians of his time, the Buddha took the moral nature of the universe for granted regardless of whether life was worthwhile. The universe is intrinsically moral. Through karma, the universe rewards good deeds and good intentions, and it punishes bad deeds and bad intentions. That is part of the law of cause and effect; see below. You should act well regardless of any reward or punishment, but, whatever you think about purity of motive, the universe still responds to your deeds and intentions.

You cannot make spiritual progress if you commit bad acts. Bad acts cloud your mind and so keep you from the clarity needed for spiritual progress.

You do not have to become a monk. Being a monk is an aid in your search, and helps the rest of society by clearly showing people that you are searching and are no longer in normal society. A person who is searching but is not a monk often looks like a bum, and he-she scares other people. Somebody dressed as a monk is more likely to bring a smile. As a monk, you can help other monks, that is, other searchers. It is not misleading to help as long as you do not cling to being helpful. It is not wrong to be a monk, and it can be useful; but it is not necessary.

Exercises such as meditation, yoga, and Tai Chi can help but are not essential. Ideas such as karma, Dharma, reincarnation, spiritual force, merit, demerit, sin, cause-and-effect, dependent origination, the non-self, and Enlightenment can help but are not essential. They can help us get rid of some delusions and clinging. They help calm and focus our minds so we can think well and can overcome the mistakes of normal thinking. But they can also be a source of delusion and clinging in themselves. We should do them to the extent that they help but only to that extent. We should not do them so that they get in the

way. The young Buddha left his teachers because they reveled in ascetic practices to the point where practices got in the way of further spiritual progress. Only after he had given up rigorous asceticism for moderation did the Buddha fully see. Overly-rigorous asceticism taught the young Siddhartha a valuable lesson about clinging, the inevitability of clinging in life, and the not-worthwhile-ness of life.

(E) (2) What Happens After You Awaken 1: An Awakened Person Does Not Lead a Normal Life.

An awakened person sees that life is not worthwhile. He-she sees that life is sticky, we cling to life-as-a-whole and to particular things in life, and so we suffer. An awakened person reduces-or-ends clinging and suffering. An awakened person lets life flow through him-her without clinging to life. The Buddha offered methods to help us do all this.

After awakening, when an awakened person dies, he-she is not reborn. His-her karma is “spent”. In a common image from Theravada, he-she “goes out like a snuffed candle”. The person is over and done. In Theravada, this is a desirable event. It is called “pari-nirvana”.

Most people who are not awakened can understand not suffering, but they dislike that they simply cease totally at death. They want to go on living but without suffering and with worldly success. In Theravada, this goal is not allowed although I think most Theravada Buddhists secretly hold this desire. In Mahayana Buddhism, this goal replaces the goal of enlightenment-and-then-simply-going-out. In Mahayana and Hinduism, people (as Buddha Mind or as Dharma) lived forever before they were born in this lifetime, and will live forever after. They are unborn and undying. I think Siddhartha Gautama denied this possibility but it still runs through various forms of Buddhism anyway.

A person who seeks awakening cannot live a normal life. An awakened person cannot live a normal life. Even after awakening, a normal life too readily leads to clinging and suffering. If you disagree, then try following a particular sports team, a particular sport, a style of music, a style of movie, TV, or novels, politics, the economy, the ecology, fashion, beauty, or celebrities. You cannot follow anything interesting in this world without getting sucked in, getting stuck, clinging, and getting confused. You cannot run a business if you seriously seek awakening or have awakened.

An awakened person need not reject some normal things such as curiosity, education, exercise, friends, etc. An awakened person does have to avoid things that are strongly sticky and that lead to clinging such as family, career, politics, business, formal religion, being a famous scholar, etc. To awaken, usually we have to live apart from society; the Buddha left his family and made monks live celibate. After awakening, a person can come back to society a bit, but still cannot live a normal life; the Buddha did not return to his family, did not start a new family, and did not carry out an occupation such as merchant. The Buddha did advise awakened people to teach other people, and advised that awakened people could live in the normal world somewhat without falling back into clinging and suffering. He advised them to “go to the market” to explain his ideas. Still, that advice does not mean seekers and awakened people can lead a normal life. The Buddha would not allow people to be cutthroat merchants, conniving politicians, or careerist academics. Jesus and Mohammad said people who feel the call of God cannot lead entirely normal lives but the two leaders differed on how their lives departed from normal.

I doubt that a person could be a public school teacher or an academic and be a dedicated seeker or fully awakened person. Teachers and academics can be really good people, and many helped me, but they cannot be a dedicated seeker or an awakened person.

At the least, true seekers and already-awakened people will suffer a disadvantage due to their greater feeling for morality. This is the same disadvantage that followers of Jesus face. To compete with other business people, and to deal with authorities and politicians, you have to do “questionable” things such as pay off bad police officers and buy elections. You have to lie on your EPA reports and taxes. Yes, if all business people, all officials, and all politicians were honest, and the playing field were entirely level, you could be fully moral and not suffer a disadvantage – but the world is not like that. Yes, a moral business person, official, or politician does gain some advantage when customers see that he-she is moral; and this advantage can partially make up for the advantage that others gain from “cutting corners” – but not enough for all honest people and not enough over the long run. You might go to the market to teach but you could never do more than run a small shop. Some Christians settle for this much and I am fairly sure some good Buddhists do as well. Yet imagine if all monks opened shops in any predominantly Buddhist country; Thailand has tens of thousands of monks; then you get the point.

Don’t fool yourself about this point. People want very much to have spiritual success and a normal life at the same time, and so people fool themselves into thinking they can awaken from clinging and suffering and can still lead a normal life. You cannot.

Most Buddhists do not work for full awakening in this life but only work toward eventual awakening. They lead somewhat normal lives but try to be spiritual along Buddhist lines at the same time. I don’t speculate on: how much, and in what ways, you have to be spiritual along Buddhist lines to be a good successful Buddhist and still lead a somewhat normal life; how much you have to give up so as to follow a somewhat normal life as a striving Buddhist; how much you can keep and still be a real Buddhist; when you stop being a real Buddhist if you keep too much; what added particular ideas, acts, or morality you need to live a somewhat normal life and still be a real Buddhist.

This point about not leading a normal life is important because Mahayana does say both a seeker and an awakened person can lead completely normal lives such as “married with children”, soldier, farmer, police officer, merchant, or politician. In Mahayana, with the right attitude, you can live in the world without worrying about clinging and suffering. In Mahayana, seekers and awakened people need not name their children “fetter” (Rahula) as did Siddhartha. In Theravada, it is not true that you can live in the world but not be subject to the cause-and-effect, desire, stickiness, and clinging. This idea is a point of contention between Theravada and Mahayana.

If Buddhism says that life is not worthwhile, seekers cannot live a normal life, and successful Buddhists do not live a normal life, then why did ordinary people follow Buddhism? See sections below.

Suppose you do awaken, then what? If you are a monk, then mostly you continue as a monk. You teach other beings, human and non-human. If you are not a monk, you adjust life so you do not do anything bad or anything that might erode awakening. You allow your native personality to play itself out, as long as your native personality is not criminal. If you are a fussy gardener, garden fussily. If you like to paint, paint. If you like to sing, sing. If you like to write logical treatises, do so, as long as you do not perpetuate

misleading ideas or get lost in the maze. Don't fall back into attachment. Wait for your life to run out, and for you to go away. While you are waiting, you can watch the world play out. In particular, you can watch the world act out Buddhism: cause and effect, clinging, suffering, moments of suffering, moments of joy, moments when people see Dharma, hardening of egos, softening of egos, morality, immorality, amorality, and the rise and fall of states. You cannot do anything bad. You can do as much good as you like, and likely will, but you should not get attached to good acts. Teaching is a good compromise. Being a patient watcher, mild liver, and mild doer of good deeds, who sees the world in terms of Buddhist Dharma law, all contribute to the charm of Buddhists, as I describe below.

For more on this topic, some of it not completely orthodox, see the section "What Happens after You Awaken 2: Just Wake Up" below.

(E) (3) Non-Metaphysical, Non-Mystical, and non-Glamorous.

The original teaching of the Buddha was not metaphysical, mystical, magical, or glamorous. That is part of the charm of Buddhism. The Buddha did not take a stand on metaphysical or mystical issues; he just ignored them as irrelevant. It does not matter if there is a bigger-than-me, I feel the bigger-than-me, I reflect the bigger than me, the bigger-than-me sees through my eyes, I do the work of the bigger-than-me, the bigger-than-me loves me, I am the bigger-than-me, the bigger-than-me is unborn and undying, individuals are real but the general (species) is not, the general is more real than particular individuals, we are all one, or we are all particular and one at the same time. It does not matter if there is God, heaven, hell, judgment after death, making the world better, objective truth, etc. It only matters that life is not worthwhile, we see this, and we take steps to correct the problem. Even though God exists, the life he made for here-and-now is not worthwhile.

In Buddhism, the ideas that life is sticky, we cling, life is not worthwhile, cause-and-effect, karma, and dharma are not metaphysical or mystical because we can see them directly in experience.

Metaphysics and glamour go together. When we want to exalt something as metaphysical we also make that thing glamorous. When we hold a person, such as Jesus or the Buddha, to be a savior, we also make him glamorous. Jesus did not really have a halo around his head and likely did not look like a movie star. The Jewish Law is not only given by God, it is also exalted, powerful, deep, and glamorous. We cannot make the union of good and bad metaphysical without also glamorizing badness a bit and making their union glamorous too, as Blake did in the "Marriage of Heaven and Hell". As far as I can guess, the Buddha wished his ideas to be non-metaphysical and non-glamorous too. There is nothing exaltedly heroic about seeing that life is not worthwhile and then letting the game play out to the end. You just do it.

To explain the Buddha, people after the Buddha used many aids. Aids always reintroduce metaphysics, mysticism, and glamour. Reintroducing metaphysics, mysticism, and glamour is almost always hurtful and an impediment. Theravada Buddhists glamorize the Buddha, his teachings, and their religion. For example, they glamorize the "Middle Path" not as an observation about how the world works, and a piece of good advice, but as the "Yellow Brick Road" of Buddhism and the magic solvent that allows them to cure every problem. Mahayana depends on glamorizing both this world and the overcoming of this world.

Even Zen masters who likely knew the Buddha well often made this serious mistake by glamorizing the Void, Buddha Mind, and the idea that everything is as it should be.

As part of how our minds work, as part of seeing a lively world, we naturally tend to some metaphysics, mysticism, and glamour. They are natural ways to think. It is natural and easy to reintroduce them in explaining a hard idea such as that life is not worthwhile. Yet to reintroduce them is still a mistake. To think without metaphysics, mysticism, and glamour is a bit unnatural, difficult, and takes practice. It can be done. You do not have to deny metaphysics, mysticism, and glamour to do it. Ironically, to deny them is to take a mystical and metaphysical stand, to glamorize your renunciation, and so to reintroduce them. You simply learn to play with them and ignore them, and learn to focus on other concerns. Some great Buddhists, and great Zen masters, understood this, could do it themselves, and advised other people to do it. Yet so strong is the natural tendency to mysticism, metaphysics, and glamour that great masters often lapsed back to them in their explanations.

Science contains a fair amount of metaphysics and usually contains more than a dollop of mysticism. That does not invalidate science, and it is not a concern here. It is not usually a concern to practicing scientists but only to philosophers of science.

(E) (4) Honoring Normal Everyday Life.

By ignoring mysticism and metaphysics, the Buddha gave more status to normal everyday life than was common among religious seekers of his time, and he supported the idea that the world is as it is and not otherwise. The Buddha used examples from normal life to support his ideas, and so also valued normal life and common sense. I do not know whether the Buddha intended to support normal life and common sense or if he supported them inadvertently, but they did become part of Buddhism.

By supporting everyday life and common sense naturalism, the Buddha did not undermine his basic idea that life is not worthwhile. We might enjoy common life and common sense, and value them above mystic life and vision, but that still does not make life overall worthwhile. In supporting everyday life and common sense, the Buddha did not make mystic, make metaphysical, or glamorize everyday life. Life is what it is. Just because we should live in everyday life does not mean we should exalt it.

In supporting everyday life and common sense, and devaluing mysticism and metaphysics, the Buddha put up a block to people with a natural mystic temper. The Buddha did not deny natural mysticism; he simply ignored it as not immediately relevant.

As compensation, people who are natural mystics tend both to over-extol and under-value normal life and the common sense world at the same time; I do not say how. Natural mystics bend the religions around them to mystic visions, often by interpreting visions and religion in metaphysical terms. Mystics seem to like Buddhism, and they want to put metaphysics back into it. There is much scope for doing so through Buddhist aids, but, eventually, mystics come up against the fact that the Buddha avoided mysticism and glamour. When they reach this impasse, rather than bow to the Buddha, they often greatly over-stress the Buddhist aids and greatly stress their own metaphysical interpretations. They “double down”. They try to stress both, on the one hand, normal life and common sense, with, on the other hand, mysticism,

metaphysics, and glamour. They both make humble and exalt everyday life at the same time. They want to have their cake and eat it too. I think the Buddha did not do this.

Several hundred years after the Buddha, Mahayana Buddhism tried to fuse the ideas that normal life is valuable and normal life is somehow mystical. I think Mahayana failed. But the Mahayana attempt was rooted in attitudes that can be traced back to the Buddha. In the next chapter, I use Mahayana as my chief example for the mystical, metaphysical, and glamorous reshaping of Buddhism.

I agree with the Buddha that a common sense naturalistic approach to life is where we should start, and that we should stick to it as much as possible. I believe in the taste of peaches until somebody can give me a conclusive argument otherwise. I agree that we should respect normal lives and that normal lives have as much value as lives devoted to mysticism or metaphysics. Yet I have had mystical feelings and I also understand the desire to inject them back into our normal life and common sense. I understand the desire to reshape religion along the lines of our own mystic visions and I know how to use metaphysics and glamour to do it. Because I see this, I have tried to use my mystical feelings without falling into error. I sympathize with the desire of natural mystics to inject Buddhism with metaphysics and glamour but I think this is a mistake and it goes against the original intent of the Buddha.

(E) (5) Middle Path Again.

Usually we err when we go to any extreme. Usually we make progress when we are about in the middle. Not to cling usually brings us to the middle. Usually finding the middle helps us not to cling. The story of how the Buddha took the last steps to awakening usually serves as an important lesson about the middle. Palace life was an unending party where nobody was sick, nobody got old, and nobody died where young Siddhartha could see it. When Siddhartha left the palace, he went over to the opposite end. His studies under spiritual teachers were quite harsh, abused his body, brought him near death, and left him no mental strength with which to figure things out. Not abundant life nor stark death, extreme pleasure nor extreme suffering, was the key. When Siddhartha left his teachers, he ate properly and he moderated his exercises. His mind cleared up, and he thought through the issues of life, death, suffering, and clinging. He realized that anti-life was just as much an impediment as clinging to life, and that pain was just as much an impediment as pleasure. The Buddha urged seekers to find and follow the "Middle Path", and sometimes called his way the "Middle Path".

Again, the Middle Path is not the end in itself; it is merely a proven means to the end. If you cling to the Middle Path, then you are not on the Middle Path, and you have erred. The Middle Path should allow your mind to work properly so you can see what is what. When you can see that, then you can follow the obvious middle path or you can veer off temporarily as appropriate. For people who have been through a college course in politics or philosophy, the Buddha's idea of the Middle Path was much like Aristotle's idea. Both men had similar ideas at about the same time.

Often Buddhists say they follow the Middle Path as a synonym to say they follow Buddhism and they lead a good life. If they are middle class and middle most things, they think they are automatically also good Buddhists. They use the term "Middle Path" like a mantra or PC slogan. They do not know, or avoid, the idea that life is not worthwhile, and instead follow a path between moral craziness and amorality, between being a fussy helicopter parent versus one who lets kids do whatever they want, a political true believer

crusader versus ignorant slacker, etc. Here the “Middle Path” is a religion in itself that borrows its validity from the historical validity of Buddhism. The Middle Path will magically take you to wherever Buddhism is supposed to have taken you. Usually there is nothing wrong with this approach, even when followers do not understand that, in Buddhism, the Middle Path is not an end in itself but is only a means to an end. It is better for these followers of the Middle Path to live morally and well in slight temporary confusion than for them to seek bizarre spiritual, cultural, and political extremes.

The Golden Rule is the middle way between diffuse unproductive empty good wishes Compassion versus specific-rules-and-moral-fervor, and between selfish indifference versus moral fervor. “Applies equally” and “rule of law” are the middle way between rigid highly specific law versus ad hoc make-it-up-as-we-along judgments, strong tyrant versus no central authority, and mass populist pseudo-democracy versus rational legalism. Old-fashioned representative democracy is the middle path between fascism (including Communism) versus mass populism pseudo-democracy, between rigid political party war versus chaos of many small ineffectual narrow minded parties.

PART 4: MORE COMMENTS

Clinging, Commitment, and the Not Worthwhile World; “Just Let Go”, Again.

“Clinging” has bad connotations, like a clinging boyfriend or girlfriend that you wish would go away. The word “commitment” has good connotations, like commitment to a cause or to lifelong marriage. That view is wrong. Commitment is clinging; we just wrongly think some clinging is good clinging. Commitment to any religious life is clinging to a dogma just as much as commitment to the idea that a losing team will finally break through this year is clinging to a vain hope.

Clinging causes suffering. If we end clinging, if we let go, we stop suffering. Clinging makes us think life is worthwhile when it is not. If we fully let go, we don’t have to worry whether life is worthwhile. So why wonder if whether life is worthwhile and why think about suffering directly? Why not just focus on not clinging, and let all the rest take care of itself? In this way, we avoid the trap of clinging to a religious life.

To stop clinging is good advice. It is a good idea not to get too lost in things, not even good things. It is a wonderful skill to participate without obsessing, without zeal, and without losing yourself in a bad way. “Don’t obsess”. I don’t go through all the situations, objects, and people for which it is fine to participate but bad to get obsessed.

Worrying whether life is worthwhile can be a form of clinging. Not worrying if life is worthwhile seems to eliminate one type of clinging. Why add another layer to the puzzle? If life turns out not worthwhile, then so be it; by not clinging, you have taken a big step toward letting go of life that is not worthwhile. If this particular life turns out worthwhile, then so be that; you have enjoyed this life even more by not clinging and by not worrying if this life was worthwhile. If life in general turns out worthwhile, including all future lives, then so be that too; you have enjoyed this particular life more by not clinging and by not worrying if any life is worthwhile. If life in general is not worthwhile, then at least you took a big step in this life by learning not to cling, not even to dogma. The situation is like Pascal’s Wager in which we believe in God because it is the gainful thing to do.

All this advice about not clinging is good advice. This is the attitude that many people take in Buddhism without actually saying so. Officially, Buddhists always have to refer back to “end suffering”. “Just stop clinging, just let go” is an attitude that shows up also in Zen and Taoism. As long as you can stick to this simple plan, I see little wrong with it. See Part 4, Section (A) (1) and following.

There are two problems. First, we shouldn't let go of everything, and, of what we do let go, we don't want to let go of everything the same way. We may not let go of deep true morality. We can let go of moral convention, but that is not an issue. We may not, and cannot, let go of the Dharma. We may let go of Buddhist teaching and Buddhist texts, but likely we don't want to do that right away or fully. After we have let go of most everything else, maybe we want to keep a few Buddhist texts for reminders and because they are no longer dangerous. We don't want to kill all desires. We have to breathe, drink water, eat, and sleep. We have to let go of particular friends when they die but we don't want to let go of friendship. We wish to let go of desire for beauty or for particular works of art, but that does not mean we cannot enjoy a beautiful sunset, beautiful animal, or piece of music when it comes up. To reject the world is another form of clinging. We have to learn not to cling to that either. We have to learn to see the wonderful variety of the world without clinging to it. If we think only of “don't cling”, then we forget that the world is sticky and that to let go is not a simple “attitude adjustment” by us but needs mutual change with the world. When we think “let go” is one simple thing that we impose on the world, really we show pride and power, and we are more caught than ever.

As we think what to let go and what to hold, and how best to let go or hold particular desires, inevitably we will seek guidance from a religious vision. As for which particular vision I think is best in deciding what to hold, what to let go, and how, that is what this book is for, especially Part One. There is nothing wrong with taking advice from several visions as long as they are not too contradictory. (Most religions become heavily relevant, get heavily involved, at the point where people have to decide what to let go of, what to hold, and how to do it all. Coming in hard at this point gives religion a lot of power. Other ideologies do the same with the same power, such as Leftism and Conservatism. That does not necessarily make any ideology evil. But the ideology better be correct.)

Second, people don't stick to this simple plan to just let go. When they begin to let go of clinging, they begin to feel good, and begin to think life is worthwhile after all. They find excuses for indulging all the traps of the world, thinking they are above it all, all the time clinging while thinking they are not clinging. They think they are the one person in the world who can get away with it when everybody else gets stuck. They are like the cigarette junky who says “I can quit anytime I want, so I'll have one more”. They think their love for their particular high-quality spouse, family, church, or country is the exception; they are not stuck in their own desires but all other people are stuck in theirs. They forget about change, suffering, illusion, unfairness, stickiness, etc. They are the lucky recipients of cosmic joy. They think “Not all particular lives are worthwhile but the entire game of many lives is worthwhile; those lives are worthwhile that are aware; and my own particular life is worthwhile because I am aware”. They are saved because they are smart. Their cleverness gets in their way. Sooner or later, you must face the issues of suffering, stickiness, and worthwhile. From the context in which the Buddha learned, and from what he said, he did not think life was worthwhile in any way that people usually think. If the Buddha saw life this way, it is a good idea to take his vision seriously before fooling ourselves again. Likely you are not smarter or better than the Buddha. I am vain enough to disagree with the Buddha but even I am not vain enough to think I am the one person who can master letting go, so I can cling to or let go of whatever I want without worry.

Puzzles Over Not Clinging.

The following puzzles do not derail Buddhism. They enhance it for people who like puzzles. It is worth spending time thinking about them. Just don't get stuck. Because I am not a Buddhist, I don't have to know the answers. See "Just Wake Up" below.

Can we awaken without not-clinging? Can we not-cling and not awaken? If we not-cling do we have to automatically wake up? If we cling, then we cannot awaken, and, if we are not awakened, then we must still be clinging, so: If we don't have one, do we automatically not have the other? Are waking up and not-clinging the same?

Are not-clinging and not-worthwhile the same? Can we not-cling yet not see that life is not worthwhile? Can we see that life is not worthwhile yet continue to cling?

I am not sure, but I think it is possible to defeat clinging yet not awaken in a Buddhist way. On the good side, other religions also advise that we not cling or that we cling as little as possible, such as Hinduism, Jainism, and Christian and Muslim asceticism and mysticism. Think of Christian monks who take a vow of poverty. On the bad side, some people seem unattached to the world and almost unfeeling such as some psychopaths. We don't want to call psychopaths awakened. Buddhists can argue that these other ways of not clinging are not "really real" and so only Buddhism has true deep insight on true not clinging - I don't take sides in that argument. Rather, assume some people can nearly stop clinging yet do not necessarily wake up in an obvious Buddhist sense. Something else is needed besides not clinging. What is needed? I say: originally Buddhism said we also need to evaluate life and see that life is not worthwhile. Buddhism now says: we also need to see that we must defeat suffering. Some people say even those insights are not enough; to stop clinging you need positive content too. See Part One of this book for my ideas on what further positive content is needed. In practice, Buddhism also requires more positive content such as Compassion and skill in Aids such as cause-and-effect and Emptiness.

When you have defeated clinging, do you also give up not clinging? Do you also give up clinging to the doctrines of Buddhism including the doctrines about awakening and not clinging? Do you let go of the Dharma? Do you give up relying on the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha (society of Buddhists, especially of monks)? Do you give up on morality? All orthodox Buddhists would emphatically deny that you give up on any of these. Is their emphatic denial more clinging? What can you believe in but not cling to? What are the implications?

In practice, Buddhists do not really think not-suffering or overcoming-suffering comes with not-clinging. In practice, Buddhists pick elements of personality and social relations that they extol for reasons other than Buddhist doctrine and they use those as markers of success at not clinging. They cultivate those traits as a way to show how far they have advanced just as some Christians show off wealth as a sign of God's favor. Many Buddhists use aloofness and the supposed ability to see through all kinds of human motives to the desire, clinging, and suffering that beset all of us normal low-life people but not them. Buddhists think not-clinging gives magical insight and so they act as if they have magical insight. You should think about how a person who has reduced clinging might act.

What Happens After You Awaken 2: Just Wake Up.

If this section appears to contradict anything in the chapter above, it does not. The ideas here are useful in my assessment of Buddhism, and for Taoism and Zen later. These ideas are not necessarily orthodox.

Beforehand, we need to get over two points. First, waking up can't be only seeing that most people live in a dream – the Matrix - with few purposes other than biological urges and what TV ads put in their heads. Every half-smart kid sees beyond that. Waking up can't be only living a life that is smarter, more mindful, aesthetic, and better than “the herd”. Those are not bad goals but are not awakening. Self-styled “better” people are not awake. Waking up has to be more. Sometimes less is more. Second, “just wake up” is related to “just let go”. They share many good and bad points. I don't go through all that. Please apply the assessment of “just let go” to the topic here. After this section, apply ideas here backwards to “just let go”.

The three main themes here are:

- (1) “Just wake up”, the most important theme
- (2) Acting naturally and-or spontaneously
- (3) Seeing the world as it is and appreciating daily life

Set aside issues of worthwhile life and of suffering, but agree that we need to wake up. Instead of waking up to the idea that life is not worthwhile, why not just wake up without saying beforehand what we wake up to? We can, and should, use ideas of suffering and life-is-not-worthy to help lead us to wake up, but, when we awaken, we can let go of those ideas too. We don't have to decide if life is not worthwhile and-or full of suffering, before waking up, during, or after.

It is hard to wake up without waking up to something. Usually we need to wake up to some vision that tells us how the world was before we woke up, why everybody is not awakened, and how the world is now that we have awakened. Usually other people give us their visions, which guide us in our quest and fill up our visions. The Buddha offered a vision of life as not worthwhile. Most religions offer visions of a bright and glorious bigger-than-me (God, Dharma, Tao) into which we merge. Mahayana and Hinduism offer visions of a bright glorious joyful bigger-than-me that is a system of many lives.

How do we make sure we wake up to something good? How do we make sure we avoid waking up to something bad? How do we avoid mistakes? How do we avoid becoming merely a powerful demon? Here the ideas of suffering and that life is not worthwhile can help, as can Buddhist aids. We can know in advance to avoid some mistakes, such as thinking we are above the law or we are above the intrinsic moral nature of the universe. After we start to awaken, we should not lapse into the idea that we are special, don't suffer much, and our particular life is superior, just because we are so clever. Hinduism is quite clear about the mistakes and about avoiding them. We can avoid this trap of wrong ideas if we are forewarned. If we avoid the wrong ideas, then, when we wake up, we stand a good chance of being on the right track.

If we know to avoid mistakes, and use the ideas of other people to guide us without seeking to remake their visions, then maybe we can wake up without having a vision to wake up to. We just wake up. We let our awakened self fill in whatever we think is correct as we wake up.

The Buddha might have had this “context free” idea of waking up in mind. He might have used the ideas of suffering and life is not worthwhile to get people to wake up, and to wake up the right way. The ideas of suffering and “life is not worthwhile” were Buddhist aids. We should be careful with this interpretation of what the Buddha had in mind because it is not orthodox. People see ideas in prophets as a way to justify their own ideas. We have to be careful not to do this with the Buddha or any prophet. Hopefully I avoid this pitfall. See below.

It is worth stressing this point in passing: It can seem like a relief not to have to worry about suffering and whether life is worthwhile. It sounds easier just to wake up. That is not so. It is easier to rely on a mental aid such as the idea of suffering. It is easier to have a context. It is hard to advance without some guide such as the idea of suffering. It is hard to wake up without some clear idea what to wake up to. Not even Zen masters can do this, not even if, on awakening, they (think they) get rid of context, like forgetting about the stairs once we have climbed them to high ground. The need for some context might be why the Buddha offered the idea of a “not worthwhile” present and-or of suffering. The ideas get us away from normal life for a while so we can just wake up. Then we can make up our own minds. If you think “just wake up” is not enough or gets in the way, then forget about it, and go back to orthodoxy. Orthodoxy has worked for about 2500 years.

The idea of “just wake up” goes along with seeing the world as it is and valuing ordinary life. I think the two ideas go together well. We can think about them together without necessarily making “daily life” the context that we must wake up to.

This idea of “just wake up” goes along not only with Buddhism but with any religion that is critical of the usual unexamined selfish normal life – which is all major religions. We can use this interpretation of “just wake up” for all religions that are critical even if they also insist the world is as it is and they value ordinary life, including Judaism, the teachings of Jesus, and commonsense Christianity and Islam. I do not go into this point in this book for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

What do you do after you “just wake up”? The answer is not clear. You cannot act immorally. You are not above the law. Contrary to misconception, you can’t “return to the marketplace”. You can’t become a politician who is “above it all” even while he-she strives to make it all better. You can’t go back to ordinary life. Not even Tao and Zen masters of the past led ordinary lives in the bustling city market or took up positions as Prime Minister.

You might try acting spontaneously and-or naturally. Don’t worry about worthwhile or not worthwhile, suffering or not suffering, waking or sleeping, karma, dharma, etc. Don’t even worry about good or bad much, although you still can’t do anything immoral. Most people are basically decent. Few people get intrinsic satisfaction from being bad, hurting people, or hurting nature. If you are the kind of person who has sought earnestly to “just wake up”, then likely you are more good than bad. Trust your nature. Trust what led you to seek to “just wake up”. Trust God. Then act naturally and spontaneously according to

your nature. You can act naturally without necessarily making “act naturally” the context to which you must wake up.

If “just wake up” is much the same as trusting your inner nature, your natural nature, your self, then “just waking up” is the same as acting naturally, and acting naturally is the same as waking up. If you can see to act naturally, and do it without anguish, then you have “just woken up”. There is no difference, and it is not worthwhile trying to figure out some subtle theological metaphysical difference. As we will see in later chapters, Taoism and Zen saw “just wake up” and “act naturally” as much the same without insisting that “act naturally” is the key vision to impose on waking up.

“Just wake up and act naturally” is a good way to go. In acting naturally, usually we act out daily life and we appreciate daily life. Waking up, acting naturally, and living daily life go together naturally. This is an even better way to go.

The idea that “just wake up”, acting naturally, and living daily life, all go together, became a central idea in Zen Buddhism. Although, in theory, the idea that all three themes go together appears in Mahayana, most Mahayana does not stress it. Instead, most Mahayana sees ordinary life as fabulous because it is part of a grand system. We do not wake up to ordinary life as it is but to life transfigured. Unfortunately, seeing daily life in terms of a grand system undermines “just wake up” and “act naturally”. I don’t explain. Zen got rid of that misleading exultation. In doing so, it returned to a Taoist vision.

Now we can better ask again, is “just wake up” what Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha originally had in mind? Is all the business about life not worthwhile, life full of suffering, and letting go just a way to get us out of the traps of ordinary life and to just wake up? Zen said so. Theravada knows of the idea but the idea is not a big theme there, and official Theravada continues to stress suffering. Some Mahayana thinkers seem to say this idea is what the Buddha originally had in mind though most Mahayana thinkers saw the idea of “just wake up without reference to suffering” to mean that life is worthwhile as part of a grand system. I don’t know if the Buddha originally had in mind “just wake up”. I doubt it. I am sure the Buddha would understand and I think he would approve. I think this idea is an improvement on what the Buddha likely originally had in mind.

Is “just wake up and act naturally” what Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha originally had in mind? If the Buddha did not have “just wake up” originally in mind, then likely he did not have “just wake up and act naturally” originally in mind. Still, again, Zen said “yes he did have both in mind”, Theravada knows of the idea but does not stress it, and Mahayana knows of the idea but prefers that we wake up to a fabulous system. Again, I think the idea is an improvement, and Siddhartha would approve, but this is not what he had in mind originally.

Does the fact that the Buddha did not originally have in mind “just wake up” and “act naturally” mean that the ideas are necessarily wrong or inadequate? No, they could still be true even if they alter a deep view in Buddhism.

Does the fact that the Buddha appreciated daily life necessarily mean that life is worthwhile, life is not full of suffering, “just wake up” is necessarily true, “just wake up” is necessarily false, “act naturally” must be true, or “act naturally” must be false? These questions are too subtle for me.

Can a person “just wake up” and then think life is worthwhile? This is the mistake that Mahayana made. I doubt you can “just wake up” and then think life is worthwhile if you think of “worthwhile” in terms of wealth, power, family life, success, or belonging to a grand system.

Feeling sure we can “just wake up”, act naturally, and life is worthwhile, is the mistake I am tempted to make when I want to merge Buddhism and Taoism with what I believe, that is, merge them with how I see the message of Jesus. It is not hard to imagine scenarios in which we just wake up, think life is modestly worthwhile, act mostly naturally, and work hard to make the world better – all without clinging and without thinking that wealth, power, success, Justification, and heaven are what it is all about. Even so, this is a tricky path. It is worthwhile thinking about this issue. Thinking about it helps get you clear on waking up, “just wake up”, natural action, not natural action, not worthwhile life, worthwhile life, my admonitions about how we should act, and Jesus. Don’t begin with the conviction that the ideas must merge simply because they all are so wonderful. Just let yourself think and wander and think.

When I thought about it, I found I had to give up “just act naturally” in favor of “mostly just act naturally but also rely on principles such as the Golden Rule”. We will see why in the chapter on Taoism.

What Happens after You Awaken 3: Common Bad Mistake, or I Might be Wrong.

I did not look through English translations of major Buddhist texts for citations for what I say here. I am sorry for the lack of citations. Even Buddhist writers that I otherwise respect seem to make the mistake here. The issue is big enough to bring up despite no citations.

Some Buddhist writers imply: A person who wakes up is able to see that things, ideas, feelings, power, wealth, etc. do not last. He-she sees arising and disappearing, cause-and-effect, dependent origination, emptiness, and maybe Buddha Mind. He-she sees that none of this makes life worthwhile. Still, because he-she sees how the world really works, he-she can get along in worldly life well, even can succeed. He-she can manipulate the world as well as it can be, as well as any business person or politician. He-she is immune to clinging and so is able to avoid suffering and avoid using others. So he-she could live in this world successfully. Power, wealth, family, and fame are back in play. This view is akin to the idea that an awakened person should take his-her view back to the marketplace and to the fields and palaces, and teach by example.

I understand the wish for this alternative. It is important in Mahayana. But I doubt that it is so. I think the Buddha doubted this alternative. The world is too sticky. The world is too adept at “sucking us in”. We think we can see how it all works and so avoid getting taken in but we can’t. If we try, we get lost. This is a major theme of the novel “Siddhartha” by Herman Hesse.

Whether true or false, the idea that an awakened person can work on the sticky world with impunity, skill, and worldly success is dangerous. It easily misleads. It gives lay people wrong ideas of awakened persons. It makes lay people think a successful business person or politician must be awakened, almost awakened, or have many merit points. Most of outwardly successful people are hardly awakened, and many are far from it. This idea makes Buddhists seek for signs just as Jews, Christians, and Muslims seek for signs of God’s favor and of Salvation. It makes people believe in magic and in monks who claim

to have powers. It makes lay people overlook Buddhists who are truly advanced, really good people, and have a lot to give, but might not be charismatic.

We should never suppress a true idea only because it is dangerous. If the idea that an awakened person can use the world easily and without danger is true, we have to accept it. Then we must deal with results. We should not suppress even untrue ideas just because they are dangerous but we need to assess those ideas openly, in public, deeply, and truthfully. Keep the warnings in mind. Keep mistakes in mind, don't make them, and point them out. These are Buddhist duties.

I don't believe the idea is true. In the end, you have to decide if an awakened person could-and-or-should thrive in the sticky world.

Buddhist Aids.

Here is the logical place for a discussion of Buddhist Aids but that takes too long. The basic idea is that people get stuck on issues about meditation, cause-and-effect, dependent origination, and the non-self instead of thinking directly about worthwhile and not worthwhile. Any idea, no matter how good it seems, even ideas like desire, sticky, clinging, and suffering, can distract us from direct insight about worthwhile and not worthwhile. So I moved discussion of Buddhist Aids to the end of the chapter. See discussion of the not-self below before going on to material about Buddhist Aids.

Buddhist Code as Buddhist Aid.

Buddhism does offer a code of conduct that nearly everybody can follow. The code differs for monks and lay people, and differs in strictness for grades of lay people. When people follow the code, they feel they are improving and are moving to success. Following the code does not necessarily wake you up. I like the Buddhist code. It is like codes in large formal Western Christian churches such as Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed. It is like a version of Jewish Law that has been made more rational and consistent. It is like French Rationalist law.

Still, the code is like external worship in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is not enough to think you are making external progress now, so you can defer real (internal) progress and success (awakening) to an indefinite future. It is not enough to do things because of a code; you have to do things because they are right and to help other people. Following an external code gives people the sense that they are getting somewhere because of what happens outside. People need to use the code to see beyond the code but they rarely do. Buddhism knows about this flaw in its own code, and nearly all codes, but can do nothing about it except warn people.

Religion should offer a reasonable chance of reasonable success in this life to every normal person. You should not have to be really smart or a "born saint" to succeed in the terms of a religion. The Buddhist code gives people that. If you try to live by the standards of the code then you have succeeded to a fair extent in ways that everybody can understand. I have nothing against religion offering fun ideas for smart people to chew on but success should not depend on those. Zen moves toward simple ideas that people can master in this life now. Most of Mahayana does not but instead elaborates the Buddhist aids.

PART 5: PRACTICE

I do not write about popular Buddhism and I don't write much about how Buddhism, society, culture, economics, politics, gender, etc. work together. Popular Buddhism uses the idea of Karma much more than ideas of Dharma and waking up. It has only a dim notion of the idea that life is not worthwhile, and it uses the idea of suffering largely to explain away bad results. With Karma, popular Buddhism explains the order of society, including high and low, bad and good, good luck and bad luck, and it gives ways for people to wiggle within the social order to improve their positions. It explains big rises and big falls. How the idea of Karma does this is too much to go into here. The popular Buddhist view of Karma is enough to support various somewhat different orders of society, it supports modest change, and it worked well with agrarian societies until recently, so it survived robustly. It is not clear what will happen in the modern world of global quasi-capitalism and modest democracy in a populist appearance. As of 2017, it seemed to be doing fairly well. Many people, academic and not, have written about Buddhism in society and vice versa. I give a few samples in the Bibliography but not many. You can find many on the Internet.

Briefly.

People often call Buddhism a religion of "renunciation" but that view is not accurate. To say the world is "not worthwhile" is not to reject it the way that we spit out bad food. If we know the food is bad and have not yet taken a bite, we simply don't take a bite. Or we take a bite because we need food to get by, hope our stomach can handle it, and don't expect food to cure all ills. If we take a bite and taste that the food is bad, but can't spit it out, we go ahead, chew, try not to get attached to the taste, swallow, and let it go through our system. Then we can refuse another bite. Monks do not dress strangely because they reject the world in the sense of spoiled food but to remind themselves and everybody else that they are not the same as everybody else.

It might seem a religion of "not worthwhile" or of "renouncing" would not get along in society and would not support society, that it should fail and disappear, but this is not true. With allowances, Buddhism, monks, non-monks, and society all support each other fairly well.

In the beginning, Buddhism appealed to the upper middle class and upper class because they did not want to live under the yoke of the Brahmin priests and the political machine that priests supported. The Buddha told everybody to rely on his-her own self, and declared that everybody had the ability to rely on his-her own self. Buddhism appealed to people generally because they liked being their own master, determining their own spirituality and destiny. As Buddhism grew, these achievements were not enough. People wanted a positive relation between their religion and success in their ordinary lives. Desire for a positive relation between religion and success in this life play a large role in Mahayana, as we will see. It led people to reinvent Buddhism as a joyous system of many lives rather than as based on the idea that life is not worthwhile.

In Theravada countries, people applied the idea of being their own spiritual masters to all of life. A person could control his-her own destiny in family, economy, and power as well as in spiritual life. Of course, this degree of self-determination is never fully true, but is true enough if you believe it. It makes a good place to start. The same thing happened in the West with our ideas of the free person and that God makes us responsible for ourselves.

People in Theravada countries saw they were not likely to be enlightened in this lifetime but they could work on the quality of life in this lifetime, especially as they were their own masters. Working on quality of this life runs the risk of stickiness and mistakenly thinking life is worthwhile but not much more risk than any other attitude and it is a good attitude. Working on a graceful quality of life is a good base from which later to better appreciate stickiness and “not worthwhile”, and it builds up good karma rather than bad karma. Non-monks could seek the middle path, be good neighbors, get an education, be good leaders, act morally, feel self-reliant, be self-reliant, and contribute to well-run society. Non-monks could do as they wished as long as they didn't hurt other people. All this was preparation for more advanced lives in the future and for enlightenment but it also built a solid foundation for a good life now for particular selves and for neighbors.

Non-monks could be good people, good neighbors, and good citizens. Monks could help non-monks in all the tasks. At least, monks could educate many children and serve as the moral foundation of their local society. In return, villagers and aristocrats could support monks modestly. A close relation grew between monks and non-monks which benefitted both, and avoided the vexing question of working hard for enlightenment right now by replacing enlightenment with a good moderate life for everybody. This resolution is part of the charm of Buddhist countries, Theravada or Mahayana. The rest of the chapter explains in more detail.

Monks and Society.

Modern people find the saffron robes of a Buddhist monk charming without realizing what the robes came from. The robes are death shrouds. In India during the time of the Buddha, before a body was cremated or buried, it was wrapped in old cloth that sometimes was deliberately dyed yellowish (“saffron”). Monks took those shrouds from graveyards to use as clothing. If the cloth was not already died yellow, monks died it. Monks made robes from shrouds to reinforce the idea that monks were no longer normal people with normal lives. They were “dead to society and the world”. They were “thus gone”. Monks literally left all family, as Jesus said a person's family had to be dead to him-her to follow Jesus. A monk may not return a greeting because a monk is not really here, not even from parents or the King. King Bhumipol (“Phumipon”) of Thailand was a devout intelligent Buddhist and did not expect monks to return a greeting. In the movies “Kill Bill”, the wonderful haughty Kung Fu master Pai Mei (“pie may”) destroys the Shaolin monastery because the abbot did not return his greeting with sufficient vigor. For Americans, the idea is a good plot device, but, in Buddhist China, Pai Mei would know that a monk may not return a greeting. (Some monks nod so as not to upset a person who mistakenly greets them, as the Buddha ate meat that was offered to him so as not to upset people who wrongly did so. I think the abbot in “Kill Bill” did nod.)

The Pali term for a male monk is “bhikku”, which means “beggar of alms”; for a female, “bhikkuni”. The word is also spelled “bhikkhu” and “bikku”. In Buddhism now, for a monk to offer a “begging” bowl is not like begging but instead the bowl is an opportunity for a lay person to appreciate the monk's quest and for the lay person to gain “merit points” by supporting the monk. I am not sure how the Buddha saw it.

Westerners think monks all live in quaint pretty monasteries but monks should live in monasteries only part time. In theory, monks should wander “begging” most of the time, that part of the year outside the rainy season. In the modern urban crowded world, they can't do that.

Monks seek enlightenment on their own, for themselves, and only for themselves, just as the Buddha had to give up his family and his teachers to awaken on his own. No person can awaken another person; you can awaken only yourself; only you can awaken you. In Christianity, no person except Jesus can save you directly; you can only save yourself, by correctly inviting God's Grace, usually with the help of Jesus. In Buddhism, you can help another person toward awakening as Muslims and Christians help another person invite the Grace of God and so be saved. In Buddhism, "learning the Dharma" is like inviting the Grace of God. So, nearly all Buddhist monks are happy to help other people learn the Dharma. Helping others, mostly by teaching the Dharma, can largely overcome any selfishness latent in the idea of seeking awakening only by yourself just as, in Christianity and Islam, bringing others to God helps overcome the apparent selfishness of one person being able to save only him-herself. The Buddha saved only himself but he also taught the Dharma to everybody and so brought millions of others up to awakening. In a later chapter, we will see that Mahayana carries the idea of helping others to salvation too far, in the character of the bodhisattva.

If life in general is not worthwhile, then certainly social life in particular is not worthwhile. So it seems monks and society would have little to do with each other but Buddhist monks took an important part in society. In practice, Buddhist lay people overlook the idea that life is not worthwhile to focus on morality, karma, meditation, advancement through lives, and spiritual power. As a result, monks and society can have close ties, and monks and lay people can carry on useful lives in the context of mutual relations. Monks help the people with morality, proper behavior, getting along, spiritual problems, learning, social order, spirits, luck, and success while the people support the monks. Monks are very important as moral teachers and often important as arbiters of peace. This stance is not necessarily hypocritical any more than similar stances in other religions. In all major religions, serious practitioners hold themselves a bit apart from mainstream society in which people primarily seek success yet religious practitioners still help society and play a role. For a hundred years after Jesus, Christians could not be politicians, military, police, or too rich, but now Christians pride themselves on all those. Christians could not have imagined their ideas being the basis for whole societies and empires, but they have been. Exactly how Buddhism goes along with society depends on particular Buddhist societies - Buddhism in Thailand, Japan, and China has different relations with society there just as Christianity in Russia and the United States has different relations with the state - and I can't go into details here.

Before the Buddha, Brahmins dominated religion, somewhat like ancient Egyptian priests, Christian bishops, or mega-church leaders but not as well arranged in a single system, somewhat like Americans think of Celtic Druids. Priests were the highest rank of a ranked society. Even aristocrats and warriors were below priests. Before any venture, a ruler had to consult priests. The rulers had to maintain priests. The rulers had to give priests a share of spoils. Suddenly, Buddhism said priests were irrelevant. Only the Dharma is relevant. As long as an aristocrat or military person follows the Dharma, he-she is alright, and may dispense with priests. Aristocrats and military people can do what they want. Buddhism spread first, and quickly, among the upper classes and merchants. Although the rulers did not become monks, they could embrace the new ideas, and the new freedom; they could always tell themselves they would become monks in a future life. The rich merchant class embraced Buddhism for the same reasons. The first patrons of the Buddha were rulers and rich people. From the rulers and rich, Buddhism spread to the common people because they emulated superiors. About 1200 years later (after CE 800), Islam spread through island Southeast Asia in the same way.

Monasteries and monks became the centers of lore, learning, education, and even research. The same Buddhist ideology that denied hard distinctions between rulers and priests also served common people through the benefit brought by monks. Monks did not limit their teaching only to rulers and rich people, they taught everybody, including common village people. They taught people according to ability to learn, not only according to ability to pay or power. Monks allowed common people to know their own society and even to advance in society.

When Buddhism is well-established, nearly every large village, or village cluster, has a monastery. The villagers support the monks. In return, the monks teach the village children. The monks prepare children for good lives as rural cultivators rather than just lives as slaves of the land. The monks prepare some village children for a better life beyond the village. Boys have greater access to the monks but even girls are taught to read and write. In Thailand, where Theravada was well-established, literacy was over 90%.

Monks ratified social projects such as digging a canal, building a palace, or building a large house. In this capacity, they did act like the old Brahmin priests. Monks also took the place of the old Brahmin priests as fortune tellers, and monks sometimes took the place of the Brahmin priests as fighters against black magic. The difference is that the monks did not seem to “squeeze” the aristocrats and the villagers as had the priests.

A few monks do live apart from society. In Thailand, they are called “forest monks”. They are interesting people and among the best people in Buddhism. They are not relevant here, so I omit them. I urge you to search the phrase “forest monk” on the Internet.

Some people, especially Westerners who first learn about Buddhism, think close links between monks and society is hypocritical, and a monk cannot really work on enlightenment in the typical monastery. The relation can subvert the spiritual quest and subvert Buddhism just as it does in other religions but usually the spiritual quest goes on pretty well anyway. According to the original precepts given by the Buddha, monasteries are supposed to be located at least so far from villages that monks cannot hear the sound of women talking; since shortly after the Buddha that was rarely possible because of dense population, and now over most of the world that distancing is almost impossible. So monks must have a relation with society and must strive to make it as little tempting and hypocritical as they can. Most monks succeed. For some monks, close relations to society, prestige, and popular acclaim for his-her magical power, is a temptation off the path.

Any serious monk who wants to work on awakening can find the time, energy, and seclusion even in a modern monastery. It is more a matter of will and of learning from other such dedicated monks than of place. Social duties are not usually a burden unless the monk allows them to be, and even the Buddha interacted with society. Some monasteries are more serious, both in practice and theory, and a monk who wants to work hard can move to that kind of monastery.

I was lucky to live in a village for two-and-a-half years in which the monk was well educated, interested almost entirely in awakening, disdained all magic, and enjoyed talking to me. Later, my wife and I were lucky to live near a good monastery, Wat Suan Mokh (“Temple of the Garden of [force for] Liberation” and “Temple of the Foggy Garden”, thanks to a play on words), begun by a great monk, “Phutathaat” (in Thai,

or “Buddhadasa” in Pali). We gained much from teaching there. Monks who really need to be alone can become forest monks even in the modern world of many people and few trees.

Monks and Magic.

Regardless of official religion, common mass religion always has much magic; I don't go into details here. Christian priests perform many acts of magic as part of their official role as priests, such as transforming bread into the body of Christ; and perform acts of magic as magical beings living in society in addition to their official role as priests, such as blessing businesses, persons, children, ships, and planes. Christians might not see that priests are magical figures in addition to being priests, but they are. So are politicians; we look to them magically to control weather, forest fires, earthquakes, and the world economy. In the same way, monks in Buddhist societies fill roles as magical figures in addition to monks. Buddhist society demands it, as Christian society does for priests. Magical roles are set by society and culture rather than by official Buddhist doctrine. Monks can be fortune tellers, seers, healers, give blessings, remove spells, provide amulets, and transfer magical potency simply by hanging around. Individual monks differ in how much they act as magicians. Some monks relish their role as magical beings, and make considerable (unauthorized) return from it in money, prestige, and popularity. I find use of magic by monks sad. My wife and I were lucky to find monks who had little interest in magic and had much interest in awakening. I was lucky that the monk in the village where I first lived had a strong grasp of doctrine and had no interest in magic.

Buddhism and the State.

People interpret and change their religion to get validation for success in life and for ways life. People in a state society interpret and change their religion for the same reasons, often to validate the state and the institutions of the state, including institutions that take care of power and leaders that use power. King and religious savior often merge into one sacred soup. Subgroups in the state do the same with their religion, or their version of the main religion, for their particular situations, both for and against the state. Farmers have one version of a religion while bankers have another version of the same religion. Rebels and bankers have their own versions. To workers, Jesus was a carpenter while to modern middle class capitalists Jesus was a supporter of free trade and the right to work. The same is true of all religions.

There is no formula for how much interpreting and change occurs within the original scope of the religion and how much is really out of the original scope of the religion but accepted by people anyway. Some ideas that start out of the original scope eventually become accepted as part of a new baseline scope. Circumcision might have started outside the scope of Abraham's religion. Christianity started outside the scope of Judaism. Likely ideas about the body and blood of Jesus started outside the scope of original Christianity. Terrorism is outside the scope of Mohammad. Whites, Blacks, Liberals, and Conservative Christians see Christianity differently. It is not clear how much Christianity can stretch to accommodate differing views and still remain Christianity. “Back to the roots” movements often are less about back to the roots than about making up ideas about what the roots were to get extra support for your group now. Protestants since 1700 have had many different ideas of what it means to go back to original Christianity and they have uses their own ideas to support versions of a good society. The exact situation varies by country and by historical periods in countries.

All this is true for Buddhism and Buddhist countries. You have to decide what true Buddhism is, what is presented as true Buddhism due to a long history of accommodation to the state and society, and what is claimed as true Buddhism by present groups that wish to have religious validation. I cannot go into any details here.

What Most Buddhists Do.

Other than monks, what most Buddhists do is what most Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Hindus do: they go to “church” in a monastery once a week, where they hear sermons and chanting, and participate in a liturgy-like service. They help build monasteries. They repair monasteries. They provide air conditioning to high-ranking monks. They do good deeds to acquire merit. They use their merit to succeed in this life or to have a better next life. They give some merit to kin so kin can have a good life now or a better next life. Sometimes they support charities and public policy such as a national health service or defending the environment. Some Buddhists follow charismatic leaders, usually priests, as Christians and Muslims follow particular “preachers”. In Mahayana, Buddhists devotedly follow a non-living spiritual leader, the bodhisattva, like Jesus or Mary. In Mahayana, some Buddhists seek to be reborn in a paradise later as a result of worship now, like Christians and Muslims expect to go to heaven. It is not hard for a churchy Jew, Christian, Muslim, or Hindu to adapt to Buddhist worship practices, and vice versa as long as they focus on the good that is done, “mitzvah”, rather than on absence of God.

Self Sufficiency.

The Buddha taught that the self is not a strong eternal thing like the soul-self of Christianity, Islam, and the Upanishads but the self is a semi-coherent bundle as in modern evolutionary theory. At the same time, he insisted every person could work out his-her own “salvation” alone, did not need Brahmin priests, did not need any priests, did not need monks, and did not even need the Buddha. As part of human nature, even if our nature is not absolute and eternal, we can think, and can think well enough to figure out the world. The Buddha’s insistence on the ability of the self was a big part of the appeal of Buddhism.

Sometimes people see a contradiction in the idea that the self is not a pure metaphysical eternal thing with the idea that each person can work things out on his-her own. I don’t feel this contradiction although I can see how other people might feel it. We don’t need to be an absolute self to be enough of a self, and to have enough abilities, to work things out on our own. A squirrel is not an absolute self but it can still figure out how to avoid hawks, get nuts, and hide hundreds for the future. It is not much harder to save yourself along Buddhist lines if you don’t screw yourself up first and cling to the screwed-up self. It helps when working things out to let go of the absolute self and to get used to the lesser self.

Both ideas are important in Mahayana Buddhism and Zen: the not-absolute self and the fact that even the not-absolute self is able to work things out and awaken.

Besides saying we are sufficient, the Buddha also said we can rely on the Buddha (himself), the Dharma, and the association of Buddhists, in particular monks or the “Sangha”. These two ideas also seem contradictory although most Buddhists deny they are. One resolution of the conflict is that people rely on the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha when they begin practice but rely more on themselves as they go

along and ultimately rely on themselves alone. I do not decide if these ideas are contradictory. I point them out because they are relevant to the following issue.

Dr. Chamrat (“Moh Jamrat”), a wise Christian physician in Nakorn Sri Thammarat (“City of Dharma Rule”) in Thailand, told me that Christianity and Buddhism differ precisely on self reliance. The Buddha said “work it out on your own” while Jesus said “where two or three of you are gathered together, I am among you”. American Christians say “you’ve got a friend in Jesus”. Buddhists are alone while Christians have God as a friend, Jesus as a friend, and have a community. God loves us. I doubt God intervenes directly much to help us but he might intervene sometimes. Buddhists would think this Christian belief was all silly self-indulgent wishful thinking. Yet Buddhists also insist that we can “lean on” the “Three Gems”, the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha (the Buddhist “Church” or society of monks and lay people). So, despite what the Buddha said, Buddhists are not alone except in a dogmatic sense or in the way that all seekers have to go through times of aloneness.

At the same time I think God loves us, and Jesus cares about us, I also think we are mostly on our own, God through evolution gave us the abilities to deal with most issues if not all, and the world provides us with many opportunities. So my views are a bit contradictory too, and I can’t reconcile them gracefully. In practice, I work out issues on my own. Sometimes God’s creation gives me hints. This result does not mean the Buddha was right, Dr. Chamrat wrong, I am wrong, and Christians are delusional. Buddhists contradict as well. This result means I don’t understand everything, and neither do Buddhists. This result means there are issues on which Buddhists and followers of Jesus really do differ.

(Technically, the passage in which Jesus says “two or three” refers to the requirements for a valid court proceeding, and might not, or might, have the meaning intended by Christians that Jesus is literally with them although he died. Whether it has that meaning, and whether Jesus does attend Christians, matters less than what Christians believe and the contrast with Buddhists. Buddhists have a similar attitude of “always with me” when they rely on the “Three Gems”. These are other issues.)

PART 6: MORE ASSESSMENT

No Simplistic Bliss.

You cannot simply “follow your bliss” in Buddhism. You need not and should not be miserable. You may enjoy what you enjoy and what the world gives you as long as you do not cling. You may plan to enjoy as long as you do not cling. But you cannot follow your bliss as in the common understanding of that slogan. In other religions, and life in general, you also have to be careful about following your bliss – life is not as it appears in the simplistic slogan “follow your bliss”. If your bliss is to be a dictator and oppress people, you may not. In Hinduism, you may follow your bliss only if it coincides with your Dharma-social-duty. If your bliss is MMA fighting, you can follow your bliss if you are adept enough and less than about 40 years old, otherwise you will get hurt for no gain. I am not sure what to say if your bliss is to give sexual service. “Follow your bliss” implies you should not be a slave to convention or harsh expectations but instead you should do what you are good at, enjoy, and does no harm. In that way, in Buddhism, you may follow your bliss, again, as long as you do not cling. The Buddha enjoyed teaching so teaching might have been part of his bliss. I don’t know if he clung to teaching or to anything in his bliss. I warn that to follow your bliss and not cling is hard.

Letting Go, Worthwhile Life, and Not Buddhism.

All the skills below contribute to a worthwhile life and can even make a sad life worthwhile.

- Learning to sort what you can cling to from what you have to let go. We all have to breathe, we do not all have to kill animals for sport.
- Learning to sort what you can cling to somewhat energetically from what you can cling to only softly or not at all. We all have to eat, we do not all have to be “foodies”.
- Learning to let go completely of many things.
- Learning to manage suffering without necessarily overcoming suffering fully.
- Learning to blend these skills with spontaneous natural “from the heart” acts and thoughts.
- Learning to “just let go” (not cling) when it feels right without worrying about all letting go and about using letting go for some other goal such as to make life worthwhile or to overcome suffering.

The problem with these skills and Buddhism is that learning to let go in this way and-or making your life more worthwhile in these ways is not to overcome suffering and it is not to awaken. These skills with their goals are not the official main goal of Buddhism and they might interfere with Buddhism’s main goal. All these skills are good, and some Buddhists do, in fact, take these skills as the goal of Buddhism just as many Buddhists make success an important goal of Buddhism. Taoism and Zen pretty much take these skills as the main goal. If you think these skills are better than the official goal to awaken and overcome suffering, then you have to decide how much of a Buddhist you really are. What was the Buddha really like? What did he really want from you and everyone?

You can’t get out of this problem by saying: “Oh, well, I will work along the above lines in this lifetime, and let future lives take care of themselves. If, in a future life, I get “beyond” these skills and I work to overcome suffering directly, great. If I actually do overcome suffering and awaken, better. Until then, I won’t worry about it.” You might as well figure out your true religion now. That will serve you better in future lifetimes than confusion and prevarication now.

Buddhism, Modern Science, and Darwinism.

Buddhism and Western science go together well.

The Buddhist versions of Dharma, dependent origination, and cause and effect, are like the Western idea of natural law. Everything that happens does so according to cause(s). Everything has results. Cause and effect are in proportion to each other. If we want to understand a thing, we should look to its causes and its effects. If we want to change a thing, we need to change its causes. Nothing exists on its own apart from the total net of causes and effects. For a given purpose, we can understand a thing according to its immediate causes and effects. For greater purposes, we can know a thing only in the context of a wide range of causes and effects. The rules of cause and effect apply not only to physical things such as trees but also to processes such as star formation and society, and to mental things such as anger, joy, seeking, clinging, and suffering, and to morality.

The idea of dependent origination is similar to Western ideas of a thing in terms of its context: Nothing arises by itself. Nothing is sufficient in itself except Dharma. Everything arises out of causes. Everything depends on its causes. Causes tend to come in clusters. One cluster depends on prior clusters, and so on back indefinitely to the Dharma. To know anything, we have to know its cluster of causes. "Thing" here includes you, your self, all selves, psychology, relations, moral acts, immoral acts, karma, desire, clinging, and spiritual progress or stagnation. To understand a cluster of causes, in Western terms, we use: multivariate analysis, systems theory, graphs, structuralism, post structuralism, post modernism, and deconstruction. The Buddhist versions seem less pretentious than Western ideas of the 1900s and the 2000s such as post-modernism. The ideas of cause-and-effect and dependent origination go along with the Western biological idea of an organism. On a bigger scale, they go along with Western ecology and the mutual making of the parts of an ecosystem. The idea of dependent origination goes along with Western ideas of a self-determining system as in idealized capitalism. The idea of dependent origination does not have to be abused as in the Western New Age "it's all connected".

The Buddhist self is a bundle held together by the delusion of self and the force of clinging. See below. Specific mental abilities, the overall operation of our minds, the coherence of our minds, and our overall mental lives are subject to laws of cause and effect, to dependent origination. Each of us is not the metaphysical eternal soul-self that we think we are. The mistaken idea of a soul-self arose as part of desire and clinging. Our mistaken idea of our self serves to perpetuate desire and clinging; it is part of how clinging sustains. When we examine the idea of a soul-self, we find particular currents of desire and clinging without anything under them to hold it all together. This idea goes along not only with Darwinian ideas of a self but with the idea of the philosopher David Hume of the self in the middle to late 1770s. In Darwinian terms, we evolved to think we are more of a self than we really are because that is a useful misconception for personal action and for social success. We evolved to see other people as more selves than they really are for the same reasons. When we examine a self, we find primarily a bundle of proximate mechanisms or mental modules rather than an integrated whole.

Buddhists and Darwinians run into a similar problem with the self and with reductionism. Buddhists do not think the self can stand up to being picked apart but they insist Dharma can. Dharma persists on its own regardless of whether people exist to understand it and believe in it. In the same way, scientific laws and scientific method persist on their own regardless of whether there are any Darwinians around to know the laws and use the method. One thing, the self, can be reduced; but the other, Dharma and science, cannot be reduced. I do not go into this issue more here.

In current Western evolutionary theory, long ago on Earth, chemicals arose that replicated themselves in the right context. The replicating chemicals became the basis for life later. As far as I know, the earliest replicating chemicals likely were similar to short strands of Ribonucleic Acid (RNA) or were such strands. It does not make sense to say the early chemicals, and the early life to which they gave rise, desired the means to their reproduction and clung to the situations that allowed them to reproduce; but the fact that they did well in those circumstances, and they developed means to get into those circumstances, form the basis for later seeking and clinging in life. When life had evolved, those bits of life that did seek some situations more than others, and clung to some situations, did better. Thus was born seeking and clinging in all life, and eventually in all sentient beings on Earth. Even amoebas have something like smell, they seek some smells and avoid others, and they attach themselves to some smells. Seeking and clinging arose automatically as part of the automatic process of natural selection of replicating chemicals and life

forms. Seeking and clinging are intrinsic to all life. Now as evolved sentient beings, we cannot master seeking and clinging until we see this fact. When Buddhism simply insists on this insight, it is consistent with modern science. What we do with this knowledge depends on our religion.

Recall that life does not see the world exactly as it is but develops biases that help success more than if life did see the world exactly as it is, such as when daylight creatures fear the dark or when we jump at the glimpse of a stick as if it were a poisonous snake. The development of bias also is intrinsic to life, and is consistent with the Buddhist view that perception and thought are more often biased than neutral, so as to allow us to strive and cling. In Buddhism, people have to deliberately cultivate neutral perception and thought. Scientists do that through scientific method and the scientific community.

Some particular evolved biases deserve mention. Buddhists think the self does not see the world as it really is but instead sees the world in distortions that allow desire and clinging to persist, and lead us to mistake life as worthwhile and full of happiness even when life is not worthwhile and is full of suffering. A Buddhist would understand that people see their mates as more beautiful than the mates really are so as to perpetuate the mating relationship. Buddhists agree that people love their children so as to better reproduce. We evolved to give life meaning even when it is an automatic process without meaning. We evolved to think we are successful even when we are only average or are below average. We evolved to think great success is just around the corner even when it is not. "Hope springs eternal in the human breast". We evolved to cling to life, and most things in life, regardless of the intrinsic worth of life and of everything in it. We evolved to have a stake in our spouses, children, nieces, nephews, friends, children, grandchildren, cousins, neighbors, and even enemies. We evolved to get involved in politics, religions, morality, and making a living. We evolved to meddle. We evolved to make ourselves beautiful. We evolved to seek fame, fortune, reputation, and power. We evolved to cling to life. We help life be sticky. We evolved to overlook pain and suffering so we could go on even in the face of sure defeat. We evolved to make life seem worthwhile even when it is not. The Buddhist analysis of stickiness and clinging is an amazing anticipation of modern evolutionary analysis.

The Buddha did not have the modern idea of evolution although likely he had an idea of transformations of life; and he did not think any of the present forms of life were necessarily absolute. "Whatever has a beginning must have an end; and every conditioned thing (most of the real world including planets and species) had a beginning." The evolved self is both not absolute and amazingly capable. The evolved self can handle most problems that come up in life, if not all. The evolved self has enough ability to figure out most spiritual issues and enough ability to awaken. The Buddha might have argued that evolution gave us both the not-absolute self and enough of a self so that we can work things out. However, I do not want to put words in the mouth of the Buddha. I put it this way: the evolved self is not absolute but it did evolve enough ability to know right from wrong and to see that we face God after we die. It did evolve the ability to wake up enough.

Life has no intrinsic necessary purpose. Life makes life, which makes more life, which makes more life, and so on. Life is a mechanism. People evolved a desire to make meaning where there is no meaning because meaning makes it easier to carry on and reproduce. Even the pursuit of science has no intrinsic value but is only something people do as continuation of abilities that evolved in our past for other uses. If people saw no meaning, they would be far too likely simply to stop trying. People who saw meaning in the past reproduced better than people who did not. For Buddhists, meaning is an illusion too. The idea

that life has meaning allows people to think mistakenly that life is worthwhile, allows people to cling to particular meaningful things such as freedom and wealth, cling to meaningful people such as our parents and children, pretend suffering is not important, and seek satisfaction. Only if we get rid of the evolved delusion by seeing it in terms of dependent origination can we see that there is no intrinsic meaning and that life is not worthwhile.

Not all evolved perceptions are pernicious. Because Buddhism sees cause-and-effect and dependent origination operating in all spheres, it sees all aspects of nature as connected and dependent. It quite specifically includes humans as part of nature, especially if we think of nature as Dharma and as subject to karma. What we do to the planet, the planet will do to us, one way or another, sooner or later. What we do to other species, nature will do to us, one way or another, sooner or later. Only recently have Western people come to re-discover and appreciate this truth.

Buddhism and modern science coincide in most of their views about morality. Even to Buddhists, most practiced morality is not intrinsic to a situation but is a distorted judgment that people make in order to advance our own interests and continue to cling. Morality develops in people as part of the development of craving and clinging. Darwinians say the capacity for morality evolved, and show that people are highly adept at using morality to serve their own ends.

Buddhism differs from modern science in some ways. To a Buddhist, the universe is intrinsically moral and Dharma and karma are intrinsically moral. Morality is part of scientific law. People might abuse it horribly, but morality still exists apart from people, and would continue as a part of Dharma and karma even if all human beings vanished. To Darwinism, the universe is not intrinsically moral. If anything, it is amoral. In current orthodox Darwinism, morality “exists” only to the extent that it appears in evolved beings. Morality is not one same thing for all evolved beings. Morality differs according to the species that evolves it. The particular uses that people make of morality are all there is to morality. Dharma and karma are moral only because people think they are. Dharma and karma do not exist apart from people and so could not be intrinsically moral apart from people.

I largely agree with the Buddhist view because I think there is only one morality, and that a version of the same basic morality arises whenever morality evolves, not only on this Earth. Certainly the details of morality differ between particular species that evolve morality, and those details will be very important if ever evolved sentient-moral beings meet. But all sentient-moral beings will recognize “applies equally” and the Golden Rule.

A successful Buddhist gives up family, friends, society, success, and almost everything that we think of as typically human. In the evolutionary past, an adept Buddhist would have left few genes to serve as the basis for kin to follow his-her path. (I assume kin selection and inclusive fitness would not have made up for what an adept Buddhist lost by not using direct reproduction). The personality of an adept Buddhist could only have arisen as the unnatural extension of abilities that arose for other reasons, such as analytic skills and a good imagination. An adept Buddhist is not a human in the usual sense that we think of a human. This does not mean an adept Buddhist is a monster or that we should be appalled. It only means that we should not easily think of an adept Buddhist as a natural growth of human potential and as the peak of what it means to be human. An adept Buddhist is more like a starving non-reproductive artist than like a successful athlete or politician. With a perfect Buddhist like the Buddha, it might be more

accurate and useful to think of them as having transcended human nature entirely. Needless to say, a Darwinian would not accept such an assessment of any being in this universe.

In the chapter on evolved human nature, I mentioned that evolution might be able to surpass itself in the sense that it could lay the basis for true glimpses that could not be fully developed through evolution, could not be sustained through evolution, and could not be very prevalent. This is the same sense that a dog might understand human society. I do not know if Buddhism is such a case. I invite you, and skillful Buddhists, to comment on this question.

Other religions share some of the same coincidences and differences with modern science as Buddhism, such as Mahayana, Hinduism, Taoism, Zen, and Islam. I think the overlap is purest with Buddhism but I do not argue the point here. I do not repeat these observations when discussing other particular religions so please look out for whatever you can see.

If Buddhism wants to use similarities between itself and science, especially to validate Buddhism, then it has to accept that people evolved naturally and so have an evolved nature. It has to take into account the strengths, limitations, and needs of people. It has to wonder if a naturally evolved person can actually overcome suffering, see that life is not worthwhile, or cease to cling, as Buddhism says we should try to do. Buddhism has to think what success it should offer to people in this lifetime to satisfy their evolved needs without their screwing up too much. Buddhism has to expect that people want superstition and magic, and has to present Buddhism so as to minimize the bad effects of the desires – it has not done well on that score so far. Even really smart people have their own versions of superstition, magic, and worldly success. While the Buddhist idea of the self and the scientific idea of the self from evolutionary theory are pretty close, they are not the same, and Buddhism has to think of differences and what the differences mean.

See Below for More on the Self.

Here is the logical place to insert more on the self but that takes too long. See the end of the chapter.

Buddhism and Modern Ethical Issues.

Because of its stress on dependent origination and cause-and-effect, people sometimes think Buddhism is amoral like simplistic materialism, but that is not true. Buddhism takes for granted the strong code of empathy and help that prevailed at the time of the Buddha, and is expressed in the slogan “you are that” from the Upanishads. The world is intrinsically moral and we must go along with its intrinsic morality. The issue in Buddhism and Hinduism was how to express this world-morality. Modern Buddhists have not yet thought out specific issues such as abortion, nationalism, environment, role of women, gay rights, class struggle, capitalism, and other problems that beset Americans. Buddhist nations are as plagued by these issues now as America is, and so eventually Buddhist thinkers have to ask “What would a close follower of the Buddha do?”

Buddhism aims to remove suffering. Few people can achieve awakening in this life, so it is not realistic to argue that Buddhism aims to remove all suffering all at once. Instead, modern Buddhist thinkers argue that Buddhism also aims to reduce suffering, including the overall extent of suffering among a group of

people. Buddhists can safely support policies that genuinely reduce the overall extent of suffering. For example, if economists can show that a national health care system is worth the cost, and thus reduces overall suffering, then a modern Buddhist could safely support such an idea without worrying too much that he-she is clinging to a dogma. If capitalism brings the greatest prosperity and freedom from worry, a Buddhist could also support capitalism. This approach to ethics is a good idea, but it leaves a lot of work to be done. I hope Buddhists work on it. In this form, Buddhist ethics is like the Western ideas of "utility", the general good, and maximizing the general good. This result does not mean one group has copied the other. This result is a good thing, and it means two great schools of thought are converging in different directions on the same conclusion.

The fact that Buddhists take for granted the moral nature of the universe puts them in line with moral atheists but might put them at odds with more strict atheists for whom morality is also a delusion. I leave this issue between those camps to settle.

Because everybody has a unique history, and because people are somewhat the product both of their history and present circumstances (dependent origination of the self), Buddhism does not expect people to conform rigidly to roles. Buddhism supports social rules that promote general morality but it does not necessarily support conformity. My impression is that Buddhists are much more comfortable around behavior that Jewish-Christian-Muslim traditionalists find difficult such as transvestites, gay men, lesbians, and independent women. As long as people do not compel you to immorality, do not hurt people, do not disrupt society, and do not disrespect long-standing cultural customs, there is no intrinsic reason to force them to act as you wish. Contrary to misconception about Thailand and other Buddhist nations, the vast majority of Buddhists are conventional moralists who would fit in with middle class people everywhere. They promote orderly and decent society, and they work hard. Buddhists who are not conventional by traditional Jewish-Christian-Muslim standards still respect people and individuality more than do many Americans. For example, they rarely force their sexuality on to anybody and they get confused when other people force foreign standards on to them. Even robbers rarely do bodily injury as long as they get the material goods they desire.

Buddhism has no inherent mistrust of the future, change, and changing roles. Because of dependent origination, Buddhism expects change. As a result, Buddhists seem more relaxed about new social roles such as for women, gay people, and old people. Buddhism is not inherently liberal but it is not offended by liberality. Buddhism is conservative in expecting serious Buddhists to treat all beings morally and with respect.

Why Follow Buddhism?

If Buddhism says life is not worthwhile, seekers cannot lead normal life, and successful Buddhists cannot lead normal life, then why do ordinary people follow Buddhism? There is both a historical answer and a general answer.

Historically, for the first time in India, Buddhism said both that people are responsible for themselves and people are able enough by themselves. The world is as it is, it is not some magical otherwise that takes a wizard to deal with. Every normal person is up to the task. Who you are and what you do is up to you. People could be free of Brahmin priests and the political system that was based on Brahmin priests, and

still succeed. While not reaching full Enlightenment, still people could make spiritual progress and seek modest worldly success. Ordinary people could mix worldly success and spiritual progress. They could do spiritual good deeds by supporting monks and education. They could use their minds, reason, and experience, and could trust the conclusions that they came to on this basis for both spiritual insight and worldly action. They could use commonsense morality based on ideas of sympathy and persons. This outlook appealed to aristocrats, soldiers, successful farmers, craftspeople, and merchants; those were the people that first adopted Buddhism. In these ways, early Buddhism was like early Christianity, like some Protestantism and some enlightened urban Reformation Roman Catholicism after 1600, and like Enlightenment Christianity such as held by Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. This outlook is extolled now in idealized small-business private enterprise capitalism.

Generally, people don't have to give up a lot to gain the benefits of Buddhism. People do not have to decide the issue of "life is not worthwhile". They can put that idea aside while they concentrate on more modest spiritual goals and on success here. You can be kind and "mindful" if that suits you, or you can be an aggressive business person as long as you don't break obvious commonsense morality. People can follow Buddhism as lay believers while leaving to monks the rigors of strong seeking and the hard questions such as whether life is worthwhile and the dogma of non-self. This is what most Christians do with issues of theology such as the Trinity, general Resurrection when Jesus returns, and exactly how Jesus saves. Buddhist laypeople and monks maintain a relation, described above, in which monks teach people and protect them spiritually against (mostly imagined) threats while people support monks. Monks and people use Buddhist ideas such as morality, cause-and-effect, and personal sufficiency. People can follow both Buddhist ideas such as cause-and-effect (science) and modest animistic spiritualism without worrying too much about logical consistency.

Theravada Buddhism appeals most when it contrasts with Brahmanism and with austere religions such as Jainism. When other competing religions can offer the benefits of Buddhism; offer priests who are helpful rather than tyrannical; offer spiritualism; offer magic; offer a system; teach that this life, and all lives, are worthwhile, as part of a system; teach that worldly success is spiritual success as when Arjuna goes to war; and teach that you can reach ultimate spiritual success and still have a normal life; then they can supplant Buddhism. When religions offer people ways to have their cake and eat it too, then they can overcome Buddhism. Exactly this happened twice in India, first when Mahayana supplanted Theravada and then again when Hinduism supplanted Mahayana. It happened in America to modest Enlightenment Christianity when various Christian religious revivals, Transcendentalism, fundamentalism, relativism, "New Age", and the occult supplanted Enlightenment belief in Jesus as moral teacher and prophet.

More on Buddhism and My Views.

I do not explain all the points on which I agree with Buddhism. Despite liking Theravada, I disagree with the Buddha, and Buddhism, on several points. I stated my skepticism about Buddhist aids, and stated the need for naturally evolved people to be able to achieve reasonable success in this lifetime. See also the chapters on Mahayana, Taoism, Zen, and Hinduism.

I think life is worthwhile. Everybody suffers, and for some people life is not worthwhile due to suffering. Even so, overall, for most people, life can be worthwhile.

Likely, evolution programmed me to feel life is worthwhile regardless of whether life is worthwhile. Still, I do not think life is worthwhile only because evolution programmed me to feel that way but because I do feel that way based on as much evidence as I have been able to process.

Life is rarely worthwhile because of particular activities or successes. Life is rarely worthwhile because we get a PhD or win the Nobel Prize. Having a good satisfying successful family can go a long way to making life worthwhile but even families can detract from life rather than add to it, and even having a good family in itself does not necessarily make life worthwhile. Just as no particular activity necessarily can make all of life worthwhile, so, also, the fact that no particular activity is obvious worthwhile does not mean life as a whole is not worthwhile. Rather than any particular activity, life overall is a good thing and is worthwhile. We can be disappointed in our careers, grow bored with our spouses, grow disinterested in our children, see our hobbies as mere shiny pebbles, get bored with art, and find science predictable, and think politics a cruel joke, yet still find life overall worthwhile. We will necessarily be disappointed in some ways in any particular thing we do yet still find life as a whole worthwhile. Life is worthwhile regardless of the satisfaction of any particular activity and regardless of the sum total of many activities.

All of us age, get sick, feel disappointment, and face unfairness. Some of us get screwed really badly. Many of us go through bad jobs, bad bosses, bad colleagues, bad marriages, ungrateful children, drugs, alcohol, stupid ideologies, and the frustration of not knowing how to contribute to the world. Still, life is not simply suffering. It is not possible to say if the total of joy (pleasure) exceeds the total of suffering, but, for most people, that is likely the case as long as they let themselves enjoy some of life. If Buddhism claims that life is not worthwhile because the total of suffering exceeds the total of joy, then it is false.

If Buddhism claims that life is not worthwhile because of deep suffering, because life is just not worthwhile despite superficial joy, then all I can do is repeat that life is worthwhile for most people. The Buddha was wrong. Even with deep suffering regardless of superficial success, still usually life is worthwhile.

Buddhist advice about clinging and stickiness is correct. Life is sticky. We cling to everything. Clinging does lead to suffering. We cling to crazy girlfriends or boyfriends, crazy children, bad jobs, bad ideas, bad politics, the hope that our job will turn out, the self-delusion that we are victims of society, the hope that we can justify our lives through our professions, and so many other things that I cannot even suggest them. Even the good things that we cling to cannot guarantee satisfaction in life, such as family, friends, love, children, a useful job, an active enlightened church, and correct politics. We are all better off if we learn to let go appropriately. Buddhism supports that. Evolution programmed us to cling and to commit sometimes. So sometimes we have to get over that part of our evolutionary programming. One program, our judgment, has to overcome another set of programs, our clinging. This is hard but it is possible to a large extent. We can do manage stickiness and clinging without falling into the other mistake of thinking all life is not worthwhile because of stickiness and clinging.

Getting over clinging is not entirely possible, at least not for the vast majority of people. We all cling to some things. Only a miniscule number of very special people can get over all desire for all family, fame, wealth, and success. Probably the hardest things to get over are family, the desire to be right, dogmas, and the desire to leave a strong positive legacy of reputation and-or ideas. It is hard to face the fact that you might die with nobody to remember how much spiritual struggle you went through and how much progress you made.

Even though people cannot get over all clinging, that apparent deficit does not mean life is not worthwhile and nearly all of us are mired in clinging and suffering. Even with some clinging, life can be worthwhile, and most of our lives need not consist of clinging and suffering. Some clinging can even lessen suffering and make life more worthwhile. Most people cling to their families but that does not necessarily create suffering and it does not necessarily make life not worthwhile; usually it creates joy and makes life more worthwhile for the kind of beings that we are.

Working hard to make the world better, trying to do good, keeping morality in mind, using our talents to their best, avoiding zealotry, and thinking of morality in terms of “applies equally” are all forms of clinging. We can carry them to excess, and they can be hurtful. But usually we err in the other direction. We do not strive hard enough; we do not act like a Buddhist monk seeking to awaken. Clinging to principles can be a good clinging, just like clinging to the goal of awakening.

Buddhism forces us to deal with paradoxes such as “what is satisfaction?”, “clinging”, and the “self”. It keeps us mentally alive, especially when we disagree with it. It gives rise to some silly intellectualism, but most people can avoid the silly games to focus on the real issues.

Buddhism is intrinsically moral, and it teaches empathy. It has its own versions of the Golden Rule and of “applies equally to everybody”. Unlike as with Jesus, it does not stress those moral points or make them central to its mission and way of life. Buddhist nations have not created the institutions that support a good life as I have described. Buddhists are amenable to those institutions, do understand them, and do take them up to the extent that their culture, society, and government allow. As the world becomes more capitalist and democratic, I hope Buddhist nations can take up strong institutions of pro-active service naturally. I hope Buddhists do so without resentment toward Jesus, his message, or Christians. I hope Buddhists can do this while acknowledging Jesus and his ideas, just as I hope Westerners learn from the Buddha. Yet if Buddhists do adopt pro-active service but insist on seeing it entirely in Buddhist terms, overlooking Jesus, that stance is fine with me.

Rather than to Theravada Buddhism, the following criticism applies more to systems of “many lives” such as Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism; but Theravada nominally is a system of many lives, so I offer this point here. It is easy to get lost in the tools of Buddhism, including karma and rebirth. Some Buddhists glimpse the grandeur of many lives and of time without end, and get caught up in that. Whether there are many lives does not matter. What matters is what you do right now right here. Even if there are many lives, you can do no better over the course of many lives than if you do well right now right here. If you do not do well right now right here, then having many lives makes no difference. You will not progress, you will not enjoy your many lives, and your many lives will do you no good. If you squander this instant, you squander not only this instant but all instants and all lives to come. If you save this instant, you save everything. To see this point is part of what it means to understand morality and good life. This is why I think we have only one life and our one life if important. This point does not mean you should live self-indulgently frivolously in the moment. I discuss more of what it means in the next chapters, especially in the chapters on Taoism in Zen where living here and now is part of mental freedom.

Theravada and I agree in a way that might make neither Buddhists nor readers of this book comfortable. I expect to meet God when I die. God might decide not to send me back to live again or to send me to

heaven, but instead simply to end me. Naturally I prefer a better next life or a vacation in heaven but I have to be ready for the chance that I might simply end altogether forever. Even if God does give me a few chances and a few vacations, eventually I think he will end even the great me. Theravada Buddhists have to be ready for that outcome as well. In fact, they should work toward that end even if they do not yearn for that end to the point of clinging. Other versions of Buddhism, and mainstream Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism deliberately avoid this possibility. (Hinduism allows this possibility as a good thing but does not stress it, and diverts attention to other possibilities.) “Rage, rage against the dying of the light”. Mostly other religions get around this end by putting us into a joyous system of many lives; another reason why I do not accept a system. I don’t think my view, or the similar view of a Theravada Buddhist, makes us unduly gloomy or heroic. It is just something you have to deal with. Dealing with it does make you a better person but not in any way to brag about.

The Worthwhile-ness Continuum.

Imagine a sequence of stances toward satisfaction with life.

First is the true skeptic who makes no value judgments. I leave him-her to another book.

Second is the person who sees nastiness, evil, and the devil everywhere. Everything should be totally good but turned out totally bad. Nothing is as it should be. It is all our fault. We are all and only bad. As Martin Luther said, we are a pile of dung covered with a thin coating of snow. I don’t like these people and I ignore them in this book.

Third is the person who is overcome by the troubles of the world. Life might be good but it just isn’t. It is a tribulation, rather like Satan wished to make Job see the world. I also ignore these people.

Fourth is the Buddhist who sees the fleeting joy in aspects of life but thinks life overall is not worthwhile. While you are in the game, play it out moderately to the end, and then let it go.

Fifth is my position, the position of Mike Polioudakis. “We are in it. We might as well play (work) hard to make it better. Things too often go badly, but often enough they go well, and they might go well in general with some luck. Some parts of life are really wonderful. Life is worthwhile as a whole even if much of it is annoying. We will not all be saved in the end. Life is real. Some of will succeed spiritually and some of us will fail. God will judge. We can trust God.”

Sixth is the business-and-political style American optimist. Life is hard work but it will turn out well in the end. I don’t care if other people fail as long as I succeed, and I know I will. My career and family make life worthwhile. Everyone could have this if they tried and knew what to do. People who don’t have this have only themselves to blame, and we can forget them.

Seventh is the exuberant style American optimist. Life is always a lot of fun. Look in the sunny side. If you are not making people happy, you are making them sad, so make them happy. We can all do well enough if we only try and if we help each other. Think of life in terms other than material success. Think in terms that will lead you to your success. “Follow your bliss”. “Be kind and mindful”.

Eighth is the idea that not all lives right now are worthwhile but life in general is worthwhile as part of a system of many lives, many lives are worthwhile right now as they are lives, and each being eventually gets at least some lives that are worthwhile while they are lived. If you are lucky enough to have one of the good lives, enjoy it, and don't worry too much about other people. This idea is typical of Mahayana and Hinduism.

Ninth is the mystic. We are all one. We are all God. We will all be saved in the end. The Great Risk of Life is an illusion. We all are part of the single great Void or Mind. We are all drops in the one ocean, and we all will sometimes be part of a shallow pool, inside a fish, part of a crashing wave, deep in the dark cold, or filling the lungs of a drowning person. Good and bad are both all one and different at the same time. Mountains and valleys are both all one and different. Everything is just as it should be even though it is not all good all the time. We should appreciate that. "Follow your bliss" and it will lead you to see how everything is right with you and the world. Be joyous.

In this frame, Buddhism is near the middle path. My differences with Buddhism are not as much as with other stances. The second and ninth stances are almost mirror images, and likely they are related both psychologically and in terms of how we might frame theology. I disagree with the stances that are either pessimistic or exuberant, for example the second, eighth, and ninth stances. I think both extremes are seriously misleading. I make this assessment not because I am on the outside looking in but because I have felt both directions myself.

Alternative Understandings of "Waking Up" and of Buddhist Success.

It is hard to accept that life is not worthwhile. The idea goes against a long evolutionary history that leads us to try to succeed and to think only in terms that help us to succeed. We deny what leads us away from succeeding. Very few Buddhists, and even few monks, really accept life is not worthwhile. They do not think "waking up" means seeing life is not worthwhile. Buddhists, even intellectuals, resented me when I pointed out that "life is not worthwhile" was the core teaching of Buddhism. They could see the idea, but they disliked it. To Buddhists, including intellectuals and monks, Buddhism is about the richness of its ideas and the quality of its practice. That is not a bad way out.

Instead of thinking that the core idea of Buddhism is waking up to the fact that life is not worthwhile, most Buddhist lay people, and most monks, substitute other ideas that we wake up to. They substitute other ideas of what it means to succeed in Buddhism. Here I am not concerned with the ideas common in all mass popular religion of religious success in terms of family success and other success in mundane life. I am interested in intellectual alternatives to seeing that life is not worthwhile and I am interested in cultural values that take the place of seeing the world as not worthwhile.

Some people think of waking up as seeing that the world is not as it appears to be, that there is a lot more going on, that much of what is going on is hard to see on the surface, and that much of what is going on undermines our normal values. That is not quite Gnosticism but it is like Gnosticism. It can lead a person to be more moral and to be intellectually curious, but not necessarily.

Some people think of waking up as seeing that the normal values of the world are silly, and that there are deeper better moral values. Usually they become more concerned and more moral. I think this is an

important kind of waking up, and so I agree with them to a large extent. I wish more people would wake up in this way.

Some people think of waking up as seeing the world is foolish and annoying. The world often is foolish and annoying but that is not what necessarily makes the world “not worthwhile”. We do not wake up just because we get deeply annoyed at the world. We do not awaken because we are cranky.

Some people seem to think that waking up means taking seriously that there are sacred powerful things in the world and that we have to respect them. This sounds like waking up to crude animism but usually it is more than that. Often it means waking up to the truth of other religions and cultures.

Some intellectuals think that waking up consists of deeply understanding the ideas of Buddhism, that they are close to awakening because they know so much so deeply, and so they are better than the common people in the same way the Buddha was better than the common people. In fact, knowing more about a good religion can make people better. It depends on what they do with their knowledge and what attitude they take. Too often, knowing more makes people stuck up. In that case, the ideas that they know are not a help but are a hindrance. This attitude is a disease of half-well-read and half-smart people in all religions, not just Buddhism, and so needs no further comment.

Some people think waking up and succeeding is not having any commitments, in being able to let go of all attachments, especially to material goods, sex, power, wealth, TV, pop culture, going to the beach, eating an ice cream cone, etc. I have met only a handful of people who come close to really being able to do this. I have met fewer people who can enjoy the world without clinging to the world. Most people who think they can do this seem far too committed to their own spiritual superiority and achievements. In any case, letting go is not the same as waking up. Letting go is one means to waking up. It can be one result of waking up.

At least among some Asians that I have met, people take the idea of waking up, and letting go, to mean a pose of superior diffidence about the world and about people. They are “above” politics, art, intellectual controversies, pop culture, and the masses. They are above the petty squabbles of their neighbors and business associates. They don’t want to get caught up in conflicts or to make commitments. Democracy is a passing fad. They don’t have to participate. They look at most people as chattering squirrels. They think of themselves as somewhat ethereal, not determined by the vagaries of this world, and not confined to the doings of this world. In strong versions, they learn to literally look past or look through people when they want to avoid people. It is odd to be overlooked in this way. In my experience, these people are not so much above the world as extremely selective in what they wish to deal with and how they wish to deal with it. They ignore what it makes their life easier when they ignore it, and can become quite agitated by issues that concern them personally or that affect family success. Haughty diffidence is not the same as waking up. It is not the same as non-commitment.

Waking Up and My Views.

We all face God whether we wake up or not. If we wake up to the idea that life is not worthwhile, then we have awakened to an error. In the same way a person can be decent without knowing he-she is decent, so a person can be successful as a spiritual being without having the idea of awakening. Just as the idea

of decency can impede decent people, the idea of Buddhist awakening can impede people who want to properly assess life. So, strictly speaking, I should describe Buddhist waking up as a pernicious delusion. But I don't feel that way about it or about striving for it. It is good to wake up to the difficulties in life not only for yourself but for other people. It is good to wake up to many of the Buddhist ideas such as cause and effect and the self is not necessarily eternal self-sufficient soul-stuff. The techniques of Buddhist meditation are worthwhile even if they do not lead to Buddhist awakening and even if they do not lead to my ideas. People who really study Buddhism tend to be more decent than average. We can think of Buddhist waking up as like a mystic vision, and so partly true but not wholly true. So I cannot condemn the ideas or the methods. I only ask that Buddhists look with the same critical eye on Buddhism that they turn on other dogmas such as the eternal soul-self. Don't be afraid to come to conclusions other than that life is not worthwhile and life is inevitably suffering. Don't look down on other religions as merely inferior versions of Buddhism or as stopgaps in this life on the way to deeper awakening in future lives.

Buddhist Charm.

This section does not take all Buddhists to be saints. I know most Buddhists in Thailand do not follow what I call Buddhism but are "animists" obsessed with magic, power, spirits, amulets, luck, fortune telling, and getting an advantage through connections to the spirit world. I ignore that here.

This section seems to contradict the idea that a religion should give normal people clear guidelines for reasonable success in this lifetime as preparation for meeting God. My guidelines for success come from Jesus, mixed with realism, and with Western ideas of government. I care more about acts than dogma. Acting well along Buddhist moral lines and intellectual lines goes with what I want people to do and with what leads to a good interview with God. It might be better for me personally if Buddhists all agreed with my dogma but likely not better for Buddhists. God will make up his own mind.

Buddhists often seem charming to Westerners. Thai people are charming apart from being Buddhists, so Thais can be doubly charming. Most Buddhists that Westerners meet are monks, or are serious about religion, are fairly well off, are students, intellectuals, artists, or academics, have travelled, or are in an international "do good" mission such as saving forests or farmers. When people of other religions meet Christians with these traits, the Christians can seem charming too. Americans used to give off this kind of charm until the 1980s.

Aside from the usual dose of magic that is found in all societies, Buddhism has a simple wooden-headed straightforward wonderful attitude. Most Buddhist goals are simple and clear, the techniques are clear, and people can be clear about what their particular goals are and what they will do to achieve their goals. You do not have to aim for awakening right away. You can simply aim to improve. You should strive to act morally. You should use logic and reason. You can make as much or as little progress as you wish on your own or in a group. You do not need to depend on other people but you can get help from other people if you wish and you can give help to other people if they wish. You do not have to depend on anybody else to save you. Nobody can send you to hell or heaven. Nobody expects you to awaken next week. Salvation is a goal but it is not a crisis issue. For most people, continual progress is more a focus than awakening. Generally, magic plays little role. At least traditionally, and even in the modern urban world, Buddhism tends to produce decent people. Despite the individualism of Buddhism, Buddhists have as much fellowship as among people in any religion. Buddhism encourages science, intellect, and

an open mind. It is no wonder that Lisa Simpson prefers Buddhism although she also follows the moral teachings of Jesus.

Buddhists aim for “lesser” goals such as clarity, mindfulness, calmness, kindness, sympathy, empathy, doing good, promoting kindness, rationality, science, and promoting the order in society that minimizes suffering and maximizes clarity. The “lesser” goals are quite valuable in themselves regardless of any attitude about worthwhile life, and would be admirable in any religion.

Buddhist aids, such as karma, rebirth, dharma, emptiness, Buddha mind, etc. are fascinating, can never be fully resolved, and make good topics of conversation. They can help sharpen the mind. Sometimes they give us insight into other topics such as how the mind evolved, causality, and the fact that most of our categories for knowing the world are made up. Sometimes they even help quiet the mind so we can think better. Studying them allows smart people to feel satisfied with themselves without necessarily leading to posing or to looking down on others people. They are like good art.

A few smart Buddhists do have a sense of the Buddhist idea that life is not worthwhile. Their response is like Existentialism: they make meaning for now, and are content to live in the present meaning that they make, even if their intellectual superiors, like the Buddha, know better. They achieve what Existentialism achieves but without pretense and self-congratulation. They are content to allow other people to find their own meaning, and they tend to respect the meanings of other people. This attitude does not lead to self-indulgent anarchy where each person lives in “his own private Idaho”. Buddhists live in society, and they adjust meaning to get along with others. To find meaning without too much pretense is quite charming in itself even without the other sources of Buddhist charm.

Most Buddhists take morality seriously without being zealots. Buddhists have empathy and compassion without losing themselves as clinging enablers. They understand that other people are like themselves and other people face the same problems they do. They know other people can get caught in clinging and other people suffer. They help other people while remembering that they need to take care of their families and themselves, and they need not to undermine society. Buddhists try to be polite and to talk nicely to other people.

Buddhists engage in causes, such as saving the forests and species, on the same terms. Buddhists can agree to disagree on social and moral issues. A Buddhist might have strong views on either side of the abortion issue but would not kill doctors who perform abortions. A Buddhist tries to follow the law while keeping in mind that few formal systems can encompass all the variety of life. Although women’s rights did not originate in Buddhist countries, Buddhists have accepted the idea because it makes sense in light of cause-and-effect and rebirth. Many people who are men in this life were women in past lives, and a person born a man in this life might easily be reborn a woman later, so there is no point in oppressing a class of person’s (women) you might have been or that you might join again soon enough. Buddhists would easily understand the philosophers Immanuel Kant and John Rawls.

Buddhists accept cause and effect. They like rationalism and science. They rapidly see the scientific point of view, and have no trouble with evolution and Relativity. They see the business point of view in which aspects of the economy influence each other. Buddhists might not have invented modern medicine

but they pick it up very quickly. Buddhists can be both stoic about the hazards of living in a body, and the inevitable decline of old age, yet see the value of medicine in relieving suffering and sustaining vigor.

Buddhists accept art as part of the charm of the world. They succumb to art because they don't expect to resist all clinging and all joys of this world. Art can bring some joy without too much pain. Buddhists are happy to learn lessons about religion and life from art without expecting art to reach the depths of the Buddha's mind and without expecting art to tell them all about life.

To many Buddhists, the Middle Path does not consist of the correct balance between asceticism and a normal healthy body. The Middle Path means trying to understand a variety of views, and then coming down somewhere in the middle, usually within the limits of common sense and general moral principles. Drink in moderation. Wear skirts neither too long nor too short. Defend a point of view but don't get into fist fights. Save some money while using some money to have a good time. Meditate but don't give up your job and your family unless you become a monk. Be brave but not foolish. Work through politics for the improvement of society until it wears you down or until politics becomes hopelessly corrupt.

This Middle Path is much like what Aristotle advised, at about the same time as the Buddha. A Buddhist who accepts that the world is worthwhile, at least for now, is much like an Aristotelian.

All this makes any person charming. It would be nice to combine many Buddhist traits with the concern and dedication of Christians and other followers of Jesus. As the world goes along, something like that might happen.

Sweet Western Buddhists.

When Western Buddhists adopt Buddhism, they learn that life is "not worthwhile", but, as far as I can tell, they don't take that idea seriously, maybe because most Western Buddhists learn Mahayana. Western Buddhists learn about suffering but tend to think of it in terms of bad situations and bad attitudes such as a long slow burn about being overlooked at work or lingering anger at a bad romance. They do not think much about the deep suffering that goes on even when life seems successful (see Part 7). They have a caring circle of friends, do good deeds, meditate, and are mindful. Instead of dwelling on life as "not worthwhile", Westerners are drawn to meditation; many lives; a joyous system of many lives; Buddhist Aids; Buddhist empathy and sympathy; mindfulness; not returning bad for bad; returning good for bad; seeing the root causes of sadness and bad behavior in general in selfishness; the beauty and goodness of nature; and many other points that make Buddhists charming. They write self-help books about not getting into bad situations and about getting out of bad situations. They write about how to be useful and help others. They write about using emotions so you are a nice person instead of a hurtful person. Sometimes they try to be diffident, un-emotional, and mildly "above it all" but not too often. Sometimes they think they are secretly better than non-Buddhists because they are so good or they are so close to true ideas, but they indulge this attitude no more than do people of all religions. All this is fine with me. It can get a little over-sweet but over-sweet is better than glamorizing villainy and better than self-righteousness and crusading. Their overall stance is not really different than the stance of love, help, and kindness as in some Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, etc. That is fine with me too.

The only problem I have with sweet Western Buddhists is the same issue I have with all dogmas: when they want to convert me to be like them and they want me to share exactly their concerns, experiences, feelings, and attitudes – the “Agent Smith” problem. I am a mild person but I am not like them. All I ask of them is good behavior, and I wish all they would ask of me is good behavior and that I make sense. It would be better if the good behavior on both sides was based on the same principles and it would be nice if we could talk with each other better. But we can’t always get what we want, and I don’t want to force them to think like me and be like me.

Buddhism Back to Almost Hinduism.

In the list of widespread ideas that began this chapter, the last points amount to accepting that the system-of-many-lives is good even if a particular life is painful, we should do our duty (dharma) as part of our role in the total system of many lives, we should enjoy this present life, and so life really is worthwhile. Buddhists reject this conclusion. The whole system is not good even if it sustains rebirths that lead to awakening. Such a system is self-contradictory, and self-contradictory systems are rarely mostly good. We can do our duty as part of our present life but we need not worry about doing our duty to uphold the whole system. We can enjoy this life in moderation but we should not get smug about this life. Hindus eventually worked their way to the non-Buddhist view; see the chapters on Mahayana and on India. They see the Buddha as one of the gods-forces who sustain the total good system of many lives. All this is a big difference between Hindus and Buddhists.

Buddhists who take the view described in the previous section seem to enjoy the present life, feel happy about the system as a whole, do their duty as part of sustaining the system as a whole, and do their duty as part of sustaining their society. Buddhists who take the view described in the previous section seem to act like practicing Hindus even if they do not follow Hindu doctrine. Most Buddhists are not happy about being described as Hindus by default. I leave it up to Hindus and Buddhists to figure out how they differ and then to tell non-Buddhists and non-Hindus.

Buddhists who want to separate themselves from Hindus should consider the points above, and should consider what the Buddha said about life being not worthwhile. If they conclude the Buddha did say that life is not worthwhile, they should consider what that means. If they conclude they can take part in this life, they should try to explain the terms both to themselves and to non-Buddhists. If they conclude that life is worthwhile, then what makes Theravada different from Mahayana, and what makes Buddhism different from Hinduism?

For most practicing Buddhists and Hindus, what matters is not intellectual doctrines about whether life is worthwhile, this particular life is worthwhile, or the total system of many lives is worthwhile. What matters is their own particular culture, and how their culture gets them to see their religion and to act their religion. Hindus are Hindus because they have roots in Indian culture. Hinduism is as much about Indian culture as about a set of ideas. Buddhists are Buddhists because they have roots in Southeast Asian, East Asian, European, or American culture. Thai Buddhists are Thai while Indian Hindus are Indians. Culture is more important than dogma. I leave Buddhists and Hindus to explain how their cultures and religious doctrines interact. I leave Buddhists to explain why non-strict Buddhists are not Hindus.

In the future, people of all cultures will face religions that were not originally of their culture, and religions will move into cultures from which they did not originate and from which they have not taken their basic character. This is already happening in America and Europe, and, to a lesser extent, India and China. It will be interesting to watch the interplay of culture and doctrine then. It will be interesting to see how far a doctrine can stretch to accommodate a culture. It will be interesting to see if a doctrine can actually shape a culture.

(Uninteresting personal note: While I was in graduate school, socio-cultural anthropologists pretty much said: society, culture, family, economics, morality, and religion are the same thing; religion takes the lead; religion and morality are closest, and form a complex; and religion-morality determines family, economics, society, and culture. Society, culture, economics, and family are a particular religion-morality in practice. Their anthropological doctrine was like a Buddhist aid. In their view, they had found the key to social life in a formula that centered on religion and morality. I disagreed. While religion and morality are important, religion, morality, culture, society, economics, and family are not identical, and which one leads depends. Using religion or morality as the key causes us to overlook culture, society, family, and economics, just as using “cause-and-effect” or “mindfulness” causes us to overlook Buddhism. Using only “not worthwhile” or “suffering” as the key might have the same result. My later experience confirmed my ideas about anthropological theory. I had to figure out my own ideas, much as the Buddha had urged. I could not have thought through the issues in this chapter or book if I had converted to the wrong views that were taught in graduate school. Buddhist students take note.)

PART 7: (A) SUFFERING VS. “NOT WORTHWHILE”, (B) BUDDHIST AIDS, AND (C) SELF.

This end part of the chapter is optional but firmly recommended. It delivers on the promise for “more later”. It goes into detail on the topics listed in the header, and includes more assessment.

(A) WORTHWHILE, NOT WORTHWHILE, AND SUFFERING.

Short Whimsical Prolog.

The idea of suffering in Buddhism and Hinduism gives me the same uneasy creepy feeling that the idea of heaven and hell gives me in Christianity. Christians sometimes corner you and demand, “Do you want to go to Heaven or Not? Do you want Heaven or Hell?” If you reject the dichotomy and you answer “No”, then you will go to Hell. If you answer, “Of course, forced to make the choice, everybody would rather go to Heaven”, you are trapped inside their view. You have to accept what they say about going to Heaven and Hell. The Christian inquisitor does not allow rejecting the frame. Suppose a Buddhist asks, “Do you want to end your Suffering or do you want to spend forever in Ignorance and ugly Suffering?” This is the same frame and dilemma. The Buddhist inquisitor does not allow you to reject the dichotomy anymore than the Christian does – the Buddhist does not allow the Middle Path. I don’t like this. The difference is the Christian openly scorns you if you don’t accept while the Buddhist merely damns you with pity and smug superiority. “Stupid not-Buddhist doesn’t even know when he is suffering”.

Like many people, my reaction is “a pox on both your houses”. I don’t live in these frames and I don’t like being forced to live in these frames. This dilemma is one tool of systems that eat the world. This is why the Buddhist view of suffering is one of the most dangerous of Buddhist Aids. A difference between me

and a few other victims is that, after a long life and a lot of thinking, I can give a few good reasons why I can reject the frames and I can give some alternative better views. Traps like this are one reason I came to enjoy Taoism and Zen.

If you desperately seek enlightenment, then you cling to enlightenment and you suffer.

If you desperately seek to stop clinging, then you cling to not clinging, and you suffer.

If you desperately seek to stop suffering, then you cling to suffering and not suffering, and you suffer.

Recall my comments earlier that the command to stop clinging and stop suffering is a negative absolute like iconoclasm, Prohibition, and sexual abstinence.

It is better to manage than to try to totally wipe out. Buddhist Aids used adeptly help manage.

“Not Worthwhile” versus “Suffering”, in More Detail.

This section can get technical. I repeat myself.

Westerners think of suffering as what happens to cancer patients or to people taken by the police in bad states. Buddhists see suffering as a common part of all life and see it in sickness, pains, aches, old age, love, accidents, disappointment, bad acts, taxes, the decay of society, and sorrow. Suffering appears in the hazards of life such as car accidents and plant closings, normal changes of life such as first crush and growing old, inevitable annoyances such as taxes, lingering unfairness such as the success of people who kiss ass, and the doubt that ever gnaws our hearts and minds. I see all this too. I don't overlook any suffering that Buddhists might consider.

Buddhists do not necessarily aim to end suffering or end all bad feeling; they aim to overcome suffering so it does not distort thought and keep us wrongly attached to life. When suffering is overcome, then it comes and it goes with no lingering bad effects or distortions. To “end” or “defeat” suffering is the same as to “overcome”. To “manage” suffering is to respond to it so as to minimize how it distorts thoughts and acts but not necessarily to end suffering or to not feel it. People manage suffering who accept that life has hard knocks and do the best they can anyway with as little bitterness as possible. They do not try to end all suffering. I advocate that we manage rather than overcome. I do not dwell on the difference between manage and overcome.

It is not clear if a person who overcomes suffering also does not feel suffering at all or does not feel much of anything at all. I doubt it. Some Buddhists act as if not feeling is the aim but they are wrong. A person who has overcome suffering still feels but he-she does not hold on to (attach to) feelings.

The issue of suffering is about something in life, about some of the content of life. In contrast, the issue of worthwhile life is about all of life, life itself. The issue of a worthwhile life contains the issue of suffering. The issue of suffering is one way to get at the issue of worthwhile life but that way is dangerous because a person can get stuck on the idea of suffering and so forget that the real issue is worthwhile life. I think that is what happened in Buddhism. I don't know if that happened to the Buddha but I doubt it. I think he

saw the real issue as worthwhile life. He used suffering to get at worthwhile life, and his followers got stuck. I cannot prove my view of what happened.

We all can be overcome by suffering. Suffering makes all of us think “crooked”. Crooked thinking leads us to more suffering and traps us in suffering. Our crooked thinking makes us make others suffer and it traps them too; then they do it to us; and so on. It could be the Buddha focused on suffering so as to alert us to these problems and to show us what is important. He gave us a way to handle suffering so it would not overcome life. He gave us a way to think clearly so as to undo crooked thought caused by suffering and crooked thought caused by anything. In the face of suffering, he offered a way to make life better, to think adeptly, and “get on top of” life, even if not to make life all good. For example, the Buddha found a way to overcome suffering so we also could end selfishness. Many Buddhists think like this although they do not usually say so. I think the Buddha used the issue of suffering to wake us up to what matters, and he promoted overcoming suffering to make life better. I don’t know for sure what the Buddha wished us to wake up to after we overcome suffering. I think the Buddha did not think that to overcome suffering makes life worthwhile. I cannot prove my view of what the Buddha thought.

Even if the Buddha offered a way to manage suffering to make life better, I disagree with the approach. The Buddha needed to say for sure if we awaken when we defeat suffering, what we awaken to, if life was worthwhile or not worthwhile before we defeated suffering, and if life is worthwhile or not worthwhile after we defeat suffering (and awaken). It seems odd to base a way of life (religion) on the idea that we must overcome suffering without also saying what makes life better and without focusing more on what makes life better. The Buddha’s approach amounts to falling back on the problem of suffering only, and it forces us to identify awakening with the end of suffering. That stance forces us to conclude that life is not worthwhile; certainly life is not worthwhile before we manage suffering; and likely is not worthwhile after. We conclude “not worthwhile overall” tacitly even if not overtly.

So, that is what happened. Orthodox Buddhism fell back on the problem of suffering, it avoided the issue of worthwhile life, but fell back on a stance that only tacitly sees life as not worthwhile, regardless of what the Buddha had intended. Orthodox Buddhism asserts the Buddha said suffering besets life (ruins it), we have to do what we can to end all suffering, and that is that. Orthodox Buddhism says ending suffering does make life better as a benefit along the way but Buddhism denies that the Buddha offers overcoming suffering primarily so as to make life all better, as a kind of therapy. Overcoming suffering is not a means to any other end except awakening. Buddhism focuses on overcoming suffering without tying the defeat of suffering to any other gain except awakening. The issue is suffering, plain and simple. This view is not so odd. A similar idea is the Christian and Muslim view that the world is fallen, beset with sin, sin ruins life, and the task is to overcome sin and all the evil that follows, plain and simple. This is how Christians and Muslims get stuck on fighting Satan and how they forget there is much more to life than fighting the Devil and fighting evil.

As far as I know, Buddhism takes no explicit stance on whether life is worthwhile before overcoming suffering, after overcoming suffering, or in general, except to say being born a human male is an amazing rare opportunity to defeat suffering, awaken, and to end dependency on the suffering of karma-Dharma-rebirth. This life is worthwhile because it allows us to end suffering and end normal life, and that is the only reason this life is worthwhile. To overcome suffering does not, in itself, make life worthwhile. The Buddhist stance strongly implies that life is not worthwhile before, after, and in general. Buddhists wish to

avoid that implication but I don't see how. I think the Buddha thought life is not worthwhile. (Women cannot end suffering and cannot awaken. Adept women must be reborn as men to awaken. I don't make the rules of Buddhism.)

I disagree that suffering ruins all life and I disagree with a focus on suffering. Suffering does not usually make life "not worthwhile". I disagree that to overcome suffering makes life worthwhile and it is the only thing to make life worthwhile. Managing suffering makes life better but does not make life worthwhile. Life is worthwhile despite most suffering. Life is worthwhile, plain and simple. I disagree with the Buddha and with orthodox Buddhism. My stance disqualifies me entirely for many Buddhists.

(0) The logic in more detail: To repeat: The issue of worthwhile life is deeper than the issue of suffering and it contains the issue of suffering. "Suffering" is about some of the content of life while "worthwhile" is about life, all of life. We can see suffering in terms of worthwhile life but we cannot see worthwhile life in terms of suffering except for a few bad situations that do not change the basic relation. We have to make up our minds about worthwhile life before we can assess how suffering affects life.

(0 continued) As developed in Buddhism, the ideas of suffering and of overcoming suffering, and all Aids, are bolstered ("reified"). They are overly strong so as to force themselves on minds. They do not follow the Middle Path. The ideas of suffering and overcoming suffering could be more useful if they were not so strident. I don't know if bolstering was done by the Buddha or by his followers but I think more likely by his followers. I don't know if "manage" is more along the Middle Path but I think so.

(1) Assume life is not worthwhile overall regardless of suffering. Then: (1A) The issue of suffering is minor in comparison. (1B) To defeat suffering does not make life worthwhile – what counts is that life is not worthwhile. So what if we end suffering but life is not worthwhile? (1C) Why work hard to overcome suffering? Especially if you feel fairly good already, working hard to end suffering gets you little more at a high cost. (1D) To overcome suffering still would not settle a serious issue in life. We would still feel malaise. It is not clear if this malaise is "suffering" by Buddhist standards but it is by mine. (1E) So, to defeat suffering does not defeat suffering unless to defeat suffering also makes life worthwhile; for this set of points (1), we assumed life is not worthwhile; orthodox Buddhism implies both that life is not worthwhile and to defeat suffering does not make life worthwhile; so, again, to defeat suffering does not defeat suffering. (1E) As long as life-in-general is not worthwhile, and not-worthwhile is a kind of suffering, we can't really manage suffering. Usually we can manage suffering if we feel life is worthwhile.

(2) The apparent Buddhist stance is based on the ideas that (a) life is not worthwhile, (b) life is beset by real suffering, and (c) to overcome suffering does not make life worthwhile. The Buddhist stance offers some good advice but is not a solution. (2A) Suppose in Buddhism, we defeat suffering so as to make life worthwhile. I say: then the real goal is to make life worthwhile, and to end suffering is only a means. It is odd to focus on the means (ending suffering) and so to obscure the goal (worthwhile life), especially when we need clear thinking to defeat suffering. If the real goal is to make life worthwhile, or to see that life is worthwhile, then say so, and go after that goal directly. (2B) Regardless of worthwhile, it is worth overcoming suffering because suffering hurts, we need to overcome suffering to think well, and then we can see clearly that life is not worthwhile. We do gain by overcoming suffering, and the gain is more than worth the cost. I agree that we need to manage suffering and to think clearer. When we do, we do not have to see that life is not worthwhile. We might see that life is worthwhile but standard Buddhism does

not allow this conclusion. (2C) Even though life is not worthwhile, to overcome suffering lets us live more gracefully until we die, and grace matters. I agree that grace matters. (2D) If people think life is worthwhile even with suffering, then people will not pursue Buddhism, and Buddhism will die. So, to keep Buddhism, we need to stress suffering and overlook the issue of worthwhile life or imply that life is not worthwhile. I disagree. See below. (2E) To overcome suffering in the Buddhist way avoids the issue of worthwhile life: worrying about worthwhile life is one kind of suffering, and it is overcome too when all suffering is overcome; the issue of worthwhile life disappears after suffering has been overcome; people do not long for a worthwhile life after suffering ends; so Buddhism does not have to deal with the issue; and-or Buddhism deals with the issue of worthwhile life when it deals with suffering; to overcome suffering is to fully awaken and to reach perfection. I disagree. See below. (2F) Even if people do not know they suffer, they still suffer, even when they feel good; and it is worth working hard to see hidden suffering, defeat hidden suffering, and defeat all suffering. I agree that people do suffer even when they don't know so. People need more insight about their real situations and how they really feel. People need to quit fooling themselves. That still does not mean suffering besets and ruins life in the Buddhist way; people should see suffering the Buddhist way; and should remove suffering in the Buddhist way. People can see suffering in other ways and can use other methods to manage it. See Part Four in this chapter.

(3) I think the Buddha thought: Life is not worthwhile before and after overcoming suffering, and so life is not worthwhile before and after awakening. The Buddha uses suffering to get at worthwhile life. Still we should overcome suffering because suffering hurts, we see much more clearly when we end suffering, and living gracefully matters. I think the Buddha thought that overcoming suffering would also take care of the issue of worthwhile life by letting us see that life is not worthwhile. I doubt that way of dealing with worthwhile life dispenses with the issue of a worthwhile life without directly confronting the issue. I think the Buddha did not care if Buddhism dies out as long as people find clear thinking, truth, and grace, learn how to deal with suffering, and see that life is not worthwhile.

(4) My stance is based on (a) the issue of worthwhile life is deeper than the issue of suffering, and (b) life is worthwhile. See (2) above and Part Four below. If life is worthwhile, then: (4A) Most of us can deal with suffering, with help. (4B) That (a) all lives have some suffering, and (b) some particular lives have much suffering, do not make all life not worthwhile. (4C) Even a life beset by suffering can be worthwhile, and many are. (4D) Even if most lives are beset by suffering, life can still be worthwhile, and is. (4E) If life is worthwhile and we manage suffering, we can better decide what to do next. We do not have to totally defeat suffering to manage suffering. If we defeat suffering and life is still not worthwhile, then we don't know what to do. (4F) Managing suffering can help us see more clearly but we do not need to fully overcome suffering to see clearly enough, some suffering helps us to see better, and ending suffering does not necessarily lead us to see perfectly. (4G) Again: If the goal of overcoming suffering is to make life worthwhile then the real deep goal is to make life worthwhile, we should say so, and we should work on that directly. (4H) Wondering-about-worthwhile-life is not the suffering that Buddhism seems to see and its methods aim to overcome. Even if Buddhist methods reduce suffering, still we have to deal with the issue of worthwhile life. Buddhism does not sidestep the issue of worthwhile life. (4I) Wondering about a worthwhile life is not wondering about the meaning of life. We can not-know the meaning of life but still decide life is worthwhile; people do this all the time. The two issues are related but I don't need to go into it here. (4J) Buddhists make the same mistake in their focus on awakening as Christians do with Salvation. Overcoming Suffering plays a similar bad role as do Grace and Justification. Christians worry about those instead of worrying about doing what Jesus wants and doing the right things for the right

reasons. Christians should stop worrying about S, G, and J while Buddhists should stop worrying about Enlightenment and Overcoming Suffering. Get better and be more useful. (4K) If you want insight into suffering and worthwhile life, ask someone who is depressed. You can “have it all” but, if you feel life is not worthwhile, you have nothing.

(5) (A) Maybe a life that does not defeat suffering is not worthwhile but a life that does defeat suffering is worthwhile. We defeat suffering to make life worthwhile. Maybe to defeat suffering is to think clearly and adeptly, to think clearly and adeptly defeats suffering, to think clearly and adeptly and to defeat suffering make life worthwhile, and is the only way to make life worthwhile. They go together. Maybe the Buddha meant all this. (B) Whatever he meant, I think: the ideas in (A) are wrong; life is worthwhile regardless of most suffering; we do not need to end suffering to make life worthwhile; and, in general, to end suffering does not make life that was not-worthwhile-before into life that is worthwhile after. Learning to manage suffering helps almost everyone. For a few sad people, learning to manage suffering might let them go from not-worthwhile life to the worthwhile life that most of us have. Buddhist methods help. None of this means that managing suffering turns life-that-is-generally-not-worthwhile into generally worthwhile life. Thinking adeptly is another issue. The Buddha and Buddhism are not clear if to-overcome-suffering-makes-life-worthwhile but Buddhism, with a focus on suffering, strongly implies that life is not worthwhile before and after. I think neither the Buddha nor Buddhism intended us to overcome suffering so as to make life worthwhile. If anything, the Buddha intended us to overcome suffering so we could see that life is not worthwhile and so to endure gracefully.

(6) We have to decide if life is worthwhile before we can really deal with the issue of suffering, even if, by using the methods of the Buddha, we seem to overcome suffering. We have to decide if life is worthwhile despite suffering, and we have to say so. If we think life in general is worthwhile, say so. If we think life in general is not worthwhile, say so. If we think life is not worthwhile before overcoming all suffering, say so. We have to decide if to overcome suffering makes life worthwhile. If to end suffering makes life go from not worthwhile to worthwhile, say so. If to overcome suffering does not make life worthwhile, say so. If to manage suffering and to think more adeptly make already-worthwhile life even better, say so. I hope I do say that.

(7) Not to decide about worthwhile life inevitably promotes alternatives, such as Mahayana and most of Hinduism, that push out Theravada. They succeed because they change the view of view suffering so it does not erode worthwhile life and worldly success. They redefine suffering, worthwhile, and success. In effect, they define away suffering so they can offer their version of a worthwhile life and success. I think their methods of salvaging suffering, worthwhile life, and success are wrong, and I think most Theravada Buddhists would agree. The best response is not to drown the question of worthwhile life in the issue of suffering but to get at worthwhile life directly, simply, and correctly.

(7 continued) Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Taoism, Confucianism, and other good religions assert that life is worthwhile. Despite all its great features, orthodox Buddhism cannot really face other religions unless it makes clear how it thinks life is worthwhile or not worthwhile, and how its view differs from other religions. If Buddhism feels other religions overlook the issues of suffering and worthwhile life, Buddhism has to be clear about how it stands and how (it thinks) they stand.

(8) This point won't make sense now to anybody new to Buddhism but please return to it later when it does make sense. Life and the things in life are inevitably sticky; and we cling to life, perceptions, ideas, hopes, stances, dreams, pleasures, feelings, etc; Both stickiness and clinging play a role in how suffering works and why it negates life. The analysis of stickiness and clinging were great advances in Buddhism and the analysis largely holds regardless of conclusions about worthwhile life and suffering. The analysis helps us see how suffering works and helps us to overcome suffering. But the analysis of stickiness and clinging itself can become sticky and become an object of clinging. We have to manage the stickiness-and-clinging of stickiness-and-clinging while not killing the ideas of stickiness-and-clinging. We have to manage the overcoming of stickiness-and-clinging. This task is hard as long as suffering is the core issue. This task is not too hard with worthwhile life at the core. With suffering, it is hard to overcome clinging to the ideas of stickiness-and-clinging because those are integral to how suffering works. In contrast, those ideas are not integral to the issue of worthwhile life. Those ideas help us appreciate worthwhile life and help to make life better but they are not vital. We can use the ideas of stickiness and clinging as needed or can let them go as needed.

(8 continued) Some parallels not from Buddhism might help. We have to learn how to be wary of all dogma without rejecting all dogma, including the dogmas that (a) we should be suspicious of all dogmas, (b) we should not reject all dogmas, and (c) we should be suspicious of all dogma but not reject it all. We have to learn how to not worship idols without also hating images. We have to learn to not worship Mary-Mother-of-Jesus without rejecting all reference to her and curiosity about her. We have to reject the Devil without denying that evil matters. We have to work at a job not so much that we neglect life and family but we do have to work some to have life and family. We have to reject superstition, magic, and bad religion without scorning all belief and all curiosity about supernatural and without enjoying art that uses magic. We have to suspect politics and politicians without hating them all and without turning favorites into demigod saviors.

It is worth repeating my guesses of what the Buddha thought and the implications. He used suffering to get at "not worthwhile". The Buddha felt life is not worthwhile before we defeat suffering and after. "Beset by suffering" is another way to say "life is not worthwhile". Most people won't accept "not worthwhile", so it is easier and more effective to use suffering. Used adroitly, suffering as a way to get at "not worthwhile" turns a question about some of the content of life into a question about all of life. The Buddha thought some people could defeat suffering well enough; then they would quickly see that life is not worthwhile; and then live graciously. You have to think yourself why the Buddha felt life is not worthwhile. I think it was part of the complex of ideas that were current in his time, what people meant by being trapped on the Wheel of Dharma-karma. The Buddha used ideas adroitly but that does not mean all his listeners did and then all their listeners did too. Used not-adroitly, focus on suffering loses people in an issue about some of life when we should think about all of life. Still, it is worth managing suffering even if life is not worthwhile, worthwhile, or we are not sure. Maybe some people who manage suffering will "break on through" to see that life is not worthwhile or is worthwhile. People who are trying to deal with suffering see not only their own suffering but the suffering of others, and they act better toward all living beings; they act morally and graciously. This goal is worthwhile even if people who seek to awaken through overcoming suffering do not fully awaken. Yet, of course, as long as life is not worthwhile, to overcome suffering cannot make life worthwhile. Even if we overcome suffering and make our lives better in some ways, still life is not worthwhile, and that remains a serious problem.

Remember the Buddha lived when people believed in many lives. If the Buddha had thought life was worthwhile after overcoming suffering and waking up, he could have arranged to live a long time in that blessed state or to live many lives in that blessed state. Instead, he chose to die at the normal age of about 85 years old and not be reborn again. He chose to get off the Wheel of Dharma-Karma. I have to conclude it was not worthwhile to live longer or to be reborn again, even in the blessedness of awakening. Again: "Oh yeah, life goes on long after the thrill of livin' is gone".

The Buddha was like a few other people who believe that this life is all there is and we should be ready to give up everything when we die, such as like David Hume. Live gracefully, then let go. To live gracefully, it helps to overcome suffering.

The Buddha wanted us to make up our own minds even if we disagree with him. In that spirit, I say the Buddha was wrong and Buddhism still is wrong. I cannot prove the Buddha thought life is not worthwhile and he used suffering to get at the problem of worthwhile. I cannot prove orthodox Buddhism is stuck on suffering and so overlooks the deeper question of worthwhile. I can see issues with all Buddhism, such as endemic spiritualism and magic, but I cannot prove they result from this problem. I can see the unease of many smart Buddhists but I cannot prove it results from this problem.

It is possible the Buddha never meant us to overcome suffering in the sense that the idea was developed after him. It is possible the Buddha wanted us to manage suffering enough so we could see grace and kindness, put ourselves in proper humble perspective, see life is not worthwhile, see the value of others despite that life is not worthwhile, and then wait to die. He gave his followers good tools. Then followers who bolstered suffering took over. It is not possible to settle speculation like this. We have to deal with issues as we have them now, including that we have to make up our minds about suffering, worthwhile, overcoming, managing, awakening, and the correct use of Buddhist Aids.

Because I think life is worthwhile and the issue of worthwhile life is deeper than the issue of suffering, I need not worry about the exact role of suffering. In this book, I may focus on "worthwhile life" and see what that implies for waking up and for conduct.

Some Christian churches, and maybe some Hindu churches, think suffering adds to life in ways that I find a little creepy; I do not rest any argument on that view; and I dislike it. We can learn from suffering but we should never glamorize it. Some Christian churches glamorize suffering. I do not glamorize suffering or worthwhile life. The Buddha did not glamorize suffering, not even to make it into a bigger dragon to slay. If any Buddhists do dramatize or glamorize suffering, they err.

Although I disagree with the Buddha about worthwhile life, he remains one of the people that I admire most. Although I disagree with the monkhood ("Sangha") about both worthwhile life and suffering, I have rarely met such good, delightful, modest, and useful people. "By their fruits you will know them". The Buddha made a good case. He honed strong tools for thinking and doing. He had excellent insights about the self, mind, and world. In showing us how to manage suffering, he also showed us how to be better people, and his insights into better are useful regardless of the issues of worthwhile and suffering. It is worth studying him to learn, be clear about where we agree or disagree, how we see suffering, and about worthwhile. Despite reliance on the idea of suffering, it is monks who carry the message of the Buddha just as Christian priests carry the message of Jesus.

Although Buddhism officially says the goal is to end suffering - and that's it - most practicing Buddhists, including most monks, don't act this way. Rather, most feel that managing suffering makes life better and worthwhile in various ways, such as by making us more mindful, making us not-selfish, "turning us on" to Emptiness or Buddha Mind, or allowing us to succeed in life and business. Most Buddhists are uneasy with the idea that life is not worthwhile and uneasy that Buddhism says life is not worthwhile. I do not say much on why Buddhists think so. In chapters on Mahayana and Hinduism, I explain how the yearning for a worthwhile successful life shaped alternatives to Theravada.

Suffering in More Depth.

I did not explain the Buddha's insight in terms of suffering partly because of the confusion just noted but mostly because people misunderstand when they think of suffering. They think: "If I can stop obvious suffering, then I have won". They use four tactics. All are wrong, and all actually reinforce stickiness and clinging. (1) If, on balance, pleasure (broadly reckoned) exceeds pain, then I have won. If I succeed in my job and family, have friends, am good, and am not disappointed, then I do not suffer overall. I have won, and I do not need the Buddha. (2) I am different from other people; I can overcome the stickiness of life even while I enjoy life; I can join fully in life and enjoy life without clinging to it. (3) I will succeed in life while I am young and so not yet taken by suffering. After I have established a family and set my children on their feet, and I begin to feel suffering, then I will withdraw from life and follow the Buddha. (4) I am in a system of many lives. The system is about joy-and-love. Stickiness in life leads me into the system; so stickiness and clinging are overall good rather than bad. Suffering is an illusion in the big arena, although real in its own way in the small arena of particular lives, so I need not worry about suffering. I can defeat apparent suffering by giving in to stickiness and clinging, losing my apparent self, finding my true self in the system of many lives and great joy-and-love, and doing what I was meant to do in the great system.

People misunderstand suffering. You still suffer at a deep level even if you are not keenly aware that you suffer. Nature gave us ways to cover up suffering when it interferes with biological success. The Buddha saw both obvious suffering and deep suffering. Deep suffering is the malaise, fear, nervousness, and ennui (deep boredom) that goes with all life, even good life. There is no cure for that in any success, not even in a joyous Dharma system. Even when you live with external happiness, you still fear to lose what you have and you compare yourself with other people and gods. You fear other people will take what you rely on. You fear to lose your reputation and standing. Even if you can get over fearing loss and get over comparisons, the fact of being caught up in having, society, and nature makes you anxious. Even if you do not fear for yourself, you still fear for other people, animals, country, church, and planet. You fear your life's work in business, science, or helping others will come to nothing. You fear God has forsaken you or the planet. You want to please God in ways impossible for humans. The Buddha explained in terms of obvious suffering but he had in mind deep suffering too.

I think the Buddha explained in terms of obvious suffering because that idea was easiest for his listeners to understand. In the Buddha's time, hunger, accident, deformity, disease, war, bad politics, old age, and death, were more obvious than now. Then, it was obvious that people have babies, who have more, who go on to have more babies, and so on, without end, and without any real purpose but to keep going on. People did get sick of life. People wanted release. The wheel of rebirth was not a joyous system but a wheel of torture in which cause-and-effect (Law, Dharma, Karma) were fetters to bind us to the wheel of

rebirth and suffering, and are tools of particular tortures. Rather than say “life is not worthwhile”, or try to explain deep suffering to the majority of people who could not see deep suffering even if they felt it, it is easier to point to obvious suffering. Obvious suffering was enough. Some people could understand the deep suffering of life as well but you did not have to understand the deep suffering of life to understand simple obvious suffering, and to want it all to stop. Anybody who had the ability to bring deep suffering to consciousness would get the idea from examples of obvious suffering. A simple, clear, moral plan such as the Buddha’s had considerable appeal.

Even now in the modern world, often it is easier to see clinging if we begin with suffering and heartache. All of us have felt them. All of us have been sick, lost a loved one, and been hurt by love or by the lack of love. All of us meet and fear old age. All of us have felt the sting of a good cause thwarted by mere self-interest and selfishness. All of us have held on much longer than reasonable to some pie-in-the-sky cause or dream of success. When we can see this in specific excessive episodes, then we can see it in other episodes that are not so excessive, and then we can see it generally.

You have to struggle to see clearly the causal chain around clinging and suffering. The struggle is a kind of clinging but you have to go through it to get to the other side.

Spoiler Alert: You can get a sense of the struggle, what you have to give up, what letting go is, Dharma logic, and the chain of cause-and-effect, through the book-movie “The Maltese Falcon”. First, the movie is an extended study of suffering when we cling to material things, love, glamorized wealth and power, rivalries, sex, and stories. The most obvious object-of-clinging-and-cause-of-suffering is the Black Bird – “the stuff that dreams are made of”. But that material thing only embodies one of many confused mental fantasies that cause suffering.

Second, the hero, Sam Spade, is a private detective, with a partner. Spade falls in love with one of the villains, Bridget Wonderlee or Bridget O’Shaunessy, both aliases. It is never clear if she falls in love with him or is merely playing him, and that is part of the dilemma. She murders Spade’s partner. The partner was a womanizing careless skunk, Spade did not like him, and Spade was having sex with his wife. Still, he was Spade’s partner, and Spade has to follow the moral Dharma of his profession, the moral Law of his profession, including loyalty to clients, his partner, and to some truth. Spade can help Bridget cover up her crime. Yet, in the end, Spade turns her in to the police. The decision is an agony. Had he not turned her in, Spade would have suffered more even though he would have had a woman well suited to him and a woman that he loved. Spade would have suffered because he feared what she could do to him and, more importantly, he would have violated his moral Dharma. He would have suffered both externally and deeply. By giving up what he loved most, Spade was able to go along with the Dharma, the moral Law, (almost but not quite fully) stop clinging to a bad personal relation, and gain some release. Spade runs through the reasons behind the decision out loud for all to hear. Spade knows full well the causal chain behind both not turning her in and turning her in, and Spade follows the logic of the chain that leads to the least suffering and the best outcome. The release is far from complete but it is a big step down the path toward full following of the Dharma and full release. Many viewers think Spade chose wrongly should have “gone for love” as Neo did in the Matrix movies, but I agree with Spade’s choice. In Neo’s case, I agree with his choice.

If you overlook “seeing-the-causal-chain-letting-go-partial-release-and-less-suffering”, and instead focus on Spade doing his Dharma duty to institutions greater than personal self, to profession, society, human law, and the greater Dharma of the whole system, then the story reinforces Hinduism. If you overlook those options and think Spade should have acted on love, and see the love that Spade has for Bridget as representing the joy that the Dharma offers us, then you are close to Mahayana. The three religions are that close and that distant. I could give the story interpretations rooted in Christianity or in any big way of looking at the world – the story does not exclusively support the Dharma and the Buddha only - but that diversion would not be useful here.

The writers of the Upanishads had heard the same ideas about the sadness of life that the Buddha had heard, at about the same time, and they remade the ideas to suit themselves. I think the Buddha remade the ideas to suit his own insights. That does not mean he was right or wrong – his correctness depends on what he made of the ideas rather than his source.

In the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition, people are saved from sin and the depravity that comes of sin. People who grew up in those traditions often cannot accept that not everybody feels sinful and depraved. You can feel the mistakes you have made, sins you have committed, harm you have done, and missed chances to have helped, without necessarily feeling totally sinful and depraved. One good idea of the crazy 1960s was seeing the difference between knowing our faults versus feeling smothered by an all-encompassing blanket of sin and depravity – a gain now likely lost. I have heard fervent Christians and sincere missionaries try hard to talk people into feeling sinful and depraved so the Christians could then save the others on Christian terms. I don't like this way of doing things “ass backwards” and of creating harm, often largely just to gain control.

As with Heaven and Hell above, Buddhist stress on clinging and suffering reminds me of Christian ideas of sin and depravity. Fervent Buddhists have tried to talk me into seeing my own suffering, mental defilement, despair, and depravity so they could show me how Buddhism had a way out. If I don't see right away how lost, clingy, in pain, suffering, and defiled I really am, the Buddhist pities me as lost in my own fog of self-delusionary depravity. Most Buddhists, like most Christians, are happy to leave you alone as long as you do no harm. I know my faults but I don't feel lost in clinging, defilement, and suffering anymore than I feel lost in sin and sinful depravity. I know when I suffer. That does not mean either that I want out of all my suffering or that I am a slave to clinging and suffering. Although loving and caring have caused me pain, maybe more pain than pleasure, still I prefer to endure the pain than to lose my inner ties to people that I have loved or do love. I also know when the pain is too much and I know how to let go of a particular relation rather than all relations. Buddhists should accept that some people do not feel suffering as Buddhism seems to require. Buddhists should think what people do feel, the implications, and what to do next. That is a sufficiently fertile ground for the ideas of the Buddha.

Buddha's Time and Our Time.

Imagine you live in a ruler-priest-peasant-merchant-worker world where everything stayed the same for 5000 years. The rulers might come and go, but taxes remain. The occupants of the land change but the land remains, and so does the hardship of making a living on the land. The seller of cloth changes but the selling of cloth remains. You come, you go, and you die. Your children come, go, and die. In a few years, nobody even remembers you or your children. At best, you are a pile of bones in a mausoleum for

a few hundred years. If anybody does remember, the memory is so distorted, and so serves the purpose of other people, that it is not you. If anything, memory serves delusion. People in the peasant villages and markets know they depend on each other, and sometimes depend on the lord, but that does not stop famine or old age, and it can make life worse. Yes, there are happy times, but so what? Nothing you can do makes the world any better. Every year we people eat more of nature but nature seems always there, and nature comes back whenever a village or market dies out from famine, fire, flood, taxes, or invader fury.

In this situation, a person really seems to gain by overcoming suffering. The question of a worthwhile life is not very important. You might as well take care of your own suffering. You can't control the suffering of anyone else. You don't owe them that. All you owe them is basic morality.

Now look at our lives. Through struggle, Americans, and some other peoples in the world, can make their lives better, and can improve the lives of their children. We are part of the government. We are part of the world, stewards of the world. If we don't take care of nature, we face horror, and we undo all the good that we do for our children. Life matters. Life can be made worthwhile and can be made not worthwhile. Life is worthwhile in general if we work on it. Suffering becomes a lesser issue than how life matters and how to make it better not only in our now but in general.

So, does the validity of a religion depend on its times? Do ultimate questions vary according to what era somebody asks? Do the Golden Rule and "applies equally" apply in some times but not in others? Are the Buddha and Jesus heroes in some times but not in others?

If questions vary according to the times, still it seems we can ask the same questions about suffering and worthwhile life in all times. People might be prone to one answer or the other in different times but the questions are still valid regardless of the times.

While the description above of old times might make suffering a more relevant question than worthwhile life, that view is not how people responded, not even in the time of the Buddha. What people took from the Buddha was his idea that each person is his-her own boss and each person determines the quality and validity of his-her own life. You need not depend on Brahmins, Lords, or Spirits. You can work it out for yourself. What you make can be worthwhile even in Theravada but certainly in Mahayana. People looked to the teachings of the Buddha not so much for ways to end suffering and get out of life but for ways to gain control of life and to find success. They acted as if life was worthwhile and they could do something about it. Let "ending suffering" wait for another life. A devout Buddhist might say that people misunderstand, and people chronically misunderstand, but that is not the issue I raise in this paragraph. I point out that the question of a worthwhile life pertained even in the time of the Buddha and it still pertains now. We face suffering. We are better off learning how to deal with it. When we have reduced our suffering to the point where we can think well enough, or even to the point where we can think about as good as any evolved sentient being can think, then we can consider worthwhile life.

To keep the historical record straight: In fact, in the few hundred years before the time of the Buddha, and in the Buddha's time, the area of what is now northern India and Nepal had changed a fair amount in its economy and politics, but not nearly as much as life has changed all over the world since about 1900. The changes were mostly in who had the power rather than in the nature of the power. The changes

then, as now, led to increased suffering for some people and increased success for others. It is possible to say the Buddha's stress on suffering was in part a response to the hardship that he saw in the changes around him. Many Buddhist writers offer that view. I have no idea if it is true. Even if partly true, it does not change the context for the general view of life as given in the points at the beginning of this chapter and in this section, and it does not change the view here that valuing life only little and wanting out of life is a reasonable response in the right conditions. It is easy enough to say that the changes around the time of the Buddha led people to see life as better and qualitatively worthwhile as social scientists have argued about changes in Europe in the late Middle Ages, during the Renaissance, and during the rise of capitalism. People then picked out of the teachings of the Buddha not that life is full of suffering and not worthwhile but "I am my own boss now". It is easy enough to blend stories to reinforce the points of this section – or other views - but I don't go through that exercise.

What the Buddha Really Said and Really Intended.

As mentioned, a "sutra" is an important religious book, like a chapter of the Koran, a book of the Tanakh, or a Gospel in the New Testament. The large majority of sutras claim to be transcriptions of a lecture given by the Buddha himself, as with the Hadith (Sayings) of Mohammad, the words of Jesus in the New Testament, and the claim that Moses wrote the whole Pentateuch. This claim cannot be true of all the sutras and all the words of the Buddha because there are too many sutras and words, and they don't all agree. Likely, when the sutras were written, people did not expect the words in a sutra to be actually the words of Siddhartha Gautama. Rather, a monk wanted to say what Buddhism was all about, wanted to explicate a point of dogma, or wanted to make points against what he considered wrong dogma, and so wrote a sutra. This practice was not dishonest. We have to assess sutras according to their content and not according to the claim that they are the exact words of the Buddha.

Theravada claims that it uses the earliest sutras, and only those sutras; those sutras are likely closest to the real words of the Buddha; most likely to represent what he said and only what he said; and so the ones that Buddhism should be based on. Theravada has all the orthodox sutras and only the orthodox sutras. Nobody else has this. Mahayana disagrees but I leave their argument to a later chapter.

The sutras that are clearly orthodox agree that the Buddha intended to relieve suffering and he expected awakened people to die out and not return. Overall, the view is consistent between sutras and the view does support the standard orthodox position about suffering, overcoming suffering, and then quietly dying out. Differences seem less important than consistency. The consistency and the sticking-on-topic are evidence that the original message about ending suffering was important to the Buddha even if not all the words of the sutras are his words. The Buddha did intend people to deal with suffering and to deal with it in his way.

Even so, I doubt that the sutras recorded everything the Buddha said on every important topic. The fact that the early orthodox sutras focus on suffering likely means that they did not record all that the Buddha said even on other topics that are important. The focus on suffering might show a bias of monks rather than a full sample of all the Buddha said. Mahayana says this about Theravada sutras, and Mahayana claims it has sutras about other topics and other ways to look at awakening. It claims that its sutras are more authentic to the spirit of the Buddha and his whole teaching. Both Theravada and Mahayana seem

to imply about their favorite sutras something like Christians say about the writing of the New Testament, that it was guided by the Holy Spirit. I do not assess claim versus claim.

The facts that the sutras are not all the Buddha said on everything important does not mean suffering is not the central issue or the most important issue in Buddhism. Other important topics might not be most important or most central. We would not be able to say unless we did have all the words of the Buddha, and only the Buddha, on all the topics that interested him; and we do not have that. Without that, most of what we say about topics other than suffering is just guesses. I am fine with just guessing as long as we know we are guessing and guesses are more likely to reflect what we care about than what the Buddha cared about. After guessing, we have to use our minds to assess.

I do say this: The Buddha might have intended all this talk about suffering to be only the springboard to a better fuller life. We have to get past suffering to get there. We can only get there through dealing with the problem of suffering; no other road goes there. No other groundwork clears the way and lays a firm foundation as does finally dealing with suffering. Once we are past the problem of suffering, then we can live a better worthwhile life through a mix of meditation, mindfulness, morality, and insight into cause-and-effect and dependent origination. Trust the Dharma, study, work hard, be a good person, listen to monks, give up superstition and magic, and become an unselfish person. All this is to awaken and end suffering. All the good stuff follows. I think most Theravada Buddhists really believe this version rather than strict orthodox Buddhism as I describe strict orthodox Buddhism – even monks. I think the large majority of Western Buddhists believe this version. This view of what the Buddha really meant is on the borderline between Theravada and Mahayana. It is humanized Theravada. It is Mahayana without the great joyous Dharma-Emptiness-Mind system. It is similar to my version of following Jesus. I cannot say if this is what the Buddha really intended. You have to read and decide for yourself.

Suppose you say this is what the Buddha intended because it is what YOU really want rather than what you think the Buddha really intended, and you follow this new program, and you make the world better. Then I would not fight you over doctrinal purity.

I cannot decide the intent of a man from 2500 years ago, especially when his words have been swallowed by hundreds of sutras each claiming authority. I don't care about accurately determining the intent of the Buddha. Rather than argue about what the Buddha really said and really intended, it is better to figure out what is correct and good, and what you have to do, regardless of your heroes. Your heroes can help with this task.

By focusing on individual suffering, Theravada set the stage for, and practically demanded, the invention of Mahayana and then Hinduism. I let Buddhists and Hindus work out this issue.

Suffering and “Not Worthwhile”; Some Summarizing.

Between suffering, deep suffering, and “not worthwhile” there is not much practical difference, and there is little hope of searching the sutras to build a case that the Buddha meant one more than the others. A Buddhist still has to follow the same meditation techniques and will see the same linkages of cause-and-effect. Still, I say a few more words about why I use “not worthwhile”. I repeat my view is not standard orthodox Buddhism even if it is close.

I think the sutras are mostly not the words of the Buddha, they are not a complete record of what he said, they are the words of monks, monks focused overly much on the problem of suffering, and monks left out what the Buddha said about other important topics. The focus on suffering is largely due to the mindset of monks and to the fact that they had to hammer fat nails into the thick hard reluctant heads of listeners. I disagree with Mahayana that Mahayana has better sutras and disagree with how Mahayana resolved the problem of suffering and a worthwhile life.

The ideas that were widespread during the time of the Buddha show a clear and strong disappointment with ordinary life, and imply the disappointment is inevitable in this diminished world of mere becoming. They promote a pessimistic attitude similar to Christian and Muslim belief in a fallen bad world. That Buddhist view is stronger than to say mere suffering is the problem. Suffering is a symptom rather than a root cause. Deep disappointment is the issue that the Buddha internalized and with which he had to deal. He dealt with it through the more obvious issue of suffering.

When people focus on suffering and will not face the issue of whether life is worthwhile, they get confused and make mistakes. I hope I have corrected some of the mistakes here but my intent was to explain in terms of "not worthwhile" rather than to correct the mistakes made by focusing on suffering.

The facts that the Buddha did not go back to a normal life after awakening, monks are not supposed to go back to a normal life after awakening, and that an awakened person disappears from the world entirely for all eternity after he-she dies (pari-nirvana), all reinforce the idea that life is not worthwhile. If the problem was mere suffering, and awakening cured suffering, there is no reason not to go back to normality in this life, and no reason not to have an infinite number of lives in the future. That too is what some Mahayana writers think.

If life really was worthwhile, we could work on curing suffering, and could eventually find a worthwhile life for ourselves, loved ones, the planet, and even people who are not determined dolts. We could seek a biological and political solution to the problem of suffering. If we had good leaders, there would be no suffering. We could give everyone drugs. We could live in the Matrix forever and not worry about outside the Matrix. Because life is not worthwhile, we can only cure suffering by ending all clinging and by seeing that life is not worthwhile. A problem as serious as the Buddha saw could not be suffering alone but had to be something on the order of "life is not worthwhile".

From Italy to India, some-people-who-accepted-that-life-seems-not-worthwhile-yet-also-wanted-to-make-life-worthwhile resolved the problem in similar ways. The West had Platonism, Neo-Platonism, Stoicism, some Cynics, Gnosticism, and all their influence on Christianity. The East had Mahayana first and then Hinduism. All do away with the problem by placing it within a big system in which people think they are miserable but really everyone would be happy if he-she saw his-her place in the big system. Some holy people are happy because they do see their part. You might disappear as one distinct individual but you become part of the mystic stuff that manifests itself all over in other ways.

Look at this result the other way around. Because they are so similar, these solutions imply a common problem, a problem that they did not solve but avoided as best they could. The problem is not suffering but deeper. The common solution implies a common problem, that life is not worthwhile. My "take" does

not have to mean the Buddha faced the same problem, but I think so. My dislike of these solutions does not mean they are wrong but I think that as well. They are wrong partly because they were not as honest as the Buddha's solution. He faced a version of the problem head-on and he did not try to sugar-coat the problem or the solution.

The fact that these wrong ideologies were driven by the same problem to the same bad solutions does not mean the problem is real, that life is not worthwhile after all. I think life is worthwhile but for different reasons.

Suppose life is worthwhile but beset by suffering. Then the insights of the Buddha and his methods still have great use. Suppose life is worthwhile but not beset by suffering. Life still has a lot of suffering, even for people who seem to have it all. As long as some honest people suffer, as long as we hurt the planet, then everyone suffers whether he-she knows it or not. Again, the insights of the Buddha and his methods still have great use. You might not use his insights and methods to awaken in the Buddhist sense in this lifetime but most Buddhists don't expect that. If you use his insights and methods to be a better person and make a better world, that result is just alright with me.

(B) BUDDHIST AIDS.

Zen saying: If you see the Buddha on the road, kill him. Here "the Buddha" refers to Aids.

Buddhist Aids.

This section lists Buddhism Aids. It helps to read the chapter in this book on the Self with its explanations of "picking apart" and "bolstering". Most ideas here were current at the time of the Buddha, but he came up with some on his own, and he so much shaped previous ideas that the ideas became his own. Some ideas were developed in the few hundred years after the Buddha. I starred ideas that likely came directly from the Buddha. Nearly all these aids are more important in Mahayana than Theravada but it is best to list them here. I provide a little annotation. Do not memorize.

-Big Awakening. Buddhists expect awakening to be mind-shattering, world shattering, life changing, and a total change from everything even as it preserves the appearance of normal life or even as it preserves normal life. Because awakening is such a Big Thing, Buddhists both greatly anticipate and fear it. Buddhist Awakening is somewhat like Christian Salvation. In standard Christianity, you can't have a little salvation, you can't rely on God to take care of you as much as you deserve and as much as you are able, you are either fully saved to amazing glory for all of eternity or you are damned. In both Christian and Buddhist cases, having such a huge goal is more stultifying than encouraging. With Big Awakening or Big Salvation hanging over our heads, we cannot live normal useful lives and rationally assess better and worse. Some Buddhists schools, mostly Zen, allow for: awakening in small ways, backslidings, and that partial awakenings can accumulate to bigger awakenings. But this view has not really caught on, and I don't do anything with it here.

-Morality. See above.

-Dharma. See the chapter in this book on common ideas. “Dharma” means how the universe works. Dharma is like the Western idea of natural law but includes morality as well. The Dharma was also called the “Law”. Effects such as striving, wanting, suffering, cause and effect, clinging, and dependent origination are in the idea of Dharma or Law. The fact that we can find release by letting go of striving and clinging is part of Dharma. Anybody who opposes the Law faces greater suffering and ultimate defeat. The best course is to go along with the Law, take your lumps, get through it, enjoy what you can, and let go. This is why I began the chapter with the quote from Bobby Fuller.

-Karma. Merit and demerit. Keeping a strict ledger of merit and demerit.

-Many lives.

*Suffering.

*Stickiness.

*Clinging.

*Letting Go.

*Dependent Origination. This idea is an immediate result of cause and effect; see below. Nothing comes into being on its own and persists entirely on its own. What a thing is, it is largely because of its relations to other things. We have to pay attention to what a thing is and to its relations. The Mom in your family has her own personality but she has also been shaped by the other people in the family, and she, in turn, shapes the other people in the family. We tend to overall value our own self, our importance, and the quality of our suffering and happiness. We overestimate how independent we are and how long we last. The idea of dependent origination helps put us in context. The strongest driver of dependent origination as it pertains to human life is human desire and clinging (attachment).

*Cause and Effect. Everything has causes. Everything influences a lot of other things. If you change the causes, you change the thing. Things only originate, persist, change, and go away, through causes and effects. Everything that originates dependently, that is, almost everything, has causes. People originate dependently and have causes; if you had a different father, you would not be who you are now. Suffering originates dependently and has causes. If you want to end suffering, change its causes; the Buddha tells you how. Whether awakening is subject to the laws of cause and effect, or is beyond cause and effect, was a controversy in Buddhism, into which I don't go. Whether awakening is the result of removing other causes, and so is not directly caused itself, I don't go. The importance of cause and effects inevitably causes issues with free will, intuition, and determinism, into which I don't go. These questions raged in Buddhism as they have in the West and in Hinduism. .

*Rationality and Logic. They are excellent tools, usually good. Use them.

*Not Self. The term for the doctrine of “not-self” is “anatman” or “an-atman” or “not (‘an’)” “self (‘atman’)”. The self is not one whole simple thing, not the logic machine that Mr. Spock seeks to emulate, not the enduring soul of Christians, Muslims, some Hindus, and some Mahayanists, and not the self of grand

emotions and appetites of Romanticism. The self is a composite of somewhat independent tendencies such as for sex, power, love, food, beauty, etc. The abilities for logic and rationality are one part of the self. Buddhists are proud of their idea of not self; Buddhists have been credited with thinking up the idea; Buddhists and non-Buddhists often consider it the one distinct contribution of Buddhism to world religious ideas, and they might be correct. Buddhists assert we cannot properly disvalue or value life if we do not clearly see that the self is really a not-self; we cannot stop desiring, stop clinging, and overcome suffering if we do not clearly see the self is really a not-self. Thus awakening and seeing the not-self amount to the same. This claim about the power of seeing the not-self might be a slight exaggeration. See the chapter on the self and see below in the parts on my assessment.

-The Unselfish Self.

*The Mind. The mind is a part of the self, and it is composite too. Buddha Mind as The Mind.

-Wisdom.

*Emptiness or “The Void”. Think of all the dog-like creatures: wolves, red wolves, coyotes, twenty kinds of foxes, dholes, jackals, and hundreds of breeds of dogs. What makes them all dog-like? There is nothing exact and concrete at the heart of the idea of “dogginess”. There is no one single ideal dog after which all the other dog-like things are patterned; and we cannot think of all particular dog-like things as clear-cut variations on one single pattern. The idea of “dogginess” is empty at the center. Yet the fact that the idea of “dog-like” is empty at the center is what allows us to hold together various related-but-not-exactly-the-same things. Emptiness is what allows the self and the mind to cohere and to work. All specific forms (things) come out of emptiness; all forms are empty at their heart. But that is what allows them to work.

-Cleaning the mind of “defilements”, confusion, and errors. The mind becomes a simple mechanism to assess what the senses bring to it.

-In some versions, the mind becomes “like a baby”; it simply reflects; it responds naturally and rapidly. These versions became important in martial arts.

-All reality is somewhat illusory. All reality is a mixture of being and becoming. All reality is a mixture of form and emptiness. All forms (things) are both real and not real; emptiness is both real and not real.

-Everything is connected to everything else. Whether connected things form a system is contended.

*Meditation techniques that focus on the above Buddhist aids.

*Emphasize practice rather than dogma. Emphasize practice rather than Buddhist aids.

*Expedient Means. Use ideas and examples that suit the student and the situation. Do not try to force ideas on people who are not yet ready for them or who cannot understand them at all. A useful half-truth is better than a hurtful three-quarters truth.

*All dogmas are misleading. All dogmas are, at best, only means to ends.

-The Dharma body of the Buddha.

-Buddha nature.

-No nature (no essence).

-Buddhist psychologies.

-Mind only.

-Non-differentiation, in particular non-duality. See chapter on Taoism. To understand and to appreciate, we divide the world into mutually-exclusive contrasts such as "American" versus "non-American", "boy" or "girl", and "animal" or "plant". Usually it is easiest to divide into two although we can divide into three or more; I do not explain the more complicated kinds of dividing up. After we divide, then we cling to one item in the contrast. We like "Westerns" rather than "chick flicks". To divide up the world so as to get along for a while is not necessarily bad; but it easily leads to clinging, and clinging is so bad, that we need to beware of dividing. Minimize it or stop it if we can. So we can appreciate beauty, we need to contrast beauty with ugliness. To appreciate goodness, we need to contrast it with badness. We make things artificially ugly or bad so we can accentuate the beauty and goodness in other things, and, in so doing, distort the world. "Nature people" hate the city so they can love nature all the more; and vice versa. When pushed, things tend to become other than they originally were, and can become their opposites. Too much love smothers. Much good can reside in ugliness. Beauty can hide evil. Effusive care hides bitter anger. Anger at others arises out of our own fear. Pursuit of heaven is a kind of hell. Fear of hell leads to zealotry and to hell. It is better not to stress one item, and, to avoid stressing one item, it is better not to differentiate very much to begin with. Non-differentiation came to be one of the deepest Buddhist aids, a touchstone for true and false doctrine.

Ironically, stressing non-differentiation is a form of differentiation.

-The unity of particular and general without subsuming either the particular or general. You cannot use particular to explain away (pick apart) general, and vice versa. You cannot use general to reify (bolster) itself, or use particular to reify itself.

You should think hard about compatibility of the idea of non-differentiation with the command for morality. This apparent conflict played a big role in later Mahayana Buddhism and Zen.

-The "storehouse consciousness" from which originated everything and to which everything returns. It is both empty and completely full at once.

-Vast compassion. Compassion is good, and is not clinging, when it leads to specific acts within the ability of particular people, and to specific good institutions. Compassion is an error when it does not lead to specific acts and to institutions but only to intentions that are not acted upon and to confusion about the depth on a person's real compassion.

-Nirvana or Enlightenment. It might seem odd to list Nirvana as a mere Buddhist aid when it seems to be the entire goal, but it is not odd. The idea of Nirvana can become a stepping stone, and so a crutch and hindrance. You do not use the idea of Nirvana to get to Nirvana. You just wake up.

-Mindfulness.

-Full simple being versus continual becoming. This aid is similar to “reality versus illusion”. It is similar to the distinction in Classical Greek thinking between being and becoming. The world of normal experience changes and is not reliable. It is hard to find something permanent and permanently fully good. Still, at the heart of all is simple full being that does not change and is fully satisfying. The changing incomplete imperfect world is only a misleading imitation of simple full being. We don’t usually experience simple full being unless we are a mystic or until we are enlightened. The difference between being and becoming is like the difference between our ideal of justice and the justice that we have to settle for in real courts; see any episode of the TV show “Law and Order”.

Until we see simple full being, becoming seems not worthwhile. After we see simple full being, whether becoming then is worthwhile varies according to personal experience and schools of Buddhism.

Some Buddhists conflate “becoming” with ordinary sleeping (un-enlightened) life and conflate full simple being with enlightenment. To see that life is not worthwhile is to see that life is becoming and becoming is not usually worthwhile; and to see that becoming is not usually worthwhile is to see that becoming is sleeping life and sleeping life is not worthwhile. To see these together naturally leads us to think there must be simple full being and to seek it. To see that life is not worthwhile leads us toward simple full being. Some Buddhists think un-enlightenment, staying asleep, is to live in becoming without seeing a clear glimpse of full simple being, and vice versa. Some Buddhists think enlightenment is seeing clearly full simple being, and vice versa. Being can be the same as “Buddha Mind” or “Mind Alone”. Somewhat ironically, simple full being can be the same as Nothingness (Void).

Buddhists who think in terms of being and becoming have to decide if full simple being is worthwhile, and have to decide if knowing full simple being makes becoming (ordinary un-awakened life) worthwhile.

In one version of this view, full simple being is worthwhile. Only becoming is not worthwhile, or more precisely, only mistakes about being and becoming make becoming (seem) not worthwhile.

For the Buddhists who think being (existence) is worthwhile, the idea that being is worthwhile mixes easily with the idea that a system is worthwhile even if some lives in it are not. This mix of “simple full being is worthwhile”, “enlightenment is seeing simple full being”, and “great dharma system” became important in Mahayana and Hinduism.

For some Buddhists who think being is worthwhile and being is in (is the same as) a worthwhile system, ordinary sleeping life is worthwhile even if we can’t usually see so. Ordinary sleeping life only seems not worthwhile until we see full simple being and the system.

In some versions of “being is worthwhile and is the same as a system”, there is no difference between being and becoming, enlightened and non-enlightened, the world after enlightenment and the world before enlightenment; it all depends on attitude and point of view; to see one is to see the other; and we can only see the one through the other. This idea combines readily with the value that Buddhism puts on daily life; see below. The idea that being and becoming are similar was the source for some wonderful ideas about reality and illusions, for which see Mahayana.

As with some philosophers and mystics in the West, Buddhists who take seriously being and becoming, in any version, spend their lives seeking simple full being in itself or as it presents itself in becoming. If they can see simple full being, they are enlightened; they can be enlightened only if they see simple full being. In effect, the search for simple full being (Mind) takes the place of the search for awakening.

The idea that being and becoming are closely related was the basis for some great literature and art. The Japanese call the world of becoming “the liquid world” because it continually changes, moves, and adapts like flowing water. The phrase “liquid world” also was a euphemism for areas in cities of brothels, drugs, drinking, gambling, and fighting. The Japanese attitude shows the ideas that crop up naturally in systems like Romanticism, Mahayana, and Hinduism. The famous Japanese woodcuts of the late 1700s and early 1800s often showed the liquid world, as with Utamaro, Hiroshige, and Hokusai. Looking at the pictures, it is easy to believe that the world of deep being and the world of becoming are indeed the same.

Even with its charm, the Buddhist aid of being and becoming is one of the most misleading and harmful. It can be useful but must be used with care. Once we begin thinking in terms of being and becoming, we find being and becoming in Buddhism whether they were there originally or not, see waking and sleeping in terms of them, and see worthwhile and not worthwhile in terms of them.

Mistakes Latent in Buddhist Aids.

(1) People use Buddhist aids to avoid the Buddhist plain truth that life is not worthwhile. People don't like this idea. They seek any way they can to get around it and to make life secretly worthwhile. What better way than to use important ideas from within the religion itself to undermine the religion? In case you think this is a fault of Buddhism alone, Christians use ideas like heaven, hell, salvation, justification, and grace to get around Jesus' simple teachings and to undermine Jesus.

(2) Buddhist aids are dogma. They have the same problem as any dogma: they mislead too often. They can be helpful and can be hurtful. All in all, for most people, I think they are hurtful. People get caught up in the supposed aid and they never get back to simple waking up. The supposed aid takes the place of simple waking up. People cling to the aid, and thus suffer. If you have to focus on anything then focus on suffering and on whether life is worthwhile; don't focus on an aid. Many Buddhist texts, written by brilliant people, are marred because they go on about “emptiness” and “no self”; even Zen masters do this. The Buddha explicitly did not do this.

(3) In particular: People think: (A) “If only I could understand ‘emptiness’ fully, then I would wake up”. (B) “I cannot possibly wake up until I have mastered ‘emptiness’”. (A and B) “If I could only be morally perfect for a whole lifetime, I could wake up. I can only wake up if I am morally perfect for a whole lifetime”. (C) “If only I could master meditation, I would wake up”. These ways are wrong. The idea that you have to

master an aid to wake up is like the Christian idea that you have to be justified to go to heaven. The idea that you will wake up if you totally know a Buddhist aid is like the idea that God must take you into heaven – you can compel God – if you worship strongly enough. To abuse an aid puts the aid in place of waking up and clings to the aid. The Buddha did not awaken by mastering the idea of emptiness first; after the Buddha awakened, he did not worry much about the ideas of awakening, no-self, emptiness, Mind, etc. If you master non-differentiation, you do not automatically wake up; if you do not master it, you are not held back from waking up; if you wake up, you do not necessarily also master non-differentiation.

You don't have to be perfect to face God. Likewise, you don't have to be perfect to wake up. Just as I offer no ideas about how good you have to be to face God comfortably, so I offer no ideas on what you have to "achieve" to wake up for sure. Both ways of thinking are wrong. As with following Jesus, in Buddhism, do what you would do anyway and then see how far that takes you. You can wake up without being perfect and without even knowing about "emptiness", "cause-and-effect" or "no self". This "general access to waking up" is a part of the Middle Path. This approach of "perfection not needed" reappears in good Zen too.

(4) Buddhist aids are hard to understand. They are harder to understand than the ideas of this chapter, and they are harder to understand than the simple idea that life is not worthwhile. Only a few religious near-geniuses can understand even some of these ideas and only a true genius can get them all. This situation is not what the Buddha wanted. The Buddha did not wake up by first mastering hard overly-intellectualized ideas. Buddhism should use a clear simple set of ideas and practices that most people can follow with reasonable chance of reasonable success. The Buddhist aids usually make it worse for most people and make people feel they cannot succeed.

(5) Buddhist aides inevitably reintroduce metaphysics and mysticism beyond what the Buddha needed. It is one thing to say "life is sticky" and another to say "life is sticky because Dharma planned it that way and wants us to get involved and committed" or to say "life is sticky because that helps us do our Dharma duty in the great joyous system". It is one thing to say "life is not worthwhile" and another to say "life's a delusory bitch". In Mahayana, thinkers often assumed people were part of a system, and the system was unborn and undying. We are saved (awakened) when we realize we are part of this great unborn undying system. The Buddha never said this, and never needed to say it.

(6) People need a certain amount of magic and magicians, such as the Mahayana bodhisattva, Hindu avatar, or Christian view of Jesus as embodied cosmic principles. Buddhist aids are the Buddhist version of magic. You can try to master the aids as an adept Hindu masters spiritual force or an adept Christian masters sacraments and masters having a personal relation with Jesus. In Buddhism, magic puts you to sleep. Magic is the enemy of waking up. So, focusing on aids prevents you from waking up by letting you make a world of magic. I don't know of a formula that lets us satisfy our need for magic without also turning magic into our enemy and without turning Buddhist aids into magic. You have to learn to do this by feel, and likely success in this endeavor is a good illustration of the Middle Path.

(7) Buddhist aids often are clinging. As much as some people cling to Heaven, some Buddhists cling to meditation or ideas of Mind, cause and effect, and dependent origination. Just as you have to be willing to let go of the idea of Heaven, so also you have to let go of meditating, Mind, etc. This does not mean you can't meditate at all; it means you have to learn how to meditate without clinging to it. You have to

think about Mind without clinging to the idea of Mind. If you can't do that, then you are just as caught as if you clung to Power as a way to make life worthwhile. You are better off not meditating and not using your mind to think about Mind.

(8) People use Buddhist aids to make their own religion that is not Buddhism, such as religions of Great Emptiness, Great Mind, Mindfulness, Unselfish Persons, or Mahayana, as a way to avoid the idea that life is not worthwhile and as a way indirectly to make life worthwhile. Some variations are good such as the modern religion of mindfulness or the contributions of some Buddhism to martial arts. Some are not good such self-indulgence as a way to break past clinging. Most variations are intellectual elaborations to keep smart people engaged. Alternative religions are such a big part of the story that they should be studied in themselves, and often writers on Buddhism make them the major subject rather the plain Buddhism that I present here. That is what you get when you read about Buddhism. But writing about them and critiquing them is outside the scope of this chapter.

(9) These points are a variation on (1) and (8). Most writing about Buddhism is not simple description of its main ideas but elaborate explication of Buddhist Aids. I find that writing hard to read and not helpful unless I am in the mood for hair-splitting metaphysics. Most writers use explication of Buddhist Aids as a way to make points about their view, and to fight against other writers who previously did the same thing. They do this even when they do not say they do this. Too often, they struggle to put enough spin on an Aid so they can make life seem worthwhile although the Buddha clearly said life is beset by suffering. They make suffering mean what they want it to mean so they can overcome suffering and still get along in this world. I think they do this so they can appeal to people who want to succeed in this world but happen to be reading their version of Buddhism. Hopefully, when I did this, at least I was honest that I was doing this. Buddhist Aids get in the way of clear explanation.

(9 continued) If you want to know what the Buddha really said but instead find yourself reading whether dependent origination applies to all things and perceptions or only to those begun in attachment, then you should switch your reading for a while. Don't feel guilty about not reading that stuff anymore. You can always go back to it after you personally think you sense what the Buddha really meant. Don't feel you have to agree with the view of a writer because you happen to be reading his-her explication of cause-and-effect. I wish I could suggest readings that explain what the Buddha really meant without mumbo jumbo but I can't. So you do have to wade through some material on Buddhist Aids so that you can make up your own mind.

The Buddha did not expect most people to awaken in this lifetime, so it is harsh criticism of Buddhist Aids to say most people can't use them to awaken right away. Even so, Buddhist Aids are too hard and too misleading. Besides, in my view, a religion should offer ideas that most people can use in this lifetime to achieve fair success; so, Buddhist Aids are not useful overall. They are like Christian theology and much of Christian dogma.

Value of Buddhist Aids.

The aids can be fun, and even can be useful for some people. Really smart people need ideas that they can chew on. Most people need ideas to keep the mind busy so the mind eventually gets quiet enough to think well. The ideas don't have to be false and don't have to be merely "doggy treats" with no nutrition.

The ideas can be real ideas with real substance. I like the idea of the Middle Path; almost all Buddhists like it; and it shows up in other good thinking as, for example, in Aristotle. Aids often help people practice the Middle Path. Both simple being and simple non-being are mistakes, and, if you can find the middle path between them, you have advanced. Both simple differentiation and simple non-differentiation are false, and, if you can find the middle path between them, you have advanced. It can help you sort things out to think about the relation of empty to partially full to fully full. Think of: an electric dishwasher; books on the shelves of a library; and the numbers not used in street addresses. How does Buddha Mind differ from the mind that I think is behind it all, that is, God? Difficult ideas can be true aids to advancement even if they cannot guarantee success. Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim theologies can help. (Jews do have some excellent theology but they don't seem to get hung up on it enough to include here.) But the ideas are not needed to awaken, and Buddhist aids should not serve as baited hooks. Even for smart people, they become that too often.

(C) SELF AND NON-SELF (AN-ATMAN).

More on the Self and the Non-Self.

I doubt Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha stressed ideas of the non-self as much as they are stressed in modern Buddhism but here is not the place to sort out the issue, so I write as if modern Buddhist ideas of the non-self are intrinsic to Buddhism.

(A) Ideal strong self: A common idea of the self is a single whole integrated soul that endures forever either in heaven or hell, or as part of a great Dharma system. Christians, Muslims, some Jews, and a lot of people of no particular religion hold to the first version while most Mahayanists and Hindus hold to the second version.

(B) Nil self or "really weak" self: The opposite idea is that the self is merely a bunch of stuff with some similarity but no real coherence like a pile of old leaves in autumn. When the wind blows, when hardship arises or we die, the self goes away like old leaves.

(C) A variation on (B) is that the self is merely good and bad feelings, especially good feelings. As long as the good feelings endure, the self endures. When the good feelings stop, then the self stops. When the good feelings stop and the self stops, it does not matter because there is no self around to feel the loss. So, while they yet live, selves might as well cultivate what joys they can and they need not worry about much else. This view of the self can be seen as intermediate between the strong self and nil self but here really should be seen as a variation of the nil self.

(D) In the Brahmin religion at the time of the Buddha, people were interested in a version of salvation just as Christians and Muslims now are interested in salvation. They held to a version of the strong self just as most people always do. To get saved, people had to depend on the Brahmins. People didn't like that. The Buddha said people didn't need Brahmins or ritual. People can know issues, make progress, even awaken, or get saved, by themselves. Ultimately, you are the only way to make spiritual progress for yourself. You are the only rock upon which your progress is built. To talk like this is to strengthen the idea of the self. It is an idea of the self like the Western idea of the person. People liked the integrity of self, independence, self-reliance, and responsibility that the Buddha taught. That was one big reason

Buddhism succeeded. Self-reliance and responsibility are big factors in Buddhist charm when Buddhists really live them.

(E) It seems that, for people to have desires and for at least some of the desires to be legitimate, we also have to be firm selves. If we want to love a spouse, love children, love our neighbors, and love God, it seems to make sense if we have a strong soul-self. It makes more sense if the self is eternal. I don't go into why it makes more sense. We want to tie good desires to a strong self, and vice versa? What about bad desires such as to molest children or commit terrorism? We want to attach good desires to a good eternal soul-self and to separate bad desires from any kind of eternal soul-self, or, at least, to make sure the bad soul-selves are not lumped in with the good soul-selves.

(F) The Buddha wanted people to let go of desire, clinging, striving, and competition so they could also overcome suffering. This desire of the Buddha implies a self that is not an eternal soul, is less than an eternal soul.

(G) To wish to awaken (cool down) and to work to awaken, something needs to wish and strive. Some self has to be the source of wishing and working. To let go of desire, clinging, striving, and competing, and to overcome suffering, it seems some self has to be doing this. Something has to let go of all that. Something has to awaken or there is no awakening, and Buddhism is an illusion.

(H) To see that life is not worthwhile requires a self to see and to assess worthwhile and not worthwhile. After (when) the self sees that life is not worthwhile, still the self needs to value other selves, morality, and acting well. Morality does not go away with awakening. To retain morality, the self has to remain at least somewhat a self.

(I) An eternal soul-self with intrinsic necessary desires cannot simply vanish at death after that kind of self has awakened. That kind of self might awaken but not in a Buddhist way. That self might transform after death but cannot simply go away completely. To go away completely after awakening and death, the self cannot be a soul-self of the Upanishad-Hindu-Dharma kind.

Philosophy, religion, and the human imagination provide a host of variations on these themes but there is no point listing them here.

The Buddha wanted a self that was strong enough to seek to awaken and to work on awakening but not so strong that desire, clinging, striving, and competing were intrinsic, necessary, and eternal. The Buddha wanted a self that could lose desire, clinging, striving, competing and a lot of individuating traits such as a love for music. The Buddha wanted a self that could separate good inclinations from bad inclinations but not get hung up on holding to either. The Buddha wanted a self that could last through thousands of reincarnations as long as it still clung but would go away completely after it had awakened. The Buddha needed something more than a pile of leaves and less than an eternal soul-self of the kind used by Christians, Muslims, Mahayanists, and Hindus.

The Buddha thought that he could get people to let go of desire, clinging, striving, and competition if he could get people to see there was no eternal soul-self, thus no basis for desire etc., and no long-term benefit from desire etc. It is like getting people to let go of the need to gamble if you can get them to see

that all they are playing for is plastic chips and that the kind of self they are can't eat plastic chips, trade them for anything useful, or get any benefit from them. The kind of self that you are does not support the sport of gambling so you might as well not gamble.

The Buddha developed that idea of the self in his doctrine of "anatman" (an-atman). The Buddha found a compromise self that is coherent enough but not too much. The doctrine that developed is pretty good. It is fairly logically consistent and it meets the needs of Buddhism without going too far either way. Whether it is entirely true or not true cannot be argued here. It is worth reading more to see what you can make of it. I suggest further readings on this topic at the back of this book.

It is more accurate to say that later Buddhists developed the idea, based on original inspiration from the Buddha. It is more accurate to say Buddhists did not so much find a specific kind of self as they made a space to imagine the right self. They did this by negating their opponents on both the side of the firm self and the side of the soft self. What is left unspecified in the center is the useful Buddhist "anatman". Many theologians and philosophers use the technique of creating an appealing unspecified space by negating opponents. This technique is related to a "hole in the center" that I described with "systems that eat the world" in the chapters on issues. Letting people imagine what they want, within limits, is a way to appeal to people but it also, again, opens the door to bad ideas and abuses.

The term "anatman", "an-atman", "no-self", or "not-self" is not accurate. It implies a weak self like the pile of leaves, and that is not what the Buddha and Buddhists were after. Buddhists used that term in contrast to the then-current Upanishad and later Hindu "atman", an eternal soul-like self that is part of the great Dharma system. The Buddha did not want that Upanishad-Hindu kind of self so Buddhists used a term that contrasts clearly with "atman". I think the choice of term is unfortunate.

To argue various versions of the self, Theravada Buddhists, Mahayana Buddhists, people who followed the Upanishads, Jains, and later Hindus all used picking apart and bolstering, both to support the selves that they promoted and to attack ideas of others. Without always seeing what they are doing, Christians and Muslims also use picking apart and bolstering to argue their ideas of an eternal soul-self. I cannot here show how various techniques were used in particular cases. That topic is difficult and often boring but fun to people who like logic and it can shed light on human psychology.

When the idea of the non-self spread in Buddhism, the idea turned into a Buddhist Aid as noted above. It became a strong idea in itself, like another strong self again. It became one of the most dangerous and abused of Aids, especially when combined with Emptiness. That Buddhists use the technique of negation on both ends, leaving an unspecified hole in the center, supports this confusion and abuse. This fault of bolstering the non-self is serious, and it deserves much more criticism than I can give. I think the Buddha would be dismayed by this development, and Buddhists should be wary of this path.

In any simple straightforward terms, you cannot have it both ways. On the one hand, Buddhists say that your self is adequate to all tasks and it is the only thing that is adequate to all tasks. It endures through karma and rebirth. It creates karma and endures the results of karma. It is you who realize that life is not worthwhile and see the other truths. It is you who practices meditation. It is you who sees all things and any thing. It is you who resists temptations of the world and of other religions. It is you who acts morally. It is you who feels pain and pleasure, gets old, and gets sick.

On the other hand, Buddhists say your self is not deeply real, to trust in the self is a delusion, and you need to get over yourself to make progress. When you see that the world is not worthwhile you have not seen anything amazing. Seeing that does not make your self cosmic and glorious. When you do see the truths of Buddhism, nothing special happens except you die out completely after this life. Good karma cannot build up to a determined threshold and so force you to awaken, it can only predispose. So there is no real thing that karma hangs on. Yes, you do good deeds, but so do cats and dogs, and they are not real in the way that you hope your self is real. Getting born again is not a blessing, it is a curse. You don't feel pain and pleasure; pain and pleasure, getting old, and getting sick, happen to the bundle that you think is yourself. So don't get big-headed about yourself.

Theravada, Mahayana, and Hinduism developed amazing rationales to have it both ways, which I don't go into here. I don't think they succeeded anymore than Christians worked out the Trinity, Salvation by Crucifixion, Justification, Grace, Faith, Works, or Free Will either. This confusion about the self added to the bad effects of the self as a Buddhist aid. If you are interested in this sort of thing, reading arguments about the self and non-self can provide insight into people, especially if you read with evolution in mind.

Trying to keep together ideas of a not-eternal soul-self, strong enough self, too weak self, and non-self confuses relations between self and society. The Buddhist idea of the non-self allows ideas like Hindu religion to coalesce and it allows society to dominate the self. Their idea of the self allows Buddhists to be selfish sometimes, and to flout society. How the balance works out depends on particular culture and society. Buddhists are opportunistic about which idea they stress.

I invite evolutionists to think about the idea of the self while keeping in mind this tension between ideas of the self and the relation between self and society. Evolutionists already do this in theories of the self and group, and theories of self and economy. Economics has a long tradition of this argument. Think of the evolutionary idea of the self as a kind of bundle when you read about Buddhist ideas of the self.

It might help to think of the Buddhist idea of the self in light of some literature. A Buddhist has to break down the incorrect strong view of the self. The self has to be broken down. Then the self can be rebuilt in a better way. This new self is not as strong in the same way as the wrong idealized unreal self but it is strong enough for what it needs, and, in some ways, because it is not a wrong strong self, it is stronger correct self than before. We all need our forty days in the wilderness. This is what happens in tragedies, stories about coming of age, stories about personal growth, and in some modern melodrama. In "King Lear", Lear falls to pieces before he finds a better self and better world. In "Moby Dick", while Captain Ahab dies before he can find a better self, his breakdown is a lesson to the crew, the crew break down too in their own ways, and so they find better selves. Odysseus in "The Odyssey" had to break down before he could give the gods their proper but limited due, come to see himself in true perspective, and come to accurately value his limited contributions rather than overvalue his cleverness. In the TV show "Burn Notice", Mike Westen breaks down partly several times, and in the end breaks down totally, before he can see what is really important and who is really important. In several Batman films, Bruce Wayne and-or the Batman has to break down before he can remake himself. The remade Batman is stronger in character than the original Batman even if weaker physically or even if he has his weaknesses exposed. The remade Batman can never be as strong as the idealized Superman but he can be strong enough.

To the extent that I understand the Buddhist literature, originally the Buddhist self was not enough on which to base Western ideas of law, responsibility, citizen, and state. Thinkers in Buddhist states have to give some thought on how to make the self strong enough to be a good citizen of a good democracy but not so strong as to violate the needs of Buddhism.

It is easy to argue that Asian states in which Buddhism or Hinduism prevail did not develop democracy, rule of law, education, science, and important Western-style institutions because the Buddhist-Hindu idea of the self could not serve as the basis for those institutions and, in fact, undermined those institutions. If a scholar wishes to argue this way then maybe I will read what he-she says. In the meantime, I suggest not thinking too hard along these lines. While religion can be important in guiding what people possibly can think or cannot think, in this case religion is not the deciding factor. Rather, culture is the deciding factor. Asian cultures did not have the needed personalities, ideas, attitudes, and institutions to develop Western-like institutions needed for successful democracy. Asian cultures promoted the picked-apart self of Buddhism and Hinduism after it had been picked apart because a vague idea of that picked-apart self sort-of went along with ideas that Asians already had from culture. The picked-apart self of Buddhism did not make the self of Asian cultures. It is more accurate to say that Asian cultures adopted the picked-apart self of Buddhism because it work for them. While some Asians understood the picked-apart self of Buddhism, the vast majority neither understood nor wanted to. That arcane topic was something priests thought about. The self for most Asians was more like the self of other cultures and more like the self of Hinduism in which the self participates in the Dharma system for a long time. Evidence for my view is that Asian cultures have changed, and now are developing the needed ideas of self, state, and education to support democracy even though their official religion(s) and official religious view of the self has not changed.

The selves of Mahayana and Hinduism are not as solid as the eternal soul-self of Christianity and Islam but stronger than the self of Buddhism. They are stronger because they tie the self to the great Dharma system. Life is worthwhile, and each particular life is worthwhile, in the context of the Dharma system, and only in that system. Each self is a “spark” of the system and participates in the system. Especially selves participate when they do their social-karmic duty in Hinduism. The system is worthwhile so each participant is worthwhile. If you do not participate in the system, then you cannot be worthwhile or feel worthwhile. This non-participation might be part of the problem with old-style Theravada Buddhism, and why Mahayana calls it “Lesser Vehicle”. Mahayana and Hinduism try to use the right kinds, and right amounts, of picking apart and bolstering to support this kind of self and this kind of system. I do not find their arguments at all convincing, not the picking apart, bolstering, nor context of the Dharma system.

My Idea of the Self and the Buddhist Idea of the Self.

My idea of the self has these bases: (1) God assesses us when we die. We need not be eternal. God made us and God can do with us as he wishes including ending us forever. Most people end after this life. I think, over the long run, everybody ends permanently. It might be bad for a human to live forever. (2) The self of evolutionary theory is a mix of distinct mechanisms and several levels of integration. The self of evolutionary theory is together enough to think of it as a self but not as together as the soul-self of Christian, Muslim, Mahayana, and Hindu lore. (3) We need a self that is strong enough to serve as the basis for legal, social, moral, and personal responsibility, and to be a foundation of democracy. I am quite sure the self of idea (1) and idea (2) meets these needs.

In my idea of the self, we can learn to let go of a lot of desire, striving, clinging, and competition but not all of it. We can learn to let go of the idea that life is worthwhile but only after much effort; and, besides, we need not learn to let go of the idea if, in fact, life is worthwhile. We can learn to be better but we cannot learn to be perfect either morally or in our ability to think. We can learn to think more adeptly but we cannot learn to think perfectly without any mental “defilements”. We can do well enough.

This brief description should get across both similarities and differences. Going into more detail here is not possible because I would have to refer to particular passages in particular texts.

The Unselfish Intermediate Self.

I first met the idea of the Buddhist unselfish self in the commentary by Santikaro Bhikku (Monk Santikaro) on the writing of his teacher Buddhadasa Bhikku (Thai: Phutathaat), who was a wonderful Buddhist and teacher. Selfishness is the source of confusion about the world, how it works, seeking, clinging, badness, and suffering. I mention the unselfish self because it might figure in future “theology” relating Buddhism to modern science, other religions, democracy, and conservation. The idea is worth watching. I do not know if Santikaro further developed the idea beyond what I have read of him so far, and if others picked up the thread properly. This idea of the unselfish self as the proper self has roots in other ideas of the proper self but I did not research the topic and do not comment further here.

The bolstered self is the selfish self. The selfish self bolsters the idea of its own selfness so that it can be selfish. Only a self that thought too much of him-herself can be selfish for long. If we can learn not to be selfish, then we can learn we are not as grandiose a self as we had thought. Then we can learn how the world works, stop seeking and clinging as much, be mindful of others, and stop hurting others. If we learnt that our selves are not the solid unified strong bolstered selves that we thought, then we are likely to be much less selfish. Santikaro figuratively likens the selfish self to Satan. The original sin of Satan was selfish pride, so the similarity is not far off.

My comments: An unselfish self is still a self but not as much as Mahayana, Hindu, Christian, or Muslim selves. The unselfish self is neither too picked apart nor too bolstered. As such, it is an intermediate self. An intermediate self is a companion to the Middle Way. It is the self version of the Middle Way.

I don't know what kind of behavior would be expected of an unselfish self other than that it would not be greedy, sexually perverted, lust for power, etc. I presume an unselfish self would be honest and would be interested in genuinely helping people. I don't know if an unselfish self would follow the Golden Rule and “applies equally” but it is not hard to make that alignment. I don't know if an unselfish self would work hard to make the world better.

I don't know how the unselfish self lines up with the evolved self. Non-biologists have the wrong idea that the evolved self must be selfish, perhaps bolstered by the title of the book “The Selfish Gene” by Richard Dawkins (a book that does not assert there are genes for selfishness and does not assert that the selfish person is the naturally evolved person or the modal person - read it). Even in natural selection and the competition that is part of natural selection, people can be too selfish and so can thwart their own long term self-interest. An adept competitor in the arena of natural selection takes account of other people

and gets along with them as much as possible. Ask gangsters and police in major cities. So the evolved self is somewhat unselfish and he-she is in the middle between selfish and altruistic. Still, the evolved self is self-interested in a way firmer than what I think Santikaro had in mind. Any reproducing self that was not firmly self-interested would leave fewer genes. Likely there is a gap between a naturally evolved self and the unselfish intermediate self of Santikaro. Still, the comparison is fun.

It is also not clear how the unselfish self could serve as the basis for a real society. This is a problem not only with Santikaro's idea but for any religion, moral secularists, and moral atheists. An unselfish self could serve as the basis for society only if nearly all people were unselfish, and that will not happen. (If it could happen, this discussion would not be needed.) I do not mean we need people to turn into nearly perfect selves or angels but merely unselfish selves. Anybody wishing to promote the middle unselfish self as the basis of society has to relate the unselfish self to the naturally evolved self and has to tell us how to get to the unselfish self from the naturally evolved self. I leave that topic alone here.

Logical Twist on Using the Weakened Self to Let Go.

The Buddha argued a weaker version of the self so as to get people to let go of desire, clinging, striving, and competition, and thus end suffering. I understand this logic. This logic might work with the idealized beings of religious imagination but likely it would not work with real evolved beings and it might not work with idealized beings either. The movie "Amadeus" is factually flawed but it does make the point that one ideal (real artistic beauty) need not go with another (high-minded or graceful) even when we think they should go together. There is no reason why, once a self does not feel like an ideal eternal soul-self, that he-she should stop desire, clinging, and striving, or feel less suffering.

In a naturally evolved self, there is no reason why a shift from feeling-like-an-eternal-soul-self to not-feeling-like-an-eternal-soul-self should end desire, clinging, striving, and suffering; and there are good reasons why natural selection would make sure it did not.

Even in ideal selves of religious discourse, if a person stops feeling like an ideal eternal soul-self, there is no necessary reason that he-she should also stop feeling desire or should stop clinging to desire. Not-feeling-like-an-eternal-soul-self does not necessarily end any original feeling, end clinging to the feeling, or end clinging to the object of the feeling.

Confusion over this topic is like the confusion that people had over the idea of cause-and-effect before David Hume pointed out that one does not magically follow from the other.

Just because I am not an ideal eternal soul-self does not mean that my desires etc, and the satisfaction that I get from them, are any less real and satisfying, and does not mean I should give them up. One does not follow from the other. My desires etc. go on, and might have value, even if they are not part of an ideal eternal soul-self and even if they are part of a weaker soul-self. I personally do not feel like a necessarily eternal soul-self (I let God decide) yet I have not given up desire, clinging, and striving, and I have not reduced my suffering greatly as a result (it helps but does not change the world). I assume animals are less ideally integrated than people and do not feel like ideal eternal soul-selves but it makes no sense to talk a panda out of eating bamboo or a lion out of killing a gazelle. When I taste strawberries, I taste strawberries, whether I am an eternal soul-self of Christians, transient modest self of Buddhists, or

a talking ape. Tasting strawberries might be a good thing or it might be a bad thing. Whether it is good or bad does not depend on how integrated I am. I might not need the Buddhist idea of the self to make it a good thing as, for example, by learning to let go of clinging to the taste of strawberries and simply enjoy the taste of strawberries now. I might let go of clinging to the taste of strawberries as a result of seeing myself in Buddhist terms or as a result of seeing myself in other terms.

When people first hear the Buddhist argument, they can temporarily feel reduced desire, clinging, striving, and suffering. I think that is a natural reaction but here I don't go into why. Still, as evolved natural beings, for most of us, the reduction does not endure because nature made sure it would not. Buddhists need to work out how their argument applies not to idealized selves but to real evolved selves (the idea that not feeling like an ideal eternal soul-self reduces desire, striving, clinging, and suffering). Likely the Buddhist argument it does not apply to real evolved selves enough to serve as the basis for overcoming suffering in the Buddhist manner.

The Buddhist vision of the self is better than the Christian-Muslim or Mahayana-Hindu visions. Studying the Buddhist vision is worthwhile. But that does not mean you have to believe all of it, and does not mean you have to believe it so as to learn to think better and to better manage your suffering. You can use the Buddhist idea of the self to learn to think better and manage suffering better without adopting it entirely. You can learn to think better and to manage suffering better even without the Buddhist idea of the self. You can adopt the Buddhist idea of the self and still have trouble with desire, clinging, etc. You can use whatever parts of the Buddhist idea that you need for your own idea of a self.

To weaken bad desires, or abuse of good desires, Christians do not weaken the eternal soul-self (though they do blather on about dependence on God). Instead, they use moral arguments and arguments about heaven and hell. In the long run, I doubt moral arguments work better than Buddhist weakening of the self unless moral arguments are well supported by reference to ecology, society, etc.

(A case can be made for the Buddhist idea that "seeing we are not ideal eternal soul-self" automatically does reduce our desire and clinging, but only with a companion Buddhist idea of cause and effect. Like Thomist-based Christian theology, Buddhist theology does all fit together into one whole. This debate is much too technical for here, and I don't accept the conclusion anyway.)

24 Mahayana

The introduction to Mahayana is long. To skip directly to points, read the starred (*) material first then go to “Reminders about Mysticism etc.” below. I request that you read the entire introduction.

*Mahayana is the dominant form of Buddhism now. “Mahayana” means “big vehicle” as in “big ox cart”. Mahayanists call Theravada “Hinayana”, “small vehicle”, as in “small goat cart”. The comparison intends to denigrate Theravada and to assert Mahayana is better. Theravada rejects the term “Hinayana” and the idea that Theravada is less. Mahayana might have developed as early as 300 BCE (BC), or two hundred years after the Buddha, but more likely later. “Zen” is a movement within Mahayana, from around 500 CE (AD) in China, the subject of a later chapter. Mahayana is to Theravada somewhat as Romanticism is to the Enlightenment, or Christianity is to the simple original teachings of Jesus. A “sutra” is a Buddhist text, usually holy, like a chapter in the Tanakh, New Testament, or Koran. The term “Dharma” refers to how the world works or to useful teaching about how the world works. Nearly all that I say about Mahayana also applies to Hinduism and to other “systems that eat the world”. Usually I do not point that out but I do when the item is especially relevant.

*Mahayana combines:

(1) The traditional teachings of the Buddha about suffering and how to avoid it. For me, the teachings include: life is not worthwhile, each life is not worthwhile, there is no great system that is worthwhile, participation in a great system does not make the self eternal and ideally soul-like, and both monks and lay people should be careful about their dealings with the sticky world.

(2) A strong desire to see life and the world as worthwhile

(3) A strong desire to see each life as worthwhile and potentially successful.

(4) Belief in a system that is overall worthwhile and joyous even if particular lives do not seem worthwhile and joyous now. This system is a clear case of a “system that eats the world”.

(5) Common ideas of mysticism such as individual union with a great system.

(6) The bodhisattva, a mediator savior between humans and the great joyous system. The bodhisattva pledges not to go to full enlightenment until he-she brings all sentient beings to full enlightenment. There are many bodhisattvas in the big system.

(7) A profusion of sacred texts (sutras) and stories. These are often beautiful.

(8) Contradictions, such as between “this life is not worthwhile” but “this life is successful”.

(9) Confusing doctrine that tries to make sense of all this. The confusing doctrine uses mystical motifs to combine the above points, especially to combine traditional ideas of the Buddha with the idea that each particular life can be successful.

*Mahayana asserts it is the true teaching of the Buddha. Theravada is simplistic superficial ideology for people of limited capacity. The Buddha gave different teachings, at different levels, to different people, according to ability and situation, a practice called “expedient means”. (1) Public teachings were not deep. The Buddha gave (2) deeper teachings orally in private to advanced students. (2A) Some oral “inner teachings” can be written down but not all. (2B) Some inner ideas cannot be written down; they can be given orally only. (3) The Buddha gave the deepest teachings non-verbally through gestures or in a “Vulcan mind meld”; these teachings cannot be spoken, let alone written down. Monks with the proper deep feeling developed ways (4) for direct non-verbal transfer of true Dharma. A smart lay person could learn from another enlightened person, monk or lay person, or could find truth for himself-herself without needing a teacher. Monks who understood only the simplistic public teachings (1) wrote down versions for each other and lay people. Those monks and lay people needed structure, as evident in writings. Their writings were the basis for Theravada. Theravada is so shallow that it stops seekers from finding the true spirit of the Buddha’s teachings and so subverts the Buddha.

In contrast, Theravada feels its writings preserved the true simple clear teachings of the Buddha and the true simple meditation that leads to awakening. Mahayana is a fantastic elaborate unclear self-serving deviation from true Buddhism.

By about seven hundred years after the Buddha (200 CE), Mahayana had overcome Theravada in India. Theravada disappeared from India. It had already moved to Sri Lanka (Ceylon), Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, where it persisted to modern times. Theravada was like core American blues of the 1920s while Mahayana was like jazz, R-and-B, rock-n-roll, and hip-hop combined. Blues was great, and it bore great children, but was not congenial to mainstream American culture and most of human nature. When core blues had done its work, it shrunk under the shade of the larger trees it had grown. R-and-B, R-and-R, and H-H lived on as much larger institutions and for much longer.

Mahayana didn’t last in India. Mahayana was closer to Indian culture than Theravada, and suited human nature better; but, by the time Mahayana arose, India already was developing Hinduism, which is even closer to Indian culture and serves human nature at least as well. Mahayana was a temporary revival inside Buddhism of one version of dominant Indian culture, a version which was taken over by an even more mainstream revival in Hinduism. By about 500 CE, all but a few islands of Buddhism had vanished from India, its home. Mahayana was to Hinduism like Jazz was to American pop music: it came from the same tradition, was glamorous and beguiling, had its own character, was different enough to be fun, had variety, referred back to the main tradition of pop more than did blues, made a lasting mark, but was not so different as to keep from being absorbed back into the mainstream when its time was over.

Mahayana veered from Buddhism as I think of Buddhism. Mahayana tried to have the cake of skepticism about this life while eating the cake of worthwhile successful life too. Mahayana covered the cake with fantasy, mysticism, and spiritual glitter. Mahayana tried to combine seemingly incompatible ideas such as: life is suffering but to realize that life is suffering is great joy; everybody is already a Buddha but does not know it; already we all are enlightened yet we still have to try hard to awaken; we all are saved yet we

are in danger of hell; and you can have wealth and power while avoiding stickiness. Mahayana used the vigor of young Buddhism to fuel a vision in which power infuses smart people, soldiers, merchants, and lords. Smart metaphysicians recast non-mystical non-metaphysical Buddhist ideas, to make them serve the new mystical vision, by putting them in a cosmic-metaphysical system that is a pyramid scheme and “eats the world”. The mythical-metaphysical system was not true to original Buddhism. Along the way, Mahayana had some great ideas and wrote some great stories.

Despite declaring that true teachings should not be bandied about in public, and truest teachings cannot even be spoken, Mahayanists wrote a lot, including both highly technical treatises and charming dramas. Mahayanists claim for their technical writing and stories holy status equal to any writing in Theravada. In Mahayana, although ultimate truth cannot be spoken, writing is justified because Mahayana writing helps you get to where you can take the last leap of intuition on your own. This process of taking you along the path is where some of the great ideas of Mahayana come out.

Although Hinduism replaced Mahayana in India, Mahayana remained the dominant major religion in Tibet and Nepal, and Mahayana moved to China, Mongolia, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. East Asian cultures put their “spin” on Mahayana. Mahayana there is like an Asian version of Hinduism. Some new ideas and truths arose due to the East Asian spin, mostly in Zen. Zen stressed direct non-verbal transmission. My ideas about Mahayana have been influenced by Zen, maybe too much.

Regardless of differences in theory, most Mahayana monks live like Theravada monks, in monasteries, reading, chanting, teaching, meditating, and trying to figure out Buddhist aids. Most people could not tell the difference between the monks. Mahayana monks have similar ideas about suffering, illusion, clinging, morality, Dharma, karma, non-duality, self, Middle Path, rebirth, meditation, Emptiness, and Mind as do Theravada monks, but they get the ideas from different sutras. Lay people in Theravada and Mahayana do good deeds so they can be successful. In Mahayana, lay people might devote themselves to a bodhisattva so they and their families can be reborn into paradise much as Christians devote themselves to Jesus, Mary, or a saint so they and their families can go to heaven.

All major religions distinguish between what the “unwashed masses” believe versus true doctrines. It is easy to satirize any religion if we describe only the mass version. I try to avoid that, and to stick to the best ideas. Mahayana and Hinduism pose a problem because mass religion and official dogma are similar. Mahayana and Hinduism offer sublime versions of the same stances that appeal to masses. Mahayana and Hindu ideas aid mass practice even as they rise above it. I describe what an educated person or educated monk might believe.

Mahayana generated amazing logical-philosophical sutras but still Mahayana teaches more by stories than argument. I cannot retell its beautiful stories except as poor paraphrases. The Bibliography lists books that tell them. “Star Trek”, “Star Wars”, and the book and movie cycle “The Never Ending Story”, fairly well represent imagination in Mahayana and Hinduism. The first movie in the “Story” cycle is one of the best fantasy movies ever, and fine for most children but not young children – long live Atreyu and the Luck Dragon! The stories of Jorge Luis Borges (“Personal Anthology”) give a flavor of Mahayana and Hinduism, and show how easy it is to get lost in the hall of mirrors. The movie “The Magic Flute”, written by Bruce Lee, largely starring David Carradine, is a good example of the Mahayana imagination, multiple worlds, and the unity of the self and great system.

Like Hinduism, Mahayana depends on the idea of Dharma and on organizing the idea of Dharma into a mental and social system. Because I go into Dharma as a system in the chapter on Hinduism, here I go into the topic only as needed. The term “Dharma” always implies “system” and almost everything I say about Hinduism as a system applies also to Mahayana, and vice versa. I mean nothing bad by the term “system” but Mahayanists and Hindus probably won’t like it. Mahayanists might prefer something like “actions, thoughts, and their results, that occur through, and for, the Dharma” or prefer that I always say “Dharma system” instead of “system”. Some Mahayanists, Hindus, and Westerners might prefer that I say “game” or “deep play” instead of “system”. Games have systematic rules. Whatever has systematic rules is a system. Games should be fun. The dharma system is fun only for some people even if, in the idea, it should be joyous for all. For many people it is not fun. It is only really fun if it is true and it leads most of us to act well. I don’t think it is true, and it does not lead enough of us to act as we should. Keeping track of all this bickering is much too hard. I am making points about Mahayana and Hinduism from the outside, not making points from within them. So I stick to “system”.

In thinking about Mahayana, always keep in mind a simple question: What are they trying to get you to wake up to? Even in sudden enlightenment that cannot be spoken, you have to wake up to something, and you need words to guide you to it. From the chapter on Theravada, see the ideas that are good to know before awakening but are not what the Buddha had in mind to wake up to. The Buddha wanted us to go beyond those ideas. He had in mind that life is not worthwhile. Mahayana wants us to wake up to something more too but Mahayana is not often clear what. Why is Mahayana not clear? How does not being clear set us up for a system that eats the world, for a kind of spiritual pyramid scheme?

What if Mahayana is true enough anyway? In the first chapter of this book, I said that what matters is if ideas are true and good, not where they come from, not even if they are in a system that eats the world. Mahayana might be true even if it is a contrived system that eats the world, and it uses contradictions to channel minds. It does convey a lot of truth and does convey the need to be good to each other. I still think it is not true. I do not argue against each idea of Mahayana. I state them as clearly as I can for the purposes here, and make clear that I disagree. I argue against the system as a whole. Please read the Lotus Sutra and decide for yourself. I take the same stance toward Hinduism.

In arguing against Mahayana, I argue against all systems that eat the world, including: all major religions as they were developed formally such as Christianity; Romanticism; secular semi-religious systems such as Marxism; and movements such as post-modernism, “systems theory”, strong feminism, Liberalism, and Conservative ideas. I cannot here sort out what is right and wrong, point by point. They all develop the same form and spirit regardless of origin and original intent. Please see for yourself what is similar between Mahayana and what you believe, and decide for yourself what is right about what you believe despite how it works as a system that eats the world and works to channel minds. Then check what you find to be true against the moral teachings of Jesus and the political ideas described in the first two chapters of this book.

Optional Section: History of Ideas.

Here I speculate on a parallel history of ideas in India and Europe. I can’t recall who first said Theravada Buddhism (India) is like Protestantism (Europe) in compactness, simplicity, commitment, rationality,

individualism, and rejection of hierarchy while Mahayana and Hinduism are like Roman Catholicism. Other parallels of Europe with India also hold.

(1) One response to the widespread ideas at the time of the Buddha about rebirth etc. was strong austere stances such given to the young Siddhartha by his first teachers, and of a religion called "Jainism" ("Jine"-ism) that is strictly pacifist and vegetarian. Modern day "Vegans" are somewhat like Jains at the time of the Buddha. Theravada Buddhism is not supposed to be austere in this way. The Buddha deliberately moved away from this austere position.

(2) Another response was given by the Upanishads and Plato. Both Plato and the Upanishads took this world to be a pale transient imperfect shadow of something more important and more definite, stressed ethereal love as a proper response, stressed strong morality, and an immortal soul. The Upanishads stressed the links between people, and between people and nature. The idea is captured in a slogan famous in Indian thought: "you are that". Both advised clear separation from the normal world so as not to be contaminated and misled.

(3) The Buddha and Aristotle offered the middle way. Aristotle was partly a common sense response both to the widespread ideas about rebirth etc. and to Plato, just as the Buddha was partly a common sense response to the widespread ideas about rebirth etc. and to the kind of thinking that is found in the Upanishads. Both Aristotle and the Buddha were cool-headed and were not given to metaphysical flights. Neither stressed austerity although both advised discipline. Both stressed living in the world as it is and coping with issues as they come up. Neither condemned regular life although both knew that deep thinkers had to keep some distance from normal life. Both stressed moderation. Both disliked extremes. Both valued free thinking and were wary of ideologies. Both developed a theory of the self in which the self unfolds in a response to the world around. Both accepted the appetites that are part of a normal self, and accepted the results of having appetites. Both liked nature and both used examples from nature and from everyday life in their teachings. Jesus was similar, but later.

(4A) First Mahayana, and then later Hinduism, were partly a response to the austere tendency of some Buddhism and to other similar austere religions of around the same time such as Jainism. Neo-Platonism (late Platonism) was unlike original Platonism. Neo-Platonism arose at the same time as Mahayana and early Hinduism. Like Mahayana and Hinduism, Neo-Platonism stressed an elaborate system of many lives. The One system was one thing sufficient in itself although people experienced it as various. The One spawned the Many of everyday experience. People came in different grades. People varied in how close they were to the One. People could ascend to the One. After they had ascended to the One, and realized the unity of many in one, they could live separated from the world or they could carefully interact with the normal world. In Neo-Platonism, the world remained suspect and corrupt while in some Mahayana and some Hinduism the normal world and the One became the same. Mahayana, Hinduism, and Neo-Platonism offer some important helper beings such as the bodhisattva, avatar, and philosopher. All three systems allow for, or encourage, devotion to saints, teachers, helper beings, and the One, as a way to reach higher levels and-or to reach the one.

(4B) I think Mahayana, Hinduism, and Neo-Platonism represent long-standing Indo-European patterns in speculative thought that show up from time to time. I think Romanticism uses similar ideas. The ideology of the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, and then again in the 1700s and 1800s, with a stress

on saints, Mary, devotion, and hierarchy, might be another form. Protestantism arose against this pattern as a backdrop. This is the pattern against which Theravada looks like Protestantism. I don't know how the basic pattern is stored in our cultural background, why it lays dormant sometimes, and why it surfaces sometimes. I don't know why, when it surfaces, it surfaces in the particular form that it does at that time in those places.

Patterns One (austerity) and Three (middle way) can be found in many cultures although maybe not as well developed as in Indo-European culture. I believe patterns Two (Upanishads) and Four (Mahayana and Hinduism) represent deep-seated forms in Indo-European culture. I don't know if each pattern can exist as an independent idea set or if they need each other. I don't know if only one can dominate at a time. As with the Mahayana-Hinduism pattern, I don't know what governs when they surface or subside, and what governs how they appear when they do appear. I don't know if we can find patterns similar to Two and Four in other cultures and-or civilizations, such as in China or in the Americas. Other cultures have patterns that are distinct to that particular culture and-or are more developed in them than in Indo-European culture, such as Taoism in China.

Reminders about Mysticism, Metaphysics, and Systems that Eat the World.

From previous chapters, recall these ideas about mysticism and about systems that eat the world:

-Mystic visions can be partly true but no mystic vision offers full contact with the bigger-than-me and full truth.

-Mystics usually feel they are connected to the bigger-than-me, to all persons, and nature; feel everything that seems distinct is really one; and everything is really an aspect of the one bigger-than-me.

-We are all parts of a joyous organic whole, a system. Often, as part of full participation in the joyous system, we have many lives.

-Some mystics feel the bigger-than-me Descended into the World; Emanated into the different-but-united many things of the world, including all people; and remains in the world. We can Realize the bigger-than-me and our Unity with the bigger-than-me. We can Ascend to Union with the bigger-than-me.

-Mystics do not feel that other beings are necessarily more distant from the bigger-than-me than mystics simply because other beings do not have mystic vision. All beings are always united with the bigger-than-me even if they are not aware of it. Mystics are aware of it.

-I compared idea systems that eat the world with a painting that had colors but no images. We project onto the color splotches our ideas.

-While this particular life might be difficult, the system as a whole is joyous. Usually, eventually, we all have some particular lives that are wonderful, and these wonderful lives make up for the bad ones.

-Idea systems that eat the world typically feature ideas that are thrown together. The ideas might have a theme, or a "feel", but they are not necessarily consistent.

-Even so, there is a central idea, or focal idea, or focal person, or focal person-combined-with-idea. This idea is soft and “absorbent”, a “hole” like the eye of a hurricane, around which other ideas move, and which is the main maker of the feel of the system.

-The central soft core usually is a combination of a person with cosmic principles. In Mahayana, the central core is the combination of the bodhisattva (see below) with cosmic principles of Compassion, Emptiness, and Buddha Mind.

-From nonsense, you can assert anything. Contradictions are a kind of nonsense but they also sound deep and profound. Systems that eat the world use contradictions to beguile minds.

-People project onto the systems whatever they can that is consistent with the overall feel and style of the system. Systems can be compatible with many ways of life. Mahayana offers many “splotches” onto which people can project what they need. Contradictions make it easy to project.

-Metaphysicians later organize mystic visions into systems that eat the world. The inject ideas (“aids”) designed to explain the mystic vision. The aids usually have the effect of making the system that eats the world more inclusive, stronger, and more resistant to disproof; I do not explain how.

-Mystics tend to see the world as infinitely beautiful, and tend to assimilate all badness and ugliness into a greater beauty and goodness. Mystics see this world right now as heaven on Earth.

Anticipation, One.

This section is the first in a series of sections labeled “Anticipation” that sketch major points. I repeat these points throughout the chapter. You may skip these sections if you wish but I recommend that you read them. If you skip them, return here if you get confused. If you skip them, go to the section entitled “Simple Mahayana Mystic Vision”.

(1) Orthodox Theravada-like Buddhism is hard to accept. It has great ideas such as cause-and-effect, the not-absolute (fragmented) self, and individual self-determination. But it is hard to know what to do with the core message. It is hard to accept that life is not worthwhile and that we cannot have strong success in this ordinary life. We want this life to be fully meaningful.

(2) People have a feeling (mystic sense) of a bigger-than-me. They feel that the system is worthwhile even if any particular life is full of hardship. People feel the system will give their life meaning and will take care of them if only they can “plug into” the system.

(3) It is hard to put the full mystical feeling into words. Point (2) above is only an approximation. We don't have to put the feeling exactly into words to have the feeling. At the same time, words can help us to get the feeling.

(4) Despite what the Buddha said, some people do seem to succeed at being spiritual and succeed at this life. These people become one with the bigger-than-me. These people would not abandon everybody

else. They will help us to connect to the bigger-than-me and to make this life worthwhile and successful. They are mediators. In Mahayana, bodhisattvas play this role; in Christianity, Christ, Mary, and the Saints do; in Hinduism, avatars do, such as Krishna; in Islam, Mohammad did.

(5) If we are part of the big system, and successful people want to help us, then, really, there is no big difference between a holy life and an ordinary life as long as the ordinary life is a good life. Spiritual success (life) and worldly success (life) are the same.

(6) If you are a good person, you are part of the bigger-than-me and you are successful. If successful, you are part of the bigger-than-me and a good person. If you are part of the bigger-than-me, you are a good person. If you feel it, you are it; if you are it, you feel it.

(7) To succeed, all you have to do is adjust your attitude.

(8) The Mahayana system-with-a-hole-in-the-center-that-eats-the-world results from the above points embedded in a structure that allows us to project onto all this ideas that we think are important and that keep people interested. It results from allowing people to project their hopes for success onto a cosmic mystic system. Most major religions have similar ideas and structure.

Anticipation, Two: Stages of Possible History.

The development of Mahayana came in logical stages. I don't know how these logical stages correspond to actual history. I repeat from above, in words that make stages more obvious:

(A) Some Buddhists reacted against the idea that life is not worthwhile by using Buddhist ideas, such as cause-and-effect and dependent origination, to support a mystical vision in which the world is not really suffering. Instead, suffering is an illusion, we are all alright, and we are all linked. This vision supported the typically Buddhist ideas that we can find salvation ourselves and that the world is pretty much as it appears to be. This vision was minimally mystic and minimally fantastic.

(B) Early smart metaphysicians tried to explain the mystic vision using Buddhist aids such as Emptiness and Buddha Mind. They relied on the idea that the new core message (new waking up) cannot be put into words. This early elaboration was not necessarily an ideological system that eats the world. This vision and its elaboration appealed to successful lay people and it was important in the early success of Buddhism.

(C) Along with mystical visions and clever rationale came a full-blown system that eats the world, centered on the bodhisattva, re-interpreting rebirth and karma as a joyous system of many lives, and using Buddhist aids as the splotches onto which we project.

(D) The early metaphysical explanations opened the door to more elaborate fantastic mystical visions such as infinite Buddhas and bodhisattvas, unfolding of the Buddha Mind, Storehouse Consciousness, Western Paradise, multiple heavens and hells, etc. Now not only are you tied into the bigger-than-me, now you are really the Bigger in disguise.

Most of this chapter is about items (B) and (C).

(E) When Mahayana moved to East Asia, the Chinese developed Zen, likely as a fusion of Taoism and Buddhism. Zen might represent an attempt by East Asians to recover the original simpler mystic vision that began Mahayana, or to produce their version of a similar simple mystic vision.

(F) Why did Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha tell everybody that this life is full of suffering, advise us to turn away from this life, and tell seekers to live as monks? Because that is the level most people work on. His external teaching is a giant expedient means. The Buddha needed to shock people out of delusions about this world and away from other seductive wrong religions such as Brahmanism, Jainism, and (all teachings like) the Upanishads. He had to force people to face their stupidity and had to give them strong reasons to seek something better. When they had overcome stupidity, and learned how to be good on a deep level, they would be ready to face the truth of Mahayana and make their regular lives transcendent. The Buddha found that, when people were on the verge, any words would inevitably lead them astray and backwards. Better not to use words, and words are not needed. When students reach this level, they will intuit what the Buddha had been about all along. When students are settled into something better, then they can use words, and any expedient means, to help others along the path without confusing words and expedient means for the path itself. The Buddha did not mislead, deliberately or through ignorance. He merely used the best public means he could in teaching about suffering, and he saved the one best true private means for later.

I dislike secret inner (esoteric) teachings no matter what religion. True: many people cannot get deep ideas, and religions rely on deep ideas even when religions try to be plain. But limited human intellect does not mean that all hidden deep teachings are true – not even alluring ones. It is best to assume that all teachings that claim to be hidden, deep, and reserved for the smart few are wrong, and then to make the ideas themselves prove they are right. By this standard, nearly all deep teachings fail. We can assume they are not offered primarily because they are true but out of misguided hope, desperation, and/or as tools for control.

To be fair, Christianity had its share of deep inner secret teachings. Originally, if Christians believed “the truth shall set you free”, that truth was not public truth. I think simple public truth is more likely to set us free. Christian teachings are all “out in the open” now only because of Christianity’s long history and the fact that it became the dominant religion of a big region. Christians turned the Old Testament (Tanakh) into a secret code for generating deep opaque forebodings of Jesus that only Christians could decipher – against the intent of the Jews who “owned” the book. Originally the Eucharist (Lord’s Supper) was not given to all followers but only to a select few of the inner circle as a way to get immediate direct mystic participation with Jesus and with godliness, and as a way to exclude people who would not go along. I don’t like any of this either.

Anticipation, Three: Mysticism (again).

To properly evaluate Mahayana, I would have to convey its mystic visions clearly, place them in context with other mystic visions, show how all the visions were subsumed into particular ideological systems that eat the world, and evaluate everything all together. I would have to contrast mystic visions of Mahayana with my own ideas about God, Jesus, prophets, and Western values. I can’t do this task here. The best I

can do here is to give a feel for the elaborate Mahayana mystic vision and metaphysical system-that-eats-the-world and say why I am uneasy with it. I do this in bits throughout the chapter. I give a synopsis of the Mahayana mystic vision below.

The Mahayana mystic vision and system is well-intended but wrong. Mahayana ideas-aids create more hardship than benefit. Some people do benefit from Mahayana ideas-aids but they have to overcome the ideas-aids to do so.

To the extent that Mahayana stresses mystical union in something like Buddha Mind or the Storehouse Memory, I don't see how Mahayana differs much from other systems that stress mystical union, such as Neo-Platonism, the Upanishads, Transcendentalism, Sufism, or Hinduism. To the extent Mahayana stresses Descent, Emanation, Realization, and Ascent, I don't see how it differs much from similar mystic-metaphysical systems such as Gnosticism or Neo-Platonism. To the extent Mahayana stresses that you personally are equivalent to the system and are Big, I don't see how it differs from other similar ideas in Hinduism and some Islamic mysticism. I don't see how Mahayana sutras differ from metaphysical writings in other systems that deal with issues such as non-duality, merging with Void, or a Great Mind. I don't see how the Mahayana bodhisattva differs from Christianized Jesus, the Hindu avatar, or the Mohammad of irrational devotion. I don't see how devotion to a Mahayana bodhisattva differs much from Hindu bhakti, devotion to Mohammad, worship of Mary, worship of Jesus, or devotion to saints. How Mahayana can be like non-Buddhist mystic-metaphysical systems but remain essentially Buddhist is a question that I cannot answer and that I leave for Mahayanists.

I happily admit that all different mystical-metaphysical systems have a distinct feel to them, and that this feel is important to their adherents. Adherents do argue over which system is truer and better. I can get a sense of the distinct feelings. I do "get it" for each system. But the distinct feelings of various systems are not important to me. Other ideas and feelings are more important.

The important ideas of Mahayana are below. You do not need mysticism, metaphysics, or system to get these ideas.

-There is something out of which everything comes and to which everything returns.

-That one thing makes the diversity that we see. The diversity is not really distinct from the one thing. The particular things are not as distinct from the one thing as we think they are.

-We too are of the one thing. We are not as distinct as we think we are. We were "in" the one thing before we were born, and return to it after we die. Death is something of an illusion.

-Being part of the one thing is worthwhile and a lot of fun. It is not suffering.

-The one thing is the same as the personal bodhisattva, who wishes to save us all. We already are bodhisattvas even if we don't know it yet. The point is to see it.

-We can approach the one thing through aids such as Emptiness, Buddha Mind, non-duality, and the unity of the particular and general. Historically those were the most important aids in Mahayana.

Although these aids can help us approach the one thing, they are not the same as the one thing. Other important aids include the unity of the awakened and sleeping worlds, and the value of the person.

Anticipation, Four: A System with a Hole in the Center that Eats the World.

-Early on, Mahayana used Emptiness as the “splotch in the empty center onto which we project ideas”. The idea of Emptiness went to China. Early Chinese Mahayana also used Emptiness. Then it switched to the idea that Buddha Mind makes the world including us. Our minds know the Buddha Mind because we are Mind likewise. From China, the ideas of Emptiness and Mind spread through the Far East and became integral to Mahayana. The idea of Buddha Mind is like ideas of Mind that developed in the West especially with Neo-Platonism and afterwards.

-Mahayana asserts that the deepest truth cannot be spoken. China used Emptiness and Buddha Mind as ideas at the empty center. Together, these three motifs make it easy for me to describe Mahayana as a system that uses a hole in the center to eat the world. Emptiness literally is emptiness at the center onto which we project what we wish. Mind literally is all the many projections that spill out of Emptiness at the center.

-If Mahayana were so obvious, it would not have lasted. Mahayana does not go directly to Emptiness or Mind.

Rather, Mahayana uses stories to involve people and to imply emptiness at the center without specifying. That is one way to use words as an indirect means but not a direct means. Mahayana allows people to fill in the story as they wish. When some people want more, Mahayana philosophers give them “can’t be put into words”, Emptiness, Mind, or another Buddhist Aid. Mahayana tells stories by finding something concrete that people can think about. It shows how that concrete thing is not really important, often it is only an obstacle, but some other thing that we can’t really talk about is important. We should be concerned about the other thing that we can’t talk much about. Mahayana never has to specify the other thing as Mind or Emptiness. By remaining vague about what Mahayana has us wake up to, the center remains empty and we can project what we wish.

Even if it is true that the central secrets to which a person wakes up cannot be spoken, this tenet is more often a ploy to “suck people in” than a way to get people to find the right stance. I accept that some ideas-ways-insights cannot be spoken well but I do not accept that the central core of Mahayana is so strange that it cannot be spoken well enough. Insisting on “a big hush” is more often a ploy than a good religious stance in any religion.

-Here I retell Mahayana stories from the Lotus Sutra to get across the point. A man has been shot with half-a-dozen poison arrows. His fellows call for a doctor. When the doctor arrives, he does not ask what color each arrow is, if it uses feathers of eagle or vulture, if it has a shaft of willow or hickory. The doctor removes each arrow according to where it is and what wound it made. Taking away bad arrows is the first step to health. Here, health is the self-evident goodness at the center about which we don’t have to be specific. We can think of a healthy man any way at all.

Now that the doctor has all the arrows out, the doctor needs to remove the poisons. Poisons also are bad ideas. The doctor does not have to know the color, taste, texture, or atomic weight of each poison. The doctor only has to know how to counteract the poison and how to remove bad effects. The doctor does not have to go into details of bad ideas, he-she only has to remove bad ideas and then good ideas arise automatically. The doctor does not have to say what health is, the doctor only has to remove illness. The doctor does not have to say what it is we wake up to, he only has to remove bad ideas and we wake up to Mahayana Emptiness or Mind.

-Rather than use Emptiness or Mind to show the empty center, how emptiness works at the center, and how we project onto an empty center, later in the chapter I use the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva is a hero at the center onto which we project our ideals of success, who acts out the workings of a Dharma system, and to whom we can appeal for help.

When smart people first sense the Mahayana technique and the Buddhist aids, they tend to go “hog wild”. Often they don’t sense the technique at a conscious level but do get it unconsciously from repeated exposure, like people learn to play table tennis. Mahayana subtlety is not a hard technique to learn and it is powerful. People love to use it, usually not maliciously, but because it enhances feeling important and because it is partly true. In doing so, despite conveying some truth, they reinforce confused Mahayana in themselves and in “victims” too. They lead people astray. This veering happened not only in the sutra writers of yore but happens now with modern Buddhists. If you can sense the method and then not use it, you will feel good in another way.

Anticipation, Five: Good Words about Mahayana Mystic Vision.

Because I criticize Mahayana, here I offer a feel for some of the good in Mahayana by using examples from mystic-like visions-and-feelings that many Westerners have. I am not saying only Mahayana has these visions-and-feelings or these are more typical of Mahayana than any other stance. I only offer them to put Mahayana in a better context than mere logical argument.

(1A) Your friends cajoled you into a picnic. The sun was too hot; ants overran the food; mosquitoes attacked everyone; the drinks were not cold enough; the softball game went on but it was not fun the way you wanted because the skill level was too low; and your would-be girlfriend spent all her time with her friends and not much with you. Yet, as the afternoon fades into evening, you realize that it is all good anyhow. All of it is all good. You can’t explain.

(1B) The same thing happens on a trip to the beach. The wind blows too much, everybody gets burned by the sun, the surf is a little too high for anyone but the body surfers, the hotels have blocked off most of the access, the hotels have attracted tourists so now there are a lot of tourists but not many of you locals, food vendors have invaded, and now litter is everywhere. But still all of it is all good.

(2) You and friends watch the evening news. Terrorists have attacked a humor magazine and a tourist train. A White cop kills a misguided young Black thug in self defense, and Black people riot and kill five more of their own. The government says the unemployment rate has fallen to 6.5% but the only jobs you and your friends can get are in a chain store. A report says there are more added chemical residues in so-called organic food than in the food sold at the supermarket. Outside, the birds are singing and some

kids are playing football in a small park, dodging piles of dog shit. Your friends have warmed up for you a brand of frozen dinner that you particularly like. You have strawberries for dessert. You feel deeply that this world could be so good and so beautiful if only a few bad apples didn't spoil the whole barrel. Twenty percent of people ruin it all for the other 80%. If we could get the 80% to see what they've got, and get the 20% to stop acting bad even if they don't get it, then the whole world would change. That is not such a hard job. Maybe you can't make it your life's work but you can do your share.

The two situations go together. When we see that it is all so beautiful, we want to help. When we want to help, we see it all could be so beautiful. If you have never seen this, then you are not fully human, and you need to wake up to your humanity.

American sitcoms have their own version, effective in the 2010s because now all families have to be charmingly-functional-within-dysfunctional by fiat of the drama police. After a terrible drawn-out holiday experience, a family comes to see they all need each other, help each other, and love each other. Their family, and the world, is better for mutual love. They usually don't show mutual love, but it runs like a deep hidden river through all. It keeps them from doing much real harm, keeps them on the right track, and rescues them when in need. They don't have to feel it all the time or say it ever. They show it to each other often enough.

Even if we don't understand everything, still it is better to have the right attitude and try to help than to do nothing and miss the beauty and goodness of the world.

(3) As a business person, you might not have it all figured out intellectually but you know what the world is all about. Through your work you serve both the bigger-than-me and the people. You are plugged in. You don't have to be a monk, a wimpy wide-eye, or a tree hugger to know there is a force that drives the world, the force is good, the world is good, you are part of it, you know what is going on, the force does its work through you, and you do the work of the force in your business and your life. As long as you do the work of the force, it takes care of you. It gives you the answers that you need to know. You never hurt anyone or anything on purpose. You know how to work on the world - that the force created - and to get things done. You see behind mere appearances to what matters. You bring other people to their senses too. You are lucky and happy in your luck. See "Vimalakirti" below.

(4) "This world is fallen. The Devil (Satan) reigns here. The Tanakh, New Testament, and Koran all tell me so. Yet I can't help but enjoy this world. I can't help but love God, my family, country, church, and friends. I can't help but love nature sometimes, even if I don't really understand nature. Life can be so good. I know that bad people, bad events such as economic recession, and bad diseases such as cancer, all can ruin life for some of us sometimes. But, really, life can be so beautiful. I know I can get lost in bitterness at bad people; but I can also overcome bitterness to make something better of my life and the lives of the people around me. My church helps me. We can overlook the fact that this world has fallen. We can enjoy the beauty that is left over from God's original creation."

(5) "I made up my mind, I saw the light, when I was twenty. I became a feminist, or a crusader against abortion, Republican, Marxist, martial artist, economist, academic, Roman Catholic, or Buddhist.

“I know feminism is not all the truth; men are not all bad and women are not all right; women of the past were not all stupid; they had minds and they did what they thought was moral and was good for their families just as we do now; they were as free in many ways as we are now or can hope to be. But there is still so much work to be done. If I don’t do it, nobody will. To get it done, we need a point of view. Somebody has to stand up for the highest moral standards. I might make some mistakes; hurt some people; not do as much as can be done; and overlook some bigger urgent problems. I might defend an entrenched position, like the people I fight. I might become moralistic; a crusader who uses morality to make myself feel better about myself. Still, overall, I will do more good than harm and I will help a lot of people. All of us will be better off for what I do. In the end, we can all be free and equal. This is what I can do now and this is what I have set myself to do now.”

Anticipation, Six: All You Need Is Love.

I am not making fun of hippy, hippy revival, post-hippy, or New Age cultures. I asked what Mahayana wants you to wake up to. It is easy to say “Love” (“mindfulness”). We wake up to the love and beauty of the world, and we want to wake up everybody to love and beauty. This answer goes along with Jesus’ teaching to love our neighbor as our self, to love our enemies; this answer goes along with current ideas of Christianity; and with a general yearning for love left over from formal Christianity. There is nothing wrong with this ideal; it is high minded; and it is one of the best stances when mixed with practicality. If Mahayana had merely stressed love and beauty, Mahayana might have avoided being only a system that eats the world and only a pyramid scheme. I don’t think Mahayana can avoid that fate through getting everybody to see love and beauty but this issue is not the main point of this section.

Mahayanists of 2020 CE (AD) might say wake up to “love and beauty” but that is not what Mahayanists of 200 CE (AD) said. That is not how Mahayana was born. Love and beauty were a part of it all but, if you focused on them, you got distracted and fell into stickiness. The original answers were “Emptiness” or “Void”, “(Buddha) Mind”, “can’t be said in any words”, joy of system, and spiritual power in fantasy worlds. Originally “Emptiness” and “Mind” were not focused on “love, beauty, and mindfulness”. I leave modern Mahayanists to sort out the relations between Love, Beauty, Emptiness, Buddha Mind, Silence, spiritual power, joy, suffering, and fantasy realized. They do not seem to succeed well.

Simple Mahayana Mystic Vision and Its Elaboration.

Now that we are past the anticipation summaries, I begin again.

An original simple mystic vision similar to the vision of Mahayana is common to many people who have a “Grand Canyon” experience, and the vision is found in many religions. In the cosmic scheme of things, we are small. There is something much bigger than me. Yet we are also important to the bigger-than-me. As parts of the bigger-than-me, people are all connected. We are tied to nature. We come out of the bigger-than-me and merge back into the bigger-than-me. As individuals now, we do suffer. But the bigger-than-me does not suffer in the same way, and the bigger-than-me gains through our suffering. It makes up to us for our suffering somehow. In Mahayana and Hinduism, the bigger-than-me is a Dharma system and a person while in Christianity and Islam it is a person.

As Mahayana developed, eventually some people had the feeling that we are not only a small member of the system but somehow we are the entire system too. Each particular person is the system as a whole but is temporarily manifest in particular bodies over the course of many lives. There is no bigger-than-me distinct from me because you are the bigger-than-me, although, while you are in any particular body, you feel smaller than the system as a whole and feel there is a bigger-than-me. The feeling of bigger-than-me that you get in a particular body is the gateway to the real feeling that you are the whole system at play. The bigger-than-me works through the particular me as I am right now.

This feeling is not necessarily crazy although it can be. This feeling is not as common as being a simple part of a bigger-than-me, and so it is hard to find positive examples from current pop culture. Imagine you are the tool of God because you are God acting through your particular body right now. You are both Jake Blues and Elmore Blues on a mission; and you are on some mission all the time. Sometimes you are Jake, sometimes Elmore, and sometimes some other character such as the character portrayed by Aretha Franklin. Or, you are a secret agent always on a case. You are the hero of all stories and hero of the entire system of the Big. You are a super hero. You can be every super hero if you want, depending on whichever hero is needed for a mission now. If you are a woman now, you are not only linked to all other women because you are all sisters but also because you really are every other woman even while you are this particular woman. Before, you were a little rock sloughed off by a mountain, rolling down the mountain. Now you are the mountain sloughing off all the rocks. You are all the birds, bees, and flowers that have ever lived.

Then smart people in Mahayana had to explain and justify this new vision. They had to explain so that other people might have the vision too, or at least could sense and respect it. For people slightly less smart, they used aids such as Nothingness and Buddha Mind. For some ordinary people, they used the character of the bodhisattva. For many other ordinary people, they used the idea of paradises to which devotion takes you. The various approaches can be combined.

Officially, the world is not worthwhile, and yet, if you look at the world the right way, the world is infinitely beautiful and worthwhile. The bad ugly world of everyday illusory life is the same as the good beautiful world of awakened life. We can assimilate ugliness and badness into greater beauty. Is this Mahayana mystic vision the same as what I earlier (in the chapter on Common Ideas) called “heaven on Earth”? Without going through texts in detail, I cannot argue the issue, but I think so. In Mahayana, I think the mystic idea of “heaven on Earth”, an infinitely beautiful world, overwhelmed the prior Buddhist idea that “life is not worthwhile”, and I think metaphysicians tried to merge the two so that the idea of an infinitely lovely heaven on Earth assimilated the idea that this life is not worthwhile. Metaphysicians used the idea of a joyous system of many lives to complete the merger. The result was Mahayana. Whether this story about Mahayana is true or false, if you have any feel for the idea of “heaven on Earth”, you can use your feeling to get in touch with the Mahayana vision, understand it better, and have some sympathy with it. Try seeing: this life as hard; the system of many lives is beautiful; and the system of many lives makes every life in it just as beautiful, including this hard life.

Most people can't reach the full version of identity between themselves and the whole system; especially they can't get the idea that they are both a particular individual and the system as a whole. Most people settle for something less but something that still has the flavor of an identity between the individual and the system. For most people, this identity is captured in the idea of the bodhisattva. The system has a

hero through whom it acts most of the time. You are both the hero and the hero's sidekick. Here, I do not dwell on the abstract metaphysical version of Mahayana but focus on a slightly lesser version, centered on the bodhisattva, but still greater than the initial simple modest version.

To illuminate Mahayana thought below, I use contradictions between an orthodox Buddhism that features fear of suffering versus Mahayana that goes beyond suffering.

Mahayana Motives for Elaboration.

Here I retell the story from above of mysticism systematized. Because Mahayana elaborated the early mystic vision to appeal to powerful people and the common masses, it is easy to dismiss Mahayana as hucksterism, like televangelism, aimed to recruit the rich and powerful by allowing them to feel successful both in spirit and in daily life, and to dazzle the masses into going along by using complex emptiness, projections, contradictions, fantasies, and paradises. All religions do that, and Mahayana is only a little worse than others. It is better to think of the situation like this:

The original teachings of the Buddha (similar enough to Theravada) were a great improvement on mass religion in India and on Brahmin ritualism. Buddhism's intellectual advances, such as self-determination, cause-and-effect, analysis of the self, assessing life, and waking up beyond ordinary self-indulgent life, were so strong that all religion in India and the East had to face them. Buddhism developed a big strong organization that had to be lived with and a group of adept people that had to be argued with – monks and educated lay people. All variations on Buddhism had to find a place for monks and for relations between monks and lay people.

Yet the core idea of Buddhism is hard to take, and most people cannot live as monks. People dislike the idea that life is not worthwhile. Even most Theravada Buddhists do not really live by the idea that life is suffering. People want religion to justify their ordinary lives and their pursuit of worldly success. Mystics think life is worthwhile and joyous. Mystics think the world is part of a joyous bigger-than-me system, and we are all important parts of the system. People dislike thinking the highest goal is to disappear forever after accepting that life is suffering. People like to think they will live in great joy forever after succeeding in this life. It was almost inevitable that somebody would combine the desire for justification in ordinary life with mystic participation in a great system.

Some very smart people and some mystics took over the ideas of Buddhism and the monastic structure, and they put the ideas into the service of well-intended mysticism. Metaphysicians explained the feelings and the system in a way that validated ordinary life and success in it, and gave spiritual "power" to ordinary life. This way appealed to lay people who were successful in the world and felt they were good people, did not want to be monks, and did not want to work toward vanishing after death. Lay people supported Mahayana monasteries rather than other monasteries. Mahayana won out. In the modern world, this is called the "marketplace of religions".

All this reinterpretation could not be done without some stubborn contradictions such as that people are both damned and saved at the same time, and without odd metaphysics such as that "form is emptiness and emptiness form". Contradictions and metaphysics actually support the package because they permit religious adepts to say anything, they provide ingredients for smart people to weave speculations, they

keep smart people busy, allow people to fool themselves, let smart people argue others into submission, and allow imaginative people to make up paradises. The contradictions and metaphysics let people feel good by acting out as normal people but with added drama, like the pseudo-reality TV shows of our time. They are the color splashes on which people project what they need.

Non-monk non-mystic non-metaphysical ordinary people enjoy the imagination of religion and enjoy the paradises but they are not comfortable with the mysticism and dense argument. Most people are not comfortable with the contradiction between “life is suffering” but “we are all in a joyous system”. Yet, if we want to have the good parts of Buddhism such as self-determination, if we want to feel justified in our ordinary lives, want fantasies and happy paradises, then we have to pay a price. In a Buddhist context, the price is Mahayana cleverness and clever metaphysics. In a Buddhist context, those are needed to overcome the tense contradictions so as to allow the justification in common life. Ordinary people were happy to pay that small price. Mostly they could ignore the heavy thinking and just carry on.

People need some idea framework. Because Mahayana theory is so abstruse, people needed something more relatable. The two biggest ideas are the bodhisattva and the idea of a paradise after death. I talk more about the bodhisattva later. A Buddhist paradise works much the same in ordinary religion as does Heaven in Christianity and Islam. Schools arose with different ideas of paradise and ideas of how to get there. In this chapter, I do not describe the paradises or how to get in them except for one example later in the chapter. One technique for getting to paradise was to recite the name of a Buddha or bodhisattva, or to recite a spiritual formula, like “Hail Mary etc.” Smart people made paradises spiritually acceptable by interpreting the paradises as a metaphor for how a person would see the world once he-she saw he-she was really already saved. Stories about how people lived in the paradises taught people how to act well here. Ordinary not-so-smart people took paradise at face value. As long as smart people could see that metaphor was the real basis for the paradises, then it was alright to let the masses believe in them literally and to recite formulas – another case of expedient means. Often enough, even very smart people go for the paradises.

The mystic-metaphysical take-over of Buddhism did not have only bad results; it had some good results too. Mahayana built solid arguments for the value of ordinary people and ordinary life, and for seeing the world as it is. Mahayana promoted connection and compassion. We all have the same mental ability to see the great joyous system. We all share the same mind. Mahayana did accurate analyses of mind in general and of human capacities for morality and spiritual insight. Here I cannot give the details of these ideas. Mystics are imaginative. Contradictions and metaphysics spur imagination. Mahayana opened up the imagination. As I said, it has wonderful stories.

One Reason Mahayana Failed in India and Why Confucius Keeps Resurging in East Asia.

In the chapter on Theravada, I explained how monks mesh with society to become a part of society even though officially they are not in society and even though in daily life they live a bit apart. They reinforce society even though they are not supposed to live in society. Although Buddhist-like religion can support society it does not always do as thorough a job as do more blatantly obvious society-affirming religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. If religion is going to support society, then it is better to have a religion that supports society “up front” in a clear strong positive way. Buddhism can support society, but only round-about.

In India, Hinduism also rejects ordinary life as most people see it but, at the same time, Hinduism offers a powerful obvious clear up-front support of ordinary life and society as it was lived when Hinduism arose and when it defeated Mahayana. See the chapter on Hinduism.

In the Far East, in particular China, Mahayana and Confucianism always carried on side-by-side, along with Taoism; and most people in their daily lives were more Confucian than Mahayanist. Buddhism was the religion for death and Confucianism was the religion for life. Confucianism provides a strong clear up-front fairly practical support for most of ordinary social life. In its elaborate forms, Confucianism offers a blueprint, for most social and political situations. Confucianism is poor at death and metaphysics. So Mahayana and Confucianism go well together, and neither can completely disappear as long as the other one is around, but Confucius usually has the upper hand because most people live in social situations and most people require guidance. See the chapter on Confucius.

Dealing with the Central Issue.

Like Theravada, Mahayana accepts that there is a problem with the way people usually live in this world and experience this world. Normal life leads inevitably to sorrow. Unlike Theravada, Mahayana denies that the problem is “in” existence, that life is inevitably not worthwhile. The problem is in how we live this particular life and experience this particular life, in how we carry on. The problem is in us, not in the world. Mahayana resolves the contradiction as below. The ways below are all mixed up in practice. If you don't understand all this, don't worry. Focus on the fact that Mahayana has methods to live with its contradictions and to gain strength from them.

(1) If we change how we live this life and experience it, if we change our attitude, then the problem goes away. With the right attitude, we overcome stickiness, clinging, and suffering. We don't have to make up our minds whether this life is worthwhile. We don't have to make up our minds about what the present world is like. We don't have to make up our minds about the system of many lives. We just have to find the right attitude first.

(2) There is a system to the world. The system is moral. It seems there is a mind behind the system. Although any particular life might be unhappy, most lives have enough happiness, and the system as a whole works. People who are unhappy now are happy later. Even if you are unhappy in your particular life now, you can be happy with the idea of the system as a whole just as a failed business person can still take comfort in the success of capitalism as a system. The system as a whole is joyous. The system as a whole takes care of the people in it.

(3) If we see our particular lives in the context of a joyous system, we can overlook the problems of our lives to focus on the system and its joys. For most normal people, the great joyous system meant some kind of paradise after death.

None of the solutions actually works; and they are not always compatible. Having the right attitude need not make you see life in the context of a greater joyous system, and seeing life in the context of a greater joyous system need not lead you to have the right attitude.

(4) Mahayana creates a hierarchy that folds back on itself, a hierarchy that folds back on the central soft dominant focus. The hierarchy is made up of spiritually adept beings. I explain this below. Rather than dwell on any contradictions, people find themselves in the context of the hierarchy, and relate to what is most relevant to themselves in the hierarchy. Usually they forge a relation to the bodhisattva, the highest level. The bodhisattva cares about ordinary people. Therefore the highest level (bodhisattva) and the lowest level (common people rather than monks) fold back to touch each other, and the system appears to be complete and not contradictory. This hierarchy plays a big role in the Mahayana version of a system that eats the world.

(5) Mahayana avoids its contradictions through one of its core ideas: Mahayana cannot be explained in words. It must be intuited without words. If you cannot explain, then you can hold any contradictions. In effect, you smother over contradictions with mysticism and metaphysics. Even if some of mysticism and metaphysics is true and good, it is so hard to tell the true from false, and good from bad, that the result is confusing. Mostly people succumb to confusion, and then try to find their own partial success by piecing together their version from the many floating ideas of Mahayana.

(6) In particular, Mahayana is vague about what a person wakes up to apart from usually waking up to the great joyous system. What we wake up to cannot be spoken. Because it cannot be spoken, we can use whatever works. Smart people wake up to resolving one of the metaphysical dilemmas such as non-duality or the Buddha Mind. Normal people wake up to the fact that they, and their families, will go to a joyous paradise when they die.

(7) “Expedient Means” and Relativism. No teaching in words is absolutely true. All teaching is only approximately true. Still, some teaching is more useful in moving you toward awakening than other teaching. Our teaching, Mahayana teaching, is more effect while the teaching of other religions is less effective. Our teaching is so effective as to be categorically right. Other teaching is so ineffective as to be categorically wrong. You don’t have to pay attention to them, only to us. We are entitled write a lot because what we write is useful. Even when our teaching seems confusing, it is still useful and correct.

This multi-pronged technique for “sucking people into the system” is not limited to Mahayana. It is a general tactic for making self-validating thought systems that “eat the world”. People who worship the market do this; people who cling to simplistic populist democracy and the culture of victimization do this; Christian theologians do this; and Muslim theologians do this; Hindu theologians are great at it. I do not explain how the combined approaches are so effective and how they work in other cases.

For most of Mahayana, the right attitude begins with an experience of bigger-than-me which includes the idea that me and bigger-than-me are the same. The right attitude comes in seeing this life only appears sad sometimes but really the whole system of many lives is joyous. You show you have the right attitude by helping other people to see the same thing. In helping others to awaken to Mahayana terms, you perpetuate Mahayana as a comprehensive self-validating thought system; you participate in a religious pyramid scheme.

I think the Mahayana approach is not what the Buddha had in mind. The Mahayana approach might be true, might be truer than what the Buddha had in mind, and might be more beautiful than what he taught; but it is still not what the Buddha had in mind. You have to decide if Mahayana differs from what the

Buddha had in mind and, if different, Mahayana is truer, more beautiful, or better. I think Mahayana is different, better in some ways, but not overall better. I have said I disagree with the Buddha in some things and especially I think life is worthwhile. Mahayana is good in fostering compassion and in valuing this life. Mahayana is more fantastic and interesting than Theravada but the fantasy is so misleading that I feel uneasy saying “more beautiful”. I understand the ideas that ordinary life is both worthwhile and not worthwhile, and that ordinary life and awakened life are both different and the same; I just don’t accept them in the Mahayana context of a greater system.

The ideas that normal life is valuable, and that the common sense naturalistic world is where we should stand, are great ideas. I agree with them. I am glad that Mahayana stresses them in its own way. Sadly, rather than take them at face value, most Mahayanists overlay them with mysticism and metaphysics, and so contradict them and nearly destroy them. I am sorry the ideas get so lost in contradictions, mysticism, metaphysics, aids, contrived resolutions, and attitudes, that most Mahayanists do not appreciate them as they should.

New Attitude.

Since the 1920s, Americans have seen a parade of movements and products that appeal by offering a change of attitude as the solution to all problems. You don’t have to change the world or change your deep self; you don’t have to seek good principles; you don’t have to assess the fit of world and principles; you don’t have to work hard on the world; you only have to change your attitude. To change attitude, you only have to join us or buy our product. Some examples are: “the Jazz Age”; “coolness”; “I got a new attitu-u-u-de”; “M-m-m-my generation”; “I gonna get all up in yo’ face”; “gangsta”, “be aware, mindful, and loving always”; “with your qpad, qbox, or qphone, you are cool”; and “those people are not assholes, they are just exuberant, or they have a legitimate grievance, they represent LIFE, and I should learn to put up with all the variety of LIFE”, “feminism”, “neo-conservative”, and “mindfulness”. To the extent “attitude alone” ignores real issues, it is hurtfully wrong. It is like popping pills or zealous crusading. The idea that you can change the world by changing attitude alone is narcissism. It might be well-intended nice narcissism but it is still narcissism. “Meet the new boss, same as the old boss”. It is a bad version of the idea that you are the whole system, you are God, instead of only a small part of a bigger-than-me.

I think: Instead of only changing your attitude, you have to start by accepting the way the world is and the way you are, the bad and good. The world really does have both good and bad. Bad and good are not only an illusion to make the play of the system more fun. Sometimes you have to change the world, and sometimes you have to change yourself on a deeper level than mere attitude. If your ethnic, gender, or religious group is bad, you have to change yourself, and change your group, or you have to abandon your group. Even if change in attitude is among the first steps, we can’t solve issues of world, self, and group just a change in attitude.

Mahayana reminds me of this silly mistake about attitudes. Westernized popular Mahayana goes along with “change your attitude”, and it feeds the silliest aspects of “New Age”, spiritualism, cheap mysticism, pseudo-rebellion, pseudo-Liberalism, and Conservative backlash. Mahayana says, “Look at the world in terms of a Dharma system in which you are only a small part but you are still what the system is all about, and, really, there is no suffering, everything is wonderful”.

Rebirth and Karma.

Among the ideas that were “in the air” at the time of the Buddha (after 600 BCE) were rebirth and karma. At first, the idea of karma was not as well developed as Buddhists and non-Buddhist Indians later made it. Now, Westerners tend to think of rebirth as like a magic carpet ride. We get many lives to have fun in and to improve spiritually. If we screw up this life, it doesn’t matter much. We can have fun not only during this life but trying to remember our past lives. Karma is relevant but how is not clear, and so it doesn’t matter. You can see the 1970s view of rebirth in the movie “On a Clear Day You Can See Forever” with Barbara Streisand. Among Westerners who knew a little bit about karma, it meant “poetic justice delayed for a while but certain to come”. If somebody treated the poor badly in a previous life, he-she would be born a worm or would become a homeless bum in a future life. “Instant karma”, as in the John Lennon song, is poetic justice on a faster track.

Contrary to the American misunderstanding, in the time of the Buddha, rebirth and karma felt much more ambivalent and sinister. Karma helped explain inequality, and it could give some comfort in the idea that things would even out over the very long run. At the same time, karma felt like harsh fate. What you are now is what you were doomed to be, and so you had to accept it. Life might be pleasant for a few people but not for most people and not overall. The idea of rebirth meant you were doomed to repeat a tedious suffering life forever and ever. Life is a long drawn out curse. Your only chance is to somehow snap out of it. Karma and rebirth were not boons but big burdens. The only silver lining to rebirth is that it gave you many chances to snap out of the cycle of death and rebirth. All this was how the Buddha took it, and how it developed in Theravada and “official” Buddhism. This is why the Buddha said that life is suffering and why he presented his ideas as a cure for suffering.

I am not sure when, and to what extent, Mahayana began to change the official version more to a version like what Westerners see in pop culture. Karma and rebirth are part of a system. The system might be harsh for some particular people for a short lifetime. Yet overall the system is tremendous fun. We suffer largely because we don’t realize that we are part of the “emptiness” or “mind” that generated the system, and, anytime we want, we can return to the mind and go back out again into apparent reality. Suffering is only apparently real on the large scale although it is terribly real to particular people when it happens. Suffering is our way of sometimes reminding ourselves that we are not one particular life but part of a big system of joy. I have seen bits and pieces of the new view in various sutras, and it emerges in beautiful sutras like the Lotus Sutra, but, in most sutras, both views are together at the same time. That sustained dual view is also part of Mahayana. I cannot here argue about various passages in various sutras and how best to interpret them.

The Issues, and some Contradictions.

Mahayana ideas can contradict ideas from traditional “official” (like Theravada) Buddhism. Mahayana has to accept the official ideas because Mahayana is officially Buddhism. Mahayana holds its own ideas while not denying the official ideas that openly contradict its own ideas. The tension between official ideas versus Mahayana ideas actually helps reinforce Mahayana as an ideological system that eats the world, largely by keeping people off balance and making them seek rationalizations.

-Officially, this particular life is not worthwhile and-or is afflicted with deep suffering. In Mahayana, this life can be worthwhile; in fact, it can be joyous.

-Officially, suffering is real. In Mahayana, suffering is mostly an illusion.

-Officially, all life entails intrinsic necessary suffering. In Mahayana, we suffer only when we are trapped in illusions and errors, especially the errors that we are alone and incapable of awakening. As long as we are trapped in illusion and error, then we do suffer. We suffer when we are separated from the system and-or the essential stuff of the system. When we reunite with the essential stuff of the system, then we stop deep suffering.

-Officially, people wake up to the reality of suffering and that life is not worthwhile. In Mahayana, people wake up to the fact that suffering is mostly an illusion and to the fact that life is not assessed according to whether it is worthwhile. Once people are over the illusion of suffering, then they stop deep suffering, and then life is worthwhile. This particular life in the system of many lives is joyous.

-Officially, after people realize that life is suffering, they still feel the suffering, but it doesn't bother them that much because they are on the path out. In Mahayana, after people realize they are part of a bigger system and identical with the "stuff" of that system, a lot of the suffering goes away but not all of it. What remains does not bother them as much. They still feel the aches and pains of the flu but they don't care, they accept it, and they get on. The attitudes toward suffering officially and in Mahayana are similar but the explanations for the attitudes differ.

-Officially, there is no eternal unchanging soul-self, and no essential eternal "stuff" at the core of a system of many lives. We cannot identify our soul-self with the essential stuff of the system because neither is real in that way. The only thing real is that "stuff happens" according to the law of cause-and-effect. For example, our soul is not the Buddha Mind. In Mahayana, there is an eternal unchanging soul-self (see below), there is an essential identity to the system, and the two are the same. Each of us individually is the Buddha Mind or the Unborn; in the terms of Christian and Muslim mystics, each of us is God. Particular and general are resolved in the joyous system of many lives, and only in this way.

-Officially, although the self is not absolute, it is still self enough to save itself. "You can do it". You can work out your own salvation. Sometimes Mahayana carries over that confidence in the self, especially when the self is able to find its connection to the greater joyous system of many lives. More often, the self needs the joyous system of many lives to step in to help, especially in the person of a bodhisattva (see below). We can't find salvation without the help of a great semi-divine mediator. We find salvation only when we take our turn as the bodhisattva, the semi-divine mediator representative of the system, a self that helps all selves.

-Officially, the system of rebirth and many lives can be useful in allowing people to be reborn in a life that might lead to awakening; but overall the system is a burden, not worthwhile, and makes particular lives not worthwhile. In Mahayana, the system always is worthwhile in itself and it can make particular lives worthwhile.

-Officially, people live a sequence of lives. One life of a person is distinctly different than other lives of the same person. The particular soul-self of a particular life does not carry (“anatman”) on but karma does carry on. In Mahayana, all the lives of one person are really the same life. They are all lived together. There is no distinction between the lives of a given person as there is no distinction between any person versus a Buddha or bodhisattva. This self underneath it all is the same as the joyous system. Sequence is an illusion that helps give rise to illusions of separation and suffering. In terms more familiar to modern Western mystics, time is an illusion. What appears as a sequence is really a single simultaneity. What appears to persist through sequence, and to change through sequence, your soul-self, is really what was there all along and what continues as the same through the illusion of sequence.

-Officially, there is a difference between normal people versus a Buddha or bodhisattva. In Mahayana, there is no difference.

-Officially, there is a difference between the life of a common un-awakened person versus the life of an uncommon awakened person. There is a difference between samsara and nirvana. In Mahayana, there is no difference common life and awakened life, between samsara and nirvana. All lives are the same. (“samsara” is the term for misleading everyday life.)

-Officially, there is a difference between asleep people versus awakened people. In Mahayana, there is no difference. All people are already awakened (saved); they just don’t know it yet.

-Officially, normal un-awakened human lives might be as good as any other lives such as of angels, but even human lives are beset with confusion and clinging. In Mahayana, normal human life is filled with the success and joy of the system but normal people don’t know it yet.

-Officially, people are kept asleep by participating in the system of many lives. In Mahayana, people are awake in the system of many lives even if they don’t know it yet.

-Officially, a monk is better off than a lay person. Although you do not have to be a monk to awaken, it is hard to awaken unless you renounce the world, and hard to renounce the world unless you become a monk. In Mahayana, a monk is both better off than a lay person and not better off than a lay person. A seeker is both better off than a non-seeker and not better off. You can just as easily awaken as a lay person as a monk.

-Officially, this world is the only world but this world still is beset with stickiness, clinging, delusion, and dissatisfaction. In Mahayana, this world is as it is, and nothing is better. When the illusions go away, the world does not appear differently. This world is only one way that we look at a greater joyous system. The situation is like a movie, such as “Pretty in Pink”, in which, at the end, the hero (including heroines) discovers that, all along, life was just as it seemed, the apparent illusions were only confusions, the world as it is still is very good after all, and people did love her (him) after all.

-Officially, a person is responsible for his-her own awakening. A person can give some help, and can receive some help such as teaching from the Buddha, but a person has to figure out it for him-herself. In Mahayana, one person can be of considerable direct help to another. Without help, most of us have no hope. Because we need people to help, the system makes sure there are people to help.

-Officially, the highest achievement is to leave the system. In Mahayana, the highest achievement is to stay in the system forever, offering help, until all beings realize the above points, until all beings realize they too are already saved (awakened), realize suffering is an illusion, and realize the system as a whole is worthwhile.

-Officially, if ever everybody realized what is going on and awakened, humanity as we know it would be over. For the system to go on forever would mean that some people remain in dark slumber forever, and the Dharma is never fully realized. Officially, that is bad. In Mahayana, although some persons work to make every other person see the light, that probably won't happen. Some people are always in the dark. So it is more likely that the system will go on forever. The fact that the system goes on forever does not mean that people are trapped in dark evil slumber. It only means not everybody at once knows that he/she is already saved, already enlightened. A few people can wake up and the system still continues on. It works better if a few people do wake up. For the system to go on forever with a mixture of awakened and not-yet awakened beings is a good thing.

-Officially, emotions such as compassion lead to the stickiness of life and keep us from awakening. A moderate amount of compassion is normal, healthy, and helps us awaken, and it goes along with the intrinsic moral quality of the universe; but too much compassion is a trap. In Mahayana, overflowing compassion is a good thing, and it is necessary for the highest beings, the bodhisattva. We can have huge compassion and still avoid the stickiness of life. We need to have huge compassion if we are to see the total system of Dharma, find our place in it, and save all other people.

From contradictions, we can argue anything, including nonsense. From contradictions, Mahayana does argue many things, some of which are sublime, and some of which are nonsense: The idea that this life is worthwhile even if we don't know it is a good idea. Holding both that this life is not worthwhile and this life is worthwhile is a bad idea. "Suffering is an illusion" is a bad idea. "Pie in the sky" imagined kingdoms in which people live in bliss forever is a bad idea. The hope that we can have unlimited mundane and spiritual success at the same time is a bad idea. The hope that we can have wealth and power but not fall into stickiness is a bad idea.

Mahayana Aids: Metaphysics and Mysticism Again.

See Buddhist aids from the chapter on Theravada. Some interesting ideas from Mahayana are listed below. I do not here explain how these ideas lead easily into mysticism and fantasies.

-The bigger-than-me is unborn and undying, or, sometimes, just unborn.

-Emptiness.

-Form is emptiness and emptiness is form. Form and emptiness entail each other.

-Everything is mind.

-Buddha Mind.

- Buddha Nature.
- Buddha body in various forms such as Dharma body.
- The unity of particular things with the one source.
- The distinction of particular things even though they are unified in the one source.
- Everything is the same thing, or an aspect of the same thing.
- We are all already awakened.
- We are all already Buddha.
- Buddha nature is in everything and in nothing.
- Nobody ever really is born or dies.
- Non-discrimination: Don't stress good versus evil much. If you can, don't find any difference between them at all.
- Non-discrimination: Don't stress differences between things. Mountains become valleys and valleys fill up to become plains. Plains rise up to become mountains. Different people are similar.
- The unity of self and other, of particular and general. Particular remains particular even when unified in the whole. The whole remains whole even when distributed into the particular. The particular and whole are unified and distinct in time, through time, and out of time.
- The unity of opposites: we are both saved and damned, we are already lost and already saved, the everyday world and nirvana are the same, etc.
- Great compassion combined with detachment.
- Storehouse consciousness (memory) from which everything came and to which everything flows.

Theravada Monk Self is Wrong.

Not even most Theravada monks really live apart from society. Most Buddhists are not monks, so they cannot feel Buddhism in terms of being a monk and they cannot judge that life not worthwhile in the same way that a monk would. Most Buddhists need a different understanding of Buddhism, and of the relation between Buddhism and normal life. Although most Mahayana thinkers were monks, not all were. Some were lay people. Mahayana says that a person need not be a monk to succeed in Buddhism. This view requires re-assessment of the self in Buddhism.

The Buddha walked the middle path between picking apart the self and bolstering it. Mahayanists said Theravada monks were selfish. Being “selfish” in Buddhism is serious. It means to bolster the self, to make the self more than it is, and thus to contradict the Buddha directly. The usual way of clinging to the self is to see it as an eternal distinct thing; the Buddha debunked that idea. You can also cling to the self by trying too hard to get rid of it, and that mistake is just as bad as clinging to an unreal immortal soul-self. To Mahayanists, that is the mistake of Theravada monks. Theravada monks seek only their awakening and benefit, without regard for anyone else or for society. They cling to the self even while appearing to denigrate and lose the self. They make the same mistake the teachers of the Buddha made when they pushed rigorous self-denial on the young Siddhartha. Theravada monks do not follow the example of the Buddha, who taught after awakening, a sign the Buddha neither clung to the self nor denied it. The Theravada self is a bolstered delusion that Theravada monks use to justify selfish isolation. It is a false re-occurrence of the soul-self that the Buddha long ago had debunked, even though Theravada monks should know better. The Theravada self cannot truly awaken, the Theravada quest for awakening cannot be a true quest for awakening, and Theravada awakening cannot be true full awakening.

Mahayana Levels.

Mahayana thinkers could not just denigrate and discard Theravada monks. Mahayana thinkers had to accept Theravada monks as better than most average people and as true Buddhist monks but without giving them status as the highest grade of Buddhist adept. Mahayana thinkers went beyond a simple distinction between lay people and monks. Mahayanists divided people into grades according to level of “spirituality”. If you accept their system, the grades are fairly clear, and they do go along with human nature. The scale I give is not official but is fair enough. I avoid technical terms (“rysi”, “stream winner”, “arahant”, “shravaka”, and “pratyaka”). Levels (1) through (3) and maybe (6) appear in Theravada but are used differently; it is not worth explaining how.

(1) The first level is a person who understands Buddhism and is committed to eventually awakening but who is not ready to devote his-her life to the task.

(2) The second level is a person who is definitely on the road to awakening, and is ready to devote his-her life, but is not ready to awaken in this lifetime. These people likely will awaken soon, perhaps in the next lifetime. Most monks hope they are this level or higher.

(3) The third level is a person who soon could become awakened if he-she wished. Again, if this kind of person thinks only of his-her own awakening, Mahayana considers him-her to be selfish.

(4) The fourth level is a person who could awaken anytime he-she wished but who chooses not to fully awaken right now, and also not to “go away” and be “thus gone”. He-she chooses to stay in the normal realm of people and to teach people. He-she pledges to remain here in this life, and all future lives, until all people understand and are ready to awaken. In Mahayana, really, this is the highest being regardless of the next levels. This person is a “bodhisattva”. See below. Despite official Buddhist doctrine, the bodhisattva is higher than a Buddha, and people strive to emulate the bodhisattva rather than strive to be a Buddha.

There has been more than one historical Buddha. In fact, there have been millions, perhaps an infinite amount. Not all Buddhas are alike.

(5) The fifth level is a “normal” or “minor” Buddha. This is a Buddha who awakens but does not choose to stay and to teach. This Buddha vanishes from all existence when he-she dies. It is odd to call a Buddha selfish, but I cannot avoid seeing that Mahayanists thought this Buddha selfish. They accused Theravada monks of wishing to be this kind of Buddha and only this kind of Buddha.

(6) The sixth level is a Buddha who does stay to teach. Buddha’s are supposed to completely vanish from all existence when they die, but this kind of Buddha might live a very long time or might even come back more in future lives to continue teaching. I am not always clear on the difference between this kind of Buddha and a great bodhisattva. I think Mahayanists would not allow that a Theravada monk could be this kind of Buddha even if he-she were somehow awakened and then taught, because he-she would be teaching false doctrines. Thus this kind of Buddha was always a Mahayanist.

(7) The seventh level is a great Buddha who changes the world. This Buddha can live for a very long time if he-she wishes. This Buddha can depart after he-she teaches in this lifetime because he-she has changed the world through his-her teaching, and so need not come back in future lives. This Buddha leaves future work to his-her disciples and their disciples, in all their lifetimes. The Buddha of our world and time, Siddhartha Gautama, was this kind of Buddha. By implication, The Buddha was a Mahayanist.

(8) The eighth level is the union of everything while still remaining particular, including bodhisattvas, all Buddhas, and you. The union can be done in terms of emptiness, Buddha mind, or Storehouse Mind; it does not matter.

Although, in theory, a Buddha is above a bodhisattva, in Mahayana doctrine and practice, a bodhisattva is higher. The bodhisattva is the real hero, highest being, and role model of Mahayana – like Jesus or Mary in Christianity. Common people look to the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva ties the ladder of spiritual achievement to the common people and makes the religion come alive.

The Bodhisattva.

For a funny satirical take on how pseudo-spiritual New Age Westerners see the bodhisattva, listen to the song “Bodhisattva” by Steely Dan, and listen to their entire album “Aja” (“Asia”).

“Bodhisattva, bodhisattva
Gonna sell my house in town”

People in chiefly and state societies need figures who are both human and god, and bridge the mundane and sacred realms. These figures are big, transcendent, powerful, and “sparkly” yet also homey and loving. The bodhisattva is an outstanding example of such a figure. Most bodhisattvas were pure made-up characters but some of them had a basis in real people, which makes them an even better example. How the bodhisattva works in the Mahayana system is typical of what happened to other similar figures and how they work in their systems, including people who were both made up and real such as Lao Tzu, Krishna, Moses, David, Jesus, Mary, Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha, Confucius, and Mohammad.

Believers transformed religious leaders even when real people insisted they were only human and were not God, such as did the Buddha and Mohammad. I do not describe similarities between the Mahayana bodhisattva and other figures. Look for similarities and think how the systems of religions have been molded around their figures as Mahayana has been molded around the bodhisattva. All this yearning for a bridge to the divine and all this mutual molding is true of Jesus too even if he really is God. How we see Jesus is shaped by our need for a divine-human mediator. Think what truth survives mutual molding, in any religion, and how we find the truth in the middle of the system with its glorious leader.

At the core of a system that eats the world is a vague idea, often negative. In Mahayana, the core idea at first was “emptiness” and later “mind”. Most core ideas are too vague for normal people, including mind and emptiness. So, the working core of most systems that eat the world is not an idea but a quasi-person. The person can represent ideas but cannot be too definite in ideas because that would hurt the ability of the system to eat the world. If you believe in him-her, you don’t have to get the ideas fully. You can still be saved. The person does not have to be god officially. Hindus call this solution “bhakti” or “devotion”, and aim it toward gods and avatars. Christians believe in Jesus and Mary, Muslims believe in Mohammad, and Taoists believe in Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, and in a variety of super people.

In Mahayana, that person is the bodhisattva. If you are a normal person and can’t work through the odd bewildering abstruse ideas of Mahayana, you can still believe in the bodhisattva and still follow him-her.

In Mahayana, unlike Theravada, you don’t have to save yourself because the bodhisattva does it for you, just as Jesus (and Mary) does it for you in Christianity. Because you don’t have to save yourself, you can participate in normal life and should. You don’t have to avoid normal life because you are saved even while going after normal life. You should vigorously pursue normal life because normal life is the way by which a bodhisattva saves the world. Without normal life, there would be no bodhisattva. Normal life gives rise to the bodhisattva and the bodhisattva sanctifies and saves normal life. You are part of that holy relation when you get promoted in your job, send your child to an elite school, or win a lawsuit. You give the bodhisattva something to do in saving you, and the bodhisattva gives you something to live for.

Bodhisattvas achieve almost perfect awakening. The only difference between a bodhisattva versus an awakened person in Theravada is that a bodhisattva declines to disappear until everybody else has awakened too. The bodhisattva promises to work hard always to make sure all sentient beings awaken fully, before the bodhisattva disappears. A particular bodhisattva might die in this one lifetime but he-she will come again in other lifetimes as the same underlying bodhisattva identity with the same good will and the same powers. Or, a particular bodhisattva might not die in any lifetime but live on until his-her work is done. Because the bodhisattva will not fully awaken until all sentient beings have awakened, in the end, when the bodhisattva does awaken, all sentient beings awaken all at once. All good Christians go to Heaven together in the Rapture.

The character of the bodhisattva satisfies the need of good-hearted people to help others. It gives them a reason to live and a way to live out their needs. In Christianity, a good-hearted godly person can be a priest or monk while in Mahayana the same type tries to be a bodhisattva. The role of the bodhisattva gives good-hearted religiously minded people a way to live their needs without themselves causing too much trouble socially, politically, intellectually, or religiously – they don’t have to win battles, support causes, or argue in churches – unless they wish. They don’t have to save everybody right away. They

can save whoever they can save in this lifetime and then keep plugging away through countless billions of lifetimes, or forever. They only have to meditate, do good deeds on any scale suited to them, be mindful, and preach sometimes to whoever is ready to listen.

The bodhisattva and the common people make a mutual support relation, as Theravada monks do with their people. Through the bodhisattva, Mahayana makes roles for all kinds of people with different hearts and tempers, as did Christianity in the Middle Ages and as did Hinduism until recently.

The bodhisattva lives simultaneously in spiritual and worldly levels. The bodhisattva is a huge success in both realms at once. The bodhisattva can have great wealth and power without being corrupted. The bodhisattva can have spiritual purity and aloofness while still being effective among common people and people of wealth and power. The bodhisattva is like how Roman Catholics see some great popes, how Protestants see Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, and Billy Graham. The bodhisattva is what Jesus would be like if Jesus saved everybody, Jesus overcame the temptations of the Devil in the desert, and yet Jesus took over the world physically. The bodhisattva is like Saint Francis absorbing early Renaissance power struggles. The bodhisattva combines Jesus and Michael; Mary the mother and Mary Magdalene; Elvis Presley, Jimi Hendrix, John Lennon, Paul McCartney, and Kurt Cobain; or sensitive Alt rock with head-banging Metal. The bodhisattva leads children into, and out of, the jaws of Hell. You too would follow the bodhisattva into, and out of, the jaws of Hell. Who can feel any spirituality at all and not want to be a bodhisattva?

Like a bodhisattva, you can live in both the spiritual and worldly realms at once, and succeed in both. Even if you do not fully succeed in either now, your trying is justified and your life is justified.

The bodhisattva is a cosmic principle embodied, "THE" cosmic principle embodied, all cosmic principles embodied, or the cosmic system embodied. A similar counterpart to the bodhisattva is the Christian idea of Jesus as The Word Made Flesh. "The Word" in Christianity is like one of the key ideas from Mahayana Buddhism such as Buddha Mind or Emptiness. The bodhisattva is Buddha Mind or Emptiness made flesh. I dislike thinking of Jesus as embodied cosmic principle and I dislike thinking of the bodhisattva in the same way. A similar counterpart in Hinduism is the avatar such as Krishna. Followers of any of the religions can get a feel for the other religions by thinking of how their major figures are the embodiment of a cosmic principle and then seeing how major figures in the other religions are similar embodiments of similar cosmic principles.

Unlike Christianity, which has Jesus alone (or Mary and Jesus in some versions), Mahayana has many bodhisattvas although people usually focus on one as their personal savior. In theory, bodhisattvas, like Jesus, start as normal humans. Some bodhisattvas likely once were real people but now, like Jesus, their mythical attributes eclipse their old human personality.

Mahayanists think Theravada monks are selfish. The good opposite of selfish is all-compassionate or all-loving. So, bodhisattvas are infinitely compassionate. They understand everybody no matter how bad, love everybody, see everything, hear every prayer, and respond to everybody in the way best suited to that person. The bodhisattva ideal of compassion embodies an important value in Mahayana, a value which people definitely feel even if they are not a bodhisattva. People know they are supposed to be

compassionate toward others, and actually try. This value of compassion is one of the most endearing features of Mahayana.

In Mahayana, everybody will get saved in the end because bodhisattvas are all-compassionate and they work actively to make sure each individual is saved. Bodhisattvas love everybody without conditions. Universal salvation is the guarantee of Mahayana that is not in Theravada. Over the long run, you need not worry in Mahayana. The Mahayana guarantee is not just in dogma, the guarantee is manifested in the body of the bodhisattva.

The compassion of the bodhisattva is not a mistake as it might be in Theravada. The compassion of the bodhisattva is not clinging and does not lead to suffering except as some bodhisattvas share the suffering of non-saved beings. The Buddha showed similar compassion when he stayed in the world to teach. The compassion of the bodhisattva is another version of the compassion of the Buddha and vice versa. The exalted compassion of the bodhisattva implies that compassion by ordinary people is usually not a mistake either.

We should not get confused about the idea of salvation in Mahayana. Unlike Theravada and Christianity, to be saved does not mean to escape the suffering of the world. To be saved means to see that you and the bigger-than-me are the same although you are distinct in your limited view here-and-now, and to see that suffering is a normal part of it all. What you feel in salvation is like joy at the beauty, grandeur, and infinity of it all. When you are saved, you go on about your business as an aware part of the greater-than-me, knowing that you contribute to the joy of the system and to the joy of all.

The bodhisattva personifies the cosmic principles of Compassion, Salvation, and Unity with the Bigger-than-Me. The bodhisattva unites Giant Person with Cosmic Principles. That is one what the bodhisattva becomes the soft core of a religious system that eats the world.

Because most people don't get ideas that are so abstract, for most people, the bodhisattva is a person who merges with Compassion, Help, Success, Love, and Heaven. For people who do understand the abstract principles, the lesser understanding of the common folk is alright because (1) they are part of the bigger-than-me even if they don't know, and (2) they will be reborn until they do know.

If you believe in the bodhisattva idea (Savior, Messiah, Christ, or "Maud Dib"), believe the bodhisattva is the representative of the entire system, have found a bodhisattva, have a personal relation with him-her, believe the bodhisattva cares about you, believe he-she can save you, and believe you might become a bodhisattva or become like a bodhisattva, then you are saved in the general Mahayana sense. You are also part of a system that eats the world.

As with Christian saints, there are many bodhisattvas. Each bodhisattva has his-her own personality and preferences. They are like patron saints. The most well-known bodhisattva probably is Avalokitesvara, who started as a man, and then became a woman. In China, (he)-she is known as Kwan Yim, in Thailand (he)-she is Kuan Im, and in Japan is Kannon. She is the equivalent of Mary, and has similar traits. She hears ALL cries for help throughout the universe and helps all needy beings. She appears in Chinese Mahayana fantasies as the Queen of Heaven. She appears in many Chinese movies. She appeared in a delightful TV miniseries about the Monkey King; the series is a good example of Mahayana imagination

mixed with magical Chinese culture; sadly I forgot the name of the series and cannot find it. Needless to stress, she appeals to women.

Mahayanists often become more devoted to their particular bodhisattva than to the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama, any Buddha, or Buddhism. They treat the bodhisattva as their patron god much as Christians treat their patron saints as patron gods. They worship their bodhisattva, and are devoted, in the same way that Christians de facto worship Mary and are devoted to her, worship saints, or even worship Jesus. As noted, Mahayanists practice the devotion that Hindus call "bhakti".

Just as the caring of the bodhisattva does not lead to clinging and suffering, in seeking to save people, the bodhisattva does not get caught up in the stickiness and clinging of life in general. Ideally, the bodhisattva is not like a modern-day tree hugger, anti-abortion crusader, worshipper of the free market, or old-style Communist. The bodhisattva can work to save people, love them, and get vested in their welfare, without him-herself getting confused. I am not sure exactly how this happens but in theory it does. The bodhisattva is an apparent exception to stickiness. If the bodhisattva does get trapped in stickiness and clinging sometimes, remember that we are all one with the Bigger-than-Me anyway, and such minor stickiness and clinging is part of the distinction of the bodhisattva within the unity of the bodhisattva with the One.

Because the bodhisattva does not get caught in clinging even though the bodhisattva cares and he-she lives in the world, in the same way, somebody who fully appreciates the bodhisattva ideal and the truth of Mahayana does not get caught up in clinging and he-she can fully participate in everyday life. Everyday life is not a danger to someone who appreciates the bodhisattva and the system. Everyday life is the fulfillment of the ongoing work of the system.

Bodhisattva and Avatar.

In a later chapter, we will see that the Hindu avatar is similar to a Mahayana bodhisattva. To avoid any confusion, it is useful here to point out how the bodhisattva and avatar differ.

The bodhisattva has active compassion for each particular person, wants to save each particular person, and works to do so. The bodhisattva not only helps people as in curing headaches or guiding them to a good used car; the bodhisattva aims to save individual people. In this way, the bodhisattva is much like the savior Christ. The bodhisattva cares about you personally and wants you personally to awaken and succeed spiritually. In Christian terms, the bodhisattva loves you personally, wants a personal relation with you particularly, and wants you personally to go to heaven. The bodhisattva is not mostly concerned with maintaining the system except as the system allows people to awaken.

In contrast, the avatar is more concerned with the system than with individuals. The avatar is here to keep the system going. Individuals need not awaken for the avatar to do his-her job of perpetuating the system. It is only necessary that the avatar get people to feel that they should do what they should do and do it; people need not see that there is a system; need not feel that they are a part of the system; and need not fully awaken even if they do see there is a system and see the need for their role. If sometimes some people do awaken, that is fine, but not necessary. The avatar need not have a personal relation with any particular person to help the system, even if, in some cases, as with Krishna and Arjuna, the

avatar does have a close relation with the person that he-she helps, and the avatar helps the person to see that the system is real (to partially awaken). The bodhisattva is more like Jesus than the avatar is like Jesus even if all three are divine mediators.

In practice, distinctions between bodhisattva, avatar, and the Christ are not great. In saving individual people, the bodhisattva also perpetuates the system. People believe the bodhisattva is concerned with them, and will save them, personally, because of the particular features of the bodhisattva. In that case, their belief perpetuates the system. When people believe the bodhisattva loves them because the bodhisattva is the representation of Buddha Mind and shows infinite compassion to all sentient beings, that belief keeps the system going. In Hinduism, people have a personal relation with a god or avatar through devotion, or “bhakti”. People do not always think of their own personal relation as helping the system, and people are concerned directly with their own personal salvation rather than with perpetuating the system. They do their duty out of devotion to a particular god or avatar rather than because they know their duty is needed for a system, as Krishna taught Arjuna.

I am not sure how much the average Mahayanist feels the love of a bodhisattva for him-her individually and feels that the bodhisattva wants him-her individually to succeed. I am not sure how much system-maintenance overrides personal relations in Mahayana. I am not sure how much difference the idea of a personal relation to a divine mediator makes in the Mahayana support for good institutions and good government. The idea certainly is present in theory. The situation might be as in Christianity, where the idea of Christ’s love for all of us individually is present in theory but the average Christian does not feel it on a daily basis.

This variety and these nuances are typical of systems that eat the world. Although Mahayana, Hinduism, and Christianity differ somewhat in theory but are closer in practice, it is still useful to know something of the similarities and differences in case you read more on any of the religions.

Bodhisattva Pyramid Scheme.

In Christianity and Islam, you are saved to a specific goal. You go to heaven. People who work to save other people work to save them for heaven. In Mahayana, this cannot be so. Heaven is not important in Mahayana. You do not save people to heaven. Because we are all already saved, even people who don’t know they are saved, you don’t save people by getting them to see they are saved. You could do that, but you don’t have to. You could save people in the sense that you open their eyes to the fact that there is a Great System (Emptiness, Buddha Mind) and that they are a part of it. But, again, you don’t have to because they already are a part of it and they already express its operation even if, in their case, its operation does not include knowing about its operation. If people know they are already saved, know they are a part of the Great Joyous System, their joy is greater. In that case, you could save them in the sense that you increase joy. But Buddhism, even Mahayana, is cautious about increasing joy and about guiding people through the promise of increased joy. The increased joy that you get by knowing you are a part of the Great Joyous System is not really much more of an addition than simply being part of the Great Joyous System without necessarily knowing it.

You could save people in the sense that you lead them to see that we are all linked and we all should be good to each other. But, if that is all Mahayana does, it is not different from any other religion. It is no

different than the many kinds of waking up that I listed in the chapter on Theravada, and those, in theory, Theravada went beyond. Mahayana wants to go beyond other religions and beyond those other ways of waking up too.

What do you save people to in Mahayana? To some Mahayanists, that was the point. You don't save them to anything. Most Mahayanists have trouble with this approach.

Yet there is still a sense in most Mahayana that people need saving and you save them to something.

Think about what a bodhisattva does and the causes-effects he-she sets in motion. (1) The bodhisattva puts off his-her own awakening so he-she can awaken other people. (2) What do they awaken to? They have to put off their own full awakening so they can bring other beings to awakening. What do they do as a result of this (moderate) awakening? They in turn put off their own awakening so they can bring other people to awakening. They make another link in a chain. (3) What does the next link do? Those people in turn do the same thing and form a third link in the chain. (4) And so on.

This is a religious pyramid scheme. It has no point. It has no end unless you think of the final awakening of everybody at the same time in a kind of spiritual Big Bang, and most Mahayanists don't really think that way. I distrust pyramid schemes. I return to this theme later.

The pyramid scheme becomes easier to accept if we think this way: Compassion and good deeds are part of the identity of a bodhisattva. You can't be a bodhisattva unless you feel great compassion and are ready to do good deeds. It is part of the bodhisattva pledge. While teaching some people to awaken, the bodhisattva also teaches them compassion and good deeds. When students delay final awakening and instead teach more people, they also teach compassion and good deeds. When those additional people also delay awakening, they teach even more people compassion and good deeds. And so on. Along the way, during the pyramid scheme, a lot of people learn compassion and good deeds. The compassion and good deeds are a pyramid scheme but one with some kind of point. So it is a good pyramid scheme even if misguided about its real mission (compassion and good deeds rather than waking up). This accumulating compassion and good deeds is what most people think of when they think of a bodhisattva and his-her teaching. This strategy is not so different from the idea that all Christians should go out to preach the Good Word, and so through the accumulation of many small efforts, the Kingdom of God will be reached on this Earth.

Unfortunately, many Mahayanists do not think of the compassion and good deeds but of the power and magical abilities of the bodhisattva. People want to tap into that. They do not think of the humanity of the bodhisattva but make him-her into a god. Then waking up is really about becoming god-like even if it is phrased in other words such as Nirvana, Emptiness, Buddha Mind, and Compassion. I can become like a god if I teach people to wake up. How do I get them to want to wake up so I can teach them about waking up and so become a god? By tacitly getting across the idea that waking up is about becoming god-like. This outcome too is not so different from what happened in Christianity, Islam, and Theravada Buddhism, and deliberately happens in Hinduism.

More Good and Bad Words about the Bodhisattva.

Hopefully, to many people, the bodhisattva is a high-minded goal and a high-minded person. The ideal likely comes from feelings similar to the feelings that guide me to work hard to help the world and guide some Christians and Muslims to help people get to heaven. Some people really do want to work hard for other people and the world. Some people really care about other people and are willing to work for them. This caring is not bad. It does not necessarily lead to bad stickiness. What is wrong with trying to make people better even if it does not necessarily lead them to full enlightenment? The ideal of the bodhisattva is another version of the spiritual knight – and that is a good thing, not a silly thing.

As with many Christians and Muslims who want to save people, the bodhisattva ideal also is often self-indulgence. Anyone who is familiar with Christian or Muslim proselytes knows that many act not so much to help other people as to help themselves. They feel righteous, powerful, and spiritual when they teach other people and when they think they save other people. They do not save other people to heaven, they save themselves to worldly glory. Buddhists are usually less bombastic but the underlying feeling is the same. People who want to be a bodhisattva, and who think they might be a bodhisattva, feel good about being fonts of spirituality. As a font of spirituality, you have to teach (save); if you do teach (save) then you are a font of spirituality (a bodhisattva). In its own softer way, this Buddhist stance is as annoying as the Muslim or Christian who knows the one-and-only way to heaven, and the way is through him-her. I know we all want to feel like spiritual heroes but the bodhisattva way might be a deceptive way to get that. Better to teach people and help them along rather than try to save them.

The bodhisattva enables magical wishful selfish thinking that I would like to minimize in all religions. The Jew, Christian, or Muslim who has an “in” with God trades on magical wishful thinking as much as the Buddhist. It is hard to deal with salvation and spiritual power without descending into mere ugly magic. Buddhists do it as badly as any religious people, and the bodhisattva is as much a magician of success as anything else.

We need to think how to keep good ideas including compassion, and good deeds including giving advice about spiritual advance and being a better person, without misleading elaborations that grow up around figures such as Buddha, Jesus, Mohammad, Chuang Tzu, and the bodhisattva.

Quantum Leap.

“Quantum Leap” was a TV show in the late 1980s and early 1990s, starring Scott Bakula. A scientist had found a way for his soul to leap through time and space. He could do so only by entering the bodies of other people in the times and places to which he leaped. While he was in other bodies, the minds of the people lived in his body back in his lab. In the situation to which the scientist went, some severe trouble was coming such as a car crash or kidnapping. Bakula had to solve the problem there so that everything turned out well and life went on properly. When he did, he would leap out of that body and into the body of the next person to help; and so on. The program was a variation of the “Lone Ranger” and similar shows where a hero helps other people despite that the hero is in distress. I think this is the first show in which the male hero took on the identity of women and gay men. The episodes were among the best TV at the time, one of the best shows never to win an Emmy as best show (I think it never won).

Ideally, when the hero had helped enough people with problems, he would leap back into his own body and stay there. As the show went along, the hero met angel-like beings who said they would help him get

back home. However, when it came time for him to get back home, the angels led him to see he did not really want to get back to his own limited body. He liked what he was doing. He liked helping. He liked sustaining life and morality. He liked being all kinds of life and all kinds of people. That was his true real self. In fact, he was like the angels, and among the leaders of the angels. When he saw his true real self, he was willing to abandon his original body and to live forever in limbo so as to keep helping people indefinitely. This is the ideal behind the Mahayana bodhisattva and the Hindu avatar. This same ideal drives James Bond and the characters in the movie “Sucker Punch”. People “get off” on this ideal.

Neither Scott Bakula nor the bodhisattva primarily aim to keep the system going but rather to save individual people; still, by saving people, Scott Bakula and the bodhisattva do keep the system going. In James Bond movies, and “Quantum Leap”, the self-sacrifice of the hero perpetuates the system; and the system was good for the vast majority of people. England, with its class antagonism, was a better option than Russia, China, or North Korea. When the bodhisattva saves people, people do not vanish from the system as in Theravada but keeping going and keep everything else going as well.

You have to decide if this ideal represents something true and deep about the universe, something about human nature, only a theme in Indo-European culture, only a theme in Mahayana as it went through Asia, only a theme in Hinduism, or all the options. You have to decide for yourself if Scott Bakula is more like a bodhisattva or more like God come down to Earth incarnate as perpetual Jesus; or if they are all versions of the same thing.

A Bit More on Waking Up in Mahayana.

Some schools of Mahayana stress the idea of “just wake up” without any preconceived notions of what the world is, you are, what you need to be saved from, or what you need to be saved too – see previous chapter on Theravada. In theory, that is what the idea of awakening without words implies. In practice, nearly all Mahayana stresses waking up to a bodhisattva and the system that the bodhisattva entails. You wake up to become a bodhisattva and to making the system work well. You wake up to getting other people to wake up to the same thing. Some schools of Mahayana have people wake up to being close to their favorite bodhisattva and to living in a paradise forever with him-her, much as Christians do with “being saved in Jesus”. These three versions of waking up are not compatible; they are examples of the basic contradiction of Mahayana. Mahayana schools use various means to make the get along, which I don’t go into here. Zen is the exception that does stress “just wake up”. It gets away with this primarily by ignoring the other ways of waking up and not trying to resolve the contradictions.

The first two ideas of waking up – be a bodhisattva or live with a bodhisattva in paradise – form the basis for a religious pyramid scheme. I don’t describe details more than above. The mix of a pyramid scheme with waking up to a glorious person or a glorious state is common. It is what we find in most Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Gnosticism.

An Imaginary Dialog between Two Advanced Mahayanists.

As far as I know, nothing like the following appeared in Mahayana writing. I can find the ideas in some sutras but I do not cite the sutras. The ideas are mine in that I take responsibility for them but not in that I thought them up. I make fun of Mahayana and Christianity but do not ridicule them. The ideas belong as

much to Hinduism as Mahayana, so keep them in mind. The speakers need not be monks and gender is not specified. "Sati" is spoken "sa tee" but the "ee" is shorter than in American speech. The little girl in the "Matrix" movies is named "Sati". Both "Jit" and "Sati" can translate as "mind".

Jit: Hey, Sati, how you doing?

Sati: Hey, Jit, doing fine. Hope the same for you.

Jit: Yeah. I've been thinking about bodhisattvas. I think something screwy is going on.

Sati: I've been wondering the same. Tell me what you think, and we can compare.

Jit: The goal of the bodhisattva is to enlighten all other beings before the bodhisattva lets go, right? There is more than one bodhisattva. They can't all enlighten all beings at different times. They have to succeed all at once. They all have to enlighten all beings at the same time and then let go at the same time. So, imagine they all succeed all at once. Then what? Suddenly everybody wakes up. Zillions of them all at once. Then what happens to the world?

Sati: Exactly. Does the world snuff out like some simplistic Theravada candle-headed monk? Does the world start over and do the same thing, and then again, and then again? Saving the world only to have it totally snuff out, or only to start again and need saving again, does not seem like what a bodhisattva has in mind when he-she sets out to save everybody once-and-for-all.

Jit: How about this instead: The world does not ever start or stop completely. Instead, all the time, everywhere, a few beings reach enlightenment, but most beings don't, at least in this lifetime. The bodhisattva wishes to awaken all beings in their turn but not all at once right now. The bodhisattva enlightens all beings but only in the course of many lifetimes. It's like "Steady State" instead of "Big Bang".

Sati: That helps but it doesn't stop the world from ending. If every being goes out when he-she awakens, then, eventually, all beings go out. The fire smolders to a stop instead of having the bodhisattvas throw water on it a cupful at a time. It's like "the big chill" or "the big rip".

Jit: Ok, then, when beings awaken, they don't go out. That is only a bad Theravada idea anyway. They go on.

Sati: What do they do as they go on? What do they go on as?

Jit: That depends. Some of them go on as a Buddha or bodhisattva. But all of them get reborn so that the world does not run out of beings and vanish.

Sati: Why not just have new beings come into being whenever old beings go out? That would be more like Steady State.

Jit: I suppose you could do that but, then, where do the new beings come from? Why are there only so many total beings at a time? Why are the new beings necessarily asleep? If you think about it, there is not much difference between having new beings come into being versus recycling old beings. It works either way. There are still a few kinks to figure.

Sati: I see what you mean. OK. We can forget about new beings for now. Let's say old beings get recycled even if they awoke in the previous lifetime. They get reborn just like beings that have not yet awakened. But, if they get reborn, aren't they asleep again?

Jit: They are if they don't remember they were awake in a previous lifetime, which, of course, most won't. But that sleeping isn't so bad because it is not the drug-like illusionary not-worthwhile sleep of Theravada. To awaken, and then get reborn, is to become a link in a chain that runs from bodhisattva-to-Buddha-to-common-person without end – in a good way.

Sati: I get it. Everybody gets his-her turn but not all at once. It's like the world is both being enlightened and being reborn not-yet-enlightened all the time in little pieces all over. It is always enlightened and always asleep.

Jit: Yeah, I think that's okay. Anyhow, it gives a Buddha and all the bodhisattvas something to do while they are around. It means their work is never done and always worthwhile.

Sati: And always done.

Who knows but maybe all the beings right now were once awakened but we just don't see that clearly yet? Even if some of the beings have never yet been awakened, still, the world will go on as it is, in a good way, and that means the work of making-and-saving the world is done.

If the work of the bodhisattvas is always done, then what is the difference between being in the world for awakened people and for not-yet-awakened people? People are always fretting about illusion but, if you get this idea, illusion doesn't matter. It is only illusion if you let it get to you. If you don't let it get to you, but go on about your Dharma business, even if you are not yet awakened, then it is the same world for both awakened people and not awakened people. If it were a different world, that would be really odd and lead to contradictions.

Jit: I am glad we don't have to go through all the contradictions. I can follow all that logic but I don't have a knack for it like some people, and it gives me a headache. If the world is the same for both awakened and asleep people, then what is the difference between an awakened person and a sleeping person? Of course, an awakened person knows we are all born and reborn in a wheel of Dharma while the sleeping person does not right now, but so what? We all eat and sleep. We all see the same stars. We all sigh the same sighs.

Sati: Yeah. That has to be true. We were always enlightened, and now we know it. It is good knowing about it but it doesn't make you special or better, unlike what Vim thinks. Even most shitheads are worth something but I wish they would stop being shitheads all the same.

Jit: What about bodhisattvas then? If everybody is already cool, then I wonder why bodhisattvas do what they do. Of course, if they didn't do it, then we wouldn't know about the Dharma, and the upper part of our brains would go on meandering, seizing, sticking, chattering, and being obnoxious. To help people quiet down the annoying part of the mind for both help giver and help receiver. In this way, eventually a wannabe bodhisattva can figure it all out. Helping other people helps both them and yourself. Whenever you have beings who have reached sentience, you have to have a bodhisattva so the sentient beings can use sentience properly, or else sentience is more of a burden than a help.

Besides, in helping people, you have to lead people to see the value of goodness, at least most of the time. Goodness is good. So helping is worthwhile even when it doesn't lead immediately to knowing you are already enlightened.

Sati: A bodhisattva promises not to fully awaken until he-she teaches the true Dharma to everyone. But all bodhisattvas seem to know (almost) all the true Dharma already, so they likely know that other beings don't need to know the true Dharma in an intellectual sense to act according to the true Dharma and so to be awake in their own ways. What is going on here? If a bodhisattva knew all the Dharma but was just holding back until everyone was enlightened, then the bodhisattva does not know all the true Dharma. It is hard to put this in words.

Jit: I can think of a couple things.

First, when a bodhisattva says "until all true beings are enlightened", he-she doesn't mean "all at once". He-she knows that all beings really are enlightened but just don't know it yet, and he-she sticks around to help them all awaken in their turn. Bodhisattvas don't explain it that way because that way is confusing. Normal people think of enlightenment as like heaven, and they want to go to heaven, so the bodhisattva puts it in a way that makes it seem as if everybody will go to heaven all at once. There is nothing wrong with putting it this way as long as the bodhisattva knows better. A bodhisattva who knows this is more like a Buddha than a bodhisattva.

Second, it might be that some bodhisattvas know everything about the Dharma except the one fact that not all beings can be enlightened at once, and so they do dream of enlightening all beings. This seeming lack of knowledge about the Dharma is not much of a lack. It is the last small step before the bodhisattva is enlightened and lets go him-herself. When the bodhisattva figures out that not all beings can awaken at once but they are already awake anyway, then the bodhisattva has done the task and can let go.

The apparent small lack of the bodhisattva is like the little bit of sleep that allows the dream and so allows all the world to be made. Without the desire of the bodhisattva to save all beings, then the world would not be at all. When seen this way, it is not a lack but a fulfillment even better than what would be if the bodhisattva did lead all beings to awaken all at once.

Sati: We need bodhisattvas to teach us. Bodhisattvas remind us of how things work. They remind us that the world cares about us, not in the common way of caring which is finite and sticky, but in its way of caring, which is infinite and not screwed up. When we do good work, we follow the example of the bodhisattva. When we see other people as sentient beings and treat them with respect, we follow the example of the bodhisattva. When the world works through all of us to fulfill its goodness, we follow the

example of the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva reminds us how the world made itself, and continues to remake itself all the time. In effect, the world was made through the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva is the world become conscious of itself through him-her and the others, and through us together; and that is a good thing.

The bodhisattva can represent the goodness and caring of the world. The bodhisattva personalizes the world. The bodhisattva gives people someone to think about when they think want to think a more useful matter besides their breakfast muffin or how cool it would be to have those sunglasses. People can think "You've got a friend in the bodhisattva". Each particular person can think about the bodhisattva however they want. In that way, some people use the bodhisattva to focus attention on becoming a better person and getting along with the Dharma.

Jit: Doesn't that open the door to people thinking whatever they want about the bodhisattva and thinking really weird and selfish stuff like justification, black and white salvation, heaven, hell, levels of heaven and hell, grace, works, God, the Will of God, theocracy, and snuffing out like a candle?

Sati: Yeah, but what are you going to do? There really are bodhisattvas. They do care about the people. Whatever you say, people are going to get wrong ideas. It is up to the community of bodhisattvas (saints) and monks (bishops and priests) to keep all believers (church) on the right track. To do that, they have to be free to think and to share ideas (councils). They have to treasure the sutras. It is up to thinkers to stir things up when needed, like the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama did.

Jit: So, here's the situation. Because the bodhisattva tries to get everybody to awaken all at once, it can't be true that everybody can awaken all at once, or that everybody even needs to awaken. Because not everybody can awaken all at once, we need bodhisattvas to teach. Some bodhisattvas might be a little incomplete but their lack is very small and it helps everybody and themselves, and that is what they mean by holding back the last step until everybody is enlightened. I know that sounds like a contradiction but it isn't. If the bodhisattva did not try, nobody would know what is going on. Because the bodhisattva does try, not everybody all at once can know what is going on. Because not everybody all at once can know what is going on, the bodhisattva has to try. It is good if sometimes some people do know what is going on but not good if everybody all at once knows what is going on.

Sati: You know you come perilously close to logic when you describe the contradiction. The bodhisattva wants to awaken everybody all at once but it is not possible to awaken everybody all at once, at least not without destroying the world. "Damned if you do and damned if you don't"; "I am my own negation". I can overlook that small amount of logic if you can.

Jit: Ha ha. You should hear yourself too.

Sati: You do know that the Buddha did not want to set up an order of monks and nuns at all, don't you? Now both that he didn't want to do it but finally did do it makes sense too. If everybody is already plugged in, then the awakened world is not different from the sleeping world. If the awakened world is the same as the sleeping world, then everyday life is the same as enlightened life. Everyday life is enlightened life. All we need to do is live everyday life in a good way. So this is what the Buddha was really getting to. I can see now how people could screw it up and go on strange diversions. I feel sorry for the poor Buddha.

He had to set up the order of monks so that people wouldn't go off along even weirder roads than being a monk. Monks might not have it all, and might not be able to get it while they are monks, but they are needed so most people can get started along the path, so sentient beings don't abuse the intellectual part of their minds, and so the mind of the world doesn't abuse its intellectual part.

Jit: It feels good to talk this out and to talk with you. I know this is how it should be for everybody, but it can't be like this for everybody all the time anymore than everybody can awaken all at once. Still, the fact that it can't be happy and cordial all the time for everybody does not make the world worse but better. I have a kind of peaceful feeling like everything is alright anyhow.

Sati: Me too. I like talking with you too. Everything is just as it should be. We need the bad stuff to learn from, appreciate the world more, appreciate good people more, and finally wake up. I've see that, most of the time, people can turn bad stuff into good if they try and they have help. When it seems we can't turn one of our particular bad episodes into good, other people can learn from our bad experience and avoid more badness. The world can turn even badness to a greater good. If it weren't like that, then the bodhisattva couldn't eventually save all beings. If the bodhisattva can eventually save all beings, then it has to be like that. All in all, everything really is just as it should be. Ack. We are getting more than a little too sweet here.

Jit: OK. So what do we do? I don't like buying and selling; the hot sun out in the fields makes me dizzy; deciding cases in court pisses me off because most people are such short-sighted selfish jackasses; and if I have to recite one more hearth fire ceremony, I am going to literally piss on the fire and the house holder instead.

I think I will write abstruse sutras explaining all of this. If a person gets them, he-she will think he-she is really smart but really he-she is just too intellectual for his-her own good. That will keep those annoying kind of monks out of our hair so we can live properly. Maybe not-so-annoying monks will talk to us in their free time.

Sati: We could preach along a circuit like Siddhartha did. I hear a dozen monks went somewhere far to the east teaching similar ideas, including our smart friend Bodhidharma. Maybe I will help you write your sutras. If we throw in a few puzzles too, that should keep them busy for hundreds of years.

Jit: I've got an idea for a kickass sutra. If you think about it, the world is about sentient beings yearning for the bodhisattva and about the bodhisattva helping sentient beings. If you think about it, as we agreed above, the bodhisattva makes the whole world. The world would not be what it is without the bodhisattva, so the world could not be made without the bodhisattva. Nothing real and important gets made without the bodhisattva. Everything that is real and important is made through the bodhisattva and only through the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva is the body of Dharma, that is, the world. The ideas of the bodhisattva are the blood of the world. The bodhisattva is all the words of all the sutras come true in a person. Run that through your logic mill.

Sati: Thankfully, most ordinary people have the sense to ignore what we write for monks and to carry on with their lives, being as good as they can. If they listen to good teachers, the good bodhisattvas, without paying too much attention to what we write for monks, then that is best anyhow.

A Kind Word About Mahayana: The World Is as It Is.

Mahayana mystic vision and metaphysics can support the idea that the world is as it is. The world is as we see it and it is not otherwise. This idea is important in Mahayana because it overcomes the idea that the world is full of suffering, and it allows Mahayana to appeal to ordinary people who want to succeed in this world and who want to feel good about succeeding.

Mahayana holds four views about the world: (1) the orthodox Buddhist view that the ordinary world is characterized by suffering and, ultimately, failure; (2) its own view that the world is not really suffering, the world is as it is, and we can succeed in the world; (3) Mahayana used the idea that the world is plastic to imagination (Mind), and used fantastic images of gems, flowers, time, and bodhisattvas to get across the system and our role in it; and (4) [from (2) and (3)], the world is both a fantastic playground and we can succeed. Mahayana never reconciled these views. That it never reconciled the views contributed to its power as a system that eats the world. It is worth looking at the idea that the world is as it is because of its role in visions such as Zen. We can see this Mahayana idea better in contrast to Theravada.

If the awakened world and sleeping world were not the same, then there would be a difference between awakened people and sleeping people. In Mahayana, there is not. So the awakened world and sleeping world have to be the same. The two ideas support each other.

On the one hand, if an idea, practice, or work of art does not change our world then there is little point in committing to it. It is only an amusement. Great ideas and works of art change the way we see the world so much that, in effect, they reveal a new world to us, different than the world in which we had been living. In moving from the old world to the new world, we discredit the old world. We find the old world false in some important aspects. The old world is not necessarily false in the sense of a pernicious delusion but might be false by not living up to its promises and-or our needs. On the other hand, the new world can't be too different than the present world or the difference would be so bizarre that we could not handle it. Even in "The Matrix", the imaginary world is very close to the normal world before the apocalypse, and, while the real world is bleak, still it has people, food, water, machines, programs, life, and death. We have to be able to adapt. The new world must be truer than the old world. If we test the new world, and find it false, then we return to the old world although we know it is not entirely true. Sometimes people can abandon a discredited old world without having a better new world to go to right away, but not very often. We can't leave "here" unless we have a better "there" to go to.

Theravada does not have to prove the world false, only show that it is not worthwhile. But, as a matter of fact, Theravada does harshly discredit the world so as to get us to stop clinging to the present world. The world is not what it seems because people are deluded and follow illusions. People think the world is all about love, affection, planning for the future, and having an immortal soul that goes to heaven. Instead, the world is all about cause-and-effect on bundles that only appear to be a full human self; there are no selves as we think; and we do not have fully free will. As a result of seeing all this, an awakened person lives in a different world than does a person who is still deluded and asleep.

Mahayanists rejected this attitude toward the world. Mahayanists had four motives. (1) To discredit Theravada, Mahayanists had to pick apart the Theravada discrediting of the present world. They had to

discredit Theravada discrediting. They had to re-credit the present world, at least in some ways. They had to place the Theravada discrediting in the greater context of their own style of discrediting and crediting. They had to show that Theravada ideas were wrong. They had to make sure the present world is much as it seems to be. (2) Mahayanists really like this world. They think this world is much more worthwhile than Theravada did. (3) If Mahayana was to appeal to many people, it had to give them a world with meaning for them. It had to come up with a world that preserved the freedom that Theravada had given common people as people and as individuals. Theravada freedom was enough to attract landowners, merchants, soldiers, and the aristocracy but not enough to hold them. Mahayana had to give those people a world that was essentially like their everyday good world but that allowed them to tap into spiritual power too. Mahayana had to give them a world in which they could pursue success while feeling religiously correct. Christianity did the same thing in its arena, using the words of Jesus. (4) To extend (1), Mahayanists had sparkling imaginations. They had another vision of real world, a vision that mixed wonder with mundane reality. To support their glittering vision, they could not allow Theravada to discredit the world in Theravada fashion. Mahayanists might need to discredit this obvious world a bit to shift over to their alternative world but they would not need to discredit this obvious world the same way as Theravada did. To support their vision, Mahayanists still need to discredit the Theravada discrediting of this world and to re-credit this world somewhat.

The motives are not all compatible, but I don't sort out what can go with what. Mahayanists show all four motives and mix them up. There is no point speculating too much about which is the real motive.

It helps to look at how mechanistic reductionism discredits this world and how I respond. Like Theravada, mechanistic reductionism also says that everything is a matter of cause-and-effect, we are all machines, we are nothing but machines, and we have no immortal souls with total free will. I don't dispute much of that. My issue is not whether this idea is accurate but whether it is complete and whether I can live by its picture. It is accurate as far as it goes. I think it is not complete, and I know that I can't live by it. I don't have to return to a made-up world of souls and free will to live by a better alternative. All I have to do is assume the real world is much as it seems. The world is as it is. Clouds might be the product of cause-and-effect but they are real just the same. The color red might arise out of cause-and-effect but it is a color, and it is red, all the same. Love is real. My wife, kin, and friends are real. I allow qualities. I allow that various things are real. To allow qualities and a rich reality does not mean I have to live in a false world of illusion and delusion. That depends on how open-minded I am.

Mahayana takes a similar attitude toward the present world as I do but not exactly as I do. The world is not an ugly delusion. An awakened person does not reject the present world as an ugly false delusion, and that is not how he-she sees the world after awakening. After awakening, the world is as it always has been. Cause-and-effect go along but they contribute to the richness of the world. To a person before enlightenment, the wonder of the world seems like magical illusion, as science would seem to a stone age person. To a person who has awakened, the wonder of the world seems like the natural scientific play of mind, a richer deeper science. What we now think of as fantasy and illusion are really an integral part of the same world. After we wake up, we can accurately gauge the extent to which we ought to commit ourselves to anything. Thus there is no reason to distance yourself from this world. You might as well participate in this world because it is the only world. You only have to not cling to anything in this world more than it merits.

If this were the extent of the Mahayana re-crediting of this world, it would be charming. I would love to go along with this version of the re-credited world. But this version would not have caught on. People need much more. So, instead, Mahayana offered people an augmented re-credited world: The world is as it is. In addition, everybody gets saved eventually. You are part of the joyous system of many souls. You and the real world are at one with the deepest level of truth. Because everybody gets saved eventually, you can continue to do what you want as long as you want. Although the world is mostly as it seems, it is not entirely as it seems. The ways in which it is not as it obviously seems do not undermine your desire for worldly success, as in Theravada. There is a gap between the obvious real world and the real world only because the real world is more fantastic and interesting than most people can imagine. The identity between your soul and the real world is only one aspect of how interesting the real world is. The world goes on forever. To be saved is to understand the identity between your soul and the real world. Because your soul and the real world are identical, you are already saved, you only need to see this. Eventually you will see it. In the meantime, you have all the help you might need in the bodhisattva.

Mahayana could not have offered this version of the world and the self if it had not said first that the world before awakening and the world after awakening are the same world.

This view of self and world is like the metaphysical-ized Bhagavad Gita as I gave it in an earlier chapter on Codes. This Mahayana view is much like the intellectual Hindu view. Once Mahayana developed this view, it no longer differed from standard Hinduism, and so it disappeared. (Standard Hinduism did not develop until several hundred years after Mahayana disappeared, but the precursors were firmly in place, and so the argument stands.) In other places where this view was not already widespread in the culture, Mahayana because the principle vehicle for this view, caught on, and spread, in places such as China, Korea, Japan, and, eventually, the West.

Some Zen thinkers saw this situation and saw that the augmented re-credited world likely was a mistake. They developed the idea of “just wake up” without necessarily waking up to any pre-conceived ideologies. Unfortunately, Zen never got out of the Mahayana metaphysical heritage and often is mired in difficult doctrinal traps.

What is a world like where the awakened world and the sleeping world are the same? If I could convey this idea, I would be a Buddha, and I am not. According to Mahayana doctrine, it cannot be described. To me, if the awakened world and the sleeping world were alike, the situation would be much like the mystic idea that this world already is perfect and heavenly. I cannot see how the two ideas differ. I have already rejected that mystic idea in the chapter on common themes. In any case, here are some hints: (A) It is like watching a parade while marching along with the parade. (B) It is like being a character in a play in a play, like the “play within a play” in “Hamlet”. (C) It is like watching the “Matrix” world of numbers and then realizing you were also a sequence of numbers, watching numbers, and that somewhere there were other sequences of numbers watching you, as a sequence of numbers, watching them. (D) It is like watching a drug addict desperate for a “fix” and thinking that is part of it all too, it adds to the variety, and it is good in its own way. (E) It is like hearing the birds singing then realizing they are screaming at the top of their lungs “I, me, me, mine. Mine, mine, mine, stay away you shitheads, stay away”. (F) It is like realizing that the nuclear energy of the sun that sustains all life is the same nuclear energy that powered the bombs dropped on Japan in World War Two.

Think of the re-credited present world in light of the dialog above. This world is the awakened world. If the awakened world is worthwhile, then this world must be worthwhile. If this world is not worthwhile, then the awakened world cannot be worthwhile. If this world is worthwhile, then daily life is as it is even if we don't see all of it at once, and daily life is good even if we don't appreciate it all the time. It really can be that simple.

The idea that this world is the awakened world, this awakened world is alright, and so this world must be alright too, played a role in Zen. This attitude toward the world merges easily with the Taoist view of the world. Please keep all this in mind for the chapters on Taoism and Zen.

Optional: “Suffering is an illusion” and “Everything already is as it should be”.

The ideas in the slogans are fairly common. There are akin to “eternity in a moment” and “the universe in a grain of sand”. “Everything already is as it should be” is like the idea from above that we already are in heaven. I cannot here go into the ideas much more. Please see essays apart from this book. The idea-slogan that “suffering is an illusion” appears often in Mahayana and Hinduism, and it confuses people, so I say a few words. If this material annoys you, skip this section.

Within any one life, a person might suffer. But “the show must go on”; and so the system goes on. If we could see the system, then we would see that the system of many lives is joyous. The suffering of one life is needed to make the system fun to play, and to enhance the overall joy of the system, just as, for some people, rugby is more fun than golf, and rough sex is more enjoyable than nice sex. Suffering does not characterize the system as a whole. So, suffering is not really real.

If suffering is not real, then either Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha must have been confused, or he must have said the world is plagued by inevitable suffering only as an expedient half-truth to get people over a hurdle to where some people might see a bigger full truth. Mahayana chooses the second option. I don't think you can have this cake and eat it too but I leave that issue to Mahayanists.

Suffering is not real because it is only something that takes place within the context of the system and is useful primarily because it carries the system along. Nobody really suffers forever or dies forever, and whoever suffers now is likely to experience joy in a future life. Everything within the system has a place within the system and takes its place in the system. Everything contributes to the continuation and joy of the system, including suffering. Suffering is not what the world is about even when suffering contributes to what the world is about. Anything that does this cannot be true deep suffering but can be only transient apparent suffering. Real suffering is never to know that you are a part of the system and that your own suffering now contributes to the greater system. “Hold up. It only lasts for a while. You can get through it. Other sentient beings can learn by your example.”

Because suffering is only for a time and only on the surface, and everything matters in the system, then everything already is as it should be. We need not change anything, not even suffering. If we do act on a big component of the system such as suffering, then likely the system had already anticipated what we would do, and we only contributed to what had to be anyway. It is still meritorious to act against suffering because acting against suffering is as much a part of the system as enduring suffering. When we have to endure suffering, it can help to know it is not what the world is all about.

Suffering is only one part of the system, a part that the system has anticipated, and a part that plays its part to support the system. Yet the same is true of EVERYTHING in the system, including Buddhas, bodhisattvas, apple pie, mothers, Zen, preaching, caring for sentient beings, medical practice, cherry blossoms, and joy. There is no difference between them. That is one reason why Mahayanists insist the enlightened (awakened) and unenlightened (sleeping) worlds are the same. If suffering is not real, then all these other things are not real either. Yet Mahayana insists they are real. They are real because they are parts within the system and help carry it along. That is the definition of real in this world.

So suffering is real too. It is just as real as anything. Pain really hurts, at least for a while. Suffering over love or errant children really hurts, at least for a while. I have seen enough people on their death bed with cancer to know that is real. Suffering might not be as real as the whole system – but nothing within the system is. The joy that is characteristic of the system as a whole might outweigh any suffering within the system. But, still, given the rules of the system, suffering is real. It is not merely an illusion.

It can be useful to say “suffering is only an illusion” to some people to get them to see beyond the narrow confines of their life now to the big system. But teachers who use this expedient means should be careful not to set up bad discriminations between suffering and other real aspects of the world within the system. Once students see that suffering is an illusion, they must also be taught that all the rest of the world is an illusion too, and so all the world, including suffering, is equally illusory and equally real.

We would like to believe that everything we don't like is only an illusion or is much less important than everything we do like. We would like to believe that suffering is only an illusion while bravery, facing up to duty, love, loyalty, and the ability to overcome, are all really real. To think this way can point us in the right direction but it can also mislead. Try to see both at the same time.

The fact that we should not hold on to strong distinctions between suffering versus the good qualities of the world is a case of how we can go astray if we hold on to distinctions between things, between this and that, and especially between good and bad. This issue arises in Taoism and Zen. To anticipate, we need to overcome (1) aversion to distinctions as much as we need to overcome the ideas that (2) suffering is not real and is real and we need to overcome (3) holding on to distinctions. We have to see what to hold on to how and when, and what to let go of how and when.

As with much in Buddhism, you have to make up your own mind. Not even a bodhisattva can make up your mind for you.

A deistic view might go like this: The ultimate reality is God, and God does not suffer in the same way that humans suffer. God knows suffering because he knows it through us but he does not suffer as we do. Rather, God feels joy because, overall, his creation is good. True suffering for humans is not to know God; true suffering is not a broken nose or a disappointing date. Even so, within the context of what God created, given what it means to be human, humans do suffer, that suffering is real, and God knows it is real for us. If we trust God, God will reward us later, and that will far more than make up for any suffering we do now. God does not look down on us because our suffering is limited and small compared to his mind. We need to keep all perspectives in thinking about suffering. Sharing our experience in suffering and in overcoming suffering can help other people, and God wants that.

Dual Attitude: This World is all there is but there are also many Fantasy Worlds.

The contradictions in Mahayana show up in contradictory attitudes about reality, fantasy, and the world. On the one hand, this world is all there is, and it is just as it appears. On the other hand, this world is a giant fantasy, of which we see only a small part. If we were awake enough, we would see the fantasy, the true world, and see that our normal world is only a dim shadow of the deeper more fun fantasy. That is how we see eventually that suffering is only an illusion. Suffering is real in this world but not in the fantastic world of which this world is only the dim shadow. Which attitude wins depends on the writer and the audience.

Along with the dual attitude to this world comes another dual attitude about many worlds: Mahayana valued this world but Mahayana also spun out fantasies of extravagant paradises. This world is only a dim shadow of another fantastic and realer world. There are other shadow worlds. Some of those other shadow worlds surely are more interesting and better than our dim shadow world even if they are not ultimate reality either. Still, they would seem like paradise to us. Rather than aspire to final awakening, we can aspire to one of those other better worlds. In those other better worlds, we learn truer versions of Buddhist ideas and are more likely to learn spirituality. Each better world has its own patron bodhisattva. Mahayana was a giant fantasy world factory. This aspect of Mahayana can be much fun.

In theory, good teachers can use this aspect of Mahayana to teach spiritual lessons and to guide people to better belief and better action. That is part of what is included under “expedient means”. This does not happen as often as it should.

In practice, this trend toward other worlds and paradises turned into “millennial” movements. People use this world as a stepping stone to other better worlds. Teachers develop methods that people can use to go to other worlds, such as reciting sutras, chanting verses, sitting in certain kinds of meditation, eating or not eating foods, paying money, having sex, etc. People love this sort of thing, and Mahayana obliged. Kipling made fun of it in his novel “Kim” in the relation between the rich woman and the monk. Mahayana seems to be more prone to this fantasy fulfillment than other major religions except Hinduism. Christianity and Islam had their versions as well. I give a brief example below of a Mahayana version.

Another Kind Word: Everybody is a Valuable Person.

If all we are is a bundle of grasping tendencies, it is hard to feel good about ourselves. The Buddha did say that everybody is capable of working out his-her own salvation, and that idea helps us recover good feelings about ourselves, but it is not always enough. Mahayana said that we are all equal parts of a great system, and that idea does appeal to ordinary people. It makes them feel important. Mahayana supported this idea by saying we are all already the heroes of the system, bodhisattvas, even if we don't know it yet. Because the overall system is good, we are its heroes, and the awakened life is the same as ordinary life, we can pursue ordinary lives feeling justified and confident. These ideas too helped promote Mahayana. I don't think we are important because we are the hero-of-the-system in disguise, but the idea that people are important is a good idea, and I agree with it. It is worth looking at this idea in Mahayana for its own sake and because it played a part in later developments in Mahayana, in particular the development of Zen.

In trying to explain how everybody is capable and already saved, Mahayana had to provide a model for (1) individual minds, both as they are effective and as they are deluded, (2) the effective one general Mind of which every particular mind is a part, and (3) their union. Mahayana had to show how we think at several levels in several ways. In doing so, Mahayana anticipated modern analyses of the mind. It advanced the work already begun by the Buddha. Here I cannot go into the details of these Mahayana analyses of mind and Mind.

One of the most important sutras in Mahayana is the “Vimalakirti” Sutra. It is named after an awakened layman, a merchant, who knows far more than most monks and who kicks the spiritual pants off most of the Buddha’s best students. Vimalakirti is fabulously wealthy. He “owns the world” but is not owned by the world. Vimalakirti understands wordless direct transmission of the Buddhist Dharma. He knows that the regular world is also the divine world but that we are confused and do not know. Vimalakirti differs from other lay people in being quite intelligent but that is not why he is spiritually successful. Vimalakirti is successful because he knows he already is a Buddha-bodhisattva while ordinary people, including most monks, do not know. It is not clear why he knows about the world and about being a bodhisattva while other people do not know. Anyhow, his knowledge gives him power over the world, over magical spiritual beings, and over people. Vimalakirti can tap into knowledge to defeat the other students of the Buddha. Often, Vimalakirti defeats other students through his control of reality and illusion, and his ability to make seeming fantasy come true. It is an excellent example of fantasy worlds in Mahayana. The Vimalakirti Sutra is short and really fun to read.

The sutra is largely the story of Vimalakirti leading a group of advanced-but-not-quite-there-yet students of the Buddha on spiritual and fantastic adventures, and through tricks, until they “get it”. The sutra is a good example of the mixture of logic, stories, and fantasy.

A fully advanced disciple of the Buddha, Gatsyapa, is having trouble with other advanced disciples who know a lot and have spiritual power but don’t get the last important step(s) both moral and for waking up. The advanced-but-not-advanced-enough disciples don’t quite see yet how they are the great system, and so they are all other people, and so should be nice to all other people. Gatsyapa takes the not-advanced-enough students to Vimalakirti. Of course, they look down on him because he is not a monk, and, in fact, he is a merchant. They don’t know he is rich and powerful. Gatsyapa and Vimalakirti pose questions and tasks to the not-advanced-enough disciples in the form of a contest versus Vimalakirti. Vimalakirti defeats them always. More importantly, in defeating the not-so-advanced students, Vimalakirti teaches them and shows them compassion. He helps them in the only way that they would take help – expedient means – and gives them what they truly need most.

In several of the tasks, Vimalakirti shows his mastery of the great system, and his unity with it, by making the appearance of reality change. He causes flowers to rain down and jewels to sprout up. He changes the shape of being such as by making them big and small or by making humans into animals and vice versa. He causes beings to change gender.

In mixing supposed reality with fantastic events and imaginary worlds, Vimalakirti shows that Mind is the source of all reality; the Great Mind and our minds are one; and so we too can create reality according to our attitude toward reality. At the same time, Vimalakirti shows that the present reality is just as real, as

fantastic, and relevant as any made-up apparently fantastic reality. Vimalakirti both relativizes and affirms normal everyday life.

The sutra deliberately makes the point that women can excel too; I won't tell you how women do it; read the sutra and see if it supports modern feminism or not.

The excellence of Vimalakirti the layman, and the fact that he affirms the normal world, allows non-monks to have great hope in Mahayana and to find a place for themselves in Mahayana. I think the sutra is early in Mahayana, so the ideas and attitudes expressed in the Vimalakirti Sutra were part of the basic ideas and attitudes in Mahayana.

This sutra led rich people, aristocrats, soldiers, and peasants to adopt Mahayana. Mahayana wanted to make normal people the equal of monks because it was still fighting Theravada and it needed the support of the community. Mahayana succeeded in taking over through ideas such as are found in the Vimalakirti Sutra. That effect does not mean the Sutra is wrong or right, but it should lead us to look at the ideas with a grain of skepticism.

Despite all the good points of the sutra, it has some bad aspects, and, for me, the bad outweighs the good.

Mahayana suggests all we need is a new attitude. I do not like this stance. The Vimalakirti Sutra is a good example of why I don't like this stance. Vimalakirti might be clever but he is not (what I consider) a good person. He is manipulative, deceitful, and arrogant. He knows he is better than almost all the other students, and acts like it. He knows he is advanced and superior, and he enjoys it. He enjoys power. He manipulates the real world as a fantasy out of his own imagination, mostly to show off. He makes fabulous worlds of flowers and gems. He enjoys being able to bend the whole world. He enjoys his tricks and status. The Sutra officially makes the point that his tricks are all designed to bring the other students to full awakening but that is not the impression I get. The idea that his behavior is expedient means toward the enlightenment of inferior others seems like a rationalization for acting badly. Maybe strong people were supposed to act like that in India at the time but I still don't like it. If Vimalakirti represents the system of the world in Mahayana, I don't like that either. Don't get me wrong. The Sutra still is worth reading. But read it critically and not with devotion.

I think the attitude of Vimalakirti is typical of Mahayana adepts and powerful lay people, and it is also typical of adepts and powerful people under later Hinduism. The Sutra gives a good idea of the direction of Indian culture after the Buddha.

In Theravada, a person who is close to awakening is usually a monk. The fact that Vimalakirti was not a monk has always been important in Mahayana. Anybody can be a spiritual hero; even a rich powerful merchant can be a spiritual hero. Vimalakirti is a role model for people who want to succeed in this world and to be spiritual heroes too. The stress varies between how much stress is put on his spiritual prowess versus how much is put on his character as a good person.

Vimalakirti is saved and knows it. We don't see how Vimalakirti got to know that he is saved but the sutra makes it seem he realized his status as a hero fairly quickly. This situation leads to a few problems.

First, on the one hand, it takes a lot of time and effort to get saved while, on the other, it takes no time or effort but simply a realization. Second, Vimalakirti knew he was saved but most of the lay people who might use him as a role model don't know. They might use him as evidence they are saved but they don't know it or feel it in the same sure way Vimalakirti does. Lay people want assurance that they are saved even if they don't know it. Third, Vimalakirti manipulates the world with miracles and displays of spiritual prowess. The world that Vimalakirti lives in does not seem like the ordinary world that ordinary people live in. It does not seem as if the world is as it is and is not otherwise. Fourth, suppose we are all already saved. Vimalakirti is rich and powerful. Most people are not. In fact, many people are miserable. It is little consolation to know you are a bodhisattva if your children are hungry. What good does it do to know that secretly you are saved and a bodhisattva? What difference does it make?

Mahayana never solved these problems. These problems played roles in the metaphysical elaborations of Mahayana. Other religions also have problems, and their problems play a role in their metaphysics. Jesus and the Trinity in Christianity is a good example.

While trying to solve an insoluble problem, Mahayana did some good. It forced Buddhists to look at the quality of normal life. It forced Buddhists to accept that normal life can be quite good and that normal people can be intelligent and adept. It forced good Buddhists to give up pretensions. It forced good Buddhists to think about involvement in this world rather than simply escaping this world, and to think about what is good or bad about involvement in this world. It reinforced the idea that the bodhisattva loves each of us individually and works for the salvation of each of us individually.

I solve some of these problems by pushing them off on to God. There is no absolute success. We don't make it on our own although we can help ourselves. Finally God decides. I don't have to speculate on grades of people. All I have to do is assume nearly everybody has the ability to be good enough and to act well enough. My assumption is not fully true but is true enough. With the dilemma settled, I can focus on the quality of life and on getting people to see more and to act better. In effect, this is what most Buddhists do too but with more theological drama along the way. Sometimes the drama is entertaining and worthwhile but often it is annoying.

Good Result: Buddhism and Imagination.

Fantasy is not always bad. Usually fantasy is good. Mahayana opens up imagination. Theravada is not very imaginative. It can be dour. Theravada countries have imaginative religion but it is usually outside mainstream Buddhism. The people of Thailand, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, and Laos certainly do not lack imagination. Mahayana does not guarantee that Buddhism will be more imaginative but it does open the door, and it provides idea grist for the fantasy mill.

Wherever Mahayana goes, there goes Buddhism too. As with Christianity carrying along the message of Jesus, Mahayana carries along the core teachings of Buddhism: personal responsibility, a critical attitude toward the world, a critical attitude toward relations with the world (clinging), a critical attitude toward selves and their relations, respect for sentience, respect for life even when life is not worthwhile in a deep sense, respect for beauty, profound morality, empathy with people not like you, cause and effect, judging according to outcomes, analysis, not picking apart without cause, picking apart properly when useful, not bolstering without cause, and bolstering properly when useful. Buddhists, even Mahayanists riddled with

fantasy and ideology, tend to have a good attitude. While Buddhism officially declares life not worthwhile, Buddhism is one of the worthwhile things in life, and tends to make life worthwhile.

If you have an aptitude for Mahayana and Hinduism, then run with it. Imagine about many lives, systems of many lives, and the joy that goes with such systems. Imagine what it is to lose your self in order to make such a system, to lose your self in a system, and to find your self again. Imagine what it is like to really help somebody in a system. Imagine what it is like to succeed or fail in such a system. Imagine when hurt is real and when it is not. Create art about it, including painting, music, and poems. I ask two things: First, don't look down on other people as deficient in depth or imagination. Second, don't create religious pyramid schemes based on worldly success or misleading spiritual success, especially if the winners in those pyramid schemes look down on people in other religions as losers.

To really get across the idea of Mahayana imagination, I would have to tell Mahayana stories. I cannot retell a Mahayana story but I can give my short version of a story from the Lotus Sutra:

A rich man had six children. They all lived in a beautiful house in a beautiful estate. The man picked up his children after school to take them home, and often brought home their friends too. One day, he picked up the friends but did not find any of his children at school. Instead, they were all at home doing various activities that each of them liked personally such as playing computer games, watching movies on TV, cooking, playing guitar, surfing the Net, texting, and talking on the phone. Unfortunately, the house had caught fire, and the father could not run in to save the children. Instead, he called them on their cell phones to tell them the house was on fire and they should run out. But, like many children, they did not believe their father, and would not come out. Luckily their friends were still in the car. So, the father had the best friend of each child call the child, and tell the child something that would make the child come out of the burning house. One friend told a child that a great guitar wizard was playing an impromptu concert in the park, and they should go see it. One friend told a child that he just got the latest version of Xbox, and they should go to his house to play it. One friend told a child that a new Thai restaurant had just opened, and was giving lessons on how to make Tom Yam Gung (shrimp soup), so they should go learn. One friend told a child that the local artsy movie theater was showing the director's cut of "Blade Runner" that day, and they had to see it. All the children came out of the house, and all were saved. Although the phone calls are lies, they serve the greater truth of getting the children out of the burning house into the beautiful estate, where they are safe, know they are safe, and can go on to the other activities described in the phone calls when appropriate. This story is an example of the good use of "expedient means" of teaching that are suited to particular people in particular situations.

Mind of Dead Ashes.

Mahayana was right in some of its criticisms of Theravada. There is no point in reviewing all the disputes between the schools. One judgment merits repeating. When we pre-judge the world as "not worthwhile", we tend to reject it completely and blindly. When we see clinging as the root problem, we want to end clinging rather than manage clinging. Clinging is an intrinsic part of the mind. We cannot have a mind without clinging. So, to eliminate clinging, we are tempted to eliminate the mind altogether. We ask of meditation that it helps us to eliminate clinging by eliminating the mind. Mahayanists said of people who follow this path that they seek to turn the mind into a "heap of dead ashes". Trying to deaden the mind and body is the mistake that the young Siddhartha made when he first studied under ascetic masters.

Young Siddhartha had to get over this mistake before he could fully awaken. Clinging might be part of the mind but we cannot get rid of the mind while we are still alive. Somehow, we can manage to have a mind and yet not cling in ways that undermine waking up. We can manage clinging. Mahayanists said Theravada had returned to the error of trying to eliminate the mind so as to eliminate clinging, and so had subverted the progress the Buddha had made. To cling to the mistaken idea of a dead mind is still to cling, and so still to have the mind that you seek to kill. This is one of the sublime ideas that can surface in Mahayana.

From what I have seen, Mahayana meditation is just as rigorous as Theravada and just as likely to turn the mind into a heap of dead ashes. Japanese Zen meditation is extremely rigorous; sometimes ironic given its goal of spontaneity. Maybe the difference between good Buddhist meditation on the one hand, Theravada or Mahayana, versus sterile asceticism on the other hand, is the guidance of an adept master who knows how to train the mind and still preserve the mind. In this regard, I think both Theravada and Mahayana fair about equally. I think adept Buddhists in both schools know how to train the mind and still keep it lively. The difference is that Mahayana has a clear doctrine that helps to keep masters aware of the problem while Theravada masters have to re-learn the idea on their own. Mahayana masters have a doctrine that tells them about the mistake of clinging to a dead mind while Theravada masters simply get to know. I am not sure how much of a difference that makes in actual practice.

Bad Results: Spiritual Pyramid Scheme (again) that Supports Fantasies.

In the 1960s, a Mahayana monk came from Europe (likely Germany or Austria) to live on Koh Samui (Samui Island of Thailand) in the Gulf of Thailand, a short hop across the water from Temple of the Foggy Garden (Wat Suan Mohk) on the mainland in Thailand. He often visited Suan Mohk. In the large meeting hall, he painted images to illustrate Buddhism. I never met him, so I can't be sure he was a Mahayana monk, but the Theravada monks that I did meet and who met him said he was a Mahayana monk, his images are from the Chinese Mahayana tradition, and most Western monks I have met are Mahayanist. His painting is skilled. I enjoyed it, and learned from it. To sum up his vision in writing, he wrote in big letters in the painting hall: "What great joy to know there is no happiness in this world". That slogan captures a core idea in Mahayana. Mahayana is a way of having joy while pretending the world is full of suffering. It is a way of having your cake and eating it too. The quest for joy pushes aside the issue of suffering. Joy replaces happiness. If we get joy, we don't have to worry about happiness or suffering. If we can't work for happiness, we can work for joy. I think, if we seek joy like this, we have left the Buddha behind. This new path might be better than the original path of the original Buddha, but I think we need to be cautious about assuming so. The slogan quickly becomes double talk. Mahayana does express some great truths but at great danger.

The German monk was intelligent, sincere, and somewhat correct. I see what he aimed at. On lesser levels, his slogan is true, and it is an important lesson in life. If we quit trying to be super-rich, we can enjoy the considerable success we already do have. If we quit pining after the air-brushed version of a movie star, we could enjoy our present spouse and family. But this is not what the monk was after, and it is not what comes out. What comes out is something like "freedom is slavery" from the novel "1984" or the contradictory chatter of the Chesire Cat and Red Queen from "Alice in Wonderland" in which words mean what the cat wants them to mean. We have a contradiction, from which we can assert whatever we want. We can make "happiness" and "joy" mean what we want. Hucksters do that. In these cases, we

have to trust the good will of our teachers, and we have to read a lot of sutras to make sure we are not fooled and we get it right.

In Mahayana, the world is not invalidated by suffering. The world can be a source of joy. If the world is illusory, we live in illusion, but illusion is not something to worry about, illusion in itself does not cause suffering, we can enjoy illusion, and we can easily overcome illusion when finally we wish. There is nothing odd to realize, so there is no awakening except to know there is no awakening. The point is the journey, not the destination. Countless bodhisattvas work all the time unceasingly for uncountable eons to save us all, that is, to get us all to realize that we have already been saved and so don't need to be saved. We don't even have to do anything ourselves except to allow bodhisattvas to save us. We need only allow ourselves to become a Buddha. We can carry on doing whatever we want to do for as long as we want to do it because the whole game does on forever, and our brief time right now need not worry us. We are saved because we are caught up in illusion, not because we get out of illusion.

This is a spiritual pyramid scheme. There is no point other than getting other people to see the same as you do. Mahayana became a religion in which some people save some other people, so the other saved people can save more other people, and then the more other people can save even more other people, and so on. You feel good not from teaching people about the value of this world but about saving them so they can save others. Yet there is no point to the saving except to go save more people. There is no point except the continuation of mystic joy in the continuation of mystic joy. There is no intrinsic message, such as "this world is not worthwhile, it is beset with suffering and illusion". I am suspicious of pyramid schemes that have no goal other than self-continuation.

This paragraph won't make full sense until the chapter on Hinduism, but it fits here. In Mahayana, you do your duty in this life so other people can do their duty, other people do their duty so you can do your duty, and the world can go on. In future lives, other people might have the role that you do now, and you might have the role that they do now. You might be the bodhisattva now but they will be the bodhisattva later. The only salvation is that it all keeps going in the joy of knowing there is not necessarily happiness in this particular life but there is joy in the total system. In Mahayana, the bodhisattvas and Buddhas are much like avatars in Hinduism. They are like Krishna from the Bhagavad Gita, or like other avatars of the god Vishnu, the god who sustains the world. They are manifestations of one of the high gods, come down to Earth to save us and to keep us going in the self-sustaining, self-justifying joyful game that is existence. This conclusion is specifically against the teaching of the Buddha. It might be true, but, if so, then the person who believes it cannot be a traditional Buddhist. Movies about the Buddha tend to take this view. People who see movies about the Buddha ought to hold in mind that the Buddha insisted he was only human and never in any way a god or an avatar of a god.

In the chapter on Theravada, I said that particular activities in life might not make life worthwhile, but, somehow, the whole experience is worthwhile anyway. Life is worthwhile. This is not the same as saying there is joy in the whole system even if this particular life is not necessarily happy. The flavor of the two ideas is different, and the difference is important. Both Mahayana and I disagree with Theravada, and we both affirm this life, but we do so in different ways, and the different ways matter.

An annoying result of Mahayana is the development of fantasies about paradises. When people don't know exactly what it is they are saved to, and being saved so you can save other people doesn't make it

as a deep guide for this world, then people find goals in traditional kinds of salvation such as paradises. Bodhisattvas save us to paradise. As the basis for spiritual pyramid schemes, the idea “not happiness but joy” supports these fantasy kingdoms. It helps people to substitute magical formulas and gigantic housing developments in the sky for serious consideration of what this life is all about and how to live it well. Anytime we have an idea that supports bad misuse, we have to go back to the idea, look it over carefully, find where it went wrong, and correct the problem. We have to correct the problem not by adding layers of mysticism but by making the situation clearer. Here I don’t describe any particularly Mahayana paradises because it takes too long. The example below has to serve.

Fantasies about joyous religious success are found in all mass popular religion in state societies. It can be hard to tell if a fantasy kingdom owes more to bad Mahayana or to bad mass religion. It helps to see an example that is not explicitly Mahayana although I think it reveals the Mahayana spirit. My wife, Nitaya pointed out a sect like this in Thailand in the 1990s. Because Thailand is Theravada, the sect should not have had features of bad Mahayana; but it did. The sect was called “Thammagai” or “dharma body of the Buddha”. The phrase is from the orthodox scriptures but that is not relevant. The sect twisted the original meaning of the scriptures so as to support a pyramid scheme in which you could buy your way into levels of joyous Buddhist heaven. If you are not happy enough here, you can buy joy in the afterlives. Orthodox Theravada allows for heaven but heaven is not important in Theravada; it is merely a leftover idea from other times. In contrast, Thammagai stresses heaven. Thammagai heaven is divided into many levels, each with its own vision of the Buddha. You get to a particular level with a money donation appropriate to that level. The sect became wealthy. The central temple was imposing, like the central church in an American mega-church network. The sect was on its way to building other luxurious temples around Thailand. Then the governing council of Buddhism in Thailand reviewed Thammagai ideas and declared them not orthodox and not Buddhist. Thailand has freedom of religion, so Thammagai can continue in some form, but it cannot present itself as orthodox Theravada Buddhism. My wife and I were not able to study the sect enough to guess if it did more harm than good overall. My impression is that Thammagai gave lip service to good Buddhist conduct but was far more focused on the money donations of believers than on their behavior.

The Benefits of Being in a System, Both East and West.

For some decent Mahayana ideas in the West, I suggest the websites of Shambhala Press and Wisdom Press, especially books for self-help. The books by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh and the nun Pema Chodron are well-known and generally useful. Most books on all subjects are short and are written in graceful English.

Robert Thurman pioneered in presenting Tibetan Buddhism to the West. For here, we can take Tibetan Buddhism as Mahayana. As a youth with a growing interest in spirituality, Thurman writes of having the following ideas-and-feelings, and of having them validated by experiences:

- Thurman was not alone; he was part of something bigger than himself
- Something protected him
- Something guided him along, opening doors as needed, and preventing severe badness
- There were tasks for him to do to help the bigger-than-himself
- There was a plan for his life

- In serving the bigger-than-himself, he found the greatest fulfillment for himself as well
- The guiding hand was a combination of his particular karma and the greater dharma of all
- Doing all this was a source of great joy
- Tibetan Buddhism provided the best rationale for all this

These ideas-feelings are true of all major religions. For particular people that have them, the feelings-ideas are validated by experiences that reinforce their own religions; a Buddhist finds the right meditation technique where a Muslim finds the right Mosque and-or the right prayer, and both attribute that finding to forces that guide us on the right path. Where Mahayanists see karma or feel the hand of a bodhisattva in caring for them, Christians feel the guiding hand of God, Jesus, or Mary. I am not sure about Judaism as a formal religion but particular Jews do have these feelings-ideas and the feelings-ideas are in Jewish writings. Even hard-core materialists think science and morality are a bigger-than-me to which they contribute, and think that the scientific-and-moral community guides them to be a better person. Their community (scientific method practiced in a group of real people) corrects them when they are wrong, and keeps them on the right path to a greater whole.

Christians often have told me of the feeling that God guides them, helps them to find good things to do, keeps them out of trouble, gives them ways to serve, and gives them ever greater understanding. Many Christians believe God has a plan for each person. The greatest joy imaginable is finding God's plan for you and doing what God wants as part of that plan. That is the best way to worship God and to value his creation. The biggest difference with formal Christians versus Mahayana Buddhists is that Christians worship God rather than belong to a system; but that seems like not much of a difference to me when these feelings come into play.

I do not know Thurman. I cannot speak for Thurman. I guess he would not deny or belittle the feelings-ideas of any other people in any other religion. I doubt he would even say he was more accurate than other people or religions. He simply reports what works for him and what feels right to him. He acts from humility and from good-hearted useful religious relativism.

The fact that this mindset (stance) appears in all major religions does not mean either that it is true or false. It is not true just because it is common; the belief in ghosts is common but still false. Likewise, this stance is not false just because it is widespread and fills the needs of vulnerable human beings. This stance is neither true nor false just because the basis for it evolved. We have to judge what parts are true and what not.

I have already denied karma previously in the book, and I have denied in this chapter that bodhisattvas secretly guide us. I doubt God has a detailed secret plan with a goal for each of us. I doubt God interferes directly in the world to help individuals, nations, or religions, although he might intervene a little bit sometimes. Rather, God, through evolution, gave us enough natural abilities to enjoy the world, get along pretty well, and be good people. God set up the world with enough variety and opportunities so we each can make lives that are meaningful to us and serve God. I try not to mistake the richness of the world, and the cleverness that God-through-heredity gave me, for direct divine intervention in everything. I try to enjoy the results when I can, and to use the richness and opportunities to good ends.

The Mahayana vision in general is like Thurman's feelings-ideas. If you feel any of these feelings, similar to Thurman about being part of a big system, or even have ideas more in line with what I think of being a small player in God's carefully crafted world, there is nothing wrong with you, and you have nothing to be ashamed about. Think what might really be true and not true. Think what difference it makes to what you do or don't do. Would you do what you do anyway even if you were not guided by the hand of God or by the dharma? Would you act according to the right principles anyway? You can still find a role for God, dharma, or science even if you base your acts on right principles.

Mahayana and Good Institutions.

Like Theravada, Mahayana does not intrinsically give rise to good ideas and institutions such as respect for law, the Western value given individuals, teamwork, democracy, science, charity, schools, hospitals, social justice, and taking care of nature. Mahayana can understand their value when it sees them, and it can be interpreted to support the institutions once they are set up. Mahayana can lend itself to good government and society once they get going. Japan and Korea are examples. It is up to the people of particular countries to value proper institutions, set them up, and to find in Buddhism the right attitudes to keep good institutions going. I think that will happen in most Buddhist countries, even in China where Buddhism supposedly died out, and even in Burma (Myanmar) where socialist tyranny has tried to stamp out Buddhist rationality for many decades.

Mahayana, Bodhisattva, Formal Christianity, and Jesus.

This section is not a comprehensive comparison of formal Christianity with Mahayana. This section only makes a few points of comparison. Formal Christianity, Mahayana, and Hinduism are systems that eat the world. I do not explain here how. In this section, I mix items from formal orthodox theology, Christian and Mahayanist, with items of common belief. I do not pick silly items of common belief. I do not defend my choices here.

Either formal Christianity or Mahayana might be true despite being a system that eats the world. It is not likely both can be true but I don't argue here which might be most true. I am already on record declaring that the teachings of Jesus are the most important. People with good intentions who argue that "both are true" mean the points that the systems share in common are true, such as we should be good to each other and that God and the Dharma both care for us and guide us. You have to decide what the points are and how true they are. You have to decide if these true points make either Christianity or Mahayana as a system true, true enough, or more true than alternative systems.

Keep in mind these different views of Jesus:

(1) The idealized Jesus who is fully God, and who is perfect in all ways. This view of Jesus might be true. You have to decide.

(2) The human Jesus of official Christianity who had difficulties but overcame them because he was God and was effectively perfect. This Jesus is included in Jesus (1) unless otherwise stated.

(3) The real human Jesus from my point of view, who was human, made mistakes, sometimes erred, but still managed to convey great truths and start a great movement.

A large share of the Jesus that we think about was not the real historic Jesus but is the mythical idealized Jesus of a system that eats the world, like the bodhisattva. Formal Christianity holds that all these Jesus-es coincide exactly.

The fact that both Jesus and the Buddha were real persons does not bear on these issues. The fact that Jesus was real while bodhisattvas are largely made up might bear on these issues in another account but not here. The fact that Jesus might have been resurrected does not bear.

Above I said both Christians and Mahayanists feel they are guided by something bigger-than-me, and this common feeling makes the religions more similar than different. This feeling can be part of a system that eats the world by keeping people part of the beliefs. I cannot here go into detail how this effect happens in general or in each of Christianity and Mahayana.

In theory, Mahayana and Christianity differ in this: In Christianity, people can go to hell forever. Most people are not saved. Only a few people go to heaven to be with ideal Jesus. In Mahayana, everybody is saved eventually; everybody awakens eventually even if only to the fact that they have been saved-and-awakened-as-part-of-the-Dharma-system all along. Awakening feels good, even better than heaven. Some people might go to heaven or hell for a few lifetimes but eventually everybody awakens, and then heaven and hell are irrelevant.

In practice, there is less difference between the two religions. Nearly all Christians believe they and their families will go to heaven to be together and to be with ideal Jesus forever. Only really bad people go to hell such as Judas, Hitler, popes if you are Protestant, John Calvin if you are Roman Catholic, current (2016) politicians that we hate such as Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, people of ethnic groups that we hate, and people of religious groups that we hate. So, in effect, almost everybody is saved. Jesus did not come to save only formal Christians; Jesus came to save the world. Some Christians do believe in hell, some people do not believe in hell including some Christians, some Christians (and Muslims) in effect worship the Devil through fear of him although they think they worship God, and some Christians “spout fire and brimstone”. Likewise, some Mahayana teachers spout the horrors of being almost-forever a stupid un-awakened “hungry ghost” (“pret”), who clings to this and that, and never feels satisfied. But most people, in Christianity and Mahayana, do not much fear a bad fate personally or for their families. So, the theoretical horror is there and it is real for “them” but not for “us”. We all get perfectly saved even if we are not perfect.

I have said already what I think: many people are not saved even if they don't go to hell. Most people meet God and then vanish.

Both Mahayana and Christianity have elaborate systems and theologies.

Both religions need intermediaries to help people through the maze. Both have a divine hero that can transcend sin and-or karma to forgive people and get them to heaven. In both, the divine hero is not quite identical to utmost reality – utmost reality is God-the-Father in Christianity and Dharma-Buddha-Mind-

Void in Mahayana. But that small difference doesn't matter. People have more to do with the divine intermediary than with ultimate spiritual reality. In practice, I see little difference between idealized Jesus, a great bodhisattva in Mahayana such as Kwan Yim, and a great avatar in Hinduism such as Krishna. (I avoid the question of whether, as God, Jesus is identical to God-the-Father.)

Christianity, Mahayana, and Hinduism have an army of secondary helper figures such as saints; religious heroes; founders such as Paul, Peter, Wesley, and Luther; lesser avatars; and lesser bodhisattvas.

The most important way that people relate to the divine intermediary is worship or devotion. People pray to the divine mediator. People conduct ceremonies with and through the divine mediator. People seek a personal relation with the divine mediator.

The divine mediator is the ultimate principle manifested as physical presence. The divine mediator does not merely represent the ultimate reality through a mere a physical "spokes person" but actually is the highest reality in physical form. There would be no physical reality without the divine mediator. All things are made by and through him-her. It is no clearer how this happens in Mahayana than in Christianity but it is just as certain.

The mediator is so vague that we can project onto him-her whatever qualities and character we wish. He-she is everything to every person. He-she is loving, wrathful, kind, stern, indulgent, strict, a teacher, a punisher, a judge who sends us to hell, a teacher who leads us to heaven, a parent, sibling, child, lion, or lamb. He she can easily validate whatever ideas we have about religion and the world because we can project onto him-her whatever evidence we need to validate our ideas. We make him-her into us.

The mediator figure sacrifices him-herself for us. The mediator figure makes an ultimate sacrifice. Only that big of a sacrifice can save us, and that big of a sacrifice is sure to save us. In Christianity, Jesus lets himself be crucified, but Jesus sacrifices more than that. He endures stupidity, taunts, hatred, jealousy, stubbornness, vindictiveness, and all the badness hidden in human souls. The bodhisattva endures as much, and contrary to what Christians misunderstand, bodhisattvas do sacrifice their lives for us. Stories in the sutras feature bodhisattvas giving their lives so common people might have their lives and might progress spiritually. Bodhisattvas allow themselves to be eaten by tigers or fabulous beasts, bitten by snakes, and torn apart by nasty kings. More importantly, bodhisattvas deny themselves final release so they can stay down here in the ugly world with us sinners, thereby win us all, and thereby make this world the real heaven. They stay down here a very long time, much longer than Jesus did. This long painful residence among the many ignorant often vicious beings is at least as hard as dying on a cross.

The next point needs a prior point: The potential in Christianity for good deeds in themselves, for doing the right things for the right reasons, is undercut by what Christians actually do and why they do it. Christians theoretically have specific tasks as a result of believing in God and Jesus. Christians need to follow the points outlined in Chapters One and Two. Christians need to follow the Golden Rule, and to treat everybody as a near neighbor. Sometimes Christians teach, provide medical care, build dams, protect forests, carry out offices honestly, etc. but they do all as specific acts of true Christian caring. In fact, far too few Christians really do this even if Christians as a whole do this better than others. Rather than do what Jesus told us to do, most Christians simply worship Jesus. Christians think that worship can make up for not doing. Christians substitute worship for doing the right things for the right reasons just as

Christians accused Jews of substituting temple sacrifice for a right heart. Buddhists don't have the duty of compassion spelled out in specific acts and attitudes.

Because of the real behavior of Christians and Mahayanists, the religions tend to be pyramid schemes. Believers act so as to go to heaven. They espouse general good principles such as "love your neighbor" and "compassion" so as to go to heaven but they do not do the specific acts that make the ideals more than empty. When they do specific acts, the acts are merely means to heaven, not good things done for the right reasons, not ends in themselves. Believers recruit others people so as to make other people like themselves and to win points for heaven. In Mahayana and Christianity, you should go out and recruit. In Mahayana, you try to be a bodhisattva and to bring more people to enlightenment. In Christianity you bring more people to see that Jesus is God and to worship idealized Jesus. "Believe as we do, do as we do, go out and get others to believe the same and do the same, and you will be saved. Worship as we do and you will be saved." There is nothing in particular you have to do out of belief. In some Mahayana, people can go to heaven simply by chanting the name of a bodhisattva or chanting a verse from scripture. It helps you if you recruit others to chant. In Christianity, you go to heaven if you eat the body and drink the blood of Jesus, and only that way. It helps a lot if you get others to drink the blood and eat the body. Rather than think about what you really need to do or don't do, and rather than scare potential converts with the need to do more, you can simply worship earnestly and get other people to do the same.

A fun way to see the difference between doing for its own sake because it is good versus doing good to go to heaven is in the movie "This is the End" with Jay Baruchel and Seth Rogen. Despite silliness, the movie is serious and well done. The fact that Jews use specifically Christian themes from Revelations to make the point does not matter.

Christians stress that Jesus was a real person. Bodhisattvas were not. In fact, idealized Jesus (1 and 2) hardly differs from a Mahayana bodhisattva. Even pseudo-human Jesus-(2) of official Christianity differs little from humanized bodhisattvas in stories, heroes who have to struggle with character faults, overcome their faults, and so carry themselves onward and carry humanity along. Although Jesus-(2) was a real person while most bodhisattvas were imaginary, still, in all, because real Jesus is assimilated to idealized Jesus, he did not differ from them much.

But in real life, Jesus (3) differed. Jesus was a great prophet but also had limitations and made mistakes. Despite limitations and mistake, Jesus conveyed truths. His limitations and mistakes are not a sign of greatness, as in Romanticism and the modern day cult of the flawed hero or anti-hero. His limitations and mistakes were not something to be overcome for the sake of greater advancement both for himself and humanity, as in Mahayana. We can gain insight and help from the teachings of Jesus but cannot expect to use him as an intermediary to make everything automatically all right with us and God. We have to work on that ourselves.

Mahayanists would see the pro-active compassion of Christianity, from the teachings of Jesus, as hurtful clinging and a mistake. I don't see it as a mistake or as clinging. It can be a mistake. It can be self-serving and can support zealotry if it is misused. But it need not be a mistake. When done with open eyes, empathy, sympathy, consideration for other religions, vigor, commitment, and without hurtful zeal, it is only what it is. When done in the spirit in which Jesus taught and the early Church taught, it is a great

good thing. This is what modern people all over the world in all religions work toward even if they don't know where it came from.

Moreover, it is hard to see Christian dedication to compassion and good works as a clingy mistake when that is precisely the vow of the bodhisattva. Certainly it was not a mistake for Jesus, and it can hardly be a mistake for great Christians such as apostles. It is not worth deciding if it is a mistake for Christians in general when it is the lifework of the bodhisattva and all Mahayanists who aspire to be a bodhisattva. So, effectively, there is little difference between the honest Christian who deeply wishes to help others and the honest Mahayanist who deeply wishes to help others. If it is not a mistake for the bodhisattva, then it cannot be a mistake for Jesus, Christians, and people in general. For Christians and Mahayanists, caring for others is not a mistake but the fulfillment of the way the world works.

Given the strong commitment to a hero at the center in both Mahayana and Christianity, the big difference between Mahayana and Christianity is in the vagueness of "compassion" in Mahayana versus specific-enough commands of Jesus. In Mahayana, you can get away with vague well-intentioned self-serving ideas of compassion. In formal Christianity, you can get away with simply worshipping Jesus (1) and (2). In following Jesus properly, you cannot. You must see in terms of the Golden Rule and you must act accordingly such as by giving to charity, helping neighbors, respecting "applies equally", and promoting rule of law. Christians try to get by with simple worship and a vague idea that they love their neighbors but that is not enough and they know it is not enough. While this distinction between Mahayana and following Jesus does not seem like much, in fact, it makes all the difference. This is why Mahayana does not foster good institutions on its own. I take up vague "compassion" versus the teachings of Jesus in the chapter on Hinduism so I don't go into it more here.

Thankfully, Mahayana, like Theravada, can accept and nurture good institutions when it sees them.

When faced with major religions that (a) have so much in common, and in which (b) believers can get by with worship and with vague feelings of loving neighbors, but (c) the religions are not exactly alike, as in (c1) orthodox Christianity's view of Jesus versus (c3) orthodox Mahayana's view of the bodhisattva, we tend to make a few typical mistakes.

(1) We tend to "write off" both the religions. Both cannot be literally true. So, both must be fully false. We dismiss them both as figments of the evolved imagination brought out under conditions of agrarian state societies and carried forward into our world. They are self-serving delusions. They are the "opium of the masses". They are tools of control by powerful people over the masses. We see priests as self-serving, out for the benefit of themselves and their extended families.

While it is perfectly natural (evolved) to dismiss similar-but-not-identical idea systems, especially when they arise under similar conditions, and when both cannot be fully true, to do so is absolutely wrong. We cannot use "nothing but" this way. We cannot dismiss out of hand. This attitude of dismissal is another layer of self-serving. People with this attitude often think they are smarter than everybody else, when, in fact, they are only half-clever. They take this attitude from the wishes to feel better than everybody else, and to feel justified, just as they accuse the priests.

(2) It is also wrong to say one religion is absolutely true while the other religion is absolutely false. To defend Christianity entirely and to condemn Mahayana entirely, or vice versa, is as wrong as to dismiss both out of hand. We do not have to fall into wishy-washy useless relativism but the attitude of “us versus them” is hurtful.

(3) Common features of the religions are not necessarily true because they are common or necessarily false because they are common. Sometimes the common points are wrong; sometimes they are wrong because they are common imaginary misleading wish fulfillment. Sometimes common points are correct because they come from wisdom. Communism and fascism both have many points in common but that does not make those points items of good government or bad government. We have to look at the points to decide their value for good government. If we hear two advertisements both claim they can save us on our car insurance, that fact does not mean one or both are necessarily lying and it does not mean both firms are bad to buy car insurance from. One has to be lying but the other might still be worth buying some insurance from. Some common points of fascism and democracy really are good for government in general such as the need to work together.

I find it hard to see how a Christian could understand the construction of the Mahayana bodhisattva and not wonder how Christians had constructed Jesus the Christ – and a good Christian should not look at the bodhisattva as merely a demonic imitation of the Christ. In the same way, a Mahayanist should look at what the Christians did to Jesus and wonder how Mahayanists construct bodhisattvas. What is true and useful about the common points and what is false or bad?

(4) Rather than focus on what is common, instead believers in one religion focus on the few distinct points and make those overly-important. Christian focus on Jesus as God while Mahayanists focus on the idea that we are all saved but don't know it. The distinct points might not be true regardless of the common ideas. Both sets of distinct points might be false. Even if some of the distinct points in one religion are true, they might not be important. Even if Jesus is God, what matters is what he wants us to do. Even if we are all saved in Mahayana, what matters is how we act as good people and good citizens right now, what kind of societies we build right now.

The better approach is careful assessment. In the past, many smart dedicated fairly honest people from two places came to similar conclusions, especially about compassion and about the specific acts that go along with being a good person. In the past and present, many smart dedicated fairly honest people followed them. Forget about all the bad stuff and self-serving stuff. What is correct about the ideals and ideas of the religions? How did they come to these ideas and ideals? What can we, now in our situations with our knowledge, fairly believe from what they offer? What can we, as aspiring good people, take from them? Mahayanists and Christians before us, as real flawed evolved people with real needs and active imaginations, acting in good faith, with good intentions, and not from bad intentions, made mistakes. What mistakes did they make? Can we avoid their mistakes? Can we avoid the mistakes and still have something plausibly real to hold on to? We will make mistakes too. Can we use their mistakes to avoid our own mistakes? In making this assessment, it is alright to adopt some supernatural.

I find it much easier to adopt the full teachings of Jesus, including specifics about attitude and acts, when I think of Jesus as Jesus (3) (only human) rather than Jesus (1) or (2). I find it easier to assess religions honestly, both the good and bad, when I think of Jesus (3) rather than Jesus (1) or (2). Thinking primarily

in terms of Jesus (1) and (2) blocks my mind and keeps me further from what Jesus wanted and from God. Having done my own assessment accordingly, I prefer the teachings of Jesus, combined with practicality and Western ideals, to any alternatives. But I have learned much from alternatives. I urge people in all religions, including Judaism, Islam, Theravada, Taoism, Confucianism, and Zen, to look past their versions of (1) and (2), at least for a while. I am pretty sure Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha and wise people in all religions would agree.

Not for Smart Weird People Only.

In my version of the teachings of Jesus, you don't have to be very smart or educated to get the basic ideas and to do what needs doing. You don't need an unusual character although it helps to be a little stubborn and helps to be a lot compassionate. Everybody can understand. Everybody can do to some extent. In the modern affluent world, we can do through giving and through volunteering even when our own immediate communities are wonderful safe clean little heavens. Neither being smart nor educated are necessarily assets or liabilities. They usually help, although sometimes they can cause problems in the short run. They have helped me. But they are not necessary. When we face God, he will not give us an IQ test, personality profile, catechism test, or ask for our resume. He will ask what we did with our talents to make the world better.

In practice, in formal Christianity, Theravada, Mahayana, and Hinduism, and too often inadvertently in Taoism and Zen:

(1) You have to deal with a lot of difficult ideas. It helps to be really smart, clever, well educated, and have a monkish intellectual argumentative character. Sometimes it helps to have a mystic personality. It seems you cannot succeed unless you master and-or overcome the abstract ideas of dharma, karma, rebirth, no-self, mind only, etc. That is why people need many lives. Even when people do master those abstract ideas and develop the right personality, it is not entirely clear what you should do afterwards other than teach other people to master the same abstract ideas.

(2) You get joy from belonging to an amazingly complex convoluted beautiful system. The system is hard to understand. Not everybody can see the system or get the joy.

(3) It is theoretically possible to wake up directly without dogma but very people actually do this or can do this. If you want to get over dogma and deal directly with waking up, even that task is really hard and requires the right kind of person to succeed. It is not clear if it takes the right kind of person to do this as to succeed in a minefield of difficult ideas, as in point (1).

Contradicting me, Theravada, Mahayana, Hinduism, Taoism, and Zen would insist that, at least in theory: (1) You don't have to be smart or well-educated. (2) Anybody can see the great system and feel the joy of being in the great system. (3) Even simple-minded uneducated normal people can awaken. It is not hard to awaken. Mahayana rose was partly because it could explain how lay non-monks can succeed. To some extent, the movement in Hinduism called "bhakti", or "devotion", arose to address these issues, as we will see in a later chapter. Despite what they say, they are still wrong. In fact, they still wrestle with many difficult ideas, seek great joy in a system, and insist that only special people can succeed. Waking

up is hard to do. Even Zen masters think only special people can succeed, and they take more-than-a-little pride in being a special person who succeeds.

When we die and face God, likely few of us will get great praise. That is not the same as saying few of us have succeeded, most of us have failed, we need many lives to succeed, or God will give us many lives to help us succeed. What happens is what happens. Many of us will be satisfied with how we used our lives. All of us will feel we could have used our lives better, and all of us will feel acutely our failures. But that is not the same as saying we, in effect, failed because we did not have some great insight about a wonderful system. We can succeed enough even if we never succeed perfectly. I do not know how God deals with people who do succeed only just enough or how he deals with people who do not succeed enough.

It is a mistake to think people need to wrestle with complicated ideas to succeed. Nobody can master the complicated ideas of any of the great religions. You should not have to be a combination of Einstein and a Supreme Court Justice to succeed. Religion should not be this hard, convoluted, or indirect. We need clearer simpler ideas of what is going on and what to do. We can have clear simple ideas without fooling ourselves and without falling into misleading harmful clinging.

When Christianity, Islam, or Judaism insist that people believe particular difficult points of dogma so that people can be justified before they face God, those religions make a similar bad mistake. The idea of the Trinity is just strange, and there is no way to make it clear and believable. If we have to explain it to God when we die, we are all doomed. If we have to believe Mohammad was the greatest and last of the prophets, than most of us are doomed. There is no clear guidance about just what you can believe or not believe when you face God. I would rather people not believe foolishness. But I think it is better to stress good deeds with a well-intended heart than any points of dogma.

You should not have to be a strange religious genius or a mystic to succeed, that is, you should not have to break through all dogma mysteriously so as to act well and to succeed enough. Very few people are that kind of person. I think most of us will not get many lives so we can gradually transform into that kind of person. We have to act as best we can on the basis of the principles (dogmas) that we have now. As long as the principles are good, acting on that basis also is good enough. If, as we go along, we learn to overcome our dogmatic weights, then all the better.

I understand what religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism mean by waking up. On the simplest level, they mean seeing that we are not selfish mechanical bastards-bitches but sentient moral aesthetic beings who should have empathy and sympathy. We should understand “do unto others” and “applies equally”. Life is not simply what it appears to be. All religions teach this kind of waking up. When people wake up to that vision, then people feel joy as well as obligation. If that joy were what Buddhism and Hinduism were talking about, then I would have no problem telling people to seek the joy that comes of waking up. But Buddhism and Hinduism want more waking up and, with Mahayana and Hinduism, they want more joy. The more is unreasonable and causes problems.

I know people need rewards to act well. Yet, if you can understand a system and feel the radiating joy, then it seems you should also understand that seeking joy is not what it is all about, and you should not teach that idea to other people. If you seek joy, even in a good system, instead of doing good for its own

sake, then you act badly. You act according to Pascal's Wager (see chapter on codes) rather than act well. If you need to wrestle with abstract ideas or be a religious genius to see the system or feel the joy, then the problem is even worse.

On the one hand, we have following abstract difficult dogma, pursuing the strange joy of belonging to a huge system, or trying to wake up in a way that is very hard. Only unusual people can even think about doing any of this. On the other hand, we have a clear simple idea of what is going on and what you need to do. This way can bring the simple joys that are part of common human life and sometimes can lead to the joy of doing outstanding deeds and having great ideas. Everybody can do the basic part of this. It is not perfect success but it is success enough. If you have more than average ability, then use it. If you have only normal human ability, that is enough. To me, this difference between needing only what is already given to nearly all of us versus having to become superhuman is the biggest difference between following Jesus versus following any other teachings.

More on the False Joy of Systems and on Accepting Smallness.

The ideas to which I respond in this section are also in Hinduism.

From "Lord of the Rings" by Tolkien: Frodo offered the One Ring to Galadriel. Galadriel knew that she, likely alone on Earth, could use the One Ring to defeat Sauron, the great evil. She could be Queen of the world, and rule in apparent goodness. She refused. She said: "I diminish and remain Galadriel". She knew, if she ruled, all beings would love her, yet be slaves and live in fear. The Ring would change her and change the world even if all appeared well. She did not want to set herself up as the hero of her own system, a hero that must make a bad system despite good intentions, as must all would-be rulers of the world. She would not put the world in danger in the name of saving it. Better to risk freedom. Sam also carried the Ring for a while. Sam dreamed of being the world's great gardener, and of setting the whole world aright through sound gardening tenets writ large. Sam had the sense to know it was all a delusion of the Ring. Frodo could not throw the Ring into the fire because he came to believe he could be the hero of his system for the world – the circle of fire. It is dangerous to be the hero of your own world system even with all the good intentions in the world.

You can do a lot of good without being the hero of a great system. You can still work hard to make the world better and still work hard in a great cause. You can still fight evil. In seeking to be the hero of a great system, you will undercut your ability to do good and you will support a bad system.

The bodhisattva is the would-be hero of a great world system. The world system is made by Mind or Emptiness. The bodhisattva represents Mind and Emptiness. So, the bodhisattva is the hero of a world system that he-she makes. Because the bodhisattva is the role model for Mahayana, all Mahayanists, indirectly or directly, seek to be heroes of their own system that eats the world. The system is not overtly about power but neither would Galadriel's intend power at first. Certainly Vimalakirti takes much joy in demonstrating his power. The most efficient power is not control over bodies but control over the mind and over hopes, including the hope for salvation-and-success for you and your family.

Here are some silly examples from my life to show that I have some sense of the mysticism suitable for Mahayana, I am not simply defending God and Jesus because I grew up in a Christian nation, and I am

not simply reacting against something I have no feel for: I have: mind-melded with a bug; floated for a long time on sparkling waves; felt the illusion of time; and felt the endless variation of the world and endless interest of being. In Mahayana and Hinduism, after the present joys have been appreciated, more joys will come; what seem like troubles now are not really troubles but are only joys in disguise; more outright joys and joys-in-disguise will always come in endless variation.

I understand “not discriminating”. When we seek heaven, we imply hell. When we know that, we know it is better not to have either extreme. We make problems when we discriminate, such as we need ugliness to appreciate beauty or need badness to appreciate goodness. Splitting hairs leads to badness and suffering. I understand Emptiness; I know Emptiness is not simply nothing; and I know how we can think that all things flow out of Emptiness. I know we help to make reality. I know that a Mind lies behind it all, and that our minds are like the great Mind behind it all.

I understand: being part of something bigger than myself; the idea that I am a reflection of God; the idea that God sees the world through me; the idea of an original “Buddha Mind”; the idea that I might be the same as it; and the “Storehouse Memory” which holds all things in a vast puddle of indiscrimination, and from which all things flow.

I understand: how we can be both this particular me and the whole all at once; how the individuals does not lose his-her identity on being one with the whole; and how the whole does not get broken by dividing into particular individuals. I know how we can think of the individual, whole, Buddha Mind, Emptiness, and the Storehouse Consciousness as all the same thing.

I understand how suffering can seem more than it is, that a lot of suffering is temporary, and that the joy we feel often more than makes up for the suffering. I see how the joy that Sally feels seems as if it can make up for the suffering of Bob.

I understand the idea that I might, in a way, be God. The idea of being God goes well with the ideas that we are part of a system in which joy flows out endlessly and that we should not discriminate.

Yet I reject that we live in a system of endless joy and that really we are God, Emptiness, Dharma, or Mind. The world is not one whole homogenous indiscriminate pudding. We must discriminate “this from that”, part from whole, and creature from creator, to live at all and to live properly. I accept differences between good and bad, bad and evil, beautiful and ugly. I reject the idea that not discriminating can lead us to a system of joy in which we are the eyes of God and the heroes of the system.

I am sure most people who hold the bodhisattva ideal intend well and have a good character. To wish to save all people, even at great cost to yourself, reflects a good person with good intent. Any Christian who does not understand this kind of person and this goal should not call him-herself a Christian. Yet you can have a good character and high ideals and still be wrong.

This situation is like that of a “saint” in Christianity. Good people give up trying to be a saint. Rather than set out to be a saint, just do what you have to do, and don’t worry about sainthood. Whether you achieve sainthood is irrelevant. Sainthood is something other people think about. If you did what you could do, that is enough. There is nothing better. If what you could do saves some system, then fine; if it does not,

then fine too. When you work on your tasks, you will find the size that you are is the right size. Rather than trying to be the hero of your own endless joyful system, simply do what good you can right here right now. Diminish and remain yourself. You will do much more good that way.

The situation is like that of a brave soldier who is labeled a hero and given a medal. The soldier likely did not think of him-herself as a hero when acting, and usually does not like it now. He-she did not do it for a great system, to save the world, or to be the center of a great system, but usually to save friends nearby. The soldier endures a label because of the need for role models.

Saints, soldiers, and anybody, still can work hard to make the world better and still work in a good cause. Sometimes we have to work in a worldwide cause such as fighting evil, fighting fascism, figuring out capitalism, fighting poverty, or helping nature. But that does not make us heroes of our own great system anymore than Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt were heroes of their own great system and were bodhisattvas.

In the Indian tradition, in both Mahayana and Hinduism, a great person can either totally renounce the world or totally conquer it. I deny either extreme. To not renounce the world does not mean instead that you must try to conquer the whole world. To not conquer the world does not mean instead to renounce the world entirely. People who try to conquer the world often find themselves so at odds with reality that, in effect, they renounce the world. To renounce the world is too often an indirect way of trying to conquer it, as with the bodhisattva. The two poles can be the same thing in disguise. Instead, simply accept your place in the world and the limited good that you can do if you try hard to make the world better. That is my idea of the middle path in this situation.

The bodhisattva effectively conquers the world by first renouncing the world and then by delaying his-her own awakening (renouncing his-her renouncing) so as to save everybody. You cannot indirectly conquer the world by renouncing the world for yourself but conquering it for others. You cannot use other people as an excuse to conquer, not even if you are a good person with good intentions. All terrible tyrants think they are doing the world a great favor. (To avoid this mistake, this trap, and the badness that flows from it, you likely have to accept that not everybody is saved.)

(The Buddha thought life was not worthwhile ultimately; but his stance does not mean he renounced the world in the same sense as did the ascetics that he rejected or as a bodhisattva delays final awakening so as to save the world. I do not try to find the correct middle path between conquering and renouncing for the Buddha or people like him.) (As Indo-Europeans, the West carried the false dichotomy between conquering versus renouncing, including conquering indirectly through renouncing, into images such as Christian ascetics, Jesus' trial by Satan in the desert, and starving artists. Tolkien tried to work his way through this false dichotomy but did not always succeed.)

An easy good way to get out of this dichotomy is to stop thinking in terms of a system that eats the world (conquers and-or conquers by renouncing) and how to be its hero.

We think more clearly when not in a system that eats the world. Simple belief in God does not lead to a complicated, contradictory, confusing system that eats the world, as do Mahayana, Hinduism, formal Christianity, and some Islam. Only rare people can think well when befuddled by aids that are supposed

to make sense of Mahayana contradictions and when beguiled by paradises and get-saved-quick schemes. The people who can think clearly then do not usually conclude they are the hero of their own system. We need to accept objective reality, that joy and suffering are real. We are entitled to reject some things while embracing others. When we can think clearly, we more likely will act well and support the right institutions.

Why do you wish to face an endless joyous system instead of a personal God? Why do you wish to be part of an endless joyous system? Why do you wish to be the hero of an endless joyous system? It is selfish, prideful, and creepy to think of yourself as God in an endless joyous system or to think of yourself as God in any context. It is only a little less creepy to think of yourself as the hero of such a system. Even if we live in a system with a lot of joy in it, that fact does not mean the system is essentially joyous; the joy goes on forever; you go on forever joyful; you are God of the system; or that holiness, the joyous system, and you are identical. To think so is to raise you beyond what you should be. You raise yourself not in the good way of striving "to be all that you can be". You do not transcend your limited self in a good way. You raise yourself in the bad way of striving to be what you cannot be, perverting your nature, avoiding the goodness you could have made, and destroying the goodness you could have made.

To get a proper perspective, think of raising yourself to the status of God-or-hero in a system that is not joyous but is neutral, focused on power, or focused on righteousness. Dwelling on the system as joyous allows you to fool yourself about the system, your place in the system, and your true nature.

I see the affinity between the idea that God loves us and watches over us with the Mahayana ideas that we are always already saved and the world is Dharma's playground. But there is a difference between the feeling that I am a small, finite, creation of God versus the Mahayana feeling that I am a part of the system, and that each part of the system, including me, reflects the whole system. I can accept one role but not the other.

We are better off, and the world is better off, if we accept what we are, even if that means we are limited, we cannot be all, our finite limits are not an indirect way for God to be infinite, we will not suffuse in joy, we are not God, and we will not go on forever. God can work through you even if you are not infinite or not a spark of the infinite. We get more if we accept this than if we seek what corrupts us.

Don't "pretend let go" (don't let go in a pretend way). Don't "let go" of the finite individual person from the perspective of right now so you become a part of the great joyous system from the perspective of eternity. Don't accept small as a devious way to be the hero of a big system. Really let go. Really accept your smallness. Forget about system entirely. Forget about being God, hero, or saint in any way. Just accept being a limited you, and that is all. It is enough.

Don't let go because you think your sacrifice somehow indirectly does save the system. That is not letting go. That is another stronger stickier clinging. Sacrificing yourself that way does not indirectly save the world, as in the movie "Sucker Punch". In fact, this world, Planet Earth, the only relevant world for you and all humans, might not be savable now. It might end up an overpopulated slum stink. To pretend to be little here as an indirect way to save this planet will not save this planet. Diminishing yourself here, by trying to be a bodhisattva or in self-sacrifice to save this planet, will have no effect on the other millions of planets with sentient beings.

People who have seen an endless joyous system and believe in it have trouble accepting that others can have an equally clear powerful vision of a system yet not believe in it. People who have seen a personal single moral God have trouble accepting that others can see a personal single moral God yet can prefer an endless joyous system. I don't know how to get over these impasses without the sort of relativism that I find as distressing as playing the hero in an endless joyous system.

It can be alright to work hard to be an ordinary hero both because it feels good to be a hero and because heroes do help others. This is a lesson of decent capitalism and a theme in "Huckleberry Finn" and "Tom Sawyer". We are only human, and striving to be a merely human hero often enough led to success when we evolved our human nature. When we accept that we strive to be heroes as part of limited finite human nature, we are more likely to act well and do good than when we strive to be heroes of our own system. Also, some of us must fight evil.

Some professions seem to have built into them the desire to be a hero of your own big system, such as academia, politics, religion, and business. Some individual people have a hard time letting go. If you can't let go fully, try this: Don't stop trying to be a hero entirely. Don't stop building a system entirely. Remember that your system is not the only system. Force yourself to let go a little. Channel the energy of frustration at letting go a little into being a better person and doing a better job.

If you love to build systems that eat the world, then go ahead. Share your systems with other people who love to build systems that eat the world. Such comparison will help you see that your system is not the final word. Ponder inscrutable problems such as free will versus determinism, the Christian Trinity, does Jesus save everybody, how Jesus saves in a unique way, faith versus acts, and free will versus karma and Dharma ("Why did Bodhidharma go to China?").

Most people in Mahayana and Hinduism do not seek to be God and do not seek joy in a way that leads to much badness. Vimalakirti aside, as far as I can tell, awakened people do not act badly and do not act like vain gods. Mostly they act well. It seems they are infused with humility along with their achievement. I think their humility includes seeing "I am not God and I am not the center of a big system". That's what Siddhartha Gautama seemed to be saying. You should go to the original stories by enlightened people to make up your own mind.

What difference does it make? It makes a small difference yet a big difference. As long as people act well and create the right institutions then it does not matter much if they believe in a personal God and believe we are limited creatures or if they believe in a joyous Dharma system in which I am the hero and we are all infinite. God does not condemn to eternal Hell people who believe in Dharma but act well, and the Dharma does not condemn to eternal Hell people who believe in God but act well. Yet, as a matter of historical fact, people think more clearly, act better, and create the right institutions when they believe in a personal God and accept their own smallness.

I wish Mahayana and Hinduism could be recast in a more limited way. I think limited accounts of recast Mahayana and Hinduism can be found in the writings of Zen adepts. It is not my place to do the task of recasting. I think young Buddhists and Hindus are doing this.

The Buddha advised against clinging to the world and against clinging to bolstered images of your self and the world such as in Mahayana and Hinduism. I advise accepting the world as it is and not thinking you are the world or the hero of the world. Mahayana wishes well but misleads by making the world into a fantastic playground and by making each person the king of the playground. Is the Buddha's advice about limiting the self and not clinging the same as my advice? I think they are similar but not exactly the same. Just because the Buddha and I might be united against an overly-elaborate Mahayana does not mean we are the same. It does mean that I exercise my ability to figure out things for myself, to which stance the Buddha would approve. I do not compare myself to the Buddha or to any prophet. The fact that the Buddha and I do agree on some ideas is good.

Jesus as Bodhisattva.

It is easy enough to see that formal Christianity built Jesus much as Mahayana built the bodhisattva, so I don't go into details here. Here are two points. First, Jesus as role model affects Christianity as a formal system in much the same way that the bodhisattva as role model affects Mahayana. Second, we can use that insight to think about how true are Mahayana and Christianity.

In the first few chapters of the Gospel of John, John explains how Jesus made the world and explains that the world could be made only by Jesus. As the Word, Jesus works much like Emptiness or Mind. He is behind everything. Jesus saves the world. Jesus does not delay his own ascension until all of the world is saved but he does everything that he can to save those people who are willing. He did spend the time between his Death and Resurrection in Hell doing what he could there. You can be saved only by and through him. In all this Jesus is like a bodhisattva. Jesus and the bodhisattva become THE principle of the cosmos.

Christians want to be like Jesus but nobody (except deluded sad people) thinks he-she can be Jesus or be exactly the same as Jesus. In theory, Mahayanists can become a bodhisattva but in practice nobody thinks like this except a few monks and strong believers (they are not considered crazy as in Christianity). Instead, people want to be like a bodhisattva in that they are moral and spiritually advanced. To be a bodhisattva is an ideal goal and a guide, like the attitude that Christians take in works like "The Imitation of Christ". Like some Christians, such as Pentacostals among Protestants and Roman Catholics, some Mahayanists wish to be like a bodhisattva so as to have powers along with spiritual advancement. So, while in theory, differences persist between Jesus and the bodhisattva, Christians and Mahayanists, in practice, Jesus and the bodhisattva, Christians and Mahayanists, are much the same.

The nature of the bodhisattva, the nature of the system that eats the world of which the bodhisattva is the hero, and the nature of the relation of followers to the bodhisattva and the system, all affect Mahayana, Mahayanists, and how Mahayanists think and act. I don't explain in detail. In much the same way: the character of Jesus as divine super-hero mediator; Christianity as a system that eats the world of which Jesus is the hero; and relations between Christians, Jesus, and the system; all affect Christianity, Christians, and how Christians think and act. Christians and Mahayanists live in much the same world system, led by much the same kind of hero, and so they think and act alike. To an outsider, similarities are much bigger, and differences are much smaller, than to an insider. If you don't like how the Mahayana system and hero affect Mahayanists then you shouldn't like how Christianity and Jesus affect

Christians. If you like how Jesus and Christianity affect Christians then you should like how the bodhisattva and Mahayana affect Mahayanists.

Where an idea comes from does not matter as much as whether the idea is true and-or useful. The facts that Christianity and Mahayana are quite similar but have minor differences should be less important than whether each is true and useful, which is truer, and which more useful. Those issues you have to decide for yourself. You have to decide if Christianity or Mahayana is true(r), which is truer, and which is more useful. The same requirement holds for the other major world religions.

You can use the similarity of Christianity and Mahayana to argue that both are mere products of evolved human imagination under particular natural-socio-economic-historical conditions and so both are not very true and not very useful. They are mere delusions that the powerful use to control the weak. Or you can use their similarity to argue that evolved human imagination used under various conditions leads us to more-and-more approach real truth. Or you can use the same fact to argue that God so arranged things that human imagination would more-and-more approach real truth. You can offer interpretations yourself, and I wish you would.

Whatever the arguments, you have to think through them and decide yourself what is most true and most useful, and what that result implies for what you do and what institutions you build.

I think through these issues much better when I do NOT think of Jesus, the bodhisattva, the Buddha, Lao Tzu, Confucius, or Mohammad as a semi-divine (or fully divine) hero of the world and hero of a system that eats the world. I think clearer when I do not think in terms of salvation as in formal Christianity and Mahayana. I think better when I do not think that Mind, Emptiness, Jesus, the Buddha, or a bodhisattva is the same as God, Mind, or Emptiness and so created (creates) the World. I suppress any system that eats the world - Christian, Buddhist, Taoist, or otherwise - to the extent that I can escape such systems after having lived most of my youth trapped in them.

I think through these issues much better when I think of all these people as real historical figures who are merely human, or as idealized figures (the bodhisattva and avatar) created by real people. I think better when I don't think in terms of rival gods or rival systems. I think better when I think of the heroes of religious systems that eat the world as made up for the needs of followers, priests, and rulers – even if the person was historically real and even if later I think the real person and the made-up person coincide in some ways.

Of course, the truth and usefulness of an idea should not be assessed by how followers, priests, and rulers use the idea. Take account of these factors so as to think through them and think past them. They are tools, not ends. "Nothing but" is not very useful even when it might be used to undermine power.

Think of the message first, then the person. Jesus had the Golden Rule, lived by it, and tried to make a society along its lines. What does Mahayana want you to wake up to? What message does the life and teaching of the bodhisattva convey? What does it call you to?

After you have thought through the issues in terms of “human only”, with maybe God, and in terms of the message, then you can think through the issues again with the possibility that Jesus or the bodhisattva are divine heroes of their own world system and of a thought system that eats the world.

When I have thought about how it might matter if Jesus or a bodhisattva were a divine mediator, I am led back to the idea of following Jesus the merely human person as distinct from formal Christianity in which Jesus is God and is a divine mediator. Then I compare following Jesus the merely human person with Christianity, Mahayana, Islam, Theravada, Taoism, or any religion.

The result of my thinking in these terms is this book. Thinking in these terms did not stop me from seeing God and accepting God, from accepting morality, and even from accepting some supernatural.

(Much the same logic applies to academic stances such as systems theory, theories of evolution, theories of adaptation, structuralism, post structuralism, post modernism, Marxism, etc.)

25 Background to China, and Confucius

This chapter and the next two form a group. This chapter gives background material and then describes and assesses Confucianism. The next chapters do the same for Taoism and Zen.

Confucianism, Taoism, and Zen are all stances from China. They are distinct but they are also similar because they are Chinese in the same way American Protestant sects are distinct but are also similar because they are American. I don't know enough about China to comment on this kind of distinction and similarity.

Confucianism is a noble way with high ideals fully comparable to Christianity. Yet Confucianism also shows what happens when we have high ideals but do not have a solid set of principles, analysis, rules, specific values, and specific institutions, such as developed in the West for governing, and as described in Chapters One and Two in this book. High ideals alone are not enough to make effective government, democracy, self-government, and beneficial capitalism.

The Romanized spelling of Chinese words has gone through several phases. I do what I can. "Tzu" is a title. Tzu means: "adult man who merits respect because he knows important ideas, does important acts, is an excellent teacher, an excellent example, and acts in accord with Heaven, nature, and virtue". I think it can be used for a woman. As a student, I learned that "tzu" is spoken like "dze" in the word "adze"; but now it is written "zi" and apparently spoken "zee" or "dzee" as in "knee". "Tao" means "way". The "t" is like "d" and the "ao" like "ow" as in "dowel", or "down". Written "c" and written "ch" are spoken like American "j", "z" jh", or "zh". "Ch" is not as in "change" but like "jh" in "jack". "Ching" is "important book". "Ching" is spoken "jhing" or "zhing". "Chan" comes out "jhan" or "zhan". "Lao" means "old man" and is spoken as in "loud". "Lao Tzu" is a personal title meaning "wise old man"; traditionally it refers to the reputed author of the important book the "Tao Te Ching" ("dow deh jhing"); see chapter on Taoism.

PART 1: Background

From about 700 BCE to 100 AD, China went through political ferment and religious invention, as at the same time in: Classical Greece; the Upanishads, Buddhism, and Jainism in India; and the rise and fall of Israel. Self-appointed wise people in China promoted stances and promised to cure all ills if rulers would listen to them above others. Some particular stances persisted and have influenced China ever since. This part of the chapter gives background to Chinese thought, describes two important stances but lesser than Confucianism, and describes Confucianism. This chapter sets the stage for two more big stances, each in its own chapter, Taoism and Ch'an (Zen). Confucius was one of those self-appointed advisors; like Socrates, Plato, and the Buddha, he had lasting value.

Most of that era in China is called the "Period of Warring States" or the "Period of the Three Kingdoms" because, at first, many small warring states fought for advantage, and, then later, three major kingdoms fought for control. The name "China" comes from the victor, "Chin" ("Qin"). The first Dynasty to rule all of China was the Han Dynasty from about 206 BCE (BC) to 220 CE (AD). Chinese called themselves "the

Han” for most of their history as Greeks called themselves “Hellas”. During the “Warring States” and “Three Kingdoms” period, banditry and warlords prevailed. Chinese martial arts movies often take that time as their setting, as cowboy movies take the American West of around 1870. The movies “Hero” with Jet Li and “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” get across the Chinese romantic idealization of the situation. “Hero” gets across Chinese ideas about national unity and strong central leadership.

Synopsis.

Confucius clearly knew key points of morality that the West also considers important such as the Golden Rule and the idea that individual people have dignity and integrity. However, he did not base his ideas of how to govern on those insights.

Confucius saw that a state could not run well on the basis alone of rules, inspiration, regard for the humanity of others, good will, or fear. The state needs something more, something that can tie together various human propensities. We will see in the chapter on Taoists that Taoists disagreed with Confucius and felt that life could be run on the basis of spontaneous action alone.

Confucius saw that rulers use laws, management skills, regard for others, and fear, as tools, but, in the end, what adept good rulers use is judgment. Westerners really think the same but look at judgment in a different context. We don’t want rulers with mere “book learning” or “street cunning” but leaders who know well the human heart and human situation, and can figure out the right thing to do in real situations.

According to Confucius, the ability to judge can be trained but it can be trained only in people of the right character. People with the right character pick it up quickly. People with the wrong character can’t pick it up at all.

Westerners also look for the right combination of character and judgment. Americans have made John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan into myths by believing this is exactly what they had. Americans looked to Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Hillary Clinton for the same.

For Confucius and his followers, the task was to find people of the right potential character, train them to use good judgment, and put them in charge of the state. The task of philosophers such as Confucius was not to rule the state directly but to find people of the right character and train them.

Selection-and-training is done through correct education. A good program sorts people by their character and skill level, advances people of correct skill and character, and teaches them judgment, all at once. The best education program is not directly in law, administration, fear, regard for other people, or many of the skills that Westerners might hold useful. Rather, the correct education is in the classics of literature, religion, art, and history. This idea is not so different from what Greeks and Romans taught, and from what the English, French, and Germans taught until recently.

Part of the education program was teaching high regard for the family. Virtuous families could produce candidates of high character, who would, in turn, take care of their families and the state. Present rulers would take care of families in general as sources of future leaders. This attitude toward the family is like the present (2016) American near-worship of the family.

This approach to leadership neglected several aspects of the state that the West found important and that are important. Confucius understood the need for particular rules for some particular situations but he did not really see the key importance of the general rule of law. In his view, a leader with good character and judgment is above the law. His-her judgment-and-example is the law. So much power to the leader is good because, due to proper training, the leader almost cannot do wrong and must do right. The entire success of the state flows from the character of the leader. The state is entirely “top down”. Confucius did not develop ideas of institutions such as the American ideas of three parts of government, checks and balances, or American style bureaucracy. He did not know how to integrate technical experts, business people, and the military in governing. We would not expect, in his time, ideas of equality, democracy, or representation for the people, but there was no regular voice for the people at all. So, when the people had a grievance or need, they could not express it and they had to resort to extreme measures. There was nothing like the Western Christian Church apparatus, with priests and bishops, to serve as liaison between the people and the state. Government at each smaller level such as the province mimicked the central state, so a provincial governor was like a lesser emperor. Although Confucius valued individual people, he could not blend the idea of personal value into how the state works and how laws work. Full democracy is not possible in a Confucian-like state although some limited form of democracy might be.

The Confucian idea of leaders inadvertently supported the cult of the leader. When the leader is actually good most of the time, this cult can help him-her get things done, as with good kings in Europe. This is the idea of a King in “good King Frodo” and “good King Wenceslas”, and in the novel “Return of the King” by J.R.R. Tolkien. But the Confucian idea can also be bad as with the cult of Mao at his worst, North Korean leaders, and cults of the Emperor and Shogun in Japan. The cult of the leader in Confucianism is more extreme than most instances the Western idea of the Divine Right of Kings.

The important role of the family easily leads to a cult of the family, especially when the state does not work well, as often it did not under Confucianism. People fall back on the family and then the strong emphasis on the family prevents the people from making a better overall state. This is what the movie series “The Godfather” warns us against. It is what is happening in America with near-worship of the family as American government has floundered since the middle 1970s.

Particular Chinese scholars made great advances in astronomy, mathematics, physics, chemistry, and other scientific fields but there was no systematic training in these fields, no system of knowledge, and no process for selecting and advancing people of ability.

China did not overcome the bad aspects of Confucianism when Confucianism failed and the state faced hardship. Rather, the bad aspects of Confucianism got reinforced in ways that I can't describe in detail here. For example, when prolonged drought or banditry caused collapse, nothing better reformed. After a time, someone else took power, and the same ideas repeated. So, once a state-society-culture enters a Confucian pattern, it tends to stay there for a long time despite the fact that this way of governing is not adequate to many tasks.

When Americans think of character-plus-judgment, they think of leaders as the source of decisive action; they think of Kirk and Picard, Obiwan Kenobe, John Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Master and Commander, and Batman. The Chinese also extol people of decisive judgment and action more than they like to admit

– think of Chinese action films – but that is not the ideal. The ideal leader is plugged directly into Heaven; that is why he (usually a man) has such a good potential character. After he learns, the ideal leader sometimes does command openly but more often he leads by example, suggestion, innuendo, hints, and vague allusions to past events and leaders. He pulls rather than pushes and guides rather than shows. Often he does this not by referring directly to the matter at hand but by referring to art or stories of the past. He is more like the ceremonial queens and kings of Europe and Japan now than like their prime ministers or like the old Shogun. This view of the ideal leader added to the failures of Confucianism, and added to intrigue in the palace and provinces.

This idea of the “ruler” stymies the idea of rule of law. The ideal ruler did not give any laws as Americans think of laws. His subordinates, such as the prime minister, gave commands, supposedly based on hints and examples from the ideal ruler but really based on needs of the subordinates. They took real power, based on the military, taxes, and appointments of their own people. Commands of subordinates could have force only while subordinates had power. When a subordinate is in power more than a few years, he becomes the real ruler of China, a province, or the military. China was often ruled by opportunists. When a ruler takes real power for him-herself, he-she often becomes a cruel tyrant as with the mother of the Emperor during the 1800s Ching (Qing) Dynasty. The Confucian view of ruler and ruling buffered the office and the ideal of highest heavenly ruler in case events turned bad – it was always the fault of the subordinate and never the fault of the ideal ruler - but also undermined the idea of law. There was no rule of law and system of law as in the West; and there could be no developed idea of those under this view of the ideal ruler and his-her relation to subordinates.

All societies have an ideal and a real. The real never lives up to the ideal, not in any Christian church, not in America, England, or China. Still, the ideal does affect the real. The relation of Chinese ideal to the Chinese reality reveals much about Chinese character and Confucianism but it is a long study in itself that I cannot take up here.

Some Early Assessment: Confucius and the Golden Rule.

Please see Chapter Two. As I mention below, Confucius understood the Golden Rule and expected that a well-educated person in China should act according to the Golden Rule as Confucius understood it. Unlike Confucius, the Chinese in general have not paid much attention to the Golden Rule. The thought of Confucians after Confucius on the Golden Rule easily supports social divisions and power politics.

Beforehand, we need to get clear about the Golden Rule and about its close cousin “make all rules as if you apply them equally to everybody”, or “applies equally”, from Immanuel Kant. The Golden Rule does not mean to treat everybody exactly equally regardless of age, gender, power, family status, government status, or social rule. Yet it does tend toward treating people equally regardless of situation. We have to find how to treat people as we wish to be treated, fairly equally, while accepting good social relations that include differences, and without reinforcing bad distinctions. We have to find how to treat everybody almost equally without cutting down all categories, especially useful ones. We have to find how to act in accord with useful social distinctions while still treating everyone as we wish to be treated, as a person like us, without always treating people exactly the same. The West has been lucky in being able to find this right balance often. China did not find this right balance even though Confucius clearly felt the sense of giving everybody respect and of not infringing on people’s innate dignity and humanity.

A teacher does not treat students the same way he-she treats other teachers, and students do not treat the teacher the same way they treat other students, and this is all correct. When we get to be teachers, we want to be treated as teachers should be treated, not as students are treated now. Jesus himself did not expect his disciples to treat him as they treated other disciples and as he treated them. Jesus did not treat his disciples as he treated God and as he expected God to treat him. We have to take relations and circumstances into account.

Taking relations and circumstances into account does not mean we use the Golden Rule as an excuse to reinforce bad unfair harmful relations and positions, such as a social order founded on fear. The Golden Rule has an inherent push to equality. It forces us to think of other persons as persons like us, and so to treat everybody on that basis. When we treat everybody on that basis, we tend to treat them equally with little regard to station. Jesus reinforced this tendency when he washed the feet of his followers, hung around with tax collectors and prostitutes, ate dinner with Roman soldiers, and respected poor people. Jesus pushed the Rule to its limits. Jesus pushed the limits of society by using the Golden Rule. (The Buddha Siddhartha Gautama did much the same.)

Taking relations and circumstances into account does not mean to respect every way that everybody wants to be treated and every social distinction. Some social relations and social positions are bad, and should not be treated with respect, even when we can imagine that we might be in those positions some day. When haughty people wish to be admired, we don't have to do that. When rich-and-powerful people wish to be obeyed, we might have to obey from fear but not because we act like we know how rich-and-powerful people wish to be treated and respect that as part of our common humanity.

This is why we stress the idea of "applies equally", "equality under the law", and "rule of law". "Applies equally" etc. are the institutional expressions of the fact that the Golden Rule is based on persons and it pushes toward equality. The West has been lucky in that we have been able to put the Golden Rule and its institutional expressions of "applies equally" etc. into our political life. Democracy would not have been possible without Jesus' idea of the Golden Rule, not even using only Greek ideas. It was only possible with Jesus' idea of the Golden Rule combined with Greek ideas about "applies equally" etc.

Confucius understood all this but not well, and his feeling did not spread among Confucians or to Chinese society. Confucius applied the rule within social categories and expected the rule to be used within social categories to reinforce social relations. The idea that he, Confucius, would wash the feet of students or consort with riff-raff would be abhorrent. He treated everyone politely and with respect but did not treat people equally and with deep respect as did Jesus. The idea that a true leader (Son of Heaven) would be treated like a peasant is silly. The idea that a peasant could expect the same reverence as a true leader is fit only for a puppet show. Confucius had a deep feel for respecting others as persons but he did not know how to apply that feeling in daily life and in statecraft. He could not institutionalize the Golden Rule. He could not see the inherent push toward equality. He could not see how the Golden Rule and the push toward equality imply "applies equally" etc., and how "applies equally" etc. must shape political institutions such as representative government, fair taxation, and democracy.

We cannot be harsh on Confucius if we look at our own practice. Although Western people know of the Golden Rule and "applies equally" they don't often live by them, and they don't often see the link between

them and our political institutions. Mostly, Westerners apply the Rule within situations to reinforce social roles. A bishop is a bishop, and God forbid that we should treat a bishop like a barber or a barber like a bishop. Trades people treat other trades people as they wish to be treated, and lords treat other lords as lords wish to be treated; but trades people don't treat trades people and lords equally as simple people, and lords don't treat lords and trades people equally as simple people. One foundation idea of our legal system, the jury, says people are to be judge by their "peers", and originally a "peer" meant someone of the same aristocratic class and-or same socio-economic class, it did mean simply a fellow American or fellow human. Americans pretend to treat all people equally, make a stink when a politician or rich person does not, gasp in heart-warming amazement when a movie star hobnobs with fans, and think the boss is hip for wearing jeans on Friday; but mostly Americans respect class, power, and wealth as much as everyone. We are not much better than Confucians. Americans are hypocrites, and so worse, because officially we know the Golden Rule in its full extended glory, know "applies equally", know better, and pretend we do better, when really we do not. We are lucky we had a better start in Jesus and the Greeks, and we have preserved enough of that heritage in our thinkers and institutions so we still actually can do better sometimes. (Just as followers of Jesus lapsed in applying the Golden Rule, so did followers of Siddhartha Gautama lapse in treating other people equally as children of the Dharma. It is a human hazard.)

Character, Discipline, Rules, and Principles.

What I say here is not limited to Chinese people but I don't have space to distinguish between what is typical of the Chinese as opposed to similar ideas among other people.

The Chinese respect people who can control themselves and have discipline. They look down on people who do not have self-control; people without self-control are not fully human (in the novel "Dune", only when the hero, Paul Atreides, passed tests of self-control was he thought fully human). More basically than meaning "fighting arts", "kung fu" means "beneficial practices" in the sense of "beneficial discipline". It is not unlike Arabic "jihad". There is no progress in society, family, state craft, business, martial arts, or religion, without first gaining discipline. Discipline should not be extreme, extremes are not productive and usually are harmful, but you must have discipline for a base. Once you have discipline, then you can, and likely will, achieve other goals. In his "kung fu" movies, Bruce Lee stressed the control that Chinese martial artists have in their technique compared to all other people and styles, and Lee used that control as evidence of general Chinese superiority. Lee was wrong about the lack of control in other arts but accurate in his statement of Chinese values. In Lee's defense, he made a strong case for China because he needed to bolster the Chinese sense of worth after a long period of decline.

People vary in how they internalize discipline and in the quality of any discipline that they internalize. The highest best discipline cannot be internalized through rules, as a soldier should internalize rules for acting while in town. The highest discipline is unified with virtue, ideals, principles, and attitudes. Particular rules have to flow out of virtue and basic principles. People who feel virtue-and-principles seek discipline and live by it. This Chinese idea is similar to the Greek and Roman ideas of *arête*, prudence, and virtue.

If people cannot see why they need discipline including virtue and principles, and do not internalize discipline including virtue and principles, they must have rules. But rules can work only as long as they are enforced, and rules cannot be enforced everywhere all the time forever. It takes resources to enforce

rules, both personal and economic. It is much better to internalize some discipline. Once discipline is internalized, you use resources to achieve other goals. People who have internal discipline rather than external rules will overcome people who need detailed external rules. Virtuous people will overcome rule-governed people in politics, war, and family life.

Some unusual people are born with a feel for virtue-principles and a propensity for internal discipline. They do not need rules but they understand the general need for rules and they can use rules. Some people are born with the ability to see virtue-principles and with a propensity for discipline, but they need rules for order and so that they can get along with other people who live by rules. They go quickly from ideals to particular rules and vice versa. Some people can learn virtue-principles and discipline by first learning rules and then seeing how rules require virtue-principles and discipline, and come from them. Some people who learn from rules can sense virtue-principles clearly while others only sense only dimly. People who feel virtue-principles clearly can rise beyond rules to live by virtue-principles alone but people who feel virtue-principles only dimly always still need rules. Some people never see virtue-principles and so have to live by rules always. Still, they understand that rules are for general good and rules represent connection to a higher order. Their discipline is only barely worthy of the name but they are still valuable in society. Some people follow rules only if compelled, either physically or through having to earn a living and raise a family. They have no true discipline. They are valuable only in an order that constrains them.

Among people who have to learn virtue-principles through rules, for some but not for all, once the virtue-principles are learned, then the rules can be taken with a grain of salt. This attitude does not imply laxity, overlooking rules, breaking rules, or excuses. It is not an excuse for bad acts but the other way around. People who know virtue-principles must behave better than people who merely follow rules. People who know virtue-principles have to exemplify principles and have to be able to show (explain) how rules follow from virtue-principles.

This vision of character and discipline is true not only among the Chinese but also among other peoples such as the Japanese. How it is distinct among the Chinese, I cannot say.

In case this description leads you to think of Chinese as robots, the Chinese have perhaps the best sense of humor I have ever seen, even if often "low". Western people do not know this side of Chinese. A good accessible example is the movie "Kung Fu Hustle". I also think the English, Germans, Japanese, and French have a big sense of humor, and they too admire discipline, virtue, and principles.

Heaven, Success, Power, and Virtue.

Chinese thinkers were not much concerned with paradise, hell, and salvation as in the Christian-Muslim tradition and in some versions of Buddhism and Hinduism. Chinese thinkers used "Heaven" much as Westerners used "the Heavens" to mean "the world and the intelligence that lies behind it" (French "sacre bleu" or "sacred blue" and German "Gott in Himmel" or "God in the Heavens"). As far as I know, Chinese thinkers did not start with an idea like Christian "salvation so as to live in Heaven" although they knew the idea from Middle Eastern and Indian thinkers. I take the Chinese idea of Heaven as close to my idea of God. The Chinese Heaven is less personal than my idea of God but more personal and less mechanical than a grand unified theory in physics or even than the dharma in Buddhism and Hinduism. Heaven is moral, has opinions, and acts on the world.

For Chinese thinkers, people had to be right with Heaven while on Earth. People had to work as Heaven works or do as an agent of Heaven would do while here on Earth. This is not the same as the Christian-Muslim idea of doing the Will of God. If the reader prefers to think in terms of “salvation”, then salvation in Chinese terms is being right with Heaven while still on Earth. If you are right with Heaven, everything else takes care of itself; automatically you receive the grace of Heaven. Living in the grace of Heaven here on Earth is salvation enough. Usually having the grace of Heaven implies other kinds of success, in particular economic and-or political success, but need not. For Taoists, the idea that being right with Heaven gives political success was wrong and harmful; see the chapter on Taoism. I do not know how the Chinese idea of being right with Heaven compares with traditional Jewish ideas about being right with God while still on Earth.

In the Jewish-Christian-Muslim tradition, prophets not only are “right with God” but have power as a result; they are in touch with the Holy Spirit; and sometimes they can do miracles. Much the same can be said of Hindu holy people and avatars. The situation is fuzzier in China. People who know the way of Heaven are more effective than other people but this is not necessarily the result of power as in other traditions. It is more like technical ability, adept dancing, leading by example, or leading by suggestion. People who are in touch with Heaven know how the world really works, and get things done as a result. Especially they can get other people to go along, get along, and act well as Heaven wishes. This seems like power to common people just as our technology seems like magic to “stone age” people or extra-terrestrial technology would seem like magic to us. Heaven does not need to give extra power to people who know its ways, and so Heaven rarely does so. Still, in stories, it seems as if some people do have power from their relation with Heaven, much as in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim and Hindu traditions. Great sages and great rulers of China not only knew, they also seemed to have power from Heaven.

In China, a virtuous person is “right with Heaven” and anybody who is right with Heaven is a virtuous person. The idea of virtue is the central idea in being right with Heaven and the central idea in character, morality, conduct, right order as in the right order of the state. Virtue seems to have power, just as, in the Christian-Muslim and Hindu traditions, virtue has power. I am not sure about the relation of virtue and power in Jewish thought; some spiritual people such as Hasidim seemed to have power as a result of their virtue; prophets sometimes had power as a result of being in touch with God but not necessarily because of any virtue on their part; Pharisees might have felt they had more power (“sway” with God) as a result of their purity.

In China, virtuous power is not power in the sense of the ability to compel but in the sense of being able to get things done; people with virtue can get things done. People with great virtue can accomplish great things. Yet the story is not clear-cut. Some people who had great virtue were stymied by petty people and by circumstances. In the end, virtue is not like magic. Virtue is like knowing how to ride a bicycle. People with virtue are in touch with Heaven, and have the ability to get things done as a result.

People with virtue can display power through advanced technique. Virtue and technique go together. Suggestion and example are as much advanced technique as engineering or swordplay. It is not clear if the efficacy lies in virtue itself or if virtue gives technique which leads to efficacy. It probably does not matter as long as we keep in mind that people with virtue get things done, and, if a person wishes to get

things done, the best path is to cultivate virtue first. More virtue means better technique - not necessarily more "moves" but more effective, if fewer, moves.

Technique is taken as a sign of advanced virtue but not necessarily of good virtue. Somewhat like "the Force", virtue can be both good and bad. In kung fu movies, technique is a sign of both good and bad virtue. Good and bad masters both can have advanced virtue and advanced technique. Good masters have wit while bad masters have guile. Good virtue can confer wit but not guile; bad virtue always gives guile but not true wit. Good masters win not always through their technical prowess but as a result of wit, just as Superman often defeats his enemies not through his greater physical skill but through his greater wit. Goodness should ally with spiritual virtue, technique, and wit, to win in the end. This is the theme of a Chinese classic called "Three Heroes" about three virtuous and powerful heroes at the time China was forming, about the time of Jesus. It was made into a TV series. Although not originally one of the three heroes, the man who really defeated China's enemies and united China had little physical prowess but had great virtue and legendary wit, "Khong Beng". When Khong Beng misused his virtue and technique, he suffered a shorter life. Confucius expected goodness to win because of its close alliance with effective virtue; see below.

Some very few special beings, often human, but not always, such as dragons and big fish, were so "right with Heaven" that they lived a very long time, and did not worry about worldly problems such as food and military power (see the movie "Big Fish" and think of the great worms in "Dune"). Some humans could become immortal. This idea might be like the idea of salvation in other traditions. Immortals lived in this plane and had physical-but-ethereal bodies, but, even if they started as humans, they were not interested in human affairs and not much bound by physics. Chinese people ideally wished to become an immortal but few people thought they could achieve it, in contrast to Christian, Muslim, and some Hindu ideas of salvation. The idea of an immortal served as a reference for an ideal being, perhaps as Christians think about archangels such as Michael or Muslims think of Gabriel. The idea of an immortal plays little role in what I say here. Stories of interactions between immortals and humans can be fun, like Celtic stories of fairies and humans.

An ideal leader is "right with Heaven"; has natural discipline and virtue; knows principles; knows that other people need rules but is not bound by rules himself (rarely herself); leads by example and not by any use of force; never does anything bad; does not allow badness even as a tool to goodness; sees the correct people and puts them into office when official work is needed; teaches other people the discipline, virtue, principles, and rules proper to them and their station; and teaches through ritual, music, and traditional arts. People of lesser ability, including officials, fall into their appropriate positions with their appropriate abilities for virtue, discipline, principles, rules, and force. When the state has a true virtuous high leader, it hardly needs officials, soldiers, or police. It is naturally prosperous to the right extent but is not obsessed with wealth or money. Other states dare not attack it. There is little crime. This is not only the Confucian ideal but, in slightly different forms, the ideal of most Chinese, and the ideal in many places other than China and the Far East.

When a state does not have an ideal leader and so is not in full Heavenly grace, it must resort to other means, in particular to laws, dogma, and force. Such a state need not be bad as long as the other means are derived from traditional contact with Heaven and are taught through traditional ritual and arts. If the leaders have some discipline and virtue, see the connection of principles to rules, and learn through the

traditional arts, then the state can do fairly well. This was the goal of most dynasties in Chinese history. If a state does not have even this, then it must resort to laws, dogma, and brute force. Even here, there are grades of goodness and badness, but I don't go into them.

Legalists.

“Legalism” was one of the lesser means for hard times.

In times of social change and stress, people want order, much as conservative Muslims and Christians want social order in the face of modernization now. The “Legalists” were a school during the time of social change, about 500 to 200 BCE. As with Confucianism, they never go away, and arise again when people are exasperated and when times call for them. Legalists wanted social order. The term “legalist” is stuck in the literature on China but it is an unfortunate term because it carries the feeling of many little fussy rules pushed for their own sake, as in Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and American legalism. Yet Chinese legalists wanted order and responsibility more than rules, and Chinese society has never been as legalistic as Western society. Chinese Legalists said human nature needs discipline so people could live together. Guiding principles and good wishes alone are not enough. The discipline has to be spelled out in a set of clear consistent systematic rules. The rules do not have to specify every small aspect of human behavior but they do have to make clear what is needed to get along and they have to make clear what will happen if people disobey. Once set up, rules have to be objectively enforced. Legalists offered both sets of rules in general and tailor-made for particular states.

Chinese Legalists were more like “law and order” advocates in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, or more like conservative Jewish rabbis and Muslim imams, than like the tendentious fussy legal codes that we see in TV shows such as “Law and Order”. I doubt they would let off a “bad guy” because of a technicality. Legalists took the same attitude toward human nature as did “law and order” advocates in the United States, especially the attitude that “law and order” advocates took toward the character of drug users, protesters, “hippies”, “social deviants”, and ethnic groups other than their own. Human nature has to be controlled. The state has to be powerful enough to control human nature and to preserve itself against onslaught by other states. Once human nature is controlled, and the state is secure, then you can talk about general welfare. Until human nature is under control and the state is secure, it makes no sense to talk about social goals, social justice, and being right with Heaven, because you can't achieve them and you simply waste time, resources, and people.

Rulers understood the need for discipline, and they quickly adopted terrible laws when that suited them. But rulers did not adopt the Legalist solution, and Legalism generally failed. Rulers prefer deciding according to particular situations so as to gain the most they can from particular situations. Rulers do not like being bound by rules, not even their own, and especially not by anybody else's, not even the laws of their respected and wise predecessors. Legalism returns whenever China experiences turmoil but it never lasts long.

As with rulers everywhere, rulers in China did not like applying the rules to themselves. “The rule of law even for rulers” has rarely been accepted outside the West and was not accepted in China. This is one of the differences between China and the West, and one reason why China did not evolve self-government and economic development as did the West.

Mo-ism.

“Mo-ism” was one of the lesser means for hard times.

“Mo Ti” was the name of a particular thinker, (family name “Mo”, personal name “Ti”) (about 500 BCE). “Mo-ism” is the school he founded, and “Mo-ists” (sometimes “Mohists”) are its followers. Mo-ism is called a philosophy of “universal love” but that short description goes way overboard. In contrast to Legalists, Mo-ists believed basic human nature is good. If one person appeals to the innate goodness and dignity of another person, the other person usually responds well unless the other person previously was warped. Even damaged people often respond to goodness. People change character in response to goodness. The normal response to goodness is enough on which to base government as long as state policies do not make people worse. The response to goodness can lead a state to excel if the rulers understand goodness-virtue and enact policies to encourage it. Goodness is the basic guiding principle out of which rules come. We don’t need detailed rules. State policies should encourage the better nature of people. When everybody feels secure in the good response of neighbors and in good state policies, then people are yet more likely to act well and the state is even more likely to succeed. Goodness creates a self-reinforcing situation. We cannot do away with the state but we can use the state to bring out the goodness in human nature, and then rely on that. Jesus intended his advice to end bad relations, to substitute good relations for bad relations, and thus to minimize our reliance on the secular state. People who act this way are like citizens of the Kingdom of God, and will help bring the Kingdom of God. For Mo-ists, people who act this way are living in accord with Heaven (God). Mo-ists are often compared to Christians.

Mo-ists were more like hopeful optimistic American liberals than like stereotyped (but not real) pie-in-the-sky pacifist-socialist-liberals who give all to anyone. Mo-ists did not think human nature was always all good, or that people never did anything bad. Mo-ists did not blame everything bad on “circumstances”. They did not excuse “victimization” and enabling. They insisted on shaping human nature through proper institutions, including family, education, the state, and local village relations. If people were not shaped that way properly, then it is no surprise if they turn out badly. If they were shaped that way properly, then overwhelmingly they will turn out well. This attitude should be completely familiar to Americans. When a person turns out badly, Americans always expect to find a troubled past, and they are unhappy if they do not find a trouble past because then badness cannot be explained and goodness cannot be taught. When a person turns out well, Americans hope the person has benefitted from good parents, schools, friends, and institutions such as the Scouts. “Behind every great man stands a great woman”.

The issue is whether human nature is good enough, and can be made good enough, without too much effort, and without horrible totalitarian regimes, to serve as the bases for good government. The answer of Mo-ists was “yes”. Legalists said “no”, except for a few exceptional people who know the principles, and make rules for everybody else. Confucians say “no” too but Confucians use other means other than laws to mold and constrain people.

Mo-ists differ from Jesus in that Jesus expected our nature to change in the Kingdom of Heaven, and he likely expected God to take a hand in helping our nature to change. Our nature was good enough on which to start the Kingdom and good enough to respond to the overtures of God and people who already

were good. Enough people already were good enough to begin the Kingdom of God, and enough more people would get good enough to sustain the Kingdom. Human nature could change enough to sustain the Kingdom of God. I think Mo-ists would say we have to continually work to make people good enough. Once we reach a certain level in which good people and a good state were nearly mutually reinforcing, the job would be easier, but we still have to keep at it. I am not sure these differences between Jesus and Mo-ists are very important. Both Jesus and Mo-ists had a strong positive hope for human nature, and for the society that could be built on inspired human nature.

I differ from Mo-ists and Jesus because I think we need firm institutions for most people so they can be good citizens of a good state. Once we have institutions in place for a long time, and the proper attitudes have become part of character, then we can usually rely on good learned national character. Mo-ism and Legalism cannot give us the good institutions. Human nature has goodness in it, and it is moldable, but it is not as innately good as Mo-ists thought, and it is not as easily moldable as Mo-ists thought. Institutions have to mold human character first, and then people with the right character can contribute to the further molding of people and the state. We can put people and the state into a self-supporting system, and that condition will make the job easier, but not as easy as Jesus or Mo-ists hoped.

Mutual support between good institutions, state, and character is not common, hard to make, precious, and too easily lost. Usually historical accident has to make institutions first, and then institutions mold human character to continue the institutions, and so on. This historical accident has happened only in a few places in the world: some nations in Western Europe, and sometimes in Japan, China, and India. In other nations, history pushed institutions and national character almost to be able to make a good state, but history did not pass the threshold. These nations passed the threshold when they met other nations that could help them: other parts of Europe, Korea, Thailand, the United States, and some parts of Latin America.

Whether Mo-ists were correct about human nature and the state in general, they did see a part of East and Southeast Asian character that Westerners overlook. Asians respond well to an appeal to human warmth and human need, or, among the Thai, when they “see the hearts of other people and respond with the water of their own hearts”. East and Southeast Asians understand a bad personal situation and are willing to help a person who is likely to help him-herself and to get better. They help a person who is down-and-out even if the other person cannot help him-herself and might not get better. They are more forgiving than Americans.

Although Asians can be generous personally and sporadically, they do not institutionalize feelings of warmth-and-humanity because they do not trust institutions; and they offer help only in brief episodes because they refuse to enable bad character. They do not support organized charities unless charities have a sterling record, and, even then, Asians contribute less than Americans. They do not give support long enough for individuals to change character; their giving is incident-by-incident. This difference in attitude toward institutions of charity shows a difference in attitude toward institutions in general. Asians “keep it in the family”. When presented with modern institutions for education, wealth, and the state, Asians can adopt the institutions even when they did not develop the institutions themselves. When Asians move into modern capitalism and do have wealth, usually their empathy is strong enough to serve as the basis for schools, medicine, hospitals, democracy, and labor unions, as long as the institutions do not undermine the success of their own family and do not contradict the state.

Contrary to what I just said, and under the influence of the West, modern Japan has developed a great attitude for giving, and has developed the institutions to go along. Their version of the “Peace Corps” is well known around the world. That change might happen in other developed countries of Asia unless the countries are locked into a system of highly competitive world capitalism in which people feel they cannot spare anything for charity.

PART 2: Confucius

Confucius (about 551 to about 479 BCE) lived about five hundred years after King David, about the same time as the Buddha, Socrates, and Plato, before Aristotle, and about five hundred years before Jesus. Confucius had a similar deep long effect on East Asia as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Jesus had on the West. He was more like Aristotle than Plato, with similar ideas of virtue and goodness. He was like Aristotle and the Buddha in seeking a middle way of reason and in distrusting mystic ideologies. The word “Confucius” likely is not a name. It might be a Western “scrunching” of a Chinese title, “Kung Fu Tzu”. In this case, “kung fu” does not mean “fighting” or “beneficial practices” but “adept at getting things done the right way through virtue-principles and ties to Heaven”. So “kung fu Tzu” means “respected adult man who has skill in getting things done properly with principles, virtue, and discipline”. Confucius exemplified productive discipline in virtue-principles, especially for the state. He was not the ideal leader himself, and never said he was, but he knew what an ideal leader was like and could seek an ideal leader for the state. He could find people of lesser quality than the ideal but enough quality so the state could be governed by discipline, virtue-principles, and connection to heaven rather than by laws or dogmas.

Disclaimer: Scholarly explanations of Confucianism often focus on Chinese terms that mean “humanity”, “humanism”, and “grace”. One key term is “Li” (“lee”). “Grace in humanity” is what makes us best as humans. I avoid this topic because we don’t need it here. We can rely on intuition about good, graceful, and humanistic. You do need to know it if you read more.

Americans have an odd idea of Confucianism. They think it means silly empty ceremony, pretentious long-winded empty flattery, hypocrisy, prudishness, putting up a screen behind which to maneuver for advantage, clinging to institutions for the sake of institutions without regard to the good and harm that they do, and family worship. Confucianism can degenerate into that behavior, but that behavior is found in all societies, not just in East Asian societies, and it does not explain why Confucianism has had such a long strong appeal in Asia. Confucianism still is the dominant stance there, and so is the dominant stance in the largest single block of humans on Earth.

Confucius prevailed because he saw the important role of virtue and integrity in human life, and the role that virtuous integrated people could play in good government. He saw that upbringing could mold young people into more virtuous integrated adults with character, what I call “good citizens”, and these people were needed for a good state and good life. He tied a good family life to a good state. He arranged ideas about discipline, virtue, character, government, principles, rules, types of people, family, and teaching through ritual and tradition. His way allows for flexibility in how particular regimes find their order and their style of governing.

Confucius held almost all the values that Americans hold high, and no values that Americans dislike. He believed in Heaven (God), family, honor, duty, service to your country, respect for other people, harmony in society, the Golden Rule, and affection toward other people. He disparaged any kind of cruelty. He did not allow badness in the name of goodness. He supported the military but did not extol the military. He was genuine, not fake. He held these values not only because they worked well in the state and suited a citizen but for themselves. He held these values not as would a martinet soldier, bureaucrat, politician, preacher, superficial teacher, or person who teaches them as part of a role. He held them because he believed in them. He held them as would a true soldier or citizen. With all this going for him, it is easy to overlook what he overlooked and easy to overlook where he came up short. Although he did come up short, we should not hold that much against him or against East Asia; and we should assess him as we would a good solid American.

Chinese Ideas in Confucian Terms.

Below I restate in terms of Confucian thought ideas that I first stated above as Chinese. My version is not exactly as you find in a Confucian text or Western account of Confucius. I give the gist of what he meant rather than follow specific accounts. I have read followers of Confucians such as Mencius and have read documents from the Confucian revivals in China, Japan, and Korea; I don't mention them here; their ideas are important in the history of Asian thought and politics but do not change the main ideas here.

"Skill" means "moral skill" or "virtue"; virtue includes the political skill that a good person would have in a decent political state. Virtue includes principles but I do not stress principles because Westerners tend to think of principles as rules such as the Golden Rule while the principles that go along with virtue come more from a feeling for integrity. The Golden Rule is a principle that goes along with virtue as long as we don't try to really make it into a rule and so argue about it. The more adept a person is, the more he-she has discipline, knows principles, and is able to use principles to guide the behavior of other people.

A Question for Perspective.

People know they should do what is best in general but often they can't do it. They can't stop from doing what is fun or what helps them show off. People know they should drive small fuel-efficient cars but they don't. Instead, Americans, at least, buy large "gas guzzlers", especially SUVs. Americans have all kinds of excuses such as about safety, excuses that don't hold up. Really, what Americans want to do is show off. The same is true of cell phones and condos. In modern life, the Chinese are not so different. There is a gap between what people want to want versus what they really want and really do. (Social scientists might think about what is really the "general will" a la Rousseau.)

If people already know what they should want, and people officially subscribe to what they should want, but people won't do it, and instead do something else, how does the state get them to really want what they should want and really do that? If the state can't get people to really want what is good, how can the state at least get people to do what is good regardless of their mixed motives? This is not an idle issue. It is a key issue in modern life. Think of global climate change and the obesity epidemic.

"You can't legislate morality". The state can try to force people but that doesn't usually work well. Often the enforcement causes more harm than the original bad behavior. Think of Prohibition and the "War on

Drugs” in America. In modern China, problems like this have included keeping track of people, keeping them where they should live and work, and keeping the number of children down to one or two. Mao tried truly drastic and sometimes horrible ways to change China, worse than American Prohibition and the War on Drugs, and Mao’s ways didn’t work.

The West and China have attacked this issue differently. The Chinese way, stated well by Confucius, is to provide a good example based on past events and past leaders. Among other attempted solutions, the West often does the same even if Westerners don’t think of it as Confucian. Confucius did not solve this question, and this question has always plagued China. In reading about Confucius, think of his ideas as attempts to solve this question.

Kinds of People.

Briefly, people come in five kinds:

(1) People with great virtue, discipline, and skill. Very few people are like this. These people lived mostly in the past. We can learn from them. To describe them and their actions is a chief goal of history. Great sages, great rulers, and “immortals” were of this kind. Confucius cared mostly about great rulers. He did not expect rulers of his time to be like great rulers of the past but he did expect that they could learn from great rulers of the past, enough to govern well now.

(2) People with enough skill to run the state if they are trained properly. Even these people are a small minority. Even people with natural potential have to develop their potential before they are able to run a state. Some people who might have potential ability to run a state do not develop the skill through proper training and so do not really have the skill even if they have the office. Confucius differs from other Chinese thinkers in how he trains these people. He trains by example and by participation in traditional culture, in particular ritual.

(3) People who can learn to run the state from the example of number (2) and under the control of people from number (2). This group includes most rulers, officials, soldiers, etc. These people should not be in control themselves. They should be under the control of people who have an internal natural sense of Heaven, virtue, and principles. When they are in the correct place, they can do much good. When they are not in the correct place, they do much bad.

(4) The vast majority of people. The common people are not intrinsically very good or bad. Usually they are good enough unless situations lead them to act badly. They can be made better through correct government. The common people do not have the ability to run a state on their own and cannot be taught to run a state. Like Plato and Aristotle, Confucius would not have supported Western style populist democracy. The common people can learn to follow people of ability. Without people of ability to follow, the common people cause minor mischief. The common people usually do not have the ability to choose a skillful person to run the state. Sometimes the common people can recognize a good leader or a bad leader once he-she is in office.

(5) People who are effectively bad. They might not be naturally wicked but they lack self discipline and they cannot learn to internalize discipline. They have to be controlled from the outside. Not many people

are so bad that they can't learn to be good enough. Any well-run state can find ways to deal with the few really bad people. Badly run states cannot control these people and they cause much harm.

Goodness alone is not enough for everybody. Laws are useful but laws alone are not enough. Rulers need to know the reason for laws, how laws work, and why laws work. They need to know principles on a deep level. Common people need to see that their rulers have confidence and laws, and that laws work.

If the rulers understand virtue including principles, then there is no need for specific laws. Example is enough. Success depends on the example, the situation, and the person.

Finding Good Rulers.

How do rulers come to the fore? How do rulers learn how to rule? What example do rulers learn from? How do rulers set an example for others to learn from? How do leaders learn virtue?

The best sources for rulers to learn virtue are history and ritual. When ritual encodes history, then ritual is the best teacher, and sometimes ritual is the only needed teacher. Present rulers learn from great rulers of the past. In particular present rulers learn from successful semi-mystical rulers of the past who relied primarily on ritual and example to govern, rather than through a proliferation of laws. Adept present rulers have a duty to train and to choose competent successors.

Ritual does not mean empty formalism. The category "ritual" includes what you do to make life work. Ritual must be based on virtue. Life only works properly when it is based on virtue. All ritual, including formal ritual, ultimately came from what we do to make life work according to virtue. This is the idea behind the Japanese tea ceremony. It is the idea behind good manners in Western society, and teachers of manners stress that good manners are ways to make life work well. Ritual is the idea behind being polite and of being considerate of neighbors. Decent people are predictable as a way to get along with neighbors, and ritual helps people to be predictable. Ritual is what people do at baseball games and football games. So ritual is often fun. People teach ritual to children without knowing it is ritual. Ritual is what people do on the Internet to make sure everybody gets along. Ritual is how to conduct a barbecue so that it works. Ritual is the rules for a knife fight or a gun fight. Ritual is what happens at the annual workplace holiday dinners. Ritual is how fathers teach children how to hunt. Without ritual there could be no military. Confucius considered music to be ritual. Confucius would want people to listen to Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Bizet, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Bix Beiderbecke, Robert Johnson, Jimmy Rodgers, and the Beatles. Ritual does not stifle creativity any more than learning musical scales or how to maneuver on Facebook stifles creativity. Ritual represents the best in human character externalized and made obvious so that everybody can follow along.

Confucius used ritual as a means to an end, and did not use ritual as an end in itself. He saw the best behavior that people could aspire to. He saw the principles that govern a successful state and successful life. He saw that ritual embodied this. His idea of ritual was a merging of spiritual and material so that we become more spiritual and better, much like the Christian idea of a sacrament.

Confucian Character and Principles.

Confucius clearly stated the Golden Rule of “do unto others” as a high goal of human action and politics. The Golden Rule was a focal point of his teachings, at least until Confucianism became the state religion in China. Even then, the Golden Rule was not forgotten but it was not pursued. The outstanding movie “Ip Man” is about one Chinese man’s resistance during the Japanese occupation of China in the 1930s. The hero is a Confucian-Taoist gentleman. Against his will, he is forced to fight back against foreigners, and he is forced to organize the townspeople to fight back against bandits and foreigners. The movie makes a point of the Confucian use of the Golden Rule and for harmony among the Chinese; and of the Confucian basis for self-defense, especially in contrast to legalism and militarism. The movie is wrong about the Confucian roots of martial arts – the roots are more Taoist than Confucian. But the movie is right about the importance of Confucianism, the importance of the Golden Rule, and the role of Heaven-like grace in human relations. A good state was a state in which the rulers inspired people to act by the Golden Rule and to defend themselves, as did the hero. In a tyranny, and in chaos brought by tyranny, people forget the Golden Rule and need to be reminded by a Confucian.

Confucius was not a formalist “stick in the mud” or “stuffed shirt”. He had a sense of humor. He would fit in with similar rabbis, priests, monks, and even politicians. Confucius and Jesus would have gotten along well. They would have liked each other, as Jesus liked big-hearted Jewish rabbis of his time. Confucius would have thought Jesus was naïve and impetuous but on the right track.

Confucius wanted an education that built what the British and Americans call “character”. Before about 1950, if Confucius was in the West and trained future leaders, he would have given them a Classical education that insisted on understanding rather than rote learning. Besides standard thinkers of the Classical world such as Cicero, Confucius would include great writers before modern times, such as Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, and John Donne. Confucius would include accessible versions of science including evolution and the Big Bang. Confucius would have hoped great leaders were more than merely military men (and women); but he also would have known that military people need a good education too, and well-educated military people can render great service. He would approve of most of the life of Winston Churchill, and approve of the idea that “Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton”.

In the modern world, to build the right character, Confucius would have young future leaders read all the “modern classics” such as you might find in the Penguin collection, including Jane Austen, Anthony Trollope, and Thomas Hardy. He would have young future leaders watch the great movies such as “Citizen Kane” and “African Queen”, and especially watch movies that show good and bad families such as “To Kill a Mockingbird” and “The Godfather”. He would enjoy Frank Capra. Confucius would have people join in the great rituals of secular religion such as the Fourth of July, Labor Day, and Christmas. He would make sure people feel the lessons of ritual in modern life, and that leaders could use the lessons from literature and rituals to decide modern problems such as universal health care. He would assume that any leader who had this training would be in tune with Heaven, get help from Heaven, and have the virtue and power of Heaven.

Confucius represents the effective mean (center) between reason and emotion, innovation and tradition, rote and spontaneity, intuition and rules, force and example, intervention and letting go, leader and led, and state and individual. In this respect, he is like the shift from Plato to Aristotle. Confucius tried to find the most effective mean in the context of Chinese culture and society. That mean in that context did not

lead to the same institutions as Western democracy and capitalism but it did prepare the Chinese for capitalism and some democracy 2500 years later. It could serve as a base for greater democracy, as it has in Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. The Confucian attitude toward tradition, leadership, human nature, followership, and the state is not so different from the attitudes of moderate Republicans and “centrist” Democrats in the United States.

When Asians seek to return to a balance after change, or seek to find the best out of a present situation, they return to Confucius. What makes better sense than to return to virtuous character? We can look at Chinese history after World War Two as (1) a brief rising of Mo-ism (“Let a hundred flowers bloom”); (2) a longer period of Legalism with accusations, trials, the Red Guard, and forced labor; and (3) then a return to basic Confucianism as China successfully humanized the Party and modernized its economy. Growth of the Chinese economy since about 1985 is a Confucian success.

The Victory of Virtue and Goodness.

Confucius knew that virtue did not always win in each particular person but he hoped that virtue could win for the state and people as a whole. Like Socrates, Jesus, Tolstoy, and Gandhi, he thought goodness-virtue would win in the end. Somehow leaders would come to understand virtue-goodness, understand the correct principles that support virtue-goodness, and would act on correct principles to order the state. The leaders would serve as examples of virtue-goodness to immediate followers, who would administer the state as its officials. Leaders and their close followers the officials would serve as examples of virtue-goodness to the common people, who would follow them in building a good state. Confucius knew that officials had to use force. Even so, he did not want force as the main binder of the state – that is wasteful and is contrary to virtue and principles. He wanted people to act well because they understood acting well. Leaders and officials learned virtue through study of history, ritual, and art while common people learned how to act well through example from leaders and officials.

Despite having read Confucius several times, still I am not sure if he expected virtue-goodness to win just because it is good-and-virtuous, as did Gandhi and Jesus, and, likely, Socrates. I think so. If goodness-virtue won primarily because leaders used force to impose virtue-goodness, then that is not truest virtue-goodness. Truest virtue-goodness should win in the end, so it must be virtue-goodness-for-goodness'-sake alone. Virtue-goodness should use minimal force. Yet, at the same time, Confucius did know that too many people do not understand virtue-goodness-for-goodness'-sake so that the triumph of goodness is not assured without some force.

Western people should see easily the dilemma of our own leaders and officials. Officials want the people to follow goodness for its own sake, yet officials know we must use force, and that using force ultimately subverts goodness. Officials everywhere seek basic principles to instill in hearts so people will be good citizens without many detailed laws and without much force.

The State as the Kingdom of Heaven.

As much as Jesus, Confucius wanted a Kingdom of Heaven; and, like Jesus building the Kingdom of God first in Israel, Confucius would build the Kingdom of Heaven in China first. Confucius wanted a Kingdom in accord with the virtue of Heaven, sustained by Heavenly people, and a Kingdom that leads people to

change their nature to be more Heavenly. If we think of Western “Good” as “Heaven”, then all standard Western thinkers after Plato have wanted the same thing. It is not an odd desire. It is a noble and good-hearted vision when not forced on us, and when it can be generalized to include everybody regardless of nation. It is one of the most powerful ideas contributing to the rise of democracy.

How does the Chinese version of the Kingdom-of-Heaven-on-this-Earth differs from the Western version of the Kingdom of Heaven (God), and how realistic is the Chinese version? Through most of Chinese history, most Chinese did not have the ideal of a Kingdom of Heaven as did most Christians, at least in theory. When Chinese thought of a Kingdom of Heaven, it was limited to “China”; it did not include anybody in the world who went along with the same ideals and wished to be members. Even for the national image of a Kingdom of Heaven, and despite inspiring patriots, Chinese people in general did not work for the Kingdom of Heaven (ideal China) as did Christians. Chinese began to think more of working for the ideal China as the Kingdom of Heaven after the Communist revolution. That is one point of the movie “Hero”. I am not sure how much the image of a great China in accord with Heaven drives Chinese people now, and if that image is enough to overcome their need to provide for their family regardless of the state. Hopefully China is aiming for something grander than reviving glory and power, control of the Pacific shipping lanes, and dominating international capitalism.

Confucian American Presidents.

I think the original idea of democracy in America was more Confucian and less populist than the idea of democracy now. We wanted our leaders to be able to run the state, and we wanted our people to be able to select people who could select good leaders, but we did not expect the people directly to run the state, and in some cases, not even to directly select the leaders. The Electoral College is a Confucian idea while direct election of all officials is not. The original idea of an American President was more like the idea of a Confucian leader than like the populist near-demagogue leader of today. Americans still want a Confucian President. Americans want Presidents to be effective leaders but Americans also want them to lead more by moral example than force. This is why the American people get upset at sexual mistakes of politicians, and more upset by lies and cover up than by a few small moral indiscretions. Force is what the military uses when the President tells them. George Washington was a great Confucian President. In good moments, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Abraham Lincoln were Confucian Presidents except as events forced them use force or guile.

When moral example fails, then Americans revert to support for a populist demagogue. Because moral example never works well enough or long enough, people always turn to populist demagogues. Good compromise while upholding the virtue, ideals, and best interests of the country is a Confucian ideal. A minimal use of law, using existing laws to best advantage, and passing new laws seldom, are Confucian ideas. “You can’t legislate morality” is a Confucian idea when the phrase is not used as a slogan to cover racism and agendas.

In his first year in office, and by temperament, Barack Obama was a Confucian President. He tried to use moral argument and moral example to unite factions that had been separated for a long time by fighting and conniving. He was open to compromise. He referred to principles and precedent. In the end, he was undermined by Congressional leaders, mostly Republican but some Democrat, and the Tea Party, so he had to change tactics. That is what often happens to Confucians. Then they become Legalists, Mo-

ists, Maoists, or flounder. In America, most failed Confucians become nasty Legalists. The Republican Party began as Confucians and ended as Legalists obsessed with power. Liberals start as Mo-ists and end up as much obsessed with power as Republicans. Confucius sought to avoid all this. He correctly saw that Legalism is only a short run strategy, and, no matter how much it hurt your own career, for the best interests of the nation, ultimately virtue-goodness has to lead by example.

PART 3: Assessment.

Governing by Being in Touch with Heaven.

Confucians want the highest leaders not to lead through laws or force but through example. The highest leaders are in touch with Heaven. By being in touch with Heaven, they know what to do, and what they do succeeds. Ritual and the arts tie everybody together and teach everybody.

This ideal was known not only in China and among Confucians but, in slightly different forms, all over the world in many cultures-and-societies at many times. The Egyptians, Babylonians, Jews, Greeks, Romans, Mayans, Aztecs, Incas, Buddhists, Hindus, and Shinto followers in Japan, all had this idea of how leaders, states, and peoples should run. European kings from Charlemagne in 800 CE (AD) through the modern age had this ideal of the king and the state. Americans have this idea when they think of the President as a moral example and great statesperson. People like the idea of “charisma” (“mana” or “The Force”) flowing down from heaven to ethereal leaders to officials to the people. When this flow is correct, the country prospers. When this flow is wrong, the country struggles. Republicans and traditional religionists still think this way about America when they think of it as the “New Israel” and the example for all godly countries. I think traditional Christians would like to see this relation in which their Church plays a key role in advising the President. Billy Graham did play a role something like this. Even “godless liberals” think this way when they see America as the avatar of Liberty and when they want leaders to be truly moral by showing a few small blemishes but no large ones – a little “pot” or cocaine, a few Cuban cigars, a fortune teller, or a few girls on the Internet are good but bondage porn is horrible.

What makes the Chinese version distinct, if it is distinct? What makes the Chinese version different from the Western version? Why did the Western version lead to self-government, science, development and the best modern way of life while the Chinese version did not? To answer would require a lot space, and I am not sure I could give a good answer. Academics spend their careers on these questions.

Focusing on the ideal alone, China differed from most non-Western versions in adding virtue, principles, character, and morality to the idea that leaders connect to spiritual power. Leaders do not have power just because they connect to Heaven. They might not have power in the simple sense at all. Leaders have virtue, principles, and character because they connect to Heaven, and connect to Heaven because they have virtue, principles, and character. Chinese leaders have morality based on ideas like the Golden Rule because they connect to Heaven, and they connect to Heaven because they have morality. The only power that mattered was closely tied to morality, virtue, integrity, principles, and character. This was much like the Jewish, Greek, and Roman ideals.

A Brief Answer.

Unlike the West, China never developed a solid rationale based on theory and experience that linked the charisma of the state and high leaders to ideas of the state, the relation of people to the state, and how to administer power on all levels. China never had the ideas of citizenship and the state that I described in Chapter Two. China never had a logical scientific theory of social relations and the state. The ideas would not have to be phrased in Christian terms, and could have been developed in Confucian terms, but were not. You can't teach what you don't have. You can't use what you don't have as the basis for good leadership and the state.

The Confucian idea was simply that Heaven gave virtue, virtue gave leaders, leaders chose officials, officials used power when they had to, and people went along. China never had a developed analysis of divine order, the state, officials, power, and the people as we find in the West after Plato, Aristotle, and the absorption of Jewish thought. China never had anything like the informal British constitution or the formal American Constitution. China did not have a set framework of laws and a large stock of legal tradition. It had little "philosophy of law". It did not have, and could not have, the "rule of law" even for high officials. Officials always had to "wing it". For convenience, call this whole stock a "middle level" of ideas, analyses, principles, and institutions.

Without a middle level set of institutions for using power apart from particular leaders, China had to blow up the idea of the graceful heavenly leader beyond anything realistic and had to denigrate the daily use of power into mere expediency and conniving. Not in Confucius himself, but in writers after him, the proper response of a high leader to a crisis was to retire to the inner palace and hold a ceremony or play music. Without a regular constitution based on a solid logical theory of social and political affairs, China fell too often into confusion and warlords often took local regions. While governments rarely out-and-out failed, they also never out-and-out succeeded, and they never gave the general cohesion and prosperity that the best Western states could sometimes give. China never developed self-government, science, and capitalism.

Ideas of connecting to heaven, cultivating discipline, cultivating virtue, leading by example, and teaching by traditional arts, are good but they need to be supplemented by a coherent set of principles and rules based on sound principles and practicality. That is what China did not evolve and the West did.

Chinese Bureaucracy and Education.

China and the West shared the idea that leaders had to be moral and have character but differed in how morality and character came to reality in the state.

The Chinese were famous for their bureaucracy. The entire country was divided into areas about the size of an American county. The central government appointed at least one official to take charge of every unit, and kept garrisons of soldiers-police all over the land. The Chinese civil service did provide regular channels for the limited use of power, regularity within a regime, and continuity between regimes. Simply the fact of having regular officials kept regimes from falling apart. But Chinese bureaucracy did not give enough. Each official had to carve out his (rarely her) own niche, often by dealing with local criminals, and always without offending a higher official no matter how much the lower official was correct. As long as all the taxes demanded by the center were given, bandits did not cause too many complaints, and the military did not have to intervene to restore order often, the official was doing his job. This is the sort of

arrangement that people used to find regularly in the “Third World” despite what was formally written in the laws of a particular country, and still do find often enough. It is the order that prevails in the parts of Mexico and Columbia controlled by drug lords.

The bureaucracy was never really trained in the use of power and the administration of particular offices but instead was trained in mythical examples of ethereal past leaders who led by connection to heaven, ritual, and virtue alone. Chinese education did teach history and what can loosely be called “liberal arts” but not in the Western sense of liberal arts. Chinese education might more accurately compare to a long, elaborate, grueling “finishing school”. It was not even like a “prep” school. The Chinese felt that studying mythical classics instilled virtue and character, and that was enough. Students learned about mythical leaders but not much about real leaders and events. They learned calligraphy, ceremonies, and music. They did not have realistic studies of how the state works and how it fails. They did not have an analysis of the state, or an analytic comparison of several types of states. They did not have clear ideas of “what is this situation?”, “how did we get in this?”, “how does this situation compare to other situations?”, and “what might be the best move to get out of this situation into a better situation?” They did not know what to do in an office when they were appointed to that office. They did not learn about the ideas of Chinese analysts in the sense that Western school children learned the ideas of Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson. Of course, the majority of training in any service in any country is done “on the job”. But, without the background that Western civil servants had, “on the job” in China did not mean to sift through ideas of previous people who were practical and theoretical (Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Burke, and Adams) for what worked best in today’s practical world but instead a crash course in conniving and survival.

Family First.

The role of the family has been a two-edged sword in Chinese history and in the failure of China to grow middle level effective institutions for government. Like education and the civil service, family provided continuity and a base level. On the other hand, it also provided a refuge when government did not work, resisted government for its own benefit, and so promoted government not working.

Since World War Two, America has seen the importance of family wax and wane several times. I have been most impressed by the waxing. Despite Conservative fears, almost all Americans consider family quite important. Look at movies about family starring liberal actors such as several done by Steve Martin. Soldiers list what is important in their lives as God, Family, and Country. Family is an integral part of grace coming down from heaven, into leaders, officials, and the common people. The family is a small version of grace coming into this world. Grace comes into parents, who teach children by example, and administer rules. The family is an important teacher of civic virtues. I know from personal experience that public schools, including universities, rarely work unless families have the right attitudes toward education and institutions, and families participate in education. Confucius would quickly understand all these ideas and approve of them. The family is the first teacher of Heaven and the most important. If the family fails to set an example of Heaven, then only a great sage leader could make up for family failure. Not even a great king or great President can make up for family failure.

I am not entirely sure why, but I found that Asians do not think American families are like this. I am not sure what Asians think American families are and I don’t repeat the mistakes here. I think the mistakes

have to do with how the modern world has changed families all over, not only in America, but the change happened first in America.

In any case, what matters is that Confucian and American ideas of the family are not so different that they cannot understand each other.

To some extent, in almost all state societies, family organization and state organization mirror each other. To me, a funny example occurs in Western weddings where the bride and groom dress up like imitations of aristocrats from the middle 1800s. The Chinese family was supposed to be a bit like the kingdom, at least in public. The eldest male was like an ethereal leader who led by virtue. Often his mother, wife, or eldest son was “the enforcer”. Children were not expected to have the ethereal virtue of the patriarch but were expected to show discipline and to internalize rules, like good civil servants. The family could be a “little kingdom” that ran along the lines of the big kingdom. The family was expected to teach Confucian views of the state and Confucian values. It was to teach its children ritual, music, painting, calligraphy, and the basics of mythical history. It was expected to teach good manners. Hopefully all this added up to the character and virtue needed for family success and state success.

When government is not well-ordered, does not often succeed well, and flounders often, people rely on the family instead. They fall back on the family. Eventually the family becomes not only first but first by a long way. Then the family does not play a role in the state as it does in the successful West. Families give little support to the state and all support themselves. When families give no support to the state and all support to themselves, then the state cannot succeed as it should. Then families give little support to the government, only to families, and so on.

When families do this, they do not operate “calmly”. They get entrenched and serious. Families operate according to dogmas of the family. They become little dogma machines. This is the caricature of the family that the West thinks is true of the Chinese family in general and was true when the family had to survive on its own.

The same thing happened in the West when the state was not reliable enough. Where the pattern got entrenched, it was as hard to get out of as in East Asia. The strong isolated family prevented the rise of a strong reliable state, and the lack of a strong reliable state supported the strong isolated family. Cases that come to my mind are Italy, southern France, Greece, and the Balkans.

Chinese people certainly had ideas of patriotism, and some Chinese sacrificed their lives for the nation. But Chinese in general did not have the idea of putting the state first sometimes. They did not have the idea of noble Greeks and Romans who sacrificed even their families. They did not have the idea of Jews who sacrificed family members for God, as when Jacob nearly sacrificed Isaac and King David had to accept the death of his children because they lived immorally. Without this idea, and with the constant failure of government, the Chinese fell back always on the family as little kingdom.

Confucianism makes it easy to entrench on the family this way because Confucius emphasized the role of family in ritual life and devotional life. I want to be clear: I don't think Confucius supported the stereotype idea of the family that we see in Western movies and TV, and which seems to prevail even among East Asians. I think Confucius' idea of the family was like the idea in Rome or Israel: strong families but with

the family in the context of Heaven and the state. If Heaven and the state are inseparable, and Heaven and the family are inseparable, then state and family are inseparable, and the family has to be seen in the context of the state. But when the state does not work well for hundreds of years, Confucian ideas of the family easily become the stereotype of “family first” that we see now. Once the pattern sets it, it is hard to escape. Confucian ideas have been used to support stereotyped ideas of the Chinese family for so long that those ideas of the family are now inseparable from Confucianism. This result is as if ideas of the family from media versions of the mafia, as in “The Godfather”, had been used so long in conjunction with the American Constitution and Christianity that they had become inseparable from the idea of Americans or Christianity.

An indication of the right balance between “family first” versus “loyalty to the state” comes in the fact that Americans actually pay a high rate of the taxes that they owe and do so voluntarily. Americans do cheat on their taxes and evade their taxes, and the American tax system is so screwed up that it promotes not complying; but still Americans pay their taxes more than any other major people. Perhaps the British and Germans are about as compliant, and they too have good ideas about the relation of family and state. In contrast, the Chinese, at least until Mao, paid taxes primarily at the point of a pike.

The original Confucian ideas of the family are not wrong any more than ideas of American soldiers about the family are wrong. Original Confucian ideas of the family are quite good, and Westerners are correct to praise moderate Confucian ideas of the family just as Americans praise English, French, and German moderate ideas of the family. Confucian ideas of the family are misused because they have been in the wrong context for 2500 years.

Once the family became the “little kingdom” while the state was relevant primarily as an irritant, this kind of autonomous family reinforced the drift of the school system and civil service not to produce institutions and officials for middle level power, officials who had ideas based in theory-from-experience on how to run the state, and carried out their offices well as offices. Families did not have an interest in promoting good scholarship and a good education system as in the Western countries such as France, England, and Germany. They had an interest in training their children for civil service posts that could provide another income and source of security. They did not care if their children did well or ill toward the job and the state as long as their children brought in revenue and kept moving up the career ladder. When the main goal is to get a government post for security, then it is best if the post is not assessed according to its contribution to a well run state in the Western sense, and it is best if the education system is mostly about ethereal ideas and mythical virtuous examples. It is better to train a child in etiquette that can be mastered and so lead to a position than in real administration.

The modern world is changing Confucian ideas of the family, and, I hope, returning them to what I think Confucius originally had in mind. What happens depends on the quality of government that prevails in East Asia. I think moderate Confucian ideas of the family can easily fuse with ideas of citizenship, the state, and self-government.

I admire how Americans, as with all people, love family. But I have seen the bad results of “family first” in America and elsewhere. Sometimes goodness and right are more important than family. Sometimes the nation is more important than family. Sometimes a family member does such wrong that we have to turn him-or-her over to authorities, not just to protect the reputation of the family, but because it is right and

better. I get nervous when Americans say “family first”, especially because populist democracy is failing and America is not dealing well with the world economy and world politics. “Family first” describes rich people and the class of rich people looking after themselves first even while their particular nations “go down the tubes”. That is not what we want. If we give up on the state, and start putting our eggs in the family basket, then we will make everything worse, and make a bad self-fulfilling prophecy. We have to find the right balance and hold it.

How to Find and Train Officials.

Much as in England, candidates for officials in the Confucian civil service were recruited from aristocratic or successful families. People who were obviously stupid or inferior did not last long in the training but that is not any assurance that the people who did last were intelligent and would be competent at their future jobs. Just as going to “prep” school or a similar other “good” school in the United States reinforces the chance that your children and grandchildren will go, and so forms a closed circle of privileged people, so it did in China as well. The people who succeed at getting into a school, and staying in a school, in this system are skilled mostly at making and using social connections. This way of recruitment-through-privileged-self-reinforcing-society excludes people of ability and it focuses on people who have a set of skills that does not serve the country best. The state can get along with this system and these people, and sometimes this system produces great people – that depends on the content of education once in the schools. But this system does not find all the able people that the state really needs and too often it offers to the state people of inferior ability. (For a while, the American system did better. The American system now suffers terribly because schools aim almost entirely at giving a piece of paper for a job rather than at education.)

Suppose we had the right principles, people of native ability were out there, and we had a fairly reliable way to find them. Now we have to consider how to train them. No matter how complete and profound, ritual alone is not an effective way to teach leaders. The expanded idea of ritual that I have described – something like deep participation in the proper culture – would help. It would not hurt. Many leaders could use a better sense of the rituals that really drive the psychology of modern people, rituals such as watching TV shows about young adults. But even watching reruns of “Friends” and “Seinfeld” will not make good leaders out of most politicians. Repeated participation in Labor Day, the Fourth of July, and Christmas, and repeated watching of “It’s A Wonderful Life” and “A Christmas Story”, does not make politicians better. Watching movies of Shakespeare’s plays might make politicians interesting, at least briefly, but it would not make them better at the public good. If politicians read histories of Presidents, politicians would have more precedents by which to tell misleading stories, but, again, likely historical literacy would not cause a big change in government. Going to a church, synagogue, mosque, temple, monastery, meditation group, or the freethinkers’ atheist potluck dinner, does not seem to make much difference either.

Ritual is supposed to teach character. Character is then enough to get a leader in contact with Heaven and to make a student a good leader. Teaching prospective leaders character alone is not enough no matter how we teach character and what kind of character we teach. We also have to teach how states really work and how economies really work.

I am not sure how to find future leaders and train them well. I am not sure how to train most people to be good citizens. I am familiar with all the programs that America has used since I was a child. They are not bad programs, and they do a lot of good, but they don't seem to do the job. Having a college degree is not guarantee that a person had the native ability to be a good citizen, official, or leader, and, if he-she did have the ability, he-she was trained up to capacity. Here is not the place to offer my ideas of what kind of character and institutions we need to make America better, and how to find and train our officials and leaders.

Content of Training and the Content of Confucianism.

Suppose we can identify good candidates for leadership and citizenship, and have good methods for training them. Now the question is "What do we teach them?" The content of their education is just the content of our ideas about the state and its citizens.

Almost immediately the question arises about Heaven in the education of good citizens and prospective leaders. For most of Western history, and in Confucianism, this is not a question. Heaven has a definite place in the state and in teaching about the state. For now, though, forget about this question. I return to it later. Accept that we all know Heaven plays a role, and we don't want to bicker about the role. So we ignore the role of Heaven for now.

So now the question is "what do we teach about political life, the state, and how the state works?" Here I repeat what I said above: This is where Confucianism and the West differ most and where Confucianism fails. This is the single biggest point of this chapter. Confucianism had high ideals and a correct view of the importance of Heaven, a view with which nearly all Westerners would agree throughout all the history of China and the West. But Confucianism did not have a good body of analysis for:

- Various political situations, both of state societies and non-state societies.
- Types of states and how each type worked.
- Why one state type might be better than the others even if not perfect.
- How to sustain the good aspects of political life in particular conditions.
- How to go from one type of state to another.
- The role of law in the operation of states.
- The relation of the ruler and officials to the body of laws.
- The role of the people other than to follow example and to obey.

I am not saying that China did not have many political and legal precedents, Chinese officials were not diligent in using them, and Chinese officials were not adept at using them. I am not saying that Chinese thinkers were not analytic – they were rigorously and amazingly analytic. I am saying Chinese thinkers

did not develop the kind of analysis that we see in the West beginning in Plato and Aristotle and carrying onward.

Another way to put this is that the Chinese did not have a scientific logical analysis of social, civil, political, and state life, at least not by Western standards, and not enough to actually work. Social science, even in the West, even now, is not scientific by the standards of physics but it tries and it knows the need for proper categories and logic. It builds on a solid historical foundation of theory, analysis, and experience. Chinese understanding of the state was not like that.

The fact that Chinese analysis of political life was not systematic and scientific served the purposes of the ruling class and of the families that sent their children into the civil service. A non-scientific literary style of education that did not directly bear on practical and theoretical problems was fuzzy enough so that it did not endanger the power of the rulers and ruling families. It was fuzzy enough to be used by rulers and ruling families to keep their power. As far as I can tell, this kind of fuzzy education is typical where rulers and ruling families do not want the civil service to be too effective, as in Russia before the Revolution and in Latin America before modern times.

Example.

Imagine two kinds of gardeners. Both men love life and love gardens. Both want to nurture life in an orderly and beautiful way. Their ideals are similar and equally high.

One gardener studies gardens from picture books of old classical gardens. He recognizes all the plants and knows that some plants are more like each other some ways and less like each other in some ways. He knows that all poppies are more like each other than poppies are like roses. He knows that annual plants are more like each other than perennials. He conducts ad hoc experiments to see which plant grows best in sunlight or shade, with little water or more water, and next to this other plant or that other plant. He knows how to save some diseased plants. He knows how to use some plants to keep away animal pests, and he knows how to set some traps for animal pests. In letters, he shares information with some of the other gardeners in the nation.

The other gardener has the picture books but also has manuals of soil science, botany, animal sciences, weather, climate, and chemistry. He knows how plants work and why. He knows about plant diseases. He knows how to make plants and soil work well together. He knows what to do in case plants and soil don't get along. He knows that some plants exude nutrients from their roots, some plants exude poison, and some exude both. He knows how to arrange plants so they work well together and so that they don't hurt each other. If roses are to be the queen of the garden, he knows where to plant them and how to plant around them so that everything works out well. He has history books of past gardens including explanations of how they worked aesthetically and scientifically. His knowledge is not perfect. He might not know of modern Darwinism or quantum chemistry. But it is good enough so that almost all gardens can succeed indefinitely.

The first gardener sometimes creates gardens of exquisite beauty but he is not always sure why, and the gardens never last a long time. His gardens often have problems so that dead spots and bushy spots

mar even the most beautiful gardens. His gardens are susceptible to sudden blights that sometimes wipe out the whole garden. He has trouble starting over again after a disease.

The second gardener also sometimes creates gardens of exquisite beauty. But, even when his gardens are not exquisitely beautiful, they are often beautiful. Even if he does not create as many one-off gardens of unique beauty as the first gardener, he does create some, and his gardens give more satisfaction and lasting satisfaction. His gardens rarely fail. He knows how to get rid of diseases. His gardens do have bare spots and bushy spots but he can minimize them and make each one go away as it crops up. If the owner of the land wants to change from featuring roses to featuring daffodils, he can do that.

Here are more ways to think about it:

Imagine the mechanic who fixes cars by experience and feel only versus the mechanic who really knows cars, metals, materials, electricity, and breaks, and who fixes by both feel and knowledge.

Imagine a computer person who fixes computers through experience and feel only versus a computer person who has studied operating systems, programs, languages, interfaces, and hardware.

Confucius and Conservatives.

Edmund Burke, an English and Irish politician, 1729 to 1797, was father of the Conservative movement. Although intrigued by America and its independence, and said that English policy toward America was a serious mistake, he was appalled by the French Revolution and suspicious of capitalism, industrialism, and changes away from the traditional agrarian and aristocratic order. He did not support free enterprise and free market capitalism. He did not support the rising capitalists. He did support the aristocracy and its links to the mainstream Church, as long as the old order produced genuine responsible leaders. He did want progress. He was rational. I see him as a version of the Enlightenment. He saw a link between stable progressive society, traditional piety, and predictable order. Movement away from what works is likely to cause more harm than good. "If it aint broke, don't fix it." We can move forward if we do not cut our feet out from under us. Certain kinds of social order go well with human nature, while other kinds do not. It is up to responsible leaders to find those orders, to guide us to new such orders in time of change, to avoid bad orders, and to make it all make sense.

The modern American and British Conservative movement that began in the 1950s, gained momentum under Ronald Regan and Margaret Thatcher, and exploded with the Religious Right afterward, is NOT a continuation of Burke's ideas despite what its apologists claim. It departs from him toward irrationalism, dogma, and theocracy. It is closer to reactionary fundamentalism and to populist anti-democracy than to real Burke-like conservative ideas. It is closer to Mercantilism than to real free-market ideals, and only uses free-market ideals to rationalize its preferred state interventions. The modern American and British Conservative has to consider what it wishes to preserve, to conserve, and to change. It has to consider how it wishes to do that. It has not done this thinking well enough.

Confucius was like Edmund Burke but not like the modern American and British Conservative movement. He saw the links between piety, character, social order, ritual broadly defined, leadership, a cohesive state, and the progress that can be gained only by building on a cohesive state. Only some social orders

go along with human nature and Heaven, and we have to seek those orders. If we need to see Confucius in modern terms, think of him as a moderate Republican with leanings toward traditional piety, a trust in old wealth, and a wish to go into the future without losing what we have now. He would not be a staunch Right Wing Religious Conservative. He would not be a champion of the unbridled free market nor would he accept a business world that thrived only as the result of state support. He would not be a fascist. He would not be a Libertarian. He would approve of limited state programs.

Confucius believed in what a genuine “compassionate moderate conservative” would believe in America, including the role of Heaven in all aspects of life and the state. Confucius believed in the receptivity of human hearts and he stated the Golden Rule clearly. Contrary to stereotype, in accord with Jesus, he held virtue and service to the state more important than family. If family members erred, they should be corrected. Unlike Jesus, Confucius did not make the Golden Rule and “pay it forward” high-level goals, and did not see them as a key way whereby people could make themselves into proper citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. He was not committed in the same way to the same ideals as Jesus although he recognized them.

Religion, Confucius, Conservatives, and Liberals.

I find it hard to imagine Confucius without Heaven, grace, virtue, and Heavenly principles. Religion was an integral part of his ideas of social life and the state. That was typical all over the world until about the 1700s in the West (excluding some Buddhist and Hindu analyses). Yet, now, we live in modern plural states where we try to conduct the state without leaning on religion. So the position of Confucius leads us directly to questions of religion and state. I have already said what I want to say in Chapters One, Two, and this chapter, so I don't repeat other than comments below. If we accept that values originally came from religion, the best values for the modern state originally came from Western European Christianity, values still have to feel sacred, and look for the values that work, then we can accept the values without worrying too much about which religion they originally came from. All religions, agnostics, and atheists can accept the values and get on with the difficult business of running a state.

Conservatives say the combination of Christianity, family values, going to church, a classical education with Greek and Roman values, and study of the political traditions of Northwestern Europe, in particular England, can make potential leaders into real leaders. I said something like this might be the difference between Confucianism and the West, at least when coupled with correct institutions for the administration of power. In contrast to China, this is what the West did for a long time; and this did seem to work until modern capitalism and populist democracy broke down the tradition. I am not sure it would work now in America or China in its traditional form. I think the study of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Locke, and etc. is still relevant but is not enough for the modern world. We need more now. I think we have good ideas to add to the tradition but we are slow to adopt them. Whatever we find, I hope it mixes with both Western and Confucian traditions to give the world what it needs.

Conservatives in the West say the West evolved middle level institutions because it has the Christian Church, and the Church taught not only religious ideas but also the Classical education of Greece and Rome. Greece was obsessed with understanding (analyzing) the right working institutions and Rome actually found them for its time. Religion, non-religious theory, and practicality combined and carried on, and were available when needed. To a large extent, this conservative observation is true. What is

important here is that the West had the additional institutions for regular middle-level government, and the attitudes that go along with regular good government, while China did not. It might be important that the Church carried those additional institutions for most of Western history; or it might not matter that the Church did the job as long as some institution did the job; maybe philosophical schools would have done the job as well if they had survived. I think it did matter that the Church did the job. Although the Church and Confucius both based their ideas on Heaven (God), the Church held ideas about administering power that are both effective and humane while Confucians did not. I do not speculate on why that happened. While I give the Church more credit than most liberals do, I do not give the Church as much credit as conservatives do. The Church preserved a secular tradition along with Christianity; it did not preserve a purely religious tradition. It was the secular ideas of Greece and Rome that kept the ship on even keel and going forward. If the Western tradition had been purely religious, it would have been like the Jews or Egyptians, and we would not have modern self-government, science, or capitalism. I do not here argue about the role of the Christian Church and how the Christian Church compares to the religious component in the ideas of Confucius.

Conservatives make parallel opposite mistakes about the interplay of religious and secular ideas and institutions.

Liberals say we should end all mention of religion. I disagree. We need not adopt a state religion but it is silly to forget three thousand years of history and to overlook the fact that people want their values to feel sacred and to be grounded in religion. We can adopt values from Northwestern European Christianity without adopting all its religion-and-culture to the exclusion of all others. We can easily learn from other religions and cultures, and value them for what is good in them. At some point, a sane person has to simply say “grow up” about this topic.

The mistake that liberals make about religion might not be so bad but it bleeds over into character. It is one thing to (try to) block off religion. It is another thing to block off character. Regardless of where it came from, or comes from now, we need people of a particular character as leaders and citizens. There is no other way. Liberals believe we can maintain the correct idea of character, and maintain people of good character, without reference to religion. This is likely not true. Confucius certainly knew it is not true. People want religion. They want ties between religion and character. To grow good character, we have to come to grips with the link between religion and character. Again, this does not mean we have to adopt a state religion. But, if religion helps us to build character, then we should not suppress all mention of religion. We should allow religion to build good character. We should allow all religions to build the best character they can, especially once they have adopted the values that I related in Chapter Two. If we deny any link between religion and the kind of good character that we need in the state, then we get religion the bad character that leads to terrorism.

As liberalism tried to separate religion and character, and tried to carry on with character building without religion, character has floundered. I am not saying modern people are all wicked now as a result of no God; but they are confused and do follow bad demagogues, politicians, and bad dogma; see the chapter on Romanticism. Modern people do not work on citizenship. If religion can help us bring people to good values, character, and citizenship, then that result is good, not bad. If lack of religion lets people lapse into bad character, then we should be slow about excluding all religion. As always, we should work on allowing religion proper scope in a state society without instituting a state religion.

The parallel opposite Conservative mistake is a horrible exaggeration of the Confucian error. They think forcing their own religion on a person gives him-her good character automatically absolutely necessarily without any exception. They think having the state adopt their religion automatically necessarily without exception leads to good citizens and a good state. Nothing else is needed or should be added. All else should be excluded. Any additions are potentially dangerous. The religion does not have to train people in social science (political science) or the long tradition of Western social-and-political thought; it only has to give people a particular God experience and has to make sure they go to the right church often. I don't have to explain how wrong this. This is religious fundamentalism of the kind that we deplore in Muslims and that leads to religious terrorism. I don't have to explain that naïve Conservatives actually do believe this even if they know enough not to say it aloud in so many words. Even if a particular religion were true and Godly it would not necessarily lead to good character unless it was supplemented with other values, and it would not necessarily lead to good citizens and a good state. This conservative mistake drives the backlash not only of liberals but all sensible people. Again, at some point, an adult has to say "enough". We need better.

A good religion coupled with the right education in the Western tradition of social-and-political analysis is likely to lead to good character and moderately competent citizens. It might even lead some people to work hard and become good leaders. I think Confucius would agree if he could have some time to study world history and look at the modern situation.

Religion alone can't do this. Can a good secular education in the Western tradition alone, without the religious component, do this? Conservatives fear it can, and so they stress the religious component and belittle the secular component – to the embarrassment of good reasonable thinking people. Since about after World War Two, America and Europe have been experimenting with a blend of religion and secular education. They have been teaching the secular component in public schools and teaching the religious component in the family and church (temple, mosque, synagogue, etc.). Americans and Europeans want family and church to teach religion but they can't say so in public. For a while, this experiment was going well.

Unfortunately, that result led liberals to denigrate religion altogether – again the parallel opposite sad error on which conservatives blame all the troubles of the world. Before we could find the right balance, the experiment was derailed by the speed of change in the modern world, by the stress of America and Europe entering the modern world economy and world politics quickly. In that situation, it is hard to find the right balance and the resulting fights hurt everybody. The public schools system stopped teaching traditional Western secular social-and-political ideas, categories, values, and institutions to instead give pieces of paper for jobs. The family stopped teaching religion except for some empty formalism; the quality of religion taught by churches etc. varied quite a bit but mostly was not good and not enough for modern people; or religion degenerated into zealous dogmatic causes as described in the chapter here on Romanticism here. The family and church cannot teach the Western tradition of values and analysis, for reasons I don't go into here. The failure of privately-taught religion led to conservative calls for religion in school; and, that led to expected backlash from liberals and thinking moderate people. All this is quite annoying.

It might seem we could easily find a sensible blend of religious and secular instruction that did not favor one religion but that was honest about the source of our values and ideas in Western Christianity and the Western secular tradition. We need not promote any one religion in school but we could teach about all religions. With the Internet for supplement, this task should be easy and fun. Unfortunately, we will not do this. I don't explain why.

We have not been very good at any of this and we really need to do better. I am not sure what advice Confucius would give on doing better.

A Last Word on Goodness Winning.

Goodness might win but goodness is not destined to win just because it is goodness. If goodness does win, rather than win because it is goodness, far more likely leaders will use force and leaders will appeal to emotions that go along with goodness but are not necessarily goodness, such as patriotism. So I see Confucius as I see Socrates, Jesus, and Gandhi. I hope they are right, but I doubt it. I think the best we can do is now far less than we could have done after World War One or World War Two, and even that will take a lot of work.

26 Taoism

PART 1: Introduction

Way.

Taoism is Chinese. In Chinese, “Tao” is pronounced “Dow” as in “wow” or “Dow Jones”. “Tao” means “way”. Boy Scouts is a “way” in this sense. “Do” (“doe”) is the Japanese pronunciation of “Tao”. Judo (“Ju Do”), Karate Do, and Jeet Kune Do are “ways”. Generically, “tao-ism” is “way-ism”. The ways of Legalists, Mo-ists, and Confucians are particular ways. Besides particular ways, Chinese also believed in one Way that was best, went with Heaven, underlay all things, and solved all natural problems. All specific ways are from the one Way. Even so, the one Way is simple and a unity. All Chinese schools saw themselves as best representing the one Way; Confucians and Mo-ists saw their ideas as best representing the one Way. Eventually, what is now called “Taoism” won as the accepted expression of the one Way. At the time of the founding Taoist writers, about 300 to 200 BCE, there was no school of Taoism; the founders did not think in terms of a school of Taoism; and they did not wish to be in a school of anything.

Chinese think the one Way solves all problems much as: Americans say “where there’s a will there’s a way”; engineers think there is a tinker to solve every problem; physicists intend to bring everything together under one mathematical umbrella; Muslims pray to Allah to show them a way to deal with their problems; scientists in particular fields, such as evolution, think there is a model that explains everything important, such as multi-level selection; and some anthropologists see culture as the one-best-and-only explanation for all behavior and social life.

Taoism always has come in three aspects: (1) political; (2) philosophical and religious; and (3) popular or “magical”. This chapter explains only political and religious Taoism. There were no divisions in Taoism until Confucianism won as the dominant political outlook after about 200 CE, then political Taoism was no longer relevant, and the strains split. Religious Taoism came to America after 1950. Americans largely ignore political Taoism. After about 1975, some Americans wanted to use “chi” for healing, sex, long life, beauty, acuity, and martial skill as in “Qi Gong”. All are magical Taoism. For many people, especially in China, magical Taoism is Taoism, and other aspects are sidelines. I know little about magical Taoism, and so ignore it here. See the Bibliography.

In a nutshell, Taoism says we can be alright with heaven and the Way, and cure all problems of the state, if we act naturally and spontaneously without dogma, guile, or pretense. If we do that, we are in accord with the Tao, and all that we need follows. Anything else, even if it sounds good, such as the Golden Rule, is a pretense, and harmful. This Taoist stance is false. People are not this good, and the world does not work like this. We have to use principles, laws, and everything else that I listed in Chapters One and Two.

Heaven and the Way have a close relation but I don't know what exactly. The Way might have made Heaven, Heaven made the Way, they created each other, or they are the same, but humans wrongly see them as distinct. One cannot "be around" without the other in the background. In the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition, God and his Spirit are both one and distinct. You cannot know of God without seeing that he set out a way for this world and for good living, and to seek his way. His way works. Other ways do not work. His way is goodness and virtue. If we follow the way of God, then eventually we will be right with God and know God. To submit to God is to follow his way; and to follow his way is to submit to him. I think the relation of Heaven and the Way is similar.

The Way, power, and virtue have a close relation too but I don't know it exactly either. People who know the Way are virtuous and have a kind of power, but not the virtue of Confucius or the power of soldiers. Some people who know the Way have power over nature, power to help other people, and martial power but that power belongs more to magical Taoism, so I do not dwell on it here. People who know the Way can get things done but not grand political things. Mostly they manage to get along with nature, get along with neighbors, make a living, find food, find wine, paint, write poetry, sing, have a good time, and make this life worthwhile.

In the chapter on Confucius, I pointed out the importance of discipline in Chinese thought. With its stress on spontaneity and freedom, Taoism can seem like the deliberate opposite of the Chinese idea in general and to Confucianism in particular. Confucians and Legalists certainly took it that way. Typical of Taoists, they did not. Discipline in the sense of Confucius or Legalism is beside the point and unreal, so there can be no opposite to Confucian discipline; all simple opposites are misleading, including discipline versus spontaneity; so Taoism does not oppose discipline. It transcends discipline. To people who are already in the Tao, discipline is irrelevant; and people already in the Tao can show all the moxie and character that Confucians wrongly think can come only from discipline. For people not already in the Tao, it takes discipline to get out of bad habits and to find the Tao; only then do we see them as free and spontaneous. Taoist martial arts, including "soft" arts such as Tai Chi Chuan and "hard" arts such as Karate, stress the need for discipline first, with the final goal of no technique and spontaneous action. Magical Taoism is full of strenuous discipline lasting decades. Taoists mocked external discipline, such as from Confucius. To mock external discipline, they talked as if discipline was irrelevant, and they were totally undisciplined. Too often, people who call themselves Taoists but are not really Taoists did flaunt supposed freedom as anti-discipline, but I think they are a side issue and not relevant to the main issues of discipline in Chinese thought and the Taoist attitude and freedom. As you read this chapter, see what you can make of these issues for yourself.

Basic Taoism is encoded in only three small texts: the "Tao Te Ching" ("Dow Deh Jhing") by Lao Tzu (now spelled "Laozi"; no dates); the works of Chuang Tzu (Juang Dze or Zhuangzi; about 369 to 286 BCE); and the works of Lieh Tzu (Lieh Dze or Liehzi; about 250 BCE). The first two are most important. "Lao Tzu" means "old master". Lao Tzu might not have been real. If he lived, his family name might have been "Li" while his personal names might have been "Erh" or "Tan". "The Chuang Tzu" refers to the work of the real person "Chuang Tzu" or "master Chuang". The Chuang Tzu consists of stories. It comes in two pieces, the "inner chapters" and "outer chapters". Only the inner chapters definitely are from Chuang Tzu. The Chuang Tzu is among the most fun pieces ever written in any culture on any topic. "The Lieh Tzu" refers to work attributed to "Lieh Tzu", also stories. They do not reach the depths of the Chuang Tzu but they are still fun and amazing, and the easiest way to learn Taoism. Traditionally, the Tao Te Ching

came first. More likely: stories were in the air before any documents were written; the Chuang Tzu came first; then the Tao Te Ching and the Lieh Tzu were assembled sometime after 250 BCE. The Tao Te Ching is one of the most amazing works in any literature. It consists of eighty-one small units that are like poems (or are). Like the Book of Isaiah in the Tanakh (Old Testament), the Tao Te Ching was written by more than one person but not many, perhaps two or three. "Ching" is "important book"; "Tao" is "Way"; and "Te" is "virtue that gets things done properly". So "Tao Te Ching" is usually translated "(Book about) The Way and Its Virtue" or "(Book about) The Way and Its Power-Ability-Efficacy". I do not justify points with citations from translations of any Taoist works because of copyright issues.

Not Bad Mysticism.

Taoism includes some ideas that are typically mystical, such as that all things arise from the Tao, subsist only through the Tao, and return to the Tao. Multiple is single; the single is multiple; and the single gives rise to the multiple without splitting. Death is an illusion or nothing to worry about. Boundaries are fuzzy. We are only "bits" of Tao and only appear separate from it. We are dreams within dreams. Morality and truth are relative. The Tao is a Force that runs through everything and gives Abundant Life. If you seek the Tao, you will find it, or, rather, it will find you, and everything will be fine after that.

Sometimes mystical ideas dominate. Sometimes mystical ideas "corrupt" Taoism in the same way that mysticism, metaphysics, and glamour corrupt Buddhism and Christianity. Mysticism is not essential to Taoism, and the best Taoism is done almost ignoring mysticism. So I avoid nearly all the mysticism to focus on what is relevant here.

I avoid the issue of whether Taoist mysticism is the same as other mysticism. It does differ in one way. In some mysticism, the obvious world is an illusion, and we wake up to something other than the obvious world and more real than the obvious world. In Taoism, the obvious world is the real world. The mystic world and the real world do not differ but most people do not feel their unity. Taoists wake up to: the grace, beauty, wonder, and fun of the real world; the connections between things in the real world; the fact that the real world is not full of distinct enduring things but is a series of transformations; and the weakness of the distinctions (discriminations, dogma, categories) that we take for granted. The world is as it is, and not otherwise. We wake up to better appreciate the real ordinary world and our small place in it. A person need not understand anything beyond the ordinary real full world to live correctly, and trying to do so is misleading. After Buddhism came to China, the Taoist idea that the obvious world is the real world mixed easily with the Mahayana idea that the world before awakening is the same as the world after awakening; together they helped make Zen.

Taoism cultivates an unusual attitude, and it is easy to misjudge the attitude as mystical. Taoism urges people to change their old attitude, and this change can be mistaken as a mystic conversion. Yet to see Taoism as "merely" mysticism stresses the bad parts in Taoism and overlooks the good parts of Taoism. It is better to think of Taoism as like the attitude that people have when they first realize global climate change is real, romance is real, or that sports, science, and art are fun.

Basic Taoist Stance.

As with Mahayanists about the same time in India, the Tao Te Ching in China begins by saying any way about which we can talk, even to name it, is not the one true Way. The one true Way cannot be named or described. Then the Tao Te Ching goes on talking about the one true Way. In the 1920s, in Austria and England, Ludwig Wittgenstein said deep truth could not be explained, only pointed at. His friend, Bertrand Russell, noted that Wittgenstein wrote a lot about what couldn't be written about. The "California Taoists" centered on Alan Watts in the 1950s and 1960s. They told people to get direct experience of Life rather than second-hand ideas - a 1950s American version of "Say 'Yes' to Life"; and extolled the drug LSD for giving direct access to Life beyond mere words. Then they took LSD, sat around the house, and chattered like squirrels about abstractions. Chinese religious-philosophical-political-literary Taoists were not verbose but they did write a fair amount about the Way despite their own warning not to; used wine instead of LSD; and were not as bad as Mahayanists or California Taoists.

Legalists said laws can tame human nature; Mo-ists said mutual regard can do the trick, especially if the state promotes mutual regard; and Confucius said ritual can teach leaders virtue, then leaders can guide followers. Laws, love, virtue, discipline, and ritual all give their own kind of power. Taoists had none of this. It is all wrong. Jews say "get right with God" through proper observance; Christians require you to believe in Jesus as God; Muslims require you to submit to God and accept Mohammad as the last and greatest of prophets; I say to follow Jesus' message mixed with practicality and Western values; middle class Americans "say 'Yes' to Life"; Buddhists disdain ordinary painful life; Mahayanists give up ordinary happiness to feel the joy of a bigger-than-me system; Hindus participate in the ecstasy of a multi-life system governed by social-duty-as-Dharma. Taoists would have none of this either, not for governing or for personal action. All schemes are artificial impositions. None work. All are contrived, odd, unnatural, factually wrong, personally hurtful, and socially hurtful. All cause more harm than good. All use power when power is not warranted. All impose an inferior human construct on what is already present in nature and already superior to anything contrivable by humans.

From the start, Taoists mixed ideas about how to govern, how to get along in life, what life is all about, how life works, how the world works, and where it all came from. What we now call (1) political and (2) religious-and-philosophical Taoism were not distinct, and an early Taoist would not understand why we separate them. This chapter presents political and philosophical Taoism mostly together. Despite the modern American tendency to dwell on philosophical and mystical Taoism apart from politics, you can't know Taoism without learning about its ideas of (not) governing and the (non) state.

The best way to govern is not to govern at all. Get out of the way, and let people act naturally. The best way to act is by not deliberately acting at all. Just act without ideologies. An apt slogan in the Western literature on Taoism is "do without ado". The Chinese slogan for this idea is "wei wu wei" or "wu wei": "act not act", "act empty act", or "act by not acting". Bruce Lee used the idea in the movie "Enter the Dragon" by saying he "fights by not fighting"; that was how he tricked a nasty bad guy into getting stuck on a little boat behind the main boat.

Yet if you make even that much of a doctrine of this idea, if you declare for the doctrine of no doctrines, the dogma of no dogmas, then you have killed the idea already. You have to drop all doctrines entirely, including the doctrine of getting rid of doctrines.

Taoists avoid power, especially political power. They do not want power over other people. They do not want other people to have power over them. To have power is a burden and a curse. Taoists are adept at avoiding power. Taoists do not dwell on power one way or another; they do not obsess over avoiding it because that is the same as to obsess over having it; they simply avoid power when it gets in the way of the Way. The attitude that I learned toward institutions and power when I was young in Oregon is similar to the Taoist attitude. "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely." Chuang Tzu was offered the office of prime minister in one of the most powerful states in China, and turned it down. It would be better to be a long-lived turtle dragging its tail in the mud than to carry the burden of power and the state, and, besides, the state would be better off without any leader anyway.

Stop supporting all the institutions of the state, and so let them die on their own. We need no king, prime minister, president, congress, road building, dam building, taxes, military, courts, trials, police, policies, theories, civic centers, civic orchestras, state schools, stadiums, examinations, welfare, teachers, priests, lawyers, laws, religions, dogmas, etc. If you leave people alone to follow the Tao, they will work this out on their own, and do it better than any governor could do it for them.

Taoism seems like anti-legalism, rebellion, Romanticism, and anarchism, but it is not. Taoism is "apart from" legalism and anti-legalism or other such categories or dichotomies. It is "don't bother to think that way at all". It is not rebellious, romantic, above the law (antinomian), disorderly, or indecent. It is like the advice that I gave in trying to overcome Romanticism in the chapter on Romanticism. The best way is not to worry about thinking in particular terms or not thinking in particular terms but to think in your own terms and to simply let it happen.

Farmers go to market to exchange ducklings, piglets, onions, millet, and chestnuts. Who can tell them what to do? Why should anyone tell them? Let them do as they do. Economic analysis is dogma rooted in distinctions. Suppose an economist could give an accurate detailed analysis of their actions, showing that farmers efficiently use resources, and skillfully exchange, so as to maximize profit-and-satisfaction. So what? The reasons in the analysis are not necessarily why the farmers do what they do, even if their actions fit the economic analysis perfectly. Even if the reasons used in the analysis are, in fact, why the farmers do as they do, why should we have a state policy about what they do? Why should we let formal economic ideas of determine state policy? Maybe next time the farmers will act for different reasons. Let the farmers do as they do. Whether the end result turns out well or not well by some economic standard of general welfare is not relevant compared to their freedom to do as they will.

A man lives by a marshland where he makes a living by fishing and by gathering bird feathers from which he makes sculptures to sell. His work is beautiful. A passing government official feels sorry for him, sees the beauty of his work, and offers the man a pension if he will make art for the king. The man refuses. He prefers to live with birds and fishes. By what standards can we call him mistaken? Even if we could devise standards, why do our standards, or any standards, apply to him? Let him do as he does. It is better if the beauty of the work simply is there, for the man and his neighbors to enjoy, without attracting any attention.

The wind blows cold from the north today. Some people lack firewood while other people use the cold to preserve beets. Who is to say the wind is good or bad, or the state should have a wind policy? Trees grow without help from the state; a "tree policy" would not make them grow better unless a previous tree

policy had already screwed up the forest. Jesus said God knows about all individual birds and flowers, and we mere humans cannot make the birds and flowers better by worrying. We cannot make ourselves taller, make our hair grow, or changes its natural color, by worrying or by enacting a state policy. Taoists would appreciate William Blake's poem "Tiger, Tiger" ("Tyger, Tyger").

After he-she has learns the trade, a computer programmer, grocery store manager, or farmer, still thinks but does not think too much. He-she does what he-she has learned. A sheep dog does not herd sheep following a mathematical program even if a mathematician can devise a program that describes what the sheep dog does. Once children learn to play baseball, they just play. Most kids never see the rulebook. Most adept golfers tell you never to read a book. If you can't teach yourself, learn from a teacher. Fourth rate artists try to make art and think it is good – nearly all hip-hop, rock, pop, and country performers are like this. Third rate artists make art, know they make art, and don't care how good it is. Second rate artists suspect they make art but don't care that it is art or how good it is. I am not qualified to talk about first rate artists. Just by giving you this explanation, I have falsified what really goes on in art, and ruined art for you. In the movie "A Beautiful Mind", a sign that John Nash might go insane came when he followed pigeons around trying to devise an algorithm (formula) for their movements. Every once in a while, the rules for "Parliamentary Procedure" actually help a meeting but the vast majority of meeting time is carried on without a thought for the formal rules.

With discrimination, with too much thought, people interfere in nature, these people here interfere with those people there, and inevitably things get "screwed up". Neither Taoists nor I define "screwed up". We don't have to. "Screwed up" is easy to see; thousands of cases appear every day in all social groups and all countries; and you know it when you see it. If you don't want things to get screwed up, then don't interfere, don't follow dogma. Use your good natural sense and follow the Tao instead.

Another Way to Think About It: Simple Integrity.

I am not sure self-avowed modern Taoists would agree with this picture.

All people have contradictions, it is not possible to get rid of contradictions, and contradictions are not a big problem if we don't make them so. Contradictions can give us character. Contradictions need not cripple us. We can still be natural, open, lively, and spontaneous with some contradictions. Yin and Yang are contradictory but get along well.

Now imagine that, despite modest contradictions, you speak openly straight from the heart all the time. You never lie. You never have to lie. You never have to cover up. You never have to evade or allude. You never have to elaborate. You can get your point across directly. You are what you are. You are not ashamed of what you are. What you are is good enough. You have integrity. You are not pretentious or self-conscious about speaking plainly; you just do it. You are not preachy and do not make other people uneasy with your honesty. You are not aware that you do it and so could not possibly think it makes you better than anyone else.

In speaking honestly like this, you connect with nature and with other people who speak honestly. You find a community in nature and with other similar people. The lack of additional knots in your stomach and in your head sets free your abilities. You do not become superhuman but you do get a lot done and

become a useful person. You appreciate others, nature, yourself, and life more. You might appreciate booze and art more. You also avoid bad people and lying more.

You do not look down on normal people and make them uneasy. You are not a New Age role model or a tough guy Romantic rebel anti-hero. You enjoy shows about normal guys with flaws such as “Magnum P.I.”, “Friends”, and “Seinfeld”. You can enjoy real normal flawed people too.

Jesus was like this. Jesus had something like this in mind when he said “the truth will set you free” and when he advised people to speak simply and honestly so their speech was simple “yes” and “no”. Jesus’ idea of the Kingdom of God was like the community of such people and with nature. Some Christians are like this but most are not.

This sounds like 1960s psycho-babble but is not. Before the psycho-babble there were real ideas based on sound feelings. The psycho-babble is a mere echo of better ideas and feelings. We cannot dismiss this vision because it reminds us of twaddle.

Not many real humans can be like this. Contrary to misconceptions of people who want to be like this but are not, nature is not like this, as we will see below.

But that does not mean direct simple unguarded honesty is not a useful ideal and it does not mean that some people, in the right times and places, can be nearly like this. To act like this sometimes is a great relief. We should respect this as a good way to be human. This is one view of Taoism.

No Dogma.

This section is abstruse but not hard if you don’t come down solidly on one side of the issues. The ideas here are about as close to a philosophical debate as ran through Taoism and the ideas here were a central feature of Taoism.

Taoism shares the outlook described in this section with other “nice” mysticism such as Sufis, Mahayana, and Hinduism. In Mahayana, the issue of “no dogma no distinctions” is the core of several Buddhist aids; if you get the idea of “no dogma no distinctions” then you are enlightened; and you are not enlightened unless you get the idea. The idea of “no distinctions” can be misleading in Taoism as in Buddhism but does not seem to have been as much a diversion in Taoism as in Mahayana. I take up the topic of Taoist aids at the end of this chapter.

Power requires discriminating between “this versus that”, usually as “us versus them”. Discriminating between this and that is necessarily incorrect, misleading, and leads to abuse. There is no absolutely accurate absolutely reliable distinction. Thus power is rooted in necessarily misleading discrimination. Misleading discrimination between this and that is the root source of power and abuse. All discrimination between more powerful people and less powerful people requires discrimination between this person and that person, this privilege and that privilege, this wealth and that wealth, this right and that right, this duty and that duty, getting now for sure versus maybe getting later, and so on.

Laws are not possible without discrimination between acts, people, and situations, and without power. Because all power is abuse, all laws necessarily entail abuse, even when they mean to minimize abuse and discrimination.

Words require that we discriminate between this and that, and words often entail value judgments. We say “our town” meaning “OUR PLACE” and everything it does in the play “Our Town” rather than merely “the place in which we happen to live”. We say “the football game” meaning “THE important event of this week” rather than merely “a sporting event this weekend among other sporting and non-sporting events”. We do not say merely “we haven’t had pizza for dinner for a while” but say “let’s have PIZZA for dinner tonight”. We say “I am a follower of the Tao” with pride. Even if some discriminations are not harmful, and even if some are fun, still many discriminations are harmful. That is why Taoists are wary of words, and prefer direct intuition and direct action.

All discrimination between this and that entails a misuse of power even when the discrimination is not done directly as part of government, as, for example, when one person says that raising rice is better than raising millet, going to the beach is better than going to the desert, or we should go to this restaurant rather than that restaurant. All discrimination between this and that is an abuse of power even in regular life. Taoists did see the simple difference between an apple and a pear, between up and down, but were suspicious of going much farther than this, much farther than what is naturally obvious.

For convenience, I subsume all discrimination under the terms “dogma”, “doctrine”, or “ideology”. Power, abuse, and discrimination are nearly indistinguishable, one entails the others, and one cannot be found without the others. Every time I write “dogma”, “doctrine”, “ideology”, “power”, “rule”, or “law”, I imply a misleading discrimination although usually I don’t point out the discrimination. Taoists avoided dogma as they avoided power. This is one reason why the Tao Te Ching said what could be named was not the real name. This is why a doctrine of not having doctrines is a mistake, and why hating power is as much a trap as loving it. Do not dwell on dogma-discrimination. Do not fall into the trap to begin with.

To decide what is good or bad is to create dogma-discrimination and to abuse power. Taoists were leery of ideas of good and bad. Vexing as it can be not to promote good, and to put up with bad, if we promote good, or suppress bad, then eventually we fail at what we wish and we make things even worse. To stop making things worse, we have to stop thinking in terms of good and bad even when we retain some vestigial shadows of good and bad in our minds.

The idea of not deciding between good and bad is so annoying that most people reject it out of hand, and so reject Taoism. Taoists do not make it easier because they write flippantly, peevishly, and mockingly. Also, Taoists said people who live according to the Tao live better than others; and said a state that ran according to the Tao (that is, without any government) was better than states that ran according to other ideas; so it does seem as if Taoists had an idea of good a bad, better life and worse life, in mind. Rather than take a lot of space here to explain, I get back to these ideas later.

To think we differ from the Tao, and thus differ from other people, from birds, trees, mountains, or clouds, is another misleading necessarily false distinction. At most, we only temporarily differ from other things because the Tao that flows through us and them makes it seem that way now. The same Tao that makes us distinct flows through them too. The same Tao makes us both different and similar. We could not be

what we are without others of all kinds, and they could not be what they are without us. Some people can specialize in selling cars because others specialize in selling furniture; yet they are all in the market. In baseball, one person can play shortstop because another plays third base and another plays second; yet they are all on the same team and all in the same game. At the end of a football or baseball game in the US when I was young, children used to chant “Who Do We Appreciate?” showing how our team needs them and they need us to have any game at all. “Us and them” is a big misleading distinction. We can’t be as distinct as we might think we are if we all come from the Tao and seek it. To invoke Dylan Thomas again: “The force that through the green fuse drives the flower, drives me.”

When we try to increase our family, security, wealth, position, power, or goodness, or decrease badness, we increase the necessarily artificial false wrong distinction between us and the Tao, us and others. We make things worse, eventually even for ourselves.

The distinctions between good and bad, and between self and Tao, are the two root distinctions that lead to all other distinctions, and thus to dogma, power, abuse, and deterioration. The distinction between self and Tao includes the distinction between self and other. We can only get things right with the Tao if we stop discriminating between self and Tao, and between good and bad.

Some Taoist stories and essays seem to say we should make no discriminations at all, as if we should live in a big ball of pudding. This is a mistake. The stories only seem to make that point to correct for the common error of too much dogma. Even after we merge with the Tao, we see differences between an apple and a peach, Bob and Jill, and me and Harry. The trick is to rest in useful distinctions suggested by the Tao, and no more. To think much about “right” and “wrong” is to make a wrong distinction. You have to let it happen. How we get to there, I do not explain.

Other stances and religions warn against making a distinction between the self versus other, self versus world, and good versus bad. These warnings are common in mystic traditions. Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism stress the warnings. How the warnings are developed characterizes particular stances-and-religions. There is no value here in trying to clarify the various warnings and traditions. I point this topic out for people who go on to further reading.

To notice we discriminate is to discriminate. To disapprove of discriminating, or praise not discriminating, is to salt the wound. Taoism has to overcome this problem, which it does fairly well but not perfectly. Rather than try to explain how Taoism does this, and so add even more discriminations, I simply go on to describe Taoism.

The idea of “dogma” strongly implies “system”. When I write “dogma”, think also “system”. I don’t use the term “system” because Taoists did not systematically attack systems, they unsystematically attacked the silly dogmas and bad outcomes to which systematic dogmatic thinking leads. The version of Taoism that I give here does not imply any system. Taoists feel free to make assertions because they do not thereby fall into the trap of rabid anti-dogmatism; but that does not mean they imply a system. Other religions do imply a system when they make assertions. Magical Taoism indulged as much in system making as any other religion but that is not what I describe here. You have to read Taoist literature and then decide for yourself if Taoism did have dogma and did develop a system. Non-Taoists certainly look for dogma and

system when they read Taoist literature. These comments apply also to Zen except Zen had to struggle with the system that it inherited from Mahayana.

Sticky Useful Logical Point.

The issue here shows up in various versions in various places, and can be sticky, so it is best to state the issue clearly here even at the risk of interrupting the flow. This issue has a version at the level of thought, stated here, and versions for society, morality, and nature, stated later. Objections to the Taoist view can be made in terms of logic or fact.

On the one hand, to insist on no dogma is itself a dogma. Usually people don't realize when they lapse into this form of dogma. Taoists don't seem to realize when they have fallen into this dogma. This form of dogma can be as hurtful as obvious dogmas such as religious prejudice.

On the other hand, not to be strict about "no dogma" allows people to indulge in dogma. It gives license to offer prejudices as facts about human nature or the world. It permits schemes about how to govern, about society, and how to live.

You cannot insist it is better to avoid distinctions of better and worse. That is a contradiction because it depends on ideas of better and worse: "it is best to avoid 'best'". If you insist your ideas are the best for all time everywhere, then you are wrong, and very likely you use your ideas to gain power.

In these dilemmas, people usually seek a middle area, wider than a line, where sometimes they fall toward one side and sometimes they fall toward the other, and where different people are not always alike in where they fall.

When openly fighting rivals, Taoists clearly insisted on no dogma. They pushed the dogma of no dogma. They saw the damage done by alternatives such as lust for power, wealth, and order, and doctrines such as Legalism, Confucianism, and Mo-ism. They were determined to stop bad dogma and bad government even at the cost of lapsing into a dogmatic contradiction themselves. They will not allow even the tiniest crack for Confucians, Legalists, and Mo-ists.

In contrast, when telling stories, Taoists seem more often to go along with common sense, and to offer people the middle ground of mixing principles, practicality, and individual variation. The stories vary, and sometimes they also support the dogma of no dogma.

Offering the dogma of no dogma is a contradiction. From contradictions, we can assert any nonsense. You have to judge for yourself if Taoists do that. Non-Taoists also sense this contradiction, and use it to assert their dogmas, such as religious and political schemers; they also often offer nonsense. You have to be sensitive to that anti-Taoist abuse as well. You have to decide which abuse is worse.

The Thai have a saying that applies here, literally: "don't think (too) much" ("yaa khit maak [koen]"). This saying can be an excuse for "don't think at all, just indulge"; but it was not originally meant that way. It means what it says. Americans say, "don't over think". The trick is how much to think. For that there is no formula. The fact that there is no formula is the real message of Taoism on this issue, rather than

“don’t think at all”. “Don’t think at all” is dogmatic abuse of “don’t think too much”, of “no dogma”. We can think about the right amount if we practice and try, and even if we make mistakes.

Taoists happily distinguish between, and prefer one of: no dogma versus dogma; no distinction versus distinction; Tao and not-Tao; following the Tao and not following the Tao; the beauty of the Tao and the ugliness of the not-Tao; the beauty of nature and ugliness of not-nature; better society that follows the Tao versus worse society that follows dogma; good conditions that arise spontaneously versus contrived (social) relations that are bad; good that arises spontaneously versus conventional morality; and simple spontaneous versus action done according to some dogma. You should consider why these distinctions persist, if that is a problem, and if there is any hypocrisy.

Throughout the book I have said that simple acts of goodness and decency are better than acts done in the service of a system, and I have shown dislike of systems, especially metaphysics and theology. Taoism and I seem to agree on this. I also said we need principles, and here Taoism and I seem to part. While Taoism says we need no principles, in fact Taoists do act according to principles, and the principles seem similar to mine. Taoism and I differ in that I accept the need for principles while Taoism uses them but denies it does. To assess how much this difference matters would require going into Taoism more than I want to do here. I hope you get enough of an idea. I think the ledger is still in favor of Taoism despite this little fault.

These issues about dogma-and-no-dogma etc. are typical of relativism such as in Theravada, Mahayana, Hinduism, and most mysticism. I pick on Taoism to “go after” these issues because they show up clearly in Taoism, Taoism fusses over them (discriminates between discrimination and non-discrimination), and because I like Taoism and so want it to be as clear and effective as possible. Taoism has value because of the contradictions and despite them. I do not point out where these issues show up in other places, but, if you can see that for yourself, it is useful.

Conforming and Yielding.

Taoists do not try to change their setting forcibly. If they live in a bad place, they leave. If they live in a good place, or in the usual mixed place, they conform. By conforming, they get along, and they induce other people to get along too.

To shock people out of the mistakes of Legalists, Confucians, and Mo-ists - that we need to manipulate our world, and might use force - Taoist stories present extreme cases of conforming. I don’t repeat any here. As a result, people misunderstand Taoists as spineless, without character, cowards, and wimps. This is false. Taoists are not assertive, and they would make bad CEOs if they were forced to be CEOs, but they are not putty. Taoist conforming is more like what a biologist calls “adaptation” or the saying “when in Rome, do as the Romans do”. When it is warm, take off your clothes. When it is cold, put on clothes and build a fire. When all you have to eat are apples and nuts, eat apples and nuts. If you can get rice wine, then drink it; otherwise, drink water. In a famous Zen saying, “eat when hungry and sleep when sleepy”. Taoists conform to the needs of their own bodies and minds as well as their natural and social environments. Taoists do not look to assert their character or their “true you” onto the world, so it is not a hardship if they cannot. Yet individual Taoists do have a character that shows through. Taoists

lead by following. Taoists do not conform to bad ideas or to bad dogma. You have to read Taoism for yourself to decide for yourself about Taoist conforming.

One of the most important techniques for adaptation is yielding. Unless you have to, don't swim against the current. Try to arrange travel so that, when you are in the river, you go downstream. When you have to go upstream, try to walk on land. Sail a boat with the wind. Don't try to argue people out of stupid set opinions. Instead, calmly act in accord with the Tao, or leave. If you stay, bear what has to be borne until people see their error. Let people decide for themselves what they like. You do not make distinctions; you yield to the changes and categories that nature presents. Yielding is a way of getting over the idea that you need dogma. Unless you yield to nature first, you can't know what to use in place of bad dogma. Some stories show yielding as an indirect skilled cunning assertion, somewhat like passive aggression; but we should not see it that way. Yielding shows up in yin and yang (see below) and the martial arts. If somebody big and strong wants to hit you, don't try to stop his-her fist with force. Instead, get out of the way, or redirect his-her force with a small nudge from the side. Roll around a blow. Run away before a fight. Of course, if you yield all the time, you lose your character entirely. If you yield all the time, then you don't run away when that is best. You may not yield to bad dogma. In the long run, yielding always defeats assertion, just as water always wears down a rock. This point is so strong in Taoism that it is best to read about it directly in stories.

The Taoist sense of yielding and conforming is like the feeling in the old Quaker (Friends) song "Simple Gifts", quoted below. The "gift" is something given by the Tao. We can give it to ourselves or to other people when we act as agents of the Tao. The feeling is not exactly the same in Taoism as in the song but is close enough. Aaron Copland did a great version of the music.

In an interview, purposely using Taoist imagery, Bruce Lee said succeeding in martial arts is like being water. Although water is soft most of the time, it can push very hard, as in a flood; and the steady flow of water wears down continents. You conform to your opponent, yield when appropriate, and so win. When water is in a bottle, it looks like the bottle. When it is in a glass, it looks like the glass. When it is steam, it rises. When it is in a river, it flows. You do the same, and so overcome. You do not really win because nobody really wins a fight but at least you continue on.

As with yin and yang, yielding and conforming are linked to ideas about female and male, moon and sun, shade and light, and valley and mountain. Yielding is usually seen as feminine; conforming can be seen as feminine; notice the "valley" in the song "Simple Gifts". Traditionally, women certainly had the idea that yielding was typically feminine and always victorious. Yet neither tactic is necessarily feminine; to forcibly categorize is bad dogma. It depends on conditions and appropriate response. Gender identification, and parallels between aspects, I do not discuss. These aspects of Taoism draw starry-eyed magical mystics but they don't have to. Seeing by means of these aspects is one way of looking at how the world works, it need not be completely correct, but still it can be useful.

Simple Gifts

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be
And when we find ourselves in the place just right

'Twill be in the valley of love and delight
When true simplicity is gained
To bow and to bend we will not be ashamed
To turn, to turn, will be our delight
And by turning, turning we come 'round right

Acting in Accord with the Tao, One.

When people act in accord with the Tao, they can know they do so or not know; it makes little difference. People who do not know are not necessarily better than people who do know; this would be a misleading distinction leading to bad dogma. In some cases, for a sage, it is useful not only to act in accord with the Tao but also to know you do, mostly so you can “tone down” a bit and make the Tao intelligible to other people. Trying, at the same time, to act in accord with the Tao and also to know you act in accord with the Tao, is dangerous because you act according to dogma. So, to learn to act in accord with the Tao, you likely have to turn off your usually obvious intellect for a long time. Then later it is up to you whether you know or not.

Here is my version of a story from the Lieh Tzu: One day, a group of rich, powerful, spoiled people were driving around looking for fun – maybe snobs and maybe “gangstas”. They saw a poor old man walking on the side of the road, and decided to tease him. They got him into the car and got him drunk. Then they said: if he jumped out of the car while it was going 60 miles per hour, they would give him enough money so he could pay the rent for a year. He did jump out, but miraculously, he landed easily on his feet and was unhurt. The rich people said he only survived because he was drunk and relaxed. So, they picked him up and tried again. They took him to the edge of a cliff, and said they would give him enough money to buy food and medical insurance if he would jump off. He did, floated down gently, and landed unhurt. They were astounded. They took him to a pier at the edge of a deep lake, told him there was a great pearl at the bottom, and he could have the pearl if he could dive down and get it. The old man did just that, and came up with a great pearl. Now the rich people knew the poor old man was really a Taoist adept, and they asked him how he did it. The old man replied, “Did what? I did nothing special. You asked me to get out from the car to walk, and I did. You asked me to take a long step down, and I did. You asked me to hold my breath for a while to seek a pearl, and I did.” The old man had no idea he did anything odd. That was why he could do it. The pearl that he found was the Tao, which, of course, was always with him anyway. From then on, the spoiled rich people respected their elders.

Most Taoists are not like this. Most know they are not common. Most seek the Tao, and they only find and follow the Tao after great conscious effort, which effort likely includes a long time avoiding pitfalls of the conscious mind. From now on, I assume most Taoists know they follow the Tao, they know the Tao is not the same as any other dogma, and they assert it is not a dogma.

Seeking and following the Tao is like seeking and becoming adept at any skill that requires performance such as archery, karate, dance, music, or hacking computers. It is like studying math hard and then acing test after test. It is like acting morally although you know you can't be perfect and you know God judges you when you die. When you do it, you are not fully aware you do it. If you try to be aware as you do it, likely you will screw up. You can be aware in hindsight. You do not need praise from others because you feel the intrinsic value of what you do. You like to share with other like-minded people when you can.

You cannot always explain it to other people or teach it. But you can do it, and some people can explain and teach it too.

Acting in Accord with the Tao, Two.

When people act in accord with the Tao, things turn out well. When people act in accord with the Tao, they also act in accord with Heaven. They make Heaven on Earth. This Heaven is not a dogmatic paradise as in Christianity, Islam, and some Buddhism and Hinduism; it is “merely” a Heavenly way to live, die, and carry on.

People who act in accord with the Tao feel they act freely and spontaneously; by all human standards, they do. As just explained, people who act in accord with the Tao are not always conscious that they do so. The standard image is a fish that is not aware of the water in which it swims.

People who act in accord with the Tao do not act in accord with any particular dogma. There is no dogma that can capture the Tao or explain the Tao. The dogma of goodness is not the same as the Tao. Every particular dogma betrays the Tao. Even the dogma of no dogma is an error.

It is not clear if animals can act not-in-accord-with-the-Tao unless they have been corrupted by people. People definitely can act not-in-accord-with-the-Tao. Why people have the ability to “screw up” is not clear. It is enough to know that we can act in accord or not in accord, and that we are much better off if we act in accord. There are no criteria for acting in accord with the Tao although there are some pretty good signs that we act out of accord with the Tao, such as following a dogma or causing strife.

When people act in accord with the Tao, they feel as if they act on their own but they also feel that the Tao cares about them, looks out for them, helps them do the right thing, helps them avoid badness, and helps them be themselves. The Tao does not solve all our problems for us. The Tao gives the ability to deal with most issues, but not all. The Tao provides opportunities for us if we look out for them.

This Taoist idea differs from the Buddhist idea that we have to work out our salvation on our own, and differs from another Buddhist idea that Buddhists can rely on the Buddha, Dharma, and community of Buddhists (“Sangha” or monks). This Taoist idea differs from the Mahayana and Hindu idea that we are part of a joyous system of many lives in which hardship is an illusion. This Taoist idea differs from the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim doctrine that God helps out a lot, especially in time of need, and that God punishes transgressions harshly. The Taoist idea is similar to the Christian idea of “seek and you will find, knock and the door will open for you”; if you open yourself up to God, God and his world will make sure that you find a way and get what you need to walk the path. This Taoist idea is similar to “God helps those who help themselves”. This Taoist idea is similar to my idea about relations with God and Jesus. God through evolution gave us nearly all the abilities that we need to get by, and God planned the world with many opportunities. This Taoist idea is similar to “we have a friend in Jesus”. When a few followers of Jesus come together, Jesus is among them. Followers of Jesus are in a community if they wish. God does not interfere much to help us but might interfere a little bit to nudge us along. None of these ideas is clearly correct to the exclusion of the others. All the ideas suffer from contradictions, all are somewhat compatible, and yet none are fully compatible. I cannot sort it out. I am happy with the possibility that my

idea and the Taoist idea might be close. In a later chapter, we will see that Taoist ideas and Zen ideas about self and world also are similar.

There are no firm criteria for acting in accord with the Tao because there can be no firm criteria. To have any criteria would be to get stuck in discrimination and to lose mental freedom. To offer criteria for acting in accord with the Tao is a sure sign that you are not fully in accord with the Tao; you are trying to make a school of the Tao like the school of Confucianism – a serious error.

The Sufficient Person; and the World Is as It Is.

Taoist “greats”, such as Chuang Tzu, were unusual rare people. It might seem that Taoism can only be understood by really smart semi-mystical people. Yet the Taoists greats themselves argue that this is not so. Anyone can feel and follow the Tao. Taoists stories are full of ordinary people, even stupid people, who feel and follow the Tao, and thus are successful in their own ways. Other schools made a point of how smart their leaders and followers were, therefore all-the-better to advise the kings and run the state. Since Taoism did not offer policies and advice, and did not offer to help the rulers run the state, Taoism did not have to show how smart its leaders and followers were. The more that common people could feel and follow the Tao, the better were the arguments of Taoism.

I agree with Taoism. You don’t have to be smart to get the idea of the Tao as long as you do not also expect the results to be as perfect as Taoists make out. It is not hard to get the idea that people do well when left alone as long as they don’t have to deal with horrible situations. It is not hard to see that states make their own problems most of the time, dogmas often make problems worse, and we could get out of a lot of problems with enlightened educated common sense.

Of course, it takes a different person, and different work, to be a Taoist great. But that is another issue from following the Tao. It takes a great person such as Jesus to put together his ideas but it does not take a great person to understand them and to follow them in most situations. The Tao does not expect everybody to be like Chuang Tzu. You don’t have to be like that to succeed fully in Taoism or following the teachings of Jesus.

A normal person could only follow the Tao if the world was not bizarre. The Taoist world is the world as it is of ordinary life combined with healthy imagination. Taoists did love imagination and fantasy, and they did see a lot of magic in the world, but their world was not the strange bizarre world of mysticism, of some Hinduism, and some Mahayana. It was the ordinary world in which people allowed their imaginations free rein and were not afraid. Taoists stories feature butchers, bakers, wood cutters, horse raisers, and other common people dealing with the normal world.

The Taoist view of the sufficient person and the normal world is much like Jesus’ idea that we can all get the ideals of the Kingdom of God and can work toward them in this world. If there are demons, we don’t have to fear them as long as we keep God in mind. I repeat his advice: “seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you”. Theravada, the better versions of Mahayana, and Zen, all share this point of view too.

Taoist Nature.

Taoists largely identify the Tao with what Western people call “nature”, so acting in accord with the Tao is acting naturally. Nature does not have dogmas unless we consider errant humans with their dogmas as part of nature, and most Taoists did not think so. Animals act spontaneously in accord with their nature unless they are perverted by people. People could do so too if we would not pervert ourselves. Taoists really want to get along with nature. They want never to hurt nature. They want to be adopted by nature. In the Taoist view, and in the urban romanticized view, nature never screws up. If we follow nature, then we can never screw up either. Nature never poisons. Nature always offers a cure for any harm in it and for any poison that people concoct. Nature cures diseases and hearts. Nature is beautiful beyond any human art and beyond the ability of humans to imagine beauty until they see it in nature. Nature does not work by straight lines and consistent angles but indirectly through curves, cascades, and mists. Nature appears and disappears.

Taoist nature comes directly from Heaven. Nature always works well. The way nature works is the Tao, the Way. If we could get in touch with nature, and work with nature, then we would work well in accord with the Tao. Working well does not mean standard success in family, business, and politics. It means working by the standards of original nature. It means being reasonably healthy, prosperous, and happy. It does not mean being rich or powerful. Only in magical Taoism does it mean being immortal and sexually prodigious. We have to adopt the standards of original nature when we get in touch with nature and the Tao. We have to abandon human standards of success and failure. We have to submit to nature and the Tao.

It is not clear how nature can work so well so easily. It is not clear how nature gets us to work well too once we have given ourselves up to nature. That is part of the point. We should not seek to understand intellectually. We should simply act naturally and become natural. In this respect nature is the Tao and the Tao is nature.

Taoist Morality.

It is a little simplistic, but not too much, to say Taoists were staunch (dogmatic) moral relativists. It is more accurate to say they were staunch (dogmatic) moral non-discriminators. They did not condemn simple naïve common moral ideas such as friendship and “be kind and good to each other” as long as people did not make dogmas of the ideas. Lapsing into moral dogma is worse than not having explicit moral principles. Because people almost always did make dogmas of moral ideas, Taoists rejected all obvious moral principles as a way to defend against the worse evil of moral dogmas.

Taoists saw that most morality was mere convention, and never tired of skewering convention. They saw that other schools promoted morality as a tool to control people, often for the benefit of the people who declared morality. In China, families had to mourn long and hard when a member died, using standard ways of mourning for standard periods for particular relations. Anybody who did not was seen as like an animal. Taoists praise fathers who did not mourn for sons. Chuang Tzu did not mourn for his wife when she died even though he had made clear that he loved her a lot. The father did not mourn because he cherished the time he had with his son. Before he had a son, he did not mourn. Now that his son was gone, he reverted back to then. Chuang Tzu felt the same way about his wife. If anything, she was more with the Tao now, and better off than him, so why should he indulge in public display?

Moral rules arise because of needless distinctions. Other schools set up needless distinctions so they can evoke their morality as the cure for the problems caused by the needless distinction. If we erase the distinctions, we don't need the rules. Because we have property, we have to have rules against stealing, and have to enforce them, thus leading to badness. If people did not claim this and that, then we would have no stealing, no moral rules, and no need for punishment. Even if we only had less stuff, we would be better off.

It sounds appealing to say we should all strive for good. But we don't know what good is unless we have bad to contrast with the good. Once we have the idea of "good", then we necessarily also have the idea of "bad", then people will do bad, and people are more likely to do harm with bad than benefit with good. We are better off having neither good nor bad, and letting things turn out as they will. Don't strive to do good or to avoid bad. Simply take care of your own business and things will turn out well enough.

Maybe you should tell a man who has been stung by a scorpion of a doctor who can save his life; but maybe you should not tell a man who has been bitten by a big cobra that no doctor can save his life and that he has only six hours to live. There are no moral absolutes. Taoists used moral relativity to pick apart but they were not moral relativists either because that too is mere dogma.

Taoists tell stories in which the leader of a rival school is a character, and the Taoist hero easily defeats the rival leader. Usually the rival comes off like a fool. In one story, a local Taoist gets tired of Confucius teaching about Heaven, his version of the Tao, goodness, ritual, virtue, and order. So the Taoist takes Confucius to meet the leader of the worst bandit gang in China. The bandit leader is a ferocious giant man. When Confucius meets him, the bandit leader is eating a plate of human livers. The bandit leader laughs at Confucius. He tells Confucius he doesn't give a damn about virtue, goodness, ritual, or order; and that he does what he wants. If Confucius doesn't like it, the bandit leader will soon add Confucius' liver to the plate. Confucius runs like a goat. What the bandit leader does is what he does. As such, it is better than the virtue that Confucius preaches because it does less harm.

Taoist ideal behavior and ideal persons are like the decency that I described in the chapter on decency. Taoist morality is like the simple decent person who acts from the heart or does the decent thing because it is the decent thing without worrying too much.

The Taoist rejection of mere morality sounds like modern Western moral relativism but it is not. It is more like what I said in the chapter on Romanticism using Reason versus Passion as an example. We should not stress one much more than the other (for praise or blame), see them as simple complete opposites, try to merge them, and see them as superficially different aspects of one underlying greater whole. Take them as they are without thinking of either as absolute. Then you can be good without trying to be good and can avoid bad without trying to avoid bad. When you don't obsess over good and bad, they take care of themselves. Since Taoism has grown in the West, Western moral relativists have taken up the Taoist view to bolster their own position, but, again, we should not be confused. I think some Chinese also used the Taoist view to advance their own version of moral relativism and so advance their own selves, but I do not know enough to say more here. I don't know if Taoists did this on purpose.

Zen came after Taoism and borrowed from Taoism much of Zen's moral neutrality, tacit morality, ideas of decency, and ideal people. Think about these topics for further discussion toward the end of the chapter and keep them in mind for the chapter on Zen.

Sadly, in stressing moral non-discrimination, Taoists over-played their hand. They seemed to undercut all morality, even simply doing good. They made a dogma of (the anti-dogma of) no morality. They made a virtue of not being virtuous. They deliberately overlooked simple natural morality. They did advance as a dogma what we now call "moral relativism".

Because Taoist moral non-discrimination is like ideas about moral non-discrimination in other mysticism, including Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu, the topic is important, and I return to it below.

Taoist Social Life.

The comments about politics apply also to social life. Social life can get screwed up in the same way as politics, and is cured in the same way. When social life is held together by conventions and morality, it is screwed up. When social life arises out of spontaneous interactions without thought for conventions or morality, it is like nature and the Tao. It is natural human life. It is not screwed up, and so beneficial. There is no crime, and no need for policies, ideologies, creeds, laws, codes, police, other officers, taxes, courts, soldiers, pensions, welfare, dams, forest management, and all the bad burdens of corrupt civilized life. When left alone, farmers get along. When left alone, particular professions, such as carpenters, lawyers, plumbers, surveyors, etc. know how to organize themselves and get along. Villagers get along. There is no need for state oversight or oversight by moral authorities such as preachers, priests, and the church. There is no need for politics. This stance put Taoism on the "idea map" in China. This is the stance for which, and out of which, Taoism originally developed.

Now That You Know the Tao.

Taoism is not primarily therapy. You can get the Tao, and get acting in accord with the Tao, fairly quickly, and then you just do it to the extent that you are able and that circumstances permit. When you do it, you live as the Tao intends you to live. You become a human person, maybe for the first time. You see the world, yourself, and other people clearly enough. You see that the world is as it is. What you do depends on you and the Tao. Very likely, you will give up almost all your previous useless hurtful strivings for silly goals. Unless your situation is odd and bad, you will enjoy your life, maybe for the first time. If you have problems, the Tao will help you deal with them. You might not be able to deal with everything but you can deal with most things. If you are miserable by nature or situation, and nothing else changes, then you will remain externally miserable despite following the Tao; see the chapters on Theravada and Zen.

PART 2: Taoist Ways of Life

Taoism, Dogma, and a System that Eats the World.

Most dogma implies a system that eats the world. Taoism denies all dogma. Taoism does recognize "the Tao" and Taoists do seek "the Tao". Taoists seek to act in accord with the Tao. All this comes close to dogma and a system that eats the world. You have to decide if Taoists are hypocritical. Magical Taoists

did seek to build a system that eats the world. Most Taoists used no dogma, non-discrimination, no good and bad, the I Ching, yin and yang, chi, and other aids described below. The best Taoists, and the Zen masters that followed, did not indulge in dogma, did not build much of a system, and did not build a system that eats the world. They escaped pitfalls because they understood that hating dogma is a kind of dogma too, humans need some dogma and system to live, and we can use a little dogma and system without building a system that eats the world.

Modern Western Taoists are caught on the horns of this dilemma. On the one hand, they know Taoist rejection of dogma and Taoist love of freedom. On the other hand, modern Western Taoists ceaselessly chase yin, yang, chi, and "The Tao", and they certainly yearn for a system that eats the world. They are the bane of martial arts classes. A bolstered metaphysical version of "The Tao" is the hole of the center of their wannabe system that eats the world. Modern Western Taoists are not far removed from magical Taoists although they know well enough to be intellectual, refined, and mystical about it. It makes sense to say you "seek the Tao" and to see the Tao in nature. It does not make sense to construct a mystical metaphysical system out of that. You have to find your own way out of this dilemma.

Taoist Appreciation for Life and People.

This aspect of Taoism is one of its best features. Two poor men sat drinking wine. It was impossible to tell how old they were because they were unkempt, smelly, and gnarled by life. Yet they were happy, and enjoyed what they had. One saw a twisted old bush by the side of the porch, and asked his friend what he would do if he were like that bush. The friend replied that he might be like that now, but did not know. If his arm was twisted, he would learn how to use that arm as it was; he might use it as a hook to catch rats. If his leg was twisted, he would learn to walk at an angle by the side of the road. A duck is not a robin, yet both use what they have to go along with the Tao. A tree at the beach is blown into fantastic shapes by the constant wind and so is not like a tree in a sheltered valley, yet both use what they have to go along with the Tao. However the poor old man was, that was how the Tao had made him, and it would be satisfying enough to go along with it.

Taoists love life. Life is worthwhile. They value life not only in the Confucian or Western senses. Life is. While alive, enjoy it. Whatever life brings can be enjoyable. If it is not enjoyable now, it might be so later. In the meantime, we have many aspects to our life that are worth living. You can sing even if you are not drunk. You can help the neighbor even if your apples have worms. This idea is not the same as "Say 'Yes' to Life". That is a misleading doctrine. This attitude is simply living. Note that this view of life is at odds with Buddhism.

Taoists value life, human life, individual people, and particular things. The Tao is in all. The Tao shapes all particular rivers, trees, mountains, turtles, and people differently. Each is unique. Each is valuable in its own way. This is not the value that a Confucian might find in a virtuous person or a Westerner finds in the individual. It is just that each of us is a manifestation of the Tao, has his-her time here, and has the potential joy of acting in accord with the Tao while here. We might as well do that. This is not the same as saying that each of us is a bit in the many-lives big-system Dharma, and we each should do our part in letting the Dharma feel joy through us. This is not the same as saying our social duty is our Dharma, as with Krishna and Arjuna. I am not sure of relations between Western ideas of individual value and Taoist ideas of individuals in the Tao.

Taoism and Usefulness.

People tend to think a long life, as a big animal, with lots of energy, strength, and power, is better than a short life as a small powerless animal. It is better to be a tiger than a squirrel. That is not necessarily true. It takes a lot of work and food to keep up a big animal. Hunters are always after big animals. Big animals cannot catch small animals. Small animals are not very valuable. If they avoid snares, they can live out their lives in fair comfort and fair joy. Small animals have many abilities too; they just don't have the same abilities that large animals have. To a bird, a cricket is small and a cat is big; but, to a cat, a bird is small and a dog is big. The cat chases the bird but the dog chases the cat; then a human chases the dog and the tiger chases the human. It is hard to say which life is better overall. If it is hard to say, then don't bother trying to say. Simply live out the life you have with the length of life, size, abilities, and strength that you have. This was a message of the classic movie "Blade Runner".

In previous chapters, I said people should make themselves useful. Usefulness and goodness go along together. Taoists would call my advice a doctrine, and take it with a lump of salt. We like usefulness but we should not confuse any particular characteristics with usefulness. We should not turn usefulness into a religious doctrine. We should recognize usefulness as it is and enjoy it as it is.

On the one hand, deliberate usefulness is to be avoided as a doctrine. A tree that is obviously useful is the first cut down. Trees with beautiful large long straight trunks are valuable to make chairs, tables, and houses, so woodcutters go after them first. Useful trees and useful people get used up by society. They do not live long. They do not beget other useful trees or people. It is better to have crooked, gnarled, knotty wood, to appear useless, to be spared by the woodcutter, and so to live a long time, give many blossoms, and advance the Tao.

On the other hand, useless trees get cut down early to make way for useful trees. Useful trees are loved and taken care of. A woodcutter first does not first go after big beautiful straight trees because those are valuable, and continue to grow in value. Those receive care until the right time to harvest them. People nurture an apple tree until it no longer bears fruit. The woodcutter goes after the twisted, gnarled, knotty trees for firewood first because they have no other purpose, and they will not be missed. A useless tree takes up space. Even if it has no use in itself, it is keeping away a useful tree, and so must be cut down.

Taoists took both these positions depending on what point they wished to make. Mostly they argued for uselessness because that went against dogma and went against conventional Chinese ideas. Chinese usually rigorously pursue utility.

More on Taoist Waking Up.

See above where Taoist waking up does not involve seeing that this world is an illusion and seeing that there is a better realer world apart from, and above, this world. Taoists wake up to the fact that this world and the Tao are the same. Taoists wake up to the confusion, interest, transformations, hardship, good and bad mixed together, and fun of this world. This world is as it is.

Waking up in Taoism is almost “just wake up” (see chapters on Issues and on Buddhism). You wake up to mental freedom, the Tao, and your relation to the Tao. The only official preconception is the Tao, and that is left so undefined that it is not much of an issue. There are few “Taoist aids” to get in the way as in most Buddhism and Hinduism, and no real Taoist system to get in the way as in Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism. The Tao is easy enough to “get” although not easy to live in consistently.

Waking up in Taoism is not exactly “just wake up” because Taoists do have some preconceived ideas of what morality, nature, human nature, good behavior, good society, and good results are like. You cannot wake up, do whatever you want, and be whatever you want, in whatever kind of world you make up to suit yourself. Taoists hide these preconceptions so it might seem as if you are quite free and you “just wake up” but that is not true. Still, the constraints of Taoism are so small, so in accord with decent human nature and with much of nature, that the constraints are not much of a burden, and you do come close to “just wake up”.

The Taoist Ideal Person.

Each religion uses its founder as the ideal person. It is easy to do this in Taoism because the founder, Lao Tzu, is basically mythical. If we knew more about him, I think Chuang Tzu would serve well as the Taoist ideal person.

Taoists adepts were women. I describe Taoist ideal people here mostly as men because they are what usually appear in the literature, but not always. I have not counted but I think women appear more often as adepts in Taoism than any other religion. Among its charms, Taoism has a low degree of sexism.

Taoism had five kinds of ideal person besides high-level adepts and magical adepts. None of the ideals saw him-herself as a Taoist, saw Taoism as a school, or saw Taoism as distinct from life. They simply acted true to character, and their character went with the Tao. Of Western literary characters, maybe Tom Bombadil from “Lord of the Rings” comes closest to a Taoist ideal. Bombadil married Goldberry, the River’s daughter. Power had no appeal to Bombadil, and power had no power over him. Bombadil could not undo all harm from badness but could undo some of the harm. Bombadil had power over the Ring in the sense that it had no power over him, he could see through it and its tricks, and could undo some of its harm. But he did not have power in the sense of the Ring, to impose his will, make others work for him, or make them into his image. Sadly, Bombadil was not in the movie versions. In LOTR, before Middle Earth was debased, among the good friends of Bombadil were the Ents, the tree herders. If Taoists had a society, it might be like Ents before Sauron (power, dogma, progress, stuff, agriculture, shopping malls) seduced and destroyed the Ent wives and so doomed the Ent way and Ent species. Taoists could be like pixies, sprites, fairies, or like Harvey the big rabbit Pookah (“Puck”) in the classic movie “Harvey”. Taoists were not always benign, friendly, or happy. They could be irascible, naughty, mischievous, or grumpy old people. If we allow that, another Tolkien character who could be a Taoist was Beorn the Skin Changer from “The Hobbit”.

The first Taoist ideal person was the perfect sage, for which Lao Tzu is the model. I say little about the sage because it is not useful here. You can read about him or her in Taoist literature. Enjoy the fantasy but don’t hold the sage as a model. Don’t try to be like a Taoist sage at first. I am not a sage, and I have never met anybody who is. People who say they are aren’t.

The second Taoist ideal person was the hermit in the wild, usually a man living as a recluse by a swamp or in the mountains. The hermit did not always live alone. Sometimes the hermit had friends, less often a wife, and sometimes even children. The Taoist hermit lived by fishing, gathering nuts, gathering firewood to sell, raising animals, crafts, and other non-destructive ways. Sometimes he-she just “lived of the land”. The hermits were not always sweet but they were never malicious. Sometimes a hermit developed his-her martial arts skills so as to repel bandits and to repel annoying representatives of other schools. Likely there really were such people in the wilds of China, and likely some of their martial arts skills are still seen today in the techniques of existing martial arts schools; Pa Kua (Bagua) might be a case.

The third Taoist person is a favorite of Western students: the poor drunken poet-painter-scholar. These artists often did see Taoism as a school, knew its ideas, and thought of themselves as Taoists. In China, most poets were painters, and vice versa. Poets tended to come from the failed literati and failed civil servants. Failure forced them to examine what is important about life and society. Failure forced them to live on the edge of nature where they could appreciate nature and see how human society was less than nature. Much of romantic Taoist ideas of nature come from them. Sometimes they did mistake political tenure or academic tenure for Taoist freedom. They are the source of some of China’s greatest poetry and painting. The real extent of their drinking is a subject of debate among critics and historians. I am pretty sure you can act like a Taoist poet-painter without becoming an alcoholic or without even drinking. Likely you will have to put up with poverty.

The fourth Taoist person lives in society, usually in a village, often on the edge of nature, usually as a quiet person pursuing a modest occupation such as a farmer, fisher, potter, smith, weaver, or painter. Everybody knows him-her and likes him-her. He-she rarely has anything to say at meetings or in the local pub. He-she does not push any doctrine or political position. Yet everyone can sense that what he-she follows is the correct path, that is, the Tao; and everybody goes along with his-her ideas even if, at the start of an issue, they advocate other positions. This person gets things done without getting things done. He-she asserts by allusion. Even Confucius would approve. When other people go along with the Tao as suggested by this person, they think it is their own idea, and do not remember where they got the idea. That does not matter because this person does not seek credit, wants not to get credit, and is fine when another person takes credit. Many cultures have a version of this person. This person is like the simple decent people that I admire. Sometimes in Western literature, this person is the quiet modest village priest. A good version is in the novel “The Warden” by Anthony Trollope; another more distant version is Father Brown, the small quiet detective of G.K. (Gilbert Keith) Chesterton. Taoists would take the fact that this person can be found in many cultures as evidence for the universal presence of the Tao and the universal validity of Taoism.

The fifth Taoist person is a craftsperson who is extremely adept without making a point (or even knowing) that he-she is adept and who loves his-her craft without making a point (or even knowing) that he-she loves the craft. This person is like the hermit or the village sage but usually lives in a town or at court. Even so, he-she is not of the town or court. He-she and the craft are one. He-she acts the craft naturally without thinking much. One of my favorite versions is the butcher (yes, Taoists did eat meat) who has not sharpened his knife in decades because he-she never hacks, saws, or chops the meat. He-she glides the knife through the natural joints and soft places while avoiding hard places, and so isolates the best meat. This way to act merges with ideas of yin and yang; see below. The third Taoist people, drunken

artists and writers, aspired to this grace but were rarely able to achieve it because they self-consciously tried. This fifth person is the ancestor of Chinese and Japanese warriors who are at one with their sword, spear, or bow, such as Zen archers. This fifth person is the ancestor of the character in the movie "The Seven Samurai" who was the best with weapons, and the basis for the James Coburn character "Fred" in the movie "The Magnificent Seven". This person is the basis for pilots who are at one with their planes but are not simply machines: Anikin Skywalker and Luke Skywalker.

I doubt you can be like this fifth person at every job. Jobs that inherently aggravate you and "suck your soul" cannot be turned to the Tao just because you are adept at them and get lost in them. "Mad Men", stock brokers, and serial killers don't follow the Tao.

The point of this fifth ideal is not to encourage losing yourself in a craft but to feel what it would be like to live your whole life this way, including morality. Rather than work at life, find out what makes life work, and then do that gracefully. Rather than work at moral decisions, find out how to help people get along and how to be useful. Then do so gracefully. Serve your apprenticeship at life and morality, and then serve life without thinking of life or morality.

Chinese people still recognize these personality types and value them, even if they don't know that the literary description of the types comes from Taoist artistes. Too often, Chinese know the types only as distorted stereotypes (dogma). They mix them with Confucian stereotypes, often in fun ways. Chinese people try to be like the stereotypes, against their own character. They adopt diffidence as the mark of a superior person and disdain openness as the mark of an inferior person even when they don't know why diffidence is supposedly the mark of a superior person and even when they really want to yell commands. It is funny to watch a Chinese boss who wants to yell at employees but instead tries to direct indirectly by hints because to yell is a mark of a spiritually low person. Eventually the boss breaks down, and then he-she screams louder than if he-she had just barked commands at first. Employees strain to pick up hints or wait resignedly for the storm to break. Sometimes it is fun to watch Asian students maneuver around a teacher so the teacher can seem to promulgate ideas by osmosis. Overt assertion of ideas by the students implies the teacher is not adept enough as an example and implies the students are not adept enough at sensing and imitating virtue. Sometimes the whole game is just sad. Husbands and wives go nearly crazy out-hinting each other without actually saying it; whoever says it out loud first is spiritually inferior and thus inferior in marriage. Watching all this, you begin to see how inferior Taoism and inferior Confucianism can merge, and how inferior Confucianism takes over.

Some Early Succinct Assessment.

At the start of this book, I said we should act well gracefully, like athletes or dancers after long training, for the sake of goodness itself, and without thinking that God will assess us. This idea is like the Taoist fifth ideal person, the spontaneous butcher, and this idea reflects ideas from the other ideal persons too. Act in accord with God but don't worry much about acting in accord with God. Don't let the idea that you must face God after death paralyze you in life. Make yourself useful without worrying about credit. Enjoy life. Don't get caught up in dogma and the crap of life. You can only act like this with some mental clarity, and acting like this helps you to find mental clarity. It takes practice.

There are some differences between me and Taoist ideals. I think nature, morality, and meekness do not fully coincide as they seem to do in Taoism. We need principles and practicality. Taoists have principles but they avoid stating them because of the dogma of no dogma. They allow ideals to emerge from stories where the ideals do not seem like ideals but seem entirely natural. Each Taoist ideal person is a bundle of implicit principles.

Sometimes we have to overcome nature with principles and sometimes we have to let practicality lead principles. Following the Tao does not automatically resolve these issues. Nature and the Tao are not exactly the same. The Golden Rule arose naturally in us through evolution but we do not follow it fully, and follow it alone, when we act naturally. We also act naturally when we are selfish. Stealing is natural but wrong; absolute honesty is morally correct but, if we did it, society would collapse. Explicit principles are necessary, in the same way that a bow and arrows are necessary to an archer, a knife to a butcher, or a stalking strategy to a wolf. Taoists think we achieve the implicit principles inherent in stories and ideal people while simply acting naturally while I think we have to work at principles. We have to work first to learn them, and then throughout life to sustain them. Principles do not always lead us to act meekly. We can't always merely hint; sometimes we have to say it straight out. Not saying it straight out is not a sign of a superior person; and saying it straight out is not a sign of an inferior person. Openly offering a plan to the village is not the same as perverting the world by imposing dogma. When Taoists act like an ideal person, they feel they have succeeded totally. I understand but disagree. Neither Taoist ideals nor mine always succeed in practical life, for example, the ideal that you should seek no credit. Normal natural people do not feel that Taoist success is enough even when they are not greedy or misled by dogma. Not everyone wants to be a hermit or a drunken poet-painter. I like to mix more practicality and practical success into my idea of success than does a Taoist. I wish I could make money writing, and I wish I could contribute as a scientist.

I am more like a Taoist than the average American and I am not much like a career-oriented academic, business person, professional, politician, networker, or firm employee. I am more like a Taoist who says "nature is enough" than a moralist who says "you all will go to hell unless you follow all my rules strictly with fear in your heart". When nature, morality, meekness, principles, practicality, and success do not all coincide, it is better to be openly honest about the situation and to work it out in that spirit. I return to the issues below. You have to decide for yourself what works and why.

It is easy to make fun of a stance that says we can get everything that we want, including a great society, and that we can all get along, by acting naturally and forgetting about dogma. To act naturally, be useful, and find a good society are not stupid wishes. Even if Taoism cannot work to cure all ills, and even if it does not work for everyone, it is still a reasonable stance for people who do not fit into conniving natural human life and who see the glory of nature and want to save some. That is part of its appeal. See what you can get out of Taoism to make your life, and all life, better.

Taoism and Mental Freedom.

Taoists sought what I call intellectual freedom, mental freedom, freedom to think as you will, freedom of the imagination, and mental clarity. I use "mental freedom" as a catch-all term. "Mental freedom" is the single most useful and important idea of Taoism for me. It figures again in the chapter on Zen.

Mental freedom does not mean freedom to do entirely as you wish. Nobody can do that. To think that way is to indulge in dogma about self, freedom, and will. Taoists can seem self-indulgent but really they are not. Mental freedom means not being bound by any dogmas so you are free to respond to situations as appropriate to the situation, appropriate to your own nature, and in accord with the Tao. Taoists varied on what they considered appropriate. Generally any theory about what is appropriate is automatically wrong even if superficially correct.

Mental freedom is far more important than any security. Life has little value apart from mental freedom. Only with full mental freedom can a person seek the Tao, find the Tao, and follow it. Mental freedom and the Tao are nearly the same. Only with mental freedom can one explore the riches within the Tao, such as yin and yang, nature, and Tai Chi Chuan. It is better to be a sick old hermit living by a swamp and free in the mind than to be the most powerful politician who cannot think straight. At best, political freedom is a means to mental freedom. Political freedom is valuable not so much in itself but as a means to mental freedom. Political tyranny is bad because it stops freedom of thought.

The Taoist idea of mental freedom is not the same as the Western idea, which is framed in political terms. The Taoist idea is more like freedom of imagination. Tyranny can kill true freedom but mental freedom does not result in democracy or any form of government. Political freedom does not guarantee mental freedom. It is unlikely that we need freedom in the Taoist sense to achieve a free democratic state. A Taoist would be deeply sad that Americans need a Bill of Rights to protect their freedoms. A Taoist would be deeply sad at using guns to protect freedom. A Taoist would be shocked by academic tenure, and would consider it a betrayal of freedom by a dogma about freedom.

Taoist ideas about nature, human nature, and goodness are too ideal to be put into social practice but Taoist ideas about individual freedom are not too ideal, at least for some people. A few gifted people can and should seek true Taoist mental freedom. Some few people can live free in that way – at least until society crushes them. If you think you are one of these people, likely you are not. The few people who can find true mental freedom should seek it despite their political and cultural milieu. They already seek it automatically, as part of their nature, as a calling from the Tao.

Political oppression can kill the possibility of any mental freedom. In the past, it was always possible to run away to the forest or swamp, and some Western Americans still try. That is not possible anymore. Freedom has to be found in at least some social context. Where there is society, in modern life there is politics. Where there is politics, it can be abused to kill all freedom. It would be nearly impossible to be a Taoist in a repressive regime, and perhaps in the modern politically correct world. One good reason to fight for political freedom is so that some people can still seek Taoist freedom.

Taoist mental freedom can be killed by mistakes about what is in accord with the Tao. Despite ample evidence to the contrary in the Chuang Tzu, Tao Te Ching, and Lieh Tzu, Chinese tend to think the best response to any situation, the response most in line with the Tao, is quiet superiority, aloof withdrawal, passive aggression, and manipulation by guilt and duty. I think this view is a Confucian misinterpretation. Taoists were not pushy but that is not the same as adopting a posture of non-pushy diffident superiority and passive aggression.

I almost used “mental clarity” instead of “mental freedom”. As a human being, you can only deal with the world, and find the Tao, if you can think clearly. To think clearly is not necessarily to think as a logician, mathematician, or good speaker. If you think clearly, and the Tao is true, then clear thinking should lead you to the Tao. However, I think Taoism is incorrect in some small ways, and so I decided not to use “mental clarity”. If Taoism is incorrect, and we think clearly, then we will not be lead inexorably to the Tao and only the Tao, although we should see the Tao along our journey. I still think mental clarity and Taoist mental freedom are very close.

The close relation of Taoist mental freedom with mental clarity points out the nearness of Taoism to other traditions that value mental freedom and mental clarity, including Buddhism, Zen, and Western ideas that stem from Socrates, Aristotle, Jesus, and Cynicism. Taoism is not far from the attitude of some scientists although the Tao is not the secret at the heart of the world for which science seeks. Taoism is not far from Jesus’ ideas of “simple ‘yes’ and simple ‘no’” with no dogmatic frills. Here I do not compare Taoist ideas of mental freedom with those other ideas. I invite you to do that.

PART 3: Agreeing and Disagreeing.

In this part, I both describe Taoism more and state how I disagree with Taoism. The point is to show that we need principles even at the risk of some dogma. Especially we need principles on which to base good institutions. That I do not fully agree with Taoism does not mean I disagree much. I am hard on Taoism because I love the Taoist outlook, Taoist heroes, and Taoist ideas such as yin and yang and chi. Taoism is worth learning and worth shaping to our lives.

Think about why Taoists dislike dogma. I revisited this chapter in October 2013 just after the American government shutdown, while the Obama-care website was a morass, and we were learning the extent to which our government had spied both on world leaders and its people. For many years, Americans have been afflicted with dogma rather than good government: Left, Right, no center (“the center will not hold”), bad laws, lawyers, stupid opinions on TV and radio, the American legal system, TV ads from lawyers, the Tea Party, Republican hypocrisy, PACs, interest groups, and political correctness. Common Americans are screaming for Congress to quit “standing on stupid principles” and, instead, just do its job. Taoists faced a similar political disaster, and reacted the same way. Just do your job. I revised this chapter in August 2014 as ISIS (ISIL) was killing everybody not like them in Syria and Iraq, to force people into their wrong perverted dogma about surrender to God (Islam).

Good Intuition.

The letter of the law is dogma, often good dogma, but sometimes bad dogma. The spirit of the law is hard to write down, rarely is bad dogma, and often is the only way to act well. When I advise that we mix the teachings of Jesus, that is principles, with practicality, I say that the letter of the law is not enough and that we need to use judgment. Judgment is not something that we can write down. It requires intuition. Even in Islam, the written Word of God cannot cover all cases, and people need guidance in particular cases to find the right path. Martial artists train hard and long in particular techniques. Yet, in a fight, martial artists often act in ways that are only barely based on techniques. They improvise. The highest art is effective improvisation. Western martial artists say we must learn techniques but then overcome

them. Eastern teachers say the same but I don't like to refer to Eastern teachers here because they have a long Taoist tradition.

How is it different to say that (1) ultimately we have to rely on judgment that can't be written down versus to say (2) we have to act simply and spontaneously, and, in so doing, follow the Tao? How is it not following the Tao when a good Christian person sets aside the law to get to the heart of a situation and so to guide wounded people toward healing?

People who want to fuse East and West say it is not different. That root of intuition and good judgment is the same in both. If we rely on that, then we don't have to worry much about dogma.

Why not just rely on intuition, assume intuition plugs us directly into the Tao, and go from there? Why not reduce all religions and dogmas to the intuition that brings us to the Tao and that comes from the Tao? I offer some cautions.

I happily admit that we have to get beyond rules and dogma to judgment and intuition. I like living in the realm of intuition. But the importance of intuition is not the crux of the issue. My admitting that intuition can trump rules does not invalidate the need for principles, nearly all the time.

We can't simply discard dogma (Law, techniques, training). We have to go through them. We have to have a background for our judgment. If we have never trained in martial arts, we cannot get into a match with an advanced black belt and expect to win by inspiration alone. We can't strap on a set of skates and win Olympic gold. We can't judge a landlord-tenant dispute without some ideas and practice. We have to have a set of principles. This is what Confucians understood and what Taoists refused to see because this simple truth upset the Taoist applecart.

Nature likely did give us all we need to learn to be good useful spontaneous intuitive people most of the time. But nature did not give us all that we need to succeed without learning. Nature gave us what we need to learn, not what we need to succeed without learning. Learning requires ideas and practice.

Even if nature did give us all that we need to learn, still nature did not give us all that we need to learn to succeed all the time in every case. Even with all that nature gave us, we fail sometimes. We do not have an infallible font of intuition in our hearts. There is no magic to plug into to make sure we succeed all the time easily and gracefully. Our failures are one way to learn; but sometimes we just fail whether we learn or not; and sometimes we fail and don't learn. To say the Tao guarantees success, even within its limited arena, only adds a layer of crippling dogma. The original Taoists saw fact this but modern students of the Tao do not always see it.

Intuition alone can lead to really bad results. People have done really bad things because they felt the Tao in their hearts or felt God in there. "Feeling from the heart" and inspiration do not guarantee truth, goodness, beauty, correctness, naturalness, or helpfulness.

It matters what principles we rely on, use as our background, and fall back on. To be extreme, it makes a difference if we fall back on Satan or Jesus, Fascism or Democracy, Marx or Smith, Lenin or Jefferson, Stalin or Washington. What we learn when we start, and learn along the way, make a difference in our

final judgment. We must base our initial training on the best principles we can find. If principles-along-the-way didn't matter, then there would not be hundreds of schools of martial arts, each claiming to be the best; and there would not be various interesting cultures.

Depending both on the principles and on judgment, the end result differs, and difference matters. Not all martial arts eventually look the same, even if they do look a lot alike at the end. Not all national styles of dancing look and feel the same even if they all are dancing. Not all religions are the same at the end. Not all mysticism is the same. If things don't turn out the same at the end, and where you start makes a difference, then we have to pay attention to the differences at the beginning and end.

We can appreciate the good results of other kinds of thinking, other religions, other principles, but, in the end, we see them in terms of our best principles. If that is where we will end up, we might as well begin there too.

It is fine to dismiss silly rules, rules for the sake of rules, arbitrary conventions, letter of the law over spirit of the law, and merely mechanical technique. It is fine to extol good judgment as inspiration. But it is not enough. When I said we have to mix Jesus, practicality, and Western values, I meant really mix them. They all have to be there to get mixed. If ideas are not there, we can't mix them with intuition. We can't just glance at Jesus, practicality, and Western values, discard them, and rely on our inner light from then on. Mixing them is hard work but it is needed work. Experience matters. This is what martial artists have to go through to get where they rise above mere techniques, what skaters go through to skate well, what good politicians go through, what good pastors go through, and what we all have to go through to rely on sound judgment and on inspiration.

Tao and Nature.

It is easy to see in Taoism "nature love" or even "nature worship" as among some Europeans, Americans, Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans. Taoists write that way and West Coast Americans take it that way. On the whole this view of Taoism is correct but to see Taoism as simple nature worship is a mistake. First, both Taoist and Western romantic versions of nature are wrong. Second, although similar, Taoists ideas and modern Western ideas of nature are not the same. American nature lovers who look to Taoism for support are wrong. Here I can show how both Taoist and modern ideas of nature are wrong but I don't have the space to explain how Taoist and modern ideas of nature differ.

People read into texts what they want to justify. We cannot read into Taoism current Western ideas about nature. Both Taoist and modern ideas about nature are inaccurate because they come from urban elites who do not live in nature. Farmers and hunters who make their living near nature don't think about nature the way Taoists and modern nature lovers think who make their living apart from nature. Nobody thinks about nature the way nature works itself, not even farmers and hunters. Biologists come closer than most Taoists or nature lovers but even they are guided by ideology. Everybody has "tainted" ideas of nature. That is not necessarily wrong. It is part of being human. We go on having imperfect ideas about nature, correcting them as we can, and acting as best we can. Still, we should not let any obviously inaccurate ideas serve as the basis for policy; people who cut up the forests of Colorado to make big houses should expect mud slides and forest fires. In effect, Taoists made their own romanticized ideas about nature into their own kind of dogma and policy just as modern nature lovers do.

I disagree with the Taoist and romantic view of nature. As a matter of obvious fact, nature does not work the way Taoists think it does or as modern nature lovers think it does. Nature does not work so well so easily. Nature does not take care of all its creatures. Nature does not always work for the best, and the results of nature are not always for the best. Sometimes nature “screws up”. Nature has useless pain, anguish, worry. Innocent creatures die. Ugly parasites and diseases live on. Not everything in nature is part of a great system; even where there is a system, not everything in nature is a useful part of a bigger good system; and even where we might call the system as a whole “good”, not everything in it is good. Not everything in nature is graceful and beautiful. Not everything in nature that appears ugly is really graceful or beautiful in its own way. Some things are just ugly. Taoists and modern nature lovers can have distorted ideas about nature only because they do not live in nature but they fantasize about it from cities, from working farms, from “genteel” farms such as on the old TV show “Green Acres”, or from a canoe while they float down an exciting but safe river.

When Taoism and nature are not the same, we have to figure out which is which, which we want to follow when, and why. We have to figure out why they differ, and what that means. The fact that Taoism is not simply nature means that Taoism has to rest on some human ideas, that is, principles. This situation is not bad as long as we accept it and get on with the tasks. All religions and philosophies are both natural in that they arise out of human proclivities and are non-natural in that they urge us to avoid some natural bad acts such as stealing and urge us to do some non-natural good acts such as give to the poor.

Taoism likely is on the right track when it tells us not to force nature much, to relax and go along with the sensibility that three billion years of evolution gave us. Taoism is more correct than dogmas that teach us to abandon ourselves to the “dark side” of greed and domination, try to impose rigid moral ideas, and try to totally conquer and subdue nature. Taoism only needs to be honest about its relation to nature and to human nature.

Just because Taoists and “tree huggers” wrongly romanticize nature does not mean they are all wrong; does not mean the state, big business, crass consumerism, and industrial farmers are all right; so we should demolish nature in our search for more junk and bigger houses. Nature might not be all-good but we can still abuse it, we need it, and we still undermine our future when we abuse it. If we do not take care of nature, nature will hurt us. We desperately need natural diversity and some balance of nature. If we abuse nature, we too will hurt in the long run. Global climate change is teaching us this lesson. Fires, floods, and mudslides are the icing on the cake. If we do take care of nature, nature might not take care of us like a loving abundant all-powerful mother, but we stand a better chance.

Despite distortion, Taoists saw nature more clearly than did officials, farmers, and hunters, who wanted only to chew up nature and get stuff. Taoists saw more clearly than business people and officials do now. Even with distortion, Taoist visions are among the most beautiful ever, and deserve appreciation. Nearly all Chinese and Japanese outdoor paintings are Taoist in spirit even if there is no official Taoist school of art. A great deal of Chinese poetry is Taoist.

Taoist admiration was part of Taoist desire to be part of a great whole in which everything is automatically all right all the time. We are all certainly part of nature because we are part of God’s creation but nature is not what Taoists make it out to be. That does not mean nature is really bad instead. Nature is what it

is. Usually we screw it up worse than it screws itself up. You can participate in God's creation but you don't necessarily do that by participating in a dogmatic Taoist view of nature. You do that by finding how you can help the most, in accord with your own nature, and then doing it. If you can participate in God's creation by joining nature and helping nature to the extent that you understand nature, I think that is great. Not everybody participates in that way.

Dogma and Human Nature.

In Taoism, we are supposed to act according to our nature. Our nature comes from the Tao. Nature is natural. Yet part of natural human nature is ideas. Ideas lead quickly to dogma. Ideas about right and wrong, distribution of wealth, dignity, freedom, rules, love, friendship, etc. are all natural to human nature. I don't deny that society plays a large role; I only say society could not play its role unless we came with a predisposition to ideas. It is not clear if ideas and dogma are part of the Tao. If you deny a natural ability to produce ideas and natural tendency to live by them, you seem to deny the Tao.

We do not only have a predisposition to good ideas. We also accept, and insist on, bad ideas. We do not have a predisposition to bad ideas. We have a predisposition to ideas, and some of those ideas turn out bad. We probably have a predisposition to sort out good from bad, but the line between good and bad is not always clear, and we are not very adept at sorting out good from bad. So we can accept bad dogma, get attached to it, promote it, and force it onto other people. That is part of our natural nature, also supposedly from the Tao.

Good ideas often turn out well. That is one reason we call them good. But good ideas can turn out badly too. Since the 1950s, Americans have insisted on rights, and much good has been gained this way. But Americans have insisted on rights without usually accepting the responsibilities that go along, and so the good idea of rights also has led to some very bad dogma. Bad ideas usually lead to bad results, but do sometimes lead to good results. I don't give examples because I don't want to help out people who insist on bad moral relativity. We are not good at sorting out good results from bad results, as in the growth of dependence on the state. None of this is unnatural. All is natural. All is part of our Tao as humans.

The trick is to sort out good ideas and good results from bad ideas and bad results, and the desire to do so is likely part of our natural (Tao) human nature. Taoism sometimes helps and sometimes does not.

When Taoism insists on no discriminations, it undercuts the natural needful useful desire to sort out good ideas and good results from bad. In those cases, Taoism is bad dogma.

Taoism originally offered its critiques of dogma to counteract good ideas that had gone awry, and against bad ideas too. That is a good use of the idea of "no dogma". But Taoism went beyond that to its own bad dogma. It got caught in the trap of its own bad dogma.

Just because Taoism made some mistakes does not mean it is all wrong, not useful, or more wrong than the alternatives. It does not mean we should have a huge dogmatic nasty state. Taoism was correct in its critique of dogmas and a big state. Taoism is essential. We need to keep its criticisms in mind when we flounder off into plausible but bad dogmas about human nature and the state. We need to use its central vision to find our mental freedom.

Acting Bad Naturally.

Taoists say people who act freely, without any dogma, act in accord with the Tao, and people who act in accord with the Tao act freely without any dogma. I think people who act freely do not necessarily act in accord with the Tao. They do not necessarily act badly or well, but they do not necessarily act in ways that Taoists would call in accord with the Tao. People who act freely and naturally can act badly in ways that a Taoist would have to say are not in accord with the Tao.

As an anthropologist, I researched firsthand the history of people colonizing new land along the coast of Thailand. When people colonize new land, they have many children, and their children have children. At first they get along with nature, then they use nature, and then they destroy it. In another instance of the natural abuse of nature, when boys walk among fruit trees, they use branches to pummel trees and fruit. They knock down fruit for no reason. People like to drink alcohol. When people drink, they act foolishly. People love to eat. Modern people routinely over eat. None of this behavior is unnatural, all of it is free, and none of it is necessarily immoral. I am sure it is not what a Taoist would call in accord with the Tao.

Even when people act in accord with the Tao, and do not act immorally, things do not always turn out as what a Taoist would call "in accord with the Tao". Interactions have a way of going oddly. Taoists often used woodcutting as an example of a typical Taoist way to make a living. Yet when enough people glean gently from the woods, they still destroy the woods. When only a few cars existed in the world, to tend a car skillfully and make it run well seems to me to act in accord with the Tao. Yet when many cars exist in the world, the same behavior results in a situation wildly out of accord with the Tao.

Now it gets worse. People act badly not because they have been corrupted by dogma or by other bad people but because all people have at least a little streak of badness and some people have a big streak. Some badness is natural and comes freely. Taoists prefer that people do not steal but people do steal, and stealing can make a difference in how we get along and in what we have to do to protect ourselves. The same is true of lying, aggression, and sexual aggression. Date rape is likely partly natural but that does not make it good or in accord with the Tao. Most people are not very bad. Most people are more good than bad. People don't have to be monsters from "slasher movies", or hungry zombies, for things to turn out worse than we can stand. People only have to be naturally bad and let nature take its course.

Taoists do not take into account natural free bad behavior and its results. Taoists have in mind natural free behavior that is also good and that leads to good results. Only this behavior would be "in accord with the Tao" although Taoists would not like to admit that.

Taoism and Society.

In Taoist society, when everybody acts freely and naturally, things turn out wonderfully. There is no crime and no need for officials. Rural romantics in all cultures believed this heaven would happen where people had not been corrupted by modern capitalist industrial Western life. People still lived like angels in Tahiti, the French countryside, or American backwoods. Native Americans were saints. This view of "natural society" in the West is like the view of "natural society" in Taoism, and both views are wrong and hurtful. When I first went to Thailand in 1981, I met a young Thai sociology professor, recently back from a major

American university. He declared categorically that there had never been any crime in all the thousands of villages over all Thai history before evil corrupt selfish Westerners intruded and brought crime: no stealing, lying, rape, seduction, murder, forgery of land documents, drugs, laziness, or anything bad. My mouth literally hung open speechless.

This Taoist Heaven-on-Earth does not happen for the reasons given above: people do not act in accord with the Tao; even if people do act in accord with the Tao, the end result is not necessarily what we want; and free natural behavior can be bad behavior that is not seem in accord with the Tao.

Human society turns out badly because free natural people are bad enough to make society bad. It only takes a few bad acts, or a few bad people, and there are always enough. People are naturally greedy, selfish, and want power, riches, and sex. Human society can turn out badly because following dogma is a part of natural human nature. Human society can turn out badly because people naturally follow good dogmas or people naturally follow bad dogmas. Human society does not turn out badly only because people are perverted by bad dogmas or by any dogmas-as-such. Society can turn out badly because the raw material, people, is not in accord with the Tao. Society can also turn out badly when people do act in accord with the Tao. Taoists wish we would act kindly when we act freely and naturally so that things will work out in society when we act in accord with the Tao. Taoists would like us to act badly when we act in accord with dogma so things always turn out badly when we do not act freely naturally in accord with the Tao.

In reality, people only get along well when they act freely and naturally in some conditions: they know each other, nobody has uncontrollable bad natural inclinations such as killing or raping, people can be held accountable, people exchange social services and goods, people do better when they exchange, people depend on each other to some extent, and people likely will depend on each other in the future. Usually you find these conditions in old rural villages and small towns and in old urban neighborhoods where people have similar incomes and where everybody makes enough to get along fairly well. These conditions are also found in idealized TV shows such as "Little House on the Prairie", "Friends", and "How I Met Your Mother".

Taoists wrongly thought these conditions would arise whenever people acted in accord with the Tao and did not have to endure the evils of civilization. Taoists thought these conditions prevailed automatically in the countryside among farmers, gatherers, and craftspeople. Ironically, Taoists could only have these wrong ideas about rural life because they came from cities and they had not really lived in the countryside except as exiles, usually drunken exiles. As anybody can tell you who has lived in the countryside as a resident, these conditions do not usually prevail. Even if, on the surface, conditions similar to these do prevail, country people are so bored that they gladly go to the excitement of the corrupt and evil city so as to be entertained.

These conditions usually only arise and persist when experienced people make good principles, make good institutions on the basis of those principles, and then get other people to live according to the good principles and institutions. It takes a lot of luck and a long history too. Hopefully the good principles and institutions are in accord with the natural tendency of people to make and follow dogma. When Taoists try to get rid of all dogma, but they smuggle in their ideas of good social life, they prevent good people from making the necessary principles and institutions.

Taoists are not entirely wrong. They can be deeply right. When conditions are right and the “live and let live” way works, and when the living situation is also interesting, it can be a good life. Civilization has its badness, and piling laws and officials on top of laws and officials does not usually make it all better. But we can’t get there by letting people do what they want. What have to think about what we want whether that is “in accord with the Tao” or not. We have to think about how to make the conditions so that people can mostly get along by doing what they want, and so people will perpetuate the conditions that let them get along by doing what they want while they get along by doing what they want.

More Taoist Social Dreams.

I have lived for long periods in a dozen places. In each place, people assured me that, there, everybody was free to live as he-she wished as long as he-she didn’t hurt anybody. People were free to “do their own thing”. Nowhere was this really true. People everywhere want you to act like them or to act as they wish you to act. They set up their way as the secret standard for the best way. If new people are serious about living there, becoming one with the place, and one with them, then new people should soon live like the long-term residents. If new people have to differ, but can live without harm, that is tolerable, but still not OK. That is better than living badly but it is still not up to the secret standard. Libertarians, hippies, Californians, Midwesterners, Easterners, Southerners, Thai, New Agers, PCers, Leftist radicals, feminists, gay activists, Buddhists, Taoists, and even old Oregonians, are all like this.

Taoist stories make it seem as if people are free to live as they wish but that is not true. Taoists have, in the back of their heads, an idea of a good life. Basically, the Taoist idea of the good social life is like a comfortable middle class American suburb, or neighborhood of old American self-sufficient working class, with a lot of nature nearby. Some societies work in accord with the Tao and some do not. Taoists would disapprove of an Amish county, or a religious commune with a lot of rules, even if the people were happy and everything worked out well for generations.

You have to judge whether this secret judgment makes Taoists hypocrites, and how much it undermines Taoism as a whole. I don’t think it undermines Taoism as a whole. I do think it makes Taoists as much human as all of us, including the tendency to make ourselves the universal standard and to use dogmas. I am also like this but I try to be honest about it.

I don’t think it is possible to run a society without dogmas, standards, and institutions. If so, then we have to think about what dogmas, standards, and institutions we want. We have to think how our ideas support our preferred way of life but give latitude to other people who are not like us as long as those others are not dangerous or immoral. Taoists have to think how to run Taoist society so as to preserve basic ideas of the Tao but still let other people live. These are old issues for free plural democracies, and the reader has heard them before. That doesn’t make them any less real even for Taoists.

Tacit Taoist Morality.

To completely shut down the mistakes of the Confucians, Legalists, Mo-ists, heavy-handed rulers of their times, and stultifying moral conventions, Taoists came down on the side of moral relativity or moral non-discrimination. In doing so, they again made the mistake of the dogma of no dogma. In fact, Taoists did

have a clear moral code, which they tacitly asserted. I like their tacit moral code but not their dogmatic anti-morality.

You cannot say “It is better not to judge better and worse”. That is a contradiction. You can say it is better to be flexible about better and worse.

When first meeting Taoism, Westerners sometimes think Taoists have no morality at all – an impression that might please Taoists. Taoists “picked apart” all codified dogmatic conventional morality and morality that came from ideologies. They showed how all usual morality was “bolstered” (“reified”) as part of bad system.

In fact, though, Taoists are neither amoral nor immoral. I have never read about or met a Taoist who did really act like the giant bandit in the story above. Taoists value mental freedom. They want to do as they wish and they are willing to allow other people to do as others wish. They do not “put their ideas on to” other people and they do not allow other people to impose ideas. They wish other people would follow the Tao (do well in life) and they hope other people wish them the same. In their own way, Taoists follow the Golden Rule. The difference is that Taoists are not proactive and they do not think they are obliged to make the world better or to “pay it forward”. Likely, in real practice, they would help people quite a bit and would “pay it forward”, but they also avoid any dogma that tells them they have to do so and tells them they are categorically better when they do it. You just do it.

If you pay attention to all of a Taoist story rather than only to the punch line that deflates moralist dogma, it is clear that Taoists have a morality much like the “good people” morality of all other religions. Despite tales of vicious bandits, Taoists are decent guys. They encourage each other, console each other, and help each other with wine if nothing else. Taoist ideas of acting in accord with the Tao, accord between heaven and the Tao, and realizing Heaven by acting in accord with the Tao, are all versions of goodness even if Taoists don’t want to call it that and they refuse to measure it in any way. So Taoists do have a morality even if it is hard to pin down. Just because Taoists see that most morality is bolstered as part of a system, and moral dogma often leads to badness, does not mean Taoists don’t have a moral vision of their own. Their morality goes along with the Golden Rule and their morality leads to something like the Kingdom of Heaven. This is why Taoism is secretly so appealing; people can be moral but claim they are above morality. It allows Westerners to be moral while espousing moral relativism. We should see Taoist apparent “anti-morality” in light of this real background morality.

Mystic strains in other religions also stress moral non-discrimination, the conventional nature of morality, and the harm done by adhering to convention and dogma. As with Taoists, I think most mystics are nice guys, wouldn’t harm a fly, and would help other people. Mystics in all religions were well-known for giving themselves up to harm instead of harming another being or allowing another being to come to harm, and for actively helping other beings. Even the Buddha felt compassion and taught. The idea here is not to do away with all discriminations and so to dwell in a land without any morality at all. The idea is to trust your instincts (Luke’s “feelings”) and your training to do the right thing without too much anguish when the time comes. Trust yourself not to fall prey to dogmas, even moral dogmas. We are easily misled by moral sounding arguments and by high-sounding principles. We need to be able to back off those so as to see clearly and then do the right thing as we see it in those circumstances. Practice stepping back and keeping an open mind. Practice seeing all sides of the question. Practice putting on the shoes of other

people, even people you don't like. Practice finding your basic principles and applying them correctly in various situations.

If you stress no-dogma and non-discrimination in morality to the point that you are amoral or immoral, then you have gone too far. You have created your own dogma and convention, based on morality, as anti-morality, as surely as any conniving preacher or politician.

There are no hard-and-fast rules for how to find the right middle path between moral dogma versus anti-dogma. The fact that there are no hard-and-fast rules but we can often find our way with practice, is likely the real meaning behind the slogans of "no moral discrimination" and "moral relativity". In other chapters, when I write about moral relativity and non-discrimination in other religions, keep in mind these comments based on Taoism. To borrow and paraphrase from Donovan Leitch and Zen:

First there is a mountain
Then there is no mountain
Then there is

First there is a kindness
Then there is no kindness
Then there is

Contradiction Inherent in "No Dogma", Again.

On the one hand, to argue against other schools, Taoists insist that the person who acts in accord with the Tao is happiest, most successful in his-her own way, and creates the best society. Taoist society is best. Taoist society is best by any reasonable standards that can be suggested by rival schools.

On the other hand, Taoists insist no measurable standards, and no other formal standards, can be used to assess personal behavior or society. There can be no measure of personal success, personal best behavior, or best society. People act according to the Tao. Automatically what results is best in its own way; but we can't compare it with other results, we can't measure it, and we shouldn't have to measure it. If we try to measure it, we impose dogma and ruin it. If we say the wealthiest society is best, that clearly is not true, and we corrupt any society that we try to make wealthy to make best. If we say the most powerful society is best, that clearly is not true, and we corrupt any society in which we create a large army so as to make it powerful. America and China are learning that lesson now. This situation is like the difference between quality and quantity. We are after quality. We can feel quality. We can feel when we act according to quality. To impose quantity, or to impose any standards so as to capture quality, inevitably corrupts and destroys quality. In Hinduism and Buddhism, to impose quantity in a mistaken effort to capture quality is to follow maya-samsara (delimited seductive illusory channeling world) instead of seeking the direct success and satisfaction of enlightenment.

You can't have it both ways – no dogmas yet best by standards - and Taoists struggled with the problem. Not only to defeat rivals but to appeal to lay people, Taoists did say that following the Tao led to the best society by implied shared standards such as secure, happy, and moderately wealthy. Yet when rivals used the same standards to show Taoism could not succeed, Taoists instead insisted that no standards

could apply and that Taoism was the way of no standards. This Taoist stance is like Bruce Lee's "fighting without fighting" or "acting without acting".

From a contradiction, you can argue for any nonsense. Taoism can only overlook that its view of human action and society is unrealistic and unrealizable because it rests on this contradiction between success-according-to-standards versus no dogmas. This contradiction allows people to read into Taoism any silly notions of what a spiritually successful person is like and what a good society is like. It allows modern Taoists to think they can forge a spiritually successful mini-society in any urban Taoist center.

For me, the main poison fruit of this contradiction is that it blinds Taoism to the fact that it uses principles of morality. Taoism must use principles of morality. Taoism can pretend that it does not need principles of morality when it does need them and does use them. Taoism would be better off accepting this fact and coming to grips with what principles are in accord with its idea of the Tao, good human action, and a good society. Taoism would perform a great service if it could show us how to use principles of morality without also falling into bad dogmas.

Taoism and Libertarianism.

In this section, these ideas from the chapter on atheism are useful:

-Anything that we make very important, above most of the world, we really make super natural, even if it is also in this world. Not only God is super natural. People who believe deeply in morality, love, wealth, power, souls, democracy, or free will really make those things super natural.

-Whenever we make something super natural, we imply metaphysics to go along with it even if we don't elaborate the metaphysics. If we think souls are really important, we have to explain the place of souls in the world, the relation of souls to each other, the relation of souls to choice, and their relation to aspects of the world such as power.

-To allow any super natural and metaphysics at all is to allow a lot. If you say you can hold something special, then other people have the right to hold things special too. Then we have to decide between different sets of super-natural-with-metaphysics. If a person says souls, love, free will, and morality are special then another person can say power and wealth are special, and we have to decide.

According to Taoism, we should act freely and naturally in accord with the Tao both because that is what we should do and because, by acting that way, we lead to the best society. Yet people acting freely and naturally do not necessarily act in accord with the Tao and do not necessarily achieve the best society. Making dogmas is part of human nature yet making dogmas is acting not in accord with the Tao. Normal natural people want credit for ideas and work. Acting freely in accord with the Tao can achieve social goodness. Yet even people acting freely in accord with the Tao do not necessarily achieve good society. No fulfilling society is made entirely of irascible hermits, drunken poets, and unerring butchers. When faced with bad neighbors or with a bad state, it is better to move away, keep mental freedom, and find the Tao elsewhere than to stay, practice what little of the Tao that you can, assume your good example will change society, and so eventually to lose the Tao and lose yourself. So, is Taoism about persons acting freely in accord with the Tao regardless of results for society (religious Taoism), about acting freely

regardless of the Tao (political freedom), or about finding the best society (political Taoism)? It can help to see these issues in a modern arena.

In Oregon where I grew up, people felt strongly we should let people do as people wished as long as they did not hurt other people, society, or nature. When I learned of Libertarianism, it reminded me of Oregon, but not quite. When I tried to explain Taoism to Libertarians, they thought they saw early Libertarians, early kindred spirits. Taoism and Libertarianism both promote free individual action and oppose dogmas of control but they are not the same. To show how they differ helps to explain both.

I do not describe Libertarians other than that they are strong advocates of individual free action, the free market, and private enterprise, and they are strong critics of the state. Like Taoists, they want to reduce the state to nothing. They want private free enterprise to build roads, build dams, run the police, fight fires, and take care of national defense. They want no public oversight of food safety, the environment, or anything. They see all policy as dogma; and all dogma is bad.

Libertarians give two justifications. The two justifications are not fully compatible but most Libertarians don't see the conflicts. They mix up the ideas. Both justifications involve hidden reliance on something above nature, that is, on the super natural. In relying on the super natural, the justifications necessarily imply metaphysics. Libertarians usually take the justifications so much for granted that they don't see these implications.

The first justification is like political Taoism. To achieve the greatest public good and best society, rely on private enterprise and free capitalist market and rely on them only. Private enterprise in a free capitalist market always leads to the greatest general good. Only private enterprise in a free capitalist market leads to the greatest general good. Private enterprise in a capitalist market always does better than any alternative, especially better than state action. The free capitalist market is THE institution that always allows the action of private people to outdo the state and to find the greatest good, and is the only such institution. The free market is the Libertarian institutional equivalent to Taoist non-institutional Virtue that leads to good society. How Libertarians define "better", "best", and "greatest good" does not matter here. I do not explain how Libertarians support their conclusions but they do give some good arguments.

The second justification is like religious Taoism. Libertarians assert the absolute value of autonomous free individuals, and Libertarians deny any standards higher than autonomous free individuals. The free individual is the highest entity in the world and ultimate standard for everything in the world. Everything is compared to the free autonomous individual to assess the value of that thing. Free individuals make their own goodness in the world. Anything that undermines the freedom of free individuals is bad. People are autonomous adults who always know their own minds and always can decide what is best. The world might be hard but it is not so hard that the average person can't handle it. Consenting adults should be free to do as they want regardless of results for the social whole. Contending adults can "work it out" or fight it out if they have to. Regardless of outcome, free people should act freely. If the outcome is the best in general (greatest general good), then so much the better. But even if the outcome is not the best that can be imagined, or the best that might practically be achieved by other means, still free people should act freely. If somehow the capitalist market did not serve as the vehicle for free people to act freely, then free people should rise above even the market to act freely.

The state should never be above the free individual. Because the state almost necessarily seeks to be above the free individual, free people almost always need to avoid the state. The average person does not need a state bureaucrat to hold his-her hand. Any aid from the state demeans people. State aid causes more damage through demeaning free people than state aid leads to any gain through wealth, security, or power. No gain from the state, however large, is worth any loss of freedom, however small. Not even the welfare of your family is worth state intervention.

If the free actions of free individuals, that is, private enterprise, on the free capitalist market, ever did not lead to the greatest social good, then the two justifications would conflict, and Libertarians would have to choose. Libertarians insist the two principles never conflict and always support each other. Libertarians never have to choose. Libertarians can have their cake and eat it too.

Here we have to dip our toes into the real world. As a matter of empirical fact, the real capitalist market does not automatically magically produce a great world. I don't go through its faults. Some Libertarians know this, and so they argue instead that the market is the best realistic alternative, better than state plans and business mercantilism. On the whole, they are right, but not entirely right. It is not worth assessing the arguments from various sides in detail. What matters: First, regardless of how well the market works, making the market that important makes it super natural. Arguments about how well it works are not directly relevant to its status as super natural. Second, Libertarians make autonomous free individuals so important as to be super natural. Third, the super naturalism gets stronger when you put together ideas about the market and individuals. Fourth, the market still has some faults, and some of the faults undercut links between the market and the importance of autonomous free individuals. Fifth, some faults erode the value of individuals and the status of people as autonomous always-competent almost-angel super natural agents; they hurt the human soul.

To prepare for the idea that the market and humans in Libertarianism are super natural, and how they are bound together in the super natural, it helps to look closer at how Libertarians see them. Libertarians find in the free market the compromise institution – between bad chaos and hyper-order - that allows them to achieve individual free action and the greater good at the same time. Free people working through the market act more in accord with human nature and the human soul than when they give up any freedom to let the state help them. The free market always allows people to act freely in accord with their nature as important souls. The free market is the only way in which people can be free and assert individuality. When individuals are free and assert their true nature, they naturally automatically build a free market. Free individuals use the market that they have built to achieve all their material, personal, institutional, and social goals, and to guard their status as free souls. The free market that free people build to serve them always leads to the greatest overall welfare. The free market that free people build to serve them always achieves goals better than the state ever could. The free market that free people build always guards free people better than the state ever could. The free market is the one and only institution of and for autonomous free people.

(Economics has a long tradition about relations between individual action and the greater social good. Libertarians know of this tradition and are a part of it. I have to ignore the tradition here.)

The market to a Libertarian is like the God-given Church to Christians, Law to the religions of Yahweh-Allah, Democracy to Americans, and laws to Chinese Legalists. It plays this role as an institution. As a

way apart from an institution, the market is like morality to moral atheists, “regard” to Mo-ists, and, as just stated, like free action in accord with the Tao to Taoists. The market is so important that it is not only natural but super natural too. Critics of Libertarianism say Libertarians worship the market, not a real market but an unrealizable idealized market. Even if the market often does work well, the idea that it always works best is not an empirical scientific idea but a super natural dogma, and this dogma, like all dogmas, comes with metaphysics. The market “comes off” not as a merely human institution but as the one God-given best institution of the world, a super natural institution that serves to protect super natural freedom and to give the greatest manna to people. Arguments over how the market out-does rivals are not so much science-based-on-facts as rationalizations for ideas that Libertarians hold for other reasons. In fairness, I stress that everybody offers rationalizations for ideas held for other reasons.

Likewise, the Libertarian idea of a person cannot be based on any scientific experiment but must rest on an ideal autonomous sufficient free-willed agent. In essence, people are souls and souls are the most important thing in the world, above the rest of the world. This view is a dogma. It makes persons super natural. The idea that people are free autonomous agents and the most important thing in the world is a metaphysical ideal. Libertarians don’t see this. A Libertarian might like the view of a person as an ultimate autonomous free agent, as the most important thing in the world; that view might be preferable to alternative dogmas such as “make the individual serve the good of the whole” and “we want the state to watch over us”; and non-Libertarians might go along; but the idea is still a dogma about the super natural and it still entails metaphysics. Most people who value the individual, Libertarians or otherwise, don’t see that their opinion entails the super natural and metaphysics. They take this stance so much for granted that they see it as entirely natural.

When mixed, the two justifications reinforce each other and bolster worship of the market. The market is the one institution that best serves super natural souls. As such, it too is super natural. The market is the best balance of life-giving chaos versus death-dealing hyper-order. The state is the enemy of souls; the state is Satan. The market is the champion of souls against the state as Satan. The market is the institutionalized good order that results after God defeats bad chaos and institutes his order; the market is the good order that remains on the free chaotic side of the hyper-order of the Golden Calf, Egypt, Syria, or Babylon; the market is the chaos that God tamed and made creative; and it is the natural spontaneous compromise institution that continues God’s work in previously subduing bad chaos. It is very hard to assess this view in any scientific terms, and almost impossible to go against it with other ideas. Once inside, the Libertarian view is a system that eats the world. When Libertarians, and other social critics, argue, they argue not so much about facts but assert super natural metaphysical systems.

The Libertarian claim might sound silly when I put it like this, but, still, it is a worthwhile claim. The free market often works well. Not only Libertarians see people as priceless souls and see the market as a great institution that serves freedom, happiness, and prosperity. The Libertarian view deserves respect. Libertarians only need to be honest about the issues.

Because the Libertarian view of the market and of persons is super natural, the Libertarian view opens the door to the super natural and metaphysics in general, such as, ironically, glorification of the state and of religions. Libertarianism arose in the 1920s, about the same time that strong fascism arose, another dogma with metaphysics. They arose together as opposing mirrors images. When I knew Libertarians, I was surprised by how many were staunchly religious church members. Deep respect for the soul, and

concern about how individuals and society fit, leads naturally to religion. If you can see the market as the institution between bad chaos and the bad nanny state, the one institution that channels good chaos and preserves souls, then you can see the Church that way too – in fact, likely the Church came first as a model and set the stage for the market much later.

Now empirical facts are relevant again. In some ways, the market does not serve free souls, such as in promoting debt slavery and stratification. Free action by autonomous important souls on a free market does not always lead to the best imaginable social result, does not always lead to the best practical social result, and undercuts free souls. If the market leads to debt slavery and stratification, and debt slavery and stratification undermine what it means to be a soul, and what it means to be a soul in a good society, then the first justification and the second justification don't go together. In that case, Libertarians have to choose. Too often, they choose the market and continue to pretend that the two justifications still do go together because they, personally, are well off. Most wealthy people do likewise. Unlike Libertarians, some Christian churches chose souls and a good society, and have urged that the market be regulated so that it does really serve souls and a good society.

The fact that the super natural market and the super natural soul do not always go together, and that we must choose between them sometimes, shows that sometimes we have to choose between sets of ideas about the super natural (metaphysics). It is possible to defend one set of super-natural-and-metaphysical views against another set, and I try to do this balancing act with my ideas in this book, but Libertarians do not. In contrast, like most dogmatists, Libertarians simply insist their super natural and their metaphysics are correct while others are wrong. If the Libertarian view were nonsense, this issue would not matter. But their view does make sense, and so it deserves to be argued, and defended, at a depth that accepts the super natural basis. What are the real relations between evolved souls, souls, the free capitalist market, the greater good, nature, and the state? What does it really mean to say that the free market fails sometimes? What does it really mean to say that the free market is the best alternative even if it is not perfect?

(Ludwig von Mises understood both justifications clearly but mixed them up anyway. I am not sure which he thought most important. Because he so often began with free individuals, I think they were more basic to him. I am not sure if he fully saw the implications of either point or of mixing them up. He saw some implications of seeing people as “free souls”. I think he saw that the ideas were super natural and that they implied metaphysics but he remained quiet. Other Libertarians, such as Hayek, also understood the ideas but were less clear than von Mises. Many Libertarians don't see these ideas at all and-or don't see the implications. I don't know about Murray Rothbard.)

Taoism also wants to have its cake and eat it too. Taoism wants both good society and free people following the Tao, and wants them tied together. This does not always work. To see how this plays out in Taoism, and how Taoism implies the super natural, it is useful to imagine what a Taoist might say about Libertarianism.

To a Taoist, the market is an unwarranted bad imposition between Taoist individuals, the Tao, and good society. Taoists want a direct link between free individuals following the Tao and good society, a direct link between the Tao and good society. Taoists do not share the Western view, and of other Chinese,

that needs institutions, such as ritual or the market, to make a good society. Their view is like people who believe in God and Jesus but are really uneasy about any formal church.

To a Taoist, the market is like a state policy no matter how free it is. The market is an obvious dogma with bad implications. Think back to the example above of farmers going to market to exchange piglets and ducklings. The free market is as bad as Confucian ritual, Confucian goodness, Mo-ist regard, or Legalist laws. It doesn't matter if the market delivers good better than the state or alternatives. "Better" is not relevant. If the free market does give more general welfare than alternatives such as state programs, then fine, but this result is not worth worrying about, and not worth making a theory to convince people. There is no point making standards of comparison, or arguments, to prove the free market serves the greater good better than Legalism, Confucianism, Socialism, Fascism, or the Business Mercantilism of the American Republican Party.

A Taoist would disagree with Libertarians in trusting the market, private enterprise, and business firms. The market is not the only way by which people can act freely, and it is hardly the best way. A Taoist would disagree with trusting wealth even if that wealth was made solely through private action. Ultimately you can trust only the Tao. Wealth, market, business firms, and private enterprise capitalism are artificial constructs as much as the state. They have dogmas, metaphysics, and officials. Libertarians worship them just as bureaucrats, dependent minorities, dependent business firms, and Confucians, worship the state. Free exchange is fine, but that is not the ultimate means or ultimate goal, and that is not what we have in real capitalism anyway. If Libertarianism means effectively worshipping capitalism, then no Taoist could go along. Relying on the market instead of the Tao is wrong and dangerous even if the market works well, perhaps especially if it works well.

Although Taoists "eliminate the middleman (person)" by getting rid of institutions such as the free market, that position still does not settle the choice between better society (political Taoism) and free individuals following the Tao (religious Taoism). To get at that issue, it helps to see how Taoists would respond to the Libertarian view of individuals.

Taoists value free people following the Tao but do so in Taoist terms rather than Western or Chinese political-economic terms. What matters is a person following the Tao. Nothing can be more important than that. Nothing can get in the way of that. Everything has to be subordinate to that. Everything has to follow from that.

Unlike Libertarians, Taoists would reject the second justification, the idea of a free person, if it rested on an idea of people as politically or morally free, or rested on any idea of people as metaphysical agents. People need freedom but the kind of freedom we need is freedom to go along with the Tao. This freedom is not metaphysical, political, economic, social, or moral. Taoists know that bad politics, bad economics, and bad metaphysics can destroy the practical freedom that people need to follow the Tao but that does not mean good politics, good economics, or any politics or economics, is the same as Taoist freedom. To think of the situation in any terms other than going along with the Tao turns the situation into dogma and destroys all freedom.

Taoists would reject the idea of people as ultimately free moral agents and as the most important thing in the world. That is not how Taoists think of souls. People are bits of the Tao. The Tao is most important.

We are important because we are part of the Tao. We are free to the extent that we follow the Tao. It is misleading vain dogma to make ourselves too important. State dogma is less important than individuals seeking the Tao but that fact still does not make human individuals ultimate.

Taoists would accept the importance of persons if it means merely that acting freely in accord with your own nature is acting in accord with the Tao, and acting in accord with the Tao always is best. We cannot measure “best” or impose any standards on “best”. People are important because, unlike most things in the world, they can act in accord with the Tao through body, art, craft, and intellect. People are important because it is a great tragedy for anything not to act in accord with the Tao and a great tragedy for people not to act in accord with the Tao; yet people are strangely prone not to act in accord with the Tao; and so people especially have to seek the Tao. People are important because it is wonderful when any creature of the Tao returns to the Tao after having been lost; “I once was lost but now am found”; and people are one of the few creatures that can get lost and then find itself again.

None of this makes people super natural in the sense of Libertarian or Christian souls. Whether it makes people super natural in other ways, I briefly touch on below, and you should think about throughout the chapter.

I don't know how much Taoists would agree with the Libertarian version of the person in contrast to other versions such as from Jefferson or radical feminism. Taoism sees that state intervention must demean a person and so thwart the ultimate energy of the world, the Tao. Any gain from state intervention is less than the loss from not following the Tao – even though we don't try to measure the gains and losses or try to impose any dogma-standards.

Does the Taoist view of persons and of the Tao settle all conflict between good society and free persons pursuing the Tao? I think it doesn't. Again, facts have to intrude. Although no real society ever ran on Taoist terms, to a Taoist, it is obvious that all alternatives to Taoism are worse than following the Way only, and obvious that, if people did follow the Way only, they would have a good society. It is a historical accident that we live in bad times in which no society is based only on following the Tao. If we lived in the great times of the mythical past, we could simply see the Tao at work in good society. The link of good society with the Tao is an obvious fact, as, to Libertarians the link of the market to free people and good society is an obvious fact; but with the Tao it is true while with the market it is not; so there can be no conflict between good society and free persons following the Tao as there is between a real capitalist market and free souls.

To me, all this is simply not true. It is like saying society would be great if it ran on Christian principles. No real society can run on simple Christian principles or simply according to the Tao. As a matter of fact, there is no necessary coincidence between good society and individual free people seeking the Tao. I think Taoists knew this in their hearts too. As with Libertarians, if Taoist society is not perfect, the next step would be to argue whether the Tao is better than alternatives such as Confucianism, Legalism, or the free market. Taoists certainly did argue that issue, but I don't need to review it here, and we already know they concluded Taoism is best.

If free people following the Tao, and good society, are not always the same, which is most important? Like Libertarians, Taoists would hate to make this choice, but, like Libertarians, if I did force them, they

would say that free people following the Tao are basic. If Taoist good society is ever realized, it will come from them, they will not come from it. Because Taoists are not committed to the market, wealth, power, ritual, or any institution, unlike Libertarians, Taoists can bring individually free people following the Tao directly to the fore. Taoist stories are full of Taoists living just fine on the edges of society or apart from society. Individual Taoists even live apart when in the middle of society, like Western philosophers and rebel rockers. The idea of uniting society and the Tao remains a dream-like ideal but the individual free Taoist living according to the Tao was a life that real people felt they could really live.

Does the Taoist idea of a person require the super natural and some metaphysics? It does, at least in that it also requires the Tao, Heaven, Virtue, mental clarity, free action in accord with the Tao, and the idea of a best society. I argue in this chapter that Taoists have ideas of morality, persons, and politics that Taoists teach through stories and ideal persons. As far as I am concerned, that amounts to holding the super natural, offering metaphysics, and building a system that eats the world. As with Libertarians, the value of individual free people seeking the Tao cannot be stressed enough. This ideal cannot be a simple natural idea, like the idea of a tree or a thunderstorm, any more than can Plato's ideal of the Good. Although Taoists refused to describe in detail a society living according to the Tao, it is clear that they saw it as a heaven-like society, very important, and so, according to my view, super natural. Society was as super natural to them as the market is to Libertarians although in different ways.

What does the fact that Taoists raise individuals, the Tao, and Taoist society, to the super natural say about their metaphysics? That question is too much to go into here and I don't have to go into it much. Taoists denied they had metaphysics; "the way that can be named is not the One Way"; metaphysics is too much like bad dogma; so for me to be clear on the topic would require me to go through Taoist texts and argue with them about points. I don't want to do that. Take this chapter as a whole as a critique of Taoist metaphysics.

If we accept that Taoists, like Libertarians, had ideas of the super natural and had metaphysics, then the question is whether Taoist super natural and Taoist metaphysics are better or worse than other versions. I don't go into this question directly here. As practice in making these assessments, I ask you to make up your own mind whether Libertarianism or Taoism is better, and why. In answer to the question of overall best, I merely assert that my ideas about the issues (Jesus, practicality, Western values) are better than either the Libertarian or Taoist versions, and I offer this whole book as my argument.

State Policies Again; No More Running Away Again.

States can't run on the basis of Taoism. People are good but not good enough. States have no choice but to develop policies. Policies have to be based on principles. Principles have to be based on ideas about good, bad, nature, human nature, and society. Whatever states do on the basis of policies and principles, they cause some damage. We hope the harm is much less than the benefit. We need ways to measure the benefit and harm. Taoism can serve as a good needed warning about plausible do-gooder schemes, but it can't do much more than that in a real government.

Taoists readily accepted that you cannot live according to the Tao anywhere. If you live in a corrupt state, society, or natural environment, it is hard. So Taoists seek situations where they can be free. The Taoist response to nearly all government, and to any society gone wrong, was to run away. Taoists moved.

They moved to another village, moved farms away from a village, or moved to swamps, forests, and mountains. As my wife often reminds me, Lao Tzu's mother told him repeatedly to move away from bad neighbors. Finally, Lao Tzu left China for the barbarian Western deserts because China was too corrupt. People in the West where I grew up dreamed of doing the same.

Running away might have worked when the world was sparsely populated and humanity was only a bad cold in nature's nose but now the world is overrun. We have infected the whole body. There is no place to go. We can't run away anymore. Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona are filled up. Either we accept the horrible effects of too many people seeking too much stuff or we make a stand. Taoism does not prepare us for either alternative, and so Taoism does not prepare us for the modern world. I do not know what Taoists would make of this situation.

What Made Sense Once Now No Longer Makes Sense; Taoism and Modern Democracy.

Taoists knew the difference between good government and bad, otherwise they would not have offered the idea (dogma) that the best government is that which governs least or governs not at all.

Taoist attitudes made sense a long time ago when the world did not change much and when government was not democratic. They do not make sense now. Taoism never had to encounter continuous change, progress, and modern democracy.

For thousands of years, for the average Joe or Jane in a state - farmers just getting by - there was no difference between one lord and another, one king and another, one regime and another, one dynasty and another, or the old regime here versus a new conqueror from there. You paid taxes to all of them, served in their armies, did your forced labor, and got little in return except maybe management of the irrigation system and somebody to carry out the ceremonies on time. Sometimes government was good and sometimes bad, but you couldn't do much about it, and you had to endure either way. Government was something some powerful person somewhere else did to you; it was not "of the people, by the people, for the people". For decades, centuries, and even millennia, nothing changed. Sometimes there were more people, sometimes less. One town rose while another fell. You got married, your children got married, and their children got married. Slowly people ate nature. Sometimes there was a drought, flood, blight, fire, plague, war, or even a good harvest. Nearly all the time, there were just as many people as the land could possibly support. Farmers worked to make the land and the crops yield more. But, every time they did, people had more babies, and things ended up just as they were before. Once in a while somebody introduced an innovation such as a new plow (curved plow in Europe) or a new crop (rice for millet in China). But, every time they did, people had more babies, and things ended up just as before. Nothing really changed. Nothing really got better.

In this context, it made sense not to worry about government, not to care about power, and to run away if things go badly. There was no feeling that "government is us" and we have a responsibility to make sure things turn out well. Although nature was slowly disappearing, there was still enough wildness left to run away into. It made sense to be a Taoist "little guy" or a Taoist recluse.

The modern world differs. The modern world changes radically within decades. We need to deal with change. Sometimes modern life even gets better. There is a difference between governments. The

United States was not the Soviet Union or Fascist Germany. Capitalism is not the same as socialism. Democracy is not either Fascism or “the dictatorship of the proletariat”. India, China, Brazil, the United States, and France are not the same. Too little nature is left to run away into. Most countries now are democracies in which the people are responsible for what happens. You are the government. What each average Joe or Jane does makes a difference. You as a citizen are personally responsible. You can’t run away from yourself. Now, it does not make sense to run away, and you can’t run away anyhow, not only because you can’t run away from yourself but because there is nowhere to go anymore. Now it makes sense to consider power, who has it, and what they do with it. Now it makes sense to work and to serve. “Stand in the place where you are”. In this context, it is not clear what a good Taoist should do, and I get no clear message from modern Taoists. Because Taoists know the difference between good government versus bad, it seems, in a democracy, they should be willing to speak up and help. I choose to found the state on good principles and to work for the best.

“Hipsters” who live in the city rather than the country, get a job that doesn’t “mess with their heads”, do what they can, enjoy life, enjoy art, and romanticize nature, seem a bit like Taoists. They “run away” by being a small part of a big city and by cultivating relations with other like-minded people. In the 1950s and 1960s, some of them thought of themselves as Taoists or like Taoists, especially White people who listened to the blues and progressive rock-and-roll. This type seems to live on in the Pacific Northwest and Northern California, and might be coming back in other large metropolitan areas. The TV comedy “Two Broke Girls” depends on hipsters. I don’t mind these people too much but I don’t think they are the modern equivalent of a Taoist. I am not sure how a person could be a traditional Taoist in a modern city or even the modern countryside. I leave them to sort it out for themselves.

From a bigger longer perspective, we might someday go back onto a stage on which Taoism makes sense. In the long run, current technological change, progress, and democracy might not make much difference. In 10,000 years, maybe what we think of as “the modern world” will appear as a mere blip. In that case, Taoist running away and Taoist refusal to serve in government might make sense. But I do not have the luxury of that perspective, and I don’t think modern Taoists do either. In 10,000 years, if people are still people, the current world was just a blip, and personal involvement makes no sense, then Taoism can rise again to counsel detachment, if that is still possible then – unlikely. Until then, modern people, even modern people with Taoist feelings, need something besides running away.

Another Annoying Allusion to Modern Epics.

At Rivendell, after the danger of the Ring was clear but before the Fellowship, Frodo asked Gandalf why they couldn’t just give the Ring to Tom Bombadil to guard because Bombadil seemed to have power over the Ring. Gandalf explained that Bombadil didn’t really have power over the Ring; Bombadil did not care about power; so the Ring had no power over him. Not caring about power, Bombadil would not see why anyone would want the Ring, and so would not guard it anymore than he guarded anything else. Most likely, Bombadil would simply forget the Ring somewhere because he would have no reason to keep track of it. Besides, Bombadil could keep some evil at bay for a while but not all evil forever. Evil would find where the Ring was, and take the Ring even against Bombadil. The world cannot run by Taoist charm. Like it or not, real normal people have to deal with temptation, power, and force. They have to meet force with force without succumbing to the temptation of power. They have to face all evil outside and inside.

They have to create and sustain a social order that is as just as they can manage. They cannot rely on wishful magic no matter how charming or how effective in the short range.

Tao and Not Tao.

Even in Taoism, we can bump into traditional “heavy” questions. Heaven and the Tao created everything, including people. How did things get screwed up? Where did bad ideas come from? How did people go wrong? In Western terms, where did evil come from? Is not having dogmas and having dogmas both of the Tao? Do both equally follow the Tao? If both not having bad dogmas and having bad dogmas are of the Tao, then what is there to get back to, and why should we try getting back to it?

Taoism does not answer these questions. It does not seem to recognize them. To dwell on these issues is to dwell on bad dogma. These are “questions not conducive to awakening” that the Buddha refused to answer. Simply accept life, and then respond by getting back to the Tao. “Get back to where you once belonged”. “Stand in the place where you live”.

These same questions appeared in Mahayana. A Mahayana solution might focus on the non-difference between awakened versus asleep. If there is no difference, then why bother to “get back” to something that is no different than where you are now? The similarity in these issues is one reason why Taoism and Mahayana could merge to form Zen.

PART 4: More Assessment

Christian Charity and Good Institutions.

Taoists would not necessarily object to “Christian charity” as long as a person did it because a person did it, because it was in the nature of that person to do it, that person did not do it primarily because it was an external preached virtue, and the charity did not enable bad behavior. This Taoist stance runs into some problems. Still, Taoists are on the right track with getting people to act well. I don’t like the hypocrisy that often hides in Christianity, and I think it would be better for people with impure motives just to be selfish rather than to use charity as the means for self-gratification. Yet it is impossible to reach purity of motive, and impossible to separate preached virtue from the virtue we come to see for ourselves. Sometimes we have to settle for a mixture of motives, and a dollop of dogma and hypocrisy. Let people do goodness as they will and don’t worry about it.

As a result of their attitude about goodness and good acts, Taoism can’t develop ideas from the teachings of Jesus and the West such as “do unto others”, “applies equally”, work hard for a better world, “pay it forward”, the rule of Law, and the Kingdom of God. A Taoist might act in accord with those ways because he-she personally acts in accord with those ways, or because he-she tacitly holds those principles; but that personal bent is not the basis for good general social relations. Taoism can’t develop the basis for Western institutions such as charities, schools, hospitals, democracy, and rule of law. Taoists mostly are easy enough to get along with but that congeniality is not the basis for good citizenship. Taoism can’t serve as the rationale for adopting and keeping up such large institutions if they develop elsewhere, such as from Christianity. Because I love both Taoism and good institutions, this conclusion makes me sad, but it is unavoidable. Western Taoists overlook this implication. Individually, Western Taoists seem to be

about as good citizens as everybody else, perhaps contradicting what they should know of Chuang Tzu and Lao Tzu. I don't know if Taoism can be interpreted to support good ideas and institutions if those are already in place, as, for example, if Taoists somehow took over the United States.

More on Taoism and Evolved Human Nature.

Unlike Buddhists and Zen followers, Taoists do not have to avoid normal life. As long as life is not too far corrupted from the Tao, Taoists can be normal people. Taoists marry, have children, and sometimes live in villages. Taoists do not need to repress human feelings to achieve freedom. Ideally, Taoist freedom is compatible with natural human nature, which means evolved human nature. In practice, it is not clear that the Taoist life is compatible with all of evolved human nature. Taoist freedom is not compatible with the bad part of human nature.

Not many people can be Taoists. Not many people can be free as Taoists need. So Taoism has to be a religion of the spiritual elite. In Buddhism and Hinduism, you can find a rationale for the fact that only a majority of the people can awaken at any one time, but not in Taoism.

I am not sure if a religion of the spiritual elite is compatible with the ideas that the Tao made the world and that nature, with all its flaws, is one with the Tao.

Ideally, Taoist freedom is compatible with the fact that humans see the world not as it simply is but see the world through natural evolved biases such as thinking we are more beautiful and more important than we really are. Ideally, Taoists can accept "flaws" such as physical deformity. But I am not sure they would be happy that they can't see the natural world exactly as it is. Taoists think they are more in touch with nature than anybody else. Taoists think they are so in touch with the Tao that they are at one with the Tao, that is, with nature. Being at one with the Tao hardly goes along with the fact that we don't see nature accurately and we fool ourselves. Taoists might accept that they can see clearly enough to follow the Tao even if Taoists do not mirror nature or the Tao exactly.

Evolution produces recurrent types including sweethearts, bullies, "Boy Scouts", con artists, compulsive liars, compulsive truth tellers, habitual thieves, and artists. Apparently evolution produced a recurrent Taoist type among other human types. A Taoist personality likely is natural for some people but not all people. Not all people can be Taoists. To me, Taoists resemble hunter-gatherers (foragers) that are still living now, and might resemble our evolutionary ancestors. Yet the Taoist type has been in the minority, at least for the last few thousand years, and probably always. I am not sure what it implies for human nature and natural nature that some people have the temperament to be Taoists but most people do not. These facts do not mean the Taoist type is unnatural, necessarily better, or necessarily worse. It does mean we should not see all Taoists as purely natural, as the embodiment of the purely natural, or as the ideal of natural nature and human nature. These facts imply that other human types might be as natural and "real" as the Taoist type. Other human types might also successfully follow the Tao, even without knowing it and without following any Taoist stereotype (dogma).

Non-Discrimination Again.

Taoists might have been idealistic dreamers but they were not idiots. They could tell a duck from a robin and an apple from a poison berry. They whined when all they had to eat was rice. They ate well when they could. They could tell sober from drunk, and got drunk because they liked it. Non-discrimination cannot mean one big ball of pudding with all the tastes mixed up.

We use distinctions and categories to live. We avoid tigers and eat rabbits. Life could not happen, and the Tao could not flow, without distinctions. The co-existence, and mutual dependence, of being and emptiness means the co-existence and mutual dependence of distinctions.

When we are in a dilemma in which both horns (no discrimination versus dogma) are not acceptable, most people naturally seek a reasonable fuzzy middle. Most people do pretty well there. They are happy to let other people do well there too even if other people are not in the same exact point of the broad middle, that is, if other people take slightly different attitudes toward non-discrimination and dogma. Some people spank their children and some people use only “time outs”; some people smoke marijuana and some don’t. In practice, that is what normal Taoists do. In ideology, that option is not open. Taoists are caught in the dogma of no dogma. This might be one reason why Taoists give up on the dogma of no dogma.

It is useful to guess what might have happened in our evolutionary past. In the past, evolution decided where the range fell between rigid rules versus no rules. Evolution allowed variation between people; in fact, evolution likely produced recurrent variation and so encouraged variation. Evolution gave us tools for drawing lines between rules versus no-rules in particular cases, and for moving the lines when the situation changed. Both poles were likely unsuccessful except in limited circumstances, and so not very common. This view goes along with reasonable Taoism. Taoists have to decide if it is compatible with dogmatic Taoism that denies all distinctions.

If we have to live with some distinctions, then it is more honest and better to admit it. I know why Taoists condemn dogma but I cannot live without distinctions. If we have to have distinctions, then it is better to be honest about it and to seek the best among the distinctions. If Taoists prefer one morality to another, and one society to another, then it is best to say so and say why. If Taoists prefer less dogma to more dogma, it is better to say so, say why, and explain which dogma is better and which worse.

“All you gotta do is act naturally”.

The idea that people only need to act naturally to act in accord with the Tao is much like the idea that we can act in accord with the Tao without also considering goodness and principles, and is wrong for the same reasons. It seems we don’t need to dwell on the argument over acting naturally. Still, these days, people are more likely to argue the issue in terms of acting naturally than acting in accord with principles of goodness – romantic ideas of nature and of acting naturally are in vogue – so I want to go through the issue again briefly.

It makes sense to say there is a natural way for a bear to behave, true to its nature, true to its “true self”, and to see that some ways in which people make bears act are not natural. Many ways in which people lead bears to act not naturally are immoral on the part of people. A bear in a “dog and bear” fight is not acting naturally, and the people who stage all animal fights commit serious immorality. A bear dancing for

peanuts is not natural, and the people who make it do so act immorally. A bear in a zoo is not natural but living in a zoo might be better than going extinct, and so people who keep a bear in a zoo might be acting morally; many zoos are well run and many zoos are the last hope of endangered species on Earth.

Some of the same can be said for people but the question is not so easy. People have a natural nature but our natural nature is much harder to pin down than that of a bear. Part of our natural nature is that it alters to suit situations and to express our imaginations. Imitating other people usually is natural. Some things we do are natural without being good or bad such as taking a walk in the woods. Some things are unnatural without necessarily being good or bad such as working on computers. Some things are bad without being unnatural, some things are both unnatural and bad, some things are natural and good, and some things are unnatural and good. It is natural for people to eat but not natural to eat fried salted meat at every meal. It is natural for people to go barefoot. It is also natural for people to wear some shoes, especially in cold climates, but not natural to wear six-inch high heels. It is natural for people to wear clothes, even sexy clothes, but not natural to wear heavy gold chains and skin-tight fake-leather skirts. You can decide which of these acts is also bad. It is natural for people to connive but hurtful gossip is bad. Some acts that do not often occur in nature can be useful and moral such as: teaching a child to read, and curing pneumonia.

Some human activities that Taoists look down on are both not natural and bad. Courtly intrigue usually is both unnatural and bad – I wrote this section during the shutdown of the U.S. government in fall of 2013. Spawning hundreds of appealing but misleading dogmas from politics and religion is not natural and it is usually bad. Wearing elaborate clothing is not natural. Being carried in sedan chairs is not natural. Taxes are not natural, and, in the United States as I wrote, the tax system was quite bad, although some kind of giving to the group in general and to our superiors might be natural.

Taoists adepts are not natural in a stereotyped Western sense, and not even in their own idealized sense. It is not natural to live alone in a hut by a swamp, even if all particular activities that you do there are fully natural such as fishing and weaving baskets. People were bred to be in company, as vexing as that often is. Rice wine and rice whisky are not natural. Writing poetry that depends on decades of training and on one thousand years of history for allusions is not natural. Writing itself is not natural. Writing gives us an “external memory” that directly facilitates the creation and promulgation of dogmas. Despite Chinese and Western romanticizing farmers, growing rice is not natural but is the end product of thousands of years of distorting nature and human nature. In fact, Taoists preferred millet and they feared rice cultivation for its baleful effects on human nature and the Tao, but not even millet growing is entirely natural. You have to decide if these acts are good despite being unnatural, or at least are better than the common alternatives.

It is worth thinking about what is natural for humans, what is not natural, what is good, and what is bad; but relying on Taoist mental freedom and relying on any ideology, including Taoist ideology, to settle the question, is bad. I like mint chocolate chip ice cream, and doctors can be useful. It is silly when people criticize either as not natural. I dislike people who make themselves sick from bad food and no exercise, and it is perfectly correct to criticize them as not natural and bad because, by nature, people should get the exercise equivalent of about five miles of walking per day. Kitchen gardens are not unnatural but they are almost natural and they are usually good. The modern method of raising animals densely packed in cages or ponds is not natural. If it is immoral, it is also bad. It leads to meat that does not taste as good. If it gives meat that is not good for us, it is bad. If it does not lead to distress for animals, leads to more

meat for more people, leads to meat that is not unhealthy and does not taste bad, and does not distort the ecology to provide animal feed, then it is good. I dislike most political and religious dogma, even beautiful examples such as Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism; and it is correct to criticize such dogma as not natural and bad although politics and religion are natural human activities. I really dislike people who walk around “plugged in” all the time but cell phones can be handy. Rice wine and rice whisky are a toss-up. Millet tastes much better than rice, and, I think, is better for you, but you can’t feed many people with millet. With nearly seven billion people, the world cannot return to what is natural even if we could agree on it. We likely can’t even return to what is entirely good even if we could agree. Even if we can’t settle all these cases, we can see that distinct ideas of good and natural are relevant, we can see the principles, and we can argue usefully.

In thinking about nature and human life, Taoists were on a better track than most people in Chinese, or any civilized, society of their time. I agree with striving to “act more naturally”. We can learn much from Taoist criticism of non-natural life and non-natural human life, and their criticism of bad non-natural human social life. But we can’t take them as simple correct good moral natural in-accord-with-the-Tao never-dogmatic role models. The Taoists did not have a lock on acting naturally or even on acting in accord with the Tao. We have to consider what is good in their message and then work out our own version for ourselves in our time.

Ideas, Principles, Clear Thinking, and Taoism.

Having ideas is usually good. Being able to think well and to evaluate ideas is even better, and is almost always good. Lapsing into dogma, living by dogma, and forcing other people into your dogma world, is almost always bad. People evolved not only to have ideas but to live in their dogma worlds and to force other people to live there too. We did not evolve to be able to think through ideas and to evaluate them well. I don’t know why. I was born in 1949. Except for some brief graceful periods in which moderation and good thinking prevailed, the United States has been driven by bad dogma my entire life. I take that as evidence enough.

Taoism can help us undo dogma and return to thinking well and assessing ideas. Taoism alone can’t do this, but it is a powerful tool, and it can work with other tools. Taoism is clear, simple, not usually harmful, values mental freedom, fights bad ideas, values nature, wants to get along with nature, wants people to get along, and is not crazier than most ideological and religious alternatives. What is wrong with that? As long as we see that Taoism is not the one-and-only-whole answer, it deserves serious study.

Chuang Tzu and Achilles.

Chuang Tzu urged acting simply out of your nature, in accord with the Tao, without regard to dogma. Achilles acted simply out of his nature, in accord with a common decency that seems to pervade the world, when he let Priam bury the body of Priam’s dead son Hector. Is Achilles a Taoist? I think not. Anybody can see the similarities but a big difference remains. Ironically, Chuang Tzu was driven by the dogma of no dogma, and by the dogma of acting in accord with the Tao, so Chuang Tzu did not act simply out of his nature in accord with the Tao. As far as I can tell, no Taoist succeeds at simply acting out of his-her nature, in accord with the Tao, as long as he-she tries to do that – not even warriors who think they have achieved perfect spontaneity, perfect “baby mind”. Think about the needs for dogma and

for no dogma. We need ideas, some ideas. We do not need rigid dogma and ideological blinders. We need modest guidance through which we can work. We do not always succeed but we can try. Chuang Tzu offered those but he had to hide the offer. You cannot succeed if you have to hide it. I openly offer old standards: the ideals of Jesus mixed with rationality, practicality, and some Western values. Those ideas are not far from the simple insight on which Achilles acted. They can be guidelines and need not be prisons.

You are Not a Taoist Adept Just Because.

Taoism went through a fad in the 1960s and 1970s, and apparently the fad lives on in places like Seattle and Oregon. I like that. Taoism is charming. However, current fascination with “chi” and “yin and yang” results in simplistic bad mistakes about Taoism; and current mistaken fascination supports misleading magical Taoism in a modern guise. The current practice of Tai Chi in America is seriously distorted by misunderstanding of “chi” and of “yin and yang”. New Age looks for validation to overly simplistic semi-magical Taoism. Not everybody is a Taoist adept just because he-she has the following traits. There is nothing wrong with these traits, and I admire many, but valuing them is not the same as being a Taoist adept. You have to decide for yourself what it takes to really find the Tao and to live in accord with the Tao. You have to decide if the Tao is “all natural”, and if “all natural” is the Tao.

- Have read a few books about Taoism
- Have read a few books about China
- Have read a few books about Zen
- Have read a lot of books on any topic
- Love nature
- Work to conserve nature
- Dislike authority, especially formal authority
- Want to be your own boss
- Willing to walk away from a job to show your independence
- Disdain formal institutions
- Disdain markers of success such as awards, ceremonies, and prizes
- Lack ambition
- Lack ambition through formal institutions
- Have a pet or have multiple pets
- Study a Taoist martial art such as Tai Chi Chuan, Pa Kua, or Hsing I
- Study any martial art
- Study Taoist meditation or any meditation
- Eat whole foods, natural foods, organic foods, vegetarian, or vegan
- Eat a “cave man” diet
- Live on the fringes of society
- Live in the woods
- Worship nature
- Ride a bicycle and-or walk
- Drive a motorcycle
- Drive an “alternative” vehicle such as an electric car
- Listen to the blues

- Listen to alternative rock
- Listen to “New Age” music such as “The Tao of the Glockenspiel”
- Are a “cool” person in an otherwise un-cool institution

PART 5: Some Other Taoist Ideas

Just because a religion is not completely correct does not mean it does not have much to offer. Just because an idea is not completely correct does not mean it is not useful. An imperfect idea can be very useful when applied properly – ask any good scientist, mathematician, or engineer. We just have to avoid making ideas into metaphysics. The ideas below are useful and are integral to Taoism. Unfortunately, they are most common in magical Taoism, as in fads that have to do with “channeling” chi. I mentioned yielding and conforming above so I do not repeat them here. I mentioned “no dogma no distinctions” too but I have to add some comments here.

Yin and Yang.

The idea of yin and yang is like the common idea that forces turn into their opposites. Too much love is like hate; too much genius is like madness; etc. Briefly, yin and yang represent yielding and assertion, female and male, shadow and light, valley and mountain, center and periphery, falling and rising, rain and mist, and the waning and waxing of the moon. In the I Ching, broken lines represent yin while solid lines represent yang. I don’t describe here how these ideas all fit together. For example, when a person is most assertive (yang), his-her forcefulness usually means he-she has issues behind the scenes, and is vulnerable (yin). Only strong people can afford to be gentle and conciliatory. In battle, a careless charge usually results in disaster, and too much defense leads to never-ending problems and eventual defeat. In martial arts, an aggressive move such as a punch always leaves you “open” in some way, and can lead to over-commitment. To defeat an opponent, it often helps to gently stick to him-her, give way to his-her movements, and wait for his-her assertiveness to leave an opening.

Yin and yang do not simply represent good and bad, or bad and good. Too much, or too little, of either, can be harmful but that is not necessarily the same as moral badness. Too much, or too little, of either, can lead to moral bad but need not. Moral bad does not come only from an excess or deficit. I think the Chinese think that moral bad is not likely to arise if people are practically satisfied. A balance of yin and yang usually leads to practical satisfaction, and so can head off moral problems. A balance is practically good, and is morally good as just described, but is not necessarily inherently morally good.

Yin and yang gain the benefits, and suffer from the faults, of any binary oppositional way to look at the world even when the idea of yin and yang allows that one turns into the other, and so escape somewhat from the faults of a strict “black and white” view. Much as a Taoist would dislike the idea, yin and yang are like light and dark, and good and evil, from Manichaeism. Not everything can be expressed in terms of yin and yang, or a mixture. What is the difference in yin and yang that distinguishes an oak leaf from an elm leaf, or an oak from a pine? What is the difference in yin and yang that distinguishes men from women, or male from female? The ideas of yin and yang can be useful in martial arts, but, if any martial artist works only with those and nothing else, he-she will face defeat soon. Things do not always turn into their opposites. After the explosion of a fusion (hydrogen nuclear) bomb, presumably massively yang, what remains is ruin and sadness; hopefully those are not massively yin. Not all yin passivity,

yielding, and help turn into passive aggression and so turn into yang. Love and hate, and good and evil, are not simple opposites that turn into each other. What all has to be mixed with yin and yang, and how to mix, is a subject beyond the topic of this section.

The I Ching.

In Chinese thought, creation from nothing was not very interesting because, if it happened, it happened a long time ago and is not relevant now. More important are the changes (transformations) that happen to stuff after it is created, as part of the real lived world now.

The I Ching (“ee jing”, “ee ching”, “ee qing”, or “yee etc.”) is the “Book of Changes”. Imagine that a line symbol can be divided into two alternatives such as whole or broken, dashed or dotted, or red or green. Imagine a sequence that can be formed from three lines: “trigrams”. Order makes a difference. The lines arranged in a particular order in a trigram are not the same as the lines arranged in a different order: trigram red-blue-red is not the same as trigram red-red-blue. Imagine two trigrams in a set, to make a total of six lines: “hexagrams”. The trigrams are arranged in a particular order in a hexagram, and the order matters (a hexagram composed of trigrams AB is not the same as one composed of trigrams BA). Sixty-four hexagrams can be made this way. The I Ching uses whole lines (dashes) or broken lines (dots) to make the figures instead of colors but the result is the same. It is like Morse code or any binary coding of signs. In the I Ching, the figures are made by horizontally stacking the lines on each other in a particular order. Usually the hexagrams are vertical but a horizontal example might be “:I I:I”.

The I Ching uses both relations within figures and relations between figures to explain change, situations, events, and almost anything. A change in the real world can be seen in the pattern in each figure and in the relation between figures. The figures represent principles of stasis and change that can apply to many situations rather than explanations for specific circumstances such as birth, war, or rice growing. The same figure might represent the dynamics of a war or of a birthday party. The relation between two figures might represent the same kind of change that occurs when rain falls hard and in a housing bust. The figures are somewhat like Tarot cards in this respect. The changes are linked to changes in yin and yang. Some conditions represent balanced yin and yang, some represent unbalanced yin and yang, and some show yin and yang in transition.

The I Ching represents one of the oldest of Chinese ideas, and the text of the I Ching is one of the oldest of Chinese texts. The basis for it is at least 3500 years old (some passages of the Tanakh might be 3000 years old; some Egyptian and Sumerian documents are over 4500 years old; and some writing from India is at least 3200 years old). All schools of thought in China claim a relation to the I Ching. Martial arts claim it as their original textbook.

Both being useful and being useless can lead to success and failure. A useless tree is not cut down to use as timber but it is cut down to make room for useful trees such as apples. Individual apple trees are only nurtured as long as they bear as much fruit as another individual tree that might be planted in their stead. What matters is not intrinsic useful or useless but useful and useless in context. Contexts differ. That differing is a kind of change. Taoism wants us to look at context so it also wants us to look at change. The I Ching prepared Chinese thinkers for Taoists ideas of relativism and context. Taoist ideas of relativism and context gave a way to interpret the I Ching's old traditional focus on change. A lot of rain

is just a lot of rain. A lot of rain after a drought is something else. This relation between the I Ching and Taoism helps both. This idea is my way of looking at one relation between Taoism and the I Ching. I did not originate this idea. I don't know how well established this idea is in scholarship on China.

Chi or “Ch’i”.

“Chi” (sometimes written “ch’i”, now officially written “qi”) is like the Force from the “Star Wars” movies. Chinese “chi” is the same as Japanese “ki”. The version of chi in “Star Wars”, the Force, was modeled on Japanese ideas of Chinese ideas. The original idea for chi likely was “breath”, but not like the common breath of ordinary hurried confused life. Chi is similar to the Indian-Hindu “prana”; Jewish “spirit”; Roman and Western “pneuma”, thus “spirit”; and Thai “khwan”. Sometimes in Chinese thought, the Earth was a giant bellows between Heaven and something else; and, I think, sometimes heaven was a giant bellows; and Chi was the breath that went through the bellows to infuse all life. Yang was (led to) thickened chi while yin was (led to) rarefied chi. Rarefied chi is still effective.

Chi flows and transforms. In Western terms, it is like “energy”. Chi is energy that can be used for many purposes. Chi moves through the human body, through natural bodies such as lakes and mountains, through places such as canyons, and events such as storms. Chi can be stored, briefly, in the body. It might tend to collect naturally in some bodies, places in the human body, places, or events. Generally, the more chi, the better, which, usually means healthier, longer-lived, more efficacious, more successful, usually sexier, and less vulnerable to attack and decline. You can have too much chi, either in particular organs or generally. A state (nation) can have chi through its leaders. It is not clear if a state can have chi on its own apart from its leaders at any given time. Now, most people know of chi through martial arts. Martial artists are said to “project” their chi in their blows and blocks. In the movie “Karate Kid” (“Kung Fu Kid”) with Jackie Chan (Chun Lom), the boy apprentice learns to project chi so as to be able to push a grown man across a room and over backwards.

Unlike the Force in the Star Wars movies, there is no inherent light side and dark side to chi. Usually chi is beneficial. Chi can be used for bad ends but that practice is not common and it is not generally feared. Accumulations and deficits of chi can result in bad outcomes but this is not the same as the good and bad sides of chi. In this respect, chi is like yin and yang.

Chi can be “out of balance” like yin and yang can be out of balance. There can be too much chi or too little chi in a particular place in the body, such as the heart, kidneys, or brain. In that case, a person feels ill and might act badly. The person would have to consult a specialist to make sure the right amount of chi is in the right place, restore chi balance, and restore proper flow of chi. For a long time in China, the idea of chi has been the basis for much of magical Taoism, including idea systems that are widespread, such as “Chi Gong” (Qi Gong) and perhaps modern Fulang Gong.

Explain Everything.

Changes, yin and yang, chi, yielding, and conforming, are the basis for a set of ideas that can explain nearly anything. It is one of the most comprehensive, beautiful, and effective of such “explain everything” idea systems, probably second only to the Indian system of karma, reincarnation, dharma, etc. I have already said I am uneasy around such systems, and try to avoid them when I can. Although I appreciate

its beauty, I feel the same way with the Chinese system of ideas. I have found the ideas of yin and yang useful in the martial arts, and found the idea of chi is a bit useful in them even if likely not true. We can use ideas that we know are not fully true, and that are even dangerous, as long as we keep in mind the risks that we take, and we “back off” and evaluate often.

Taoist Ideas as Taoist Aids.

Buddhism has aids that are supposed to help you awaken. If you master “Buddha Mind”, “conditioned origination”, or “non self”, then you are supposed to be fully awakened. You can only fully awaken if you master “Buddha Mind” etc. I believe these aids mislead.

The Taoist ideas presented here can be like the misleading Buddhist aids but shouldn't be. For example, some people I have met think, if they master yin and yang, they have found the Way, and they can only find the Way if they master yin and yang; if they haven't mastered yin and yang, they haven't found the Way. This kind of thinking is a mistake similar to what some Buddhists do.

Not too many traditional Taoists abuse Taoist ideas this way except with the idea of non-discrimination. In the Chuang Tzu and the Lieh Tzu are several stories that say “If you want to master the Way, you have to float in a soup of non-discrimination; and, if you don't float in a soup of non-discrimination, you cannot find the Way”. I can't quote or paraphrase the stories here. If you think you have mastered “no dogma” because you think you are floating in soup, and you think you have found the Tao because you think you have mastered “no dogma”, then you have abused the Taoist ideas and made the same mistake as some Buddhists. Modern people that I have met, and who know a little Taoism, have only vague notions of “no dogma” that usually amount to “If you believe in something that I don't like, then you are practicing bad discrimination, and I can tell you to stop. When you stop, you have to believe what I say. Your morality is discriminatory dogma while my morality is the natural Tao, so I am right and you are wrong.” They don't seem adept on the subject of “no dogma non-discrimination”. Regardless of what modern people do, in the traditional Taoist literature, the idea of non-discrimination seems to be a misused aid. If so, that is an error, and people who are interested in Taoism should avoid it. Find your own happy medium solution to this issue.

Yin and yang, changes, chi, yielding, conforming, and non-discrimination are tools that help you get along. Usually they are more helpful than hurtful but are hurtful if misused. They need not be entirely true to be useful. They need not apply fully in all cases and might not apply at all in some. Sometimes other ideas are more useful and truer. I could not explain quantum mechanics or Relativity by using yin and yang while ignoring the ideas of Einstein. In martial arts, not every fighting situation can be best analyzed using yin and yang, although many can be seen that way. If you find these ideas useful, then use them. If you find other ideas more useful, use those. Yield, conform, adapt, play with categories, and thrive. I don't know if this tactic brings you to the Way, and that possibility is not very important to me.

27 Ch'an and Zen

Americans think of Zen primarily as a Japanese version of Buddhism. It is that, yet Zen came from a type of Chinese Mahayana. The word "Zen" is the Japanese version of a Chinese word now spelled in English "Ch'an" or "Chan". "Ch'an" comes from Sanskrit "dhyana", or "meditation", so it refers to schools in which meditating and doing are important. The Chinese spoke "Ch'an" like "jan" or "zan" so Japanese "Zen" is not far off. Ch'an grew in China after about 500 CE (AD). It moved to Japan about 1000 CE. It dwindled in China after about 1300, so most of what we read about now is Japanese Zen.

Zen was a fad in the West in the 1950s and 1960s, and has been again periodically after. Much crap has been written featuring Zen including the famous novel "On the Road" by Jack Kerouac. Be cautious. At first, avoid modern material, even by "modern masters" such as D.T. Suzuki (Daisetz Teitaro) and by heartfelt students such as Phillip Kapleau. Go to original Ch'an and Zen adepts. A lot of good material has been translated well into English, and most is short.

Ch'an-Zen is a blend of Taoism and Buddhism. Which prevails is not clear. I think Taoism usually wins despite the fact that Zen uses Mahayana terms. Rather than a Taoist living with his-her family in a hut by a bog, imagine he-she lives in a monastery celibate. Rather than catching fish, he-she tends a garden, goes "begging" in villages where he-she will be fed decently, and accepts support from patrons. Rather than fall into a system of many lives, he-she uses this life to settle issues and to win mental freedom. The Taoism in Ch'an-Zen took some of the Mahayana out of Buddhism. The Buddhism in Ch'an-Zen kept most Ch'an-Zen adepts from excesses of Taoist nature worship, drink, drunken poetry, and magic. How Japanese Zen differs from Chinese Ch'an is a topic for scholars and is not an issue here. What I say applies to both Ch'an and Zen. I don't care about schools within Ch'an or Zen.

In a nutshell, you can think of Zen as Taoism, cluttered at first by Mahayana categories, which Zen then throws off. Zen also says to act spontaneously without dogma, pretense, guile, or too much thought. Zen does not say such action will solve political problems but it does say you will see them in a new light and not worry as much. As with Taoism, most people cannot act as Zen advises, and we certainly could not base a society on the hope that people do act as Zen advises. Zen knows this, and does not advise basing society on Zen. Who can get it, does get it. If this nutshell summary satisfies you, then you can skip the rest of the chapter. But Zen is fun; its blend of Taoism, simple Buddhism, and Mahayana is fun. It is fun to go along as Zen throws off clutter. So I hope you do read on.

The idea of "no dogma, free action" was deep in Taoism before Buddhism came to China. Arguments by Taoists against Mo-ists, Legalists, and Confucians improved the idea. During its formation, Ch'an did not take part in political fights as much as Taoism had, Ch'an did not need "no dogma" in the political sense, and Ch'an did not develop "no dogma" that way. Taoists live ordinary life without dogma, enjoy ordinary life, and value it. Mahayana comes with the idea that ordinary life is the same as awakened life. So Ch'an took "no dogma" and the value of life from Taoism, and merged those with Mahayana ideas of "cannot be said in words" and "ordinary life is the same as awakened life". Ch'an and Zen are largely about how to live clearly, openly, plainly, naturally, and well without dogma. Ch'an-Zen students were

nearly all Buddhist monks, although lay people did practice Zen. Ch'an-Zen masters take whatever personality suits their particular mental freedom.

Almost every assessment that applies to Taoism also applies to Zen. Zen does not have fully accurate ideas of nature and human nature although Zen's ideas are beautiful. Zen scorns rote morality yet has strong tacit morality. Zen scorns discrimination yet Zen masters obviously discriminate between this and that skillfully. Zen adeptly plays the dogma of no dogma. Zen masters rebuke elaborate theology yet yearn to fully feel they are at one with the Great Mind that is both seamlessly whole and makes particular individuals. Zen cannot serve as the basis for a modern democracy or any state. Zen ideas can be modified to go along with ideas for a state that come from other sources, such as Confucianism and Western political philosophy. Zen can go well with the teachings of Jesus except Zen is leery of being proactive and of involvement in politics. Zen would tacitly approve of "pay it forward" and the Golden Rule although Zen would condemn them if stated as explicit dogma. Few people can succeed in Zen but it is still worth learning from Zen.

From now on, I use "Zen" for Zen and Ch'an both unless I need to separate them. I use the English terms "master" and "adept" as synonyms; neither English term refers to a Buddhist term such as "arahant", "ryshi", or bodhisattva. I could illustrate all the points here with quotes from original Zen texts but I cannot do that because of copyright. Thus my writing is too theoretical, for which I apologize.

Quick Anticipation.

Recall the Mahayana ideas that ordinary life is valuable and there is little difference between ordinary life and awakened life. Ordinary life and awakened life come from Emptiness and-or Mind. Recall the Taoist ideas of spontaneous action from the heart, this kind of action comes from the Tao, and it leads us back to the Tao.

If ordinary life is valuable and awakened, then all its episodes are valuable and indicate awakening. What size is an episode? It can range from a whole epic, to one story in the Lotus Sutra, to one particular act-and-or-thought. For Zen, it is useful to focus on a particular act-and-or-thought. Each particular act etc. is valuable, can show awakening, and can lead to awakening – like the properly chosen notes in a well-written piece of classical music or well-played piece of jazz. This Mahayana stance leads to the same attitude as a Taoist adept who is spontaneous, accepts each act, feels each act comes from the Tao, and feels each act leads back to the Tao. Distilling valuable life into particular acts, simple episodes, merges Taoism and Mahayana into Ch'an-Zen. Ch'an-Zen does not break life into bits. It points out that valuable life permeates all acts, and so we can begin there and rest there.

The role of episodes comes out in Taoist story about a butcher who never sharpens his knives because he never needs to. He makes each cut at the joints, in between resistance, in emptiness. Each cut freely follows what nature (the animal body) gives him. He needs no more; that is enough. Because each single cut follows nature, the whole process of cutting a big animal is one continuous move. Because each single cut follows nature through hollows, the knife never encounters any resistance, so never gets dull, and so never needs sharpening. The butcher has been using the same knives for decades without ever thinking of a whetstone. In putting together many small movements through the void, the butcher also lives a craft and a life.

The emphasis on spontaneity even in small acts, especially in them, the belief that “local spontaneity” is effective, and the belief that local spontaneity is enough, influenced the marital culture and martial arts of China, Japan, and Korea. I think a similar feeling from Theravada also influenced the martial culture of Thailand but I do not dwell on that point here. Swordsmen, and other martial artists such as Tai Chi or karate adepts, are like the butcher in that they use the emptiness that is given them when it is given them, and that is enough. They are not like other common butchers who hack at their target. Living life in this way leads to one whole way of life. Unfortunately, to make this case for Ch’an-Zen and martial culture requires a long digression that I cannot take here. Many authors have mentioned the connections; I cite a few in the Bibliography.

One downside of seeing life this way is the mistake that everything is all right in itself, everything is part of a plan (Mind), and nothing is misplaced, including badness and evil. Everything already is as it should be; nothing needs adjustment; it is up to us to accept it; and up to us to play our part in the grand scheme. Hinduism comes to a similar stance. For more on this error in Zen, see below in this chapter.

Another issue is relations between each episode, the flow of episodes, and the whole. In the story of the butcher, this issue does not come out but it is in the background. Martial artists strive to excel at many techniques, find the link between techniques, find flow between acts, merge all this in one craft and one life, and, if possible, act spontaneously not bound by any particular style. Bruce Lee was obsessed with “no style”. Martial artists don’t often succeed. This issue is something like the argument over faith versus works in Christianity. By using particular techniques, Zen adepts shock students into getting beyond all particular techniques so do not rely on any particular technique or style but so they can use any technique from any style correctly. I can’t go into this issue here other than a brief mention below of the practices of Zen teachers. I introduce the issue because you will meet it in other places.

Zen and Mahayana.

I explained Taoism with as little mysticism as I could. I got away with that approach because Taoism did not come with historical baggage and because Taoism avoided dogma. I explain Zen also with minimal mysticism but Zen presents a problem because Zen does come with the elaborate historical baggage of Mahayana, and Zen has to accept Buddhist sutras (scriptures) including their mysticism and metaphysics. The best way out is to do as many Zen masters do: ignore the Mahayana baggage. What is important about Zen can stand on its own without reference to Mahayana. What is important about Zen on its own is what I focus on.

Some Zen masters do simply ignore the Mahayana heritage. Some Zen masters demand that students avoid the sutras, stop thinking about Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and stop thinking about mystic ideas because all these ideas are confusing and trap us. Some masters advise to kill the Buddha if you meet him because “Buddha” is a conventional category that blocks understanding of the true message of the Buddha. But some Zen masters do refer to the Mahayana heritage. Some masters refer to aids such as Emptiness and Mind, and some masters refer to specific sutras in which those aids are featured. Some masters advise long hard study of sutras and aids. Some sutras are closely associated with the tradition of direct non-verbal transmission that is key to all Zen, such as the Lankavatara Sutra, Heart Sutra, and Diamond Sutra. Although some masters use Mahayana terms, I still think what is important in Zen does

not depend on those, and we are better off not referring to those here. Sometimes it is useful to refer to a Mahayana idea. I do that without implying that all of Mahayana is correct.

I do not explain why some masters frame their awakening in terms of Buddhist aids other than to say that people in all traditions think of awakening in terms of their traditions. This issue would only matter if Zen and Mahayana gave total full direct access to God ("bigger than me"), yet neither Zen nor Mahayana do that anymore than any approach does, so I do not have to deal with this dispute. Zen is partial truth with its own big value but limited value. I only have to give what is important in useful terms. I do not compare awakening in Christianity, Hinduism, Theravada, Mahayana, and Zen.

Despite disparaging mysticism and Mahayana, Zen does have its own modest mystical vision. I describe it below. I do not explain how Zen's vision is similar to, or differs from, Mahayana mysticism.

Three ideas from Mahayana are important in Zen. First, each individual person counts, and each person comes with the ability to reach awakening by him-herself. Second, the world is as it is and not otherwise. The world after awakening is much as it was before. Awakening is not about awakening from a delusion or awakening to a fantasy. Awakening is about seeing clearly and simply. This life right now is important. Even if this life is embedded in a grand joyous system of many lives, we have to use this life right now. Third, awakening occurs through direct transmission so words are not as important as doing. Just doing is a way of being awake. If you can learn to just do, then you are awake. I believe these ideas are also in Taoism, and it is the Taoist version of these ideas that influenced Zen.

When a person has all this, he-she is mentally free. As with Taoism, for Zen I use "mental freedom" to refer to what is important. The Zen version of mental freedom is the biggest topic of this chapter.

Zen has some long-standing controversies which I don't care about and don't write about, such as: rapid versus gradual awakening, Northern versus Southern, Rinzai versus Soto, emptiness or mind, meditation versus wisdom, words versus no words, private awakening versus the social duties of the bodhisattva, how much we can associate with secular (political) powers, etc. You can find material on these issues in the works in the Bibliography.

Comparison Shopping.

Mahayana features: awakening, the awakened life is identical to the non-awakened life, a joyous system of many lives, a central essential rationale to the system such as Buddha Mind or the Unborn, the identity of the self with central essential rationale of the system, the illusion of suffering, the reality of suffering when we deviate from the system, non-verbal transmission, a lot of writing and other verbiage, verbal games, other games, following the Dharma (system and its rationale) once awakened, non-duality (non-discrimination), especially non-duality of good and evil, pyramid schemes, the bodhisattva, and a good imagination. In theory, the world is as it is and is not otherwise but Mahayana writers love magic, magical powers, tricks, and illusions. Mahayanists follow a bodhisattva so they can live in a paradise with him or her. The world is more like a giant amusement park than an American suburb.

Taoism features: the Tao as the central rationale, trying to follow the Tao and become one with the Tao, people who are at one with the Tao act spontaneously, the Tao flows through everybody and everything

even when they are screwed up, people who do not follow the Tao screw up and cause pain for self and others, non-discrimination, especially non-duality of good and evil, non-verbal understanding, moderate amount of writing, dislike of dogma, and a good imagination. Taoism has nothing like the bodhisattva, and only weakly lends itself to pyramid schemes. There are no other-worldly paradises. Taoism does not appeal to rich or powerful people, or to warriors. The world is as it is. If you are sensitive to the Tao, the world is much more fun than if you are obsessed with wealth and power, but the world is not full of tricks and illusions. Magical Taoism does feature long life, paradises, great magicians, etc. but that is not at issue here.

Zen features: waking up to something bigger than yourself, the identity of true me with the bigger-than-me, awakened people act spontaneously, non-discrimination, non-duality of good and evil, awakened people and non-awakened people are really the same, but non-awakened people can cause suffering through clinging to wrong ideas, suffering is primarily in the mind, non-verbal transmission, verbal games (koans), other games (hitting students, shouting), moderate amount of writing, dislike of dogma, and a good imagination. Zen does not stress the bodhisattva, and only weakly lends itself to pyramid schemes. Zen does appeal to rich and powerful people and to warriors because it can be used to rationalize the world is as it is. After you have awakened, the world is a much more congenial place, but it is less full of magic, power, tricks, and illusions. If there are any paradises, they are not relevant.

A Mahayana joyous system of many lives is not like the Tao, or like living in the Tao, even when the Tao is “unborn and undying”, and even when you can merge with the Tao. I am not sure if the idea of Tao, in Taoism, acts like the “absorbent center”, such as the bodhisattva or the Buddha Mind, of the Mahayana ideological system of many lives that eats the world. I am comfortable with the Tao but not with the long Mahayana parade of candidates for the essential central absorbent spirit of its joyous system.

In theory, as Mahayanists, Zen adepts accept a joyous system of many lives including its metaphysics, absorbent hole in the center (bodhisattva and-or Emptiness and-or Buddha Mind), and its ability to eat the world. In practice, Zen adepts seem hardly concerned with any of that, and seem far more concerned with waking up now in this life. Most Zen adepts obviously accept a “bigger-than-me” and they feel an identity with it. They do not merge into it as with stereotyped mystics and they do not take part in it as a Mahayanist does, as a person in a greater system of many lives. To refer to the “bigger-than-me”, Zen adepts use a “rationale” when they teach including standard Mahayana terms-aids such as Nothingness, the Unborn, Buddha Mind, etc. In Mahayana, this central rationale acts like the core of a system that eats the world but in Zen it does not. Zen masters do not usually see the central rationale as the core of a system of many lives. Instead, for the “bigger-than-me” and the central rationale, Zen adepts have in mind something more like the Tao than what Mahayanists had in mind.

As part of waking up now in this life, Zen and Taoism stress non-dogma and the spontaneous freedom of awakened people and-or of people who have found the Tao; Mahayana does not. Mahayana points out magical powers of awakened people; Zen avoids magic. In Zen, a person does not wake up to the reality of suffering or to the joyous magical system of many lives but to a congenial world as it is. The Zen world is like the world of a Taoist. A Zen master is happy to teach but he-she does not rely on awakening other people for his-her identity, as does a Mahayana bodhisattva. A Zen master is not a savior to the masses, and a Zen master does not derive satisfaction from apparently awakening thousands of people. Even so,

a Zen master is not a solitary self-savior as in some versions of Theravada Buddhism but seeks to merge with the One Whole that is behind everything.

More Mahayana Hangover: Contradictions and System.

Mahayana faces contradictions: This life is not worthwhile but this life is worthwhile; Nirvana differs from ordinary life but the two are the same; a person has to wake up but what he-she wakes up to is that he-she has been saved (awake) all the time but didn't know it; we are particular and general at the same time; and avoid discrimination but do good and avoid evil. Mahayana resolves contradictions by putting them in the context of a joyous system of many lives with a bodhisattva as a spiritual guide. The system allows great joy in the system to make up for this life officially not being worthwhile. The system "eats the world" by explaining everything.

Zen resolves Mahayana contradictions mostly by ignoring them. Some masters use issues as training aids but do not try to resolve them in the standard sense; see Bibliography. Even when masters write a lot about these issues, in the end, mostly they ignore them. Not many Zen adepts worry exactly how this life and the awakened life are the same, about duality, non-duality, or the unity of particular and general. Masters might force students into impasses over these issues so students stop thinking in these terms but they do not expect students to solve these issues intellectually. This is part of the fun. Sometimes masters hit their students to force their students out of thinking in terms of these issues. I cannot take space to show how Zen masters do all this; books on Zen are full of examples.

By overcoming contradictions, Zen masters can focus on this life right now. By focusing on this life right now, Zen undercuts a system of many lives and so undercuts Mahayana. Zen undercuts the Mahayana system that eats the world. To worry if this life is worthwhile is to trap yourself in ideology. To seek the deep suffering of life is to trap yourself in ideology. Whether this life is worthwhile does not matter if your mind is not free. Once your mind is free, then you can decide worthwhile-ness and suffering. Whether we are embedded in a larger system is not important. Whether the joyous system solves mystical and metaphysical issues is not important. What matters is this life right now. If we can wake up to this life right now then we can decide about a system of many lives. This life right now is a chance to wake up and win mental freedom. We wake up to the fact that we already have the tools that we need to cope and to get along if we quit relying on ideology. If we can't cope, then dying is a better option than lapsing into ideology. We can use ideology, but we should not get trapped in it.

Mental Freedom is Not.

Mental (spiritual) freedom is the core of Zen. If you find mental freedom, you will be enlightened. To be enlightened means to find the mental freedom that is already inside you just because you yearn for it and you are a part of the Dharma (Tao, nature, Heaven). Imagine Taoism stripped of all concern for the state, making a living, getting along in a village, poetry, painting, drinking, and even love of nature; then imagine all Taoist energy focused on mental freedom; that is like Zen. I do not describe mental freedom more. In this section, I say what it is not. Below I suggest what it might be like.

Mental freedom is most important. Without it, you really can't have much else that is important or lasting. With it, you don't care about most silly things, and you can enjoy what you do have.

Americans think of mental freedom in external terms such as freedom from political doctrine, artistic frameworks such as hip-hop or country music, or from media brainwashing. If you can see through the right wing power structure, the left wing conspiracy, or institutionalized religion, then you are mentally free. Those external dogmas are of little concern to Zen, and, regardless of Zen, it is not true anyway that getting on top of those dogmas makes you free. Any external dogma like those would have fallen by the wayside a long time ago for a Zen student. The only external ideas that still plague a Zen student come from the religion itself such as yearning to be a bodhisattva or trying to figure out Emptiness and Buddha Mind. More important than getting rid of any particular external dogma, even one as important as Buddha Mind, is learning to get rid of relying on any kind of dogma at all. That is another issue.

Zen freedom is not political freedom. As with Taoists, Zen adepts know that Zen cannot flourish, and might not survive, during harsh political oppression. Zen needs some political freedom. But that does not mean political freedom is the same as Zen freedom anymore than political freedom is the same as artistic success or commercial success. Zen can get by even when people are not free in the Western democratic sense; China has never been free that way and Japan has only been free that way since after World War Two. I don't know if having a few free Zen masters in a state, and openly teaching Zen, could contribute to political freedom in general but I would not be surprised.

Zen should not be confused with psychoanalysis or any kind of therapy. Some therapies do aim to get you to where you can make up your own mind, and Zen does that too, but otherwise they are not similar. I do not explain why; you can find out by reading. This point is important because the people who first introduced Eastern religion to the West, such as D.T. Suzuki and Carl Jung, did compare Zen to therapy, and, I think, left a bad legacy of confusion.

All other concerns must fall to mental freedom. You can have nothing that interferes: spouse, children, politics, government post, teaching post, dogma, theory, explanation, success, concern with goodness, concern for nature, concern for other people, enlightenment, or the Buddha.

You may have human emotions but you have to let them go if they get in the way. Negative emotions tend to linger and get in the way, so eventually you have to get rid of them. You cannot linger in envy, greed, anger, revenge, jealousy, etc.

If anything interferes, no matter how innocuous or human, it must be cut out. If it does not interfere, you can leave it develop by itself, reach maturity, and go away by itself. If you enjoy success as a scholar, orator, meditation teacher, martial artist, motivational speaker, writer of dharma books, or interpreter of the sutras, and that tempts you, as it probably will, then stop it right now. Zen adepts cannot seek any success or fame. If you have to gouge out your own eyes, then you are better off blind. Jesus knew the importance of soul freedom when he advised sinners to cut off a hand rather than to let a hand lead them astray. Jesus said people would have to treat their families as already-dead if they wished full spiritual success. Socrates had a small spirit that forcibly stopped him if Socrates veered toward error such as seeking pay for his teaching; so Socrates lived poor and harassed much of his life. If the Buddhist scriptures lead you astray, then burn them; the Buddha had no sutras (scriptures). If a teacher leads you astray, leave that teacher just as the Buddha left his. The idea of enlightenment is especially likely to lead you astray, so stop thinking about enlightenment, and stop seeking enlightenment. The ideal of the

Buddha and-or bodhisattva is especially likely to lead you astray, so stop trying to be like a Buddha or bodhisattva. If you have to live alone away from people all your life, do that. If you forget to eat, then starve. If you have to lie to eat, then starve to death instead because even a small lie sets up a huge long-term block to mental freedom.

Zen adepts are not cut off from all normal life. Anti-normal is a temptation too. They walk the middle path of the Buddha. A Zen adept can enjoy an ice cream cone, movie, boat ride, puppet show, or long walk. A Zen adept could be a scientist seeking truths as long as he-she did not actively pursue a career and did not care about success. A Zen adept could interpret sutras (scriptures) as long as he-she expected to be wrong sometimes.

A Zen adept does not envy anybody success in family, business, politics, religion, or life; more precisely, a Zen adept does not hold on to the envy for enough time to count as feeling envy. Usually, when we meet a successful person, we envy them a little bit, even if we are quite successful, and, in fact especially when we are quite successful. Even if the person is a good friend, and we are much more happy than envious, we still envy him-her. That is part of biological comparative competition. It is human nature. Even if we are rich, we envy a lotto winner. If we are a famous scholar, we envy the graduate student who just published her first paper. If we make millions of dollars a year catching passes in football, we envy the baseball pitcher who threw a no-hitter. The painter envies the poet. The middle aged mother envies the new mother. Zen adepts feel no envy at all. They can look a new father in the eye and congratulate him with all their heart. They can look a Christian preacher in the eye and congratulate her with all their heart on her successful telethon.

Mental freedom implies some consistency. It is hard to be free if you are inconsistent. If you envied one minute and did not envy the next, you would not be free. Consistency brings in issues which complicate the story needlessly, so I overlook it.

In the literature on Zen, writers say Zen masters strive for spontaneity. "Spontaneity" is probably as good a way to describe the goal as "mental freedom", but, to an American, spontaneity implies emoting without hang-ups, rebellion, TV talk shows, Jedi masters, doing without effort, doing without thinking, or upwelling creativity of the Spirit. It implies that a master never studies or deliberates. None of this is true. Study and deliberation are part of human nature, and Zen masters did have to think things through. The point is not to get lost in distractions and ideologies.

To an American, the term "mental freedom" implies lawlessness, romantic rebels, people who do wrong as a way to free themselves, magic, people who do not stop to think, people who think outside the laws of physics, and selfishness. All this is wrong. But I don't know of a better term. As long as we get rid of the bad implied ideologies, the term "mental freedom" works.

"Trust your feelings, Luke". "Search your feelings, Luke". That is not right either. To follow dogma is to allow our intellects to mislead us but the cure is not to throw out all ideas and to follow only our feelings instead. Feelings can work like dogma. Contrary to widespread misunderstanding, intellect and feelings are not simply opposed. If we trust only our feelings, we might "ooh" and "aah" at puppies or we might wring their necks. If we trust only our feelings, we might help the neighbor child or might smack it for crying. Feelings run the gamut. We can trust our feelings as long as we have been well trained in both

trusting our feelings and not trusting our feelings. We can trust our feelings as long as we also trust our intellects. Trusting his feelings is what turned Anikin into Darth Vader. Air Force pilots are trained NOT to trust their feelings but to trust the instruments. A good shooter combines a thorough knowledge of the weapon, the situation, and a feel for when to pull the trigger. Marriages work when spouses combine feelings and intellect. Americans romanticize their feelings, and so they want to see Zen as validating romanticized feelings, but that is not so. Zen masters trust their mental freedom, which includes some feelings and some intellect.

In Zen, as other religions, adepts sometimes get to where they know absolutely that they will do no harm, they know they will not explode in anger or simmer in hate, and are sure they will help appropriately. If you wish to call this condition "being filled with compassion" that is fine. You do not get to this point by simply trusting feelings; I offer no advice on how you do get there. After you reach this point, you can trust your feelings. Even at this point, I don't think you can trust your feelings alone to awaken you. I am not sure what all you trust your feelings for after you reach this point.

Mental freedom does not solve all problems. Mental freedom does not pay the rent and it does not solve problems in the Middle East. Mental freedom does not cure cancer. Mental freedom is not the same as perfect health in mind and body. Mental freedom usually does reduce mental conflict, and a reduction in conflict usually leads to better overall health; but mental freedom does not by itself cure cancer, arthritis, or alienation. Recall what one patriarch said, to paraphrase: "Before I awoke, I was miserable. I hated myself and everybody, my body ached, and the world looked like crap. After I awoke, I am still miserable. People are still assholes, and the world still looks like crap."

Mental freedom does not necessarily mean you are "tapped into" the bigger-than-me, are identical to the bigger-than-me, have merged with the bigger-than-me, and have full direct contact with the bigger-than-me. I take up the relation between mental freedom and the bigger-than-me in a section below. I do not think any mystic vision or religion has a clear full direct view of God, and so I do not think Zen does either. I don't hold this limited access against Zen. Disputes about which mystic vision has the best contact with God are not useful. Some Zen adepts accept that they cannot have full direct access to the bigger-than-me, and see that accepting this fact brings them closer to the bigger-than-me as long as they don't expect it to bring them full direct access via the "back door" of non-expectation. I agree with this Zen acceptance of our limitations and of the results.

Mental freedom does not mean you can answer all questions about past, present, and future, physics, biology, law, and politics. It does not turn you into a psychic. Even if mental freedom does mean you are in touch with the bigger-than-me, it still does not turn you into a psychic.

Mental freedom does not mean you know the meaning of life in general, your life in particular, and the life of anybody in particular. It does not make you better than anybody. It does not mean you can tell people what to do. You still have to work at being a good person and helping out. Even if mental freedom does tie you into the bigger-than-me, mental freedom does not mean you deserve to control the world.

Mental freedom means not acting like any character out of fiction or pop culture. You cannot act like a character in Seinfeld, Star Wars, the Bible, the Koran, a Sutra, the Mahabharata, The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, Dr. Zhivago, Pride and Prejudice, Shakespeare, reality TV, or media-generated fantasy about

heroic Republicans or Democrats. You are not a character. If you do act like a character except briefly for fun (actors excepted), then you are not awake. Instead, try acting like yourself honestly, including useful roles and codes. Fantasies can work like dogma. You have to commit to fantasies as with dogma, keeping up fantasy requires keeping up some dogma, and dogma is usually based in unrealism like a fantasy. Part of accepting the world is learning good fantasy from bad dogma-fantasy.

Mental Freedom is Similar to.

I am not an enlightened Buddhist so I cannot describe mental freedom as Buddhist enlightenment. All I can do is relay my ideas of what might be going on based on my experiences and reading.

Mental freedom appears when we combine our natural abilities with reasonable training and then act out what we have learned. Acting includes thinking. We have to act without worrying too much about what we do. Mental freedom is like what happens when our training bring us to a new level of performance, we know we have achieved something different, we are not likely to fall back (we might), and we know it does not matter if there are other levels.

Mental freedom occurs when you can tell a good discrimination from a bad discrimination, and when you see that most of the time you don't have to.

Mental freedom is like what athletes do once they have been well trained and are ready. You have to do. You can't think too much. The time for thinking and training is past. Even if somebody beats you in a competition, you have done your best, and have proven yourself. In Japan, soldiers studied Zen as a way to act without thinking once they had been trained. Mental freedom is like good driving by a good driver, over familiar roads at first, and then over unfamiliar roads.

Mental freedom is like riding a bicycle. You have to try for a while before you get it. Training is important. Then suddenly you just get it. After you just get it, you don't ever quite forget. If you don't do it for a while, then you are not smooth. To do it again smoothly, you might have to practice, but you should be able to get back to adept level pretty well. To stay good at it, you have to practice a little bit continuously. But, if the bicycle becomes part of your life, then you should have no trouble getting the practice that you need naturally as part of daily life. After you are adept at the bicycle, there is no specific purpose to the bicycle; it is just a part of your life.

Mental freedom is like seeing one day that you can deal with nearly all the problems that will come up in your normal life. You can't deal with all of them. The problems that you can't deal with don't matter, not even if they kill you. You just go from problem to problem, coping pretty well.

Imagine you are an adult hunter-gatherer from 30,000 years ago out hunting. You are mature enough, and have been trained over a lifetime. You know what you are doing, and you do it. You do have to worry about snakes and even some big predators such as lions, hyenas, and leopards; but you don't have to worry too much. So far, all your life, you have gotten enough game. If a snake or predator gets you, or you come home empty-handed, then so be it, that is part of life. Imagine you are out gathering. You know where the fruits, vegetables, and nuts usually are. You know when a snake is likely to be around or when a predator might be waiting for you or your children. So far, you have managed to bring

home enough food to feed your family for years, and to avoid death, so you just do what you have to do without worrying too much about it.

You are in a citizens' meeting over a civic issue such as property tax. You have heard all kinds of facts, theories, ideas, opinions, and bullshit, and you are tired of it. Gradually at first, then suddenly, you realize you can sift through all this crap, think for yourself, and come to the best conclusion. You need not be an expert. You are not perfect. But you can do it. Not only can you do it in this case, but, with practice, you see that you will be able to do it in every case, with other issues such as bonds for new sewers, guards in schools, traffic cameras, and the whole city as a smoke free zone. You gain confidence. As you gain confidence, you become even better at it. Confidence and performance feed on themselves. You learn to trust your native natural mind. You see that everybody could learn to trust their native natural mind but that very few people ever will learn to do it. Most people who think they can do it never really learn to do it, as any civic meeting or any news channel shows clearly.

Mental freedom is like shopping in a farmers' market, large grocery store, mall, or big department store. You have been through this before. You know what you like. You are ready to pick up a bargain if you see one, and ready to switch from your usual brand to another brand if the price on your brand has gone up too much. If somebody beats you to a sale item, so be it. If the store is out of something you wanted, so be it.

Mental freedom is like waking up one morning, remembering you have to go to work, but it is OK. Mental freedom is like working in a job you like. You can have mental freedom even in a job as long as you are willing to give up advancement, raises, and competition with co-workers. You focus on doing the job well. If you never advance, and even if someone steals an idea from you, you live with it. Of course, you advance or get a raise, and you might out-perform fellows, but those are not concerns. You just do what you do well, come up with ideas when you can, and enjoy it too.

In the Classical World of Greece and Rome, Cynics were not "cynical" as we think of it today. Cynics doubted conventional morality and conventional ideas. Cynics wandered around, usually they were quite poor, and they taught people how to think well and act freely. They taught people how to be free. Some people think of Jesus as a Jewish Cynic. Stoics accepted what came their way, endured as much as they could, and worked as they could for integrity, dignity, morality, and political improvement. The Emperor Marcus Aurelius ("Golden One") was a Stoic. Stoics taught much the same ideas as Cynics but Stoics accepted their places in social life and their duties. I don't know if Taoist freedom, Zen freedom, Cynic freedom, and Stoic freedom are similar or how they might differ.

Mental freedom is not exactly like these examples, or exactly like any examples, because, in all these cases, there is a clear goal in mind: kicking a field goal, scoring high in gymnastics, breaking a big run, winning an account, eating well within a tight budget, not getting eaten by a leopard, etc. Mental freedom has no particular clear goal in mind. It cannot be measured, scored, or verified. It is more "subjective" even than a judged event like gymnastics. Mental freedom can take in all the example goals, and many other goals, without being any particular goal. That distinction makes many differences but it would take too long to explain here and might not be explainable. It is like a swimmer trying to explain swimming to somebody who had never done it, but even more so.

If you substitute any particular goal for mental freedom, then you have erred. You have erred even when the goal is especially laudable such as “do unto others” and “work hard to make the world better”, or when the activity is highly valued such as martial arts. An advanced black belt is not mental freedom.

Few people speak the truth consistently. Among the few, nearly all speak the truth not mostly because it is the truth but mostly because they want to prevail. A very few people speak the truth because they want to be right, that is, in line with truth. On my good days, I aspire to this. Even fewer people speak the truth because it is true and for no other reason. Among a very rare few, the truth speaks through them without their having to consider if it is truth. Zen people aspire to be among the last group but, as long as they aspire, it is hard to do.

So how do you know if you have mental freedom? That is a good question, a question that figures large in Zen, but which I cannot take up here. The easy answer is: you just know it, almost anybody else who has achieved mental freedom can see it in you too, and you can see it in them.

Zen uses examples from the natural world to show mental freedom, such as clouds drifting, birds flying, water flowing, turtles crawling through the mud, or mountains looming. These examples don't work well in the modern world because modern people see nature through a veil of false romantic glamour, if they have ever seen it at all outside the TV screen. Even in the time of classical Japanese Zen before about 1820, these examples had become so clichéd that masters used them to show what to avoid.

Amazingly, some Zen adepts seem really to achieve mental freedom. There is no point trying to describe what they are like. I have never met someone like this so I have to relate what I know from reading and from my imagination. I can't imagine what it is like not to dwell in envy and spite. When you are like this, you can see the world as it really is as much as any evolved sentient being can see the world as it really is. You just do. You can understand dogmas without succumbing to them. You can accept the accidents of the world. You can accept aging and dying and injustice. You can learn to be useful in ways that are consistent with your nature.

Mental freedom in Zen might be like Western ideas of acting honestly, not being phony, and being true to your true self as long as your true self is not bad. Similarities between the two ideas are one driving force behind outbreaks of Zen popularity in the West. I am not sure about relations between the ideas because I can't get far enough away from my American ideas to judge well.

You are Enough, and the World Is As It Is.

The Christian version of the Zen ideas above and below might be “Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door shall be opened for you”. Most answers are there if you simply accept them.

Probably the most famous story in Zen is about the Sixth Ch'an Patriarch, Hui Neng. According to the story, Hui Neng was a poor illiterate boy who was taken to the monastery because he showed much talent, rather like Jesus at the Temple when Jesus was twelve years old. Hui Neng's job was to clean up, and he was never considered a real monk. When Hui Neng was a young man, the abbot (Patriarch) was dying, and sought an heir to lead this monastery and all of Ch'an, someone who saw the truth (Dharma) directly. In the usual way in Ch'an, the abbot held a poetry contest to find his heir. Everybody expected

the brilliant protégé of the abbot, Shen Hsiu, to win the contest. The protégé entered a poem which said that inside everybody is a mirror that reflects the world without bias, anybody can awaken if they polish their mirror diligently, but they have to keep polishing even after awakening. Hui Neng anonymously posted a poem saying the mirror already was clear enough by nature, and there was no need to polish it ever; all we have to do is find the mirror and look into it, or, more accurately, just let the mirror reflect back through us. The abbot found out who posted the poem, and, because the abbot feared reprisal against Hui Neng, the abbot gave leadership to Hui Neng secretly. The temple hierarchy didn't understand Hui Neng. They were so upset that Hui Neng had to flee and hide for several years before returning to lead what became a great school of Ch'an. Shen Hsiu founded his own school, which, with the school of Hui Neng, became the two great schools of Zen. In fact, there are two great schools which divide roughly along these lines but it is unlikely that Hui Neng ever had to flee for his life.

The standard Mahayana reading of Shen Hsiu's poem is that, deep down, we already are awakened. We already are at one with the world. But we need the expedient means of Mahayana, including help from the Dharma, Buddha, monks, and bodhisattvas, to know we are at one with the world and see correctly. We must polish. Hui Neng was not denying that we are one with the world and we already are awake. Hui Neng was not saying we need do nothing or that effort is pointless and misleading; if so, he would not be Patriarch of a school that stresses hard meditation and free action. Hui Neng warns against getting caught up in dogmas, distinctions, yourself, and the interface between yourself and the world. That is polishing. While polishing removes a few big scratches it also makes thousands of little scratches that it cannot remove. Once we begin to polish, we have to polish endlessly. Instead, simply accept that you are enough as you are. Let the mirror work on its own. If you polish it, you get in its way. If you stop, it reflects on its own without any extra help.

The following "take" on the story supports Hui Neng: As in Taoism, a Ch'an-Zen adept is already at one with the world when he-she follows the Tao (Dharma) because the Tao created the world and runs the world. To understand the Tao is to understand that the world is as the world is and that you already are a part of it. What the Tao does with you, the Tao does with you. To polish your mirror is to fall back on dogma. It is gilding the lily. It is mistrusting the Tao, and trying to impose your ideas on the Tao. It is screwing up what was already fine.

The fact that there is a mirror does not mean there are no distinctions. Distinctions are endemic to the mirror and the world. They are natural. If you don't fight them, they do not mislead. In trying to remove a little dust, don't also try to polish away what is natural. Fall back on your original nature rather than try to make your nature out of ceaseless polishing.

Regardless of polishing or not polishing, both stories agree that, deep inside us, we correspond to the most real world, and the most real world corresponds to us. For this correspondence to hold up, there cannot be a big difference between what is most real about us and what is most real about the world. We must be able to see the world as it is. We ourselves are part of the world as it is. The mirror is simple. It is not a funhouse mirror, powerful microscope, or kaleidoscope. Once we see this, nothing else matters. Whether the world is fantastic as a movie or plain as a cup of tea does not matter because the world is as it is, we are as we are, and we can see the world as it is.

Maybe the most often quoted saying from Zen is “eat when hungry, sleep when sleepy”. In a monastery where many people had to coordinate their lives including food and sleep, students had to hear lessons from teachers, monks had to serve the local people, and high ranking monks had to receive important visitors, in fact, people could not “eat when hungry and sleep when sleepy”. The saying arose because students wanted their teachers to give them magic formulas for how to run their lives and how to awaken, including when to eat, what to eat, when to sleep, how to sleep, when to meditate, how to meditate, what books to read, etc. I have found in teaching that people still want the same magic. You can see the craving for magic formulas every ten minutes on TV. The saying “eat sleep” does not deny regularity and does not sanction total self-indulgence but it does deny magical regimens. It reinforces the idea that we have what it takes to awaken already inside us because we are in accord with the world, and we should rely on ourselves and the world rather than rely on magic dogma formulas.

Students asked masters question such as “Where is the great Storehouse Mind from which all things come and all things go?” Masters might respond, “The peach tree sleeps in winter and blooms in the spring”. Students asked, “Does the Great Buddha Mind know right from wrong?” Adepts might answer, “The bird eats worms while the squirrel eats nuts” or “water and ice”. The point is not to stop thinking entirely. The point is to not get lost in dogma but to accept that the world is as it is, learn to live in it, and accept that it gives you most answers. The answers of the masters “do not follow” the logic of the student questions and are “out of the box”. This tactic forces students to think well. Asking questions based on ideas such as “Storehouse Mind” and “Buddha Mind” imposes bad discriminations that, ironically, ideas like “Storehouse Mind” and “Buddha Mind” were intended to get rid of. You cannot get rid of bad ideas by using them. You have to rely on the world as it is, and get rid of them that way. Learn to see the world as it is rather than the world cloaked in dogma. This too is Taoism.

To me, the idea of always polishing the mirror also suggests the system of many lives. Not polishing is to reject the idea of needing many lives. That we do not need to polish the mirror suggests this one life right now is enough, and we need not worry about the system of many lives. Focus on what is here right now.

Zen Modest Mysticism.

Zen disdains mysticism and metaphysics but Zen offers its own modest mystic vision. Zen mysticism is a version of its basic message, and is familiar: (1) The world, with you in it, is one. The world is both seamlessly whole and gives rise to all various individuals, at once. You are both you and the “bigger than me” at the same time. Sometimes, following Mahayana, Zen calls the one world “Emptiness”, “Void”, or “Mind”. (2) You and the world correspond. Because the world and you are the same, you can “get” the world. (3) The world is as it is and is not otherwise. The world is not bizarre, threatening, or evil. Often the world is interesting. (4) Just as you are, you have enough native ability to cope with the world most of the time. You can figure it out. The world will help.

You might think these ideas are not mystical, are self-evident, and necessarily true; but they are not. To believe in them is to have a mystic vision of the world, selves, and being in the world. Zen mysticism is a minor vision compared to most other elaborate mystic visions but it is a mystic vision anyhow because it is not verifiable except by direct feeling. It is not verifiable by experiment even though an accumulation of experiences can give it great weight. I think it is as true as other partial visions.

This modest mystic vision is a far cry from most Mahayana elaborate visions. This modest vision goes along with the vision that I suggested is common in many religions, is common to people who have strong experiences, and might be at the heart of the Mahayana jump from the original Buddhist ideas: We are all connected to the bigger-than-me (there is a correspondence), we are all connected to each other (our minds are alike and mirror the bigger-than-me), and life is all OK most of the time (we have enough ability to cope most of the time). Even if this vision was at the heart of the Mahayana feeling, Mahayana always went past this vision to elaborate alluring visions and systems.

The Zen ideas of “the world as it is” and “we can ‘get’ the world” go along well with modern science. I do not say Zen and modern science are the same or that one can displace the other. Modern science also sees a correspondence between the world and the minds of naturally evolved selves. Neither expects the correspondence to be exact. Both expect it to be close enough. Scientists express amazement at how well mathematics can model the world, and how people can continually come up with new and better ideas about the world. We can understand the world because we are of the world too. Zen forces us to “think outside the box” so we can overcome dogmatic habits so we can simply see. After we overcome dogmatic limits, then we go back to living in the ordinary world of common experience. Commentators say Zen masters force us to think “irrationally”. I think “irrationally” is a poor choice of words but let it stand. Science does value reason and rationality highly, and is suspicious of irrational mumbo jumbo, but science also encourages people to “think outside the box” so people can have ideas that later can be tested in rational reasonable ways. It encourages imagination that can later be tested. It encourages speculation that then goes back to the ordinary real world. That is not much different from Zen. See below for more.

Mahayana faced two contradictions: “life is not worthwhile yet life is part of a joyous system of many lives” and “ordinary life and awakened life differ yet are the same”. Mahayana reconciles these contradictions in the idea of “heaven on Earth”: badness and ugliness can be absorbed into a greater sense of beauty-rightness-and-joy. This life has some ugliness and badness but ultimately this life is amazingly beautiful, especially when we see this one particular life is only one particular life in a system of many lives. Really, everything is alright with this world after all. Everything always has been just as it should be, and is now just as it should be. As part of Mahayana, Zen inherited these contradictions, and it often resolves them in the same way, in a feeling of “heaven on Earth”. We will see that resolution just below. I believe this is a wrong resolution.

Mahayana spins big systems. Mahayana excuses its systems as expedient means for teaching people who have not yet awakened to their identity with the One. But, in fact, Mahayana dwells in big alluring systems both before and after. Zen differs from Mahayana in the extent to which it sees a system. Zen seems to want to get rid of system entirely, and, instead, just have people be and act. Zen sometimes succeeds but not often enough.

In its early history, Zen relied on the Mahayana idea of “Emptiness” or “Void”. Later, it relied on “Mind”. Any difference between “Emptiness” and “Mind” is not relevant here. These ideas refer to the one great system of which we are all a part, seamlessly whole and particular at the same time, moral and more-than-moral, and “heaven on Earth”. In Mahayana, this one whole is always a system.

Here issues get complicated. Even original Zen masters did three things with these terms. How they used the terms is not always clear, not even with the great masters.

First, Zen masters used the terms much as non-Zen Mahayana did, including the idea of an elaborate alluring system, including other ideas that go along with it such as dharmakaya, eons, storehouse mind, etc.

Second, Zen masters used the terms to mean their particular vision, which is simpler and more direct than most other Mahayana. They used the terms to refer to the mystic vision that I described above. When Zen masters used the terms this way, they disparaged and-or explained away other Mahayana, and they did not imply a system. They disparaged other Mahayana.

Mahayanists and most Zen students would disagree with me that Zen differed from other Mahayana in how it meant these terms. They try to find ways in which the Zen sense corresponds to the standard Mahayana sense. They explain away Zen disdain for other Mahayana. I do not dispute the point here. I merely assert my opinion.

Third, Zen masters used the terms to mean something even simpler and more direct, something that is not really in the terms "Void" and "Mind". They used the terms to try to get past the terms to something even better. This vision carried little sense of system, and did not necessarily imply the idea of "heaven on Earth". It is similar to the idea I have about God and his relation to the world, although I do not stress that point here.

Mahayanists and most Zen students would disagree with me that Zen ever meant anything other than the well-known Zen ideas associated with "Void" and "Mind" (second sense), and that these Zen ideas were exactly the same at heart as standard Mahayana ideas (first sense). Again I differ, do not dispute, and merely assert.

To the extent this chapter refers to modest Zen mysticism, I have in mind two and three. I try to explain how Zen masters felt about the world as Void and Mind, and how they felt about the world as something else, simpler, and better. Even when I try to get across that "something else", even when the Zen view and mine largely coincide, I do not simply endorse the Zen view. Zen and I also disagree. I try to convey the disagreements as well. I disagree with Zen for the same reasons I disagree with Taoism.

Clarifying all this is hard because Zen masters themselves were confused and unclear. Zen masters are notorious for being hard to understand, but that is not what I have in mind here. I do understand them when they are clear in their own minds. But they are not always clear in their own minds or their writings. They waiver between the three stances. They are trapped in the terms. Sometimes they try to explain away differences between Zen and Mahayana, sometimes they insist on differences. When they insist on differences, it is not always clear if they are making point two or three. To assert that Zen masters might be confused even in their own minds is great blasphemy in Zen circles. It will be taken as great pride on my part. I can only assert what I think is true.

Zen masters were clear that Mahayana ideas of "Void" and "Mind" are misleading traps, and did urge students to go beyond those dogmas to direct experience of the "Void" and "Mind"; but, too often, I think

Zen masters themselves lapsed back into the dogmatic trap entailed in the terms. Too often, even great masters failed and even they got mired in the terms “Void” and “Mind”, even Hui Neng, Ma Tzu, Huang Po, Hui Hai, and Lin Chi. Even in their lapses, I still sense dimly something better than “Void” or “Mind”. Reading even great Zen masters, I get tired of constant references to “Void” and “Mind”, the dogma of identity of self and mind, and dogma of the identity of whole and part. I feel relief when, briefly, masters take their own advice to go beyond their ideas to something more direct and simpler than wondrous Mind and more direct and simpler than wrestling with false dichotomies of whole and part, subject and object. Think for yourself. Then they lapse again.

I don't know how the Zen idea of Mind differs from ideas of Mind in other traditions. It would be fun to compare the Zen idea with the Greek idea of Nous and its descendants, and to compare the Zen idea with my childhood idea of “a mind behind it all”. I don't know how Buddhist ideas of Mind differ from Tao or Heaven. I don't know if various ideas of mind come from the same mystic feeling, are basically the same, and only appear to differ because they developed in different traditions. These questions are too far afield. I do know that different traditions draw different conclusions although they share a seemingly similar idea of Mind. My idea of mind does not lead me to think we are all part of the mind, the bigger-than-me is the same as me, we are all intimately the same, subject and object are the same, we always vastly overstress differences between particulars, we always vastly overstress principles of morality to the point of blind dogma, it is all really alright, there is no Great Risk to the world, and this world always really is Heaven on Earth. I am not sure what differences these issues make as long as we act well, especially because I am sure any idea of mind (Mind) is only partially accurate.

I advise you to read the works of Zen masters directly – they are not hard – to look for these issues, and to make up your own mind about how the masters fare, what you think, and what to do. You don't have to share a vision of “Void”, “Mind”, “heaven on Earth”, or of something simpler and truer, to get what is important in Zen, to get acting in this reality right now, acting with your best evolved abilities, unimpeded by dogma. As with assessing Mahayana, if you share the vision of “heaven on Earth” somewhat but not fully, if you can see persistent beauty despite ugliness and badness, then use your sensitivity to better assess Zen. If you do not share the sense of “Heaven on Earth” at all, then assess in any terms that make sense to you and are fair to everybody.

A Modern Zen Story.

Misunderstanding the story of Hui Neng, and misunderstanding modest Zen mysticism, lead to error. Here, I tell, and then contradict, a cherished story of modern Zen in Japan. Because I am not an adept, and Japanese Zen cherishes this story, I might be wrong. D.T. Suzuki (Daisetz Teitaro) was a leading explainer of Zen to the West, and is a hero in Japan. He, among others, told this story. A young woman is mortally ill with a few years to live. She uses them studying Zen. On her deathbed, with a few hours to live, she awakens. As part of awakening, she sees that the world is exactly as it should be, and nothing is wrong, including herself and her illness. The world is beautiful. She is no longer miserable. She dies in peace. This feeling is common when people review their lives, in Zen and in all religions: “I wouldn't change a thing, not even my stupid mistakes”.

Her feeling is similar to the feeling of “heaven on Earth”, of a world in which beauty assimilates ugliness and badness. Although the feeling can be graceful, the feeling is wrong if it implies any of this: we can

overlook all the evil of the world; all details of the world are necessary; her illness was necessary, likely so she could awaken; her particular illness was necessary as part of the beauty that overcomes evil; all good and bad is necessary; suffering is good; good and evil require each other; good and evil are in balance; good and evil need each other; nothing can be changed; everything returns to what it was; the system is what counts; I am part of the system; as I die, I return to the system; I never really had left the system to which I return; and it is a mistake to make the world better such as by curing my illness.

I think standard Mahayanists make many of these mistakes. These mistakes negate the Big Risk of the world. These mistakes diminish her life right here right now and diminish all life right here right now. As far as I can tell, this is the mistaken sense that Suzuki and modern Zen interpreters offer both East and West. If we want to see her in a better light, a Taoist might say she is like the twisted men sitting at the café or she is like a gnarled tree. She sees that she has to make do with what she has and that what she has is good enough for her situation. Although she makes the best of her situation, still there are other people who are not in accord with the Tao, and the Tao does not prevail in the world. I do not think that is the intent of the story as it is usually told. I think original Zen is more in line with the Taoist version, and in line with what I see, but that original Zen has been covered over by Mahayana metaphysics again, even by good-hearted smart modern scholars such as Suzuki.

The ideas that you should rely on yourself, and that there is a correspondence between yourself and the world, lead again to the mistaken idea of "Trust your feelings, Luke". They lead to the mistaken belief that human emotions, human imagination, and the world as it is are exactly the same, that is, they lead us to believe in the fantasies that we make up. They lead us to believe in a Force of the world because there is a power in our imagination. They lead us to a wrong view of "heaven on Earth" in which we are tempted to overlook strong evil. Just because the world is as it is, and we can live in it if we want to, does not mean we can be self-indulgent and ridiculous. "The world is as it is" means you need to eat regularly and you need a warm place in winter.

Ikkyu.

Ikkyu (1394 to 1481 CE) was a Japanese Zen master. Due to his history and character, he was soaked in the ideas that awakened life and normal life do not differ, and we are all capable of awakening in this life; and he acted on the ideas. To me, he seems more like a seeking indulgent Taoist than an austere Zen master, and he seems like an adept poet-painter caught in the wrong profession. He spent most of his life in the "Bohemian" sections of Japan (the "floating world"), including brothels, when Japan was in turmoil and when the Bohemian sub-society was booming. His friends were painters and writers. He loved the wooden flute. He indulged emotions. He had a mistress and a child; the mistress was a blind "folk" singer much like an American blind blues singer. He did this not because it was trendy or as an ideological expression of Zen freedom but for love of her; he was like "Siddhartha" of the Herman Hesse novel. Ikkyu is not typical of Zen but he is not right or wrong just because he is not typical. I do not offer him as a role model for Zen but he is worth knowing about. His poems are short, and, once you get the allusions, good. Likely Ikkyu helped create the style of short Japanese poems that Americans like, such as haiku. His artistic style contributed to the artistic view that later led to the great prints of the "floating world" in the 1700s and 1800s such as of Hokusai and Hiroshige.

After Ikkyu died, the Japanese made up stories about him as a “wonder kid”, like Jesus at the Temple, or as a Trickster confounding enemies and doing miracles. Now, the Japanese see him as a beloved rascal. That view is not right but it is not far off and it shows how images of prophets get remade to suit the needs of the people. The Japanese did an animated series about a boy monk named “Ikkyu”. That Ikkyu solved puzzles and mysteries, like a mix of Martin Gardner and Sherlock Holmes. The series was a hit all over Asia, it is a lot of fun, and it is well worth watching if you can find it dubbed in English (I saw it dubbed in Thai, and it is dubbed in many languages).

More on Dogma: Mental Freedom and Categories of Thinking.

Like Taoists, and coming from an explicit Buddhist tradition of non-duality, Zen adepts said discrimination is bad and so, with some irony, we should avoid distinctions, especially of good and bad. Like Taoists, Zen adepts were not idiots about non-discrimination. They stressed non-discrimination because that was the mistake that people make more often than too much mixing and blending of categories or too much spontaneity.

Discrimination depends on mental categories. Mental freedom is not giving up all categories. To commit to not using any categories at all is to commit to a dogma (category), and so is a trap. It is to burn your mind out for no good end. It is to go against human nature, and thus to go against natural nature. As with most traps, the best strategy is to avoid it. If you fall into the trap, then just step out. Don't go along. People evolved the ability both to make the traps and to step out of them.

If you want to learn archery, you start with a bow, arrow, and target. Those are distinct. You cannot blend them in any glib way although you can merge them in a better way through practice. You have to practice. Practice is not the same as sleeping. When I think of food, I see the grocery store and farmers' market in my mind's eye. When I think of food, I see fruit. So even to eat, I need categories of stores and of food. Some people see a deer blind and meat. There is no art without a medium, and no art without categories. The great artists of the “floating world” painted specific scenes, often in specific places, they knew how to use wood blocks as a medium, and knew the difference between a prostitute and the men who came to her. It usually helps to have categories more than it hurts. Categories are useful tools. If we got rid of all categories, we would sit like puddles of slime, and we would starve.

The trick, of course, is to use categories without becoming lost in our categories. When I go to market, I pick apples from the bin without using any complex algorithms; I do use rules of thumb. In the 1970s and 1980s, when I saw how state policies of both the Left and Right fail, I changed my ideas accordingly. The need not to get lost in dogmas is not news nor is the idea confined to Zen. The idea is, or should be, part of any good training in any discipline from picking fruit to martial arts to global statesmanship. Evolution gave us the ability to use categories, make categories, and re-make categories; we can improve ability with training; and we should.

Don't think usually of dogma and not-dogma, discrimination and non-discrimination; don't discriminate about dogma and discrimination. Think in terms of dogma and not-dogma when it is useful. Instead of non-discrimination, learn to use your mind adeptly. That is all.

Zen adepts think more clearly, and suffer fewer traps, than normal people. This comparison implies that a Zen adept could be free of all traps, could be totally consistent, and could think with absolute clarity on all issues. As long as we are finite humans who have to think with finite minds using categories, then we necessarily live in some traps. I don't think Zen aimed to be free of all mistakes and all illusions. That is a dogma and a mistake itself. If the awakened life and ordinary life are the same, then the awakened life has to have some mistakes in it too. Ikkyu saw this. Zen did aim at a certain plateau, on which you are free enough, and from which you are not likely to fall too far back, but which is not entirely without limits or mistakes. Reaching that plateau is the same as waking up. Ikkyu might not have seen this. Right away people ask: "How free is free enough?" "What mistakes can I make and still be awakened?" "Can I carry on my normal life and still be free enough of mistakes?" Because I am not a Zen adept, I can only guess. To ask such questions shows that you are still far from free enough. You cannot live a normal life and still expect to be free enough. At the least, you have to live like a Taoist character or Buddhist monk.

Words, Words, Words.

Officially in Mahayana, the message cannot be conveyed in words, but Mahayanists still wrote a lot. Zen adepts did not usually suffer from this Mahayana problem. Usually they wrote little and they did not like too many words. All this leads to a common silly Western mistake about Zen: Zen has nothing to do with words, words are necessarily misleading discrimination, all words are irrelevant, all words are necessarily a betrayal, and we must stop talking. Moreover, the intellect is like words, it is an enemy, and we should not use the intellect at all. Some Zen masters, such as Dogen, did write quite a bit, and were usually lucid and helpful in what they did write; and all Zen masters could think well.

Zen masters have nothing against words or the intellect as long as they are used properly. When words and the intellect are used properly, they make fine tools. They can bring us up to awakening even if they cannot make us awaken. They are part of human nature like eating, drinking, and smelling flowers. You cannot write poetry without words even when the point of the words is to get us beyond words. It is hard to smell and appreciate flowers if you can't recognize one. Words cannot capture the One but they can help us get to the point where we can see for ourselves. To react against words is to fall into the dogma of hating dogmas, and is as much a mistake as embracing dogmas. If you can't make your peace with words then you are not likely to achieve mental freedom and awaken.

Now that we don't have to mindlessly fear categories and words (discrimination), we can use them to develop a proper attitude and to gain insight into mental freedom.

Imagine some villagers talking about where to build a rural cabin and how to build it.

Most people prattle. They don't know what they are talking about but they talk anyway. They say too much, assert unfounded opinions, assert many false points, but never get to the heart of issues. I think Mahayanists would not stress that the lives of these people are really awakened. They might be part of the joyous system, and might be awakened somewhere deep down, but I hope Mahayanists would not argue that their prattle was the wise talk of a Buddha or bodhisattva.

Some people theorize too much. They talk a lot about magical location, water flow, clouds, wind, will of God, harmony, and conflict. Again, I think Mahayanists don't want to stress that the lives of these people are really awakened on any obvious level.

These first two groups are the monkeys in Rudyard Kipling's "Jungle Books".

A few people know the subject. They say what needs to be done in plain simple words. They explain to the extent that they have a basis for explanation and to the extent other people need them to explain. If they can convey ideas by referring to concrete situations, they do. They bring in only as much theory as needed and as people can understand without getting more confused. If they need to explain the north wind to make people build thick walls, they do. They don't offer a theory of quantum gravity to use a plumb line, and they don't care that two plumb lines are never exactly parallel. They don't repeat often, not even to make people listen. If you leave them alone, they do what needs doing.

I don't have to stress that Zen is like the last group. If you are hungry, and you have an apple, eat it. If you have to go pick the apple first, then go pick it. If you have to use science to figure out where apples might be growing, use science. If you have to explain to hungry people what an apple is, where the apple trees are, and which apples are ripe, then explain to them.

It sounds easy to do this but it is not. It is very hard. Only a few rare and wonderful people ever master the art of plain simple speaking or writing. Jesus and Chuang Tzu were masters of the art. Even Zen masters who clearly knew what was what sometimes could not explain themselves, and resorted to other means such as shouting, striking, walking away, and riddles. Here it is not relevant whether "it" can be explained or not.

Zen masters knew the sutras thoroughly. Zen students were expected to study the scriptures. When Zen masters said to study the scriptures or to ignore the scriptures, they had the above points in mind. The scriptures can be useful tools to be taken up and put down as needed, or can trap students in Buddhist aids. Students and teachers have to make sure of proper use.

Buddhism, Zen, and Doing Good.

Zen has all the same problems with goodness that Taoism had – Taoists said the Tao was beyond good and bad but tacitly expected conventional goodness in following the Tao - although Zen does not usually extend its ideas of goodness into politics. In Zen the problem might be a little less embarrassing because Zen inherited the Buddhist idea that goodness is in the basic nature of the world. Zen still preached that discriminations of good and bad are misleading yet still expected goodness to result from people doing what they will. Zen wants goodness to result from people not thinking about goodness and not trying to do good. Zen has no answer to the fact that goodness does not always blossom when people simply do what they will.

I think the following story takes place sometime around 800 CE (AD) in China. The character "Po Chu-I" might be the famous poet "Bai Chi-I".

BEGIN STORY

Po Chu-I asked Master Bird Nest (Niao K'o): "What is the core meaning of Buddhism?"

Bird Nest answered: "Do no evil, do much good".

Po Chu-I said: "But a three-year old child understands that."

Bird Nest said: "A three-year old child can say it but many eighty-year old people cannot do it".

In commenting on this story, Master Ryozen said: "If not for this one phrase from Bird Nest, our followers would get stuck in wrong dogmas such as:

- From the Beginning, not one thing
- Not thinking of good, not thinking of evil
- Good and evil are not two
- True and false are the same"

END STORY

This exchange bothered Ikkyu a lot. It goes dead against standard (dogmatic) Mahayana and Zen ideas of non-discrimination, non-duality, no morality, and unity in one great Mind. If the essence of Buddhism is "do good, avoid evil" then Buddhism is no different than naïve common do-gooder religion with mundane distinctions of good and bad, that is, Buddhism basically does not differ from what I (Mike Polioudakis) follow. Then why is Buddhism supposed to be about suffering, ending suffering, cause-and-effect, mind, emptiness, etc. To do good and to avoid evil, we have to discriminate between them, accept distinctions between general and particular, and accept self and other. Buddhism, Taoism, and Zen all say we should not practice discrimination, especially not between good and evil. If we allow in these discriminations, it seems we allow in all discriminations and dogmas. If we allow this discrimination and all discriminations, then what is the point of the Tao or of Zen?

This is why Buddhism is inherently moral despite making a show of not following simplistic conventional morality. This is why you have to learn to manage ideas, not to avoid ideas altogether. The real world is made of distinctions such as "good" and "bad". They are real and important. To think they are unreal and unimportant is as much a bad distinction and a trap as to think they are clear and gigantic. To strongly assert either end of the dilemma is to remain trapped in both ends of the dilemma. This is why Obiwan Kenobe said "Only Sith believe in absolutes". Without the comment by Bird Nest, Zen would be trapped in the dilemma by denying the reality of morality and other useful distinctions. This is why Zen stresses "the world as it is" and "every particular person is valuable and capable". This is why hating dogma is as bad as following dogma.

From this exchange and commentary, it would be easy for me to argue that Buddhism and all religions are merely variations on what I believe. Besides being selfish, that outlook is just as much a mistake as over-stressing differences. Even if "do good, avoid evil" is the essence of Buddhism, and that essence is pretty much what I believe, there is much to practiced Buddhism that is not in the formula, including the ideas that life is not worthwhile, cause-and-effect, and the self is not a simple soul-stuff. You have to

decide for yourself how much is really in Buddhism, how much is added on by smart people, how much is added on by common people, and what is true regardless of why it is there. You have to decide not just for Buddhism but for all religions, including what I profess. To decide, you have to come to grips with Bird Nest, Ryoken, Ikkyu, good, bad, concepts, words, and doing.

Zen Self and the Greater Joyous System.

Before briefly getting to this subject, I revert back to one of the enigmas in Mahayana. The self and the bigger-than-me are both distinct and the same. Before awakening, usually we do not feel the sameness. After awakening, we feel both sameness and distinction. Which we stress when we are awake depends on the situation and on what mood we are in. Just because a Mahayana or Zen adept extols the joyous system does not mean he-she does not feel the self. Just because an adept talks about how much he-she likes to drink sake and play Go does not mean he-she does not feel the system. I do not resolve this issue. It is a non-issue, and can mislead. It takes up too much mental energy of Buddhists. I think the Zen idea of the self and its changes is different than the Mahayana idea but here I can only sketch the differences. I make this point so people think for themselves better and people do not get “hung up” on either Mahayana or Zen terms about the self and its changes.

Some Zen masters, such as the Japanese Hakuin, do have a great experience of their self as strongly “in tune” with the essence at the core of a joyous system such as the Unborn or the Buddha Mind. Even Zen masters who do not have a grand experience of union still feel that they and the bigger-than-me are the same even if different, and are different even if the same, such as the Japanese Dogen or Ryokan. This attitude of having both self and bigger-than-me can be part of Mahayana theology that nirvana (awakened world) and samsara (asleep world) are one. When people make contact with the bigger-than-me, then their self changes, or, at least, the idea of their self changes. They see more truly the relation between self and bigger-than-me, and see more truly the status of the self as not-self, bundle of features, Buddha, bodhisattva, or whatever.

Feeling a relation between the self and the bigger-than-me, feeling change in ideas about them, or feeling a change in their relations, does not have to be exactly what Mahayana tells us even when Zen adepts use Mahayana terms to talk about it. Mystics outside Mahayana have a similar experience, and they do not explain it in Mahayana terms. People talk in the terms of their tradition even if those terms are not exactly the same as their vision. People outside Mahayana who have a “Grand Canyon” experience do not usually explain in Mahayana terms. Because I think all mystical experiences are only partial contact at best, I do not have to accept the Zen explanation that uses Mahayana terms. This is another instance of society, culture, history etc. conditioning what people think even about tremendous experiences. All I have to accept is that Zen adepts have an important experience that involves feeling close connection between the self and bigger-than-me, and that this changes ideas of the self, and of relations between the self and bigger-than-me. Then I take out of that what I think is most true and most useful. That is what I do with all mystic experiences.

Many Zen masters, including Lin Chi (Chinese) and Hakuin (Japanese), reported great healing of doubts, and great healing of a formerly sad self, to go along with meeting the bigger-than-me. Even masters who did not need much healing still felt a better sense of self and fewer doubts, such as Dogen and Ryokan. The change of self and healing of self when in contact with the bigger-than-me is true in other traditions

such as Sufism, as with the poet Rumi, and in Christianity, as when Martin Luther felt close to God. I do not have to explain why. It is just true, and that is fine. The fact that it is true still does not mean we have to accept the metaphysical terms that people themselves use to explain change of self and improvement of self. It is best if we do not impose the metaphysical terms of our tradition but just accept that this happens. If you like to speculate on metaphysics, again, go ahead, but don't expect to be exactly right and don't force other people to follow you.

The Mahayana feeling of self and bigger-than-me is: I am part of a joyous system of many lives. I am the system. I control the world. I want to be a bodhisattva. I am a bodhisattva. Out of my great compassion, I will help other lesser beings. Good for me.

The Zen feeling is: Don't worry about systems. Big deal if I am a bodhisattva or a Buddha. The system got along without me knowing about it before, and it will get along fine with me knowing about it now. Do what comes naturally for me and is most useful in general. Help out other seekers in a way that does not hurt their integrity.

People who have contact with the bigger-than-me usually report strong feelings of compassion and caring for all other beings and for nature. This is true regardless of their original religion, culture, society, history, etc. This is true even when the original culture etc. might not be very "sweet" such as Theravada, Islam, Mahayana, or market worship capitalism. The fact that the feeling of compassion bridges religions etc. does not necessarily make it truer or falsier, and does not necessarily mean that the person who had the feeling was in full contact with the bigger-than-me. I take the feeling as truer than usual human narrow self-interest and I take it as evidence of partial contact if it also gives rise to compassion. If you have this experience, and you love people more as a result, then you were closer to God. What you do with this experience in the real world, and over the long run, is another story.

Sometimes people go into Zen so they can have great feelings, change the self, find the bigger-than-me, unite with the bigger-than-me, heal the self, or have robust health and a long life. I am not sure if people go into Zen so they can feel greater compassion. I would rather people go into Zen because it is useful and fun in itself, like riding a bicycle, and accept those other effects as beneficial side effects; but people are not like that, and going into Zen for such motives is not bad (even if it might impede progress), so I don't say anything against doing that. People seek the Tao, seek Rumi's "companion", or go into Tai Chi Chuan, for the same reasons. If anyone is sick, and changing the self through contact with the bigger-than-me helps him-her find healing, then I am genuinely glad.

Zen Games.

Zen stresses practice as part of meditation. Zen ideally avoids useless disputation but Zen has a lot of disputation too as part of practice. This is part of using words adeptly.

Much has been written about Zen "games" such as koans, tricks, verbal battles, and physical shocks like a shout or a slap to the side of the head. Such "games" are an instance of Mahayana direct teaching, especially teaching that defies words even when it uses words. Such games are a good holdover from Mahayana. The games are an instance of expedient means wherein skillful teachers adjust techniques for particular students. Saying much about these "games" only prolongs confusion, so short is better.

The point of the games is to shake up people so that people achieve mental freedom. There is no other point. If a person can reach mental freedom without games, then the person does not need games, games would not do any good, and games might do some harm.

The Japanese term “koan” (“cone” or “ko-an”, from Chinese “kung-an” or “gong-an”) originally meant a public verbal dispute, especially a court case. In the West, it now means an absurd riddle, such as the sound of one hand clapping. A koan is more. It is how a teacher helps free the mind of a student by giving him-her a mental issue, often an issue that cannot be solved in the terms given. Westerners have called it inducing a mental “cramp” so you stop doing the bad things that lead to stress in the first place. It is the Zen way of forcing the young James T. Kirk into an impossible battle simulation, so he must go beyond the boundaries. When he learns to do that, then he can escape similar situations in the future. Koans have a feel of “damned if you do and damned if you don’t”. The best way is to read them. Several fun anthologies are available. You can find a few examples on the Internet for free. Don’t get hung up on koans. Some Zen masters, such as Bankei, did not like them and seldom used them.

To get you started, here is a classic koan. You have to respond right away or the master might hit you. You need background. This background is tedious, and the tedium is part of the point. Bodhidharma was a monk from South India who lived about 500 CE (AD). He went to China to teach Buddhism. He is the founder of Ch’an. On the one hand, in Buddhism, the truth will out, including dharma (dogma). Dharma controls all, the world works according to dharma, and some sentient beings must become aware of the dharma even if other sentient beings stay ignorant. If people in China were destined to know the dharma, then people in China would have learned the dharma whether Bodhidharma went there or not. While it might be a person’s karma to be a monk, it seems odd to say it is a person’s karma to go to China. Not China, nor Bodhidharma, nor the Dharma, gained by Bodhidharma going to China. On the other hand, if Bodhidharma had not gone to China, you can say that China would not have gotten Ch’an. In Buddhism, everything happens by cause-and-effect. Nothing happens without a cause, that is, without a reason, including travels to distant lands. If we say anything just happens by itself without a cause, then we deny cause-and-effect, deny karma and dharma, allow for independent origination, deny dependent origination, allow for the self-subsistence of the self-determined soul self, and so deny Buddhism. China and the world benefitted because Bodhidharma went to China. If Bodhidharma had a reason for going to China, then the meaning of his life and of all lives was tied to it. If Bodhidharma did not have a reason for going to China, then we have to re-assess our attitude toward meaning and life. If we are all already saved, we are all already bodhisattvas, if ordinary life is the same as the awakened life, then it makes no difference if somebody tells us that. If somebody has to tell us that, then there must be a difference.

The koan: Why did Bodhidharma go to China?

For a Taoist, this is a silly question. For a Buddhist, this is a serious question. For a Zen adept, this is an opportunity to get past simplistic misleading discrimination while pondering issues. This koan is roughly the analog of the Western riddles of free will versus determination, why we have prophets who help us but they don’t save us, or why God would allow his joyous creation to get so screwed up. All the jargon that led up to the koan is only a taste of the metaphysical baggage that the average monk carries in his-her head, that impedes mental freedom, and would have to be dealt with. You could try screaming, “I don’t give a damn why Bodhidharma went to China but I am glad that he did” or “I wish that blue-eyed devil had stayed home”.

Zen Sweetness.

Zen masters were not known for being sweet, and were known for being hardnosed and cranky. Yet they often were sweet in deep ways that mattered. They cared about their students and they cared about the common people. They cared in ways that a simplistic Buddhist or diffident Asian might consider too much or consider clinging. Zen masters could yell at an ignorant selfish person who was trying to distort true ideas, but more often they yelled at students as a way to get them to improve. They worked on students not only to get them to mental freedom but to make them better people in many ways, such as to make them more responsible, less compulsive, stop stealing, not drink too much, and care for other people too. Zen masters did this not only by yelling at them, hitting them, and disputing with them but also by setting a personal direct example, giving chores, telling stories, and even helping animals. Zen masters wanted people to get along. Zen masters taught people to be honest, responsible, and caring. They taught people in authority not to misuse their authority, to be aware of subordinates, and to use authority for general public good. Zen masters were like the “tough but fair” coach of sports myth. Regardless of the source of sweetness, and regardless of whether it is orthodox, this sweetness is a credit to Zen and it enhances the idea of mental freedom.

Modern Western Buddhists focus on Zen sweetness as much as on the idea of mental freedom, without realizing how important Buddhist sweetness is and without giving it the right context. Westerners call it “being mindful”, that is, what used to be called “caring” and “good manners”. Westerners refer to cases where great Buddhists of the past showed sweetness. I simply praise modern Western Buddhists for their concern for human kindness.

Awakening, Clear Thinking, Plain Speaking, and Bigger-than-Me.

Nearly all Zen adepts tied clear thinking and plain speaking, that is, awakening, to a feeling of a bigger-than-me. They could not think and speak clearly until they felt the bigger-than-me. When they felt the bigger-than-me, then they automatically thought and spoke clearly. I can make a case that a few Zen adepts did not have to refer to the bigger-than-me but so many adepts obviously did refer to the bigger-than-me that there is no use arguing about the record one way or the other.

Zen adepts often referred to bigger-than-me by a term inherited from Mahayana, such as Nothingness, Buddha Mind, Unborn, or Storehouse Consciousness. I think this was more a matter of convenience than evidence that Mahayana mystic visions and metaphysics are correct. When I read what the masters said and did, it does not seem to me that they had in mind Mahayana ideas even when they used Mahayana terms. If anything, they had in mind more something like the Tao, and just as often used the term “Tao” as any term from Mahayana.

Is it possible to separate clear thinking and plain speaking from any feeling of the bigger-than-me? This is the atheist ideal. It is not the ideal in Mahayana, Zen, or Taoism even when adepts make clear that what they feel is not the same as any historical standard idea in Mahayana, Zen, or Taoism. Among atheists that I have read and spoken with, only David Hume in the 1700s in England came close to this ideal. All modern atheists seem, to me, to yearn for the bigger-than-me but to exclude any stereotyped idea of God. Even Hume felt morality quite strongly. Feeling morality forces an atheist into contact with

the bigger-than-me, or with modest metaphysics, as I explained in the chapter on atheism. All modern atheists feel the bigger-than-me and metaphysics of morality.

In my own thinking, I find it almost impossible to separate clear thinking, plain speaking, and the bigger-than-me. Clear thinking and plain speaking are what God wants me to do, and, when I feel most in touch with God, then that is what I do naturally. Sometimes I try to separate them. I can do it as an exercise in my head but not convincingly from my heart. I understand that evolution likely made it hard for me to do. If I do succeed, I will write about it in another venue.

Does the fact that evolution likely made close ties between clear thinking, plain speaking, and a feeling of the bigger-than-me mean that the bigger-than-me is only a delusion? No, it does not.

Does the close tie between clear thinking, plain speaking, and the bigger-than-me prove that the bigger-than-me exists or that the bigger-than-me is necessarily like my idea of God, the Judeo-Christian-Muslim idea of God, the Tao, the Mahayana joyous system, the Hindu joyous system, or any idea in Zen? Not, it does not prove any of those ideas. If we take for granted the bigger-than-me, then we have to decide the relation between the bigger-than-me, clear thinking, and plain speaking. Looking at how the Zen masters and Taoist masters dealt with these issues is a great place to start because they are likely the most free of confounding problems of dogma, mysticism, and metaphysics. Jesus was pretty free of side issues as well and is also a good place to start too.

Waking Up in Zen.

Waking up in Zen is much like waking up in Taoism. You awaken when you find your mental freedom; if you find mental freedom, then you are awake. I can't say much more about it than I said above. I do not compare waking up in Zen to waking up in other forms of Buddhism or to Hinduism.

Talking about waking up in Zen is annoying because of the Mahayana baggage that Zen carries. As said above, some Zen masters do refer to Buddhist aids such as Mind, Emptiness, Storehouse Memory, the bodhisattva, and the great joyous system, when they talk of waking up. However, some masters insist you not refer to aids at all, and that you avoid them altogether. Waking up to become a bodhisattva is nothing at all. Waking up to the great joyous system is nothing different than waking up to fix breakfast. It is best if you read the original masters and decide for yourself.

Good Government.

Zen was not born out of political conflict. Unlike some Taoism such as of Lao Tzu, Zen does not offer a political theory. Zen is like the Chuang Tzu form of Taoism that was not political. Zen does not expect to change the state or to change the hearts of people. Zen accepts that only a few people can achieve Zen insight. So few people achieve Zen insight that it will make no difference to the workaday practical world. In this, Zen is like the Buddha and like Theravada Buddhism. Zen cannot serve as the basis for political institutions that I think important such as democracy. Zen would not disdain good institutions, and would not oppose them. To the extent Zen adepts could approve of any institutions without fear of hurting their freedom, Zen adepts would see the goodness in political freedom, democracy, charity, education, and paying it forward. But I could not, and would not, seek their endorsement.

Although Zen was not born in an atmosphere of political seeking, did not endorse any particular theory of government as Taoism and Confucius did, and feared getting entangled in politics as much as getting entangled in dogma, Zen adepts still had moral sense, and still scolded bad politicians. Immorality blocks awakening, the Buddha had sympathy and empathy, Buddhists should try to lessen suffering, and bad politics is immorality that leads to suffering. So, when a fiscal policy led to hunger, high taxes, and war, a Zen master might scold the politicians that carried out the policy, and call for better policies. Zen masters did not like ostentatious display that sucked money away from the people and that forced the people into stealing and prostitution. Zen adepts did like moderation in courtly life that allowed for lower taxes, did not tempt young women into becoming concubines, and allowed the common people to be comfortable enough to be moral. The Zen masters Bankei and Hakuin were blunt and colorful in addressing officials about these matters.

Human Nature.

Everything I said about the Tao applies to Zen. Everything that disqualifies you from being a Taoist adept also disqualifies you from being a Zen adept.

Although Zen, modern biology, and me, all stress our natural capability, Zen and modern evolution do not have the same view of human nature. Zen does not have the same view that most people hold of human nature even apart from ideas from evolution.

As noble as Zen might be, Zen is not in line with the nature of most humans. It is not human to be able to give up all dreams of success and to erase all envy. This discrepancy between Zen and normal human nature does not make Zen bad but it should give pause to people who romanticize Zen or who praise Zen as the cure for all that ails us. Zen is not encoded in any genes, but, like all major stances, the ability for Zen is built on inherited capacities. I do not go into what those capacities might be. Zen is an extension of our abilities in ways that are not usually done and that seem to subvert us. Zen seems like a self-negation of human nature.

Other human activities take us beyond the bounds of our original evolved "design specifications". Almost all performance sports, such as swimming, take people outside what our original evolution intended for our bodies. Mathematics takes people outside what our original evolution intended for our minds. Hard martial arts such as karate certainly exceed our design specifications. Golf exceeds what we might have expected while hunting and gathering. Movies and theater are outside the drama that was enacted around ancient campfires. Whether this is good or bad depends. Zen differs from most of these other activities because it negates a core part of our potential even while extending other parts of our potential. Other activities do not usually negate our core potential and might be ways of reaching our core potential. Most athletes and scholars do fairly well in the mate-and-family market. Even Taoist adepts had families. Zen monks do not.

Sometimes we need people who go outside the bounds to show us what is out there even if we do not go outside the bounds ourselves. These extraordinary people do not necessarily negate human nature even when they seem to do so. They enhance human life through their sacrifice. Great artists can be like this,

such as Seurat and Beethoven. Whether Zen adepts are people who reveal our full nature by negating important parts of it, you have to make up your own mind.

Although Zen negates some key aspects of human character, such as envy, it does not leave the mind a "heap of dead ashes". Mahayanists accused Theravada monks of seeking not real enlightenment but to make themselves a heap of dead ashes; by its goals and rigor, Zen seems to do that; but it is not so. Zen adepts were lively interesting people. By removing commitment to dogma and by removing bad feelings such as envy, Zen adepts made themselves great people in other ways.

If we romanticize Zen, then Zen adepts still gain much from their self-sacrifice but we throw away what they might have done for us. Romanticizing Zen wastes it. People are much more at risk of falling into a romantic delusion about Zen than of pursuing it so far that they negate their humanity. That is a different problem. The cure for that problem is not specific to Zen but is a part of general human silliness.

Buddhism developed an elaborate theory of human nature to explain not-awakening and awakening. As a branch of Buddhism, Zen has access to those sutras. But Zen does not use it much. Zen is not about explaining human nature or developing human nature. Zen accepts the ability for Zen in human nature, and goes from there.

Humans evolved with the propensity to deceive other people, a considerable tendency to self-deception, biases in how we see the world, and some inconsistency. Zen mental freedom implies not being limited in those ways. Even if a Zen adept does not achieve perfect mental freedom, Zen implies that an adept rises above deception, self-deception, biases, and inconsistency. Again, to rise above those tendencies is to negate a big part of our humanity. Natural selection would have made sure that people who could rise above those tendencies in the past did not succeed and did not leave children to carry on their odd freedom – always recall that Zen adepts are celibate. In that case, could any real humans actually free themselves of these limitations? Does it make sense to even consider that success in Zen is possible? I can't say. I doubt people can reach total freedom from evolved limitations-biases but I think people can achieve enough freedom to make Zen practice worthwhile and for some people to succeed. Apparently people can lose envy, and, if they can lose envy, they can do almost anything.

Worthwhile Life Again.

Taoists consider the world worthwhile. When not plagued by the state, Taoists consider the world a lot of fun. This life, right now, as it is, is worthwhile and fun. In Christian terms, life is good. Zen, as Buddhism, should not have this attitude, but, in fact, Zen adepts do seem to have this attitude. They seem to enjoy life. In their eyes, life is worthwhile, not only because it gives you a chance to awaken, but because it is worthwhile in itself. If you take seriously the idea that there is no difference between the awakened life and the sleeping life, that suffering is only an illusion, then you can enjoy this life. The Zen attitude does not seem to come out of such an intellectual approach but is a more immediate enjoyment of this life right now – as befits non-dogmatic Zen. Zen adepts are more like Taoists in this way than like Buddhists. In Taoism and Zen, this life matters right now, not the system of many lives or the Tao of long ago and far away and everywhere every time. This coincidence of Tao and Zen enjoyment of life does not mean that the Tao is the same as the Buddha Mind, the Unborn, or any of the other metaphysical ideas at the heart

essence of Mahayana many-life systems. Of course, because I am not a Zen or Taoist adept, I could be wrong on these issues, and I welcome the reader to seek for him-herself.

Zen Not Hokey; Not only Life but Zen Can Be Worthwhile.

Zen and Tao adepts try to be fearsome but often they appear more hokey or nerdy. Tao adepts get drunk and write poetry. Zen adepts say they can bring you to awaken if you let them starve you, beat you, yell at you, torment you with puzzles, force you to sit in cramped positions for hours, and make you do their laundry and cook their food. In the end, what reward do you get? Trees look like trees, and flowers smell like flowers; the world is as it is. You can't take that to the bank, and you can't even use it to amuse your friends. You don't learn to use a sword to kill enemies, as in the movies "Kill Bill". It isn't just that Zen is impractical, it seems silly too. Because Zen seems so hokey, we have to ask if Zen is worthwhile.

Suppose Zen monks are extraordinary people who build on human potential to push past what ordinary people could achieve or would want to achieve. Zen achieves but only by negating part of what is most important to being human. Zen is not for ordinary people. Then how is Zen useful for ordinary people? Can ordinary people learn from it? Can they learn enough to make Zen a commendable human activity? We can learn from great pianists even though we cannot play like them. The issue with Zen is different. We can appreciate almost fully what a pianist does even if we could not do it ourselves. Playing great piano does not negate core aspects of human nature even if to achieve it requires sacrifice. We cannot appreciate what a Zen adept does unless we commit to Zen. We have to be willing to erase some core aspects of our human nature even if we do not succeed. There is only so much we can learn from Zen unless we commit to it, and few people do that, or should do that.

So, should normal people spend time on Zen? The answer, of course, depends on the person. All in all, a study of Buddhism, Taoism, and Zen is good for many people. Study as much as you can to the point where you know you are not getting any more out of it, then quit. Keep an open mind toward people who get further along than you are. Don't disparage it.

I don't recommend Zen or meditation as therapy, weight loss, mind expansion, cancer cure, tension relief, or for any other immediate practical benefit. Zen can have those benefits, but I have found that light low-impact exercise, such as swimming or walking, has more long-term benefit, and is easier. Do some Zen because it is interesting. Take it as far as you like it. Don't make more of it than it is. It is only hokey if you make more of it than it is, if you turn it into something you see on TV or in recreation courses.

I have the same comments for Taoism, although I recommend that you stay away from ideas about chi, flow of chi, yin and yang, etc. until you are familiar with good solid basic simple Taoism. You cannot drink your way to the Tao.

Yoga originally was a way of meditation but now is taught as a health exercise. If we do Zen or Taoism without intending to awaken but for the good effects along the way, don't we reduce Zen and Taoism as modern yoga has been reduced? Yes. That is a danger. The difference is that you should be aware of what you are doing and of your limited goals from the beginning, and you should respect people who strive for more even if you do not understand them.

As Time Goes By.

Until about 1700 CE (AD), the world was like this: You got up early in the morning to work hard all day long. The vast majority of people made a living working the ground. Mostly the air and water were clean. The aristocrats rule over peasants arbitrarily. Sometimes there was war. Sometimes the ruling class changed. Sometimes there was disease, flood, famine, fire, or even a bountiful harvest. You had about ten kids. Your parents died, your friends died, sometimes you children died, and then you died. You got what you could out of life, which could be a lot or little. Nothing really changed.

In the world before 1750, traditional religions make sense. It makes sense, as in Buddhism and some Hinduism, to step outside the world to let it go by. It makes sense, in Taoism and some Christianity, to step outside the main flow of politics and conniving to enjoy the world as much as you can. It makes sense, as in the Kingdom of God of Jesus, to work to build a distinct just world of well-intentioned people within the bigger political world. It makes sense, as in Islam, to work for a real Kingdom of God in the bigger political world.

Then about 1750, the world began to change, and kept on changing, faster and faster. I don't go through the changes. Here are a few: Democracy arose. Capitalism arose. The air and water got dirty. We had a mechanical revolution, chemical revolution, electrical revolution, and atomic revolution. We are still having revolutions in biology, artificial intelligence, and micro devices. The new world demands that we participate in a way that the average peasant never dreamed of.

In this new world of change and participation, stepping outside the world, as in Buddhism, Taoism, or some Hinduism, does not make as much sense. Trying to change over the world unilaterally, as in some Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, does not make much sense either. It makes more sense to change the world as much as you can to conform to good principles. You have to find the best principles to live by.

Only if you give up entirely even on the modern world of change and participation does it make sense to step outside the world to watch it go by. Nowadays, few even of Buddhists, Taoists, and Christians really want to do that.

Even if the traditional religions don't make sense as originally intended, still, they were built by smart people on solid experience with human nature and the real world, and contain many valuable lessons. We might not be able to follow them as originally intended but we can still learn from them, and apply what we learn to make the new world as good as possible.

You have to decide if the traditional religions make sense in the modern world. You have to decide what to take from them for the modern world.

No Relativism.

If no one path gets us to full complete contact with the bigger-than-me, and all paths get us some contact, then it seems I have drifted into relativism. Maybe I have drifted into relativism to some extent but I don't like the idea that I have drifted into relativism, and I argue against that.

Precisely because no path gets us full direct contact with God (bigger-than-me), it is easier to argue that some paths are better than others. If all paths led to full direct contact, then all would have to be equally good even if they seemed different. That is not so.

Not surprisingly, I still think following the teachings of Jesus, mixed with practicality and Western values, is the best path, and is basic, although I do not disparage other paths. Unless you are in a monastery, or you live quietly somewhere, even while you are doing Taoism or Zen, you still have to work to make a better world and you still have to be a good citizen of a pluralistic modern democracy. You have to try to be decent. At first while you are working for at finding the Tao or waking up, you can ignore the teachings of Jesus and ignore being a good citizen. At first, you might have to shut out distractions until you are adept enough to relax and assess. After then, if you choose to follow Taoism or Zen while not working to make the world better and while not being a good citizen, then you diminish the other path and yourself. Sooner or later, in the modern world, you have to see that you have to do Buddhism, Zen, Taoism, Islam, and Hinduism in the context of the modern world, and, to do that, you have to face the message of Jesus mixed with practicality and Western values. You do not have to accept that Jesus was the one and only God, although I invite you to think about it.

It is not necessary that the best path be one that almost everybody can follow but I think any path that almost everybody can follow is more likely to be better than other paths, and more likely to be basic to other paths. While in theory, almost everybody can understand, follow, and succeed in Theravada, Mahayana, Taoism, and Zen, in fact, that is not so. Usually only a minority of smart people can do well in those religions and fully succeed, unless we allow that simplistic devotional worship primarily in your own self-interest is full success. Those religions account for the fact that not everybody can follow them by use of ideas such as karma and dharma but that response is not very satisfying. So they are not good candidates for a basic path that everybody can follow. Maybe everybody could be a fundamentalist idiot, but I hope that is not an acceptable alternative. Not everybody wants to be a Jew, nor should they have to be a Jew to be acceptable to God. The same is true of Islam. I don't think people should have to accept Jesus as the one and only God to be acceptable to God - as long as they act well. Everybody might be able to act well along the lines originally imagined by Mohammad but not along the lines that real practiced Islam has turned out. The same is true of most real practiced Christianity. In contrast, the teachings of Jesus, practicality, and basic Western values are easy to understand, and everybody can follow them to some extent. God does not expect perfect success. If, from that base, you want to do more, such as mystic discipline, and you want to try another path, for a while or for a long time, such as Zen, mainstream Islam, of Sufism, then I see no reason why you can't do that. If your heart tells you to go on, or to turn around, then do so. Never lose sight of the basic values of Jesus, practicality, and Western good government.

Think of it this way: You have become enlightened through some form of Buddhism or you have come to know and follow the Tao. Now what exactly are you going to do, stand around and spit at polliwogs? Get drunk every night and write poetry? Read abstruse sutras? Watch too much TV? Complain about how bad everyone else's Zen is and how they are all frauds screwing the masses? If you follow the Tao, the official answer is that the Tao will lead you. If you follow Buddhism, including Zen, the official answer is that you play out your last karma, and that last bit of karma will lead you. Both those answers are glib and lead to a boring life. That is not what the Buddha did. Either Buddhist or Taoist, if you are an adept, you are now able to discriminate correctly, and you are unlikely to be led astray by dogma. You might as

well use your talent and energy to help people, make the world a better place, promote the rule of law (“applies equally to everybody”), and be a good citizen of a modern government. In his time and place, that is what the Buddha did. Or, you can do science and art. If you find yourself getting trapped by life and clinging, then you are able to back off. The Buddha did not get misled when he went back into society somewhat. Maybe doing this is what the Buddha meant by taking awakening back into society and back into the marketplace.

True, helping society is not what the Taoist Chuang Tzu did; in fact, he refused the leadership of a large state in non-democratic China. We don’t all have to be exactly like Chuang Tzu; to imitate him slavishly is to fall into dogma. I would like to try talking Chuang Tzu into helping out a little bit in the different context of a modern pluralistic democracy and in a world where nature desperately needs help. When nature dies, the Tao likely will die too.

Optional Theological Indulgence.

In this section, I return to ideas of mind or Mind.

In the play “Our Town” by Thornton Wilder, a character shows off his erudition to his fellow rural “townies” by addressing a posted letter something like: “John Doe, This Number, This Street, This Town, This State, United States of America, North America, Planet Earth, Milky Way Galaxy, Universe, Mind of God”. In some official Christian theology, the universe exists in the mind of God. In Classical philosophy, all of Western philosophy until the 1700s, and most Western philosophy even after, the world was evidence of a mind at work. The play “Our Town” is worth reading, and movies of it are worth watching.

I have a similar attitude as Wilder although I hope I am not quite as pretentious as his character. The world is evidence of a mind at work. The mind is moral. We do well when we go along with the mind, including when we follow its moral principles.

Buddhism, to some extent Taoism, and Zen, all have a similar attitude. The world is evidence of a mind at work, the mind is moral, and we have to follow its morality. The world is Buddha Mind. The world is also Emptiness, but it is not too hard to merge the ideas of Mind and Emptiness.

Then what is the difference? In the Judaic, Christian, Muslim, Western tradition that I follow, we have to actively live out the moral principles. In my version, we have to follow the teachings of Jesus. We have to be proactive. We have to actively follow the Golden Rule and actively work hard to make the world a better place. Simply thinking of the world as the realization of a moral mind at work does not lead us to embrace Jesus’ moral principles. The people in “Our Town” would have felt this tacit assumption without Wilder needing to make it explicit, and they lived it in the play.

In stressing the need for action, the Judaic-Christian-Islamic-Western tradition too often gets caught up in zealotry. People feel they need to justify and save themselves, and turn to self-serving zealotry to do so. They end up doing more harm than good.

The East somewhat escapes the curses of justification and zealotry by not requiring that people live out the moral principles that I have described. People do not actively have to work hard to make the world a

better place along the lines of Jesus' morality and Western political ideals. The East has its zealots but the role of religion might be different than in the West and in Islam. Yet, in not stressing these principles, the East never built the kinds of people and institutions that I value.

On one side, Theravada avoids active morality. Mahayana also does that, gets caught up in the joyous system of many lives, and puts its trust in the golden bodhisattva too. In contrast, Zen ignores the joyous system of many lives and does not rely on the bodhisattva. In Zen, people should be moral on their own. It is tempting to see in Zen a useful compromise between the West and East. Because Zen people are so adept at using dogma without getting caught up in dogma, Zen people can be moral along the lines of the best principles while not feeling the need for justification and not becoming zealots. We can have the best of both worlds.

Traditionally Zen did not see itself this way. I don't know how modern Zen adepts think when faced with the need to engage a single world in economic, ecological, and political distress. As far as I can tell, the people who gave Zen to the West, especially D.T. Suzuki, did not think of Zen this way, perhaps because the world then was not one, did not share similar problems of economy and ecology, and problems then seemed amenable to science. The generations of Westerners who took up Zen after them might have seen Zen this way, as a base for limited moral action. I have in mind the Beat generation, Alan Watts, and the people that I met on the West Coast in the 1960s and 1970s. I have not reviewed the work of recent Zen writers to make a case either way. If recent Zen writers did not think that ideas of mind could serve as a correct base for moral action, they were well-intended but wrong. If they thought that ideas of mind could serve as a correct base for limited moral action, then I would have to know more about their ideas of limited moral action.

As far as I understand Zen, it can't be used as an appropriate base for moral action in the modern world way, and Zen alone can't serve as the basis for the kind of moral action that we need, for all the reasons listed above. Zen clearly stresses Mind as the basis for the world, it avoids the inaction offered by faith in the bodhisattva, and it clearly expects high moral standards; but it cannot alone serve as the basis for the principles, people, and institutions that I have argued for. Those ideas have to be added to the idea of mind that prevails in Zen, at least as Zen is now understood.

I don't know if, in the long run, the Zen stance of mind and morality is a good thing or a bad thing. When the world gets worse, and as the world changes in response to bio-technology and artificial intelligence, it might be that the stance of Taoism and Zen is more useful than the stance of simple the "gung ho moral principles" and "make the world better" that I take. I don't know what that will imply for the mind of God and the teachings of Jesus.

28 Relativism, Hierarchy, and Encompassing

This chapter prepares for the next chapter about Hinduism. A major theme in Hinduism is relativism, the idea that all religions are valid in their own limited way, or “all paths lead to God”. This idea is wrong although well intended. This idea does not come up naturally in most religions but does come up naturally in Hinduism. Hinduism comes in a big system of ideas focused on the idea of the Dharma. Coming in a big system sets the tone for Hinduism. I use the term “system” for a group of people or a group of ideas. The term “system” is not exactly right, and it has a bad reputation from its use during the 1950s through 1980s, but the alternative is a lot of technical terms for different groups of ideas or people; so “system” is the best choice.

PART 1: Relativism

“Relativism” is the idea that what appears true from one point of view is not as true from another point of view; and what appears false from one point of view has much truth from another point of view. “Moral relativism” is the idea that what is good from one point of view might be bad, or not as good, from another point of view; and what appears bad or not-so-good from one point of view might appear good from another point of view. Relativism looks at true, false, good, bad, practical, and impractical with context and point of view in mind. An economic project that might be bad for a neighborhood might be good for the city as a whole.

Is it less morally bad for a poor mother with hungry children to steal than for a financier to embezzle? Is it alright for a woman to seduce a teenage boy but bad for a man to seduce a teenage girl? Many people who allow relativism for some subjects, such as art and economics, do not allow moral relativism. They insist on universal simple moral principles. They do not always follow their own advice in real life practical matters.

Relativism does not arise from lack of human ability. It is unlikely that any evolved finite sentient-moral being could consistently apply simple principles. The world is not perfectly ordered into better and best, more practical and most practical. What is better or more practical really does vary by situation. At the same time, there really are general principles that we want to apply. It is best to try simple and universal at first; use relativism sparingly in particular cases when we have to; and then return quickly to simple-and-universal when we are done with exceptions.

Sources of Confusion.

I am not sure if the world would be better off if we could decide all questions of “better than” but we can't. The following issues contribute to not being able to decide. The issues are thoroughly mixed up in practice. Mostly I ignore these issues but I have to state them here to get them out of the way properly.

First, often it is impossible to completely rank items with the information available. Joe prefers apples to oranges, prefers oranges to bananas, but prefers bananas to apples. The Detroit Tigers baseball team

beats the New York Yankees, who beat the Boston Red Sox, who beat the Detroit Tigers. Sometimes this issue can be clarified with repetitions, as when the baseball teams play each other many times and the Tigers get the majority of wins over both the Yankees and the Red Sox.

Second, some preferences are entirely subjective, and no comparisons can be made between people. Frank prefers apples to oranges while Bonny prefers oranges to apples. Tim likes brown shoes while Bob likes black shoes. We can't decide whose preference is best although sometimes we can find patterns for groups. Seventy-five percent of people prefer black shoes to brown shoes but that does not mean Tim is wrong to like brown shoes, 25% of the people are wrong to like brown shoes, or black shoes are somehow better than brown shoes.

Many things have a "kind-of" ranking but not an absolute ranking. Most people would agree that the movie "Gone with the Wind" is better than the movie "Sharknado" but not everybody can agree that "Gone with the Wind" is better or worse than "The Godfather, Part One". "Kind-of" rankings are evident in art and religion. When people argue about rankings in art and religion, usually it is hard to figure out what kind of argument they are asserting other than they usually assert something like "that is what I like, and what I like is best in all situations".

Hierarchical (Superior and Inferior) and Encompasses (Includes).

Something is superior to another thing when the first thing is morally better, practically better, or in some way metaphysically better, at least for the situations at hand. A modern gasoline powered car is superior to a horse drawn wagon, at least for getting around a modern city. The Golden Rule is superior to "instant and total retaliatory vengeance for every perceived insult". When we say democracy is superior to kingship, we mean not only practically but morally and metaphysically. When we say a sports car such as a Porsche is superior to a common sedan such as a Camry, we don't mean just practically – in fact a sedan is better practically – we mean practically in some ways and better in other intangible ways that more than make up for any practical deficiencies; essentially we mean metaphysically. When we say a Cadillac is superior to a Chevrolet we mean practically, socially, for prestige, morally, and metaphysically. It is just the case that human minds tend to think with mixed senses like this. We can separate out the senses, but we tend rather to mix them at first.

Something "encompasses", "subsumes", or "includes" another thing when the first thing has all the relevant features of the second thing, in as much quantity, and-or in as-good-or-better quality. We say that a luxury car, such as a Cadillac or Lexus, encompasses a regular sedan such as a Chevrolet or Camry. The luxury car has all the features of the sedan, and better. A dominating championship sports team encompasses other mediocre teams. A Super Bowl winning team has all the features needed to win and has most of them better than other teams have them. Other teams might have one particular feature better than that particular feature on the championship team – another team might have the best kicker – but the championship team has that feature well enough and is better all around at the other features too. A really good gangster movie such as "The Godfather, Parts One and Two" encompasses mediocre gangster movies. It has all the good features that they do, and it has them all better. A good landscape painting has all the features of a mediocre landscape painting, and it has them all better and better arranged. A well-designed well-ordered well-decorated well-run home has all the features of a sloppy home and it has them better.

Usually Superiority and Encompassing go together. When thing A encompasses thing B, thing A is superior to thing B; and when thing A is superior it encompasses thing B. All the examples above show how the two ideas usually come together. When the French say their cooking is superior to that of other nations, they also imply that French cooking encompasses the techniques of other styles, or could easily encompass them by extension of the techniques it already has. The Chinese think the same of their cooking. When we say a democracy encompasses other forms of government, we mean it incorporates them, changes them, transcends them, and is superior to them.

Relativism sometimes contradicts superiority and encompassing. Relativism says we cannot have a neat hierarchy of superior and inferior, encompassing and encompassed. I leave you to figure out counter-examples to the examples above. If both the French and Chinese believe their cooking is superior and encompasses the cooking of all other nations, can both be right? Perhaps there are two best, and those are superior to, and encompass, the cooking of all others but neither is superior to, and encompasses, the cooking of its main rival. We will see this situation among religions.

Agree to Disagree; Tacit Value Judgments.

When people face issues for which they can't objectively decide best, highest, and most encompassing, they agree to disagree. I like Camry and you like Accord, so I buy a Camry and you buy an Accord, and we have fun arguing who got the best deal. You like the Giants and I like the Patriots, and we have fun arguing about which is the best team until they meet in the Super Bowl – and even then we can continue the argument by saying the game did not decide. I like Star Trek while you like Star Wars, and we have fun arguing.

This is not what people have in their hearts. Even while people agree to disagree they do not give up on the secret conviction that they are correct and their opponents wrong. They think their favorite is best, highest, and encompasses all rivals. Anybody who disagrees with them is wrong, mentally deficient, morally deficient, and metaphysically deficient. Anybody who disagrees is inferior and encompassed. "The Godfather" is the best gangster movie, and the best all around movie, and that is the end of it no matter what you say. Benz makes the best cars. Democracy is the best form of government. We see this kind of thinking too among religious believers.

Because what people feel differs from what they say, people fall into self-contradiction and hypocrisy. This result leads us to the difference between good relativism and bad relativism.

Good Relativism and Bad Relativism.

Good relativism happens when people argue about the best movie or best athlete of all time, cannot agree, agree to disagree, know what is in everybody else's heart, and then don't fight over the secrets in their hearts. People appreciate all the movies and athletes even if they don't agree on rank. People do not denigrate any movie or athlete even if they feel the movie or athlete is overrated. Even if overrated, the movie or athlete is still worthwhile, and still has something qualitatively distinct to contribute.

Bad relativism happens when people agree to disagree, secretly believe their choice is best, superior, and encompasses alternatives, look down on others, and secretly fight. Bad relativism occurs when people use relativism to backwardly assert that they are really better and superior.

Whether relativism is good or bad depends on the situation. If people can fight while still pretending to agree to disagree, then relativism is more of a cover for fighting than it is good disagreement. Usually people can't fight when they are under an authority. One dominant member of a group allows other members to disagree as long as it doesn't make much of a difference and does not discomfort the dominant member and the group. The boss allows workers to have their opinion on which movie is the greatest unless the workplace happens to be a movie studio. The boss won't let each worker have an opinion on which is the best sales plan.

Bad relativism can happen when one agent (person or group) really is better than the others but does not come right out to say it and accept the consequences. Sometimes the one better agent does this so the other members can "save face" and so the group can keep the peace, but it is still an odd situation, and it can still go bad. Sometimes the one better agent does it so as to exert power over the others while still keeping up appearances. Bad relativism is like one unusually pretty child saying to all the other children, "oh, we are all just as pretty in our own way". It is like one very good athlete saying to the other children, "oh we are all just as good athletes in our own way, some at golf, some at baseball, and some at table tennis". It sounds good, but it is a cover for being the best, and it is a way of asserting you are the best while asserting there is no best. Only a really confident girl or boy could say this, and they could only be confident if it were not really true.

The one better agent is really using the language of equality and relativism to assert the opposite: the one agent is better, superior, and encompasses the others. It is as if the pretty child said, "Yes, you all have some prettiness but really your prettiness is only a reflection of my prettiness, which is perfect". Or the athletic child said, "Yes you all have some skills but really your skills are only variations of my skill, which is all-around and perfect". Relativism often denies one thing while it asserts that same thing, as in the slogan from "Animal Farm": "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others". Read the book or see the excellent early animated version.

To assert something while at the same time denying that thing is a form of nonsense. From nonsense, we can derive anything. We have to be careful not to derive silly ideas from nonsense.

Problems with relativism are not obvious or easy. It is not too hard to show that (A) asserting something can deny it at the same time; but it is harder to show how (B) one member of a group (one religion) while asserting something good about the group really tacitly asserts superiority and encompassing, so that the one better agent subsumes all the other members of the group as inferior versions. To see this, we need long examples.

Examples of Bad Relativism.

Honest anthropologists run into the problem of bad relativism and self-contradiction with the doctrine of cultural relativism. The slogan "cultural relativism" asserts several ideas, not all compatible, and not all true. Here, it means all cultures look at the world a bit differently, and each is just as right in its own way.

We should respect other people and listen to them. We should not impose our way. We should allow other people to carry on with their way unless we have compelling reasons to intervene. It is like the “Prime Directive” in Star Trek. This idea is a step forward from the common bad attitude of “we are right, they are wrong, they are a danger to us, we must prevail, so let’s get them”. In this respect, cultural relativism is a good idea.

The idea flounders when it meets a culture that does not share the idea, is bad toward other cultures, and pursues bad ways. These are the Borg in Star Trek TNG. The common example used in anthropology is the Nazis. We cannot be broadminded about Nazis. Non-anthropologists correctly refer to militant Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. “PC” anthropologists are not supposed to use those examples but apparently it is alright to point out how even mainstream Christianity is narrow-minded and selfish. I refuse to allow relativism to excuse any culture that mistreats women and children. I cannot accept child slavery and sex slavery. I cannot accept the abuse of democracy. I do have some cultural and moral absolutes. Nearly everybody does even if they refuse to admit it openly. We all hope to reach a middle ground where we can reject all bad practices and allow only non-harmful practices. We have not done that yet. We cannot do it as long as we insist on PC cultural relativism.

A group that proclaims cultural relativism without thinking through the issues does the same thing that the pretty child or athletic child did above, and does the same thing that a religion does when it proclaims “all paths lead to God”. It says that all cultures are equal at the same time that it tacitly asserts that it is better than cultures that do not officially declare for cultural relativism. It is better, and cultures are not equal, just because it asserts that no culture is better and all cultures are equal. It means well, but it is caught in a logical trap, and there is no easy way out. In asserting that all cultures are equal, it indirectly asserts it is superior, and therefore denies that all cultures are equal. This hypocrisy always bothered me about anthropology and political correctness.

This example is easier for PC people to swallow. A serious form of this problem with relativism arises with a simplistic ideology of the free market (“market worship”). In this ideology, a person should be free to make any deal that he-she wishes, without state oversight, even if the deal seems stupid to us, and even if the deal is obviously hurtful to the person. A person can agree to a loan from a loan shark at 10% interest per day. This idea of making a deal depends on a vision of people as autonomous and free. I like this vision of people. Yet, in a world with this freedom, may a person sell him-herself into slavery, or is it possible for a person sell him-herself into slavery? To freely sell yourself into slavery is to negate your freedom. Once a person is a slave, a slave cannot make any deals he-she wishes, and so that being is no longer a person. If “yes”, if a person can sell him-herself, then a free person can make him-herself un-free and so make him-herself not a person. If “no”, if a free person cannot sell him-herself, then freedom has limits, personhood has limits, and likely people need the state to defend personhood. This issue might seem like intellectual silliness because people nowadays don’t sell themselves into obvious slavery. But people nowadays do sell themselves into debt slavery and do sell their children into real slavery. Because most Americans have never seen children sold, omit selling children. Still, people sell themselves indirectly through debt slavery, especially credit card slavery, but including debt for furniture, cars, gadgets, student loans, weddings, houses, vacations, and showing off. Do not fool yourself. Debt slavery is as much slavery as outright selling yourself and your children, and it is just as bad. Debt slavery can be worse because debtors fool themselves that they are free persons who have choice even while really they are un-free slave second-rate-persons with no choice. Much of the rhetoric

of “choice” in the modern world is really meant to deceive people about choice and to make them into slaves while still wrongly feeling free; slogans promoting choice really mean to allow self-deception, undermine choice, and create slavery. This problem paralyzes Congress and allows financiers to hurt the entire economy.

In many classrooms, and in many “good will” institutions such as Scouts, fraternities, sororities, churches, and political associations, one small clique comes up with most of the ideas, and comes up with plans in which everyone fits in. While it appears as if everyone is equal, equally valued, does an equal share, and contributes equally to public benefit, everyone knows that is not true. The clique that comes up with the plan and runs the plan really is “first among equals”. The clique subsumes the other people and makes them reflections of its greater ability. “Queen Bees” depend on this effect. Although the planner clique might be full of good well-meaning people, everybody else always suspects the planners and holds a little grudge because everybody else knows the not-so-secret implications. This result is so common that now it is even a standard theme on sit-coms and “reality” TV shows.

A Good Religious Case.

My brother-in-law is an adept, intelligent, educated, sensitive Buddhist. Because Buddhism does not have bolstered versions of self, and it uses the illusions of everyday life (picks apart) to make points, Buddhism leads easily to relativism. The fundamental truths of Buddhism are called “Dharma”. One day, my brother-in-law said that nearly all truths were relative to human ways of life. Particular truths were true in certain times and situations. He had in mind what anthropologists call “cultural relativism”. There is no absolute right-and-wrong, and no absolute better culture or religion. This good-hearted outlook is part of Buddhist Dharma. I asked him if he thought the Dharma also was relative. He looked dismayed. A day later, he told me he did not think the Dharma is relatively true but is absolutely true, and so there must be at least some absolute truth beyond human minds. The real question is what we make of it.

Self-Contradiction.

Suppose my brother-in-law had continued to assert there are only relative truths. Even the Dharma is relative. Even the idea that tells him all ideas are relative is relative. What about the idea that all ideas are relative? Is the idea that all ideas are relative itself relative? If it is, then in some cases it must be false (or else it would be absolute and not relative), and so there must be some ideas that are not relative. If it is true of all ideas, then it is not relative, and then it is a case of at least one idea that is not relative. This dilemma is an instance of a class of problems called “the liar’s paradox”, illustrated by the example in which a person says of him-herself “I am a liar”. Nearly all relativism is plagued by this problem. How important the problem is depends on the issue. Usually humans have the ability to laugh off the problem and to see what is important about the particular issue. That ability might be one talent that distinguishes us from machines, at least so far.

People too often tacitly contradict themselves when they assert relativism. People assert relativism when they really don’t mean it, when they really believe their view is better; and this stance is a contradiction. We can feel these contradictions even when we can’t always point them out and explain them. We are leery of people who assert relativism because we feel these contradictions.

Suppose a group of co-workers gets together to decide who is the best co-worker. A co-worker can vote for him-herself if he-she likes. About a fifth of workers do vote for themselves but about four-fifths vote for another co-worker who they really believe is best. One co-worker publicly declares, "I think we are all equally good co-workers. Nobody is best. I can't decide who to vote for. If I have to vote, then I vote against myself because I know my own faults". Nobody really believes this. Everybody thinks this is self-serving crap. By asserting that nobody is best, the person really asserts that he is best because he is so broadminded, fair, and generous. The person negates what he asserts, a version of the liar's paradox. In asserting relativism, and tacitly asserting that he is best because he is so generous, he also asserts that he encompasses the lesser views of smaller-minded co-workers, and that he is superior. He asserts that he is better, superior, and encompasses others. In so doing, he contradicts himself again. Other people feel this ploy even when they can't spell it out.

The same is true for most of the cases of bad relativism described above. When the pretty child says, "we are all pretty", he-she really says, "I am prettiest; I am better, superior, and encompass all you other plain children". He-she contradicts him-herself. When the athletic child says, "We all have sports that we are good in", he-she really means, "I am the all around better athlete and could beat any of you in any sport; I am better, superior, and encompass you other mediocre children". He-she contradicts him-herself. When one culture insists on cultural relativism, it really says, "Because I am so tolerant and open minded, I am really better than all you other cultures that insist your way is best. I am better, superior, and encompass you smaller-minded cultures". The supposedly broad-minded culture contradicts itself. When PC people insist on the same generous relativistic values, they do the same thing.

In the case of the office workers, it is just a fact that some co-workers are better than others. Yet once the first person has declared that nobody is a better worker than anybody else, everybody else has to go along or else they will seem narrow minded and selfish. They have to go along even when they know it isn't true. This trap adds to the bad feelings in such cases. This trap springs in all the other cases too, such as the pretty child, athletic child, cultural relativism, and PC, and adds to our consternation in those cases as well.

Of course, it is possible to say "everybody is just as good as everybody else", "we're all pretty", "be fair to other cultures", and "all paths lead to God", and to really mean them. Some people really do have good simple hearts and really do say these things out of the true goodness of their simple hearts. Some people might know what they say is false, and might even know that they are better than others, but want to keep the peace and keep good relations. That is a good motive even when it deals in falsehoods and is self-contradictory. We have to develop a sense of when people are sincere or not sincere about such things. Evolution likely gave us the basic tools for this job.

"All Paths Lead to God".

The idea "all paths lead to God" is religious relativism. It says no one religion is better than all others, all religions have major truth, each religion has some truths that it expresses best, we should not denigrate any religion, and we should learn about other religions. It is hard to argue with that intention.

People mean "all paths lead to God" in three ways. In the first, people say one religion is better for some things, some issues, some people, in some situations while another religion is better for other things, on

other issues, for other people, in other situations. Buddhists often told me that Christianity was better for social issues while Buddhism was better for personal salvation. A variation is: the religion into which people are born is good for them while other religions are good for the other people who are born into those religions: Protestantism is good-and-true for born Protestants while Roman Catholicism is good-and-true for born Roman Catholics.

The second kind of relativism says that all religions are good-and-true in their own way, each has strengths and weaknesses, each finally gets to God, and no single religion is clearly the truest and best. In either case, because no one religion is best, you might as well stick with the one you are born with unless you want to convert. For this chapter, you can take “all paths lead to God” either way but keep both in mind.

The third kind of relativism says that all religions are good-and-true in their own way but our religion is best. More particularly, all religions except Hinduism are merely good-and-true in their own way but Hinduism is best and encompasses other religions. Other religions are lesser versions of Hinduism. Other religions are not bad as far as they go but they are not Hinduism. I defer this topic until the next chapter. For now, focus on the first two kinds of religious relativism.

The idea “all paths lead to God” is factually wrong. It is only possibly true when limited to traditional “high” religions such as the ones described in this book. Even then, it is only possibly true when we insist those religions stick to the best moral principles. That is what many people really mean when they say “all paths lead to God”: all religions can get us to act well when they teach their best ideas. Most people don’t think “all paths” is true of belief in ghosts, demons, the devil, spirits of dead flowers, enchanted frogs, zombies, and other superstitions. Most people would not like “all paths” to be true of religions such as voodoo even when voodoo does little harm, or true of variants of Hinduism that practice violence such as Thugs and worshippers of bad Kali. Most people would not like “all paths” to be true of religions that claim you get to heaven by chanting the name of a deity over and over. Most people would not like “all paths” to be true of religions that say you go to heaven by suicide bombing or by killing innocent children in a shopping mall. We don’t want it to be true of religions that say girls should not go to school.

If we want “all paths lead to God” to apply only to religions when religions uphold best moral principles, then why don’t we just say, “following the best moral principles leads all people to God”? In fact, that is what I have been saying throughout the book. I don’t dwell on it again here.

The idea of “all paths lead to God” is like the cases of relativism from above, in particular the cases of bad relativism. The religion that first says “all paths” claims the “moral high ground”. Even while appearing to say all religions are the same, in fact, it says it is better, superior, and encompasses all other religions because it sees that “all paths lead to God” while other religions do not. It contradicts itself. It asserts its superiority while pretending to assert equality. The religion that proclaims “all paths” is the pretty religion among other plain religions. It is hypocritical. I have the same uneasy feeling about “all paths” that I do about cultural relativism and political correctness. I would much rather we are honest about differences and that we focus on the best general moral principles. I would much rather we see how all religions can be interpreted to lead to the values that serve the modern democratic pluralistic world.

Most people want “all paths” to be true in that sense and to lead to good things too. To appreciate what people want with “all paths”, we have to see the alternative. Unless we are careful, the alternative is religious intolerance, which quickly leads to ethnic, political, social, economic, and gender intolerance. People use religion as an excuse to look down on others, oppress them, take advantage of them, and hurt them. If it is a choice between mildly hypocritical “all paths lead to God” versus intolerance and badness, then we should choose mild hypocrisy every time. Who knows, maybe by indulging in mild hypocrisy, we take advantage of tolerance and peace to actually learn about each other. Maybe we learn the good points of each other’s different beliefs. Maybe we learn the best moral principles and we begin to live by those. If we can actually live by the best moral principles then the details of belief don’t matter that much. That is how I promote the idea of “all paths”.

In dwelling on differences in religious beliefs, I hope I have not promoted intolerance but instead gotten people beyond differences to the best moral principles.

Many people want “all paths” to be true in another sense. This sense is a little self-serving but it also does little harm, and so I don’t mind much. People vary in their basic character, their basic “true you”; usually a particular character does little harm; often a particular character adds to the diversity and fun of life; and we want to encourage the expression of individual character in all ways rather than discourage it in any particular way. Different people want to pray, chant, give alms, meditate, do Tai Chi, sing in the choir, practice random acts of kindness, teach small children religious lessons, work in the community center, practice mindfulness, wear particular items of clothing, etc. They don’t want to think they have to give up these practices, take up meditation, or eat only a “kosher” diet or “hallal” diet. They want to think God enjoys the traditions of their ancestors, and to think the traditions of their ancestors lead them closer to God. They want to think that these various practices all have a value, and that no practice has much more value than any other. This is all fine with me. Most of these practices have value to society and they help people think about goodness. No practice actually takes a person directly to God, but nothing does that, the practices do little harm, and they do some good.

Most people use the common practices of their religion to justify their search for success. They have a family altar, give to certain charities, support a church, read particular scriptures, and ask for guidance in their business. People don’t want to think their practices are not crucial to their success, don’t like to think the practices of other religions are more likely to support success, and don’t like to think they have to switch. (People do switch during times of religious change, but that is another issue.) The idea of “all paths” does not really support the quest for success but espousing the idea at least prevents eroding your hope that your religious practices are alright in the eyes of God.

Some gifted people interpret “all paths” in the following way. We will see that Hinduism interprets it this way. People have different temperaments. Some people approach God through heart while others go through the mind. Some people can approach God through the intellect, some through moral actions, some through community action, some through devotion and worship, and some through meditation and yoga. There is no reason to believe any of these approaches is better than any other. All can lead a person to good moral principles and a correct view of nature and human life.

Some Specific Objections to “All Paths Lead to God”.

If it is worth putting up with the hypocrisy of “all paths lead to God” to gain tolerance and peace, and to allow human diversity, then why do I make such a big deal about the idea? Why do I pick on Hinduism as an example of what makes me uneasy?

First, people need to be clear about what they are doing. People need to see the whole situation around religious relativism. The slogan “all paths” gives an excuse not to think.

Second, the idea of religious relativism annoys me. It is factually not true, and I would rather people face up to facts first before deciding they have to make an end run around the facts. The self-contradiction and hypocrisy in the idea bother me in the same way that they bother me about cultural relativism and political correctness.

Third, the idea allows people to be complacent about their religion and about bad practices. Not all points of all religions are great. Some points really are bad. We need to search our religion for the deep best moral principles. If necessary, we need to push our religion to be more faithful to those moral principles. If we find bad ideas, bad principles, bad interpretations, bad acts, and lies, we need to be sure those are not part of our religion. We need to get after the bad people.

Fourth, once the idea of “all paths” got “into the air”, then all religions had to take it up or else sink back to militancy. It is like the co-workers above. Religions have to say it even when they don’t believe it and would rather go after domination. Suppose one truth modest religion says in contrast, “Wait, we are not all equal and alike. Some things in my religion are not very good just as some things in your religion are not very good. Let’s sort this out.” That religion gets branded falsely as a reactionary militant bad guy seeking domination when that religion is in fact the most reasonable. This is one of the bad result of the hypocrisy and self-contradiction latent in the idea.

Fifth, I don’t like the result that religions that proclaim “all paths lead to God” tacitly assert they are better, superior, and encompass other religions. If you want to assert you are better, superior, and encompass other religions, then do so openly, and do so on solid grounds. The idea of “all paths lead to God” is not enough to make this claim.

Relativism and Not Knowing God Fully.

People cannot know God fully and completely, not even mystics, not through intellect, emotions, intuition, or devotion. The prophets do not give a full picture of God. If we could know God fully now, we would not need to meet him after we die. Even after death, I doubt that meeting him is all about knowing him fully. Thus all religions are only approximations. How does this belief differ from “all paths lead to God”? How is this belief not faulty relativism?

This belief differs in all the ways described above. Even if we can’t know God fully, we do have good enough principles of moral action. We know what to do. That is a good enough start. We don’t need to know in other ways. We are not prevented from using our imaginations.

While no single path knows God fully, still, some paths are better than others, and some attitudes are better than others. Any path that emphasizes the best moral principles is better than any other path that

does not. Any path that consistently accepts truth, especially scientific truth, is better than any other path that does not. Any path that leads to honest, decent, interesting, useful people is better than any other path that does not. Any path that is leery of “all paths lead to God”, and does not use it to tacitly assert its own superiority, is better than any path that falls into line behind “all paths” and uses it to assert its own superiority.

My belief is a weak form of relativism, weak enough so I don't worry about it. Other relativism is strong enough to worry about.

PART 2: Systems, Especially Systems of Ideas.

Some idea systems are small, and are aimed mostly at situations that occur in a limited world, often daily, such as the shop manuals for a mechanic or textbooks on how to program apps for smart phones. Some idea systems are big, and aim to cover as much of life as they can such as the legal code for the United States. Mostly this difference between big and small is intrinsic and marks the character of a system. It is hard to extend a shop manual to encompass all of American life, and it is hard to make an app to cover all aspects of life although app writers appear aiming at that goal. A lawyer can specialize in “family law” or “business law” but all kinds of law eventually have to fit together into a total system of law under some general principles.

Big systems tend to be “idea systems that eat the world”, that is, they explain everything in their terms and they explain away what they cannot explain in their terms. Small systems do not. Big systems and “systems that eat the world” do not exactly coincide but I can't go into differences here. For here, take all big systems as idea systems that eat the world.

Recall that true science is not a system that eats the world. True science is open to testing in ways that big systems that eat the world avoid. From convenience, daily science often is a self-validating big system that eats the world, but scientists know the difference, and know how to get out of that rut into true science when they need to. I do not deal more with science here.

The famous anthropologist Clifford Geertz said all cultures are idea systems that offer a total way of life to their people, and that the ideas are encoded in symbols, rituals, art, religion, etc. “If you're a Jet, you're a Jet all the way, from your first drawn breath to your last dying day”. In my terms, a culture would be a big system that eats the world. After him, anthropologists tended to see in religion the core code for culture. If you are a Thai Buddhist, you are a true Thai; you can only be a true Thai if you are a Thai Buddhist. I don't think Geertz' idea can be always true. Some cultures are intrinsically less comprehensive than other cultures. The “small” cultures get along well in their world but they can't take in the whole world and especially they can't take in the whole modern world. They do not offer big idea systems that eat the whole world and that would appeal to people of other cultures. Beautiful as it is, a culture on New Guinea is less likely to take in the whole world and to appeal to a Chinese person than Chinese culture aims to take in the whole world and might appeal to a non-Chinese. The culture of a small radical Protestant church might be beautiful and good for its people as long as they stick to the limits of their world but it is not as big as the culture of Roman Catholicism and likely appeals to fewer people. Wonderful as they are, Italian cooking is not French and Thai cooking is not Chinese. This idea is not politically correct but it is true just the same. Anthropologists sometimes mislead themselves by treating every culture as if it

were one of the great comprehensive cultures of the world, and treating great comprehensive cultures of the world as if they were another tribe. For this book, assume that a big system is bigger, aims to be total and closed, and aims to take in the whole world.

Life in a Big System.

Life in a big system differs from life in a small system. Not all small systems are the same and not all big systems are the same, but big systems do have some features in common, and do share some common feelings.

To get across the feel of life in a big system, I compare small systems to small businesses such as “mom and pop” groceries in a big city, small farmers, and professional people such as dentists while I compare big systems to large business firms (“corporations”), universities, and whole professions such as “the law”. Any anthropologist who reads this would “cry foul” but I can’t describe a real large system so I have to use what I can. I don’t think the problems are so big that they invalidate the comparison. I deal in idealized abstracts here. To avoid lawsuits, I do not use real names, and I avoid allusions to real firms. So don’t read anything into this.

A small grocery store does not stock everything, and the owners don’t have to know everything about all the items they stock. A large department store with a supermarket has to stock a much greater variety and the buyers for the chain have to know a lot about the produce, grains, dairy products, fruit, clothes, and shoes that they buy. So you might think an employee in a big store would have a broader outlook than in a small store; but this is not so. Each employee in a small store might not know everything about every product but he-she knows something about a lot of products. Employees in a big chain only know about their specialty. A shoe clerk knows about shoes, not about rice. Managers don’t know everything about shoes and rice, they know about the people who know about shoes and rice. Paradoxically, people in big systems often have a smaller scope than people in small systems even though the big system tries to encompass everything. Farmers brag they have to know plumbing, carpentry, electricity, mechanics, computers, air conditioning, biology, and all skills. People in big systems are specialists while people in small systems are generalists.

Contrast the watch counter at a big chain super store with a store that sells watches. To the employee in the big store, watches are merely items. They differ in price and in details but they have little character. Any item outside the watch counter has no character. To an employee in a watch store, each watch is distinct, and some watches are works of art. Watches have character.

Employees in large chains sometimes recognize repeat customers but they rarely get to know them and the customers rarely get to know the employees. For a small store, personal relations are often the key to success. Even if the small store can’t give regular customers much of a discount, still the employees get to know the customers, and the customers get to know the employees. In a small system, relations are between persons. In a big system, relations are between kinds. In the army, all officers are officers while all enlisted people are enlisted people. For the most part, all majors are majors and all sergeants are sergeants. On a football team, it matters a lot who plays quarterback. In a big store, relations are between customer and check-out clerk; stocker and night manager; day manager and retail clerk; check-out clerk and stocker; producer clerk and dairy clerk; and etc. Relations in a big system are like the

feeling that students have at football games. The students of one school see the students of the other school only as “them” and as rivals. Relations in a small system are like the feeling that students have when they meet other students as fellow engineers at a convention or like fellow competitors in a chess tournament.

The most important relations in a big system are variations of power. Who ranks above and below, who has seniority, and who has any ownership, are the key distinctions. There is a “chain of command”. It is a good idea to keep power relations in mind and never to break the chain of command. In a little system, while power is important, personal relations are added to the formal chain of command. A fun example of this is in the TV show “Pawn Stars” on the History Channel.

It is not possible for an employee in a big department store, university, law firm, or corporation, to know everybody. Instead, people focus on techniques that help their personal success. Their personal circle shrinks within the big circle of the system. They get to know a small clique. The members of the clique mutually support each other. The members of the clique think of other cliques as their natural enemies even when the cliques are in the same store, school, or firm. The natural unit of social life in a big system is the clique. Nobody outside the clique is “one of us”. Small towns are cliquish too but life there can be a bit better than in an institution. Small farmers are natural competitors but they compete indirectly so they are also natural friends. Farmers get to know other farmers. They share information, friends, and even share help in hard times. They can learn to trust each other and treat each other as persons. Any other farmer, or any resident of the associate local town, can be “one of us”.

Cliques in big systems treat other people badly and don’t seem to care much. I have seen professors in a clique scuttle the good work of a person outside the clique for no reason other than he-she was not “one of us” and might get money that we might want but didn’t have yet. Cliques rationalize this behavior by saying the system will take care of all people so they personally don’t have to take care of other people. If Joe doesn’t get the money we want, then Joe will get some other money when we don’t want that other money. If I stop Susie from a promotion now, Susie will get a promotion later. If we get Ted demoted in our section, he can move to another section. This kind of behavior, and the self-deceptive rationalization, is meat for all the lawyer shows on TV. People in small systems might treat other people badly but they can’t fool themselves that the system will make up for what they do or that they are blameless. In small systems, even moderate competitors tend not to treat each other badly and tend to help out as long as they don’t hurt themselves. A clock store that sells Citizen but not Rolex might really send a customer to a nearby Rolex store. A wheat farmer will tell a corn farmer of a disease to watch out for. If you don’t help a neighbor douse a fire, you have nobody to blame but yourself.

Big systems, the parts in big systems, and the cliques in big systems, feel superior to small systems and feel they can encompass small systems even when the small systems show superiority in some aspects. A supermarket is bigger than a “mom and pop” grocery store, and encompasses it because the big store stocks every item in the mom and pop store, often at a lower price. Chain stores encompass local stores by setting up franchises, or turning local stores into franchises. A law firm that specializes in family law can beat and encompass the local “general practice” lawyer.

Big systems make small actors and small systems relative in the same way that they encompass them. The work of a big construction firm becomes the backdrop against which you hire plumbers, electricians,

cement men (people). You evaluate the small contractors in reference to the big construction firm. You evaluate the local doctor by reference to the clinic or hospital in the big city. More exactly, you evaluate the work of the local doctor by reference to the clique of specialist doctors at the big teaching hospital across the state. You evaluate ideas about salvation from the local preacher by reference to doctrines from Thomas, Luther, or Calvin. You evaluate the teaching of the local community college professor by the ideas of the clique at the big university somewhere.

Small systems are not all wonderful. As anybody knows who has lived in a village or small town, the lack of privacy is maddening. Big systems have their good points, including privacy, variety, and the comfort needed to get something done. People can be happier in cities than small towns. Big systems offer a sense of security and comfort. They give some people a clear world.

It is not the case that all big systems are totalitarian nightmares made up of horrible selfish people like the robot of market-worship capitalism while all small systems are like "The Andy Griffith Show". It is more a case of how to draw the line between "us" and "them", and how to act across the line sometimes. People in small systems can learn to draw the line more widely and can learn to be nicer across the line. That is what Jesus and other teachers wanted to show: draw the line more widely as you would with people in a small town. You should act nicely to many other people as the residents in one small town act toward the residents in another town, even when the two towns play each other in football. Sometimes people in big systems can learn to draw the line widely because they are safe in their clique and because they are more used to strangers, but not often.

Hierarchy, Policy, and Actual Behavior.

In almost all enduring human groups, people depend on each other. Often they depend on each other because one person does one small part of a whole job while another person does another small part of a whole job, and they need each other's small jobs to do the whole job. They use what economists call "division of labor" and they are what old anthropologists called "functionally differentiated and mutually dependent". In a hunting party, some people "herd" the deer while other people wait to shoot the deer. In a garment factory, some people cut large pieces of cloth stacked in many layers while other people sew the pieces together.

In a big system, an important division is between management and everybody else. Management almost always has more power, and the chain of command goes from workers up through layers of managers to a top level of a few people. Usually this arrangement is good because it is not possible to run most big organizations democratically. Even worker-owned firms need managers. Managers get paid more, for reasons I don't go into. There is a strong line between workers and managers. Although workers are different, and some workers see themselves as more important than others, the line between managers and workers is always bigger than any line between workers.

All organizations have to balance realities: the organization as a whole has to go on if anybody is to gain from the organization; everybody needs everybody else; but management has more power and gets paid more; and the line between workers and managers is the biggest line. If the people in an organization accept that the organization is made up of other persons like themselves, then the organization also has

to put that fact in the balance. Usually “common humanity” goes in the balance on the side of “everybody needs everybody else”.

Organizations find their own balance in many ways. Almost always the ways include some hypocrisy because all the facts can't be perfectly reconciled. People learn to live with that. In modern business firms, and other large modern organizations such as schools, the balance gets expressed in a policy with a formal policy statement. Rarely can organizations live up to the policy. Instead, organizations develop a pattern of balances of real behavior that the people in it can live with. Not everybody is equally happy with the pattern of real behavior, and it is rarely perfectly fair, but people still live with it. So there is a gap between formal policy and real lived policy. Idealists might lament this reality of the human situation but we have dealt with it for a long time, and the ability to deal with it is likely part of our evolved nature.

I have noticed we can divide these situations into roughly two kinds. The kinds are similar to the division between big systems and small systems but not exactly. It is not worth going into the details here.

In the first kind, the organization has a general policy, usually an idealistic statement about how we all depend on each other. The policy is beautiful but vague, so people in the system don't have to live up to it, and, in fact, don't live up to it. Higher people use the vagueness to keep power while excusing what they do and while giving lower people tokens to mollify them. Management uses the vagueness to maintain its position while asserting the policy symbolically. Management says: “we are all in it together”; sacrifices are recognized and appreciated; a person is better off in the firm than out of the firm despite any inequalities; the firm must have some inequalities; when the firm benefits, the people at the top benefit more but everybody benefits some; and “a rising tide floats all boats”. The ideology is much like the national ideology of induced economic growth. When things are going fairly well, this situation can result in a good feeling, as with big business firms in America in the 1950s and with some tech companies from the 1990s through today (look up “good places to work” on the Internet). When things are going poorly, people feel exploited but locked into the system, and fear leaving the system even when they are exploited, much like workers in a “one factor town” and much like the American middle class has felt since about 2000. The more that managers talk about freedom, choice, and working together, the less people believe them. People pretend they are all equal, and because they pretend, they are far from equal, likely far less equal than if they didn't pretend.

In the second kind, people accept differences but try hard to work across them. People take the policy to heart even when they know it is not fully realistic. People offer specific acts and relations to keep the situation better, to help people feel more like people, yet that do not undercut the ability of the system to keep going, and do not undercut everybody's benefit. In business, people offer specific acts and relations to help workers and managers to get along without undercutting the ability of the firm to make a profit and so without undercutting everybody's job. They look only for modest levels of benefits, and they work to reduce health care costs. When the firm profits, they expect all to benefit too, and to benefit fairly; they do not expect the owners to take all the increase. Because people accept that they are not equal, they achieve more real equality than if they pretend they are. This situation irks somebody committed to strong democracy and equality, and it sounds like an excuse for petty fascism, but it is still true. It helps to read Anthony Trollope's short good novel “The Warden”.

We see the first kind in political correctness. We see it among leaders of Black and Hispanic rights. We see it in schools which adopt high-sounding policies about racial equality and students having a future but which graduate few students and which give little real education even to students who do graduate. We see it in America since about 1980 with rising income disparity and no sense of national commitment by rich people. We see it in big business firms that call everybody by a nice sounding name to make them feel as if they are a part of the firm when really they are just an employee, terms such as “sales associate” and “repair technician”. These firms hire as many part-time “temporary” employees without benefits as they can so as to avoid any real commitment, and they give skimpy benefits when they do give benefits. They do not match employee contributions to retirement and charities. They brag about how many employees advance up the ranks while overlooking how many quit, how many employees they have in total, and how many do not advance up the ranks. They make up ranks to advance in, such as “first and second assistant floor manager”, like some martial arts schools make up many colored belts with different steps in each color.

We see the second kind in firms that hire and train employees so as to keep them, have full time long-term employees, give as good benefits as they can consistent with survival of the firm, and keep safe pleasant working conditions. They match employee contributions to retirement and charities. They listen to workers. They adopt employee suggestions. Employees listen to managers and trust them. People know the firm has a leader, and the leader sometimes has to “kick ass”, but people respect that and value it. They handle conflicts with face-to-face meetings in conditions designed to give everybody a say. We see this pattern also sometimes in small schools or “pilot” schools. Keeping an organization like this was the point of the movie, xxxxxxx, starring Chris Farley and David Spade.

We see this same difference between, one the one hand, religions with good policy statements about how everybody is valuable under God or the Dharma but which do little specifically, and in which privileged people are able to interpret policy to maintain their privilege, versus, on the other hand, religions that encourage people to go out and do specific things to make life better.

Rule of Law and Other Good Institutions.

To have the rule of law, we cannot treat everybody as a distinct individual and we cannot respect all their personal connections and status. We have to treat people as persons but not as any particular kinds of persons. We have to treat people as the same. This sounds like the big business firm with the beautiful but deadly policy, yet it is not. We should not confuse the platitudes of equality-within-an-institution with the rule of law in a democracy. On the other hand, we also have to respect natural kinds of persons such as “child”, “parent”, and “old”. We have to accept that differences in nature and differences in wealth and power can lead to injustice, and call out for redress. If not, the rule of law has little practical benefit. So we have to find a balance between “people are all the same” versus “people are different”. In finding the balance, we run into all the problems from above. We have to not use platitudes to make ourselves feel good while overlooking specific problems. In redressing any grievances, we have to not give any group too much power, and so undercut the ability of the system to help everybody. This is the balance that the West has sought, starting from its roots in the teachings of Jesus and in Greek thinking. Only if a culture-society finds this balance can it develop good institutions. The rule of law begins with the idea of similar persons, and it depends on this balance with different persons.

Two Kinds of Religion.

All major religions except Taoism and Zen developed big ideological systems that eat the world. (Some versions of magical Taoism developed big ideological systems that eat the world and Zen inherited such systems from Mahayana.) The most organized big system for Christianity likely is "Thomism", the thought of Saint Thomas of Aquinas, in Roman Catholicism; but it is not the only one. Protestant Existentialism amounts to such as system. The Christian system of God, the Trinity, Jesus as the Emanation of God, archangels, the Devil, angels, eternal souls with almost total free will, Justification, etc. amounts to a big ideological system that can easily be borrowed when theologians want to build their own rigorous system. Christians built it as a combination of Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism. Marxism developed a wonderful system which fairly closely goes along with the Christian system. Islam developed big systems also by borrowing from Classical philosophy. Judaism developed the Talmud(s) because it needed to regulate life to survive. Judaism also borrowed from Classical philosophy and, I think, Gnosticism. Mahayana and Hinduism are good examples of big idea systems that eat the world. Hinduism is likely the best, fullest, and most beautiful example.

Major religions develop big systems that eat the world because they have to compete with other religions, they want to convert and hold people, and being able to explain everything makes believers feel powerful. Likely the biggest reason religions develop big idea systems that eat the world is because it goes along with, and directly serves, the state. Once people accept a big system that eats the world, they find it hard to think in other terms and to leave the system. Judaism began to develop such as system after Israel rose in power under David and Solomon. Christianity developed systems after it became the semi-official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine. Islam developed big idea systems after it became the official religion of governments around Baghdad, Alexandria, and Tehran. I do not explain how states and big idea systems that eat the world go together. Religions that did not develop big idea systems would be at a competitive disadvantage.

Although all major religions developed big idea systems that eat the world, not all major religions began that way. The deistic religions in the Judaic tradition, including Christianity and Islam, did not begin with a big idea system but with small clear ideas about a single moral God. Theravada began in a context of big systems but gave them up for a small clear idea about life not being worthwhile. Taoism never needed or developed a big system. For the most part, Zen got rid of big systems.

Mahayana and Hinduism began in big systems and then solidified the systems. Big systems, and the way of life in big systems, are intrinsic to Mahayana and Hinduism, and natural to them.

Sometimes people in big systems rebel against the system and form small systems within the big system, at least for a while. I do not go into whether this is the same as a clique. Something like this happened with Protestantism within Roman Catholicism until Protestantism developed its own big systems. This is the feeling that the "Mad Max" movies tried to convey, as when groups called themselves "tribes". Small-within-big also happens in Hinduism but Hinduism is able to make revolts relative and so to neutralize and absorb them.

Americans where I grew up intrinsically distrust big systems for all the reasons above. They also distrust small tight societies but I am not sure if their distrust of small societies equals their dislike for big systems.

Americans dismiss big systems as “bureaucracy”, “government”, and “church”. Their dismissal is ironic, and all-the-more warranted, because America has among the biggest bureaucracies and government structures in the world. Maybe American dislike of big systems is one reason why we are attracted to Taoism, Zen, and, sometimes, to Buddhism.

Among all major religions, Christianity seems best able to maintain the behavior typical of small systems while in the middle of a big system. Christians were taught to treat their neighbors in all contexts much the way good citizens in villages treat their neighbors, and Christians have preserved the ability despite the growth of large systems. They can extend the line, and work across the line, better than can believers in other religions, most of the time. Christians have the attitude of the small system generalist. They tend to see other people as people and not as mere roles; at the same time, they respect duty and do not let personal relations overcome duty. I am not saying Christians are perfect and do not suffer from the faults of both small and large systems. I am only saying Christians were able to overcome faults well enough often enough to build good institutions.

This distinction of Christianity might be why Jesus still appeals to Americans even though they do not like big systems. They see in the lived value system of Jesus the values that they like even if Americans are wary of values that were added to Christianity when it became a big institution serving the state. Taoists, followers of Zen, and some Buddhists in the West seem to strive to set up and keep this “small system” feeling in their temples and communities. That is one reason why they appeal to Americans. It can be fun to go to a Taoist, Zen, or Buddhist “school”. To me, it seems Taoists, Zen followers, and Buddhists are blending Christian ideas with Taoist, Zen, and Buddhist ideas; and that is a good thing.

29 Hinduism: Not “All Paths Lead to God”

Here I would like to quote the Beatles from their “Maharishi” “Hindu” phase but may not. Listen to songs such as “Fool on the Hill” and “Within You, Without You”. Listen to “Penny Lane”, particularly the verse about the nurse who feels as if she’s in a play.

PART 1: Introduction

First Words.

This chapter is not as long as it seems. A lot of material is optional and is marked as such.

Hinduism is beautiful. It fosters huge imagination and feels like a grand adventure. It has profound ideas such as we are all alike and we should feel compassion for everyone. Yet Hinduism also is a big system; eats the world; combines moral relativism, class society, and traditionalism; uses bad relativism (“all paths lead to God”); asserts it is superior to other religions; encompasses other religions; sees most people as tokens in a game rather than as persons; and subverts its own ideals. Indian society is cut into rigid classes, has a gap between rich and poor, and is sexist. Indian culture and Hinduism foster people who are legalistic, argumentative, haughty, superior, and pushy. In the past, Hinduism served Indian society well. Now, it needs to be re-thought to remain viable in the pluralistic democracy and capitalism of the present and future.

I am uneasy with Hinduism. It uses a beautiful vision to support ideas, acts, and relations that I don’t like. Hinduism is like Romanticism, and Romanticism already has too much bad influence. Americans already have an attitude that enables faults similar to those of Hindu Indian society. Ideologies like Hinduism appeal to Americans. Americans likely won’t adopt Hinduism but Americans could adopt a doctrine like Hinduism and so overlook Jesus and Western values. To do justice to issues, this chapter is long. To get a feel for how a belief system like Hinduism can merge with Western culture, read: Herman Hesse: “Steppenwolf”, “The Glass Bead Game”, “Siddhartha”, and “Narcissus and Goldmund”; Aldus Huxley’s “Brave New World”; and stories by Jorge Luis Borges.

Disclaimers.

This chapter assesses what a thoughtful Hindu might believe, not widespread popular religion. Much of what I say also applies to: Mahayana, Romanticism, Gnosticism, Descent, Emanation, levels of reality, God sleeping, the world as a dream, dreams within dreams, and good and evil need each other; but I can’t go into those topics. For Arjuna, Krishna, and the Bhagavad Gita, see the chapter here on Codes. The term “system” is used loosely and does not refer to Western formal ideas from after about 1930. See the chapters on Issues for more about systems that eat the world.

I omit aspects of Hinduism that Hindus might consider important, such as the stages of life, the Code of Manu, purity, ascetics, world renunciation, world conquering, and Hindu deities. I do not discuss the roots of ideas except for brief mention of some documents such as the Vedas and Upanishads. For some of this material, see the Bibliography.

If all French Roman Catholics converted to Hinduism, they would still act like French Roman Catholics for generations. If all Indian Hindus converted to Lutheranism, they would still act like Indian Hindus for generations. Religion is not only some beliefs, acts, and attitudes. Religion is more a product of culture than of dogma, and it shapes culture. Hinduism is more an aspect of Indian culture than the product of dogma. Here I can only describe ideas and attitudes. I can't settle relations of culture to religion.

Contrary to what Americans think, Indian culture is closer to Russian culture than Chinese or Arab culture. Indian culture is one branch in Indo-European culture, which includes American culture. Most features of Hinduism are true of other Indo-European cultures. I can't definitely separate Hinduism from other Indo-European cultures. Other groups in South Asia share a version of Indo-European culture that is related to Indian culture but the people are not Hindu, such as in Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Some groups in South Asia are not Indo-European but did contribute to Indian culture and Hinduism, such as Bengalis and Dravidians. I can't sort out all this either.

I do not describe Hinduism so much as an ideological system that is like Hinduism. I use American pop culture to describe Hinduism. What I do is like using "Bollywood" (the Indian film industry) to explain the MSNBC or FOX view of American politics. Even so, I think I don't distort too much.

Just as I can't untangle culture and religion, so I can't see Hinduism apart from the fact that it is a big system etc. I report on what I know from my reading and from having known Hindus.

Young Hindus will change Hinduism as it goes around the world.

People live in both ideal and real systems at the same time: the ideal American Constitution versus the bizarre political reality that Americans have lived in since about 1980; or ideal Christianity versus the real lived Christianity of a particular community church. The real system is most important but we have to get at it from the ideal. For many reasons, people insist wrongly that, in their case, the ideal is the real. To overcome their objections requires mountains of evidence. This book is not that kind. I mix the ideal and real, using the ideal to catch glimpses of the real, and without justifying what I say.

Every criticism of Hinduism also can be aimed at all major religions except maybe for Taoism, Zen, and simple moral teachings such as of Jesus. I don't point out where we also should criticize other religions except in a few places. Why I pick on Hinduism should be clear. I consistently defend the teachings of Jesus combined with practicality and Western values. I stress Western ideas of the person against Hindu ideas of Dharma, karma, and system.

Hindus argue about whether the world is all-one, dual, plural, dual in single, single in dual, plural in single, or plural in dual. The dominant philosophical trend in Hinduism for centuries has been "Advaita Vedanta" ("non-dualism after the Vedas"). It says the world is not dual (not "subject and object", "this and that", or "me and you"), the world is single but shows as dual (mind and body) or plural (mind, body, process, self,

other, quality, quantity, etc.) to most humans. Other schools offer alternatives. These issues are not relevant to most Hindus, including intellectuals. I don't address them here. What I have to say does not require a stance on these issues.

India is a big diverse place, many Hindus now live outside India, and Hinduism is a big diverse religion. For more on India and Hinduism, see the Internet.

Although Americans live in a big bureaucratic society, still we see ourselves as individualistic crusaders against the system and for cosmic freedom, and we have biases as a result. We used to think we were all John Wayne or James Dean and now we think we are all Frodo, Neo, Luke Skywalker or Trinity. I do not escape the biases of my culture and society but what I say here is more true than false even so.

I repeat not to harangue you into agreeing but because I want people to be clear about my intended meaning. Please be patient.

Synopsis of Hinduism.

Hinduism is like a well-thought-out long-running version of Western Romanticism in which God plays by forgetting himself so as to dream the world. Reality is a dream to God but real to us. The dream of God is the only reality there is; it sets the rules to live by; and we need to accept the situation. God dreams a system in which people have many lives and the system as a whole is joyous even if some particular lives are hard. The core idea is "Dharma". "Dharma" can refer to God as origin, God in action, sacredness, the power of sacredness, the big system, rules in general, rules for one element such as an occupation (warrior) or gender (proper behavior for men or women), rules for society as a whole, and rules for any particular individual because of his-her position society and the Dharma system. "Dharma" can mean "the identity, logic, basic character, and operation of a distinct thing" as in "the Dharma of farming". Hindus called Christianity "the Dharma of Christians" or "the Dharma of Westerners".

The Dharma system is a big system and a system that eats the world. It is relativistic, and uses hierarchy (superior and inferior) and encompassing. It uses a "hole in the center", the vagueness in the idea of Dharma. The Dharma system uses "everything in its place" to rationalize roles. People in a Dharma system have attitudes typical of people in big systems that eat the world etc. The vagueness of the idea of "Dharma" allows some people to interpret so as to control the system and control behavior. The big system of Dharma and traditional Indian Hindu stratified society mutually support each other; that mutual support is part of the control.

The elements in the Dharma system include individual persons; groups made by gender, age, socio-economic class, occupation, ethnicity, and religion; whole societies; and "callings" such as holy person or priest. A combination of class-occupation-ethnicity is a "Varna" ("color") or "caste" as in the light-skinned warrior-and-ruler caste. The socio-economic-class-caste-occupation groups are ranked. Each person has a self. Each person also has a social-personal Dharma such as priest, scholar, rebel, man, woman, wife, householder, husband, child, elder, student, teacher, holy person, etc. The self Dharma and the social-personal Dharma of a person should be the same. Social-personal Dharma ties a person to the Dharma of society. The Dharma of society ties society and people to the big system of Dharma. Society mirrors the big Dharma system and society supports the big Dharma system.

People are not so much persons as they are players in the big Dharma system. People respond to each other as roles in the big Dharma system. Acts of goodness and badness are done toward other roles in the big Dharma system rather than directly toward other particular persons.

Nearly all elements are hierarchical and support each other. Higher is better and encompasses lower. The highest two elements are Hindu holy persons who know the Dharma as well as any human can, and Hindu traditional stratified society. Intellectually, a holy person encompasses everything while socially Hindu society encompasses all relations. Despite superficially seeming apart, in their way, holy people have a place in society even if not in the middle of it.

The one-and-only society closest to the Dharma is Indian Hindu traditional stratified society. All social-economic-class-occupation-caste groups ("castes") arrange by higher and lower. Lower castes support upper castes. Upper castes guide lower castes and guide the whole system. Lower castes cannot fully know upper castes. Upper castes can fully know lower castes. What lower do castes know is a distorted lesser reflection of the greater deeper better knowing of upper castes. Every person must do his-her part, including that each person should believe what is right for his-her caste, so as to keep the whole mutually beneficial system going, both society and the big Dharma system of the world. Every person has a role. Upper castes have a duty to guide lower castes, and the lower castes have a duty to obey. Every person has the ability to know the duties (Dharma) of his-her position.

Hindu society makes all social groups relative by finding them a place in this system, including non-Hindu groups and religions. Any social, ethnic, religious, or occupation group can belong, if the group causes little trouble, and it can keep up relations with other Hindu groups. Even groups that do not fully know the Dharma can find a secure satisfying place. Eventually every group and its ideas is modified, absorbed, and becomes Hindu in its way. If Christian computer nerds lived in India, and formed their own society, eventually they would be a caste in practice, even if they did not know it and did not accept it. Their children would know it and accept it.

Hinduism goes along with this kind of society because this kind is the most realistic arrangement given human nature and human social nature, that is, human Dharma; and because the Dharma made humans on Earth. No other kind of society blends human individuality and desire for success with needs for other people and for proper order. This society is the essential expression of Dharma on Earth. This society enacts Hinduism and Hinduism explains this kind of society.

Who you are, what you do, and how you live are a service to the system; but do not mistake your role for full truth. Only some Hindu holy people are fully aware of God playing and of the many forms he-she takes in play.

One ideal of Hinduism is to understand the whole system but few people can achieve the ideal. That is as it should be. The complete system, with its joy, depends on the persistence of many people who don't fully understand. The people who don't fully understand are the part of God that is still asleep and still at play. They are as much God as the people who are awake.

Rather than see the full system, the vast majority of people find spiritual success in devotion (bhakti) to a particular aspect of the system such as a god (Vishnu), avatar (Krishna), or a principle (non-violent good action, or “ahimsa”). Devotion can unite you with the system as well as can knowing. You can play out your role in the family-social-spiritual system by devotion. Devotion leads you to right conduct and spiritual success. The idea that devotion was a fully legitimate way to participate in the system likely was the key idea that brought Hinduism together and led to victory over other religious ideas, in particular over Buddhism. I think some Hindus see Christianity and Islam in terms of devotion.

Once you get the idea of the system, you can dispense with the idea that God created it; you can think entirely in terms of the Dharma making itself and making the system together all at once. The Dharma system is something that works as it does, and sustains itself, for its own reasons, like the self-creating universe of some physics and some atheism. If you want to keep the idea of God, and think there is a relation between God and the Dharma, that thinking is alright too.

Hinduism can encompass all other systems; no other system can encompass it. Hinduism explains itself, other religions cannot fully explain themselves, and Hinduism always explains other religions better than they can explain themselves. Hinduism is the big dream while other religions are sub-dreams within it. The only true full outlook is Hinduism. All religions are sub-plots in the big plot of Dharma playing - even when they do not know it or deny it. Other religions have interesting valuable insights. All their insights can be understood as an aspect of Hinduism even when Hindus did not think of the idea first. Non-Hindu religions are like lower classes (castes) while Hinduism is like the one highest class (caste). Non-Hindu religions sometimes are admirable as a warrior (Islam), ruler (Confucius), or teacher (Jesus) is admirable; but other religions are never like Hindu holy people, who know the full system and always rank above warriors, rulers, and teachers. People in other religions are less aware than Hindus-in-general even when a Hindu is not a holy person. Hinduism is to other religions as Hindu holy people are to other good natured but mere commoners. Most other religions can be seen as kinds of devotion to particular gods (Yahweh or Allah) or to particular ideals (Chinese humanism). Religious relativism arises naturally in Hinduism. Hinduism can say naturally “all paths lead to God” because other religions are minor variations of it and all lead back to it. Other religions are not false but not full either. Hinduism is better, superior, and encompasses other religions.

To a Westerner yearning for adventure, Hinduism makes sense of the feeling that what matters is not the destination but the road. The idea of a destination is just another method to make the road interesting and important, and to keep us going when we might get temporarily discouraged. “The road goes ever on and on”. Hinduism is not like “and miles to go before I sleep” because it is the “miles to go” that matters rather than the “I sleep”; the “miles to go” never ends; Hinduism is already the “I sleep (and dream)” if we only knew it; and, if we did know it, we would never want it to end.

Hinduism might be the most complete and successful ever religious “system that eats the world”.

Synopsis of My Assessment.

Although Hinduism tells us that we are all alike and we should feel compassion toward all sentient beings, Hinduism does not produce people who act like that. Hinduism does not develop the ideas that people are all persons and we should work hard to make the world better. Hinduism does not develop the ideas

of persons and a better world that are latent in the ideas of likeness and compassion. Instead, Hinduism uses the idea of Dharma to develop a system in which a person fulfills his-her role in the system and uses the system to his-her advantage. By relying on a Dharma system instead of persons and a better world, Hinduism undermines compassion and “we are all alike”. It enables conniving, striving, class, relativism, secret disdain for other religions, etc.

My view: Act according to simple decency, goodness, the Golden Rule, and “applies equally” first without regard to any system. Treat everybody as a person regardless of social status, gender, age, ethnicity, religion, etc. Work hard to make a better world. If you act on this basis first, without regard to system, then you are alright as a human, you will help others, and do little harm; and, if there is a system, you will do well enough too. If you try to act in accord with a system first, likely you will forget simple decency, betray your humanity, hurt people, hurt nature, rationalize bad behavior, and do badly in the system. If you act without regard to a system, and there is a system, you might miss out on glory, wealth, or power that comes by knowing the system, but, so what? If you try to please the system, you will hurt yourself and decent people. “What does it profit a person if he-she gains the whole world but loses his-her soul?” This assessment seems like my version of Pascal’s Wager (see chapter on codes) applied to Hinduism but it is more than that. Unlike Pascal, I do not offer this scenario to trick you through personal gain into believing what I want. You can gain more by putting the system first. I believe in simple good people and simple good acts, and do not believe in system. I want you to act well and to help others. On that basis, you can build good institutions that do not suffer too much from the evils of a system.

My view is American. The criticisms I give of Hinduism are not new. They have been given so often they are now trite. The only difference is how I say them. Even so, my criticism is not invalid or worthless. It is still accurate and might have some value.

I disagree with Hinduism. I disagree with its version of Indo-European culture. I disagree with its mythical cosmic metaphysical Dharma system. I disagree that we must do our Dharma duty or the whole system falls apart. I disagree with using imagination and adventure to keep people engaged. We are not part of an adventure within an adventure, and so on. The road is interesting but there is a point to life besides going on-and-on down the road. The point is good action and good thought now. The point is doing the right thing for the right reasons. The point is connecting with others.

Other religious stances fail and fall into hypocrisy despite good ideals as when Christians fail to live up to the Golden Rule. Hinduism fails for that reason and, in addition, because it does not rest on an intuitive but correct view of persons but instead it rests on an abstraction, Dharma, and its ideals are abstract, such as Compassion; even high minded abstractions indirectly encourage the worst faults of big systems that eat the world and are relativistic. Abstraction, even high ideals, enables bad behavior. Religious stances need enough specificity to stay grounded even if they are idealistic, such as the Golden Rule, the idea that we are all persons, “applies equally”, and rule of law.

I agree with the mix of Judaism with Indo-European culture that resulted in following Jesus and in Christianity. I agree with the mix of Jesus’ teachings, practicality, and Western values. Rather than an impersonal Dharma system, I see a personal God. Rather than other roles in the big Dharma system, I see particular individual persons. Rather than a hierarchical society made by the Dharma and for the Dharma, I see institutions made by tradition and by people, that should serve us all. We are all selves

too. We are what God made us and are only what God made us: "I am what I am and that's all that I am". "Made by God" differs from our karma identity or how Dharma makes us. We are not merely our Dharma. We are not in a Dharma system. We do not have to support the Dharma system.

Dharma can be a useful idea, like chi, Tao, yin, yang, Li, the Force, Destiny, calling, mission, justification, grace, or Spirit; but Dharma is not the supreme idea. We do not live in relativism, superior and inferior, hierarchy, encompassing, and encompassed.

The Dharma system should promote some specific good acts, seeing people as persons, compassion, sympathy, responsibility, and good institutions. Instead, it promotes bad traditionalism, making excuses, rationalization, separation, vying for position, hierarchy, selfishness, bad relativism, cliques, using other people as things, arrogance, legalism, argumentative character, bad institutions, social injustice, and bad attitudes toward other religions. It supports high ranking people using other people, and it supports high ranking people getting other people to go along by saying we all need to play a part. It did not support the development of good institutions such as rule of law, "applies equally", schools, hospitals, science, and social mobility. Hinduism does have good features, and I do mention them.

Other religions are not encompassed by Hinduism as lesser versions. The teachings of Jesus are not a lesser included version of Hinduism any more than Hinduism is a lesser included version of the ideas of Jesus, Mahayana, or Taoism. I reject Hinduism as Taoists and Confucians rejected Mahayana, Islam and Christianity rejected Gnosticism, and Judaism and Islam reject Christian polytheism. Hindu ideas add to the world stock of ideas but, more so, Hinduism decreases overall interesting diversity by jamming everyone into a single system with itself at the top.

Do not think about any system, and do not find yourself primarily by finding a place in a system. Follow the suggestions given above. Enjoy this world now. After you are comfortable with all the suggestions above, you can think about a system if you feel you still need one.

When Hinduism has ideas that are wrong, true, good, or bad then Hinduism is false, true, good, or bad. When Hinduism promotes good people, principles, acts, and institutions, it is good. When it does not promote them, it is not enough. When Hinduism thwarts them, or promotes bad ones, Hinduism is bad. The same is so for all religions.

Think how Hindu ideas, especially Dharma, might be re-interpreted so as not to support a big ideological system, stratified society, bad relativism, and rationalization. Does a major religion need a big system to eat the world? Does a big system necessarily support bad relativism and stratified unfair society? Think how Hindu ideas can be re-interpreted to support good people and good institutions in the modern world of pluralistic democracy. How does Hinduism have to acknowledge Jesus' teachings and Western values to succeed at re-interpretation? These questions apply to all religions.

All religions suffer from arrogance and the same faults as Hinduism. Many Christian churches and large institutions are as stratified and as stultifying to persons as Hinduism and traditional Indian society. The difference is that Hinduism institutionalizes and validates this arrangement.

As far as I can see, young Hindus are adapting well to a single world, and are easing up on the features of the caste and belief system that I don't like. They are assimilating widespread middle class values based on the teachings of Jesus, practicality, and Western ideas. They take occupations in which they use their sharp minds, skills in argument, and desire for learning, such as doctor and politician. When they do, they promote Western values for the most part, without looking down too much on the people that they serve. Even Hindus who come from successful families adopt a variety of roles and occupations that require humility and require assimilating widespread middle class values. I would not advise young Hindus to take as a role model the character Kumar from the movies "Harold and Kumar" (you could do much worse), but, from those movies, we see that young Hindus are using Hindu imagination to enter society in many ways, without looking down on other people. I hope young Hindus keep the sharp minds and wonderful imagination of Hinduism.

In an episode of the TV show "The Big Bang Theory" from early 2015, Raj, a Hindu, expressed the ideal of good Hinduism beautifully. Raj is an astrophysicist (star scientist). He was anxious about a probe that he had helped send into space. He and his friend Howard, a Jew, drove to a Hindu Temple. Raj said going there made him feel better because it gave him better context for his own life. He felt that a greater something – call it Dharma, mind, consciousness, or God – was working through the world to the ultimate good ends of the greater something. It works through us, and uses us, to achieve its good ends. We do the work of the spirit in our work. It made Raj feel good to be part of that. Howard was impressed and said he felt likewise. These feelings are typical of some high-minded Hinduism. If Hinduism stopped there, and worked out the implications of these feelings for relations with other persons and with nature, then I would appreciate it more. But Hinduism went on to interpret those feelings as part of a system-and-society that also subverted those feelings. As modern Hindus go away from the original society and system to a new bigger world and hopefully better society, they still carry those noble feelings with them. I hope they can reinterpret the feelings to do the feelings full justice, can find how young Hindus must include persons and nature, and can teach us what they find. Below I describe how Hinduism subverted its beauty away from the vision of Raj.

Useful Images.

If a huge Christian church, with internal diversity and hierarchy, such as the Roman Catholic Church, had no central leadership, that church would be like Hinduism. If all the Christian churches of Europe and the Americas, including all centralized hierarchical Churches, felt they were one church in spirit, and gave up central leadership, that would be like Hinduism. If Protestantism saw itself as one movement and formed a big informal league without one strong authority, that would be like Hinduism. If Hinduism evolved a clear strong central leadership, Hinduism would be like a large diverse single Christian church such as Roman Catholicism or Orthodoxy. Vishnu-Krishna is like Jesus; and Christian saints, especially Mary, are like Hindu avatars. People who convert to Roman Catholicism from another Christian smaller Church, such as Presbyterians, are like Hindus who have worshipped only Shiva all their lives but now see the full range, depth, and beauty of Hinduism as a whole. I am not surprised that smart Westerners convert to an intellectual version of Hinduism, or Hindu immigrants such as ex-Governor Bobby Jindal of Louisiana, can convert to a large Christian church such as Roman Catholicism.

Hinduism and Romanticism.

This section gives a made-up response of a Hindu to a Romantic. As far as I know, no real person other than me said this. Still, I think the remarks fairly represent Romanticism and Hinduism.

In Romanticism, the Spirit takes various dominant forms in different eras and through different societies. In the old Middle East, it was Jewish ethical monotheism. In the Classical age, the dominant Spirit was Greek Rationalism first and then Roman Order. As a strongly relativistic system, Romanticism seems to encompass Hinduism. Hinduism is merely one form that the Spirit takes in one part of the world for one time, albeit an important form for a long time in a big part of the world.

In the Hindu view, the Romantic view is backwards. First, the Spirit is not the Dharma. Dharma is bigger than Spirit. The Spirit is too personal and human-like. It is too much small individual people writ large, too much like an individual dream of being big and cosmic. It is a holdover of pre-Christian and Christian ideas about a spirits; it is almost still animism. Some people have to think like this but good thinkers get over it. The Dharma is not impersonal in the way that a rock is impersonal and is less than an animal. The Dharma is impersonal because it includes everything personal and is more-than-merely-personal as well. It includes the Spirit. It is super-personal and super-rational. What the Dharma is, you learn from living it and from Hindu holy people.

Second, the Dharma does show up in various forms in different times and places, and can assert itself most in one dominant form; but, deep down, the Dharma is always one; it shows up in all things, not just in one form; you can find it everywhere if you know how to look; and the Dharma makes sure Hindu holy people can find it because being found out is part of its basic character and part of its graceful plan for all sentient beings. If the Dharma were not one thing, it could not show up in variations in different places; there would be nothing similar to see behind appearances; there would be only distinct places, eras, and societies. You could not compare and could not see the Dharma shining through. It would be like seeing only Fords, Hondas, Toyotas, or GMs without seeing cars. You could not tell what a car was, and so you could not say which was the best car at the time.

Third, even while the Dharma is universal, the Dharma also is particular and it endures as particular. The one Dharma has one best representative, gives people an anchor to hold, and gives one view by which to see others. The fact that the Dharma presents itself as one is how the West could come up with the idea that Western Romanticism is the Culmination; but the Western idea of its Romanticism as Culmination is a mistaken view of the correct bigger idea that the Dharma has one best representative. This mistake is a typical Western misunderstanding of Dharma. If you know how to look, the Dharma culminates all the time everywhere. To help us understand this, the Dharma gives us one true best form of itself. The one true best form of Dharma, the true Culmination, is Hinduism, both in religious-intellectual-spiritual form and in social form as Indian Hindu society. Other forms are lesser versions of Hinduism. Hindus know this because only Hinduism has the idea of Dharma instead of "Spirit"; only Hinduism naturally developed the idea of many paths to the one Dharma; only Hinduism accepts human nature, human social nature, and human society as the Dharma created it; and only Hinduism did this long ago. Hinduism adopted the one form of society suited to the continuing realization of the one Dharma among sentient beings.

Evidence for Western confusion about the Dharma and the Spirit is the development out of Romanticism of bad social, culture, and political forms such as European fascism of the late 1800s through the middle 1900s, Communism in all its styles, Western nature worship, and Western leftist political movements in

the 1960s and afterwards. Even American and British rightist movements are a bad form of Romanticism and nationalism that could be avoided if Westerners properly understood the Dharma. Even the Western romantic view of Hinduism and India in the 1960s shows that Westerners cannot understand Hinduism as long as they see it from the outside as a form of Romanticism. While Hindu society is not perfect, it can avoid such catastrophes by taking the Dharma as its foundation.

Romantics insist Hindus wrongly claim they know the core of being and it is the Dharma. That is true only for them in their time. Hindu supposed superiority through encompassing others is only an over-extended deluded continuation of what the Spirit did for a limited time in India long ago.

Romanticism does have one leg up on Hinduism, at least for self-promoting people. Whatever your own group, you can say your group is the current most important form of the Spirit. You can justify what your group does and your participation. Whether Hindu Brahman, American Lefty, Christian Rightist, Muslim fundamentalist, Jewish zealot, or academic with a cause, then your group is the spearhead of the Spirit, everything your group does is right, and everything you personally do is right. You and your group are the best right now.

PART 2: Some Basic Hindu Ideas.

Some Useful Dates.

“CE” means “Common Era”, which began in “1” AD, so “CE” is equivalent to “AD”. “BCE” means “Before the Common Era” and is equivalent to “BC”.

From before 2000 BCE to perhaps 800 BCE, an advanced agrarian-and-urban civilization, equivalent to Babylon, flourished in the Indus Valley, what is now Pakistan and eastern India. Its cities were “Mohenjo-Daro” and “Harappa”, so it is called the “Harappa(n)” or “Indus Valley” civilization. This civilization was made by people who were native to the Indus valley before Indo-Europeans; it was not Indo-European; it was not “Bharat”. I do not know its relation to other cultural groups in South Asia.

By 2000 BCE, likely earlier, and until about 500 BCE, people speaking Indo-European languages moved from the west to the east, into what are now Iran, Pakistan, and India. Their original home is not clear but might have been from around the Black Sea. They were cattle herding people, with horses, and they likely knew wheat cultivation. These people invaded the Indus Valley civilization. It is not clear if these people contributed to the decline of that civilization or if it was already in decline. As these people moved into the Indus valley, they took up ideas from the Indus Valley civilization but I do not guess which motifs in South Asian culture were from the natives and which from Indo-European invaders.

The invading Indo-European peoples used in their rituals “liturgical words” that were called “Vedas”. The Vedas are like chants, as in a formal Christian liturgy. For a long time, the Vedas were memorized only and deliberately were not written. Later the Vedas were written; I am not sure when but I think before 1 CE. All “orthodox” Hindus consider the Vedas the foundation documents of the religion even if other later texts and ideas supersede the Vedas.

The Ganges River Valley is east of the Indus Valley. It is lower, swampier, humid, and does not support wheat farming or horse raising but does support rice farming. Rice farming supports centralized state societies - kingdoms. As the Indo-Europeans moved into the Ganges valley, they began rice farming and let off horse rearing and wheat farming. They developed stratified societies based on rice farming. Some of the societies became large kingdoms. That is the context in which Hinduism formed and solidified.

Bangladesh is yet further east while the arid Deccan Plateau is further south. I do not consider the cases of Bangladesh and the Deccan.

After 1000 BCE, a set of ideas about life was present from Italy to India; see below and see chapters on Buddhism.

About 500 BCE, Buddhism arose, largely in response to those ideas.

About the same time that Buddhism arose, the ideas in the Upanishads were current; see below.

About 200 BCE, the Upanishads were written down.

Between 200 BCE and 200 CE, poets contributed to the epics the "Ramayana" and "Mahabharata". By about 200 CE, the poems were written down.

By no later than 200 CE, the main ideas of Hinduism arose.

After 200 CE, ideas of Hinduism were formalized in a long series of written documents called "Shastras" and "Puranas". The documents do not all agree but they are largely compatible.

By no later than 500 CE, bhakti (devotion) became a strong trend in Hinduism. It might have arisen in the areas of Bangladesh or of Southern India but quickly spread throughout India.

Likely by 500 CE, certainly by 1000 CE, Hinduism as it is now was well-defined.

Some Basic Texts and Ideas.

A set of ideas was found from (what are now) Italy through India by about 800 BCE, including karma and many lives. See the chapters on Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. Hinduism, as a version of these ideas, was evident from about the time of Jesus. Hinduism distinct from Mahayana, and competing with Mahayana, was evident from before 500 CE (AD). Complete Hinduism was evident after the rise of ideas about "bhakti" ("devotion" or "worship"; see below) after 500 CE.

The idea of "Dharma" developed in India and is common to Buddhism and Hinduism. Originally Dharma meant something like "ritual efficacy" but it came to mean the system of the world and how it works. The world is like an ongoing successful ritual by the Dharma for the Dharma.

The idea of "Dharma", especially "personal Dharma" and "social Dharma", came to mean doing your role in life and society as a priest does his-her role in ritual. Each kind of person (farmer, priest, ruler, warrior,

doctor, mechanic, yogi, ascetic, etc.) sustained the whole society and the whole society supported each kind of person in it. When you do your duty, you make society, family, and the whole system efficacious. You got your appointed role by karma and reincarnation.

Hinduism accepts that ordinary life is misleading, and might be an illusion or delusion. We need to wake up from ordinary life, and waking up is a big theme in Hinduism. The technical term is “moksha”. Unlike Theravada but like Mahayana, Hinduism stresses that the system of many lives is worthwhile, and can be quite joyous, even if any particular life is hard. You need to see past the details, including the details of the one illusory life you now live, to see the system in full glory. Once you see that, you can put ordinary life into the proper context, and it is not quite an illusion.

Hinduism officially begins with instructions for ritual, and explanations of ritual, called the “Vedas”, which are also about gods, relations to nature, relations to the gods through ritual, and social relations. At first they were only memorized and recited. They received “standardized” form between about 2000 BCE and 1000 BCE. Later they were written but I am not sure when. Seekers and scholars still read them but I do not consider them here because they are not used anymore in practiced Hinduism.

The Upanishads originally were oral essays about spiritual life apart from the rituals. The ideas in them were current at the time of the Buddha, about 500 BCE. They were written down from about 300 BCE to about 200 BCE. The term “Upanishad” means “private teachings given apart, in the forest, (out of normal society)”. The ideas in the Upanishads are not unique but they are well said there and they have been important in Hinduism. Different ideas were developed in different Upanishads but I summarize the ideas as if they come from one source. All educated Hindus revere the Upanishads but it is not clear how much Hindus actually read the Upanishads; like the “Federalist Papers” in the United States.

The most famous saying from the Upanishads is “you are that”, which means we are all quite similar, and should treat each other accordingly. It means “there through the grace of God do go I; and here through the grace of God do go you; we are not really different”. The Upanishads do not quite say we are all a spark of God and so really we are the same person, but that idea is close to the feeling of “you are that”. They do not say we are all manifestations of God and so really we are all God in disguise but that view is latent in “you are that”. Later Hinduism developed the feeling into the idea that we are all sparks from one God and-or we are all God in disguise. We are all pieces of God. We literally are all the same thing. We differ only in minor externals. (The physicist John Wheeler once teased his student Richard Feynman that all apparently distinct electrons are really the same one electron; that idea is close to the feeling in the Upanishads.) Originally the idea meant that all humans are similar but was extended to the idea that all sentient beings are similar, then all animals including all sentient beings, all life, and then all the world. Eventually these views of the Upanishads reinforced the big Dharma system in which particular lives might be hard but the whole system is joyous.

The right way to express “we are the same” is compassion. Compassion is a big policy in the big system of Hinduism. The forms that compassion takes are discussed below. In Christian terms, the blend of “you are that” with compassion is: “love your neighbor as yourself” and act accordingly. We are all equal children of God.

At the time of the Upanishads, as in Theravada Buddhism, having many lives and being subject to karma was not necessarily a good thing, and could be a bad thing. Being born over and over again to a harsh world where you were deluded, and where society forces you to commit immoral acts for its sake, was bad. In trying to deal with the situation, the Upanishads began to systematize many lives and karma. In making a system out of many lives and karma, they paved the way for later interpretations of the system as a good thing. I am not sure how particular writers of particular Upanishads felt about the system.

The Upanishads feared the ability of normal life to “suck you in” and put you to sleep, so the Upanishads advised avoiding normal life. The name “Upanishads” not only means “discussions in the forest” but implied a life apart from normal life. Exactly what the Upanishads recommended by “being apart” varied by particular Upanishad. “Being apart” was interpreted later to suit ideas that belong more to times after than to the Upanishads. “Being apart” could mean renouncing the world, being a forest ascetic (ryshi), and conquering the world through your spirit. It could mean waiting until after you have had a family, in old age, before going into the forest. It could mean being an awakened person in the middle of sleeping people. It could mean renouncing the fruits (karma) of your involvement in the world even if you accepted that you had to act in the world. It could mean going about your social obligations aloofly. It could mean going about your social obligations aloofly and without much concern for people other than to whom you are directly obliged. The latter interpretations eventually prevailed for most Hindus.

Buddhism, and maybe Siddhartha Gautama himself, developed the idea of the self as a bundle partly to forestall mistaken interpretations of the Upanishad idea that selves are quite similar, are eternal, and are ultimately the same as the system itself (each self is a version of God). I am not sure that the Upanishads promoted these mistaken ideas of self, but later interpreters did, so it is still worth seeing what the fuss was about. If all selves are identical (or nearly identical), it is possible to see all selves as eternal “stuff”, nearly-identical bits of eternal God, or, really, as small local versions of God. In that case, selves have to be part of a big eternal joyous system in which life is worthwhile. Otherwise, the different life situations of selves don’t make sense. Yet the Buddha argued that life is not worthwhile. If life is not worthwhile, then we cannot be in a big eternal joyous system and selves cannot be a minor version of the big eternal system. Selves cannot be simple eternal things, largely identical. The best way to shock yourself out of seeing selves, and yourself, as simple eternal things is to see the self as a bundle; which it really is. If the self is a bundle, then it hardly makes sense to think of life as deeply worthwhile in the same way that life might be worthwhile if the self were an eternal part of an eternal joyous system. So we have no eternal self, no self as part of God, no identity of different selves, no eternal joyous system, and life is not worthwhile. Get over yourself, and get used to it. The Buddhist view of the self does not undermine the idea of compassion, and, in fact, I think, supports it.

Hinduism stressed the alternative that the Buddha rejected. If you do want to think of selves as eternal simple things quite similar to each other, much as Christians and Muslims think of the soul, then you are led toward three things. First, selves are so similar that they are identical. Second, if they are identical, they are really local versions of one God. We are all God, but don’t know it until we wake up. Third, to make sense of the variety of the world, we have to see (nearly) identical selves as part of one eternal joyous system. You don’t have to know all this to participate in the system. If you want an eternal joyous system with selves as parts, then you have to think of the self as a simple eternal thing that is identical to God (the system) or nearly identical. Westerners tend to this option when they read the Upanishads or about Hinduism. It is the option that, I think, invaded Mahayana, but which Mahayana did not develop as

well as Hinduism did. Eventually this option allowed Mahayana to defeat Theravada, and Hinduism to defeat Mahayana.

The Upanishads are mystical in that they say: how we see this obvious life is not accurate, and a big system might be behind all obvious life. But the Upanishads are not “airy fairy”. They are not hard to read, and they make sense. They can support “airy fairy” conjectures but that way lies as much in the reader as in the texts.

Hinduism Goes Many Steps Further.

“It’s all in the game of love”

In the chapter on Codes of this book, in the section on the Bhagavad Gita, I already mentioned the ideas described in this section. The best way to make these points would require quoting major parts of Hindu epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, which I can’t do here. To get across the ideas, I use Western popular epic drama, especially what appears often on TV. Mahayana takes many of the same steps but not as fully or adeptly as Hinduism. Earlier points help with later points but you can accept a later without an earlier. Each point can be accepted or denied by itself but they do tend to come in a set. The point about devotion (“bhakti”) is supported by previous points but can stand on its own. Few Hindus could state all these points without prompting but many could state them with prompting. See chapter on Mahayana for the dialog between two advanced Mahayanists.

(1) Not only heroes (including heroines) are important but so are all the “little” people. They are needed mostly to move the plot forward but they often have key roles. They are not only sidekicks. In “Lord of the Rings”, Gandalf is not the main character. He is not the Lord of the Rings. The two real combatants for Lord are Frodo and Sauron. Sam is “only” a sidekick yet where would the story be without Sam? Tolkien makes this point about the importance of little people with the character “Gollum” (Smeagol) when Gandalf tells Frodo that Gollum deserved to die but it was good that the elves did not kill Gollum because Gollum might yet have some important unforeseen role to play. He did. Gandalf is the ultimate helper character to both Frodo and Aragorn. Read LOTR or see the first part of the “Hobbit” movie trilogy, “An Unexpected Journey” for an eloquent speech by Gandalf on the importance of little people.

With all their greatness, do Peter, Paul, John, and Mary compare to Jesus? Yet where would Christianity be without Peter, Paul, John, and Mary? Where would Roman Catholicism be without the small army of good Popes who have led it for two thousand years?

Where would the Lone Ranger be without Tonto, Dr. Evil be without Number Two and all the henchmen, and Bond without the “Bond girls”? Where would warriors be without their charioteers and armor makers? Not only do we need Luke, Vader, and the Emperor, we also need Obiwan Kenobe, Yoda, Hans Solo, Leia, R2D2, Count Dookoo, Grievous, Commander Cody, the bounty hunter and his son, many clones, and a host of characters to kick-start adventure such as Jar Jar Binks. Besides needing the Joker, Batman also needed Alfred, Police Commissioner Gordon, Robin, and many villains. Peter Pan needs Tinker Bell, Captain Hook, Wendy, and some Lost Boys. Where would we be without poets to retell all adventure in a way to make it interesting, as in Scott’s novel “Waverley”? The animated movie, “Rango”,

shows how a literal host of characters literally supports the hero, and how the “legendary” hero (Rango) and a “legendary” villain (Snake) respect each other.

Even in ordinary life, where would anybody be without farmers to grow food and merchants to distribute food, without the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker? Where would we be without busybodies and gossips to stir things up on so-called “reality” TV? Now we can see all people not just as accidentally there but as necessary parts of the whole system of joyous Dharma and many lives. They might not play as large a part as the heroes and villains but their part is important. In Hinduism, people of all ranks and all abilities can feel they are part of something important and joyful even if they do not feel it fully now in this life. God falls asleep to continually dream the world, the whole world with all its small players; and his creation is good.

The importance of little people goes beyond their roles in a story. Hinduism says through its stories that all the various kinds of people are needed in society too. Even if you are not a big glamorous person, still your role is essential to the integrity and continuity of society, just as modern society needs farmers, butchers, bakers, computer programmers, and advertisers. Hinduism was brought together as a religion when the old cow herding society of India had been completely taken over by wheat and rice farmers, and society was organized into a structure with kings, aristocracy, priests, farmers, merchants, crafts people, and workers. Hinduism was brought together as a religion when Hindu society became like Medieval Europe. People needed an ideology, a rationale, for this new society, the people in it, and their relations. Hinduism and its epics provided this rationale, and did so by making people feel good about the whole thing. When Hinduism first did this job, around the time of Jesus, likely it was a powerful good integrating force for a powerful vibrant new way of life. This sense of belonging to a good society by doing our jobs well is just what Americans, and most of the modern world, now lacks. For a Western version of what Hinduism makes of the idea of little guys supporting society, read “Brave New World” by Aldus Huxley, especially the passages where various castes explain how they are the true foundations of society while other castes only think they are.

(2) Not only are minor characters needed for a good story and good society but so are bad guys. It is easy to see that drama is based on conflict, and usually there is no conflict without a bad guy – think of Iago in “Othello” by Shakespeare. But the Hindu idea is stronger than that. Bad guys and good guys are tied together, often are mirror images, often bring out each other’s character, and often are not completely good or bad. Hinduism has good guys that are a bit bad, and bad guys that are a lot good, not unlike modern Western, especially American, fiction with anti-heroes and flawed heroes. Bollywood movies are as much “white hat versus black hat” as TV shows such as “Walker, Texas Ranger” but Hindu literature and Hindu feel for character are more like good film noir such as “The Maltese Falcon”.

Sith need Jedi; Jedi need Sith; the Chosen One will unite the light side and dark side of the Force, at least for a while until we start again. We could not have had Theodore Roosevelt breaking up the big trusts without McKinley kissing up to the big trusts; we could not have had Ronald Reagan without the chaos of the 1970s; and we would not have Barack Obama without the errors and collapses of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. Where would Batman be without the Joker, and the Joker without Batman? They mutually made each other and continue to need each other. Where is Superman without Lex Luthor, or Spiderman without Doc Oc? Where were modern TV detectives without their arch-enemy serial killer

crazy counterparts? A wonderful recent example of mutual determination of the hero and would-be villain is the animated movie “Puss in Boots” (Puss and Egg).

In the Mahabharata (“Great Poem about India [Bharat]”), the epic poem of which the Bhagavad Gita is a small part, the good guys are the Five Brothers while the bad guys are their cousins. The good guys are not thoroughly good while the bad guys are not thoroughly bad. All the good guys have some serious character flaws, which is how the whole problem began. The bad guys have some great traits, which is how they get genuine heroes to join their side. The Five Brothers are a bit better than the Americans were during the Cold War while the bad cousins are no worse than the Russians. The good brothers are like the “A Team” while their bad cousins are like Two Face Harvey Dent or the Sandman in “Batman” and “Spiderman”. The Five Brothers are like the brothers in the movies “The Sons of Katie Elder” with John Wayne or “Four Brothers” with Mark Wahlberg. Both sides are needed to make a good story, keep action moving, and reach the proper moral conclusion. In part, this portrayal of good guys and bad guys reflects the Indian ability to assess human nature accurately. It also shows the Hindu attitude toward good guys and bad guys, and their relations, in the joyous system of many lives.

For good to feel truly good, for good to be as good as can be, goodness has to contrast with badness; just as to fully appreciate beauty we have to see the contrast with ugly and with plain. For good guys to be fully good, to reach the full potential of past karma, to reach the full potential of their Dharma as good guys, and to support the entire joyous Dharma system of many lives, they need bad guys as their foils. Likewise, bad guys can be truly bad only when they despoil innocent good people such as children or despoil innocent animals.

(3) The mutual dependence of little people and big people, of good guys and bad guys, makes sense in a Dharma system of many lives. We can only see how people could be so good, or so bad, if we see their present goodness or badness as an accumulation over lives. People cannot be so bad as to slaughter whole villages if they have not built to such badness over many lives. People cannot be so good as to offer themselves to be ravaged by bandits, so as to save a village, if they have not built to such goodness over many lives. The Dharma system helps to explain the extremes of goodness and badness while extremes of goodness and badness lend evidence to the Dharma system.

Goodness, badness, and the Dharma system support each other in another way, more important in the long run. Except for a few people at the height of the Dharma system, few of us are overwhelmingly good or bad. Most of us are a mix in this life, and have been a mix in past lives. Most of us will be more overall good in some lives and more overall bad in other lives. Good people need bad people; bad people need good people. For some of us to be good in this life, we need other people to be bad in this life. For some people to be bad in this life, it helps if other people are good in this life. If the system is to remain in balance, if we are good in this life while others are bad in the next life, then we can expect that we will be bad in other lives while they are good in other lives. We need each other, as good and bad, not only in this drama right here right now but for the whole drama to keep going. This is what Krishna told Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, or at least what Krishna implied.

If you find yourself in a bad role, and you don’t play your role, then you not only betray yourself and your personal Dharma, you thwart the current roles and future roles of many other people and you endanger the whole system. The same is true if you are in a good role, or a mixed role, and you don’t live up to

your character. You must play out what role you have been given for the sake of yourself and others, for now and all the future.

(4) This step might be two half steps. (A) Most people have felt that everything really is just as it should be, even bad stuff. Nothing is wrong. Everything is right. (B) Everything contributes in its own way. If we took away anything, the whole world would suffer and might not come out alright. Another way to say this is “everything is beautiful in its own way”, and, in fact, “everything is ugly in its own way too”. Nothing is really only ugly and nothing is so beautiful that it is incomparable. All is connected, so all share in the great beauty of the whole system.

We should not be too quick to judge anything is useless or bad; we should not be too quick to judge at all. A weed is a flower for which nobody has yet discovered a use. A flower is a weed that is easy to grow.

In the West, this feeling contributes to the idea that, in nature, everything plays a role and everything is needed, including mosquitoes, malaria, bacteria, fungus, and disease. “It takes all kinds to make a world”. This is the same feeling as that God has a plan, and everything and event has a place in God’s plan including you and your obnoxious neighbor and the fight you just had.

Hinduism makes sense of this feeling. If you think you have a good life now, and your bravery is needed, while some peasant has a bad life, and his crops are not needed, likely you are wrong. Even if you can argue your point, you are not thinking long term. You and the peasant will exchange lives someday, and his life now is needed to sustain yours then.

This feeling played a role in Mahayana and some Zen. I described it in the chapter on Zen but did not explain how it fit into a system. In Hinduism, it more obviously fits into a system.

One of my big steps in spirituality was to realize that this attitude is not true. It is generally true, and it is useful as a support for tolerance; but it is not true in all cases. Some bad things are just bad and we can do without them. We don’t need slavers and rapists. Some good things are more useful than other things, and we do right to extol them. We do right to praise people who help neighbors in a hurricane. It is not clear to me how this view goes along with the Hindu innate strong sense of morality. See below.

(5) If everything is needed in its own way, and everything is beautiful in its own way, then we should let everything play out in its own way. Even if a thing, act, belief, or person seems to do some harm, as long as the harm is not catastrophic, then let it go on to its natural end. Live and let live. Live and let die. Die and let live. Let everybody listen to the kind of music he-she likes, Bach, Mozart, kitsch, or sexist racist crap – as long as they don’t hurt people. Let people worship whatever gods they like. Let people follow holidays and perform ceremonies as they like. Let people use what drugs they like. This attitude leads to the plethora of festivals and gods that we see in India.

In practice, Hinduism is not as tolerant as this statement sounds. Some things undermine the Dharma system itself, such as, sometimes, Islam, Christianity, and naïve materialistic determinism. Those cannot be tolerated. Those must be controlled. Even the worship of some Hindu gods, such as Kali Durga (bad mother) cannot be allowed in full but must be controlled so they do no great harm. Thugs might be allowed in theory but they cannot be allowed in fact. This is the same dilemma faced by democracies in

which we want to allow fully free speech but cannot allow people to yell “fire” in a theater when there is no fire and cannot allow people to advocate violent un-democratic overthrow of our democracy. Democracy protects one set of values while Hinduism protects organized Indian society and the Dharma system.

(6) What matters is not the ending, not winning or losing, but the game. A well-played game is better than a game won badly. What matters is not the destination but the journey. Every moment, every place, in all ways, we have already arrived. In the movie version of the novel “Kim” we literally see this when the searching old monk sees his magic river in a dried up old stream bed in the dry high hills.

(7) Everybody is saved all the time but most of us just don’t know it. It might be better to be saved and to know it than to be saved and not know, but that is not necessarily so and certainly not clear. If you know it, you surrender to the game with gusto. If you surrender to the game with gusto, then you don’t need to know if you are saved or not.

(8) We should say “Yes” to the Dharma and its game. In Western terms, we should say “Yes” to LIFE and its game. I (Mike Polioudakis) say “enjoy life as much as you can” but, I think, Hindus mean more than this when they say “Yes” to Dharma and Westerners mean more when they say “Yes” to LIFE. Hindus mean to surrender to the Dharma LIFE game much as Muslims surrender to Allah and Christians give themselves to Jesus. Devote yourself.

(9) Everyday life is not much different than life after you are awake. It is still the same life. You still do the same things. You are kinder and gentler. You are not as driven. You help more than you hurt unless it is your Dharma duty to hurt righteously, as with Arjuna. You still eat and sleep, marry, and have children.

(10) Illusion fills everyday life for people who are not aware. After you are aware, the illusion is still there but you are master of the illusion, as was Vimalakirti in Mahayana and as Kim was in his training to be a spy. You can use illusion to help you or others. You do not let it drag you into bad clingy situations.

(11) We should allow people to believe and do as they wish as long as they don’t hurt people. To allow people in this way is part of surrender to the Dharma game. It is part of the diversity and fascination of the Dharma. It leads to different kinds of social groups, different religions, and different societies. Of course, without necessarily knowing it, just as not all people know they are saved, so groups and their ways of life are part of Dharma’s variety. They are part of the Dharma game whether they know it or not, and likely especially if they don’t know it.

(12) The Dharma game encourages a wide variety of social ways of life but not every social life is equally valid or expresses the Dharma best. Traditional Hindu society takes account of the Dharma game and it takes account of basic facts about humans as (evolved) sentient beings between the gods and animals. People are not all the same. They have different capacities. Often their capacities are inherited. Men and women should be matched to each other. Children should be taught the ways of a good society. Society needs specific stations. The stations should help each other; they should be complementary. At the same time, not all stations are equal in ability or power. Some stations are for governing and some are for carrying out tasks. Traditional Hindu society accepts channels of the Dharma and flows through them, so it is the best society. Other societies have their merits, but they can be seen as variations on

Hindu society just as other religions can be seen as variations on knowing the Dharma and other ways of life can be seen as variations on the Dharma game.

(13) Nobody except a few very unusual and wise Hindu holy people see the whole Dharma system and the place of various beings in it. The best most people can do is to know their role and to carry out their role as the Dharma appointed it. (The best people can do is carry out God's Will as they know it.) This view is just restating the lesson of the Bhagavad Gita.

(14) If you cannot expect people to act on the basis of full understanding, different people have different roles, and different people see differently, then what is reasonable to expect? When is it reasonable to say that a person "does God's work"? When is it reasonable to say that a person goes against God or does not do God's work? People do as they are taught. We hope that people get good teachers. We should not rush to judgment. We should give people the benefit of the doubt. As long as people carry out their role in society, worship as they were taught, do little harm, do some good, and do more good than harm, then we should not judge. Jesus taught us not to rush to judgment. In fact, people might be doing God's work even if we cannot see so and even if what they do is different than what we do. Allow every Hindu to worship his-her particular deities as he-she sees fit, as long as he-she does no obvious harm. What harm can come of letting people worship God each in his-her own way? Isn't this the accord that Protestants and Roman Catholics extend toward each other? Isn't this the accord that the many Protestants extend toward each other? Isn't this what the Constitution of the United States of America insists upon as a high right? We should never say a person goes against God's Will unless that person does harm. If we follow this "live and let live" idea then all of us will get along much better and society will work much better.

This view is one large basis for the idea that "all paths lead to God". It is not easy to reconcile this view with the idea that Hinduism is best after all. Hindus reconcile this view with Hindu superiority by saying that Hinduism develops this view naturally while other religions have to be taught this view, often by a Hindu. The religion which develops this view naturally is best even when it teaches that all paths do lead to God. Roman Catholics take much the same view toward Protestants, and large Protestant divisions take much the same view toward every religion but their own.

This contradiction is not confined to Hinduism or even to religion. It lies at the heart of democracy. What does a republican democracy do with people in it who disbelieve in democracy and want to overthrow the republic to institute their idea of a religious or ideological totalitarian state? Do they have an equal right to their opinion? Do unjust thugs have an equal right to due process of law?

(15) All of this leads to a combination of moral relativity and social determinism, which I, as a Westerner, find distressing. This subsection describes the moral relativity while sections below describe how it is embedded in social relations. "Moral relativity" includes moral ambiguity.

Contrary to modern religious confusion, moral relativity was not invented in 1776 (American Revolution), 1789 (French Revolution), 1848 (Paris socialism), 1890 (Gilded age), 1917 (Bolsheviks), 1920 (jazz age), 1932 (Roosevelt and the New Deal), 1954 (rock and roll), or 1980 (hip-hop or rap). People have always known of it and used it to their gain. It has always confused us and led some of us astray. The relevant questions are what roles it plays in this life now, and why it plays those roles at a particular time and

place. I can't tell if the kind of moral relativity that developed with Hinduism is similar to what the West has now, and if the role of moral relativity is similar. I can't tell if the West now is growing the kind of moral relativity and social relations that Hinduism set up about 500 CE (AD). It might help to read how John Milton depicts Lucifer (Satan) in "Paradise Lost", as a confused super-hero. If you can find episodes, it might help to look at the TV show "Lucifer" from 2016.

Think of life as a Dharma drama. Small characters in life can be both good and bad. Big characters can be both good and bad. Bad characters are needed for good characters to develop their full goodness. No matter how bad it seems, it always turns out well in the end. It would not turn out as good as it could possibly get if it did not get really bad along the way. Good (God) can turn evil into even better good. Good (God) could not turn evil into the best good if evil was not really evil first. Everyone is a mix of both good and bad. Even the worst bad guy has a good side. Good needs bad. Good needs bad to turn out as good as good could be. Good and bad depend on each other. To be bad really is to advance good. There is no absolute bad because good always subsumes bad and good needs bad. You do what you have to do given who you are. If you don't do what you have to do given who you are, then you are not being better or worse, you are being stubborn and selfish. Even if you are bad by nature, you are being even worse and more selfish if you refuse to do the bad that you are by nature. You hinder the normal relations that need to go on so that everybody else can do his-her job and the whole drama can move on toward the perfect ending, and then do it all over again. Everyone has a place that includes both good and bad, and everyone should act out his-her place as indicated in his-her character.

To have real fun and to feel fully alive, we must have real risk. God (Dharma) is immune to real risk. For God to have something like real risk, God must first fool himself. God fools himself by falling asleep. When asleep, he dreams he is real particular human beings who are susceptible to (pretend) real risk and so can feel fully alive. Human beings are a way in which God fools himself so as to have fun. Bad guys are part of falling asleep, (pretend) real risk, and having fun. Without bad guys as obstacles, there would be no fun. Without bad guys, we can't fool ourselves into thinking we are in true jeopardy so we can get the full feeling of being alive. God is both good guys and bad guys, both good and bad.

Badness is not really bad. Badness is an indirect way of contributing good. The system is able to turn badness into greater good. You really do good when you do bad. You can do bad with the consolation that you really are doing good. The system needs someone to do bad. Bad guys provide the turmoil out of which new creation and new goodness arise. Good and bad make each other, and so make each other better. So, if you feel like doing bad because it is part of your character, or just because feel like doing bad right now, go ahead. It is your Dharma.

By this point, we have full-fledged moral relativism including a lot of ambiguity.

How much bad is too much? How much bad can be mixed in with good before the good turns bad? Do we have to suspect some characters who want to good or all characters who want to do good? We can't answer these questions if we accept the point of view given above.

(16) Somewhat as in Mahayana, in Hinduism, almost all people should be making spiritual progress. You should work to be a better Hindu, a better player in the Dharma game. You should work to understand the Dharma system. People are assessed not only by how well they carry out their obvious current role

now but also by how well the progress toward greater understanding and compassion. Of course, only holy people fully succeed, but that does not mean you should not work and it does not mean you cannot be assessed also by your progress. This attitude allows Hindus to make sense of the greater insight that most of us have as we get older, and the fact that some of us progress faster than others.

If we take the idea of spiritual progress seriously, it means that, someday, all Hindus will understand the Dharma game. In that case, will the game end? In some versions of Hinduism, as in Mahayana, it does. But in most workaday versions, it does not. There seems to be no end to the supply of un-enlightened people, and no end to the progress that most people need to make just to carry out their current role let alone to get more adept at the system as a whole. So, in practice, people don't worry about everybody reaching enlightenment and the system ending but do take spiritual progress as evidence of a system.

If everybody should be making steady progress, albeit slowly, where do all the un-enlightened people come from, and what is their role? As far as I know, there is no clear answer as to where they all come from because there doesn't have to be. The Dharma at play can produce an infinite supply of not-fully-awake players to keep the Dharma game going.

Their role depends on their place in the Dharma system. Usually, their place is to support other players in the Dharma system. Sometimes other players support them. In particular, people who are making only slow progress (or none) provide a means for other people, who are making clear fast progress, to show their spiritual advance by doing good deeds, helping others, helping society, and so helping the Dharma game along. As heroes need small people, as heroes and villains need each other, so fast learners need slow learners so fast learners can put into practice what they have learned.

In acting primarily to let fast learners show their advanced Dharma level, are slow learners still fully persons? Can we still really think of "you are that" between fast learners and slow learners? Ideally in Hinduism, slow learners are still persons and everybody is still the same. In practice, and so in another deeper form of theory, slow learners are not fully persons. They become mere tokens in the Dharma game. They are means to the ends of other better persons. The ideal theory allows us to overlook this demotion. You can treat "other people" as mere means to ends and still feel good about it. See below where I discuss the movie "Groundhog Day".

(17) By the time of Jesus, Hindus had developed the idea of "bhakti" or "devotion"; see below. Few people can understand the full Dharma system, and the gap made many people feel lost, just as earlier many people felt lost when Brahmins controlled the ritual and cosmological system. Bhakti states that anyone can be fully in contact with the system, fully realized, and successful. All you need do is devote yourself to one large coherent part of the system. You need to make sure you devote yourself along moral lines and act morally; I do not consider odd devotion such as Thugs. I think most people become devoted to a god such as Vishnu, one of the forms of a god, avatars of a god such as Krishna. Some people devote themselves to a calling such as education. Bhakti is the religious feeling that people have when they cannot know the depth of ideas such as Dharma and Salvation-through-Grace yet they still feel religious, want to belong, and want to feel "plugged in". It is similar to Christian devotion toward Mary, the saints, and Jesus. Bhakti is what monks and nuns do who pray constantly. It is what Christians do when they perform the liturgy and make offerings of all kinds. Bhakti likely is the single most important way in which Hinduism overcame rivals such as Mahayana Buddhism.

Although devotion is the way by which most people are in the Hindu system, and bhakti plays a huge role in practicing Hinduism, it does not add much to the ideas given above, for example, to Dharma and its implications. So for now I overlook the practical importance of bhakti. I take it up again at the end of the chapter when I assess Hinduism more.

(18) In the view accumulated so far, what does another religion such as Christianity, or an ideology such as democracy, look like? Hinduism is like the Army Rangers while other religions and ideologies are like the Boy Scouts. Other religions and ideologies are for children while Hinduism is for adults. Sometimes other religions and ideologies are for children who are impetuous, petulant, “in a mood”, and stuck on one idea while Hinduism is for adults who have gained from their own experience and from the wisdom of many wise people and who can nobly graciously assess the whole. Other religions and ideologies are serious and to be taken seriously in their world, but are a mere reflection of something better in Hinduism; and adults in the big world should seek something better. Hinduism sees other religions and ideologies much the same way that large Christian Churches see other churches, in particular see small Protestant sects, and more particularly how the Roman Catholic Church sees the many Protestant Churches large and small. Other idea systems are only approximations to Hinduism. They do not come up to the mark because they were made by people who did not appreciate the Dharma. Another religion or ideology is the product of people who might be fast learners in their own societies but are slow learners compared to Hindu holy people. (Smart people in other societies might have had the native talent to be a holy person in Hinduism but had the bad luck to be born elsewhere.)

For example, Jesus taught us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Some early Church members took that idea to mean there were no social distinctions at all - rich and poor are alike - a logical implication within the early movement but a wrong strategic move anyhow. Other members had to correct them and had to place compassion in the context of social order – even though there is no basis for placing compassion in the social order if we follow the strict logic of Jesus’ teachings and there is much basis for crossing proper social lines. While a Christian might love his-her neighbor as him-herself, he-she had better not treat the neighbor as him-herself, and had better not expect such treatment even from other Christians. This tension in Christianity was never fully resolved. This mistake comes easily in Christianity and other non-Hindu systems because they do not base compassion (love your neighbor) on correct ideas of “distinct and same within Dharma”. Hinduism already did this, and so Hinduism did not need the corrections of early Christianity, and Hinduism does not lead to mistakes about social order and proper behavior.

Islam means that we have to submit to God and to the Will of God. This view is correct when it means to accept the reality of the Dharma system. Islam is a version of bhakti (devotion). However, submission to Allah is not up to the mark if it means to accept arbitrary commands from an unknowable deity, especially as those commands are conveyed and interpreted by people. The Dharma system has reliable knowable logical regularities. Nobody need accept the ideas of other people just because other people claim they speak for God or even just because the ideas are written in a book. Study the Dharma.

Western democracy tries to institutionalize, in a political way, the idea that we are all the same (“you are that”) by pretending we are all equal in rights, power, abilities, and responsibilities. It pretends that all cultural, social, gender, ethnic, religious, and occupational groups can quickly learn self-government and can fully succeed at self-government. It mistakes a spiritual truth for a political principle. This mistake

promotes an unworkable bad system in which the masses are easily misled by rich and powerful people and-or the masses lead the whole nation astray. For us to see that we are similar, and to know what to do because we are similar, first we must see that we differ, and must see that differences persist even after we know we are similar. We have to understand that both similarity and difference are important, and have to place both in a single social-political system. We need a political system that respects both similarities and differences, and puts each in its own proper arena. Hinduism does that but Western style democracy does not.

Fascism is the parallel mistake to democracy, where power is used as a substitute for compassion, and where the idea of “you are that” is completely overlooked rather than overstressed. Fascism does not care much about similarity but it pretends a lot of compassion. It builds institutions in which, ideally, able people should extend compassion so as to knit together the entire social order but in fact fascism gives power to wealthy people so their power and the whole social order are one power. Precisely because Hinduism accepts both similarities and differences, it can provide real compassion and the one set of true institutions based on real compassion.

Many Christians believe God can turn everything bad into something even better. God is good and God is stronger than evil, so God must overcome all evil in the end. God even overcomes all evil as we go along, as when God-as-Jesus came into the world to lead us to salvation even before the end of the world. A bad illness can bring people together, make us value each other more, and make us value life more. In fact, though: nothing necessarily in Christianity leads to the belief that God can turn all evil into something even better as we go along, and pure Christianity is pessimistic about how the world turns out until the bitter end – read the Book of Revelations. In Christianity, the world is fallen, and that means evil wins most of the time until the end. In contrast, for example from the movie “Marigold Hotel”, Hindus say, “it is not over until the happy ending”. The Dharma does lead good to win even as we go along. The Dharma does turn evil into something even better. This Hindu idea includes the Christian idea that God can turn bad into better. This happy result is a necessary part of Hinduism. No matter how bad it is now, that is all part of a bigger plan in which everything turns out for the best. For example, the struggles for independence and self-government in India made the long oppression of the “British Raj” into something even better than if there had been no British conquerors. World War Two was horrible but did lead to the United Nations, one world economy, the spread of democratic ideals, and freedom and comfort for billions of people in the world. Global climate change might lead people to see that we must act soon. In the Mahabharata, the victory of the good brothers over their bad (in context) cousins led to greater good even at the cost of great carnage. As long as the wheel of Dharma turns, it produces good that necessarily overcomes bad. Behind every black cloud there really is a silver lining. It is the Dharma.

The information that follows won't make full sense until the material below on avatars, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva but it is well to mention some of the information here: Except perhaps for Buddhism, no other religion can account for the holy people, heroes (including heroines), gods, and avatars of Hinduism, at least in a good way. In contrast, Hinduism can account for ALL the religious people, and many religious fantasy figures, in ALL other religions. Hinduism can do this gracefully without straining its basic ideas. ALL figures in ALL religions are manifestations of the Dharma. ALL serve the Dharma, each in his-her own way, suitable for the time, place, and people. There is nothing odd in this, nothing to be surprised at. This result is part of the Dharma turning all situations to goodness. It is part of the ultimate happy ending that happens all the time. For example, most positive religious figures are best seen as manifestations

(avatars) of Vishnu, a god who sustains the world and keeps goodness obviously in control. Moses, the Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, and Mohammad are Vishnu at work making the world better, safer, and saner. When other religions claim that their figure is a god, that claim does not offend Hindus, and makes much sense. Jesus is both a great yogi (holy person) because he was human and a great god because he did the work of God. In Hinduism, there is nothing odd about that status at all, and even to be expected if we rely on the Dharma. Even bad people who seem to make the world worse for a while really only make the world better in the long run. They shake up the world so that agents of goodness can make it better. Bad figures include Napoleon, Hitler, Tamurlane, Stalin, and Mao. They are manifestations of Shiva. Creative people such as David, Michelangelo, Leonard Da Vinci, Steve Jobs, and the Beatles are manifestations of Brahma, especially when they are also a little amoral and adventurous (not immoral).

To put this Hindu view in perspective, most other religions, especially Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, see the figures of other religions as demons out to conquer the world and-or subvert it for humans, they think of other religions as evil ideologies out to enslave souls to evil demons, and they necessarily see all other religions as exclusive rivals – you either believe us or them. In comparison, the Hindu idea is a breath of fresh air and a ray of cleansing sunlight. For the non-Hindu, all other religions are a great evil to be fought at all cost while for the Hindu other religions are gateways to a greater truth and are to be nurtured until people find the greater truth. Other religions naturally teach hate amid love, as we can see in radical Christians and Muslims in the year 2016 while Hinduism naturally teaches open tolerance. This Hindu view is a strong force behind “all paths lead to God”.

Again, the following information makes more sense in light of the seven paths explained below but it is well to mention the ideas here: Most religions offer only one real path to only one real kind of salvation. In Christianity, you must accept Jesus as God. In Islam, you must accept Allah as the one and only God and accept Mohammad as the greatest, last, and most authoritative prophet. In Taoism, you need to find the Way and act accordingly. In Confucianism, you must make Heaven your model so you can be a model to others. In theory, in Hinduism, there is only one salvation and that is to see the Dharma system fully. In practice, and in accord with theory better understood, there are four official paths and seven unofficial paths. The four official paths are: (1) withdrawal, contemplation, and yoga; (2) intellect; (3) moral action; and (4) devotion (bhakti) to a god or avatar. ALL the salvation plans of ALL other religions can be seen in terms of these plans of Hinduism. NO other religion gives all four (seven) plans equal weight as does Hinduism. ALL other religions stress only one or two plans, usually devotion and small moral acts. Even when another religion sees that other plans are part of the natural “spiritual” life of some people, it gives those other ways weight only as they lead to devotion, as when Christian monks meditate to better worship Jesus and Sufis meditate to better worship Allah. ALL other religions and ideologies can be seen as incomplete and frustrating approximations to the full spiritual options of Hinduism. A Hindu who practices one way does not look down on Hindus who practice any other way. A Hindu who practices one way does not want to look down on other religions and ideologies that practice other ways, and is surprised when they look down on him-her.

Hinduism promotes “live and let live”, accepts that people need not have full knowledge of dogma to be religiously valid, accepts that people can differ and still be religiously valid, and accepts that people can approach religion in many ways. When combined with the Hindu ability to explain a huge variety of religious figures as servants of the Dharma, we can understand why Hinduism fosters amazing variety,

even open contradiction, without anxiety. Hinduism has a hundred thousand compatible sects. If you can find a way to get along, then you can find a way to God and the Dharma.

Pretty much any slogan or any feature of any religion can be found in an idea, attitude, social relation, or ceremony of Hinduism. Christian sacraments can be subsumed as Dharma acting on people to change them more in accord with the Dharma.

Because Hinduism can look at all other religions and ideologies this way, Hinduism can see them all as lesser versions of itself. It can encompass them and make them relative.

Because Hinduism can encompass and make relative all other ways of thought, Hinduism can look down on other ways as I described in the chapter on Relativism. It can say that other ways do lead to a god but other ways are inferior paths to a lesser god. Hinduism can encompass other ways in its ideas of society and human social life, including the aspects that I dislike.

The ideal, when stated as above, is appealing. When stated to bring out Hindu smug self-superiority, is not appealing and is usually annoying. The actual practice is far short of the ideal, and it is even more annoying. All religions are annoying in practice but not all religions have the tools for understanding that Hinduism has and yet still abuse them. When we see such big gaps between good ideal, bad ideal, and actual practice, then we have to suspect the founding ideas, that is, the impersonal Dharma system. So, I deny the impersonal Dharma system. I prefer the personal Judeo-Christian-Western system even with its faults and its gap between ideal and real. I work not to let it lapse into its own stupid errors, such as blaming other religions and religious figures on demonic cunning.

The antidote is to not accept the starting point of the impersonal Dharma system. Insist on some moral relations and personal relations, and insist they are not relative as described above. Find a clear set of principles about specific actions and relations, such as the Golden Rule, “applies equally”, equality under the law, and decency without prudery.

While resisting the impersonal Dharma system, don't fall back into narrow-minded bigotry. Keep the open-minded tolerance that the best Hinduism preaches even if practiced Hinduism does not follow it.

(19) Above I said the idea of “you are that” (“we are the same”) from the Upanishads can be pushed to the idea that we are all sparks of God, and even that we are God himself (Dharma itself). I am God and you are God. We are both God because we are all the same, and we are both the same because we are all God. If we all play a part in the drama, then we are the drama, and are all equally the drama. In terms that start from the Gospel of John and go beyond the Gospel: Jesus is the Child of God and is God; and so we are God too only we might not know it yet; that reason is why we can all become Children of God through Jesus; we borrow his knowledge of this truth.

In the 1950s through 1970s, some Westerners pushed this idea to silliness. This idea fueled the claim of religious charlatans. Although Alan Watts was part of a movement called “California Taoism”, in fact, to me, his ideas were more Hindu than Taoist. He wrote that Westerners, Jews, Christians, and Muslims are all appalled at a claim of “I am God”, but, to an enlightened person such as Watts or a Hindu, the idea is almost trivial. To a Hindu, we are all part of the Dharma game, and, at heart, are all the core of the

Dharma expressing itself temporarily in a particularity. It is about time we realized it and we started acting accordingly.

While this idea is an implication of Hinduism, I don't think smart Hindus make much of it. Smart Hindus who do get it don't push it the same way that confused Westerners and religious charlatans do. If you really know it and feel it, you don't make a point of it.

I don't agree with it. At the same time, I don't think other all people who feel it are crazy although some might be. It comes naturally with the "Grand Canyon" feeling of something bigger than me of which I am a part. We have to keep in mind that we are still only a part even when we do sense the bigger than me and do sense that it sometimes works through us. I do think some people who say "I am God" are selfish connivers. Some Westerners overstress the idea of "I am God" to use against Hinduism by saying that Hinduism is self-delusional self-indulgent self-idolatry. I don't agree with their extreme reaction either. The idea "I am God" is easily abused by non-Hindus, it does not play a big part in Hinduism, and it is not needed for other points here, so I don't go into it further.

Other Ways to Look at the Whole System.

A handy way to look at this system is through gender. Like good guys and bad guys, heroes and helpers, we have two basic genders of women and men. They need each other. By splitting, the world (Dharma) can play a never-ending drama about getting back together again. By getting together occasionally, the genders create more men and women to repeat. The new men and women are not exactly like the old. The new are similar enough to keep things going but different enough to keep it interesting. The new create more new, and so on, for a long time. Each generation thinks it invented the whole game. To a more enlightened person, the world splits not into two genders only but several genders. Most genders are needed in their own way. All gender interactions are always interesting even if annoying too often. Gender is only one of the many ways in which the system diversifies and unites at the same time.

The varieties of gender can blur the lines of gender – although in "rom coms" the basic fact of two distinct mutually-needed and mutually-attractive genders is never at risk despite blurring. We also have genders that are not best seen as varieties of a major gender, or due to blending, and are best seen in their own right. We have metrosexual men, tomboy women, dandies, girls who like softball, girls who study martial arts, men who bake, etc. All these are needed for the full richness of the story.

In the 1920s, vampires, zombies, and werewolves were bad. Beginning with Lon Chaney for the original werewolf movie, by the early 2000s, they all gradually developed a mixed character, and many are good. They stimulate good guys to be better, do good deeds themselves, the better ones fight the worse ones, and they all provide plot movement. In the 1950s, all space aliens were horrible. By the time of the movie "ET", they were good. In the 1960s and through the movie "2001: A Space Odyssey" and the first "Terminator" movie, all super machines were also super bad. By the time of "2010", the sequel to "2001", through all the sequels to the "Terminator" movies, and through movies like "Johnny Seven" and "Chappie", most machines had become friends. In the 1950s cowboy movies, there were "white hats" versus "black hats", and never the twain shall meet. By the 1970s, good guys were often worse than bad guys. In the 1930s, gangsters were bad while cops were good. By the 1970s, too many cops were corrupt. In the 1950s, everybody wanted a high-paid secure job in the modern business corporations that

were shaping the world of the future. By the 1990s, corporations were behind the corruption of government at the highest level and they were the spear point ripping apart the heart of nature; yet people still want jobs with them. What happened to all these creatures and people over a hundred years in America is what happened to bad guys and good guys in Hindu literature and ideology. Good guys need bad guys, and vice versa. In all good guys, there is a bit of bad, just as in all bad guys there is a bit of good.

In Christian terms: God has a plan. God has a plan for everybody and everything, no matter how big or small. We all play a part in God's plan. Everything that happens is a result of God's plan. It all works out well in the end because of God's plan. God foresaw everything and made allowances for it, including the bad results of free will. God foresaw the revolt of the Devil, and arranged so everything would turn out all right anyway. God turns evil into greater good, such as the killing of Jesus. That is one meaning of the Resurrection. We all do best when we go along with God's plan for us and for the world. Even when we go against God's plan in the short run, we cannot do so in the long run. We can take great joy in God's plan and in whatever small role we play in God's plan.

In terms of "Star Wars": the Light and Dark side of the Force came from one source and are destined to be reunited. What looks like separation of the two sides of the Force is really only a temporary situation, and the temporary division leads to a greater and happier reunification in the end. The Force has a plan. Quigon Jinn and Obiwan Kenobe thought Anikin Skywalker was the One who would reunite the force, and they were correct, but indirectly. It was necessary first that Anikin Skywalker first go over to the Dark side of the Force so his son, Luke, could reunite the two sides of the Force in an even greater, stronger, and longer way. Even small creatures such as "droids" serve the greater plan and can be crucial to the plan, as when R2D2 delivered Leia's message to Obiwan. Even apparent bad serves the greater good. Even when the Emperor thought he was carrying out his own amazing plan, really the Emperor was carrying out the deeper and more subtle plan of the Force.

In terms of "Lord of the Rings": God foresaw the revolt of Morgoth (the Devil) against him; foresaw the revolt of the Elves against Morgoth and, indirectly, against God; and foresaw that Sauron would return to Middle Earth to carry on the war. God has a plan. Even the littlest creatures such as Hobbits and Gollum play a big role in the overall plan. Even the smallest events, such as the chance finding of a plain ring, play a big role in the overall plan. God can turn evil against itself and for good. The making of the Ring was not the triumph of evil but the final undoing of evil. What looks like evil might be good in disguise, as when Strider the Ranger turns out to be Aragorn the King. Sometimes the worm turns as when the Ents finally rise up to destroy Saruman and his evil Orc army. The real story is not any one story in the saga but the fact that the story goes on forever: "the road goes ever on and on", and "not all who wander are lost". We all have a home in God's plan just as Sam had a home in the Shire, and we do what we do as part of God's plan just as Sam did it all for home in the Shire.

In terms of Mahayana: Good and evil are real but also illusions. They support each other. We should not come down too strong on one side or the other. Everyday life and enlightenment are the same, they only look different. Enlightened people and un-enlightened people are the same, they only look different. All enlightened people are also un-enlightened. All un-enlightened people are also enlightened; they just don't know it yet. They will in the end. When they do know it, they will return to the everyday world to keep the system going. A bodhisattva will come repeatedly to remind us and to save us by getting us to

accept the system and our role in the system. You might be him-her. The system supports, comforts, and guides you. What matters is the great system and that we accept our role in it. That is what enlightenment really means. What looks like the normal world is really a burning house of desperation while what looks like a burning house is really the normal world of plan and home. Both are the same, and both lead equally back to joy in the system. The system has a plan.

Hinduism can subsume and make relative all these views. None of these views can subsume and make relative Hinduism.

Cosmic Place Becomes Social Duty.

See Part 3. Bhakti (devotion) and the Hindu view of social life were two reasons why Hinduism replaced Mahayana Buddhism in India. All societies hold ideas about human nature, social life, human-nonhuman relations, the universe, and the supernatural. The issue here is not just that there is a relation. The issue is how the two shape each other into a particularly Hindu style.

The Dharma plays by becoming many qualitatively different things. If the Dharma was many copies of exactly the same thing, no matter how all are beautiful, adept, and wonderful; even if the Dharma world was millions of the same thing; then there could be no game, no drama, no advance, and no fun. If every ant were exactly the same, there could be no colony and no ant life. A beach is fun only partly because it has trillions of sand grains all nearly exactly alike. If a beach did not also have water, sun, surf, fish, cliffs, boats, and even sometimes some humans showing off, seagulls, and vendors, it would not be a beach we could enjoy. If every flower were a rose, there might as well not be flowers. If every plant in a forest were the same plant, really there could be no forest. If there were no inherited differences between very similar organisms in a species, there could be no evolution. If there were no sex or genders, life would be more boring. If beings did not differ, we could not feel the bridge between us, we could not feel “you are that”. Great compassion between beings would make little sense.

All different things might be equally God (Dharma) or might be equally “sparks of God (Dharma)” yet, still, within the game, and for the game, they are not the same; they differ. The game within which they differ is, for us, reality. It is the only relevant reality, as long as we recall that it comes from the Dharma.

The Dharma reality game has rules. Rules, reality, and difference-in-similarity imply each other. Reality comes from the rules of the Dharma dream game. There is no relevant reality apart from the rules of the game. Rules are needed because things differ. If things did not differ, we would need no rules and could not have useful rules. When things differ, we must have rules for interaction. Whenever we have rules, we also must have differences, reality, and a game.

It is good to see commonality (“you are that”) but equally good and equally needed to respect differences (“great compassion”). You must do both. You must see both ways. You are both one and different. Both ways are equally important and equally valid. To stress one or the other is to fall into one of the doctrinal disputes of Hinduism, and I avoid doing so. To stress that we need to see both also is to fall into a view but this view is benign enough for this book and does not require me to take sides in any of the endless debates of Hinduism.

For the Dharma to play an ongoing drama game, things must differ yet relate. In relating, things are not always equal; difference and relating imply some inequality; inequality is part of difference; inequality is part of relating; inequality is good. At any time, some things have to be more important than others. We can't all be Arjuna or Krishna. Some things have to be higher while others are lower. If every character in a play were the hero (heroine), even if they were all somewhat different heroes but still heroes, then there could be no play. If every character were the good woman, even if all were good women but each with her own good character (like a really perky clean version of "Little Women"), there could be no play. The cast of characters need at least as much diversity as the sisters in "Pride and Prejudice" and their different lovers.

"Different" necessarily includes "more adept" and "less adept". If all the characters in "Romeo and Juliet" were as adept at running the city, and running their families, as the Prince, then there would be no family conflict and no play. If every tough in the Montague and Capulet families were an equally good fighter, then there could be no fights. If every police officer were as adept as Sherlock Holmes, there would be no mysteries for Holmes to solve.

Diversity also implies "better and worse" in the moral sense, as noted above about moral relativity.

Multi-celled organisms work because not every cell is exactly alike although all carry the same DNA. Multi-celled organisms work because cells differ and they interact to support each other. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts even if the whole needs all the parts. The parts need to be part of the whole. The parts have to help each other. Until recently, biologists liked to think of ecosystems in the same way, and this view is still largely true.

The terms for variation and functional mutual dependence in organisms, societies, and ecosystems are "functional integration" or "organic solidarity". These types of organization differ from the "mechanical integration" or "mechanical solidarity" of a stack of wood. Organic functional integration is more interesting and more fun.

Diversity, and "better and worse", in morality and in abilities, are natural because they are needed in a Dharma system. Diversity, and "better and worse", in both senses, are a natural part of Dharma life.

Among animals and people, those who have greater than average ability are naturally less common than those of average ability. Animals and people who have lesser ability likely are less common than those with average ability too but they are less of an issue. Animal societies work best when they channel their members of particular ability, and-or greater ability, into tasks that need the ability, and when the societies have just the right tasks into which they can channel the kinds of abilities that recur often. Ant colonies work best when workers work, soldiers fight, and drones impregnate queens. The queen in a bee colony can make many eggs, some of different kinds, and there is a need for a bee that can make many eggs, and only one bee of that kind, so the queen fits the task and the task fits the queen.

Abilities tend to be inherited. The fit is not perfect, but, generally, animals and people of high intelligence tend to produce smart children while animals and people of modest intelligence tend to produce average children and animals and people of low intelligence tend to produce children of low intelligence. Musical parents tend to have musical children, as in the Bach family. Being a police officer tends to run in families

as in the TV show “Blue Bloods” although this tendency is as much due to situation as to genes. If Arjuna had children, we would expect them to be smart, good-looking, and good at war. The fact of inherited ability does not go with the modern politically correct “all children are above average” (Lake Woebegone) but it is true and it is part of the natural Dharma game.

What kind of society best goes along with Dharma naturalness and would support Dharma-ness over the longest time?

To see, it is easiest first to rule out some societies that do not serve this role well although they might play a role in a bigger Dharma game as inferior reflections of best Dharma society, as encompassed lesser versions of the best Dharma society. We do not want societies in which:

- There is no gender or sex and-or no recognition of distinct gender and sex, and their roles.
- Gender is rigidly split into two and only two.
- Everybody could do everybody else’s job equally well.
- Every job made just the same difference so that every plumber made just as much of a difference as the mayor of the city.
- Everybody could learn the job of everybody else.
- Everybody has the same power.
- Radical populist democracy prevails.
- Everybody has the right opinion about religion.
- The opinion of everybody counts equally in religion, politics, economics, etc.
- The opinion of only one person or one group counts.
- Rigid stratification prevails without any change over time.

We want ONE society in which:

- People recognize, accept, and enjoy natural differences (differences given by the Dharma).
- Natural differences include differences in ability and in moral stature.
- Different roles, and different people, mutually support each other.
- People naturally tend toward the roles that suit their natural abilities.
- Society takes account of natural abilities by providing tasks for the natural abilities.
- There are fewer tasks that require great ability and many tasks that require average ability.
- Ability is very largely inherited but not entirely inherited.
- People accept that characteristics and abilities are largely inherited.
- Social place is very largely inherited but not entirely inherited.

The only society that fulfills our needs is Hindu traditional stratified society. Hindu society is the only truly Dharma-based society. It is the only society that accords with Dharma-based (evolved) human nature.

All other societies are lesser variations of Hindu traditional society, and other societies make some of the mistakes listed above. All other societies can be encompassed in Hindu traditional society.

In Hinduism, everybody has a place in the cosmic system. There is room for everybody, everybody plays a role, and everybody is needed. As Jesus said, "My father's house has many rooms". In the early days of Hindu religion and Indian society, this thought likely was a comfort.

But this thought necessarily also has "flip sides" that are discomfoting. If you have a place, you must keep that place. If you do not keep your place, the system falls apart. You are now responsible not only for your own little role but for the entire system. Dereliction of role is not only a betrayal of self but of every particular player and the whole as well. You have to find your role and carry out its duties fully. Once you have found your role, that role is your role; you may not change roles. That role is you. You are your role. You become your role and not anything else. You find your spiritual cosmic place by your role in society and, with few exceptions, in no other way.

This way of thinking helps rich and powerful people excuse their position and excuse what they do in their position such as exploit the poor. They have a cosmic duty to act that way. They have a cosmic duty to act rich and powerful. This way of thinking is a way to keep poor and weak people in place by stressing that they deserve their place and their place is needed, no matter how humble or painful. This way of thinking reinforces the subordination of women. Women and poor people have a cosmic and social duty to act like women and poor people. Downtrodden pained people have a cosmic and social duty to take what the rich give them, and to act like downtrodden subservient people. This way of thinking reinforces the subordination of non-Hindus, non-Indians, and other relations.

It might seem as if seeing cosmic duty in terms of social station would foster stable good relations both between socio-economic-cosmic classes and among members of each class, but this is not usually so. What happens in real life is that people who have an advantage use the system to keep and-or augment their advantage and to keep down rivals. Their intrinsic ability does not matter. What matters is that they have a privileged position from which they can maneuver to keep privilege. Privilege takes the place of native ability. People with privileged station make sure subordinates stay subordinate. People accept a place not so much because they feel that is the place Dharma gives them but because that is a secure base from which to connive to be richer, more powerful, have more powerful families, and get more sex, or because it is secure. In using their station as a base from which to connive, people indirectly reinforce the whole system and, at the same time, make it a bad system. When people find themselves in a bad system, they use their place as a base from which to connive etc. It is self-reinforcing. In a system like this, people develop personalities that go along with the system, like the nasty people that developed in Nazi Germany, Russia and its colonies under Stalin, and China under the worst times of Mao. They are much like the system and the type of people ("the establishment") that have been a favorite whipping boy of American literature at least since "The Scarlet Letter"; yet they are still real and still bad. And so the bad system perpetuates itself in a bad way.

Westerners romanticize the Hindu ideal of diversity, everybody has a role, everybody is needed, and everybody helps everybody else, and Westerners make it seem fun, by taking for granted more freedom than is allowed for them personally in the real system, and by seeing their personal role not as a social role but as a cosmic hero who bursts all boundaries and re-defines everything as it should be. They see play rather than a rigid unfair system that fosters bad feelings. Westerners are wrong.

Whether, overall, this way of thinking leads to more good than bad depends on history, economics, social relations, and other forces that go along with it such as degree of personal choice. Since the population of India got dense, and certainly since India moved into industrialized capitalism, this way of thinking does more harm than good. Whether this thinking can be interpreted to help people in the modern world is one of the tasks for young Hindus. To appreciate this situation, it helps to look at how the train of thought was interpreted in Indian Hindu society, as in Part 3.

We went from pleasing ideas about diversity and mutual help to scary ideas about tight roles in a system. It is hard to start down this path without going all the way to that end, a “slippery slope”. Try to think how you would keep the best parts while dumping the worst parts. It is easier to keep the best parts if we think in terms of persons and a personal God rather than in terms of roles and Dharma. I find it very hard to stop along this path if I start from impersonal Dharma and roles in a Dharma system.

In America, we say we are all equal but we know we are not really all equal, we praise the idea of wealth according to merit yet we fiercely fight any inheritance tax, and we know we could not have diversity and mutual help if we really were all equal. We try to use “equality under the law” to balance ideal equality with ideal diversity and mutual help. In reality, we do not succeed well. In Hinduism, everyone accepts difference and so should mutually help but in fact difference leads to entrenched inequality and only token mutual help. Hindus accept diversity that feeds the system but not some important natural diversity such as homosexuality and non-traditional roles for women. In totalitarian systems such as Stalinism, in contrast to Hinduism, everybody should be treated the same but in fact are treated differently – the end result too is entrenched inequality. How can we see similarity, difference, equality, inequality, diversity, individual effort and reward, mutual help, and compassion so as to develop a good working realistic system? How do we avoid hypocrisy serving a bad system? While the current Western solutions are far from ideal, and far from what I can imagine as a real workable practical system, still they are better than alternatives in India, China, Africa, and to most of the rest of the world.

Young Hindus in modern democracies are in a bind. Modern plural democracy is not compatible with the ideas of Hindu traditional society given above. Yet young Hindus are learning to live in modern plural democracies. To merge Hinduism with modern diverse semi-populist democracy would require rejecting and losing many of the ideas given above. Most core ideas of Hinduism and a Dharma society can be made compatible with ideas of modern plural democracies but to explain how here would take too much space. Besides, young Hindus should solve this problem for themselves. Please see my other essays apart from this book.

Culture, Society, Religion, and Concordance.

Usually people are happiest when these aspects of life all line up: (1) our culture apart from our religion, that is, what we think (believe) in general apart from religion; (2) society, that is, the groups in our society and how they relate to each other; and (3) religion. Desire for harmony is true not only of Hinduism and Indian society but of almost all societies. Individuals seek social concordance as individuals and as part of societies. Even thugs, punks, rebels, and Satanists want the world to line up with their view, if only so they know what to be mad at and what to covet.

How, then, are Hinduism, Indian society, and Indian culture distinct? That is what this chapter is about. I can't explain any more succinctly than through this whole chapter.

I can say a few things briefly. Hunter-gatherer-foragers do not expect, and do not seek, the degree of concordance sought in Hinduism. (Except maybe for the Australian indigenous people (aborigines), who were not originally hunter-gatherer-foragers, in my opinion.) I doubt that an evolved basis to seek and expect Hindu-style concordance is a big part of our nature. We did evolve the desire to expect, and to seek, some concordance, but not nearly to the extent imagined in Hinduism.

Except for a few tribal societies, tribal societies do not seek or expect such concordance. Except for some brief times and places in European, Chinese, and Japanese feudalism, most peasant societies didn't do so. This desire for tremendous concordance makes the Hindu system odd and strident.

The most interesting way to see the concordance is how Hinduism is able to turn most ideas and most other thought systems into parts of itself, and-or into versions of itself. Again, how Hinduism does this is the subject of the whole chapter and cannot be summarized any better in this section.

Americans naturally, and correctly, resist strong concordance, at least in myth, as when the crew of the Star Ship Enterprise in the original TV show overthrew computer-based societies. Yet Americans overdo the case the other way, and we extol false chaos while actually being about as conformist as most other cultures-and-societies. This hypocrisy makes it hard for Americans to be objective and fair about how Hinduism does the job, and this hypocrisy would lengthen my task of explaining.

I had a hard time in graduate school because, at that time, anthropologists emphasized the concordance between culture, society, and religion. They apparently assumed that we could explain all if we could get at one. Usually anthropologists fixed on religion as a symbol system and used religion to explain culture and society. This view would please Hindus. It is not a true view of how human nature, culture, society, and religion work, or of how the basis for them evolved.

Societies and-or religions, other than Hinduism, that try to force concordance on human life, also worry me. Puritans were not nearly the prudes that modern myth makes them out but I still fear falling into such a society. Academia, with modern political correctness, seems that way to me. The great failed collective systems of the world, such as Russian and Chinese Communism, are also examples, and they failed for good reasons rooted in human nature. When a large Christian church – I will not name any, and there are more than one – tries to organize all life and politics, I fear it too.

We do need some order and some correspondence in human life. It is worth thinking about what kinds, and how much, and where to draw the lines.

“You Are That”, Compassion, the Upanishads, and Hinduism.

The Upanishads teach that we are all “in” each other, we are all connected. The proper response to this insight is compassion for other beings, especially sentient beings. Who would hurt even a bird when we know that, to a large extent, we are that bird? This feeling has the same root as the idea from Judaism, and Jesus, that the second of the two supreme bases for the Law is to love neighbors as ourselves. (The

first basis of Jewish Law is to love God, as he loves us.) The same feeling lies behind the Golden Rule and behind Kant's idea that all rules apply equally to everyone including ourselves and others. Achilles feels it when he sees Priam as a father and he gives Priam what is needed and right. We see ourselves as persons and see others as persons too; when we do, we can act only in accord with our feeling that we are alike. Of course, not all these views are exactly the same, and differences can be important. I do not disentangle any differences here.

In the numbered points above, when I began picturing Hinduism by showing the importance of all the little people and even the villains, I seemed to follow a logical extension of the Upanishads. When I continued by showing how bad guys and good guys depend on each other, I seemed to continue the logic and to move toward the inherent social endpoint. We can see the link from the Upanishads to Hinduism in this way but I think this way is wrong.

A change occurred between the Upanishads and Hinduism. The change is one possible development of the Upanishads but not the only possible development and, I think, not the best. The same change could be done in the teachings of Jews and Jesus if their teachings were taken along the direction of the points above. Their teachings did not go that way because of Jewish character and because Judaism merged with Greek and Latin thought in Christianity. Some versions of Christianity, such as Gnosticism, did try to take the feelings that way, but, luckily, formal Christianity defeated them.

The change in Hinduism comes when thinkers embed "you are that" and "compassion" within a Dharma system and social system. In the full-blown system, we don't feel the link to others and the compassion that the Upanishads and Jewish teachers wanted. We don't feel like one fully sentient person connected to a lot of other similar beings, some of which are partly sentient such as dogs, and some of which are also fully sentient such as humans. We don't feel person to person. We don't feel that the importance of life arises out of what we do on the basis of God's love for us and our love for others.

Instead, importance in Hinduism arises because I, you, he, she, it, them, and everything, are parts of a system. We are persons only in the system. Our identity as persons depends on our role in the system. Our sense that we are all the same arises because we are all roles-parts in the system. Our feeling that we should love each comes because we and others are parts of the system. To love others is to love the system and to love the system is to love others. There is no love of others apart from love of the system. In my view, to love the system is not the same as to love God or your neighbors. This difference in going from the Upanishads to Hinduism is similar to the difference between loving someone because he-she is a person versus loving someone because he-she is a citizen of your town. It is the difference between loving your country because it is good (or you wish it was a good country) versus loving it because it is your own country, right or wrong. It is like loving Big Brother in the novel "1984".

Of course, in real life apart from formal religions, many real Hindu people do feel the togetherness and compassion taught by the Upanishads, Jews, Jesus, and Homer. The difference is that one feeling makes sense in the context of simple human action (Upanishads, etc.) while the other feeling (Hinduism) does not.

When Hindus feel this feeling, they can refer back to the Upanishads to make sense of it and justify it, at least in the way that Hinduism interprets the Upanishads. In giving an approved context to this feeling,

they reinforce Hinduism and the change from the Upanishads to Hinduism even if they don't know they do so. They convert the feeling of togetherness and compassion to Hinduism even when, in fact, Hinduism does not make sense of the feeling in its original Upanishad form. Hindus who feel connection and compassion in the original sense of the Upanishads have a feeling apart from a Hindu Dharma system even if, after, they make sense of it in terms of a Hindu Dharma system. Hinduism pre-empts the feeling to serve its system. This is what Hinduism, and other systems that eat the world, do. Christianity does this when a well-dressed person on the street flips a dollar into the hat of a homeless person and the well-dressed person thinks he-she loves his-her neighbor as him-herself. (Please don't stop giving money to poor people on the street or anywhere.) The shift to Hinduism is much like what happens in the novel "Animal Farm". The ideas "You are that" and "Compassion" become slogans much as "We are all equal – but some are more equal than others".

Humans have a hard time acting on the basis of "you are that", "compassion", "love your neighbor", "you are like your neighbor", and "applies equally". People have a hard time simply treating other people as persons like themselves and treating nature as full of beings similar to themselves. People have a hard time acting in simple decency as did Achilles. I doubt any real society could run on this basis. People prefer roles and social systems; and societies have to have roles and systems. That is one reason why, after Achilles gave Priam the body of Hector, Achilles led the Greeks in funeral games to honor his dead friend Patroclus. Society restored itself, hopefully better now that Achilles has felt simple decency. Christianity developed roles and social systems out of Jesus' simple teachings. Hinduism developed roles and social systems that could refer back to insights from the Upanishads. Hinduism did a good job. Hinduism satisfies the great majority of Hindus. Hinduism meets human needs, including the need to recall "you are that" and "compassion" from time to time. Yet just because Hinduism is one very effective way to make a human system using versions of "you are that" and "compassion" does not mean it is the way I prefer or think best. In its success, Hinduism undermined "you are that" and "compassion".

Ideally in Judaism and Christianity, people should feel connected to other people and feel compassion for them not only because we are similar as people but despite that we differ in age, gender, wealth, power, social station, etc. People should feel connected and compassion because of the differences, not only despite the differences. We cannot simply ignore differences but we can overcome them often enough to see common personhood. We feel both similarity and difference, and sometimes we can overcome difference. Sometimes we revel in difference when we can see both commonality and difference at the same time. In practice, Christians are not able to bridge differences to feel love for all neighbors. In contrast to the Judeo-Christian ideal, Hindus do not feel connection or compassion despite differences or because of differences. Differences are acceptable walls. Differences are an indirect way to other kinds of connection through the Dharma system because they give us roles in the Dharma system. While a Hindu might feel something for a peasant or a beggar, he-she feels it because that thing is a peasant or beggar playing a role in the Dharma system and not because that thing is a person like him-herself who happens to be in different conditions.

I am not sure how the writers of the Upanishads wanted us to feel connection and compassion when we are distinct in situation. The Upanishads were mystical lessons for people who lived in the forest apart from society. Normal differences were not relevant. A Christian would read the Upanishads to say we should overcome differences to see our commonness underneath. A Hindu would read the Upanishads as pertaining only to a mystic link in the deeper Dharma system, irrelevant to social differences, and so as

really supporting differences because differences are natural in the Dharma system and the Upanishads support the Dharma system. It is worth reading the Upanishads to decide for yourself.

I don't know if a full Dharma system can be re-interpreted to re-capture the feeling of the Upanishads, Jewish teachers, Jesus, and Homer. I doubt it. I think we have to get beyond impersonal Dharma to an idea of God as a person too. We will see, as adept caring young Hindus move around the world.

PART 3: More on Embedding Cosmic Duty in Indian-Hindu Society.

See above about Hindu society in the section "Cosmic Place Becomes Social Duty".

Entrenched Rank, and Relativism.

Hinduism is pervaded by a sense of higher and lower that is hard to get across to Americans. The Hindu feel for rank is like the gender system in the Romance languages where every noun is either masculine or feminine regardless of common sense; Americans don't get that either; I struggle with it. In Hinduism, of two people or groups, one always is higher and the other lower: occupations, genders, classes, castes, siblings, families, callings, schools, skills, etc. Of two women, one is higher and the other lower. Of two doctors, one is higher and the other lower. Of two cities, one is higher and the other lower, like rivalries between two high schools in America in athletics.

The bare roots of ranking are fixed. Men always outrank women, within castes. Age outranks youth. Major caste categories are always ranked in the same order: holy people, priests, rulers and soldiers, peasants, merchants, and then others that I don't go into.

Rank and system go together. Anything has some a character in itself and gets some character from its relations to everything else. Each individual robin is the common worm-hunting friendly neighborhood bird but what it fully is, what it eats, who it fights, when it leaves for the south, and when it returns to the north, all depend also on where it lives and if its neighbors are jays, cardinals, other robins, or hawks. A yellow star is a yellow star but we don't fully understand stars unless we also know about red stars, blue stars, neutron stars, super novae ("novas"), galaxies, planets, and interstellar dust. The character of a whole house changes when a new baby comes or a parent dies. Who the child becomes depends on who it grows up with.

Rank is an important way that anything finds a place in a system and makes the system. Households, schools, and communities in which children outrank parents, teachers, and adults are far different from those in which parents, teachers, and adults outrank children. Cities are usually better to live in when neighborhoods are divided by socio-economic level and work type, such as middle class from upper class. Much as Americans hate to admit it, cities usually are better to live in when some ethnic groups form their own neighborhoods, as when Italians and Jews have neighborhoods. Ecosystems in which people are the top predator differ from those in which tigers, elephants, and king cobras are. Ecosystems in which people are the top herbivore (farmers) differ from those in which elephants are. Every year, popularity rankings drastically change network programming, usually for the better.

In Hinduism, rank carries over somewhat. Holy people rank higher than military people who rank higher than peasants, so holy people rank higher than peasants even though peasants feed and support holy people and when holy people depend on peasants.

Although the general idea of rank is clear, specifics can be complicated. Context and relativity support the system even when situations get fuzzy. A family can rank high within its caste but low compared to families in higher castes. Families focus on arenas in which they rank highly.

Rank does not always transfer perfectly. Rank does not always extend neatly across groups. Where comparisons might cause a problem, they are adeptly avoided. Family A is highest rank in city A while family B is highest rank in city B. When the two families do business, they avoid arguing about which is highest overall. In old India, warriors ranked above doctors while now doctors rank highly. Modern police officers are like the old warrior aristocracy. Now doctors rank above most officers but not necessarily above high ranking officers. So doctors and high ranking police officers avoid pushing questions of comparative rank. Still, the idea of rank remains.

As all over the world, power, wealth, prestige, and history can confute ideal ranks, while context and relativity help to preserve the ideal of ranking. All professional men are above all professional women. Yet a professional woman might be above a man merchant unless the merchant were rich and powerful, and his family had a long history.

Rank is not like an idealized chicken linear pecking order, and it is not necessarily the stuffy rigid horrible oppressive system of nasty higher-eats-lower that Americans dislike. Rank is more like the concern of a bride that everybody sits in the right place for all ceremonies. Rank is as much about peace and order as about asserting dominance. You don't want people who squabble to sit next to each other; and you do want people to sit next to each other so they have a good time, enjoy events, and the whole wedding is a success. Business firms need rank to run well.

In the Hindu view, the idea of rank, coupled with relativity, is a good compromise between the need for individual expression and the need for group life. Rank-with-relativism is the right blend of individuality and useful tradition that old-fashioned conservatives such as Edmund Burke praised. It is what Aristotle had in mind when he said people are "political (city) animals" and he supported aristocratic government. Hindu religion and Indian society take account both of individual differences and the fact that abilities are inherited. Hindu religion and Indian society allow people to go along with the history of their group yet to find themselves within the context of their group. In all societies, most group relations arose out of good practical use. Indian Hindu society allows good group relations to persist, and allows an individual to find him-herself in the context of historically good group relations. Indian Hindu society is natural. As natural society, it is the best expression of the Dharma on Earth.

I do not like Hindu, Asian, European, American, and other formal systems of rank but my dislike is due as much to how I grew up as to anything intrinsic in ranking or anti-ranking. American dislike of rank often is hypocritical. American attitude toward rank pretends an individual is what he-she is without consideration for what is around. The Hindu attitude goes to the other extreme but the Hindu attitude likely is more in tune with evolved human nature than is my egalitarianism. I find most people, even Americans, can get happy with the idea of rank and with how rank plays out. Americans love housekeepers.

Different Indo-European societies stress rank or equality, relativism or absolutism, and individual (part) or system (whole), and do so in different ways in different times in their history under different conditions. I don't know if Indo-European culture is unusual among world cultures. Why ranking, relativism, equality, absolutism, individual, or system wins in a particular case is not clear to me. How they all relate to each other is not always clear.

Why Dharma.

During the time of the Vedas, some Indian thinkers noticed that rituals worked on their own. A ritual did not work because a god made the ritual work. In fact, rituals compelled the gods somewhat. You acted out a ritual to invoke the god of luck because the ritual had power to make the god of luck work for you; likewise with gods of health, wealth, success, etc. Otherwise, why bother with a difficult ritual? Rituals had their own power. This is the basic idea of ritual efficacy. It is like magic.

Thus technique has its own power without necessarily needing the will of a god behind the technique. The world works through technique. If you understand the technique, you know how the world works. If you can get along with the technique, you can get along with the world and you can use the technique to do better. The technique of the world, how it works, is Dharma.

At the time, the Indian idea of technique was an advance on the idea of the will of the gods. It is like the idea of science in ancient Greece or like Tao, chi, yin, yang, and Li ("humanism") in China.

As the idea of technique developed into the idea of Dharma, it mixed in with ideas of rank and relativism, and became integral to ideas of how society works. To know rank and relativism, especially in a social context, was to know how the world works and so to know how to get along well with the world, especially the social world. Ideas of Dharma and society became mixed early in the development of the idea of the Dharma, and they have stayed mixed since.

The same thing did not happen in India as in the Greek development of science. China had ideas similar to technique (Dharma) and science in "Tao" ("way", chi, and yin and yang) and "Li" ("humanism"). I don't know why similar ideas went in different directions in the different cultures.

The Dharma is impersonal. It is not a personal god even though it leads to individual deities and leads to the creation of individual selves in human beings. The idea of Dharma establishes an impersonal force at the heart of Hindu ideas about how the world works, humans work, and society works. So Hinduism has to stress system. A solid system is based on a structured society that makes a place for the individual and keeps the individual in his-her place. This view differs from the Judaic-Christian-Muslim view of a personal God, and, I think, differs from the Taoist-Zen idea of the Tao and nature. I return to the effects of this difference later after I have said more about the Hindu system.

The idea of Dharma has a duality-and-vagueness that both allows people to feel subject to the system and prompts them to maneuver in the system. It is like Christian issues with faith and works, or salvation through grace alone versus what we contribute. It is like Christian and Muslim issues with the Will of God, or modern problems with free will (including legal responsibility) versus strict causality (determinism). On

the one hand, we have to be responsible for our own salvation and our submission to God; not even God can do this for us. On the other, we can only be saved by God's grace; ultimately we cannot earn our salvation, and, really, can do little toward it. In reverse order: On the one hand, only God can send us to heaven. On the other, we feel we can compel the Will of God if only we believe, believe strongly enough, follow all his rules, pray enough times a day, act well enough, Justify ourselves, Justify ourselves with a crusade, know the correct dogma well enough, or kill enough of God's enemies.

With Dharma, on the one hand we are subject to our inherited Dharma, and must find a place within the social-cosmic Dharma system. On the other hand, we can make our own Dharma-karma and we can improve our lot in this life and the next. If we can make our situation better in the next life, then we can also make our situation better in this life. We might not be able to change our station much unless we are a great king or a Buddhist, but we can maneuver within our situation to be better off and make our family members better off. We can hand off the benefits of our maneuvering to descendants. If we do better by maneuvering, that is the result of both our personal efforts and our past karma-Dharma, so even quite a bit of maneuvering and selfishness ultimately reinforces the system.

Such vague and contradictory ideas are the "meat and potatoes" of systems that eat the world, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, or Buddhist.

Actors in the Dharma Social System.

Here is the logical place to write how the Dharma system sees individuals not as person but as roles in a big system, and how people see themselves within the Dharma system. I cannot do this task fairly here. I would have to compare Hinduism with other big systems, and that would take up much too much space. Instead, I give a few comments and examples.

You can learn about Indian society and Hinduism from classic texts such as the Mahabharata but they tell more about idealized Hindu life at the time of Jesus than about how Hinduism turned out as an enduring system. At the end of the chapter, I offer a discussion of the movie "Groundhog Day" with Bill Murray and Andie McDowell to show how even a well-meaning best use of a system like Hinduism, with a strong emphasis on treating people well, still can lead us to overlook people as individual persons. A fairly good way to learn about Indian society and Hindu culture is to read Indian writers even when they were not born in India, such as V.S. Naipaul. You can learn from Westerners who lived in India such as Rudyard Kipling or E.M. Forster but they tend to romanticize India even when they describe the harshness of life there. If you are adept at looking back into movies to get at their presuppositions, you can get a lot from watching Bollywood, but it takes patience. I know nothing of other sources such as Indian television. You can learn from reading anthropological work on India but it takes a while to see through the conventions of that work as well so I offer none of it in the Bibliography.

The gist of my assessment: In Hinduism, people are not individuals but roles. People do not treat each other as individual persons with intrinsic value but as "stuff" in the stratified social Dharma system. Perversely, confinement frees people to be selfish as long as they fulfill the letter of their role. As long as people do not compromise their karma fate in the Dharma system, people feel free to use other people for their benefit. People do have a duty to carry out their role to other roles in the Dharma system, as a servant must serve a master and a master look after his-her subjects, but that is not the same as treating

people as persons even when the interaction is nice in particular cases. People are good at subverting duty even when the original intention was founded on good principles and the duties spelled out so as to promote humanity. This is like the proverbial nasty bureaucrat, such as a teacher, who uses the power of his-her position to “lord it over” the people who come under his-her sway, and proves that he-she has the power by hurting his-her subjects even without cause. Any system based primarily on roles alone, without also a big allowance for individual persons, is bound to fall regardless of the other good principles on which it was founded. People have to feel and internalize the idea of a person so that they avoid corrupting a system based on roles alone.

Even systems based on the idea of individual persons and the Golden Rule can fall when they lapse back into mere roles. I grew up in a big Greek Orthodox Church, and have seen other big Churches such as Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Methodist, Buddhist, and Muslim. There is a common way that big people in churches treat small people, and it has little to do with the teachings of Jesus and everything to do with the reality of human nature in a big system. American academia is supposed to be about equal individuals working for the benefit of all, about persons meeting persons, collegiality; yet it is not that. Hypocrisy in the West makes inequality in the middle of supposed equality worse. In some ways, Hindu churches are better than Christian and Muslim churches because they accept inequality and make the best of it that they can. But even that is not good enough, and, over the long run, it is not better than Christian and Muslim churches.

Krishna and Arjuna Again.

Return again to the classic story of Krishna and Arjuna from the Bhagavad Gita. Arjuna starts out feeling bad for all the people who will die as a result of the great battle looming. He feels especially bad for the little people, farmers and merchants, who will be killed without knowing what the war is about and without feeling that participating in a great battle leads to glory. Krishna tells Arjuna, basically, to look out for his place in the Dharma system and to let them look out for theirs. You have to do what you have to do, and let the chips fall where they might, including on the heads of the little people. Krishna rationalizes and he dresses up his rationalization by saying the Dharma system ultimately benefits them, if not in this life then in future lives. If Arjuna does not do his part, he hurts the little people more in the long run than if he does his part now and some of them suffer now. It is not hard to use this view to convince yourself of what you want to do, and to convince yourself of anything that works to your benefit. But it is a rationalization. I am not saying we should never go to war, but we have to think along the lines that worry Arjuna at the start of the poem. We cannot accept Krishna’s answer no matter how beautiful, cosmic, mythic, and useful for talking ourselves into something. We have to think better and do better. We might still end up in battle but we have to have better reasons than this, and have to consider the little people as persons more than Krishna really does.

Mohandas Gandhi.

The great Mohandas (“Mahatma”) Gandhi offers a surprising instance of how the stratified rigid Dharma system enters the minds even of people that we thought escaped it. I do not explain who Gandhi was; see the excellent movie about him starring Ben Kingsley. As with many “baby boomers”, for me, Gandhi is a hero. Martin Luther King took him as a role model, the biggest role model after Jesus. Gandhi did much that was right, into which I cannot go here. He did one thing wrong. (As I say elsewhere, “Maha

atma” means “great soul”, and it is a title rather than a name. “Gandhi” is a fairly common Indian family name, and it means something like “grocer” or “shopkeeper”.)

Gandhi usually fought non-violently against the caste (“Varna” or “color”) system of India. He met with members of the lowest group in India, the “outcastes”, when to do so could result in total ostracism for him and his family for life. He insisted that members of all castes, including lower castes and outcastes, should join equally in Indian democracy. So it seems he should fight for the abolition of all caste. Yet he did not. In fact, toward the end of his life, he urged people to follow most of the traditional caste rules, including that a child should take the occupation of his-her parents. In particular, a son should follow the occupation of his father, and a daughter should follow the occupation of her mother; the son of a baker should bake, and the daughter of a homemaker should care for a home. He urged his wife to act a traditional role. So that we don't misjudge Gandhi harshly, I speculate on his motives, although I cannot say I am clear about his motives.

(1) Gandhi correctly saw that modernization would upset society, and that Indian society needed stability to grow and to compete on the world stage. Sticking to the caste system could provide the stability that India needed until India could figure out how to change gracefully. (2) Gandhi knew India needed well-educated clear-thinking objective leaders who knew the issues. Some people like that might come from the lower castes, but not many. Most of those men – and they would be mostly men – would come from the upper castes. Upper caste people must take up their duties as upper caste members to guide the country well. They could not be allowed to abandon their duty to the nation and to the other castes. Upper caste members could be expected to do their duty well, and to put the country ahead of their own gain, only if other caste members did likewise. (3) Gandhi deeply felt the power of goodness. Goodness had to win because it was goodness and not through force. The power of goodness was part of the power of Dharma. Only if Dharma reigned could goodness defeat evil through intrinsic goodness alone. Social order is part of Dharma. The caste system is part of social order. To uphold caste is to uphold Dharma and to prepare for the victory of goodness. To upturn caste is to upturn the social order, deny the salience of Dharma, and undermine the path of goodness to eventual victory. Dharma filled Gandhi's heart and mind, as a good Hindu.

The links between the self, social duty, the greater stratified society, and the big Dharma system are at the core identity of Hinduism. Gandhi showed he was a true Hindu in the full sense. Even Gandhi could not accept Hinduism apart from this context.

I understand the reasoning but I cannot agree. This thinking allows Indians to excuse rape, oppression of women, and class oppression. It stops good institutions. The fight for goodness should not depend on a total social order and on the caste system. It should not depend on a stratified society. If Dharma is to be a useful idea in the future, Hindus have to think of Dharma in other terms. Hindus cannot support caste, bad traditional roles, and bad social ranking no matter how much they can rationalize in terms of Dharma. If the link between Dharma and social stratification is an intrinsic part of Hindu ideas, then Hindu ideas of Dharma and goodness are not viable in modern life and have to be rejected. Not even Gandhi can make such thinking acceptable. Modern Hindus have to re-think Dharma, goodness, and social relations in a way that is acceptable to modern life and modern values. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have to do the same with some of their ideas such as the Will of God.

Example of Ideal Personhood: Yudhisthira at the Gates of Heaven.

Here I use an example from literature to say that Hindus don't, and cannot, live up to their ideals. If they don't live up to their ideals, then what they really do is maneuver within the system. Hindu literature is a good place to read about Hindu ideals but not to find what Hindus really do. For that, you have to refer to history and social science.

Reminder: "Mahabharata" means "Great Story of 'Bharat' [India]". The heroes of the Mahabharata were the Five Brothers. They had to fight the villains, their cousins. The story of Arjuna and Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita is one small part of the Mahabharata. Eventually, after many long hard struggles, the Five Brothers won. The leader of the Brothers was named "Yudhisthira" ("You-DEES-thee-ruh"), which means roughly "victorious in battle" (it might also be related to the root for "justice"). Yudhisthira was Arjuna's older brother and his leader. Yudhisthira was grand but not perfect – he had a serious gambling problem - and he was partly to blame for the war.

Yudhisthira had adventures after the war, and then it came time to die. He hoped he would go to heaven after death, so he took along his faithful dog. When he and the dog got to the gates, the guardian, what looked like an angel, would not let in the dog. The guardian said heaven did not allow dogs. Yudhisthira could choose to go to heaven without his dog or to hell with his dog. Yudhisthira did not want any heaven that did not allow dogs, so he chose hell. While in hell, Yudhisthira was surprised to find members of his close family, and was not-so-surprised to find his cousins, his former enemies. Yudhisthira could get them all out, and up to heaven, if he wanted to, if he forgave them. Yudhisthira was happy to do so, and they all went to heaven. Yudhisthira learned that, earlier, the supposed guardian of heaven was really a devil trying to trick Yudhisthira, and the gate then was not the gate to heaven but the gate to hell. Any place that kept out sentient beings, including dogs, could not be true heaven. Any place that practiced exclusion on the basis of superior and inferior was hell. Any place that gave free rein to selfishness had to be hell. If Yudhisthira chose heaven without the dog, it meant he was not truly selfless, and so did not deserve the highest heaven. The highest heaven is the chance to forgive your enemies and for you all to continue on in life.

This story shows how the ideal system works in Hinduism and shows Hinduism's goodness and appeal. Compassion and forgiveness are important and always lead to good results. In the right context, people see other people as persons. In fact, people even see other sentient beings (dogs) as persons. The view of goodness is much the same as what Sartre offers in "No Exit" through showing us what happens when we don't hold this view.

The story of the man (or woman) taking his dog to heaven likely is more widespread and older in Indo-European culture than the Mahabharata. The idea was the basis for an episode of the TV series "The Twilight Zone", set in the Appalachian Mountains, starring Buddy Ebsen. A mountaineer chose his dog over false heaven, and then went to real heaven as a result. In the episode, the story was not about keeping the whole system going, or saving an extended family. It was about the simple decent act of a man to his friend, a dog. In the West, that is all, and it is enough. This is the core contrast of my beliefs versus Hinduism. I don't know if the writer(s) of the "Twilight Zone" episode were influenced by the Mahabharata.

Recall that Yudhisthira was not spotless; he had a serious gambling problem; his cousins took advantage of his serious gambling problem; and that is what started the war. None of the five brothers was spotless; each had his own vices that cause problems. As official enemies, the cousins had to have flaws greater than the Five Brothers, including standard greed, lust, lying, envy, and desire for power. But good guys share those flaws too, to a lesser extent, and the cousins had good qualities too including the qualities of the upper class: bravery, generosity, and loyalty to proven comrades.

As with Arjuna's act of going to war, Yudhisthira's acts of choosing his dog over heaven, and choosing to forgive his family and cousins, are in a system. Yudhisthira's gambling symbolizes the never-ending play of forms in nature, the variety of Dharma's dreaming. Yudhisthira's gambling problem symbolizes both the pretend real risk of the apparent world and the irrational commitment that we make to the world when we live in it as normal humans and are not fully awake. We think we play dice with our lives and souls but really we don't. The fact that Yudhisthira's gambling problem eventually leads to a good end symbolizes that the risk is only apparently real on one level, and that, at a deeper level, it turns out alright. Really, it is all play; serious deep play, but play. Everybody is related and linked, good cousins and bad, people and dogs. Nobody is entirely good or bad. Good and bad depend on each other. By interacting in the right ways, good and bad keep the whole joyous system going and so serve everybody. Everybody does his-her Dharma duty. The idea of Dharma can serve all needs and all other ideas. Compassion is the natural expression of Dharma. We are all saved in the long run even if only a few are saved now. We all have good lives in the run even if only some of us have good lives right now. By choosing connection and compassion, Yudhisthira saves family, friends, enemies, himself, and the system. With compassion, all good beings go to heaven and bring bad beings to heaven too. Heaven is not a steady state but is the continuing playful system even with its apparent good and apparent bad.

Raj, Preeya, and Leonard.

Recall the TV show "Big Bang Theory" in which one character is Raj, a young Hindu physicist. One of Raj's best friends is Leonard, a star of the show. Raj has a younger sister, Preeya, who just graduated from law school and is now a lawyer with an Indian firm that builds cars. The father of Raj and Preeya is a doctor in India. The family of Raj and Preeya is wealthy and upper caste. Preeya and Leonard had been having an on-again-off-again affair before Preeya moved back to India. Leonard tried to keep up a long distance affair. Preeya seemed to go along until she finally admitted that she had sex with an old boyfriend, and the affair ended. Raj's father and mother did not mind that Raj had sex with local women in America but they did not want Raj to marry an American or anybody but a high class Indian Hindu. While the parents likely knew of Preeya's dalliances in America and India, nobody ever spoke of her behavior in front of the parents.

Preeya and Raj are contrasts. Raj is like an ideal Hindu, including even a sexually ambivalent sensuous personality. He is kind, sweet, thoughtful, and usually considers the feelings of other people before his own. He puts up with bad behavior from other people. He is a social facilitator, and goes out of his way to consider the personal needs of other people and to make them feel welcome.

Preeya is a real Hindu. Preeya plays around with the power that she has as an educated woman with a profession and a job. Preeya maneuvers within her sexual, social, and job positions to get what she can. She does not want to hurt people but doesn't mind hurting people. The affair with Leonard had hurt Raj,

not because Leonard was a White American but because Raj objected to any man violating the supposed purity of his sister. Yet, while Preeya was in America, she got what she could from the local people even if it hurt her brother. Raj's objections were silly but that does not explain how brusquely Preeya handled Raj. Preeya knew all along she would not stay with Leonard but strung Leonard along because Leonard was easy to be with and he was the kind of person that a woman could string along to suit her needs. When it "got down to brass tacks" back in India, Preeya solidified relations that she needed there, until Leonard was a liability, then Preeya dumped Leonard and settled into her destined high class position and eventual marriage to an Indian Hindu. Preeya is good at using the system and using people.

When talking to educated or high class Hindu Indians, I have found their character oscillates between Raj, Preeya, and the parents, without being quite sure what to do.

Sad Example One.

The next two examples are a bit unfair, for which I apologize. Yet they are useful and not so inaccurate as to be false. I know that all other countries show these same bad behaviors.

As I was first writing this chapter, India was trying to prosecute a case against six men who gang raped a woman in a bus, beat up her boyfriend, and threw them both off the bus – while everyone else on the bus pretended nothing was happening. The woman died two weeks later. I don't know what happened to her boyfriend. At least a dozen such cases occur in India every year. This case was prosecuted only because of publicity and because the woman died in the public eye. Usually the police and society blame the victim, the woman. Even here where it is clear that the rapists are guilty and the woman did nothing wrong, spiritual and community leaders blamed her. They said: if she had adhered to traditional values by not getting educated, not working, not wearing dresses, and not using public transportation, she would have been safe. One guru said she would not have been raped if she had stressed to her attackers that she was a woman, weaker, and thus in need of their help; any real Hindu would have helped her then rather than hurt her. Other Hindus on the bus knew she was a woman but did nothing. Traditionalists say, "Rape never happened in traditional India, and it still does not happen in rural Bharat (idealized old India) where village counsels control women's lives. Rape only happens in cities in India (not Bharat) where modern life has corrupted true Hinduism." Of course, this case should not represent all of India, and stupid people from all religions have said the same when women were abused in their societies. Yet this situation is too easy to rationalize under simple relativistic Hinduism.

Sad Example Two.

As I revised this chapter, a woman associate of the diplomatic staff of India in New York was arrested for mistreating her Indian maid and for misfiling a visa. The diplomat said she paid her maid at least \$10 per hour and limited the maid's work hours, but, in fact, the diplomat paid her maid only about \$1 per hour and she forced the maid to work at least 60 hours per week with no days off. Not all diplomats get full immunity, and this one did not. When arrested, the diplomat was detained at an American police office. The police followed procedure, and did nothing wrong. The diplomat was not "strip searched" but, when Indian media reported the affair, the media said she was. Small riots broke out around India because of the supposed mistreatment of the diplomat and the reported strip search. As far as I could tell, no Indian media tried to find the truth of the case or arrest. As far as I could tell, no Indian media showed interest in

the welfare of the maid although she was exploited even by Indian standards, and she was exploited far worse than the diplomat. Compassion does not extend to foreigners or to lower class-caste people. The idea that people are persons (“you are that”) does not extend to lower class-caste people or women. This view goes against the spirit of the Upanishads but this view is allowed by the vagueness in the idea of Dharma and this view is required by the link between Dharma and stratified society.

PART 4: Some Implications of Hindu Ideas.

Waking Up and the System.

People who wake up in Hinduism are not necessarily “out of the system” as in Theravada Buddhism. Awakened people represent the world most aware of itself. People who wake up are part of the greater system, and are as needed for the system as sleeping people. Awakened people are like the small part of our brains that is conscious while asleep people are like the big part of our brains that is unconscious. Awakened people are more adept, often smarter, and often morally better, but are not categorically better than other people. Truly awakened people know this. That is why they know “you are that” and stress compassion. Awakened people teach sleeping people what the sleeping people need to know to carry out their role in the world well, as when Krishna teaches Arjuna.

You do not have to fully wake up to have a worthwhile life. Even people who only partially wake up, even full sleepers, can have a worthwhile life if they carry out their personal-social Dharma, if they are true to their role. You can support the joyous system even if you do not know it fully. Sleeping people might not be blissfully happy but they are usually moderately happy and fairly satisfied. Even if you do not fully feel the great system of joyous Dharma, you can partially feel the joy, and even that small amount of joy is still a great joy. Truly awakened people teach these facts to sleeping people as part of their social-personal Dharma as the mind of the system.

Looking at truly awakened people as the self-awareness of the system, looking at other people as asleep but still leading worthwhile lives, and looking at everybody as necessary parts of a total joyous Dharma stem, reinforces rationalization in the Dharma system, and reinforces the control that high caste people have over the system and over lower caste people.

I am not sure how people act and feel after they have fully awakened because, as far as I know, I have never met any such people. I have met people who claimed to be fully awakened but I doubt it. I might have met people who are fully awakened but had the good sense not to make a point of it.

Among people who accept the Hindu view, and among other people who accept a system of many lives, including Westerners, I have seen this attitude: They know they should feel charity, sympathy, empathy, compassion, and connection to all other life; but they don't really. They secretly feel better than others, and they struggle to generate some compassion. They try to “fake it”. Whether a person has awakened yet or not, it is a sign of superiority to be born in a culture, religion, social class, or nation that teaches true ideas and that prepares its members to wake up. They feel sorry for people who are not born in a religion etc. with correct ideas, and they look down on all the other ignorant underprivileged people. People who are born in another religion etc. have no chance of waking up. People who have no real chance of waking up are not interesting. For people in a superior religion to show much compassion to others can

be dangerous. People who know true ideas and are partially awake should maintain a correct haughty distance from others. They know a powerful secret and they should guard the secret so others do not learn distorted versions of the secret and thus dilute and pollute the secret. I have seen the same haughty bad attitude among Christians who start from a base of “love thy neighbor” and “Christian duty”, and among Muslims who start with the Will of a Compassionate and Great Allah.

Mahayana suffers from a clash between standard Buddhist dogma that life is not worthwhile versus the opposed idea that life is worthwhile as long as it is lived in the system. In theory, Hinduism might suffer from the same conflict but the conflict does not seem to have haunted Hinduism as it did Mahayana. In Hinduism, this conflict is the concern only of really smart people and really holy people. Ordinary people are content to live in the system and to take instruction from holy people, especially after the rise of the helper ideas described below. This attitude serves Hinduism as a system and helps Hinduism rationalize roles and serve society. This change might be one reason why Hinduism replaced Mahayana in India.

Everybody is Saved.

From the viewpoint of particular lives, not everybody does well and not everybody is saved. But that is a limited view. From the viewpoint of the whole system, where it does not matter if everybody eventually knows the whole system, everybody does well and everybody is saved. One possibility is that everybody lives long enough until he-she finds salvation, either by seeing the system as a whole or by finding the right devotion. Another more useful possibility is that you are saved even if you don't know it, and even if you never find the right devotion, but it is easier to think of people being saved in terms of knowing and devotion. You are saved because, as part of the system, you are the whole system. In Christian terms, people already have Grace whether they know it or not but if they know it, or feel it through devotion to Jesus or Mary, then they Grace is even more so.

This Hindu idea of salvation is similar to the Universalist idea of salvation in the Unitarian-Universalist Church and similar to some ideas in Mahayana. You are reborn until you get it right. You are reborn until you wake up, see how valuable everything is, see how beautiful everything is, become a useful person, stop hurting others, and “get with it”. This idea appeals to many Westerners and to many thoughtful kind people from all over.

I disagree with this idea in the Hindu, Universalist, or Mahayana forms. It is just not true that everybody wakes up sooner or later. It is just not true that everybody is reborn until he-she gets it right. One of the hardest lessons I had to learn in my own progress was that some people are just not saved. That does not mean that they are damned, but they are not saved.

In my view, there is no cosmic system so it makes no sense to ask if people are still integral to the system if they are not saved. It makes no sense to ask if saved people disappear from the system or are above the system. It makes no sense to ask if not-saved people keep it all going, and whether the system would disappear if everyone woke up at once. This is not my way of making everybody feel welcome. Some people do understand more than other people but that little additional knowledge does not automatically save them and it does not automatically damn the others. I applaud early Hindus for trying to make all people feel welcome by saying all people will be saved eventually, or saying all people are saved already but do not know it. But I disagree with the idea and results. It is better to accept that none of us knows all

the truth, almost all of us know enough to do a decent job, and we should just do what we can. My way of making people feel welcome is to say that most of us get a tolerable shot at life, and God is pretty good about the situation when he assesses us at the end.

Other Religions as Players in the Drama.

See point 18 above. Not everybody has to be awake and know he-she is awake to be a valuable player. People can be spiritual successes although they are not consciously awake. You only need to carry out your role (social-personal Dharma) properly. Even high-ranking Hindus other than holy people do not fully know the Dharma. Krishna had to explain the Dharma to Arjuna. The ideas of normal people are incomplete. The ideas of Hindu holy people encompass the ideas of other people.

Religions outside Hinduism are like the fully sleeping people and not-fully-awake people in Hinduism. Religions other than Hinduism do not need to see the full truth to be useful and to be largely true. Other religions lead people mostly to act well. When believers in other religions act well, they serve the Dharma regardless of what they believe. Sometimes people in other religions act badly despite the religion and sometimes they act badly because of the religion such as when they persecute people or destroy the art of other religions. Even in this case, the people might serve the Dharma system indirectly. They might spur Hindus to greater compassion or to develop arguments against bad beliefs. Just as Hindu holy people know all people are saved already simply by being in the big Dharma system, even if other people don't know it consciously, so Hindus in general know other religions serve the Dharma even if other religions don't know it. In serving Dharma, other religions are aspects of Hinduism. The dogmas of non-Hindu religions are only an approach to Hindu ideas. Hinduism encompasses the ideas of other religions. Hinduism is better, superior, and encompasses all other religions.

In Hinduism, everybody will get saved or is already saved even if they don't know it yet. I don't know if some Hindus consider other religions in the same light but I think so. Eventually other religions will come to see the truth of Hinduism and come to see that Hindu Dharma encompasses their ideas, and so will convert to Hinduism. That does not mean they will convert over entirely to Hinduism but only reinterpret their ideas in Hindu terms and come to accept Hindu analyses. For example, Hindus see Jesus as a great teacher, like a yogi, and perhaps an avatar of Vishnu like Krishna. To see Jesus that way hardly makes him less a son of God and less God than in Hindu eyes than he is in Christian eyes (Jesus cannot be the one and only begotten son of God in Hinduism). To see him that way would make him more acceptable to most people in the world and so more effective. When Christians come to see Jesus that way then they will in effect become Hindus, and Hinduism will encompass Christianity. In the long run, this subsuming is inevitable.

Dharma and Old Indian Society.

The ideas of Dharma, "you are that", and compassion are all vague. The vagueness serves Hinduism. But too much vagueness can be a bad thing. If Hindu mythical bad guys are also good, then why aren't revolting peasants and Muslim conquerors also good? The ideas need enough context so the system is stable enough to eat the world, and so the people who benefit from the system are secure. That is what traditional stratified Indian society did. By merging traditional Indian stratified society and the Dharma system, Indian thinkers came up with the right mix for their time of security and vagueness. If you grow

rice and give a proper share to the lords, then society keeps going and the whole world keeps going. If you don't sweep the streets well, and you don't marry the boy that your parents picked for you, then your family is disgraced, your caste is disgraced, all Indian society tumbles down, and the entire cosmos with all its joy comes to an end.

When the merger first arose around 500 CE, India was not the nation we see now of overpopulation with extreme rich and poor. India was about like the Roman Empire or Chinese Empire. Being a peasant, soldier, or merchant was not so bad. It was easy to accept that your role was given by your karma and social-personal Dharma in the system. Of course, now the situation is much different, and Indians have to rethink social relations and their economic system. The close ties between Dharma, "you are that", compassion, and Indian traditional stratified society have to break down. Young Hindus likely will salvage Dharma, "you are that", and compassion in some form acceptable in the modern world.

Heaven on Earth.

"Heaven on Earth" is the idea that this world is actually heaven but we just don't see it until we have our eyes opened. The apparent badness and ugliness of this world are assimilated to a greater beauty-and-rightness. What appear as mistakes are really helpful indirect ways to make the world more beautiful and more right. The obvious bad and ugly things of the world, such as disease and crime, are not here simply to contrast with the obvious good and beautiful things so we can better appreciate the obvious good and beautiful, but are really beautiful and good in their own ways once we see the whole rightly. It is easier to support a feeling for "heaven on Earth" in the context of a system of many lives. The two support each other. The feeling of "heaven on Earth" is part of the joy of a big system of many lives.

Without giving evidence, I said the mysticism in Mahayana shares this view. I think the same is true of Hinduism, and I also do not offer evidence for my opinion because that would take us too far off track. Hindus can feel this world is really the best world, is really alright. With that feeling, Hindus can pursue their apparent destiny in this world with vigor. For Hindus that find this feeling, it is one of the rewards of Hinduism. Of course, most Hindus don't find this feeling, any more than most Hindus fully wake up. But the idea is there, and the feeling is available for some Hindus.

I also said the feeling of "heaven on Earth" is not fully true no matter how true it seems to people who have the feeling. The feeling of "heaven on Earth" undermines the Real Risk of life, and I think the risk of life is real, not just pretending, and not just a game. The fact that the feeling is not true undermines to some extent both Mahayana and Hinduism. I don't say how much it undermines them, in particular I don't claim that it invalidates them. That is an assessment you have to make.

Regardless of what you think about "heaven on Earth", if you have ever had a feeling for the goodness-and-rightness of this world as it is with all its faults, use your feeling to better assess ideal Hinduism. Use it to understand the goals of the ideal system, how other people fit in, and, in the Hindu view, how bad and good persist in the real world. In its ideal form, apart from its real form, Hinduism appeals to a large good part of human nature.

Raj's Beautiful Idea Again.

Recall that Raj, from the TV show “Big Bang Theory”, said the Spirit (God, Dharma) works its will in the world through us. Here, we are the instruments by which Dharma does good. This idea is beautiful and I would agree with it if it were properly interpreted. I now take this beautiful idea and turn it into something ugly. I use a pseudo-Christian tone but the view easily could be put in a Hindu tone.

The Spirit cannot work its will equally through all of us. It might be that some badness serves the ends of the Spirit but not all badness is needed and not all badness works the will of the Spirit. It cannot be true that all child molesters and war criminals work the will of the Spirit. So we have to choose some people as more likely to be working the will of the Spirit and some people as not working the will of the Spirit or even as fighting the will of the Spirit.

A good society goes along with the will of the Spirit. A good society promotes those people who do the work of the Spirit and hinders those people who oppose the will of the Spirit. A good society has to be organized so it reflects the will of the Spirit and thwarts what is against the Spirit. A good society has to recognize that some people are more of the Spirit than other people. A good society has to make sure that people acting on their socially-given natures promote the will of the Spirit. A good society has to make sure that people who do some kinds of bad actually indirectly support the good society and the will of the Spirit. A good society has to accept that it will cultivate bad feelings in some people and has to turn those bad feelings into the service of the Spirit.

The best society to do all this, and serve the Spirit, is stratified society in which people get their character from their society, and their character serves their station, society, and the Spirit. Other societies might approximate what the Spirit wants but only Hindu society fully achieves it.

It is not hard here to recognize the rationale of Hindu society and the rationale used by a lot of societies in justifying themselves, people within them fixated on power, the bad acts of leaders, and predations on other societies. Bad Western nations and bad Eastern nations have used similar lines of reasoning too. The difference might be that this line of reasoning is endemic to Hinduism and turns a beautiful vision like that of Raj into a bad vision similar to fascism at its worst.

We might not see that this tendency is common not only in Hinduism but arises even when we think we accord people the most freedom from determination by a system. One of the common rationales for an unbridled capitalist market is the market automatically turns the greed of capitalists into the greater good of consumers and the whole society, no matter how much bad the capitalists seem to do along the way. The bad capitalists are really the good heroes of society who secretly do the will of the Spirit as the Spirit manages to turn even apparent badness into secret goodness.

No society automatically does the will of the Spirit and automatically instills in most of its people the traits that promote the will of the Spirit. We do not automatically do the work of the Spirit. Not all of us are the way the Spirit does its work in this world. We have to think in other terms to have the best society we can in the real world. It is good to try to do the work of the Spirit. It is good to dedicate yourself to doing the work of the Spirit. But you should never think you, your society, or your religion, has a lock on that.

PART 5: Helper Ideas.

The ideas described in this part are more important in practiced Hinduism than the abstract ideas from above, but, ultimately, these ideas depend on the ideas above. These ideas are what most Westerners learn about Hinduism. I say nothing about sacred cows.

The ideas here are among the most effective tools by which Hinduism is a big system that eats the world, is superior, and encompasses other systems. Hinduism uses these ideas to explain everything. These ideas allow the idea of Dharma to be a vague policy and they allow rationalizing. These ideas are how higher Hindus convince other people that we are all in one joyous system together, everybody has to do his-her duty, everybody has to sacrifice, and we all benefit from the system. These ideas are how the ideas of Dharma, "you are that", and compassion become just definite enough to combine with traditional Indian Hindu society and to solidify a big system.

Various Gods.

Like the Egyptians, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Germans, and pre-Muslim Arabs, the Hindus always had many gods. The idea of one system came later, and the many gods were fit into the system as best as could be done. The Hindu gods coalesce, merge, and split in bewildering ways. I do not sort it out. There are always gods with which a person can identify, to which a person can devote him-herself, and that can serve as the patron deity of particular groups.

At first, all the various gods were not considered aspects of the one main god. That idea developed after intellectuals, such as the writers of the Upanishads, unified the religious system. At first, individual people were not considered aspects of one basic god, as being a manifestation of the one basic god, as having a little bit of the basic god in them, or as being full-blown god. Those ideas also came afterwards, in all of their alternative forms.

Three Main Gods: Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva.

For people who like to think of one system, it is confusing to have many gods. Hindus eventually settled on three main gods as the most important aspects of the one main god-system. These three gods taken together are, in effect, the one main god. Each represents an aspect of how the Dharma mostly works, as the three persons of the Christian Trinity represent how God works. The three aspects can be applied to almost any phenomenon, including non-human life, human social life, and physics. With these ideas-and-gods, Hindus can offer a valid explanation for almost any social group, religious system, and social-historical event.

The three gods are an outstanding example of raising someone to a cosmic principle, whether that one is a real person such as Jesus or an imagined deity such as a bodhisattva or god. This tendency is a trait of Hinduism, almost forced on Hinduism by having an abstraction such as Dharma at its core. That is why Hinduism lives so well with many gods.

Brahma the Creator.

"Brahma" the god is not the same as a "Brahmin" or a "Brahman"; I am not sure of the relation between the three words and the things they designate.

Things happen. Suddenly, something new arrives. Something changes. Change is “in the wind”. Somebody invents something. We are waiting for “the next big thing”. Brahma is the force behind all this, the force of innovation. Brahma is a never-ending bottomless fountain of change. Americans think all change is good but Brahma is more like nature; Brahma is amoral. Brahma just causes new things to appear. New things can be good or bad, and they can be good or bad depending on who uses them. Brahma is like evolution when a new group of species arises, multiplies, changes constantly, and takes over the world. Brahma is like the power behind the radiation of the flowering plants, mammals, and of made-up realities in computer minds. In case you are misled by the Romanticized idea of creativity to think he is all beautiful and you forget that Hinduism is relativistic, Brahma makes all the weapons that Shiva and Vishnu use.

Vishnu the Sustainer.

The world would be confusing if it changed at a furious pace constantly. Without some stability, there would be no morality, no joy, and no point to it all. Some situations have to last a while so denizens can “get their bearings” and make something of the situation. Historical-social-cultural-political-economic eras have to last long enough, and be steady enough, so sentient beings can assess the world, find morality, and act appropriately. People in Hinduism understand “Dharma” as doing your duty as a human, social being, parent, child, and citizen. All these duties sustain the world. The biggest manifestation of Dharma is to sustain the world. The world has to be steady enough long enough so that people can do their duty and make the world go on enjoying itself. Dharma and continuity depend on each other. Vishnu is the force behind all this. Vishnu puts to good use what Brahma creates. Vishnu guides sentient beings. Vishnu makes sure people find their way in the swamp of Brahma’s creativity. In practice, Vishnu is the friendliest god and usually the most important god. If Americans were Hindus, Superman, Abe Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, and Franklin Roosevelt would be avatars of Vishnu. If Republicans were Hindus, Ronald Reagan would be an avatar of Vishnu.

Shiva the Changer.

“I am Shiva, Destroyer of Worlds”

The line is from the Bhagavad Gita. Robert Oppenheimer, the director of the project to create the atomic bomb in America, famously quoted it when the first bomb went off.

The usual title of Shiva is “The Destroyer” but I think that title misrepresents Shiva. Shiva is the disorder that allows creativity and allows new order to arise. All things must pass. All good things come to an end. Even all bad things come to an end. The rain falling on the mountain eventually wears down even the highest mountain. If people did not die, the world would have filled up with hungry zombies long ago. If bacteria did not eat corpses, the world would have filled up with corpses long ago, and there would be no fertilizer for new plants, trees, and people. Shiva brings change. Shiva opens the spaces for Brahma to fill with new creation. Shiva often is the first user of new creation. Shiva makes change by ending old forms. Destruction of old forms is an important ingredient in change. Shiva brings about change by rearranging things, as when the mountain erodes to become the new plain, the rain falls to become new flowers, and the mind gets rid of garbage to see true new ideas. Shiva is the headache before a creative

burst. Shiva brings weapons to warriors and to holy people on a crusade. We can see Shiva in all the toys both of Batman and his enemies. Physics teaches us that the total amount of matter-energy in the world cannot change but can only re-arrange into new forms. Shiva does not destroy absolutely. Shiva less often destroys old forms as rearranges old forms to allow new forms. Shiva increases the joy of the world by allowing for the creation of new forms. Shiva allows the multiple diverse world to go on in joy.

As you will see, one main way to God in Hinduism is through asceticism or renouncing the normal world. Asceticism and renouncing the world usually go together but don't have to. This way is like the path of a monk in the West. Shiva is the patron both of people who renounce the world and of ascetics. Shiva is usually the patron of yogis both male and female. I cannot spend much space on this aspect of Shiva and on the topics of renouncing and asceticism because they are too big. Also, for most Hindus, these paths remain as ideals but are not very important except as some Hindus adopt mild ascetic practices in the same way Westerners now adopt mild yoga. A person who renounces the world successfully is said to "conquer" the world.

Brahma and Vishnu have sinister aspects as well as their usually joyous comforting aspects but the bad faces of these gods are usually well in the background and come out only on special occasions. Much more than Brahma or Vishnu, Shiva is sinister and marauding. Shiva uses weapons that Brahma dreams up, and Shiva does real damage with them. Asceticism can give a person great powers, and the powers do not always come out in good ways. To renounce the world, essentially you have to defeat the world, and defeating the world spiritually is symbolized by literally beating the world. The bad guys in the movie "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom" likely are Shiva devotees. The good guy villagers and local holy man also are devotees of Shiva, so aspects of Shiva usually are mixed. When Westerners learn about Hinduism, they can be fascinated with sinister aspects but they do not usually pursue them. To work our way through them would take a lot of space. Although Shiva sometimes apparently does evil and he apparently destroys large parts of the world, in the end, the evil leads to even better good, and this world returns or another takes its place. Shiva reminds us the system is greater than its apparent parts, and is really joyous even in destruction.

Asceticism and renouncing the world can go together in a different way than the stereotype sweet good forest-dwelling holy person. When asceticism and renouncing the world do not go together as they should, effectively they do not really go together at all; instead, power uses asceticism in its service so as to conquer the world. A person, demon, or god studies ascetic technique to gain power to conquer the world. Hindu versions of this alternative are too ornate to relate here, and Westerners usually have few examples for reference to make the task simple, not even from Indian "Bollywood" movies. Some villains in Bollywood movies do develop special powers through asceticism. Hindu myths and stories are full of people who take this path. The opponents of good guys in classic Hindu stories, including demons and misguided gods, usually study asceticism to gain power. These bad guys usually are devoted to Shiva. Westerners might have seen a parallel related example in a different venue. The Mahayana Buddhist version of asceticism-for-power can be found in Chinese movies in which a kung fu master retreats to the forest to develop a bizarre form of kung fu so as to defeat enemies and conquer the kingdom. Western comic book super villains are a version of the same idea as when Lex Luthor uses his time in prison to perfect a plot to develop some horrible weapon to defeat Superman and take over the world. In all traditions, West and East, the bad guy always fails because, after all, the world is intrinsically moral and good conquers all just because it is good. See the Bibliography for more.

Westerners now think of modest bad guys, some gangsters, and hard kick-ass avengers as the chaos of the world that brings down the older order so that the new order can arise. We glamorize and romanticize our bad boys and bad girls. We are wrong; but we do it anyway. The movies about the “Avengers” and “Shield” groups are more than enough evidence. About one-third of the movies starring Mark Wahlberg are on these themes. When we do that, we are much like Hindus who worship and admire Shiva in all his variations.

All Three Mutually Together.

Despite the famous line from Shiva, in fact Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva do not really destroy and remake whole worlds. They destroy particular worlds, or particular eras, within the greater system that itself remains through all changes. They never destroy the whole system of many worlds. There is only one system and there has ever been only one. Shiva sometimes lays waste to this Earth for a while, but this Earth comes back with the help of Brahma and Vishnu. Brahma never creates entirely new systems because he is within the one forever system that created him. The worst Brahma ever does is to create amazing new weapons for Shiva and Vishnu with which they battle to stalemate. The battle to stalemate does the destroying and is all the fun. In this way, Vishnu represents the main spirit behind it all because the system as a whole always is sustained.

Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva represent the total mutual dependence of parts that keeps the system going. They are a small model of Hindu society except that Hindu society is stratified while the three main gods are supposedly equal. Even then, most Hindus seem to prefer Vishnu. Think of any movie starring Mark Wahlberg in which he uses a lot of weapons to get vengeance and tear down an evil system so a good system can grow and be preserved. In creating mayhem, Wahlberg is like Shiva while in helping a new better world to grow, Wahlberg is like Vishnu. In “Ted”, Wahlberg is like Vishnu. In “Blue Bloods” the various members of the Reagan family take on various aspects of the three gods with Donnie Wahlberg most often like Shiva and Frank most often like Vishnu.

Brahma is like the appearance of life out of the primordial ooze of Earth. Shiva is like the tremendous destruction of life during the half-a-dozen times that life nearly died off on Earth. When the destruction was caused by a physical event such as the meteor that ended the great dinosaurs, a great ice age, or the release of oxygen from the spread of plants, Shiva is the physical cause. Shiva is the competition, natural selection, and “survival of (only) the fittest” that allow evolution. Brahma is like the flowering of life that takes place after great destructions. Brahma is like plants slowly adapting to mud and air for the first time, and like mud fish slowly crawling out of the water, from pond to pond,. Shiva is the first plants flooding the Earth with oxygen – then a caustic poison. Brahma is animals using the sudden availability of oxygen to proliferate. Brahma is the many types of life and many individuals in each type. Brahma is the huge proliferation of forms in nature. Vishnu is like the long winnowing out of the best forms and the long periods of particular lifestyles after a flowering. Vishnu is the “equilibrium” between “punctuations”. Vishnu is the long reign of bacteria, flowering plants, trilobites, dinosaurs, birds, ants, and cockroaches. Vishnu is the solid base of a particular lifestyle that allows variation and the development of higher forms. Vishnu is the long reign of mammals that allowed the development of sloths, monkeys, elephants, horses, tigers, and whales. Vishnu gave the ape base from which humans evolved. If we see God making the universe, the Earth, and the evolution of sentient-moral-aesthetic beings through the Big Bang, natural

selection, and cataclysms, then we see God as a mix of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, and we see God as working through them. We see God as the Dharma working through Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Well-educated Hindus sometimes see the “godhead” this way.

As all this, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva also are a logic-like contradiction from which you can derive sense, nonsense, and any relativism. They are an indicator of the powerful relativism at the heart of Hinduism.

Rebel, Rebel, Creative Chaos.

We can get a sense of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva from American ideas of rebels after about 1880 and especially after 1950 and the rise of rock and roll. Right or wrong, Americans feel something is amiss with this world now, and we need to change. The changers are rebels, and, as such, are instruments of Shiva. To make change, they use art and especially they use new art forms such as rock and roll and hip-hop. They get their tools from Brahma. Yet the ultimate goal of rebels is not to end all order. Rebels want to overturn bad old order and to replace it with good new order. The good new order is based on the same morals that have always prevailed and that run through all life and the universe – but modified to suit the times. As such, rebels are instruments of Vishnu.

Thanks to American culture, Romanticism, and the media, the whole world now sees chaos as creative and sees true creativity as coming only from chaos. Without disorder, we can have no better future order. Rebels, the mass people as a whole, the populace, the lower classes, fringes of society, underbelly of society, entrepreneurs, investment bankers, inventors, risk takers, ethnic groups that are not dominant in a society such as Blacks in America or Kurds in Iraq, political refugees, oppressed tribal groups in Africa, victims of the supposed war on Islam, victims of the supposed war on Christianity and Christmas, and artists, are all human instruments of creative chaos. Good social order can only come from them, and certainly will come from them if we turn them loose. Shiva is creative chaos. In our times, the face of Shiva is creative chaos. He is the instrument of beneficial change. He is the face of outcast creators and they are the face of Shiva. Together, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are the faces of the Romantic Spirit when the Spirit is both creative order and creative disorder, its own force forward and its own resistance, and its own art and its resistant medium. Together they are the advance of the Spirit, self-resistance of the Spirit to its own advance, and the Spirit overcoming its own self-resistance.

When we look at things this way, we are blind to the real work that must be done. I return to these topics in essays apart from this book. This use of Hindu-like ideas helps explain why they appeal.

Avatar.

Today, an “avatar” is a character that we assume in a computer game, or is the name of a hit movie, but originally the Hindu idea “avatar” meant an identity that a god took, usually on Earth, for a purpose. The avatar embodied one aspect of the total person of the god, and the avatar took care of the god’s business here. The term “avatar” means “passing over, into, or through” as a god passes from one realm (Heaven) to another (Earth) or from one state (incorporeal) to another (corporeal). A famous Buddhist sutra is the “Lankavatara” Sutra or “Lanka Avatar-a sutra”: “Lanka” is a great mountain, a backbone of the world;

here it means the island of “Sri Lanka” or “Ceylon”; and the sutra is about how Buddha Mind passes down through Sri Lanka; how Buddha Mind makes the world and makes itself known.

In the Mahabharata, Krishna has come to tell Arjuna to “man up” and do his duty by going to war against his cousins. Krishna is an avatar of Vishnu. If Arjuna did not do his duty, the victory of enemy cousins would have been a triumph of bad over good, and it would have upset the world order. For the world order to continue, heroes like Arjuna must do their duty. By doing your duty, you affirm that the world runs according to the Dharma, and runs best by going along with the Dharma. By getting Arjuna to do his duty, Krishna-Vishnu sustains the world.

In our modern capitalist world, if Brahma had an avatar, it might be great inventors such Nikola Tesla and the people who developed the silicon chip. Shiva’s avatar might be great marketers, such as Steve Jobs, who get us to discard old things in favor of new things. Thomas Edison would be an avatar of both. If Vishnu had an avatar now, it might be Superman or Abe Lincoln. Some Hindus think of the Buddha and Jesus as avatars of Vishnu; Buddhists and Christians don’t like that.

In the movie “Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom”, shortly after Jones and friends arrive in a grief-stricken Indian village, an old man tells Jones that Shiva has sent Jones to destroy the bad guys and to save the village from evil. Jones insists that Shiva did not send him. The old man insists Shiva did send Jones even if Jones doesn’t know it. Jones can be an avatar of Shiva even if he doesn’t know it. In my understanding, more likely Jones would be an avatar of Vishnu. Sometimes in particular local traditions, the gods switch roles and take on each other’s roles. That does not change the idea framework behind the system of gods.

All other Hindu gods can be seen as versions or avatars of one of the “Big Three” although I don’t think most Hindus think of “their” god mostly in these terms, and I don’t think most Hindus seek one complete non-contradictory system that assigns all secondary and minor gods as versions of one, and one only, of the Big Three. The idea that all gods can be aspects of the Big Three is an instance of encompassing and of how encompassing depends on a little vagueness.

In the Hindu big system that encompasses small local Indian systems, the major gods of local groups and of various castes are avatars. Sometimes they are not avatars directly of Brahma, Vishnu, or Shiva but are avatars of other gods such as the clever monkey god Hanuman or the lucky bird god Garuda. I have seen Hindu depictions of Jesus and the Buddha as yogis and as avatars of Vishnu. I don’t know how Jesus rates as an avatar compared to the Buddha or Krishna. I don’t know if other great figures such as Mohammad and Confucius are also depicted as avatars; if so, they also likely would be avatars of Vishnu. I don’t know if Karl Marx (in a good way) or Adolph Hitler (in a bad way) would be avatars of Shiva. Atom bombs are weapons that Brahma provides to avatars of both Vishnu and Shiva.

The Avatar as Agent of the System.

In the chapter on Mahayana, I compared Jesus in Christianity, the Mahayana bodhisattva, and the Hindu avatar. I pick up the comparison again here. Common to all is that people in states need a mediator figure between the highest divine with ordinary life here on this world. The mediator is both divine and human. The mediator helps people succeed in this life and in spirituality, and makes them feel better.

In Christianity, Jesus understands human life because he was human. Jesus came here to save people, that is, to get them to heaven. He loves each person individually and helps each person individually. He has a plan for each person individually. In original formal Christianity, when Jesus had done his job long enough, the world ended. In popular Christianity now, the world does not end; people just keep going to heaven or hell; and Christians don't think much about a change in the system.

In Mahayana, the bodhisattvas ideally began as real human beings but that does not much matter now, and most bodhisattvas are purely mythical beings. Still, they know human life, and they love each person individually. They hear complaints about life on Earth, and often help out, such as by granting health and wealth. Their ultimate task is to awaken each person. In theory, people awaken to a joyous system of many lives, but the system is less important than that people simply awaken. In theory, if everyone really did wake up, the system would end, but that end does not seem to be much to fear in Mahayana. The system keeps going on, and bodhisattvas keep helping people individually. To awake is to be saved and to succeed spiritually.

In Hinduism, the avatar appears human but likely is not human as we understand it, and not human as was Jesus, the Buddha, or a historic bodhisattva. An avatar might have a human history, but that is more a story to make the entrance of a god into the world more interesting and more plausible; Hinduism is full of bright stories of the early life of Krishna as a child and young man. The task of the avatar is to help along the joyous system of many lives. The task of the avatar is not to awaken any person or to save any person in the Christian sense or Mahayana sense. To help along the system, usually the avatar gets people to do what they have to do as part of the system (or to not do what they should not do). Krishna explains a lot about the system to Arjuna but that is mostly to get Arjuna to do what he has to do; Krishna does not try to enlighten Arjuna in the sense that a bodhisattva tries to enlighten. Enlightenment would be relevant only if it helped the system, and enlightenment usually does not help the system except for special holy people who count little. When a Hindu person does his-her duty, then the whole system benefits and all the beings in the system benefit. To do what you have to do is as good as being awake and as good as being saved in the Christian sense. To do what you have to do for the system is success both in terms of common life and in terms of being a secret actor in a grand system. The fact that the avatar is most concerned with getting people to support the system does not mean the avatar does not feel compassion for the system and for individual people, and does not help people with their needs; the true avatar often gives great comfort.

In Mahayana, the bodhisattva changes human lives; the bodhisattva saves people almost in the Christian sense. In Hinduism, the avatar helps people with particular tasks and problems but the avatar does not usually save people in the Mahayana sense or Christian sense. The avatar saves the system. Krishna helped Arjuna with Arjuna's problem over going to battle but Krishna did not have to save Arjuna's soul in order to help him with that problem. Krishna did help Arjuna to a partial awakening (partial saving) but only enough to get Arjuna to fight with a full heart and so save the system. The Mahayana bodhisattva is like the hero in the TV show "Quantum Leap" who really did save lives and souls. The Hindu avatar is like the President of the United States who has to care for the country as a whole even if he-she has to send some soldiers to die and even if he-she has to accept some damage to nature or some damage to an industry.

Because Shiva is called “The Destroyer”, it might seem as if an avatar of Shiva does not perpetuate the system but instead brings it down. In fact, this is not true. This is why I prefer to think of Shiva as “The Transformer”. Shiva and his avatars keep the system going. Shiva keeps the wheel of Dharma turning. If the system did not change, it would get stale and uninteresting, and end. Shiva and his avatars keep the system interesting by shaking things up. Shiva and his avatars are the “bad boys” who actually make things work. No matter how much damage Shiva does or his avatar does, the system always reforms, and keeps going. The system reforms and it keeps going because of the damage that Shiva does rather than despite him.

So far, it seems Christianity and Mahayana are warm personal religions which value each individual while Hinduism is a mind-crunching totalitarian system led by avatars who act like North Korean commissars. In fact, Christianity often is systematic and totalitarian, and official Jesus is a ferocious champion of a rigid system rather than a loving friend. I think, for most Hindus, the avatar is a loving friend who guides them through the complexities of life and of religious ideas rather than an Inquisitor who makes them do what the system says, as did Krishna for Arjuna. “You’ve got a friend in Krishna”. Still, there is a difference, and this difference makes a difference.

If avatars were only stern cosmic spiritual teachers like Krishna to Arjuna, Hindus would get bored with Hinduism. That is what Shiva is for, and that is what bad guys are for – to relieve the boredom of pretty goodness. Even good guy avatars have many varied personalities, and they help Hindus with many kinds of problems. Avatars are risqué sexual adventurers more like Indiana Jones than his father. The adventures of Krishna alone fill volumes, and Krishna wears more disguises than Sherlock Holmes. In one appearance, Krishna is a young man who tends dozens of semi-divine girl cowherds while they tend cows. Krishna invents lots of games for fun, including sexual games. The stories of young Krishna are like stories of young Buddha or young Jesus but more fun, risqué, and rebellious. If you want to feel the adventurous spirit of Hinduism rather than suffer through argument such as you find in this chapter, read stories about Krishna and other avatars, and stories about the gods.

Seven Major Paths to God and to Success.

Ultimate religious success (moksha) in Hinduism is seeing that this world as ordinarily lived is not the real world or the best world, seeing how this world is a projection of the best world (pure Dharma), and seeing how this world is really good when taken as an expression of the true Dharma. You see the same world but in a new better way with a new better attitude. Ultimate religious success is not needed for most people, and only a few achieve it. After ultimate realization, for the few people who do achieve it, life can consist of living beside the daily world as a yogi, monk, hermit, or holy person, nowadays in an urban apartment, rather than living in the world such as by being a parent, teacher, or theologian. It is not clear if people like Mohandas “Mahatma” Gandhi are closer to a holy person living-in-but-beside-the-world or closer a normal person living within the world.

Hinduism teaches four large paths to success. I prefer to think of the seven numbered paths below. The original four are (A) 1 Intellect-Mind-Wisdom, (B) 2 Action, (C) 4 Asceticism-Yoga-Renunciation, and (D) 6 Devotion. 3 and 5 below are mixes, chiefly of 2 with tinges of the others. Because most people do not reach full awakening, the paths are also ways to spiritual growth and to modest spiritual success rather than only paths to full realization. You do not fail if you do not achieve full realization, and, in fact, you

gain much by any steps along any path. That is how most people understand the paths. Most people adopt a modified version of the paths as a way to feel spiritually successful now and as a way to mix spiritual success with worldly success. Most people mix a modified version of the paths with normal family life and with their occupations.

These paths were the original paths in the idea behind the slogan “all paths lead to god”. Hinduism sees other religions as manifestations of one-or-more of the paths in an intellectual-cultural context other than Hinduism. By extending the idea of these paths to other religions, Hindus can say “all paths lead to god” and thereby include all other religions as well. Hinduism can make other religions aspects of Hinduism.

(1) Intellect-Mind-Wisdom: A smart person, or observant person, can use his-her intellect to understand the world. This does not mean you sit on your porch until you figure out the world from first principles. Usually it means you read the great Hindu texts and study with good teachers. You use your intellect-mind to gain wisdom. You need wisdom go guide your intellect-mind and need your intellect-mind to see how wisdom works in the world and in your life. To a Westerner, “mind” tends to mean “rational thought” somewhat along the lines of logic; but in Buddhism and Hinduism, mind is more than that. The nearest equivalent to what Westerner’s think of as mind might be intellect. Mind guides intellect just as wisdom guides mind. When wisdom guides mind-intellect, the three almost fuse. When wisdom does not guide mind and mind does not guide intellect, the three can become enemies of each other and of the sanity and health of a person. People far from the Dharma suffer mental problems.

(2) Action, Moral Action, as Saint: A person can live morally and perform moral acts. Saints teach about the Dharma system in many ways, by words and example. In Hinduism, all sentient being share affinity. Hinduism requires devout people to care about other beings, give alms, help other beings both in bodily need and in their spiritual quest, and to sacrifice yourself if need be.

(3) Action as Moral Duty, as with Arjuna: A person has to perform his-her duty as part of his-her karma in the whole system of Dharma. In theory, this kind of action is a variation of the moral action of item (2) but the categories differ because a person who does his-her duty might have to perform acts that seem unkind. That was the dilemma of Arjuna in the Mahabharata. If all acts done in accord with your karma actually sustain the world and help perpetuate the system of Dharma, even if on the surface the acts seem unkind and immoral, then really they are kind and moral. This too is part of the relativism of Hinduism. Sometimes this relativism is truly dangerous. If the acts are really kind and moral, then there is no sin in doing them, and categories two and three merge.

(4) Yoga and other Asceticism: A person can advance through yoga and other similar practices. A person can practice yoga and other asceticism while not living apart from society but usually it is hard to really “get into” yoga and similar practices if a person lives a normal life otherwise. Therefore yoga often goes together with some renunciation (see below).

(5) Action through Compassion: A person can advance spiritually through great compassion for people, other sentient beings, animals, and nature. This is a particular manifestation of path (2), moral action, in which morality is manifested as compassion. Or, path (2) is a particular manifestation of this path (5) in which morality originates from compassion. Christians call this “the path of love”.

(6) Devotion: A person can advance through devotion (bhakti) aimed at a deity, avatar, or even a great human person. Devotion and worship hardly differ. The idea that devotion was a path to god equal to other paths likely began as early as ideas about the other paths but was not accepted by Hindu thinkers until about 500 CE. Literary works such as the Bhagavad Gita were important in gaining acceptance for bhakti because, in the Gita, Arjuna and his brothers are devoted to Krishna-Vishnu. As far as I can tell, devotion-bhakti is now by far the path that most Hindus follow, just as simple worship of Jesus, Mary, and the saints is by far the most common relation that Christians have to their gods.

(7) Renunciation: A person can advance by denying nearly all aspects of the normal life and living apart from normal society. Such a person does not necessarily condemn normal society, at least for other normal people. In my reading, in fact, such people seem to appreciate normal society for normal people. Such people live apart so they are not distracted and so they can concentrate on getting in touch directly with the great Dharma system. In traditional Hindu understanding, these people lived in the forest. Now, not much forest is left, so these people live in other ways, sometimes in cities or in places set aside for spiritual study and spiritual life. These people often combine their seeking with asceticism and yoga, but, strictly speaking, they need not.

You do not have to be adept in all paths to reach God well enough. You only have to be accomplished in one path to reach God well enough. There is nothing wrong with being skillful in more than one path. The paths do not exclude each other, and, in fact, help each other. Intellectuals like to believe they are also adept at yoga and have great moral sensitivity. Yogis like to think they are mentally acute, can see all that a mere intellectual can see, and can see things that mere intellectuals cannot. Gods and avatars were depicted as skilled in multiple paths. In the past, intellectuals and yogis often studied together. All seekers valued the forest dwelling monk and his-her insights.

If it was necessary to be skilled in all paths to reach God, then nearly all people would be excluded, and Hinduism would have died. For Hinduism to remain appealing, it had to develop the ideas that a person need be skilled in only one path, and a person needs to be only moderately skilled without necessarily being a master. The idea of many paths greatly aids relativism. Hinduism did not develop many paths so that it could be relativistic and expand. Hinduism developed the idea of several paths first, and, because of the idea, then became relativistic and expanded. The two come together closely.

More on Bhakti.

This section does not consider incorrect variations on bhakti that sanction criminal acts, such as the Thug movement in India.

Focusing on Dharma alone can be impersonal. Most people can't relate to Dharma alone any more than they can relate to gravity. Bhakti puts person back into Dharma, and into Hinduism. Whether it succeeds at making Hinduism personal without also making it merely devotion, I think not, but you have to decide for yourself, and you have to decide the same question for other religions too.

See earlier chapters on common ideas and mistaken ideas. Especially Christian Protestants tend to think of "devotion" as simple emotion-based idolatry to local idols such as "Baal", fat laughing Buddha figures, blue-skinned Krishna, or the Virgin Mary; but that view is simplistic and unfair. "Bhakti" is a version of the

personal relation that all evolved sentient persons can feel toward spirits as persons. It is a natural relation because it is rooted in evolved feelings. Sometimes bhakti is only idol worship in that devotees take idol-gods for granted; must worship their gods; and expect to be repaid for worship. Most Christians have the same attitude toward Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit. Most Muslims have the same attitude toward Allah. Some even worship Mohammad in this sense even when they insist on not using the word “worship” with Mohammad. Changing the name from “Krishna” to “Jesus” or vice versa does not change the character of the relation.

On a higher level, bhakti is like the personal relation that Christians have toward Mary and the saints. It gives people comfort to know that somebody like them, but more powerful, knows of them individually, takes interest in them, and will help them. In return, they are happy to feel devoted. This relation is just as much worship and devotion as bhakti.

Bhakti can be like what some Protestants feel when they have a “personal relation with Jesus”. They can pray to Jesus. Jesus listens. Jesus helps them see correctly. Jesus helps them out of jams. Jesus makes sure they go to heaven when they die. They feel an indescribable sense of peace, security, and surety. They know Jesus is not interested in such token gifts as incense or sweets, although they would be happy to offer them as symbols. They know Jesus is interested in their service, in the devotion of their minds, bodies, energy, attention, and time. Jesus has selected us in particular to carry out his activity on Earth, and even has selected us in particular to be a “little Jesus” in the sense that we are like a finger on his hand doing his work. People are happy to offer that. Hindus feel this same way just as honestly and just as fully toward Krishna, Shiva, or even Ganesh.

Hindus who know some theology say bhakti unites the devotee with the god, never in any bad way, but as a way for a finite human to “tap into” the ultimate, the only way that is available to most finite humans. Devotion helps us transcend ourselves to see where we came from, what we really are, how we are tied to other sentient beings and to all creation, and, hopefully, where we are going. We accept that we are part of God’s activity, and so God accepts us as a participant in his activity, including his good acts and his joy. Rather than devotion being pretentious, emotional, or a dodge to avoid intellectual effort, rather than an emotional indulgence, devotion is a way to know our own personal real place and real worth in relation to everything else. The world is god’s projection. By accepting god, we accept our place in the projection of god. We become the vehicle for god to carry out his-her identity and activity fully. In being the vehicle for the god to become him-herself fully, we also become god. We unite with god in a way the both loses our identity in the god and preserves us as an individual. There can be no higher realization.

Bhakti is like the union that Christian and Muslim saints feel with God. It is not necessary that most people who follow the bhakti path feel as much or as deeply as famous mystics. They do not have to feel they have access to the whole truth and the whole god. They only need to feel that they have access, and their access is enough to guide them.

It is not fully accurate but still useful to frame bhakti in terms of an argument within Christianity and Islam. In the famous conflict between works and faith, bhakti is on the side of faith. Bhakti is trusting that God will respond to faith, and that faith alone is enough for God. Bhakti realistically accepts there is nothing a real finite human can do to make him-herself worthy of God and the whole Dharma system. Still, thanks

to the merciful joy of God (the Dharma system), a normal person can succeed. There is little difference between a devoted Hindu and a devoted worshipper of Yahweh-God-Allah.

In my view, faith must combine with works, and must combine with the correct works. The correct works are based on the ideals of Jesus mixed with practicality and Western values. While some Christians, Muslims, and Hindus also advocate the need to combine faith and works, it is not clear to me that they actually carry out the combination of faith and works, let alone the combination of faith and correct works. Most Christians seek the minimum they can to get into the heaven of their imagination; I don't think most Muslims differ. I do not see any stress in Hindu bhakti on combining faith and works. More importantly, I do not see in Hindu bhakti any consistent recognizing of the correct works. Devotion is enough. Before you jump to condemn Hinduism, I point out there is no real difference between people who see the need to combine faith and correct works (most Christians, some Muslims and Jews) but don't actually do it (almost everybody) versus people who think devotion alone is enough (Hindus, and some Christians and Muslims). Both groups don't do enough of what needs to be done.

More than any other aspect of Hinduism, bhakti allowed Hinduism to triumph over Mahayana and other rivals to Hinduism. You did not have to try to be a bodhisattva or any other spiritual hero. You did not have to do great deeds. You did not have to starve yourself in the forest. You did not have to deal with the problems of whether this life is worthwhile or illusory. You did not have to deal with the annoying "aids" such as Buddha Mind or Storehouse mind. You just have to trust God and do what the right people tell you to do. Everybody can do that, and that is what most people want to do. Later Mahayana devotion to a particular bodhisattva was a similar development in a different place (Tibet and the Far East) but it did not come in time to save Buddhism in India, and the "flavor" of the devotion in it differs.

If devotion was all, Hinduism would differ little from most common religion. Hindu theorists had the sense to accept all six (four) paths along with bhakti, and to make sure that all paths were given equal status. Everybody fits in. There is no rift between intellectuals, mystics, ascetics, rulers, do-gooders, activists, and common people. Everybody gets an equal shot. Hindus can ignore the annoying arguments among intellectuals and mystics. If that is how those people want to get to heaven, then let them try. Hindus can do a bit of good, such as by giving alms or supporting the temple, without worrying about saints who let themselves be eaten by tigers. Mystics can have ecstasy without worrying about leaving out or putting down common people. Zealots can crusade, confident they succeed even if the common people are lazy and amoral. The combination of paths, with bhakti as the biggest and central path, is far more powerful than any particular path alone. No other religion besides Hinduism has managed the mix as graceful or as successfully. That does not mean it is true; you have to decide; but it is something to think about as you wonder what to do with the diverse kinds of people and with human limitations.

Bhakti presents an interesting challenge to evolutionary theory. Bhakti is widespread enough so that it seems to be a part of human nature. What is the evolved basis for bhakti? Could a feeling of bhakti have been sustained in our evolutionary history? What would be the benefits and costs of a feeling of bhakti? Even if full-blown bhakti was not present in our evolutionary past, but only develops after we settled down into agriculture and states, still the basis for it must have been laid in our evolutionary past.

Atman.

“Atman” is the soul-self. It is not exactly like the Christian-Muslim soul-self but it is not nearly as different as Christians, Muslims, and Hindus might think. It is like the philosophical idea of the self that developed in Greek philosophy, especially like the idea of the soul that developed in Roman times in Neo-Platonism and that serves as the model of the soul-self in Christianity. It is something like a combination of the “true you” in modern America, the soul-self in Christianity, the self of social-personal Dharma, and the self of social role. This idea is related to, but distinct from, the idea of the self in Theravada Buddhism; see that chapter. The Hindu self is a strong entity as long as it is part of the Dharma system and it does its social and cosmic duties. Then, the atman is as strong and as eternal as the system. The atman is not eternal in the sense the soul is necessarily eternal in Christianity and Islam where God promised eternity whether in heaven or hell. This Hindu idea of the atman is descended from the idea of the self in the Upanishads, although likely through many ancestors rather than only the Upanishads.

The Buddha argued against strong ideas of the self including the Muslim-Christian idea, the common idea held by many people regardless of religion, the idea in the Upanishads, and what later became the Hindu idea of the self.

“Maha” means “great” and is cognate with English “major”. “Mahatma” is from “maha” plus “atman”. It means “great soul”. It is an honorific way to address someone as in the name-plus-title “Mohandas ‘Mahatma’ Gandhi”.

Many Gods.

Jews, Christians, Muslims, and irreligious Westerners look down on Hinduism for having many gods, which they consider idols. This view of Hinduism is superficially correct but a bit hypocritical even if we set aside that the Christian Trinity is polytheistic. Hindu gods are much like Christian angels and saints, especially Mary. Hindu gods and Christians saints are a major way by which the religions raise heroes to cosmic principles. Christians worship Mary and the saints, and act toward angels, as if they were gods. Each saint, Mary, and each angel, has a specialty, special powers, and special clientele. Even Protestants revere founders more than is appropriate for mere humans. The “Reformed Church” attitude toward John Calvin frightens me. The Marxist attitude toward Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Mao was idolatry pure-and-simple. The Jewish attitude toward Abraham, Moses, and David is much more than I expect toward mere humans. Despite denials, Muslims basically worship Mohammad much as Christians worship Jesus. I do not dwell on Muslim Jinns (genies) and similar spirits. Muslim attitudes toward the early patriarchs, especially the Sunni and Shiite attitudes toward founders, are not less idolatrous than Hindu worship of gods. Muslims think of archangels as gods, especially Gabriel. American boys used to idolize sports heroes before being a selfish lout became part of the necessary persona of an athlete. I don’t even go into the subject of media stars. It seems part of human nature to deify important people and to look for good relations with friendly spirits. Buddhists accept this tendency as natural, and only hope to avoid the bad effects.

Hindus theoretically can recognize many gods but in practice don’t. In practice, each person has a few important household deities, and a few important deities for their larger clan, village, or occupation (metal workers, computer programmers). A few avatars and deities are common, such as Krishna, the monkey god (Hanuman), Phoenix or Eagle (Garuda), and elephant head (Ganesh). These deities are somewhat like archangels. They are more powerful than the average deity, have distinct personalities and abilities,

and everybody recognizes them in addition to his-her own deities. Thus the real “deity count” for Hindus likely does not exceed the count for many Christians and some Muslims.

Using deities can be a useful way to organize your thinking and social world. It is like seeing the world in terms of the players in a video game or the characters in an epic. Hindus believe in deities as much for the usefulness of the deity in organizing life as because Hindus hold the deity to be a transcendent god for all time and in all places. To understand how this attitude works requires going into the kind of details that I can't go into here.

Protestants accuse Roman Catholics of worshipping Mary and the saints while Roman Catholics counter that they do not worship Mary and the saints as they worship God including Jesus. Roman Catholics revere Mary and the saints, and they ask for intercession from Mary and the saints. I don't go into the details of the doctrine of intercession other than to say it is reasonable if we recall that human nature leads us to ask for help and if we think of God as the big busy patriarch of a clan who listens only to the appeals of his wife and children, and to the appeals of others that are passed on by his wife and children. While clever erudite priests might be able to explain the doctrine of veneration-and-intercession and skirt the issue of worshipping Mary and the saints, most lay people are not that clever, and, by all obvious standards, most lay people and lay Roman Catholics do worship Mary and the saints. “If it quacks like a duck and walks like a duck...”

Many Hindus find their attitude toward gods much like the Roman Catholic attitude toward Mary and the saints. An educated Hindu says Hindus do not worship all the little gods as they worship the Big Three. Hindus do not even worship the Big Three in the same sense they respect the One for which the Big Three stand, that is, the Dharma. Rather, little gods are merely aspects of the Big Three. A Hindu does not worship little gods so much as ask for help in dealing with the Big Three and the Big System of which we are all part. Not-fully-educated Hindus who do not know the Dharma system and the Big Three in effect worship small gods but that is not so bad and not such a big price to pay. Fully educated Hindus don't have to follow them anymore than smart Roman Catholic priests have to follow common people. The alternative is to fight human nature. I suspect Protestants tacitly ask for help from their founders and heroes in the same way. All this is variation on the doctrine of veneration-and-intercession. I find it hard to accuse Hindus of craven multiple idolatry when I don't want to accuse Roman Catholics of the same based on ideas of veneration-and-intercession and I don't want to accuse Protestants in their respect for spiritual heroes. If we say Hindus worship many little gods then, by the same standards, we have to say Roman Catholics do so too, and we have to suspect Protestants. If we want to absolve Roman Catholics and Protestants, we have to be open-minded about Hindus. I don't know how to get people to stop wrongly worshipping Mary, saints, little gods, and heroes without fighting a battle against human nature that would take more than it gave.

Modern Samsara, Maia, and Moksha.

Modern Hindus continue to hold vague notions that the obvious present world is not all there is, it is not satisfying, and there is a deeper spiritual reality to which we need to wake up. They hold ideas that are related to the ideas in the terms Samsara, Maia (Maya), and Moksha. I doubt most Hindus take these ideas really seriously or really understand what they mean but educated Hindus do.

Most Hindus have the same attitude that many diffident Buddhists and some Christians have: We know something that you don't know and that makes us better than you. We are not quite sure what it is that we know, but we know it is important, and know you can't get it. "Awakening" is awakening to the fact that we are smart Hindus; it is not awakening to any particular universal spiritual truth. Most Hindus that know of the traditional role of samsara, maia, and moksha in Hinduism are fairly well educated, so their attitude shows up more in how they relate to lower class and lower middle class members of their own Hindu-Indian society than in how they relate to people of other religions.

The historical development of Hinduism minimized the importance of samsara, maia, and moksha. It replaced moksha with bhakti (devotion). It seems traditional people who think the world is a dangerous illusion (samsara and maia) would have little place, and that the traditional idea of moksha (awakening) as release would not make sense as an important goal. Yet some Hindus do see the world as samsara and maia, and do seek moksha. These are the stereotyped Hindu "holy people". Some of them live in cities and hold regular jobs now. I do not know much about them. I do not know how they think of awakening. I do not know how they feel about other religions and about modern democratic capitalist life in comparison to traditional Hindu life. I do not know how the two strains of Hinduism see each other.

Subtle Point.

Hinduism is powerful partly because it explains itself and so more easily encompasses other religions. Turn Hindu relativism back on Hinduism. Doing so is another version of asking if the Dharma is relative or absolute. On the one hand, if the Dharma is absolute, then something absolute is outside the regular Dharma system of Hinduism because Hinduism is only one manifestation of the Dharma even if it is the best manifestation for humans. If something absolute is outside the Dharma system of Hinduism, then maybe other religions actually know this absolute better than Hinduism. On the other hand, if Dharma is relative, then it is not fully true. If Dharma is not fully true, then Hinduism is not fully true and other religions might be truer. If Non-Hindu religions are lesser versions of God playing by forgetting himself, then what if Hinduism too is God forgetting himself? In that case, Hinduism doesn't get it all exactly right either. No system of ideas can get it exactly right although some systems come closer than others. Not even the Hindu high holy people can get it exactly. In a different book, this point would be a good place to launch imagination.

PART 6: Hindu Appeal.

Here I show the appeal of Hinduism to a Westerner. Not all these ideas are bad. Most are good, at least in their own ways. That is part of the point. The ideas become bad when out of context, Romanticized, or taken in context as part of a full-blown system that eats the world.

Although we are all part of one single total system, the situation of each person is explained by his-her past and present behavior. Everybody is responsible for him-herself.

People are mutually dependent. Events are mutually dependent. There is no high without low. High people should not simply benefit from lower people; high people should guide lower people and improve them. It is a system based on idealized "noblesse oblige".

There is a place for everybody. Everybody can find a place. In theory, nobody is left out.

The system takes care of you. You feel safe, warm, and wanted. The system answers your questions as when Jesus said "Seek and you will find, knock and the door will open for you". The system loves you as when Christians think God and Jesus love us all. The system comforts you and takes care of you as in Robert Thurman's experiences with the Mahayana great system.

You don't have to be a complete spiritual success to be enough of a success. As long as you do your job then you contribute, and you can advance in later lives. It is like the American ideal of working for a large business corporation but in this case a spiritual corporation. You can be spiritually successful as a plumber, banker, world leader, community organizer, piano teacher, or whatever, as long as you do your Dharma sincerely and fully. You don't have to worry about being a saint. Of course, you can still be a saint if you are so inclined.

Nobody is irretrievable bad. You can be forgiven whatever you do. Eventually everybody is saved.

Even if you don't understand all Hindu ideas and aids, and your religion is not high Hinduism, it doesn't matter. You can continue following the religion of your ancestors (or your chosen religion) and still be a valued part of the whole spiritual system.

The highest spiritual success consists of doing the Dharma, which is pretty close to doing good. The highest spiritual success does not consist of rules, laws, righteousness, or self-justification. Hinduism is an intrinsically moral system based on goodness.

Life is a constant game of hide-and-seek. Life is a constant game. Even when one version of the game might be painful, the game overall is fun. The joyous game goes on forever without boredom.

Life has enough risk and pain to be interesting but not so much that you ever really fail.

You can "say 'yes' to LIFE" with a whole heart. You can throw yourself into LIFE without feeling guilty. If you want, you can gamble and have sex, play the stock market, have a homosexual fling (or heterosexual fling in case you are gay), or be a gangster.

It is always darkest before the dawn but the dawn inevitably comes. Good wins out. Evil is defeated. The world comes right again. The King returns. The postman always comes. The victory of good comes from unexpected places and characters, often not from the high and mighty but from the small and weak. Even the wisest people cannot foresee this cleverness of the God-and-the-Dharma.

Hinduism is logical. Hindus are adept at analysis and at laying out arguments. Hinduism can mesh with modern science and math. Hinduism appeals to intellectuals, who can use its tools to explain everything, and use its tools to show how everything is an aspect of the whole system. It is like "Thomism" in Roman Catholicism or like any comprehensive system. It can even take in seemingly different systems such as the "natural language" school.

Hinduism has a place not only for logical scientific people but for people of almost all tempers including artists, mystics, monks, and yogis. It is like large comprehensive Christian Churches such as Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. If you are prepared to (pretend to) ignore your social duty (Dharma), then Hinduism even has a place for adventurers, rascals, and bad guys.

When you do your social duty, family duty, and professional duty, you also do a religious duty. You help yourself and help the whole world at the same time. When you are who you are, you also do a religious service. As long as can you ignore your tremendous social duty, even if you are a rascal or bad guy, you also do a religious service.

When you individually succeed in your profession, or at your job, you also succeed in the Dharma and you help the whole world at the same time. It is like the feeling that market-worship capitalists want to cultivate in business people and in workers. When you are a pretty successful woman or a handsome successful man, you are also a good Hindu.

Hinduism captures the feeling of the sayings “the destination is the journey” and “the road goes ever on and on”. There is no intrinsic goal. We make up goals. The goal is what happens right now again and again in constant variation. Hinduism captures the best sense of the idea of living fully in the now, in the present moment.

God has a great thing going on. He finds himself, loses himself, finds himself, loses himself, and so on over and over. He plays wonderful amazing games. He plays out each game to the end, and then begins again. He is trillions of different people all at the same time. He loves the world and himself. It would be wonderful to be like God. Guess what? Good news! You are like God. In fact, you are God. You just have to realize it. Now you can do whatever you wish. Enjoy yourself.

The world is a dream but the dream is important. Dream away.

It is easy to let loose your imagination. Hinduism is full of amazing literature, visual art, and music. It is a font of ideas.

Many people really do feel love for the world. They would like to love the world but feel that the command to love the world from Christianity is self-contradictory and silly. Christian love is supposed to change the world but it doesn't. In Hinduism, love doesn't have to change the world. It is alright to feel love for other humans and for nature even if humans don't love you back and nature sends mosquitoes. Love is not a quixotic self-sacrifice but a part of your personality and a good habit. Superior people feel love without expecting it from other people or the world. You can feel love and feel good about it.

On the one hand, moral absolutes don't work. It takes a lot of work to be moral and to get other people to act as they should. On the other hand, moral relativism often is a tool for bad people. We need a system so we can be relativistic without feeling we are dupes or we add to the badness of the world. Hinduism lets us play around with morality while feeling not that we are doing anything bad but that we are helping the world to get along.

Human life is a great tedium of constant practical and moral issues. They are never fully solved. They never end. When Americans beat the Fascists and so thought they made the world safe for decency forever, Communism and the Cold War arose. When the Cold War ended, religious terrorists arose. When Putin replaced Yeltsin, Russia acted like an imperial power again. Americans thought we had made much progress against racism; then, after about 2013, Blacks showed how much more we had to do; and some Whites showed how much more Blacks still had to do. Financial institutions never stop finding ways to screw up the financial system and so undercut basic needs such as housing. We went from prosperity to huge national debt. Hackers are always able to get around any fix. When we thought nuclear war between the super powers was over, China started hacker attacks instead.

In Hinduism, fussing is an opportunity rather than tedium, a positive rather than a negative. Humans are moral animals. They love moral issues. They love moral disputes. They love figuring out what to do and implementing solutions. If they did not have moral issues, they would go crazy. The Dharma arranged it all so that we never run out of moral issues of about the right size to keep us always engaged and always feeling as if we are inching forward. Whether we really are inching forward does not matter as much as we feel we have to keep struggling. Even if we make real progress, we will not run out of problems and steps forward. This is a great boon to humans. No other religion shows how this all makes sense in the context of a system.

Never-ending moral issues at the right level for humans is what it means to be part of a never-ending story in which God (the Dharma) forgets himself to have fun.

If you are smart enough to see through all this business of never-ending moral issues, it doesn't matter. You can continue to work on moral issues or you can shrug them off. Either way, you contribute to the Dharma system.

Once you see that Hinduism allows for many paths within it and it encompasses other religions, then you can practice relativism – what I see as bad relativism. You can feel smug about your superior knowledge and stance, and still feel good toward other lesser people and other lesser religions. You can allow that Christianity is one path to the same God although poor Christians do not see the situation clearly as you do from your great Hindu height. Although Christians are still wandering a bit lost with blurred vision, still, the Dharma in its great compassion leads them back to itself as God. In fact, morally, Christians might even be a bit better than you are, so your intellectual insight and their simple morality all even out. As Hinduism promised, it all works out in the end. I have met Western Hindus who act like this, convert and born.

Some Westerners feel they connect with God. Hinduism gives them an explanation in that they are an important valued part of God, guaranteed. Some Westerners do not feel they have a close tie to God in any Western religion while in Hinduism they can find that. You do not have to be a saint to be a part of God and an important part of God. Some Westerners feel important to God. In Hinduism, these people can feel good about actually being God. If you have trouble figuring out your exact connection to God, Hinduism tells you that you are God, and so explains it to you and makes you feel important too. People can feel they are God without feeling guilty that they are God, without feeling that they fall into the sin of pride, and without feeling insane. It explains their feeling of centrality, without stress.

Some literature that Christians consider Christian, especially recent fantasy and science fiction, seems to me more like Hinduism than like the simple teachings of Jesus. Christians do not expect this literature to follow rigid dogmatic lines but they do expect this literature to promote the spirit of Christianity. It seems to me the spirit is more Hindu than Christian even when the authors were Christian. This is an example of the power of culture, here Indo-European culture. I do not say it is bad literature; it is good literature. All the fiction of C.S. Lewis, in particular the Narnia series, and the novels of J.R.R. Tolkien, including “The Hobbit” and “The Lord of the Rings”, seem more like Hinduism than the simple teachings of Jesus. The mutual development of Frodo, Sam, and Gollum is more Hindu than Christian. Gandalf is an avatar of Vishnu in everything but explicit name. Boromir and Faramir are like Hindu brothers from the epic Mahabharata. The feeling that you are doing work of God when you think you are doing your own work, when you don’t even know about the work of God, and especially if you are a little person only doing your small bit, is more Hindu than Christian. Even the Christian classic “Pilgrim’s Progress” is more about growing into the Dharma, finding your Dharma role, and purging confusion, than about simply acting well along the lines of Jesus’ teachings. The Christian literature does retain the idea of clear (absolute) evil and clear good. Sauron, the Ice Queen, and Orcs are bad; and that is that. Aslan is absolutely good Jesus; and that is that. But the absolute good and bad are only vague extremes between which a lot of Hindu-like mixing happens; and the absolute good and bad depend on each other in a way that is not really Christian but is acceptable in Hinduism. The little mouse “Reepacheep” in the Narnia books is less like a Christian saint than like the monkey god Hanuman. So much recent non-Christian science fiction seems like Hinduism that I don’t even go into the topic.

Westerners get infatuated with Hinduism because Westerners don’t see how Hinduism takes over your “true you” in personal-social Dharma, and how personal-social Dharma serves Hindu Indian stratified society in the big system of Dharma. Westerners don’t see problems. Westerners see a charming world where everybody can do what he-she wants and feel good about it yet there is a big cozy system with a place for everybody. The world is a big adventure that seems serious at the time but is not really serious. It is Peter Pan grown up but still Pan. The situation is like a Medieval Fair with rogues, wizards, wenches, bards, honor, duty, and crazy holy people but without the tight social Dharma (rigid Feudal system), starving peasants, bad sanitation, sexism, ageism, lack of schools or hospitals, and without the need personally to reinforce stratified Hindu society and the big system of Dharma. Hinduism is a theme park, like the Disney World of religions, while other religions are like particular rides in the theme park. To some modern Hindus, it seems this way too now. In reality, it is not.

PART 7: Further Assessment.

Most assessment was done above. This part picks out aspects of Hinduism that are relevant to it as a big idea system that eats the world, is relativistic, and feels superior to other ideas even when granting them credit. The points reinforce my idea that adhering closely to any system thwarts acting simply according to the teachings of Jesus, decency, and Western values. We can build institutions on the teachings of Jesus and the West well enough without falling into a bad system. The ideas also show my appreciation for some good aspects of Hinduism. I repeat that I say nothing new and many points have been offered so often they are trite.

I know that Christians and other non-Hindus can be obnoxious. I know that many Hindus are wonderful people. I know that Hindus have a sense of personhood and that non-Hindus treat people as things even

when non-Hindus have a clear dogma of personhood in their religion, as in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These facts are only partly the issue here. All of us live in a big political and ideological system, of which religion is a part. So the real issue is what leads some systems to stress persons and build good institutions while other systems lead people to treat other people as things and keep them from building good institutions. What leads some people in some systems to mutual respect, acting good for the sake of goodness, rule of law, equality under law, schools, hospitals, voluntary local sports, love of learning, and the Scouts while other systems with great ideas and great books do not build good institutions? What leads some systems to find the right balance of authority and creativity while others become rigid or diffuse? There is no easy answer. All I do is to offer a few observations.

Briefly, to repeat from the start of the chapter, the West had ideas of persons and of working hard to build a better world both from Jesus and from thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Hume, and Kant. Hinduism had “you are that” and great compassion. While fine in their own ways, “you are that” and compassion did not lead to ideas of persons and of working hard to build a better world, and so could not lead to building good institutions. Instead, they combined with the idea of Dharma to form a system that led to social involution, relativism, conniving, and the other bad features I have already listed too often. To get out of this trap, Hindus need to reinvent Dharma to stress ideas from Jesus and the West, that is, to stress persons, working hard to make the whole world better (not just your family, caste, city, etc.), and building the good institutions that go along.

We should not do good (act well) so as to please God to be saved and get into heaven. We should do good because it is good. That pleases God. To do good as it should be done, we need to see other people as persons. We need to offer and receive respect. We cannot do good as it should be done unless we see other people as persons and act rightly. Christians undermine the teachings of Jesus, and undermine good, when they do good to get in good with God, get saved, and go to heaven. In Hinduism, people should see that they are like other people and other people are like them, “you are that” from the Upanishads. The response to seeing that others are like us is great compassion. Hindus should do good because it is good and they see other people as persons. As with Christians, Hindus do not live up to the ideal. They do good not because it is good and other people are persons but as a way to earn karma-Dharma points, to have a better life now, and a better life in the future. That is the Hindu equivalent of getting saved and going to heaven. Hindus act well so as to support the Dharma system and themselves in the Dharma system.

It might seem that the two second-rate responses are about equally bad but that is not the case. While most Christians are mired in confusion about doing good, getting saved, and going to heaven, at least sometimes some Christians do leap over the barrier, manage to see other people as persons, and do good on that basis. They do this because they have the teachings of the Bible, the teachings of Jesus, and the example of Jesus. Some Christians know they should do good because it is good, and see that Jesus taught them how to do good in that light. Even when the mass of Christians do not do good on that basis, but do good to be saved and go to heaven, the mass of Christians are still guided by the few who do make the leap and tell others what to do. Christianity has managed to support Western civilization on this meager base. In contrast, Hindus do not make this leap often enough to build a similar civilization. They do not manage to get over the Dharma system often enough to see people as persons. Although both Christianity and Hinduism are Indo-European civilizations that stress persons and compassion, only one managed to build the best practical civilization. The differences were the teachings of the Bible, the

teachings of Jesus, and the example of the real person Jesus. I say these ideas many times in this part of the chapter.

At the root of Hinduism are the abstractions “Dharma” and “general compassion”. Hinduism is both too abstract and too detailed – a fault typical of big relativistic systems that eat the world large state agencies, big business firms, the American legal system, and the Indian legal system. Hindu abstractions are lovely but they enable the worst faults of a big system that eats the world and is relativistic in bad ways. They allow people too easily to treat each other not as persons but as ciphers in a game. Abstraction, even with high ideals, enables bad acts. The abstractions of high Hinduism paradoxically encourage people to cling to tiny details of stratified sexist caste-and-or-class life. The abstractions paradoxically drive ever-expanding tiny details of particular worship such as many gods, avatars, rituals, temples, and particular beliefs. The abstractions leave too much space for, and encourage, conniving in your Dharma position for power, wealth, prestige, sex, glory, success, and other goals that the idealistic abstractions formally warn against. Abstractions make a great playground for religious virtuosos but confuse normal people. For high ideals to succeed, they must be specific enough while still remaining ideals, such as the Golden Rule, the idea that we are all persons, “applies equally”, and rule of law.

In the right situation, Hinduism is a better alternative than rigid religions that lead people to act badly and to oppress others, even when the non-Hindu religion officially teaches compassion and good acts. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are too often bad in practice. Likely Hinduism was a terrific idea and terrific advance when it first formed in India in the centuries around the time of Jesus. Hinduism would be a good alternative to the rigid religion of America before about 1950, the “religion” of the racist classist Religious Right in America now, the “religion” of the racist classist Black in America now, or bad Muslim fundamentalism. In Hindu society of the 1800s and 1900s, Hinduism was about the same as those bad religions are in their times. Hinduism seems like a better general option only to a befuddled desperate seeking unrealistic Westerner who does not see Hinduism clearly and sees only idealized adventurous dreaming of God. Hinduism is never a better general option than following Jesus if we hear Jesus with an open mind, figure out what he really taught, mix his ideas with practicality and Western values, and then act in accord.

“I am Krishna-Vishnu-Godhead” versus “I am not Jesus”.

Here is a simple brief way to think about the situation according to how Hindus and the followers of Jesus think of people (persons) and their place in the world (the system):

If I think of me as a person among other persons, all of whom will meet God, then I tend to act according to the Golden Rule, “applies equally”, and rule of law, and to build good institutions. If I think of me as trying to excel in Dharma standing, and think of other people as cogs in the big Dharma system, I tend to treat them as an ATM machine and I do not build good institutions. When Christians think along similar lines as do stereotyped Hindus, when Christians do good to get to heaven and encourage other people to do the same, they act likewise and do not to build good institutions either.

Although Alan Watts styled himself a Taoist, he was more a Hindu. Watts noted that, if a Westerner were to say “I am God”, he-she would be shunned, burned, put in a home, ridiculed, or ignored. We need to see the God in us to love our neighbors as God loves us. By blocking natural insight that we are God-

Jesus, we also cannot see ourselves in others, see others in us, and love them as we love ourselves. By not being able to see ourselves as Jesus, we fail as Christians. Yet when a Hindu says "I am God", no Hindu gets upset. Wise Hindus say: "Good. Congratulations. I am glad your eyes are finally open. Now you can see where you come from, where you are going, and your duties along the way. I am glad you can join our band. Now do your Dharma job". By seeing that each Hindu is part of God, and so is God, each Hindu can act up to the ideals that Christians should work for. As a shock tactic against wrong rigid uptight moralistic do-good-to-go-to heaven Christianity, Watts makes sense. He does not make sense if instead we talk with any moderate person who does not need urgent rescue but rather simply needs a good way to think about who he-she is, what the world is like, and what to do.

A Hindu can see himself as Krishna, avatar of Vishnu, one of the three high gods, the divine hero of the Bhagavad Gita and Mahabharata. Hindus do not only emulate or learn from Krishna-Vishnu, they can become just like Krishna or become the actual Krishna-Vishnu. Especially through bhakti (devotion), but not only through bhakti, a Hindu does not only emulate, he becomes Krishna-Vishnu. In fact, usually he-she merges with a lesser god rather than one of the three highest gods such as Krishna-Vishnu, but the feeling is the same. (Feeling you merge with a deity goes along with traditional Hindu gender ideas and pronouns; the sexism is not in me; similar sexism was found in all major religions until recently.)

A Western person could not see him-herself as God, and a Christian could not see him-herself as God or Jesus. The ideas should be unthinkable. Both ideas are wrong and lead to bad results. It is against this idolatry, with its bad results, that Jews and Muslims warn Christians; and it is a good reason why Jews and Muslims don't like to make Jesus into God.

The difference between being able to see yourself as Krishna-Vishnu versus not being able to imagine yourself as God-or-Jesus, might not seem big but it is big enough to be qualitative. It is not a matter of degree but of kind. It makes a difference. When you do see yourself as God, the result is not mostly good as Watts thought.

To get a feel for the difference and its results, think of those Christians who are sure they have a personal relation with Jesus, are saved, see how it all works, see what to do, see what all other people should do, have the right to tell others what to do, feel others cannot be saved unless others are the same as they are, feel they deserve their high position, and feel others should accept their position. Imagine such a person who is rich, in the upper class, or an entrenched government official. Imagine how he-she can use the feeling to rationalize power, wealth, and the system. Imagine how he-she and the whole family look down on everybody else, especially not-our-sect-group and not-Christian. Imagine what happens when this person gets power, as with Cromwell in England or Communists in Russia (listen to "Oliver's Army" by Elvis Costello and see the movie "Doctor Zhivago").

Such exalted people can evade real issues of morality, society, and ecology while forcing other people to face the world for them - one privilege of a god. In effect, Krishna does that to Arjuna. Recall science fiction stories about people who get god-like powers and then act like demons. Recall smug people from your life. Recall bureaucrats and professors who think they are the system. Even when smug powerful people are gracious and help the downtrodden, they condescend and put up with inferiors more than they reach out to human persons. Their acts are not "I am like others" and "compassion". In Hinduism, this

holier-than-thou feeling and its bad results is raised to a qualitative higher level. That is how the feeling of being a god in disguise affects people and reinforces the system.

Even when any particular Hindu does not feel that he-she has merged with a god, the attitude pervades Hinduism and shapes ideas of who you are, personal relations, group relations, and the system. You can take on the attitude of a god anytime, and persist in it. You can act “high and mighty” to anyone below you in rank or in power. You identify with others as it suits your Dharma role, that is, your convenience. You feel for others only as expedient.

In Hindu mythology, often demons are beings that take the power(s) of a god, often by stealing, and act badly. Think of Magneto’s disdain toward mere humans or Jean’s fury. People who think they are the system do not often become Professor Xavier. Hindus feel the tendency of their system to make demons of people that aspire to more; and Hindus warn against the tendency. But the tendency cannot be ended as long as people can merge with god. In their mythology, Christians say that the key fault of the Devil is, in his pride, to think he is God. They try to stop that train too, but Christians can never fully succeed as long as human nature is what it is.

Most Westerners know something is wrong with this wish to become god even if they cannot say what, and even if, supposedly, it leads to seeing yourself in others and compassion. For Christians who do fall into this mistake, hopefully friends and fellows straighten them out. At least Christians have clear doctrine and clear tradition to help them tell smug over-godly people to “clean up you act”.

Most Hindus who identify with their god do not become full-on demons anymore than most Christians who have a relation with Jesus lord over their fellows. That is not the issue. The issue is the mindset and the system that is led to by the different potentials to feel like god, or not feel like god.

I dislike the idea of feeling that you are god, even the good god of a good system, both because it is wrong and leads to bad results personally and in a system. It is inaccurate. It feels wrong. It is a wrongheaded if powerful way to think.

If you are not god, then what are you? What does that mean for thinking, doing, and relating?

If you let yourself be merely human, you will be better off and your fellows will be better off. As a mere human, you have to deal with real moral issues, real problems, and stinky people. You cannot assume godlike above-it-all-ness while others do the work. You might even become more god-like by being more merely human but that is not the reason you should do so.

Because I do not worry whether Jesus was (is) God, I have to accept that it is theoretically possible for a person to think of him-herself as like Jesus, fully equal to Jesus, or better than Jesus, without thinking of him-herself as God. This case does not matter much to me and it is not important in what I say here. It is only possible for a person to think of him-herself as like Jesus if he-she does not think Jesus is God. A person cannot think of him-herself as God; and that is what matters. I discourage people from thinking they are equal to, or better than, Jesus. To feel the message of this section, try thinking of yourself as like Jesus, fully equal to Jesus, or better than Jesus; or think why you cannot, and wish not, to think of yourself as like Jesus, fully equal to Jesus, or better than Jesus.

Jews cannot feel as if they are God. Muslims cannot feel as if they are God. Muslims feel they cannot be Mohammad because he is so holy, that is, in the same way that Christians feel they cannot be Jesus. The relation of Christians to Jesus and Muslims to Mohammad raises problems along the lines described above but I do not go into them here.

Mahayanists do not feel as if they can become one with any particular bodhisattva but they do feel they could become a bodhisattva in their own right. They can return to Dharma, Mind, or Emptiness, and can act from that matrix for the good of all. What result that view leads to, I don't take up here. Theravada Buddhists can use religion to justify pride, power, and aloof disdain but not in the same way as a Hindu who identifies directly with a god. While Taoists feel they can merge with the Tao, their idea does not seem to lead to the same overbearing personality and bad system as in Hinduism, some Christianity, and some Islam. I do not go into why the difference for Taoists. They have faults. Zen is like Taoism and Theravada. In true Zen, the idea that, "I am a Buddha, a bodhisattva", leads not to vanity but to junking the whole system and to appreciating everyday life.

(A) The Golden Rule and "Applies Equally" versus (B) Great Compassion.

According to Jewish teachers around the time of Jesus, including Jesus, the two greatest points of Jewish Law, on which all other commands rest, are: (1) (1A) Love God, which implies (1B) knowing that God loves you; and (2) Love your neighbor. If you can: (2A) love your neighbor as you wish God to love you, (2B) love your neighbor as you wish to love god, and (2C) love your neighbor as if he-she were yourself. The Golden Rule is another way to say this. This Jewish idea seems to differ little from the ideas in the Upanishads, Buddhism, and Hinduism about compassion and about being the same as the other. Yet the West, based on Jesus' Jewish ideas, developed good institutions while India did not.

In theory, compassion sounds much like "love your neighbor" and the Golden Rule but practice does not work out that way. It seems I should contrast compassion with "love your neighbor" but workable practice is more along the lines of the Golden Rule than "love your neighbor". So I contrast compassion with the Golden Rule. A feeling of diffuse compassion lets us treat people as tokens in a game, as a way to make us feel spiritually successful while, in contrast, the Golden Rule leads us to think of people as persons and to act as they need rather than do what makes us feel successful. "Love your neighbor" either leads people to freeze because they can't live up to it, and so don't help others and do harm themselves; or it leads to treating people as tokens to prove our worthiness through love, much as does compassion.

It might be odd to think of it this way, but the idea of great compassion does not require that the object of our love be a person or even like a person. Of course, being people, we tend to think of it that way but it doesn't have to be that way. We can love a person without thinking of him-her as a person. These days, when people love animals, they tend to think of them as almost-human, but, in fact, they are not, and we can love them even if they are not. Many people in the past did that. We can love nature, the cosmos, ideas, ideals, and art but do not have to think of it as a person. We can support the arts without thinking of the artists as persons and without thinking that art is made by persons for persons. Many do-gooders, and many conservatives, love society, love a nation, or love a social group, without really feeling it is made up of persons and should serve persons. If they claim to love humanity, they love it in this abstract way rather than as persons. This is what Charles Schulz meant when he had Lucy say something like "I

love humanity, its people I hate". This is the way that great compassion tends to play out in places where it comes along with ideas of Dharma.

Christians make this mistake when they feel compassion in a cause or toward a group but do not see that the cause and the group are made of persons and do not see that their simple broad diffuse compassion might not be the best response for them or us – especially when expressed through a state program or in a crusade such as against abortion or for political correctness. We slip into a bad version of this attitude with “Oh, look at that poor unwed pregnant girl not of our ethnic group, religion, or socio-economic class”, “We have to do something about all these poor kids”, “Farm families are the bedrock of our past and the farming way of life must go on”, or “Small business is the bedrock of our capitalist spirit and we have to help them in their fight against big bad corporations”.

In contrast to Hinduism, hopefully in the Judeo-Christian-Western tradition, and in the Muslim tradition, we are told not just to love some abstractions or groups, not just to show compassion generally, but to love all particular individual real persons (people). We are told to love them even when they are not nice. Of course, real people have limits to how much we can love. If only for the sake of families and society, at some point it is wrong to love a bad person. But at least we have the ideal of person-to-person relations. Again, this is the point of the classic book by Martin Buber “I and Thou”.

I am not saying it is bad to love something that is not a person. I think it is good to love nature, art, some groups, some ideas, your dog, and your cat. But we have to remember the importance of persons too. Do not reduce people to non-persons so you can love them or when you love them.

I am not saying we should never think of people in terms of groups, never work through agencies such as churches or the United Way, and never use the state as an instrument of compassion and welfare. We have to do all this. But every so often we need to engage a real individual person out of the group and we have to think of the group as made up of individual persons.

As real limited human creatures, we need guidance for the idea of loving real flawed persons. While still an ideal, the “Golden Rule” gives guidance that is better than vague love. If we act toward other people (persons) as we want them to act to us as a person, then we have pretty good ideas what to do. The Golden Rule suggests institutional guidelines such as giving charity and accepting charity. Likewise, the idea “applies equally” is an excellent guide for how to put in practice the Golden Rule and “love your neighbor”. “Applies equally” gives strong guidelines for building good institutions such as the rule of law, fairness, and sportsmanship.

I am not saying we should not feel compassion, and even feel diffuse compassion. I am saying we have to be more specific through the Golden Rule and “applies equally”. We have to be more specific if we get trapped in the ideal of loving everybody as we love ourselves when we just can’t do, and we have to be more specific so we don’t use compassion as a means to personal justification and success. Sometimes it helps to think not of loving everybody as we love ourselves or as God loves us but love everybody as if he-she were our brother, sister, good parent, or great teacher.

A lot of people feel big diffuse compassion sometimes and a few people feel intense compassion in big long doses. In those cases, go with it. Let the compassion infuse your life and make you a better person.

Likely, then, you do not feel compassion as a roundabout selfish means to justification and success. Use the energy that you get during your “high” to power being a better person when you get back to acting in the normal world. Then, likely you will find that you use your energy along the lines of the Golden Rule and “applies equally”.

In versions of meditation, including yoga, and in versions of some systems of thought, Hindus seek to go beyond simple compassion and even deep compassion. Compassion can impede full understanding of the Dharma. This view is rooted in the common experience of the need to get beyond a “bleeding heart” to have a clear head and to do greater good. In the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition, God can be stern, and God does not let compassion get in the way of chastising his people and making them better. “Going beyond simple compassion” does not mean no morality. Even a Hindu who is beyond simple compassion still has to act morally. Only schools of Hinduism that are aberrant act amorally or immorally. Westerners often know of Chakras. Compassion is rooted in one chakra, the heart chakra, which is about midway on the line of ascent. A seeker must get above the midway heart chakra to higher levels and higher chakras. I do not describe them. While true of esoteric ways, this view about getting beyond compassion is not true of most Hinduism and most Hindus would only dimly get it even if most have heard of it. This way of thinking does not change my view about compassion anymore than similar thinking in the West changes my assessment of Hinduism, such as in the Neo-Conservative school. I get this view about compassion. Still, I do not go along with this view nor do I think that getting beyond compassion gets us out of the need for principles. While rooted in the need for a clear head, this view goes too far and it can be misleading. I suspect all schools that claim to lead above compassion without giving us guidelines, principles, for good acts and good relations once we get there, and without telling us how to rightly mix superiority with proper empathy, sympathy, compassion, and principles. Compassion is part of us, or should be, and it has to be guided by principles such as the Golden Rule even if sometimes we are also objective or stern. Even if a person is above compassion, he-she still needs to act, and needs some principles on which to act. This result leads back to Jesus and the Golden Rule. Even a stern God follows some rules most of the time – or should.

“You are That”; and “We are All Sparks of One God”.

In theory, it seems the idea that we are all the same deep down would ignite good feelings of connection to each other and compassion for each other. When we see ourselves as all sparks off the same God, as all really God himself at play through us, it seems we would be good to each other, at least so we can be good to ourselves. In practice, the idea that we are all similar often produces bad feelings. Whether good or bad win depends on context. I think bad feelings win out in systems like Hinduism despite the ideal of Compassion.

Here are three ways in which sentient beings are the same or different. The ways are not usually fully achieved in real life but they are thinkable and they affect how a system works out.

(1) Each person is qualitatively different, so different that it is hard to imagine what other persons are like and hard to communicate with them. Everybody is “on his-her own”. Everybody tries to shape the world to suit what he-she thinks is important and what he-she likes. Even when many individuals are good, or mean well, the situation turns out badly. It becomes a contest of wills. Recall meetings where everyone talks past everyone else. Because people cannot relate, each individual finds it hard to assess his-her

own desires and to limit his-her own desires to what makes sense. Even when individuals start out well, they often turn bad out of frustration and out of unlimited desire. This is what Sartre had in mind when he described Hell as “other people” in “No Exit”, and how C.S. Lewis described Hell in “The Great Divorce”. This is how theologians paint Hell, as ultimate isolation from other persons and God. This is why Jewish teachers around the time of Jesus, and Jesus too, said the two greatest commandments, on which all others rest, are “love God” and “love others as yourself”. This is what the writers of the Upanishads tried to prevent when they urged people to see others as like themselves and to feel compassion for others. This is how critics of economic individualism see economics, capitalism, and Darwinism, not only as ways to analyze human life but as ways to promote this hellish version of human life. Anti-abortion activists, pro-life groups, see widespread abortion as an inevitable result of this stance and as clear evidence that this stance prevails in society.

(2) This option is the happy middle. This option makes more sense if you read option (3) first. Both similarity and difference matter. Every person differs but still we are all essentially equal and each of us is valuable in his-her way. Equality is not sameness nor is sameness equality. Not everybody is equally valuable except maybe in the eyes of God. Equality is more important than value. People respect both the difference and sameness of everybody. Seeing the commonality of each person allows each person to develop his-her own way and promotes beneficial manageable diversity, that is, difference. Accepting difference allows us to see beside (beyond, behind) the difference to what makes us equal. Unlike God, people are not necessarily good judges of what makes us valuable and equal. We value wealth, power, artistic ability, prowess in sports, appearance, and trendiness more than decency and a good heart. The middle position reminds us that we are not good judges, to think both of common equality and particular distinction, and to think more deeply about human value and natural value.

(3) Every person might be different but that doesn't matter. Everyone is the same. Everyone is equally a spark of the one God, equally the Dharma at play with itself. Sameness totally dominates difference and individuality. A strong personification of this attitude is Agent (Mr.) Smith in the movie trilogy “The Matrix”, who could make everyone exactly like him no matter what they began as and how powerful they were. It is a theme of the Chaplin movie “Modern Times” where everyone is a cog in the machine. People might be different cogs, they might have distinct duties, they might all need each other, and some people might have command functions while other people might be only simple cogs. Still, neither the differences nor mutual dependence matter because all are still only cogs. We are all in the Great Communion. We might have different roles but still we are all part of the same society. Aldus Huxley satirized this view in “Brave New World”. Some anthropologists have (had) this view of society.

Most people know the idea that things turn into their opposites when pursued quite strongly, as Justice becomes Tyranny. Usually the idea is surrounded with Romantic and metaphysical claptrap. Forget all that because you need a clear head to assess when things really do turn into opposites: Attitude (3) tends to turn into attitude (1) and vice versa. When all we see is similarity with no individuality, then we treat everyone as a creepy little aberration, and treat them not as the same but as totally different from us. We make them different, anyway we can. We do not feel connected to them and feel compassion for them but instead try to assert our individuality, our specialness, and our will. In situations where attitude (1) prevails, as with equally powerful politicians, business people, professionals, artists, fashion setters, householders, or people who insist on their rights without also accepting their responsibilities, what people see is not the distinctiveness of the others, what makes them special and successful in their little

realms. People see only that there are other powerful beings out there, each all vying to assert his-her will. Everybody is reduced from unique to merely the same hunger for assertion and power. Everybody is the same now, and that leads not to compassion but to competition.

To prevent the collapse of (3) into (1) and vice versa, do not rest on abstracts such as we are all the same, all sparks of God, and should feel great compassion for each other. Instead, use more concrete guidelines about what a person is and how we should act toward others. We need the Golden Rule, “applies equally”, the rule of law, and the idea of a citizen with both responsibilities and rights. We need to merge those with experience and practicality. We need to put those into concrete form with good institutions such as schools, hospitals, charities, and research. Even then, we still make mistakes, but we are less likely to err, more likely to see both similarity and difference, and to bridge difference with proper compassion.

Equality under the law does not mean everybody has the same ability and all should achieve the same wealth, fame, power, romantic success, and family success. It does not mean we are all smart enough to succeed in modern capitalism. It means we all get treated fairly and honestly by officials and citizens, according to procedures that are set down and are available for all people to understand. Each person is the same under the law but all persons are not the same, and we expect people to differ, or there would be no need for the law at all. Yet through all the differences, there is a common personhood on which we can base the law and a society. We are neither so different that we cannot have any law at all nor so similar that we don't need law. We are different enough to need law and similar enough to make law and to make it work. “Applies equally” works the same way, and we can see “equality under the law” as a variation of “applies equally”.

The Golden Rule works the same way. If we really were all the same, and it was easy to see so, we would not need the Golden Rule but could rest on simple compassion. The Golden Rule says that there are others and they are NOT exactly the same as us or we would not have to think about how to treat them. We have to treat them well despite real differences. When we do think about how to treat them, we treat them as we wish to be treated, not just with simple great compassion.

Westerners do have problems with attitudes (3) and (1), and the collapse. The problem is a malingering threat in our societies, and we fear it. Lately we have been more worried about the idea that everyone is the same (3) than that everyone is absolutely qualitatively different (1). The fear of ultimate sameness is the “Communist Specter”. It is a theme of episodes of the old “Star Trek” TV show, often run by overly-parental computers. In the comic TV show of 2016, “People of Earth”, aliens abduct humans and they try to soothe humans by telling us how special each is; but one woman knows such patter is only twisting the human psyche to cover abuse, and she “calls” the aliens on their “bullshit”. Americans want a level playing field, equal opportunity. What they often get instead is politicians and interest groups, including business firms and wealthy people, using the system to get their version of a good outcome. While we dream of “equal under the law” what we usually get is a huge rationale for special privilege and adept conniving. Fittingly, other societies see America as plagued by attitude (1), economic individualism and radical insistence on rights over responsibility in society and to nature.

Hindus tolerate enormous diversity in practice, in details of belief about the Dharma, and in what serves the Dharma. The variety and diversity of Hindu sects is legendary. “Indiana Jones and the Temple of

Doom” is an unfair parody of Hindu diversity, but the movie means well, gives the average American a small sense of Hindu diversity, and shows the importance of family and community despite the religious ideologies. Imagine every saint and famous historical religious figure with his-her own cult and dedicated temples. Despite the diversity, Indian society does cohere. Hindus seemingly connect with each other through the idea that we are all sparks of the Dharma (God). This situation seems to validate the idea that seeing the core of commonality allows more individuality and allows individuals to bridge the gaps between them. Hindus seem to make attitude (3) work (we are all the same), and work well enough so that attitude (1) (deep distinction) is not a threat. Indians seem to merge attitudes (1) and (3) in a way that overcomes the threat of becoming the same bad thing.

But that is not what really happens in Indian and Hindu society. Rather, Hindu society often really is full of contention, Hindus are argumentative, and the society holds together as much through authority as common good will. The movie of Gandhi’s starring Ben Kingsley life give a good sense of the conflict in Indian society despite high ideals. The war between Hindus (Indians) and Muslims (Pakistanis and to some extent Bangladeshis) is better seen as a conflict between South Indians with the same general outlook than as a conflict between Hinduism and Islam.

One good analogy for a Westerner is Protestantism. For someone raised in the Eastern Orthodox Church, “Protestants” here includes Roman Catholics but, for here, take it in the sense of Protestants versus Roman Catholics. Protestants stress their equality and their right to interpret the Bible as they see fit. Everyone is equal before God and can have a direct relation to God that does not depend on any particular historical Church. They refuse to accept the authority of any established church, in particular the Roman Catholic Church, despite the fact that the Roman Catholic Church has historical continuity from Jesus. Despite all having almost the same Bible, they still find thousands of different interpretations. They often agree on well over 90% of what it means yet still split into factions over interpretation of as little as one verse or one practice, for instance over Baptism and the Eucharist. Commonality of text breeds not unity and compassion but diversity, disagreement, and enmity. As Christians, Protestants should love each other and help each other. Yet their stress on equality of standing produces thousands, or tens of thousands, of sects, many of which are so distinct they cannot talk to each other. Within each church, Protestants are notoriously authoritarian and accept little deviation – so much for individual self-determination through one standard text and direct personal relation to God. To someone outside the Protestant movement, the community seems not made up of the qualitatively distinct non-commensurate entities they say but made up of many nearly-identical highly-argumentative competitive robots that split hairs just to have something to fight about and to use to distance themselves from other people and God. The Protestant mix of attitudes (1) and (3) too often leads to badness. Protestants drove the slave trade and they found easy Biblical rationales. Particular Protestant groups often cohere through authority and, in bad irony, state-sponsored churches such as in England, Germany, and Scandinavia. When Calvinism prevailed, it was a bully among Protestant equals, taking over the state and using it as an instrument of superiority, as in Switzerland, Colonial America, and during the time of the Revolution in England. Contrary to misconception (fueled by a beautiful but wrong book by Max Weber), capitalism does not thrive under pure Protestantism but in societies with a blend of peoples and ideas. Pure Protestantism stifles Capitalism. When Protestant societies do succeed, as in the United States in its first 150 years, it is not through extreme individualism or extreme sameness but because they take seriously the Golden Rule and applies equally, their concrete realization in the rule of law, and in other institutions such as schools and hospitals. They also have neighbors who differ in belief and way of life and with whom they

have to trade and talk, that is, they have to cross borders between differences. America would not have been America without both Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

That is what Hinduism lacks. Imagine Protestant pseudo-individualism combined with strong coherence within each church-and-sect, and without “applies equally” and rule of law. That is the kind of coherence that prevails under Hinduism when attitudes (1) and (3) dominate.

I revised parts of this chapter during the 2016 election season, and I saw that American political parties might provide more familiar examples than Protestantism. Both parties have an ideal rationale for why the members are in the party, that is, both parties have an ideal for why their members are the same and should feel great compassion for each other, for Americans in general, and for Americans regardless of political affiliation. In fact, in both parties, nobody believes that rationale. Instead, both parties have half-a-dozen major special-interest groups, each group vies to take over, and each group secretly disdains the others no matter what each group says: white working class, white medium-sized business, other middle-sized business, rich people, the Religious Right, the Religious Left, Blacks, Hispanics, Women, and eco-activists. Every group says: “we love America and we have the one-and-only way to save America” but no group sees beyond its own problems to bigger issues and solutions. Love for America seems a lot like love for self. Each group acts like isolated captives of Hell according to Sartre and Lewis. No society ever was free of interest groups, and it is natural that subgroups seek power. It also use to be natural in working democracy that interest groups would seek the greater interests of the country and compromise with other groups to work toward those. That is the middle position described above. Since at least Reagan, and likely since the early 1970s, that middle position has dwindled to nothing, and America has slid down the road to the Hell of high slogans and low cunning.

(When Buddhists see clearly, the middle position above is an example of what they mean by “the middle path”. Few real Buddhists see this clearly, and most use “middle path” only as a slogan. Still, it is worth pointing out that Buddhists can see the middle and see how it can save us from suffering.)

(The three options above interact with ideas of hyper-order, order, and no order, of reduction and holism, and of individual-and-society. Hopefully, I go into these relations in other writing.)

Marxist Parallels.

Recall the famous dictum from the rules of “Animal Farm” as interpreted by the ruling pigs: We are all equal but some are more equal than others.

How do systems built on great ideals, such as compassion, fail? Without implying Hinduism is just like Marxism, Marxism is a useful comparison. I could as well find parallels in right wing movements such as Reagan-ism, “compassionate conservatives”, “contract with America”, or “a rising tide floats all boats”.

Marxism too taught compassion in ideals such as “From each according to ability; to each according to need”. That was the Marxist version of “love your neighbor” and the Golden Rule, and it superseded “love your neighbor” and the Golden Rule. The system was the means by which people showed abilities and received needs; people related through the system. This maxim implies that people should relate as persons even if they do it through the medium of the social system. Yet Marxism got caught in deep harsh

hurtful debilitating contradictions that prevented Marxist systems from treating people as person and from mediating between persons.

On the one hand, the great mover of the world is history. History makes empires and breaks empires. It leads to changes from one dominant form of this era to another dominant form of the next era, as when the large agrarian mercantile states of Europe fell to capitalism. History will lead communism to replace capitalism. (Marxism was influenced by Romanticism.) On the other hand, people make history. People are the actors in history. If particular individual people don't see what is going on, see what needs to be done, and do it, nothing gets done. The right things don't get done. On the one hand, people are mere pawns and cogs. On the other hand, people are what it is all about and are the main movers of progress both material and spiritual.

Marxism never resolved these conflicts. In practice, what happened is that all the little people became mere pawns, things, abstractions, to be used as system and leaders demanded. They lost personhood. On the other hand, the leaders, in theory, retained their personhood. And the Party became the biggest person of all with the biggest will and biggest role. People related as persons only through the medium of the Party, if they related at all. The leaders of the Party, and the Party, had no trouble suppressing the personhood and lives of the people when that served their ends. They had no trouble rationalizing what they did as actions needed to build history and build something better, as the road to realizing the ideal of "from each according to ability; to each according to need". Of course, they failed, and instead they got Stalinism.

Although in theory the leaders retained their personhood, in fact what they retained was power while they lost their personhood, that is, in old-fashioned terms appropriate to Christian slave masters, they traded their souls for power. This is what happens in a system of slaves-and-masters. While the masters retain power, in denying personhood to slaves, in the end they lose their personhood as well. In case you think this disease is only one of Whites on Blacks, Black leaders and Black thugs lose their souls as well when they lie to their people, and continue the slavery of their people, through half truths. George Orwell deftly criticized all this in "Animal Farm".

All this is what happens in big systems that eat the world and have vague ideas at their core such as Dharma, inevitable history, dialectic, and diffuse compassion. It happens even in systems with better ideas of persons. It need not happen; but, to stop it, we have to keep in mind lessons from history and we have to hold better ideals.

Diffuse Vagueness, Right Balance, Overly Rigid System.

When Americans think of a system gone wrong, we think of fascism and Stalinism. We think of a strong, centralized, hierarchical, rigid, highly ordered system with one leader. When we think of free persons, we think of free persons naturally opposed to such systems, fighting them, and defeating them. We define our personhood in relation to such systems as their opposite. We see Captain Kirk defeating Klingons, Luke Skywalker defeating Darth Sidious the Emperor, and Frodo defeating Sauron. We think that rigid and free are the only two categories, and they must be opposed. There is no better middle. Americans think all chaos is creative and only chaos can be creative. Only total freedom, that is, anarchy, can lead to right ideas of the person and society. If I criticize a system for disorder and not having some important

right ideas such as personhood and rule of law, Americans think I am secretly a fascist. When I say that vagueness is not necessarily freedom and does not guard the free person, Americans don't get it. When I say vagueness can lead to chaos, and out of this chaos comes not freedom but oppression, Americans think I am a rightist calling for a strong military leader. When I say Hinduism goes wrong and is elaborate because it relies on vague ideas such as Dharma and because it is diffuse, Americans don't get it. How can a system that is not hyper-ordered also not promote personhood and freedom? How can it lead to too much elaboration and to hierarchy?

Think of American Protestantism and politics again. I don't repeat the descriptions.

The founders of the United States knew the need for balance between system vs. anarchy, and knew that persons thrive best in that balance rather than in anarchy or deep structure. They knew that anarchy leads to the destruction of the free person, and the French Revolution proved them correct. They sought better balance in selected leaders, selected councils, and a strong legal framework (rule of law) much as the Orthodox Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, and some Protestant churches did in the past – although the Orthodox Churches did not succeed well. These are not secret conservative ideas but open American, Western, and liberal ideas.

The West has the tools to find the right balance of system versus freedom, order versus chaos, person versus demon, etc. We don't usually find it but sometimes we do. When we do, we need to try hard to hang on to the balance. Despite its high ideals, Hinduism does not have the right tools, and the result is much as we find in American Protestantism with its high but diffuse ideas.

Impersonal Dharma versus Personal God.

Dharma is an impersonal order while God is personal. Karma is an automatic system of reward based on accounting while an interview with God is a merciful assessment and it helps more than hurts. Hinduism works well as a system that eats the world and supports structured society because Dharma is a vague impersonal idea that can be interpreted to meet both the needs of rulers and yearnings of ruled. Some good points of Hinduism arise because it is an impersonal system that includes both good and bad: "the rain falls equally on the just and the unjust", and, in some cases, that is a good thing. Yet the bad things of Hinduism come through its impersonal system-hood, and the bad outweigh the good.

Sometimes educated Christians say a personal God is unlikely to be misused as Hinduism is misused. A personal God would not stand for mixing good and evil, and bad relativism, even if a personal god would show as much mercy as justice. If this were strictly true, we could easily decide on one big point between Hinduism versus theistic religions - but it is not always true. It is certainly possible to interpret a personal god to rationalize bad deeds and bolster a structured unfair society. Christians and Muslims have a clear sad record for doing that. You are not automatically a bad person because your religion centers on the Dharma or a good person because your religion centers on a personal God.

Still, there is a difference, it makes a difference, and it is worth speculating.

A personal God does not let us get away with much self-deception and self-serving rationalization. A personal God forces us to think of other people as persons rather than as items in the cosmic system and

as the potential source of spiritual goodness points for our own advancement. Their good points are not part of their role in the cosmic Dharma system; their good points are just part of their personality. Their bad points are not part of their role in the cosmic Dharma system either; their bad points are just part of their personality; and sometime their bad points have no redeeming value. Compassion to real full mixed persons is real compassion rather than an indirect way to serve ourselves. Living with real persons, we have to take seriously the Golden Rule, “applies equally”, and “pay it forward” even if we don’t follow them well and even if we disagree with them. Martin Buber made all these points clearly in his classic book “I and Thou”. This personal view is a basic implication of Jewish ethical monotheism.

God’s Plan and the System.

I am sure God had something in mind when he made the world. I doubt he had in mind what people think of as “a plan” and I doubt he had in mind anything like the Mahayana or Hindu systems. No matter how comforting it might be, I doubt God has a detailed plan for everybody and that everybody has a key role to play in making the world come out alright. In the chapters on issues, I said God made the world so that it is diverse and interesting, and so most people can find what they need. God made the world so people could try to do the right thing for the right reasons and so people could see if they are up to the tasks of self-government and acting as steward for a planet. We have not done well so far.

The facts that (1) this world follows physical laws, (2) the obvious order in the world, (3) this planet and likely many others give rise to life and intelligent life, and (4) three billion years of biological evolution, (in theology, all aspects of the “argument from design”) give people the impression of a strong detailed plan or a system. While there might be a plan, the plan might not be what we think it is. When we learn our way around the forest, city, business we carry out, firm for which we work, school to which we go, or evolutionary theory, we feel we are in a planned system, it is all for the best, and we have a distinct role to play; but that is not usually true. We can make it truer if we make a place for ourselves. So, in the world in which we live, everybody has a place. Everything works out alright in the end even if some of us suffer deep pain along the way. Goodness overcomes evil. The great risk of the world seems obvious in daily life but it is not so in the great plan cosmic system because the cosmic system subsumes risk into a long range insurance policy. Existence is joy.

In fact, things might not work out alright in the end. Contrary to the “Marigold Hotel” movies about ideal romanticized Hinduism, sometimes it really is the end even though it is not all alright. I am sure some planets that evolved intelligent life went down the tubes, and this planet is in grave danger of doing that. Not everybody has a key role to play. Not every orc is an undiscovered Frodo; not even every hobbit is Frodo; and not every armchair political analyst is Winston Churchill. It might be that evil wins in the end. Not all evil can be turned to greater good; in fact, the definition of evil is that it cannot be exactly reversed and made good. If we want things to turn out well, we have to work hard to make it so. Even then, we have no guarantee. Yet we have to try anyway. The great risk of the world is real. The great risk of your life is real. You might fail. Some people will fail. Likely you will vanish after you talk to God after you die. In the meantime, there is a lot to do. You can keep busy and feel useful. You can get to know a lot about the world if you put your mind to it. You can have fun. You can make the world more interesting. You can use your life dreaming if that suits you. Life is a gift, life is worthwhile, and life is often a joy. But life is not a cosmic joy, and it is not a guaranteed joy for everybody.

I like it better the way I see it. I like being not big but still important, working hard, getting satisfaction from what evolution made for me, what I make for myself, what I get from others, and what I make with others. I hate that it might not work out well but I can stand that. I know not everybody thinks as I do, and many people seek a system because they need the comfort of something to watch over them. That is why Jesus and Krishna turned into God. Make up your own mind.

Explaining Everything Dramatically.

Hindus have deified beginning (Brahma), middle (Vishnu), and end-or-transition (Shiva). In deifying these principles, Hindus incorporate them into the vague Dharma system. Almost everything has a beginning, middle, and end. So these ideas, and these deities, explain almost everything. Whatever happens, you can think of it in these terms. You can incorporate everything into the Hindu Dharma system. In this way, and with many of the ideas described above, Hinduism is like Chi, Yin-and-Yang, matter-and-energy, and mind and matter, which also explain everything. Once you think that way, it is hard to think otherwise.

Most things that can explain everything really explain nothing. If everything has a beginning, middle, and end (transition), then what does it explain to say that a particular thing has a beginning, middle, and end, or to personify and dramatize the fact? We need more.

All these things had a beginning, middle, and end, even if, for some of them, we don't see the end yet: the cosmos, the sun, the Earth, oceans, trilobites, birds, dinosaurs, storms, humans, TV, movies, print newspapers, the Red Spot on Jupiter, capitalism, Indian society, and Hinduism. The trick is not to point out the beginning, middle, and end, but to say how each particular thing had its own beginning, middle, and end, and how each differs from the others. The trick is to explain not in terms like Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva but to explain in terms familiar from science and philosophy – which I don't go into here. We need to get into specifics in a way that systems like Dharma with Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva don't allow. We need to get beyond the idea that ideas that explain everything are good ideas. Ideas that explain more are usually good ideas (not always) but rarely so with ideas that explain everything.

The advantage of ideas such as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva is that they are dramatic. They are a lot of fun. I find science fun but not everybody does, and I understand. People need something more dramatic than science. Sometimes drama and fun open our minds, help us to assimilate better, and even help us to come up with better explanations in more scientific terms. The “thought experiments” (“gedanken”) of Albert Einstein exemplify the good use of imagination to stimulate solid logical science. If you want to use ideas like Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva for fun without necessarily committing yourself to their objective existence and the system of which they are apart, then go ahead.

Indians, like my Greek ancestors, always were gifted enthusiastic analysts. They do not rest on simple ideas like Brahma (beginning), Vishnu (middle), and Shiva (end) but also give analyses based on other more concrete ideas. They do tend to return to some basic ideas such as Dharma. Hindus pioneered in analysis of the mind, society, and political society. Much of their specific analytics work can be found in the “shastras”. Hindus have written hundreds of long detailed texts of explanation, with which I am only barely familiar. In Thailand, which borrowed from India, modern Western-based sciences are called by a term particular to the science plus the suffix “shastra” (“saht”). Mathematics is called “khanit + shastra” or “khanit-saht”; economics is called “seta+saht” (“seta: wealth” + saht: study”). Magic is “saya” (“sleeping”)

+ saht (I thank my wife, Nitaya, for pointing out this case). Magic is delusory; it puts us to sleep; it adds to the stickiness of the world. The logic that comes out in shastras is like the logic that Westerners develop for particular topics and which we glorify with the suffix “ology”, as in “sociology” and “anthropology”, or the suffix “ics”, as in “physics” and “linguistics”.

Until recently, Hindus did not have an alternative to Dharma-based ideas to rest explanations on, and so did not make progress in science and explanation as Westerners did. In the end, shastras seem limited by reasoning based on ideas such as Dharma. Since finding Western science and logic, Hindus have proven adept at moving beyond Dharma based personified ideas such as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva to more scientific style explanation, and have distinguished themselves. Off the top of my head, I can think of at least four South Asian Nobel Prize winners – I do not list them here. This is about the same relation that Western science has to the Jewish, Christian, and pagan ideas that gave it birth. It is what I expect to see more of.

Vague Contradictions at the Center.

Logicians argue that we can assert any nonsense if we start from a contradiction. Vagueness can play the same role as a contradiction, and allow us to assert any nonsense as if it were sense. Vagueness often generates contradictions. Vagueness plays a big role in big system and systems that eat the world. People get lost in contradictions, vagueness, and nonsense yet think they are in the middle of something important.

Having lived through the silliness of American politics and the American “culture wars” since the 1960s, I cannot claim that Westerners are much less prone than Hindus to vagueness, contradictions, nonsense, and all that follows. I can say: Hopefully educated experienced people now do not rest too much on vagueness, contradiction, and nonsense. Experienced people learn to see through political posturing to important realities below such as responsibility, freedom, and “live and let live”.

A critic can say our ideals are vague but I think that is wrong. Our ideals include personhood, freedom, justice, rule of law, etc. It is wrong to say those are the same kind of vagueness as, for example, “vital force”, “spiritual progress”, or Dharma. A critic might say I rely too much on vague ideas such as “God” in this book, but I do not here defend myself; hopefully the book already did defend my use.

Of vague ideas which support contradictions and nonsense, “Dharma” is likely the strongest and most successful. Everything is a product of the Dharma, even apparently opposed things such as good and bad, creating and destroying, and aristocratic freedom with lower caste slavery. Those are contradictions from which any nonsense flows. Even if the idea of Dharma does not give rise to flat-out contradictions, it supports animistic non-scientific thinking such as personifying.

Used properly, Dharma can be a beautiful idea, such as the Greek idea of the logic (“logos”) of a thing. But the idea of Dharma has not been used properly by modern Western analytic sometimes-scientific standards throughout most of its history. When Hindus think well now, they do not use ideas such as Dharma but use ideas that, these days, are usually taken from the West.

Both “Dharma” and “logic” mean how a thing works but the feel is different. Using Dharma is like using ideas from Aristotle or Medieval Europe but with more of a “hold” on the mind.

Imagine a Hindu and a Western social scientist seeking to figure out how Indian society works (here I mean a social scientist with a scientific bent, not an anthropologist overwhelmed in culture). At the level of villages, society is supposed to be egalitarian and governed by a village council. Society is definitely not egalitarian even in the villages, but that is a fact to be considered later. Yet at the state level, society is supposed to be NOT egalitarian. It is supposed to be stratified. In both cases, the Hindu says it is the Dharma of the social unit that leads it to be that way. It is the Dharma of villages to be egalitarian, and it is the Dharma of the state to put all these egalitarian villages in a stratified whole. That is as far as the Hindu needs to go. This (lack of) understanding is a contradiction – it is both Dharma to be equal and Dharma to be unequal - that allows the Hindu to rationalize all kinds of silly things about Indian rural life and Indian stratified court life such as that women should be equally subjugated and subjugated the same ways in both places despite the need to earn a living in one place and the need to intrigue in the other.

In contrast, the Western social scientist would try to find out how egalitarian or stratified things really were where. If there is stratification, what kind of stratification is there? Who benefits and who loses? How does the whole thing endure if somebody consistently loses? What are the winnings and what do the winners do with their winnings? What are alternatives? Would alternatives quickly lead to stratification again in a few generations if we magically made villages and the state start over as egalitarian systems? What are people’s motives both given from their desire to have a family and make a living, and from their culture? I have read enough to know that Western social scientists can come up with romanticized nonsense too but at least they don’t stop there. The group of colleagues works through alternatives until they get to something deeper than “Dharma”. With that something deeper, hopefully they can get away from romanticized nonsense.

Try the same thing with a bicycle. Bicycles should not stand up. A Hindu responds that it is the Dharma of bicycles to stand up, at least when moving. A Western scientist looks for broader comparisons and other types of explanation. What things stand up when still yet fall when moving? What things stand up when moving yet fall when still? How fast do they have to move? What is the distribution of weight on the things that fall or stand up?

When we combine this Western scientific outlook with Western ideas of the person and with Jesus’ ideas of the person and personal relations, we get good Western civilization. Resting on the Dharma, so far, Hindus have not been able to get that.

Again: Creative Chaos, Rebels, and Moderate Good Order.

From the second chapter on issues, from the chapter on Romanticism, and from comments above, recall American ideas about rebels, chaos, hyper order, and good order. I briefly re-frame these ideas in Hindu terms below. The re-frame is fun, but, if we look hard, we find that it adds nothing, and it helps lead us down the garden path of silly modern political myths. To get on a better track we need to return to the Western ideas that I have been promoting.

Unlike the past, modern Americans fear hyper order more than chaos. They even fear moderate order more than chaos. Americans fear that moderate order almost inevitably gets corrupted into hyper order, that is, fascism. Americans think chaos is creative and good. All chaos is creative. All creativity needs some chaos. The only source of goodness is creativity. So goodness needs chaos and comes from chaos. To get to goodness, we need chaos. To get to goodness, we must oppose hyper order and even moderate order. Rebels are natural enemies of hyper order and even moderate order. Rebels oppose bad hyper order and bad moderate order. Rebels create chaos. From chaos, artists arise to help create moderate good order. Better to be a rebel who opposes hyper order and even moderate order than to be a sheep who accepts moderate order, accepts rationalizations for all order, and so paves the way for bad hyper order. Better to live wild and free. Out of the wild and free people comes art and all goodness for all other people.

In Hindu terms, sometimes particular societies go bad (greater Hindu society based on Dharma cannot go bad; when particular societies within greater Hindu society go bad, contact with the greater Hindu society leads them to return to their correct Dharma path, as I am about to describe. Ultimately all societies, even in the West, East, and Islam, are particular societies within the greater Hindu society.). To change, old bad society must first end. That is the job of Shiva. Modern political rebels are Shiva doing his good job of shaking things up, overturning, destroying old bad order, and paving the way for the new good order. Brahma supplies Shiva his weapons. Brahma supplies many weapons, and, out of that array, Shiva is always able to choose the best weapons for the job. In the modern world, the best weapons for creative constructive disorder are rock and roll; drugs; sex; art; movies; TV; media including the Internet; conflict about ethnicity, gender, age, religion, etc.; political causes based on those conflicts; and even conniving right wing dirty tricksters such as people I cannot name for fear of being sued. The chaos of the 1960s through 2016 was the work of Shiva – in a good cause, even if we don't see it now.

As those forces do their job, Brahma also supplies weapons (tools) to Vishnu, who will build a new better moderate order and then safeguard it. Some of the same tools that serve Shiva also serve Vishnu: art, artists, political awareness, civic groups, etc. Especially artists and sensitive politicians will help Shiva build a better world. As I wrote this, America had swung much more toward social acceptance and some solidarity than it showed in the 1980s and 1990s. Gay people (homosexuals) were allowed to marry and to adopt children. Women were forging ahead in politics and some areas of business even if they still lagged in wages. Racism was talked about openly. At least three states had allowed limited marijuana use. If all this leads to a general consensus and the building of good institutions on that consensus, then Vishnu will have done his work.

Fine, but so what? Using this logic, we can explain everything, including a return to 1950s conservative family life, if that is how America turns out, and what America settles into. Using this logic, if it happens, we could explain White Power taking over America. If Vladimir Putin restores the Russian Empire and make it even stronger despite all the challenges of the 1980s through early 2000s, we can use this logic to explain that. Using this logic, we can explain the rise of militant Muslim fundamentalism and terrorism. If ISIS (ISIL) restores the Caliphate, takes over the Middle East, oppresses all Muslims, oppresses women, and wages war on Christians all around the world, we can use this same logic to explain that as well, especially from the view of ISIS who would consider that outcome great.

How do we explain that Americans are beginning to accept gay people and marijuana but are still uneasy about abortion? How do we explain that class fear lingers even when Americans are more comfortable around gay people? Is the persistence of capitalism despite some unfairness the work of Vishnu?

When we contrast scenarios, and get into the specifics of particular scenarios, the Hindu categories won't do. Everything goes through destruction, change, innovation, and stasis, and so alluding to destruction, change, innovation, and stasis explains nothing. We need better. When we use better, we mostly use the style of thinking and categories that the West has developed.

Dharma in the Modern World.

When Hindus reinterpret Dharma for the modern world, I think the new Dharma will come to look much like Western science combined with ideas about people as persons. The patterns that we find in the physical world will be amenable to explanation by science rather than Dharma. The formation, life, and death of stars will be less about Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva than physics. The invention and spread of bio-technology will have less to do with Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva than about applying genetics and chemistry. Whether capitalism is fair, and whether it can serve as the basis for a plural democracy in the modern world, will have less to do with the Dharma of capitalism, bankers, and workers, and more to do with patterns of interacting self-interest from evolved persons. "You are that" will have less to do with giving alms to a beggar sometimes and will have more to do with working personally in charities, figuring out how to run the welfare system well, and treating other ethnic groups as humans. Hindus will have to act as good citizens in modern plural democracies, which means they have to participate in education, charity, and personal action. They have to pay it forward, follow the Golden rule, follow "applies equally", and have to see other citizens as persons rather than as Dharma points.

Not Simply Idolatry.

To a believer in God, especially in the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition, it is easy to make out the Hindu Dharma system as idolatry, and commitment to the system as idolatrous worship. This is wrong. While commitment to an impersonal Dharma system might be a mistake, it is not idolatry as Christians think of idolatry. Commitment to the traditional Hindu system is more like commitment to an elaborate theological system such as in Islam, Christianity, and Mahayana. Commitment to the Dharma is like commitment to Roman Catholic Thomism or Protestant Existentialist Humanism. Commitment to a Hindu god or avatar is more like commitment to a Christian saint or to Mary than demon worship. Worship of the free market with wildly wrong ideas of persons and business firms, or commitment to political correctness with its wildly wrong view of human nature, are as much idolatry as commitment to the Dharma system and as much idolatry as commitment to Mary or a saint.

Rather than think in terms of idolatry, it is better to think in these terms: What difference does it make if I put commitment to the teachings of Jesus, and put my action, in the context of a system, versus if I just accept and act? What mistakes does putting myself in the context of a system lead me to? What do I really add to my commitment and my acts if I put them in the context of a system?

People do need some context to act. Normal people cannot simply act. They are not Zen and Taoist masters. How much context, and what kind of context, do I need? How can I get the appropriate kind-

and-level of context without leading to big errors, without leading to a bad relativistic system that eats the world? I think that is what the teachings and Western values do well.

Duty.

The following poem is by Richard Lovelace. I use American spelling. I love this poem.

“To Lucasta, Going to the Wars”

“Tell me not (sweet) I am unkind,
That from the nunnery
Of thy chaste breast and quiet mind,
To war and arms I fly.

True; a new mistress now I chase,
The first foe in the field;
And with a stronger faith embrace
A sword, a horse, a shield.

Yet this inconstancy is such
As you too shall adore;
I could not love thee (dear) so much,
Lov’d I not honor more.”

As a matter of temper, I see in terms of duty, and I over-stress duty. It is a duty to make the world better, follow the Golden Rule, strictly follow “applies equally to everybody”, be decent, treat people as persons, and love your neighbor. Immanuel Kant first stated the idea of “applies equally to everybody” in terms of duty, and that appealed to me when I read it.

In Hinduism, the world is a big adventure dream of Dharma, reality is not as it simply seems, and you can see your role in the system as playing, yet still Hinduism sees affairs largely in terms of duty. Your social role (personal-social Dharma) is needed for the entire social and cosmic system to work. You owe duty to your parents, family, caste, socio-economic class, and race. You owe duty to other sentient beings who are trying to play out their karma heritage and their current Dharma. Mostly you owe a duty to the entire Dharma system.

Despite sharing a common stress on duty, I cannot take on the Hindu view. The Hindu sense of duty has a different feel than my sense of duty or the typical Western sense of duty. The Hindu view differs from how I think Jesus felt about duty and how followers of Jesus see things. The most apparent difference is that Hindus do not usually do kind acts except out of a sense of duty while followers of Jesus do kind acts out of both a sense of duty and for other reasons.

The cosmic order will not end if people don’t do their duty. God will be unhappy, and this little damp rock Earth might turn into a crap hole, but God will go on, and other planets have their chance. You personally are not responsible for the cosmic order. You have a duty but you do not carry the big burden of the

world. In Hinduism, the cosmic order falls apart if you neglect duty. You do not merely disappoint the gods, you deprive every person of his-her Dharma rights, and you stop the entire wheel of Dharma from turning. This burden keeps Hindus focused on duty rather than on other motives.

Followers of Jesus institutionalize their sense of duty and their connection to people and animals through charities such as Red Cross and World Wildlife Fund, through schools, projects, etc. Hindus do not. To the extent that Hindus act on duty to people below them at all, they give alms.

Hindus feel an official duty toward people beneath them in station but they do not act on it much and they do not institutionalize it. Their sense of a cosmic system does not lead them to extend the same sense of duty they feel toward fellow caste members to everybody; rather, it leads to the opposite. Hindus do not set up charities for the poor except under the lead of Christians. They do not set up institutions to try to get people out of poverty and keep them out. In fairness, for the last thousand years, there have been so many poor people, and poor people have reproduced so fast, that it is unlikely any institution could have done the job. But Hindus did not feel it part of their duty to try.

In Hinduism, duty is something that you carry out as something inherent in you and your station. Duty is not something that you do from a sense of others as people and their situation.

Both followers of Jesus and Hindus feel duty toward kinds of people such as mothers, police officers, and children, and feel duty toward animals. Hindus sometimes do feel duty toward a person because of who he or she might be regardless of his-her position, such as Jane who happens to be your sister. Followers of Jesus feel this kind of duty more than Hindus. Hindus feel duty to people mostly because they too are members of the system of Dharma. Followers of Jesus feel duty to people and animals because they are people and because they are living persons.

I feel duty to an ideal such as “friendship” as in the Chandler novel “The Long Goodbye”, to justice, love, freedom, and compassion. My sense of duty is to an ideal rather than to a cosmic system. Some ideas command attention and duty on their own. Hindus would recognize these ideas but, as in their attitude toward other people and other religions, would put them in the context of the cosmic system, as Krishna placed bravery, loyalty, and compassion in the context of a cosmic system.

Besides duty to ideas, I feel duty toward real individual persons rather than about social-cosmic roles. I do my duty for Nit, Dino, Imad, Else, Ginnie, John, Emily, Chris, Bruce, Norm, Wayne, Donn, and other people. When I act toward people I do not know, I imagine them as individuals, like people I do know, to the extent I can. This is why I can extend the sense of duty beyond immediate family to include friends, people in the neighborhood, people in the city, and everybody. I am sure Hindus feel this sense of duty-about-real-people toward family and toward people they know well but they do not seem able to extend it beyond that limit. Beyond that limit, the objects of duty again are players in the cosmic system.

Acting Well Not from a Sense of Duty.

Both Hindus and I make a basic mistake when we make duty the major basis of actions. Rather than duty, I should think in terms of acting toward other people (and animals) for two better reasons. First, they are people (and animals), and that is how you act toward them. They really are like me. They really

do have hearts and minds, and I should act toward them in a way suited to that fact. Second, giving, justice, caring, sharing, helping, guiding, educating, healing, giving clothing to, etc. are right and good in themselves. You do not do them out of duty; you do them out of themselves. You do not even to them because they are good; you do them out of themselves. Of course, you have to not contradict goodness when you do them out of themselves, but you should not always have to place helping or educating in the context of cosmic goodness to do it. People should not even act well because it is God's command. It should just be something people do.

Hindus do recognize these virtues and do understand their value in themselves. Yet Hindus do not often act on these virtues apart from a sense of cosmic duty or sense of what is going on in the cosmic system. Kindness is part of the Dharma; educating is part of the Dharma; and healing is part of the Dharma. We Hindus do it because it is our role in the Dharma not because it is right and good in itself and the receiver of the benefit is another person like ourselves.

For people like me who have trouble acting apart from duty or cosmic system, we just have to accept our limitations and we have to get along that way as best we can. If you are lucky enough to be able to just do well without thinking about duty or the cosmic system, then carry on.

Behaving Rather than Believing.

I care less about what people believe than what they do. Hindus allow people to know mere partial truth, and even some false ideas, as long as people act according to their station and carry out their duties. Again, superficially these attitudes resemble but they differ where it counts.

Hindus want people to do their social duty to sustain the system. I want people to act following the ideas of Jesus. I do not insist they have the same ideas that I do but I want them to act as if they knew the ideas. They can act according to the Golden Rule without being able to state it and without knowing that Jesus made it common. I am not sure how acting as if you know ideas is different than knowing the ideas; and I don't argue about that issue here. The ideas that I want people to act as if they knew do not require a person to follow a strict social code, and sometimes the ideas lead a person to go against the social code.

Suppose Harry was brought up to know all the rules of correct behavior for a soldier although he does not know why soldiers have these rules. David never learned about being a soldier but did learn honor and duty, and he could apply the ideas in different situations so as to act correctly in those situations. When David is drafted, he acts like a better soldier than Harry even though he does not have the same ideas as Harry.

I don't care if people say they are Hindus, Jews, or Christians as long as they act according to the Golden Rule, "applies equally", and the ideals of good citizenship in a modern Western plural democracy. This is not the same as saying they are doing their duty although they have only imperfect partial knowledge of the system. I do not make people relative to the system when I allow that they can act well even if they do not publicly share my religious ideas.

Alms and Compassion.

Giving alms is a sacrament in Hinduism. Hindus should give alms out of compassion. Giving should get across the Hindu idea of universal connection. Yet when a Hindu gives alms, the giving benefits the giver at least as much as the receiver. Givers get “spiritual points” that help them to be reborn in a better life, higher life, or to have opportunities for spiritual growth opened to them. In fact, people give alms for the benefit they get more than they give alms to benefit the receiver or because giving alms is good in itself. The giver of alms acts as an agent in a system rather than as one person giving to another person as the only way the first person can help the second person right now. This is not compassion.

Followers of Jesus should not worry about getting “spiritual points” for helping other people or for doing their duty toward other people. They should do it because they can “see the heart” of the other person, and know that what they do helps the other person, as with the Good Samaritan helping the victim of robbers. Christians do say the giver benefits more than the receiver but they don’t have in mind spiritual points. Givers increase their sense of being like other people. They become aware of what truly helps and what does not. If all that a giver gets is a sense of do-gooder accomplishment, and maybe scoring some points with God, then that has to do but it is less than what is available.

You can give out of duty but you can’t real feel compassion out of duty. Giving can be done as a duty but giving is better when it is done because the other person needs help and can use help, without thinking even that it is a good thing to do but because you just do it as one person to the next.

In Hinduism, at very best, other people are like the other people in the movie “Groundhog Day”; you help them but they have no chance of reaching high levels of spirituality. They are not full persons. At usual best, other people are the object by which you give to get spiritual brownie points. You don’t bother to find out what they really need and what might make their lives really better because they are not persons in the same way that you and your clique are. More commonly, they are just other people to whom you owe a systematic duty, which you carry out for your own benefit.

I do not discourage people from giving alms. I want people to give alms both directly to needy people and through charities. Don’t let an imperfect heart stop you. Nobody is perfect. Institutional charities are one of the great achievements of Christians. You should write checks to charities (or give a card number) even if you don’t know any real persons that will be helped and even if you give from duty from a sense of duty. If you live in a town where nobody really needs personal help then all you realistically can do is give through charities, and that is a lot. Think about what you would do in a personal situation. That might be all you can do sometimes. Even that is better than toting up spiritual points.

Saving Everybody.

Although Unitarian-Universalists and Hindus both believe everybody eventually will be saved, even the Devil, the end attitude differs between them. Unitarian-Universalists come out of the Western Christian tradition and they tend to be kind-hearted Liberals who want good for all creatures great and small. They treat everybody well. They want to save the Devil out of sympathy for the Devil. I am not sure how many of them have been the victims of real evil.

In contrast, Hindus want to save everybody to make sure they are saved and to make sure the system works well. Saving the Devil is a way to make sure everybody is saved and so they are saved. I do not get the sense in Hindu literature that Hindus really have much compassion for bad guys, not even for the misguided cousins of the five hero brothers in the Mahabharata. Bad guys get saved because they are the unwitting tools of moving the plot forward (“turning the Wheel of Dharma”) and so should be rewarded for the service they perform. If anybody ever were truly beyond redemption then the hope of the system would fail and the system would end.

I have said I don’t believe everybody will be saved or deserves it. We don’t all live many lives so that we all eventually become saints. Part of being a person is the chance that you won’t become a saint, or even the chance that you will be bad. People can just fail. We should be proud of the people who do succeed in seeing beyond themselves even in little ways. We cannot rely on a system to save us. As a person, we can count on some help from some other persons. Get used to all this.

People sometimes become better people because they have to deal with badness. Badness offers good people a chance to act well and advance goodness. I don’t know if good people need bad people so as to become good and act well but I doubt it. If good people do need bad people, then it seems God should ultimately rescue bad people as a reward for their unwitting sacrifice and service to goodness. I can see this logic but I don’t agree with it. It is like arguing that God should reward malaria because it gives good people a chance to take care of each other. Bad people can simply be lost.

Adventure, Fun, and Games.

Hinduism is not a “Peter Pan” religion for most Hindus who have to deal with social class, making a living, government, sexism, prejudice at home and abroad, and the other realities of life. Hinduism does feed into mistaken ideas about life being an adventure for people who have the luxury to look at life that way, or need the excuse of looking at life that way, including Hindus and Westerners. This life is an adventure, this life is one of many adventures, even death is an adventure, and the whole circle is a ball of joy. The more adventure I have, the better off everybody is. Hinduism suffers from the same potential for abuse as other systems of many lives and other ideas of life as a game. This is why the Upanishads and early texts in Hinduism stressed stopping it all, getting off the wheel.

When westerners discover Hindu ideas about life as an adventure, they often use the Hindu ideas as an excuse to go off on tangents of self-indulgence. That happened in the 1950s and after, and it then fueled the reaction against Eastern religions and in support of stern unhappy fundamentalism.

The cure for this disease is not to stress how serious life is, how much we have to suffer, how we need to sacrifice everything for the sake of others, how much depends on us personally, our duty to God, life is not worthwhile, or getting off the wheel entirely. The cure is not to say that this life ultimately is a game of adventure, and part of the adventure is being lost in the supposed seriousness of this life, so we can play it out that way if it adds to the fun.

The cure is simply to deal with the current situation as best you can and to let any big games worry about themselves. Dealing with the current situation as best you can includes seeing other people as persons, making moral decisions, being useful, working hard to make the world better, and being a good citizen. It

includes enjoying life, having fun, and, yes, some adventure and games. World War Two was won by a big team. If you personally alone need to carry the Ring to the Lake of Fire, God will let you know. If you have fun chasing Sasquatch, and you don't need any rationalizations, then do it. Again, we have to find the right balance between empty games with bearing a "really real" world on our shoulders.

More against Making Jesus and His Teachings Relative.

Christianity has been used to ratify many kinds of social organization from small churches on the margins of the Roman Empire to the entire hierarchy of the Roman Empire and the European states that followed. It has been used to justify slavery in the United States. So it is hard to say that Christianity condemns the Hindu Indian state and easy to say Christianity could approve of the Hindu Indian state. The teachings of Jesus do not necessarily condemn stratified Hindu Indian society any more than they supported Imperial Rome. So Hindus can say Jesus supports the Dharma even if he does not specifically support stratified Hindu Indian society.

Suppose Christians insist Jesus would not support a stratified unfair state such as the traditional Hindu Indian state. Hindus still can make Jesus relative. Christianity has supported many kinds of states. Now it is used to ratify a modern plural democracy. Modern plural democracy is the foremost representative of the Dharma now on Earth, at this point of human history. So Jesus supports the Dharma as it appears in modern democracies. Rightly interpreted, Hinduism also supports modern democracies as the current best representatives of the Dharma. Christianity is not so flexible that it usually sees Jesus in this way, as helping the best state available in a historical period. Hinduism can see both Hinduism and Jesus this way. So, again, Jesus is a hero of the Dharma and Hinduism can encompass Jesus and Christianity.

Although Hinduism might be able to make Jesus relative in these ways, I hope it does not, and I think to do so is wrong. While Jesus was sent by God, that does not make him representative of the Dharma, an avatar. The idea that Jesus is an avatar is similar to a mistake that formal Christians make when they see Jesus as God in some way. Rather than think Jesus is important because he represents the Dharma or he is God, think of the content of his teachings, and assess the content of his teachings as the content is relevant to conditions of people at times in human history, including under different kinds of state. Even if Jesus is God or the Dharma, to see him that way while neglecting to act on his teachings is to betray his teachings and to betray him as Dharma or God. Forget about the big Dharma system and the Christian theological system both.

The teachings of Jesus should not be used to ratify any kind of state, good or bad. I hope I did not do that with Western plural democracy. I support Western plural democracy because it goes with the best moral and political values. Jesus' teachings also go with those values and so support modern plural democracies. Jesus' teaching provides values that can be used in many situations, and so can be used in a variety of states. That does not mean they can be used to ratify any kind of state. They can be used to convince people to support a kind of state when they coincide with the values of that state, as they do mostly with modern plural democracies. As I have said before, no state is the New Israel and is thus the embodiment of God and of all correct living on Earth. Not even modern democracy is so perfect as to be considered a type of New Israel. Modern plural democracy happens to be the best we have now, and we can give good reasons why it is best. Modern plural democracy and Jesus' long-running teachings go well together. That does not make Jesus representative of the Dharma now on Earth.

Avatars and Prophets; Jesus is not an Avatar, Holy Person, Yogi, or Guru.

A prophet is a real person, who lived and died, and who had ideas. Some ideas were correct. Correct ideas took us a step forward in how we see God, our relation to God, each other, and nature. Sometimes prophets did not have new ideas so much as they implemented good ideas of previous prophets, such as did Moses, Joshua, and Mohammad. Prophets erred, in both their personal lives and as prophets. Not all their ideas were good steps forward nor did all their acts lead people rightly. The new ideas of a later prophet could override the old ideas of an earlier prophet. I don't know exactly how prophets are "from" God, and I don't worry much. We have to take the entire stock of prophets, sift it, and make guidelines. We may, and should, accept advice from church and authorities.

In contrast, an avatar has a direct link with a god, and, within the scope of his-her work, is infallible and unstoppable. An avatar is the "coming across and down" of a god into this world in the form of a person. The apparent person is not really an ordinary person but is really a god. Usually an avatar is a character in literature such as Krishna. Sometimes an avatar is a real flesh-and-blood person but then his-her role as avatar is based on such a strong idealization that the real person disappears and only the god-avatar remains, as with leaders of sects or schools. An avatar is a cosmic idea-force embodied rather than a real person. Even if an avatar took flesh as a real historical person, an avatar is an idea-force in the flesh rather than a real person. Sometimes an avatar resolves problems merely by his-her presence, awing people into submission and correct behavior. Christianity has similar characters in its idealized saints, especially saints with a knack, such as George, Christopher, and Santa Claus. As far as I can tell, for many Christians, Mary Mother of Jesus is an avatar of femininity and Grace. I don't know of any recent real historical person who is considered an avatar although Mohandas Gandhi might be taken as one, and Hindus likely do see some real holy people and national leaders as avatars.

An avatar can be from (of) a good god, as Krishna is an avatar of the good god Vishnu. An avatar can be from a god of disorder such as Shiva. Even if from a disorderly god, an avatar ultimately serves Dharma and so serves good. An avatar can be from a demon-like force such as with avatars of Kalima-Kali Durga (awful fearsome female deity) but, again, ultimately the avatar serves the Dharma and thus goodness. In the American elections of 2016, idealized Donald Trump was an avatar to many Americans – from both heaven and hell.

A real person can be an avatar without knowing that he-she is such, without knowing that he-she is doing the work of a god, and even without intending good or intending to stir up the world. Gandhi might have been an avatar of Vishnu or Shiva without knowing or even while denying it. This idea of doing the work of a god without knowing is a fun literary device, common in "sword and sorcery" stories and comic books. It goes along with the idea that the cosmic is doing its work (playing) through us. Still, I reject it. You can serve God, even greatly, without being an avatar.

Although an avatar sounds better than a prophet, and although we like heroes and villains bigger than life, I prefer prophet to avatar. I dislike avatars. They lead us away from the beautiful but often hard reality that God gave us. At least since Shakespeare, Westerners have preferred heroes (including women) flawed so as to show how the hero connects to reality; the trend has gotten stronger since 1890 with Sherlock Holmes, anti-heroes, and their descendants; and my view is biased by the trend. But I can

discount the trend and still honestly prefer prophets to avatars. I would rather sort through the flaws and mistakes of prophets to take to heart the truth that they offer than be overcome by an avatar with his-her logic and presence. We make ourselves less when we follow the awesome presence of the avatar than when we think about what a prophet says, and do what is right accordingly. I distrust religions that rely on avatars, and whose systems seem like giant avatars.

When Christians see Jesus as the Word made Flesh, as God come to Earth, as Salvation incarnate, Love incarnate, Prince of Peace, the only path to Justification, embodiment of any idea, answer to all questions simply through his being, then they make Jesus into a mere avatar, no matter how good and wonderful Jesus as God-Word made flesh seems. Christians diminish Jesus into an avatar. In diminishing Jesus that way, Christians also diminish his message and diminish the religion. To see Jesus this way opens the door to a Hindu interpretation of Jesus as avatar. When Hindus do that with Jesus, they also diminish Jesus and diminish following Jesus.

I do not reject Jesus as avatar because Jesus was real and most avatars are made up. Gandhi was real yet it is easy enough to make him into an avatar. I reject Jesus as avatar because the idea is false and it leads us to think and act incorrectly. We focus on devotion to Jesus rather than doing what he wants. If we think of Jesus as avatar we easily overlook really acting according to the Golden Rule, working hard to make the world better, and really seeing other people as persons.

I am sorry I can't give an exact citation for the following image. Hindus sometimes portray Jesus as they do holy people, yogis, gurus, and holy-people-as-avatars. Jesus sits cross-legged, floating in the sky, a halo around his head, with beaded necklace, his hands spread in standard Hindu gestures of blessing, dispensing compassion and grace, flowers and rainbows spraying about, Jesus beaming down on us all. When Hindus see this image, they do not see the points below. They do not see anything definite about Jesus that leads us to think of people as persons rather than as the mere recipients of compassion and workers for the Dharma. Hindus do not see what would lead to specific acts of making the world better and to building institutions. They do not see what leads to active do-good churches in the West. They see only an insipid wise man who tells us to be vaguely good in a way that supports Dharma and society. Seeing Jesus that way avoids what is important about him and his message. Far too many Christians do the same who simply worship Jesus as God. Hindus do not see:

- Jesus struggling to apply the Will of God to specific human situations
- Jesus struggling to understand the Jewish Law in terms of "Love God" and "Love your neighbor as you do yourself"
- Jesus thinking about how far to apply the Golden Rule, who to include and who to overlook
- Jesus thinking what ideas and acts are appropriate to persons as God sees us
- Jesus wondering how to get the Kingdom of God actually moving
- Jesus wondering how to set up the Kingdom of God, what institutions to support, so the Kingdom will last a long time
- Jesus trying to get a band of ragtag followers to act as if they were saints
- Jesus trying not to get killed by the authorities yet knowing there is a good chance he will
- Jesus confused as to why God does not lend him more vigorous support
- Jesus fearing he has to die to get his message across
- Jesus dancing at weddings, having fun, and enjoying life

- Jesus drinking wine
- Jesus with a temper, sometimes a bad temper
- Jesus annoyed at being pestered by people, especially to solve all their problems
- Jesus having an unrealistic view of the Temple, how the Temple works, and the role of money changers
- Jesus finally getting murdered by the authorities

That Jesus was murdered, was murdered by the authorities, was murdered on a cross like a bad criminal, and, in standard Christian belief, rose from death, and went to heaven in glory, are not as important to me as his message, so I do not elaborate here on what difference those make for Hinduism. I do stress that Hinduism simply avoids the issues, as far as I can tell. To a standard Christian, these issues are central. These facts about Jesus are what save us. Standard Hinduism so far, cannot deal with these aspects of Jesus and his life, no matter how much it exalts Jesus as avatar or holy person. Hinduism cannot explain how these facts save people. Without dealing with these issues, Hinduism cannot explain the appeal of Jesus to most people and the historical success of Christianity. I leave standard Christians and standard Hindus to argue this topic in more detail.

For the same reasons that I reject Jesus as avatar, I dislike the idea of Jesus as God, even the God-Man of orthodox traditional Christianity. Orthodox Christianity turns Jesus into an avatar even though orthodox Christianity does not have the term and it recognizes only one avatar. Jesus is to orthodox Christianity much as Krishna is to those particular Hindus who, in practice, take Krishna as the one and only avatar that matters and so the one and only real avatar. Orthodox Christianity is misleading even when it says that Jesus is both God and human. Because this chapter is about Hinduism, I do not dwell here on this misleading Christian view of Jesus as avatar of Yahweh. I invite Christians to think of the ways in which they doubt the Hindu idea of avatar and then turn those doubts onto the Christian idea of Jesus. The fact that Jesus was a real historical person is irrelevant for this issue. I ask Muslims to do the same with Mohammad. Muslims make Mohammad an avatar even if they insist he is only human and they don't officially have the idea of an avatar – a mistake against which they warn other religions.

All Paths Lead to What God?

If all paths lead to God, we should expect them to lead to the same God and, eventually, to get there. We should expect the God of all religions to be the same, and should expect all seekers eventually to find this one God. These claims are not true. I don't see how the Christian God, or the God that sent Jesus, can be made out as the Dharma, or as an aspect of the Dharma, at least not without going against the basic intuition of the God behind Jesus, the basic sense of God from the Jews. Buddhists, Taoists, Confucians, and Hindus might all be good people and do wonderful things, and might all make spiritual progress, but I don't think they all reach the same God. This mystic ideal is not true. If, at some level, everyone were playing the same game although everyone appeared to be playing a different game, then we should expect the games to go to the same end and to have the same feel. Eventually we expect everyone to reach the goal and to see they have reached the same goal. But they don't.

I do not condemn other religions, say they have no truth, say traditional orthodox Christianity has all the truth and the only truth, or claim what I have written is all the truth and the only truth. I accept that every vision is only partial and almost every vision has some element of truth and goodness (see the opening episode of the TV show "The Good Place"). I say: (1) Not every religion and every vision is contained

within Hinduism. (2) Regardless of where we start, we all have to come to grips with the message of Jesus and the West about persons, the Golden Rule, applies equally, rule of law, and good institutions. (3) What a given religion lacks can be important. Hinduism lacks ideas about persons etc. People have to go beyond Hindu relativism and have to deny that Hinduism contains all other religions and visions. The same is true of other religions. I am not a strident relativist. (4) The idea that all religions are a path to God yet all religions are contained within Hinduism is a strong way in which Hinduism makes all other religions to itself and eats the world. I don't like that.

Even if God is not the same, Hindus can say the basic moral teachings of all big religions are the same. This claim is close to true, and I am glad of it. If the basic moral teachings are the same, and they lead people to act in the same good ways, then, in that sense, they lead to the same God. If you want to take the claim in that way, then it might be true; but I don't see how this claim leads to the Dharma, Allah, the Christian God, the Heaven of the Chinese, or the Tao. It doesn't lead to any one particular God that we can identify as the God of any particular religion. It doesn't lead to any one God that we can identify as the God of all religions. The claim that all religions promote a similar morality does not support the further claim that the God to which all religions lead is the Hindu Dharma. All this claim says is that people want to act well and sometimes they use different self-illusions about God (Dharma) to act well. It does not say that the illusions are the same.

All religions are only partial views of God. As long as religions follow the best moral principles, all of them can take us toward God but no one religion can take us all the way. Likely not even a mix of all religions can take us all the way. In this sense, all religions are paths to God and no one path is clearly better than any other path. Yet, still, the Hindu claim of religious relativity cannot hold. Even though all religions are only partial paths, they are not equally good; and, even if they lead toward the same God, they do not all lead to the same God. Straight across a river at the widest deepest point gets you to the other side but it is not as good as going down the bank a little to the ford. Floating downstream never gets to the other side. If all trips down the river end in a swamp, then you never get to the ocean. If all religions are only partial paths then, by its own logic, the Hindu Dharma path cannot claim to be the best path, claim to encompass all other paths to the same goal, and claim that one goal is the Hindu Dharma in various disguises.

If the Hindu path is not the best, then what else do we need? If the Jesus path is not the best, then what else do we need? In the case of the Jesus path, the "what else" is not what Hinduism gives us. In the case of Hinduism, the "what else" is what Jesus and the West give us. Think about this for a while to see how much relativism, and what kind of relativism, survives.

As long as the basic feel for the God (Heaven, Dharma, Tao) of religions is different, then the religions are not all paths to the same God even when different religions support the same morality. How much difference it makes that the Gods of the different religions are not the same, I don't know.

The God of the Dharma game is not the God of Jesus, and etc. All I can do in this situation is hold to my intuition of what the God is like who lies behind this universe, evolution, sentience, morality, the various prophets, especially Jesus, good government, science, and modern times. That God is not the Dharma. Allow me to repeat that I don't much care what other people think of God as long as they act according to the teaching of Jesus combined with practicality and the best Western values.

I understand that: Different people have different skills and serve God in different ways. It is hard to say one way is absolutely better than another. People should do what suits them because they are likely to do the most good that way. Nobody sees God entirely. Nobody serves God perfectly. We need a lot of different people. "It takes all kinds to make a world". Some religions suit some people better than other religions, and some people are not at home in a particular religion. Religions do well to make a home for all sincere people who do good. Hinduism, some versions of Mahayana, large Christian churches such as the Roman Catholic Church, and Islam before about 1700, were among the churches that do best at accommodating the diversity of people and guiding them to serve God well.

None of this about individual people changes what I said above. The issue of personal differences is distinct from issues of: (1) All religions are paths to God and equally good paths to God. (2) Hinduism subsumes all other religions and swallows them, so, really, being the one-and-only true path to God. We can accept personal differences and still not think Hinduism handles that issue best and so automatically is the biggest broadest best path to God among other lesser paths.

Suppose a Hindu looks at Christianity like this: Jesus is an avatar. Jesus told people that they are alike, and we should all feel compassion toward each other. Jesus did not want people to overturn the system. He wanted people to do their social duty honestly. If people must choose between harming others versus allowing others to harm them, people should allow others to harm them. That is what dying willingly on the cross means. When people see such an example, they are more likely to see how they are alike and how they should feel compassion. When they do that, the social order gets along much better, the social order follows the path of what it means to be human, and most individuals follow what it means to be human - the Dharma path of humans and human society. Jesus saved people by showing us that we are alike and should feel compassion for each other, even to the point of death: "few people love each other so much that they will die for others". Salvation is getting on the right Dharma path, whether you know it or not, and Jesus showed us how to do so in a way that most people can feel. Many Christians teach this view of Jesus and his message although they do not put in the part about the Dharma path because they don't know that yet. Most sermons in church and lectures by Christian authority figures pretty much boil down to "be good" in this way. The life and message of Jesus is the same as the message of Hinduism, and Christianity is one of the purest branches within Hinduism. Christianity reinforces Hinduism.

This is how one religion eats other religions and eats the world. I could do the same for Hinduism with Islam, Judaism, Taoism, Mahayana, Theravada, Zen, and Confucianism.

How to Get Out of Hindu Relativism.

I have already said that moral relativism is useful if done carefully ("judge not lest you be judged") but is prone to misuse and so is dangerous. Hinduism goes too far with moral relativism. I don't say much more than to re-assert this assessment.

The only way to strongly distinguish Jesus from a Hindu avatar would be to show that (1) Jesus does not support the Dharma system because Jesus goes against the system somehow, (2) Jesus does not care about any system so that we don't need a system, (3) Jesus demands something of us that the Dharma system does not, or (4) the Dharma system leads to acts, person, or institutions that are objectionable.

This is hard to do. It is hard to find cases where Jesus goes against the Dharma system because that is like finding cases where Jesus goes against slogans about goodness and God. It is hard to find cases where Jesus doesn't care because that is like saying Jesus doesn't care about goodness and God. Even where Jesus cares more about the Kingdom of God than he does about Israel or Rome in his time, he still does care about the Kingdom of God, and that is close enough to the idealized Dharma system.

The real problems with seeing Jesus as an avatar of the Dharma system are (3) and (4): that Jesus asks of us what the Dharma system does not and the Dharma system leads to results that we don't like and he would not like. We have to accept the reality of the Dharma system as well as the platitudes. Briefly, the teachings of Jesus support Jewish values, Western values, and proactive "doing good" while the Dharma system does not. The teachings of Jesus support the acts, people, and institutions that I want while the Dharma system does not. The Dharma system leads to acts, people, and institutions that I don't want such as rationalization, exploitation, and social injustice. The Dharma system gets in the way of being a good person in the sense of Jesus' teachings. In the Kingdom of God, people do not have castes and mistreat beggars, and they do set up schools and other good institutions. If we see Jesus as an avatar, we lose focus on his proactive teachings and we fall back into rationalization.

This difference might be enough for a follower of Jesus to argue against using relativism to make Jesus an avatar but might not be enough for a Hindu. Hindus might still be able to make Jesus relative to the Dharma system if they adopt modern Western-like values into a Dharma system. Christians might have to put up with Hindu-izing Jesus in the modern world.

The Hindu Dharma system gets in the way of acting according to the teachings of Jesus not only because it is Hindu and a Dharma system but because it is a system, a big system, a system that eats the world, has a hole in the center, allows rationalizing roles, and uses relativism, superiority, and encompassing. Other religions that are similar systems get in the way as well. Even Taoism and Zen get in the way when they fall back on their versions of dogma. It is natural and can be useful to work with systems. It gives people comfort to find their meaning in the context of a system. Even so, I advise that you stop to put aside systems for a while. Get used to the idea of simply acting in accord with the teachings of Jesus without worrying about justifying yourself in the context of a system. The most system-like attitude you should use at first is to try to please God and to treat people decently. When you have sorted that out, if you do, then, if you still need it, you can find your selfness in a system. If you find yourself in a Dharma system, tell the world how that works out.

Systems, Me, and God.

I just don't feel as if I am in a system. If I am in a system, it is not relativistic in the bad sense; not based on a hole in the middle, rationalizing roles, superiority, hierarchy, and encompassing; does not support any traditional stratified society or any bad society; and does not consist of adventures within adventures. If I am in a system, it is God's system, not mine and not the Dharma's. I don't want to take over God's system. I don't want to be the star. I don't want to milk the system for my own gain. I can imagine God sending teachers without thinking of them as avatars of a system. I have a duty to do the right thing, not toward the system. I have a pretty good idea what I am supposed to do, and what I do is the same if I am in a system or not. I am more likely to make mistakes if I think I am in a system.

Some Last Words.

I don't know if the idea of Dharma can be developed without system, hierarchy, relativism, superiority, encompassing, and traditional stratified society. I don't know if any of these ideas-and-social relations are independent, if they all need each other, if some need some of the others, or the whole set has to come together. This is what modern Hindus have to think out. I think they can develop the idea of Dharma without the other bad ideas; but they have to be careful. I would be surprised if Hindu imagination was not up to the task. I wish them luck.

PART 8: Systems and Persons: The Movie "Groundhog Day".

This part of the chapter is optional. I mentioned the movie "Groundhog Day" in other chapters. It stars Bill Murray and Andie McDowell. The movie is a fun way to contrast Hinduism with Christianity. It shows how Hinduism (and systems like Hinduism) shapes ideas. As you read this picture of "Groundhog Day", think of what Hinduism would do with movies such as "The Breakfast Club" and novels such as "Tom Sawyer" and "Huckleberry Finn".

"Groundhog Day" is a "chick flick" "rom com" (romantic comedy aimed at women). It also features motifs from Hinduism, or from any system based on Dharma and on many lives. All art, movies, and chick flicks have conventions. So do Hinduism, Christianity, and Western culture. The movie mixes conventions so that it is not possible to say for sure where an important theme comes from. For example, the Bill Murray character changes for the better over the movie. This change in male lead is typical of "chick flicks" such as "Knocked Up", and "You've Got Mail", and is important in major religions – Moses, the Buddha, Arjuna, Paul, and Mohammad. All I do is point out motifs and guess what produces what.

You should decide what produces what. The real issues are not what force drives what romantic ideal but how characters are persons, how characters change, what change implies for them as persons, and what being a person implies for relations to other persons. The real issues are about people. You should look through conventions to decide if Hinduism or the teachings of Jesus most likely leads us to correct and good ideas about persons.

The movie uses the motifs from Hinduism to reinforce conventions of modern love, especially to present an ideal man. The ideal seems to come from Hinduism, as a logical growth from Hindu premises. But that conclusion is misleading. The ideal romantic man is a mishmash of ideas, mostly from the chick flick genre and Western Christianity. The ideal is tacked on to motifs borrowed from Hinduism as a way to tell a story to reinforce chick flick ideals. I describe the borrowed Hindu motifs, how they build a base for the romantic ideal, and how the ideal does not depend on the motifs.

Murray's character "wakes up", literally, symbolically, and spiritually. The same dramatic change for the better that happens to him cannot happen to all people at once in a Hindu system because, if it did, the system would vanish. For Murray to wake up, other people have to remain "asleep". As you read this, think how to make a similar movie if all the people in it went through the same changes as Murray and woke up. What does it imply if some of the people have to stay asleep so the main character can wake up? Thinking about this might help the sorting out.

Here I write as if people really believe myths, motifs, and conventions: “Romantic love saves us”. I know that often the myths are not true and that most Americans don’t believe them. Still, Americans often act as if they believe. They hold out for true romantic love even when, on another level, they know it isn’t true. Please willingly suspend disbelief about what people believe.

Just because the movie mixes motifs of East, West, and “rom com”, does not mean it is bad, silly, or a “fluff piece”. The movie is good, not just in its genre but as a movie of any genre. If it weren’t good, I wouldn’t use it. I like the ideal person that the movie builds to. I like that we can see this ideal as resting on Hindu roots, as one flower from the best of Hinduism. Only by using a positive view of Hinduism in a good movie can I show fairly how Hinduism is misleading.

I use terms like “selfless” without implying anything, in particular without implying that we can overcome our evolved tendency to self-interest. When you see “selfless”, you can substitute a phrase such as “based on an ability to empathize with others, and ability to act to further their welfare, even at some cost to your short-term welfare; abilities which might have led to your long-term welfare under conditions that were common in our evolutionary history”. Sometimes everyday language is easiest.

Peculiar disclaimer: I use the term “person” to mean a human sentient being. I do not imply anything about non-human animals. I make this point because originally the word “person” came from “persona”, which is a mask used in the drama of Greece and Rome for a role or character. Here I use “person” to contrast with a mere role.

The Story.

Bill Murray and Andie McDowell are part of a big city news crew that goes to a rural town to do a “fluff piece” on a groundhog festival. Murray’s character starts as a selfish cad with unrealistic ideas of his own importance. Murray considers the assignment far beneath him. McDowell is the typical charming sweet talented sensitive helpful pretty romantic comedy heroine, and stays so. Murray likes McDowell but he shows it by being rude to her and by trying to have casual sex with her. A freak winter storm blocks all traffic in or out, trapping the whole crew in the town. Murray and McDowell stay in separate rooms at a local bed-and-breakfast.

The next morning, Murray wakes up and finds that this day repeats the day before. It is still Groundhog Day. It is the same day. Every night, Murray goes to bed hoping the day has passed, and every morning he wakes up to the same day. The same day repeats and the same events repeat. The same people are in the same places doing the same things and they say the same words.

At first, Murray takes advantage of the situation to have adventures, steal, lie, seduce, assert dominance, be nasty, indulge his senses, and pay back old grudges. After a while, the adventures and nastiness get boring. Then he gets desperate and bored. He kills himself but, each time after he dies, he wakes up again in the same bed on the same morning, and the whole ordeal starts all over again.

Then, rather than seeking adventures, payback, or indulgence, he begins to live in the situation and to make the most of the situation this time each time. He begins to do good things. Murray helps out old

ladies with flat tires, gives money to bums, tries to save the life of a bum, buys insurance from a pushy salesman, warns women of men who mistreat them, plays the piano at parties, sings, and acts politely toward McDowell. He begins with small acts but as he gets more adept at being good, and as being good becomes part of his self, he does bigger good acts. Murray loses himself in helping other people and in making the town a better place, a better world. The skills (karma) that he learns in one “day” (one life) of “Groundhog Day” carry over into the next day (life), so he has many days (lifetimes) to accumulate skills (karma) by which to help others (more karma). He learns to dance, play piano, talk to people, entertain them, educate them, help them with what they need, and provide them therapy.

Murray learns all about the true you of McDowell, and they fall in love. He shows he is really in love by not taking sexual advantage when he has a chance. Murray loses himself in love instead of selfishness. Naturally (karmically, Dharmically), Murray wakes up next morning and it really is the next day. He is no longer stuck. He has gone on. His literal waking up is the same as symbolic waking up. He is free. The days stop repeating. He goes on to a “brand new day”, “the first day of the rest of his life” with the woman he loves and who loves him.

By the time Murray wakes up, he has been transformed into almost an ideal man. He is cooked instead of raw (the image comes from Thai culture rather than from Claude Levi-Strauss). You have to decide by what standards he is an ideal man. I list most of his new good qualities below. Murray does not lose his former “badness”. He is still full of life and full of emotion. He still likes sex. He still has a good sense of humor. He still enjoys naughtiness as long as it is not really hurtful. He is still not bound strictly by rules, but he does appreciate rules, and now he is bound by caring. Murray now knows how to channel energy and “joy in living” better both for other people around him and for himself.

Murray is “saved”. His selfless love for the townspeople and selfless romantic love for McDowell save Murray. “Saved” not too strong a word for what happens in chick flicks, and Murray’s shift is so profound that it qualifies for “saved” in Hinduism. Murray does not accept Jesus but he does act as Jesus taught, and he acts as a good Christian should, so “saved” is not too strong a word for a sensible Christian view of Murray. If Murray does not deserve to go to heaven, who does? If Murray is not likely to get the Grace of God, who is? The movie does not have to say exactly what “saved” means, and how a saved person acts for the rest of his-her life, for the movie to show that Murray is saved.

A Central Problem as a Handy Image for Religion-Based Movie Criticism.

Despite how strongly Jesus, Immanuel Kant, and Western Christianity teach us that we should treat all people as persons all the time in all cases, we just can’t. Sometimes people are bad and then we have to control them. Sometimes we deal with people under conditions in which we are supposed not to act as if we were simply persons but according to other rules, and, if we did act person-to-person or sibling-to-sibling in those cases, society would fall apart. We do not treat a judge as if he-she was our sibling and he-she cannot treat us that way. We really can’t treat the postal carrier as a sibling. Not only must we refuse to treat all job applicants as if they were our siblings, when our siblings apply for the job, we have to treat our siblings as if they were not our siblings. This does not mean we can’t see a person behind the role and can’t be nice along with being officious but it does mean we have to rely on the role first. Mostly, though, treating people as persons like our own siblings (ourselves) all the time is too much trouble and society would fall apart if we tried.

Different groups and different art forms have their own ways of dealing with this issue. Usually societies create subgroups that the members of the society treat differently. How many subgroups there are, how big each subgroup is, and how we treat each subgroup, varies with religion, culture, society, historical period, economic system, etc.

Chick flicks and Hinduism deal with the problem in a similar way. Each has a very small group at the top within which people treat each other closely. With Hinduism, it is the parents and their children while with chick flicks it is the girlfriend and boyfriend. Beneath that group is the family in Hinduism and the family-and-or-entourage-of-friends in chick flicks. All the rest of society is not people but roles. The similar way in which chick flicks and Hinduism deal with the issue of who is a real person and who is merely a role allows "Groundhog Day" to use Hindu motifs to support the chick flick world, and to make it seem as if the ideal hero comes out of Hindu-like experiences.

Western Christianity says ideally that we should treat everyone like ourselves, as a full person, but in fact Western societies set up a pyramid. We treat people at the top as full persons almost like ourselves, with each descending subgroup treated less like persons and more like roles. At the top is a small subgroup within which to be fully sibling-like such as the members of the same family or church; in America, then come friends; then people mostly sibling-like such as close neighbors and parents with their children in the same school; officers of all kinds; fellow workers; general neighbors; nice people in public places such as restaurants; people in general on the street; and so on.

Chick flicks acknowledge the Western Christian ideal, and use the ideal as a test of the hero, but do not structure their final romantic society on that basis. Hinduism sees something like the ideal, as shown in their adages "you are that" and "great compassion", but societies based on Hinduism pretty much ignore it in practice for most people not in the inner circle.

To be precise, both chick flicks and Hinduism do not see the people in the small bubble at the top as full human persons but they do see them as special kinds of roles that approach what I see as a full human person. If we exclude most of humanity from full personhood, then we find it hard to give real personhood to the privileged few in our inner circle. We have to practice it with everybody even if we do not succeed. Western Christianity carries the ideal of full human person even if Western Christians do not often live up to the ideal, and Western Christianity encourages practicing it with everybody.

"Groundhog Day" as Chick Flick Rom Com Love Story.

This section covers only a few conventions. This section does not try to resolve any contradictions in the conventions or between the conventions and human nature.

The heroine is wonderful mostly as she is although she might have developed some bad habits. Even in movies where the heroine has to change, such as "Clueless", "What Happens in Vegas", "Friends with Benefits", "Valentine's Day", "Bridesmaids", and "Bad Teacher", the heroine only discovers her true nature that had not yet shown itself. She doesn't really change much.

The hero has to change. He is good at heart or he wouldn't be worth changing; but he does have to change.

The hero changes by seeing the value of the heroine and a few of her closest friends or family. The hero comes to accept most people as they are but especially he accepts the heroine and her entourage. The hero comes to see people somewhat as persons, valuable in themselves. He comes to see the heroine as especially valuable.

It is not entirely clear what distinguishes the heroine from other women, but, she is distinct, and better. She is better than her primary sidekick. The heroine often contrasts with other women in the film so we can see that she is better.

As part of his change, the hero comes to see other people as persons and so valuable. He stops acting toward them as mere instruments of his own satisfaction and begins treating them as valuable in their own right. If the hero did not see people in general this way, he could not learn to see the heroine both as valuable in herself and as better than other people.

The chick flick genre solves the problem of who to be most personal with by restricting it to the bonded couple; after that the entourages of both members come close; sometimes the family also comes close; and then it really doesn't matter much.

Although the hero sees the value of other people, he does not act toward all other people equally. If he did, he would not see the heroine as special and would not fall in love with her. The hero cuts his ties to any bad guy former friends (selfish guys); he treats people in general pretty well; he treats the heroine's entourage better; and he treats the heroine best of all. While paid work is important so that the hero can give his share to the couple's treasure chest and can show his general responsibility, paid work cannot interfere in his relation to the heroine. The heroine is at the top of the hierarchy as a person in a bubble all her own; then comes her entourage and family who are treated as full persons; then the general public are treated pretty much as role players but nice; and last comes the rejected selfish male world.

“Groundhog Day” as Hinduism.

Even if the average viewer could not explicitly connect themes in the movie to themes in Hinduism and Christianity, he-she can implicitly feel the link to some idea systems. The background idea systems are clear enough. This section describes how themes in the movie are like themes in Hinduism.

Repeating the same day over and over is like repeating lifetimes. We can choose to use lifetimes to do nothing, feel awful, or get better. Murray did all three. If we have enough lifetimes, eventually we choose to get better. Once we choose to get better, the choice should stick for all the lifetimes after, even if we backslide in some lives. Once we accept the path of getting better, we are on it from then on.

Murray is able to carry over what he does in one day (lifetime) to other days even if the other characters in the movie could not. Carrying over is what allows Murray to progress. Carrying over is like karma. Karma works whether people are consciously aware of it, as was Murray, or not.

At first, Murray has adventures, especially self-indulgent adventures. When indulgence is not enough, Murray tries acting bad. Murray is like God deciding to lose himself in the world so as to find himself through the world. The most obvious sign of losing yourself in a world, being asleep in a world, is selfish seeking after success in the narrow obvious terms of this kind of world: sex, wealth, power, cunning, and nastiness. Even if you did succeed in those terms, it would not be enough. Adventure for its own sake, badness, and indulgence get horribly boring, the boredom for which there is no cure on its own terms.

After deciding to get better, by having many lifetimes and carrying over, Murray does get progressively better. He does not just get to be a better piano player or better mechanic; he gets to be a better sentient being; a better person. Improvement is what the whole process is about. Ideally, constant improvement might lead to enlightenment, where a Hindu sees what the whole system is about and sees the place of all kinds of people in it. But constant improvement need not lead to that. Constant improvement is a goal in itself and has value in itself.

Originally in the precursor ideas to Buddhism and Hinduism, many lives was a curse, not a blessing. The cycle of many lives was called "the wheel of Dharma" and it had the feeling of a wheel on which we are tortured (crucified), not exalted. Mahayana and Hinduism spread by making many lives an opportunity both to get better ourselves and to contribute to others. To make many lives an opportunity, we have to see it that way. At first, for Murray, many days (many lives) is a curse; but then, when he wakes up a bit, it is an opportunity. The more he uses many days, the more it becomes a blessing. That is part of the benefit of accumulation.

Murray must lose himself first before he gets better. In particular, Murray does not treat himself as a full person and so cannot see any other persons. That is when Murray acts badly. This motif is common in most "pilgrim" stories but that does not mean it is not part of the overall Hindu fell. See more on this motif below.

Hinduism solves the problem of who to be most personal with by restricting it to me-and-the-Dharma. We engage other people only as they are roles in the self-reinforcing Dharma system and we expect them to do the same with us. Personal in the Western Christian sense is not relevant. We might be personal with some people but that has little to do with role relations. In traditional Indian society, the closest Dharma relation was parents and children. They formed the a little bubble at the top. Husband and wife were not closest. Eventually, as they became parents themselves, a husband and wife might form their own little bubble at the top of their own pyramid. Other people come in far below and are mostly Dharma roles. That resolution is not acceptable in chick flicks, so they invert the order, and adjust the Dharma system accordingly. The hero still shows his general moral worth by being nice to almost all other people but he cannot be as nice to people in general as he is to the heroine. She is in the place the hero once had with his parents. The parents and entourage are now in the secondary place. And, of course, everyone else is still in roles below. With these minor adjustments, Hinduism and chick flicks can coincide fairly well.

When Murray begins to wake up, the appropriate feeling for other people is compassion. While we can't stop other feelings, especially bad feelings toward bad people, bad feelings are not best either for Murray or other people. We don't have to act on bad feelings. When we feel compassion, we should act on it. Murray does feel compassion and is able to overcome other bad feelings.

Murray does several kinds of acts out of general compassion but I do not list them all here; see below. Only some kinds of acts from general compassion are important in Hinduism even if all the acts might come from general compassion, those that support the bubble at the top and support the total Dharma system. What counts is doing your Dharma duty as your new Dharma self. What counts in your acts towards others is how you help them realize their Dharma role and carry out their role. In ideal conditions, you might help people wake up but none of the town people are near to waking up so that ideal does not apply here. Murray does do the kind of acts that are important in Hinduism but he also does other acts that are important for chick flicks and for Western Christianity.

While the form of this movie is like Hinduism, the content is still “chick flick”. Despite Murray’s many lives and karma, Murray does little that a Hindu might see as promoting the Dharma system or Dharma social world. Murray does get people to stop doing bad things but he does nothing like what Krishna did for Arjuna and the other brothers. Murray focuses attention on the heroine. He treats all other people nicely but they come in far below.

Helping other people does also help society generally. Even if we don’t help other people directly, by helping good social interaction, we do help other people. In Hindu thought, ordered society is always good, so, if we help ordered society, we help people too. Murray does this when he helps parties to work well as when he entertains at parties.

Helping other people helps yourself. In particular helping other people helps you to wake up, and helping other people to wake up helps you even more. In Hinduism, it is hard to tell the difference between an act done for the sake of another and an act done so that you make progress. Overall, the feeling is of doing good deeds for your own spiritual progress rather than for others. The attitude of helping, and confusion over who you are really helping, contributes to the motives of the Mahayana bodhisattva and the Hindu avatar.

Before anybody can fully wake up, he-she has to feel diffuse compassion to everybody regardless of the person’s station in life and moral status, and regardless of whether the feeling really helps them or really helps you. Only after feeling this can a person realize how much he-she is a person, and how much he-she is like that other person. This is the Hindu “you are that (him-her)”.

This fully waking up toward other people is the first culmination of the movie, as waking up of some kind appropriate to your Dharma role now is the culmination of Hinduism.

In the movie, after Murray wakes up, then, and only then, can he have a satisfying romantic relation with McDowell. This fully waking up, focused on the heroine, is the final and real culmination of the movie.

“Groundhog Day” from Western Christian Values.

By “Western Christian” I mean values that Western Christians hold about people, relations, society, etc. as part of the combined heritage of Jesus, the Church, and Western values. I do not separate sources of values here.

Christians can say that many days is not the same as many lives and that remembering what you learn is not the same as karma. Many days can be the many chances that God gives us even when we screw up continually and when we don't deserve it. Remembering is just remembering, especially when it is in the service of spiritual progress. Waking up is waking up to God's love and to the love we can have for other people, not necessarily waking up to our role in a Dharma system. I don't argue much which view is best. I think, deliberately in this movie, "many days" and "remember over days" are more like Hindu many lives and karma.

In Western Christianity, appropriate actions based on compassion can be many, and Murray does all of them. First, Murray helps other people in bodily ways, as by giving them food, keeping them from getting run over by cars, or feeding people. Second, Murray keeps people from hurting themselves, as when he keeps women from staying with abusive boyfriends. Third, Murray keeps people from hurting others as when he stops bad men from preying on women. Fourth, Murray helps people achieve what is important to them as individuals, sometimes because it is important in their jobs or in their current situations. For example, he buys insurance from a pushy salesman and he warns the workers in a bar of future events. Helping people in all these ways does not really help people to wake up but it is important to them and it can help them relax enough to think about better things.

Fifth, Murray helps people to see other people as people. Not everybody can fully see everybody else fully as a person, so we have to adjust how we help people wake up that way, and we cannot expect too much. But we can nudge people along. Murray does some of this latter task but he does not do much of this latter task, and this lack is important below.

In theory, Hindus would not expect to do much of this. Hindu aid from one person to another sometimes comes in time of need such as famine; and, apart from acute need, aid usually comes to help a person along a spiritual path; but it rarely comes just as help from one person to another. I can see a Hindu buying insurance to get rid of a pushy sales person, intending all the while never to pay any premiums, just as Hindus give a beggar a penny to get rid of him-her. But I can't see Hindus buying insurance to help a person succeed as a seller because that is important to the person. I can see Hindus giving a bum a dollar but not taking care of him when he is sick and dying, or trying to save his life with curbside CPR. A Hindu might think it sad that men use women but I doubt a Hindu would do much to stop particular cases unless the women were kin. Hindus do not see people as people in the way that makes giving help to people generally compelling. Hindus cannot build institutions on that basis.

I know these judgments sound harsh but that is the point. Westerners have made into habits and have institutionalized views and expectations that other people might see sometimes but do not make a habit of seeing and do not act on often. I know that most Christians don't live up to these ideals and that many Hindus act according to these ideals even though the ideals are not explicitly taught in the religion. That is not the point either. Even when Hindus act out of general humanity, they limit their action to members of the same village, caste, neighborhood, or socio-economic class. They do not see "neighbor" as almost everybody. So the point is just that one religion, Western Christianity, fosters pro-active and re-active help from one person to another, and builds institutions on that basis, while the other, Hinduism, does not.

Western views of people have found their way into genres such as chick flick but have not transformed those genres. Except for point five, Western Christianity and chick flicks have about the same general

expectations of good guys such as Murray. Chick flicks have taken much of their general expectations from Western Christianity. To argue these points, I would have to contrast chick flicks in the West with chick flicks from “Bollywood”, and I can’t do that. If Hindu heroes in chick flicks act on points one through four, they limit their actions to close family members and do not act toward the public, based on seeing other people as persons, as Murray did in “Groundhog Day”.

Despite taking some ideals from Western Christianity, chick flicks still differ from it. The difference shows up in point five. Western values expect us to help other people not just by tending needs and wants but by helping them be better persons. This is part of being a person ourselves and of seeing other people as persons. Western values do not expect us to save people or to wake them up. Treat people decently, let them know why you are treating them decently, hope they wake up a little, and that they shift over to treating people decently as a result. If they don’t wake up a little, we don’t stop helping them. But we try to help them see what it means to be a person and to treat other people as persons. We do not expect to fully succeed and we do not expect to transcend roles but we expect to hold the ideal of person-to-person contact even so.

Chick flicks cannot try to extend personal relations to everybody as in the Western Christian ideal. Chick flicks cannot even hold this value as an unreachable ideal as in Western Christianity. Chick flicks have to focus on the relation between ideal man and ideal woman, and have to see all other characters as mere characters or roles – as in Hinduism.

Chick flicks want the hero to wake up to the heroine-as-a-person, help her (devote himself to her), and maybe wake up to some of her friends-as-persons to a lesser extent, but chick flicks don’t care much about other people generally. By learning to feel love, love saves the man hero and saves his relation to the woman, but it does not save much more than that and it does not have to extend beyond that. Chick flicks take acts from one to four as evidence of a new man who can feel in the way that is needed to wake up enough for romantic love with the heroine. To wake up enough for romantic love, sensitivity such as in points one to four might be needed but diffuse respect of all people as persons, point five, is not. Chick flicks are closer to the Hindu point of view. I am not saying women, or any watchers of chick flicks, are like Hindus. I am saying that we tend to fall back into a restricted point of view when we do not expect more of ourselves and when we are part of a system.

A Note on Human Character.

Only after Murray has wallowed in self-indulgent adventure, badness, and boredom long enough does he “break on through to the other side” to live in the current situation and to seek goodness. Most of us need to do some wallowing in naughtiness, hopefully without hurting anybody irreparably. We can do most of this wallowing in our imagination and by watching what happens to other people. We do not need to go to the extremes of Murray to get past the allure of badness. Once past the allure of badness, we do not need to achieve the sweet great goodness of Murray. If we think we have to be a saint when we give up the allure of badness, we never give up the allure because we can’t be saints. Only when we see that all we need is be normally good people who genuinely try hard, and that we can do this, do we give up the allure of badness.

When Murray gives up self-indulgent adventure and badness, and when he takes up goodness, he goes “whole hog”. He stops doing anything naughty, does only good, does much good, and does sweet good. He is amazingly considerate. It takes many days, that is, many lifetimes, to learn this. This result is not realistic and it is not meant to be realistic. The movie exaggerates to make a point. In real life, nobody is that sweet, nobody wants to be that sweet, and nobody wants to be around a person like that. The movie made Murray super sweet to make a good point but we should not be overwhelmed by the good point into the mistake of not trying.

Other People and Self Success Again.

Because of the importance of seeing other people as persons, it is worth looking again at conventions in movies, particularly how movies don't fully meet Western Christian ideals.

Murray goes farther toward seeing himself and other people as people than most characters in movies and father than most “chick flicks”. Murray goes farther than most real living people do and farther even than most dedicated Christians do. The change in him is not sappy but inspiring. If Hinduism and real practiced Christianity really led people to become like Murray, I could heartily endorse both. If Murray was not a good model for this change then the following point would not be strong:

Despite the change, other characters in the movie are not full people as I would like them to be and as Jesus taught us to see people. The other characters are still primarily vehicles for Murray's spiritual and romantic success rather than full persons in their own right. Everything still centers on Murray. Even when Murray comes to see them much more as persons, and we see them as persons through Murray's eyes, that is not enough. The more that he comes to see them as persons, the more “you are that”, the more they are mere vehicles, and so fall short of being full persons. It is a paradox that we can easily miss. This flaw is typical of “chick flicks” and of religions, including formal Christianity, but especially religions like Hinduism. The point is not to try to be perfect but to keep the problem in mind and to try to do better. At that, Murray does succeed well.

When the movie begins, the everyday people are annoyances to be avoided, and have no personhood or humanity at all. As the movie goes along, Murray treats them better and he sees them as persons. This is all-well-and-good but something else is going on socially, and this social change should worry us about what personhood really means. Not only people get better but society gets better. Parties are happier; the workplace is happier; people do their jobs better; the people that Murray helps carry out their social roles and work roles better; bums are not a threat; and we all get along. We begin to see the characters in their social roles. We begin to see a better society as the proper result of better persons, and to see people as subordinate to their role in helping society do better. Murray himself takes on that role. He is good because he makes society better not primarily because he treats people as people. We begin to see society and the people in society as a sing-along around the piano. Everything gets better and better for people and society. Everything turns out alright for everyone and society in the end. It is not the end until it does turn out alright for everyone and society. I don't want to fall back on the other extreme cliché of modern fake-rebel Romantic myth that all society is bankrupt and the only real people are outlaws. I don't want to replace “Groundhog Day” with French New Wave such as “Breathless”. I do point out how easy it is to think of good people in social terms rather than as simply persons. This is what Hinduism

necessarily does, necessarily grounding it in a metaphysical context. This is what makes “The Breakfast Club” and “Huckleberry Finn” good antidotes to Hinduism.

In almost all drama, supporting characters are not supposed to be as much persons as are the leads; an exception might be movies such as “The Misfits” and “Bus Stop”. But in this movie that limit should not hold. The point of this movie is that the lead character comes to see other characters as persons, even to his detriment. So other characters need to be believable as persons. If the movie wants us to take the change in Murray seriously then the filmmakers should show other people in the movie as more “realized” persons; but they don’t. The conventions of drama are partly to blame but not fully.

The issue does not arise because of bad writing or bad acting. The movie is well written and nobody could have acted the role better than Murray. He does an excellent job showing change, of showing a growing feeling for other people, of showing that the character resigns himself to doing good without reward, showing the limits on the new feeling, and a slight uneasiness.

If I wanted to be unfair to Hinduism, I could blame the adopted Hindu motifs for the fact that other minor characters are not developed much as persons. There might be some truth to this assessment but adopted Hindu motifs are not the major roadblock.

The major roadblock is that chick flicks and romantic comedies don’t see any characters other than the leads as really persons. Sometimes the leads aren’t even very realistic. Sometimes the friends of the leads are interesting as in “Knocked Up” but they still don’t become very human.

In chick flicks, typically the hero changes for the better but the heroine doesn’t change much because she is already wonderful. Even in “Clueless”, where the heroine is the one who changes, her change is more to realize the good person she always was than to change at a deep level. The same is true of “Friends with Benefits”. In the movie “What Happens in Vegas”, both the hero and heroine change quite a bit but the hero still changes more.

None of this might matter much except that real people get ideas about life from art, and act on the basis of those ideas, and so make mistakes. I don’t expect much art to be realistic; I expect it to be unrealistic somewhat so as to get across ideas. But we do have to notice when conventions, even fun conventions, lead us astray.

We can see the same effects in religion. An ideal of the Upanishads is “you are that”, which implies that all people are full persons, whether hero, heroine, or supporting player, and whether fully awakened or not. The reality of Hinduism is not like that. In much of Hindu literature, the only near-persons are the hero and-or the person who fully wakes up. Other people might be quite nice or might be quite bad, but they are characters that move the plot rather than real people. Except maybe for Arjuna and Yudhisthira in the Mahabharata, all characters in Hindu “big” literature are not persons, they are stereotypes who represent cosmic ideas. They seem less human than even supporting characters in epics of the West such as the Iliad, Odyssey, and Death of Arthur. In Hindu literature, the hero treats other people nicely, even bad guys, but other people are there to serve the spiritual advancement of the hero. To do that, they need not be fully developed people. In real life, what matters are you, your family, and social duty. Other people don’t have to be full people to do their social duty, and, in fact, the system works better if

they are not. When the hero or heroine learns to treat other people well, the lesson is part of a total experience in which the hero or heroine progresses spiritually. Spiritual advancement necessarily gives rewards. The reward sometimes is enlightenment but more often are a good marriage, status, and worldly success. The hero and heroine reap the rewards, not necessarily the supporting cast, although the supporting cast usually benefits from the general glow of the spiritual-worldly advancement of the hero or heroine. To me, chick flicks seem like Bollywood.

When Jesus teaches and acts, almost everyone is a person. By helping other people, Jesus does not gain material goods or power, and he does not advance spiritually. He does not help other people as a way to get to heaven. According to Jesus, you do not use other people for spiritual progress. You do not think of your service to people as a way to awaken, get better, or go to heaven. It is not the way to get to heaven. It is not a technique of spiritual advancement. Acting well toward other people as people is part of doing unto others, treating everybody the same, making the world better, being decent, and being a good citizen in the Kingdom of God. Working out this ideal in real life might force you to change for the better, and that change can be an interesting story in itself, but that is not why you do it. You are not the hero of the world, and other people are not your supporting cast. Of course, this is hard to do, but the ideal is clear, and perfection is not required.

Contrary to the teachings of Jesus, in most practiced Christianity, and even in preached Christianity, a person treats other people well so the original person can go to heaven. Other people are means to an end even when, as part of the means, we treat other people as if they were persons. Christians have trouble reconciling the ideals of family love, romantic love, friendship, and patriotism to this strategy of being loving so as to get to heaven, but, still, Christians focus on the strategy of using other people so as to get to heaven, and that strategy is what they teach their children. In some Christianity, people ascend a spiritual ladder to get better and better, at the top of which is God's approval and heaven. In these versions, other people are the means by which the hero ascends the ladder. Learning to treat other people well, as full persons, is part of the ascent, but it is only part of the ascent, and it is not the main goal. What matters is the ascent. We see this attitude in classics such as "Pilgrim's Progress" and "The Imitation of Christ". C.S. Lewis leans heavily on it in his writings. Although well-intended, I consider all this Christian attitude to be a mistake. It is found in other religions as well, such as Hinduism and East Asian (Mahayana) Buddhism.

As with Hindus, in real life, Christians, and other followers of Jesus, do not successfully treat everyone as a full person. It is just too hard. They do what they can. They catch glimpses of other people as full persons. They hope what they do is good enough in itself, or is good enough to make God like them or to go to heaven. Even in the classic "A Christmas Story" by Dickens, Scrooge learns to feel for other people only because the future scares him silly. I have met Hindus in the United States who have just as much sense of other people as persons as do any Christians.

Although Hindus and Christians are similar in high ideals and lowly real life, they do differ in the middle, where it counts a lot. Hindus tend to get caught up in a system that lets them see themselves as the hero in a drama, and lets them treat other people as minor characters or treat other people badly. Christians know they should not do that, and try not to do that, even if they fail often.

What Happens in the movie "Groundhog Day".

What happens in the movie “Groundhog Day”? The movie was a chick flick made in a Judeo-Christian country but deliberately adopting some Hindu motifs so as to tell the story in a more interesting way. The Hindu motifs give a better sense of what it takes to improve than do most chick flicks, in which the change comes almost by magic. The Hindu motifs make sense of the chick flick convention that the man has changed much for the better and the better man is now focused on his beloved; he does not squander his newfound goodness on the public in general. He has an all-around better personality, he is good when it is reasonable, he is extra good to her friends, and he is still a lot of fun, but he is not a selfless saint to everyone. While he sees that all people are persons, he doesn’t treat them as full persons like he does his beloved and her friends. The Hindu motifs lead up to this ideal man well but the ideal man does not depend on them.

It is hard to decide if chick flick conventions, Western Christian ideas, or Hindu ideas win. Murray does learn to be deeply nice to other people, and does see glimpses of their humanity. That approaches the ideal in the teachings of Jesus. When Murray does an ultimate selfless act, and so wins McDowell, that pattern is like getting to heaven through a selfless act, and so is like the teachings of Christianity.

The point is not to decide whether chick flick conventions, the teachings of Jesus, Christianity, the ideals of the Upanishads, or practiced Hinduism, dominate, but: First, see how these ideas can work through a piece of art and can find a place in our minds. Use art to see what has been put into your head and to figure out what you want to stay in your head. Second, when you act within any system, especially one which rewards right acts, then consequences follow for the actors and society. You have to pay attention to the realities of the system, of how it affects people and relations. Third, this result with systems is true of Hinduism too. If you place finding yourself and finding true love within the context of a system of many lives, karma, Dharma, and tight social relations, results follow. You cannot have any kind of people, acts, and relations in this system. You have to have the right kind of people, acts, and relations, ones that go along with this system, and ones that the system promotes. We can use art to think about this question too. Fourth, it is still important to see other people as persons and to treat them as persons as best we can. Do use them merely as vehicles to perpetrate the Golden Rule or to make yourself feel better. Do what they need. At the same time, we can’t be perfect at this. We think of ourselves first, even spiritually, and that is that. But we can try hard. That is all God asks. Trying hard this way is a way of being perfect enough.

Optional Notes on Chick Flick Conventions.

(1) Apparently some men are permanently scarred by looking at too much porn and then hoping to find that impossible porn ideal among real women and real acts, even when men know they personally do not measure up to fantasies. Likewise, women might be scarred by chick flicks into seeking the impossible ideal man, and assuming they can “get” him, even when they know they personally don’t measure up. They overlook reality; they overlook what is more matched to them personally. Replacing the real with the ideal, then longing for the ideal when we know we can’t measure up, is a problem with all mythic conventions, especially in religion.

(2) Watching “Groundhog Day” or any chick flick might give insight on why women try to change men and why they think they can.

(3) In the movies, romantic love saves people and saves communities just as strongly as just as surely as God's love saves people in Christianity. In movies, romantic love takes the place of love and salvation in Christianity. Westerners have replaced Christian love and salvation with romantic love and salvation.

(4) That exchange might not be a good bargain.

(5) Romantic love as salvation, instead of salvation from religion, is one of the ideas that are going around the world with modern life.

(6) It might be worthwhile trying to figure out why this idea is part of modern life and why it has spread. To do that, we have to figure out why people want to be saved.

Reprise: People in Hinduism and other Similar Systems.

Even if other people are not going to wake up, and so are not as important as heroes such as Murray and McDowell, still, all those other people are there, so Hinduism needs to explain them in a way that makes them less than full persons but does not force us to notice that they are mere token characters.

First, in Hinduism, "everybody will have his-her day". Ideally, eventually, in a Dharma system, everybody takes his-her turn as hero (heroine), at playing the character of Murray, at being Arjuna. Second, not everybody can have his-her day all at once. If everybody woke up at once, the system would end, and we don't want that. Third, after you individually wake up, you can help other people wake up. Fourth, everybody needs everybody else; even awakening or awakened people need sleepers; so everybody is valuable as they are. Fifth, there is really no difference between awakened and sleeping people. We are all connected. Even awake people are part of the system that includes sleeping people. All these five points are how relativism arises naturally.

The teachings of Jesus do not need to provide for the "other people" in these ways or any other ways.

So, in Hinduism, other people are a problem at one level but on another level they are part of the solution. In a Dharma system, the job never runs out. People always need help. They need help because they don't see each other as persons but see each other as things. They need help because they are asleep. If ever they all wake up, the whole Dharma system ends. But they are asleep, see each other as things, and need help; and this is fine too. It perpetuates the Dharma system, and having the Dharma system is better than not having the Dharma system even when we can only maintain the Dharma system because most people are asleep, see others as things, and need help. The fun is not in ending the task but in doing the task. The fun is not the destination but the journey. The journey is the point. What seems to be the problem of not being able to fully appreciate other people, what seems to be the problem that other people are not fully persons, is really part of the solution of continuing on joyfully forever. God loses himself in the world. God loses himself in persons-who-really-are-not-persons. If people did not see the world as not-persons, the world would not be so much fun. The situation is really joy in disguise. This is the sense we get of Murray and his relation to other people at the end of the movie. What happened to Murray can happen to any in his turn, especially if a woman nudges him along.

This answer in Hinduism is a pyramid scheme. A few people at the top (think they) benefit when they wake up just because most other people stay asleep. Yet it is alright that other people do not benefit in the same way because really they support the system and the system is fun. By selling the system, everybody expects to be at the top someday. Even people that are low in the system expect to be at the top someday if they sell the system enough. That is how “all paths” arises naturally and why the idea of “all paths” is not satisfying.

When we see other people not as full persons but as sleepers who are part of the solution that keeps the whole system going, then we fall back even further into treating other people as spiritual “brownie” points even when we treat them well. We fall further back into thinking of our self even when we treat them well. Thinking of other people as part of the system is only a disguise for thinking of our selves. This is not a solution to the problem of other people; it worsens the problem. In thinking their sleep is our waking up, and we can succeed by giving them standard help, we fall further into sleep ourselves. We want them asleep, so we can help them, so we can help our self, really regardless of them. We don’t want them to fully succeed. We are selfish so we can score points. This fake solution to the problem of other people arises in the practice of Christianity when Christians want other people to be bad off so Christians can help them and so justify themselves. This fake solution to the problem of others arises when Christians act well toward other people so they can help them and so help really help themselves. This fake solution arises naturally in Christianity when people think of heaven, salvation, or justification rather than simply acting well. This fake solution does not arise in the ideas or practice of Jesus. This fake solution to the problem of other people arises naturally in Dharma systems, and it comes naturally along with relativism, superiority, and encompassing.

“Other people as a problem” diminishes if we stop thinking in terms of sleeping, fully waking up, spiritual success, selfless love as success, and romantic love as selfless love and success. Stop thinking in terms of a Dharma system or anything like it. Stop thinking in terms of heaven, or in terms of chick flick motifs. Stop thinking of saving yourself and going to heaven by doing good deeds or by inviting God’s grace. Just be useful. Just be decent. Do the best you can as hard as you can. Use what you have efficiently. See people as persons as best you can. If you do a few selfless deeds in your whole life, count yourself lucky. If you wake up a little, enjoy it while it lasts. Don’t demand of others that they be selfless to achieve spiritual success or even to achieve romantic success. You can more easily treat other people as persons if you don’t demand of yourself that you be selfless, purely loving, and a spiritual success. Don’t demand it of other people either; and don’t demand they be asleep, lost, and need your help.

PART 9: Some History and Social Science.

This part is optional. It explains more about relativism in Hindu society and the origin of relativism. It clarifies why relativism is an intrinsic natural part of Hinduism, and how relativism works with the ideas of system, superiority, hierarchy, and encompassing. In explaining for Hinduism, I hope it helps explain relativism anywhere.

Some History.

Hinduism did not begin as a relativistic religion. It began with a dominant ethnic group openly asserting their superiority. The dominant ethnic group in India is closely related to people in Iran, and less closely

related to people in Russia. They are the “Indo” part of “Indo-European”. Until a few decades ago, the Indo-Europeans were also called “Aryans”; now that term is not useful. As with other Indo-Europeans, Indians likely originated in Southern Russia. They arrived as conquerors before 2000 BCE. Their ideas changed due to contact with local people, but I cannot describe what happened. Originally the invaders were nomadic cattle herders. Their priests were like Celtic Druids or Roman priests, called “Brahmans”. The Brahman priests kept a tight hold on the militaristic leaders and common people through rituals for most situations, which only they could act. As the cattle herders settled down and formed princedoms, the rulers and the Brahmans split duties: rulers got military power but they had to support the Brahmans, who, in turn, made sure everything ran well by making sure the princedom was in tune with the cosmos. The two social classes were mutually dependent.

After 1000 BCE, the power of the priests began to wane. A similar split between rulers and the priestly class also happened in other parts of the world under similar conditions, such as in China and Greece. When the power of the Brahmans waned, the new ideas listed above really took hold. In India, the new ideas were expressed by thinkers who wrote a set of texts called the “Upanishads”, as described in the chapter on the self and above. The Upanishads are among the greatest documents in world religion, are fairly short, and can be fun to read. In addition to the Upanishads, the new ideas appeared in Theravada Buddhism, Jainism, and later Mahayana Buddhism.

The Upanishads stressed a key idea in the Mahayana-Hindu solution to the problem of existence: “you are that”. You are just like all other sentient beings and they are like you. There, but for the grace of karma, go you. Here, but for the grace of karma, goes him-her. The Upanishads did not always say explicitly that you and he-she are exactly the same, are similar because you are both aspects of God, have God in you, or are a part of God; but it was easy to develop any of those interpretations later.

When the Indo-Europeans had gained most of the north of India (Bharat), agriculture supplanted cattle rearing, and the new people had to interact on a daily basis with old local people. The Indo-Europeans and local people merged, kept separate, and interacted across their separation, in many ways that need not be explained here. What is important is how they saw their relations. The invaders and original people were separated but mutually dependent in a way that fostered social relativism and ideological relativism.

First, everybody was divided into four large ranked classes or “castes”. The Indian word for social-class-caste is “Varna” which means “color” as in “color of your skin”. The Indian conquerors were lighter in skin color than the local people, and so they held lighter-skinned people, themselves, better. The highest class-caste in prestige was the Brahmans, who continued as ritual specialists and advisors to the rulers. (A “Brahmin” is a member of the group of “Brahmans”; sometimes “Brahman” is also used for a single person; and sometimes “Brahmins” is used for the group). The second class-caste was the military-political rulers (“Kshatriya”). The Buddha Siddhartha Gautama was a member of this caste-class. The third class-caste was farmers who controlled their own land, although under the ultimate ownership of the rulers. The fourth class-caste was merchants and crafts people. In addition to these class-castes, some people fell outside the system for various reasons, including making a living through crafts that were considered morally bad such as butchery. These people became the infamous “outcastes” that Gandhi tried to help and that are still an issue in India.

A similar social division into four or five large classes appeared in many agricultural state societies, such as in Rome, Europe, and China. How India differed cannot be addressed here. Although in theory the Brahmins were at the top of the hierarchy, in practice the military-political elite often ran the show, and they demanded respect from the Brahmins. Although in theory merchants ranked low, in practice, a rich merchant family would have much prestige and power. The real power of the rulers and merchants is one reason that religions offering equality, such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Hindu Devotion (bhakti), spread in India especially among the military-political rulers and the merchants.

Even though the castes were in a hierarchy, the castes understood their relation to each other as mutual dependence. No caste could get along without the others. Just as the rulers and the priests needed each other, so the priests and farmers needed each other, the rulers and merchants needed each other, and everybody needed everybody else. This idea is similar to how the major castes understood each other in the novel "Brave New World". It is still how social groups explain each other in modern times.

Second, the major classes were good as general guidelines for social relations but they did not help in daily life, as the case of the merchants shows. In practice, people were divided according to particular occupation such as tailor, barber, chariot soldier, bow soldier, grain farmer, fisherman, goldsmith, etc. People were divided by region, so that the barbers of one "county" were not necessarily the same as the barbers of another county. People were divided by family history, so that the rulers of this county were not necessarily of the same family as the rulers of the next county. People of one particular group, such as warriors of Snowy Mountain, tended to marry within the group, or to marry consistently with a few other similar groups such as the ruling classes of Bald Peak and Fertile Valley. Social scientists say Indians are "largely caste endogamous". Caste endogamy is holding up pretty well even in modern urban life.

Third, the major castes did not necessarily have their own patron deity but nearly all other divisions did: place, particular occupation, family, etc. The local deity of one occupation in one place might not be the same local deity of the same occupation elsewhere, although there was a lot of overlap. Each deity had its own rites and expectations for worship. This situation in India is much like the patron saints in Europe and Latin America.

When Indians explained this situation to each other, they used an idea that is common in the West but is not given as much force: What is right for them is right for them but is not necessarily right for us; and what is right for us is right for us but is not necessarily right for them. This is relativism. This is not such a bad idea for the situation. It is a good version of "live and let live". It is like saying that all the species in nature have a right to go on living, and that there are no better or worse species. It is also like saying that all the social groups mutually depend on each other in one system in the same way that all the species in nature mutually sustain each other in one system.

Most people were content not to force a single system onto this multitude but instead to live out relations as events came up naturally in their daily lives. Only intellectuals would want to force a single system onto such a multitude, but India had intellectuals, and respected them. When intellectuals saw a single system, they explained the diversity like this: All the local deities are manifestations of one basic god, or of no more than a few basic gods. At heart, the one god is simple, but, in practice for most of us limited beings, the god is so complex that few people can see the god in entirety. Most of us see only aspects of the god. The aspects of the god are the local deities. People relate to the one god by relating to their

local deity. They have various ways of relating to their local deity. For the few people who see the god in its entirety, these various ways might be more accurate or less accurate, but for the vast majority of people who cannot see the one god in its entirety, the various ways are only different, and each way is right in its own style. We should respect the various ways. We should respect different ideas about god not as absolute ideas about god but as relative ways of seeing god according to the situation and past history of people. People belong in a social group due to past karma. People in various ways depend on each other. If we subvert the local deities, we subvert the identity of the particular social groups, we subvert their mutual dependence, we subvert the fabric of society, and we subvert the karmic system that keeps the Dharma and the whole world going. So respect is not only a matter of respect for other people but also respect for the basic god and for the entire Dharma-karma system that the basic god instituted. Disrespect for the social system is disrespect for god. When we consider other people and the social system, we also consider ourselves, because we are like them and they are like us. We can help them by considering their place in the social system and their beliefs. We can also help them by guiding them toward better understanding of the one god and the entire system.

This system eventually was put in a larger theological setting under mature Hinduism, but it is better to delay giving that picture for a while.

This is relativism. It can be good or bad relativism depending on how it works out. Modern Hindus would like to make it good relativism, and so would modern people of other religions. Whether good or bad, this is exactly the religious relativism that the Tanakh (Old Testament), New Testament, and the Koran fought against. They refused to see local gods as manifestations of the one true God, refused to see the social system as depending on karma and local deity worship, and refused to see nature as the interplay of local deities. For Theravada Buddhists and Zen Buddhists, ultimately the controversy is not important as long as you keep to the goal of freedom from the world-that-is-not-itself-worthwhile. The trick in the modern world is to sort through all this so as to keep both the good relativism of Hinduism and the spiritual-mental rigor of theism and Hinduism.

As Social Assimilation.

I first learned of this system not as a mental system that assimilates various views of the gods but as a social system in which a large society assimilates smaller societies even while it seems to let the smaller societies retain some of their identity. The process is called, appropriately enough, "Hindu-ization". The following example is completely artificial.

As large Hindu society conquered its way across the Indian sub-continent, it encountered a local people whose society had the following characteristics: they herded goats (not cattle), raised millet (not wheat of the Indo-European conquerors), adeptly sold goat and millet products on the market, and their young men were staunch warriors. Hindu society will certainly defeat these people. Thus these people face these choices:

(1) Fight until the local people are defeated, nearly wiped out, their lands are taken away, and their way of life totally lost forever. This is the option that some Native Americans took when Europeans and ex-slave Blacks invaded.

(2) Assimilate totally into Hindu society. Their way of life will be lost forever and their gene pool will be absorbed. In a different context, this is the solution that was forced on some Native Americans.

(3) Assimilate by taking a place in the Hindu caste system. To do this, they have to accept the authority of the Hindu ruling class and, in theory, the Brahman priests. To accept such authority does not require much of a change in life. In most cases, Brahman priests would have little to do with them anyway, so, to accept Brahman authority meant nothing. Local people still get to carry on most of their way of life, and most of their original culture. Local people have to decide whether to assimilate primarily as warriors, merchants, farmers, animal herders, etc. They might break up into different castes according to these particular ways of life within the larger sub-society. Each caste will need its own deities and its own marriage relations.

While the people in the local society might think they are preserving their way of life, in fact, they have become Hindu whether they know it or not. As long as they interact with Hindus, they are Hindus. The more they preserve of their way of life and its distinctions, the less those distinctions matter, and the more Hindu they become. In a few generations, they will not be distinct from any other older Hindu caste. This assimilation is as true of their religion as of their social way of life. "Resistance is futile".

The Hindus in this situation would rather the local group take the third alternative because it provides the Hindu rulers and priests with additional steady income, provides them with allies, and saves the problem of a war. That is what happened with most groups. Other empires and other groups faced these choices as well, including in Greece, Rome, and China. China was famous for assimilating peoples, especially its conquerors. As in India, mostly the other empires assimilated through option (3). How Hindus differ from other peoples is too much to consider here.

When Jews, Christians, and Muslims were the minority group, they tried to gain a successful version of option (1). When they were in power, usually they did not give other groups option (3) but allowed only options (1) and (2). Jews and Muslims were sometimes a bit more lenient, and allowed a conquered group to retain its identity as long as it was clearly subordinate.

Western "Hindu-ization".

Thinkers in India used widespread ideas in their time, such as karma, reincarnation, and Dharma, to forge systems that spread all through Asia and Europe. The first new system out of India was Theravada. Mahayana followed. When these idea systems moved around Europe and Asia, it was much like what happened after World War One through to the present, when America forged a pop culture that moved around the world. America conquered the world with its music, song, and drama rather than with guns (alone). In the same way, India conquered the world twice before with Theravada and Mahayana, and then developed another system that almost conquered the world with Hinduism. When non-Hindus feel uneasy with Hinduism, that uneasiness is the same feeling as when non-Westerners feel uneasy with Americanism.

To Americans, it matters little if other people watch American TV, watch American movies, play American video games, listen to American music, eat American food, wear American clothes, drive cars designed for American roads, drink American sodas, learn English, start schools on the British-American model,

send their children to American universities, and copy British-American institutions such as representative democracy, free press, impartial judiciary, and rule of law. To the other people, it makes a big difference. The other people appreciate the knowledge of the West but they fear the total loss of their identity. There is only so much any culture-society can absorb before it stops being its own culture-society and becomes the other culture-society.

The institutions that Americans take around the world are not so much American as of the modern middle class and upper middle class. They are how people live in a successful capitalist economy-society. They are international values now, values of the international middle class. Any society-culture has to develop versions of these institutions to support economic development.

It happened that these institutions grew first, and on a huge scale, in America, and that America exported them around the world. The institutions took an American flavor wherever they flourished. So, what are really more class institutions than cultural institutions feel like cultural institutions to other societies. Now other societies have to develop a version of these same institutions even if the institutions had not spread to them from America, as, for example, if they had spread from France, Germany, Russia, China, India, Iran, or Saudi Arabia. Many cultures-societies are making their own versions. When I first wrote this section, “Gangnam” style from the Korean pop singer Psy was peaking in popularity.

When the American version of capitalist society-culture spreads around the world, Americans do not force it on anybody, or not very much. Other cultures-societies take it up the American version of middle class values so they can interact with the dominant culture-society-economy of the world. Other cultures-societies become assimilated into the American version of world middle class values in the same way that local peoples in India became Hindu-ized in the past. America seems like a large amoeba, as did Hindu society-culture when it spread. To many people around the world now, Americans are the Hindus of modern culture and society. To many people around the world in the past, Hindus would have been the Americans of religion.

Cultures-societies can take on enough Western ways to develop economically without necessarily taking on all good Western institutions and without necessarily taking on the American version of middle class culture-and-society. China and India are now developing economically without taking full Americanized identity. It is still an open question how much a culture-society can develop without also taking on at least some version of middle class political institutions such as free speech, rule of law, equality for women, and equality for formerly-oppressed groups such as gays. I think cultures-societies that adopt economic change with only limited social and political change will be able to develop for a while but will not be able to compete over time with societies that accept the full array of changes.

30 American Religious Fascism

Huey Long, the politician from Louisiana, was powerful in the 1930s as fascism was rising in Europe. Americans then feared America might “go fascist”. Long rightly said: if fascism ever came to America, it would not come as an explicit doctrine and will not be called fascism. Rather, fascism would come as Mom, Apple Pie, Baseball, The Flag, Our Troops, Americanism, and a fight against enemies of America. Fascism was a tendency in many societies but did not take the same form everywhere. Fascism would come to America in a crusade to preserve what is “American” against enemies. It would come much as Right Wingers now promote Americanism to sustain a class system in which they are secure, and use Islam and poor people as enemies; or Left Wingers deny the European Christian roots of America so as to make an American identity to serve Political Correctness and its beneficiaries. Only some people get to decide what is American, what gets preserved, what gets discarded, and who the enemies are. The fact that fascism comes this way is a message of novels and movies “The Watchmen” and “V for Vendetta”. To stop fascism in America, we have to head off false Americanism while preserving good universal American values and while extending them to everybody who can live by them. A good movie about Long, based on a good book, is “All the King’s Men”.

“Fascism” with a big “F” refers to the governments in Germany, Italy, Spain, and Japan around World War Two while “fascism” with a small “f” is the general term for that kind of society. The term “fascism” means “state system based on the idea of a bundle of sticks” in that one stick breaks easily while a bundle is strong, much stronger than the sum strengths of the individual sticks; the state is a team; so we should all work together, and be bound together, for greater good. “Fascism” in Germany was “National Socialism”. All fascisms combine: people believe society is a system, people believe the system can work, people believe they depend on the system and on it working, people believe they have a place in the system, people believe that people come in different kinds such as occupations and-or socioeconomic classes, people believe the system is based on mutual cooperation, people believe their mutual dependence and cooperation makes them much stronger, moderate socialism (not communism), strong civil order, putting almost everyone in the system but not everyone, taking care of everyone who is in the system, making scapegoats of people who are not in the system, state support for business, business support for the state, cooperation between business firms, using business to lead the country, a sense of national and ethnic destiny, and having constant enemies so as to stimulate cohesion. America already has all this, as do China, Russia, India, likely Brazil, and some Muslim countries such as Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia. In social science, fascism is a kind of socialism but it is better to think of socialism as a kind of fascism. Russian and Chinese socialism were more like fascism than like idealized British or German socialism from 1910. Chinese socialism now is more like German or Japanese fascism than like idealized communism. Fascism is not like the socialism that Right Wingers dread in theory but is more like the strong state that they work for in fact. The intent of Left Wingers is not authoritarian society but the end result of their programs resembles fascism.

I am not worried that: Americans will adopt Hinduism en masse, worship blue skinned Krishna, and worship cows; Americans will adopt Islam en masse and follow Muslim law; or Americans will become

pacifist vegetarian Buddhists. If individual Americans do wish to do any of that, their decision is fine, as long as they do it out of enlightened free choice.

I am worried that America will move to modest fascism similar to what China or Russia have now, call it Americanism, and find a religious rationale. This fascism does not have to be heavy-handed as German Fascism was up to World War Two; it can be fairly light-handed as long as it is pervasive. To do so, Americans will have to give up the teachings of Jesus and Western values; but that does not seem to be a big obstacle.

Driving Issues.

Recall from the chapters on issues some realities for the near future. Americans do not accept these realities well but instead try to ignore them or run around them. How these realities play out, and how Americans deal with them, or don't deal with them, will affect the future of America.

-The world is already over populated and will continue to over populate.

-Most of the people in the world cannot live like idealized American suburbanites even if the world economy was more productive and the wealth was evenly distributed.

-America gets more world resources, and lives "higher on the hog", than its productivity in relation to other nations warrants. While the overall standard of living in America need not fall, especially if the country is well run, Americans cannot continue to live much better than everybody else.

-If America is not well run, the average standard of living in America will fall.

-Capitalism is an effective and good way to run an economy but it needs to be regulated wisely.

-Capitalism inevitably has about 6% to 12% real structural unemployment so that even people who really want to work, and have trained somewhat to work, cannot get jobs.

-Capitalism inevitably has at least 10% under employment in that people who are will to work hard have jobs but the jobs do not pay enough, and offer enough benefits, to raise a family on well.

-Some people are not smart enough, and have not trained enough, to get good jobs even if there was no problem with unemployment or under employment.

-As more wealth is created, it does not increase the standard of living generally. Rather, the power to control the wealth concentrates into a few hundred families around the world.

-World climate is changing. The changes will hurt more than help.

-The world ecosystem is deteriorating.

-Class society is real. How bad or good it is depends on the situation.

-The people who have good jobs want to keep them and want their children to have them. The secure people are willing to oppress the poor in order to keep secure. They use the state to control the poor.

-People do not like to see the poor suffer in public. People will provide programs to alleviate public suffering. The programs never cure poverty.

-Socio-economic problems interact with ethnicity and religion.

-People, and business firms, quickly become dependent on the state.

-People, and business firms, seek to have the state take care of them.

Scenarios.

Below I list some options for the future of America. All but option one are kinds of fascism. Which of the scenarios below seems most likely in America? Feel free to make up your own scenarios.

1. Americans rediscover the teachings of Jesus and Western values. They see that working hard to make the world better is hard work, but it is also fun, so they put in the hard work, and they get out some of the fun. They see that citizenship is important but also is hard work; and they put in the hard work. They are able to extend values to include non-Christian religions and people of all kinds. They can sort real problems from false problems. They are able to face real problems and can provide workable long-term solutions that everybody can understand and live with. Individual Americans can assess their own ability as citizens. When they are not up to the task of citizenship, they do not assert their selfish desires. Instead, they choose wise representatives who can run the country well. Americans rapidly adopt "green" technology.

2. Americans revert to strong fundamentalist religion, Christian in name but not in practice. In theory, Americans give up pre-marital sex, serial monogamy, birth control, and abortion. In practice, they use all of them, but illegally. The police select who they catch, and the court selects the punishments given. In theory, Americans use drugs much less except alcohol and tobacco. They find a way for some middle class women to stay home to take care of children, likely by making sure women always get paid less even when they do the same work as men. They use business firms as a tool to address all social and economic problems even when business is not the appropriate tool. If a problem cannot be addressed through business and private charity, Americans give up on it. Americans adopt the "gospel of wealth" meaning that rich people are favored by God, if God likes you then he makes you rich, poor people are punished by God, and everybody should be able to make it on his-her own. Americans accept a socio-economic hierarchy of rich, middle, and poor. Americans use laws against drugs and sex to attack the poor and keep them from threatening the security of the middle class. To make sure the poor do not starve in public, Americans continue some care programs.

Christians extend tolerance to non-Christian religions as long as non-Christian religions are not taught at school or featured in state ceremonies, and non-Christian religions share the same fundamentalist values about family and class. Most major non-Christian religions are able to comply. Groups that do not share

the security and general standard of living adopt some religious ideas that are non-standard, such as strong social justice. As long as those ideas cause few problems, the majority ignore them.

3. Americans adopt a public ideology of radical equality but make sure, in practice, that a socio-economic structure develops which preserves the middle class and upper class. Women have to work, and do so in large numbers. Birth control is widespread and abortion is available. Despite legalizing some drugs, the middle class prefers to focus on school, jobs, and hard work. Middle class families fight to keep funding for their schools high, and the performance of children in their schools high, so their children can get good jobs. Middle class families make sure the schools of poor children are technically passable but really inferior so poor children cannot compete for jobs. The middle class extends some support benefits to the poor so the poor do not suffer in public. Rather than understand problems deeply and take account of human nature in addressing problems, the typical response is to “throw money at it” as long as throwing money does not undermine the security of the middle class. Hard-hit groups do not try to understand and to address problems at a deep level but instead seek to be clients of the middle class through programs.

Religious affiliation does not matter if believers follow these values in practice. People take pride in their religious tolerance even while knowing little about their own religion or other religions. Most people adopt a generalized belief in spirituality and some god, and go to some religious institution. Some hard-hit groups develop alternative religious ideas that explain their situation, such as Exile in Babylon or the ultimate revenge of God. These ideas are tolerated as long as they do not upset the basic order or require the general public to examine religion.

4. Options 2 and 3 combine by not stressing Christianity but instead by overtly stressing the destiny of America and by covertly stressing class society. In the new view of God, God does not obsess about ethical monotheism and social justice, God is all about progress and development. This idea of progress need not mean anything moral. This is not the idea of progress from the Enlightenment. This progress will mean stronger, wealthier, knowing more science that can be used to create wealth and power, able to implement technology; and able to assert national destiny and domination. A variation on this attitude has been present in states for at least 3000 years, so this attitude is not unnatural. In this idea, God is not personal in the sense that I feel. God is a principle of cosmic regularity and cosmic expansion, and our society is the particular representative of this principle. This is the idea of progress that C.S. Lewis feared in his science fiction. Groups that push for this kind of progress often use half-moral arguments about general prosperity but really they foresee that they will benefit, both directly and by having a strong country, and they do not really care much about anybody else. Both right and left wing groups argue this way. In theory, everybody benefits, and everybody is better off than in the past even if we do not have justice, so we don't need to worry about justice, humanity, and the planet: “a rising tide floats all boats” and “everybody gets a piece of a constantly bigger pie”.

America is the chosen country of God to lead the world into the best future. To lead the world into the best future, America has to be strong. To be strong, America must have some strong socio-economic classes, some strong ethnic and religious groups, and many strong business firms of all sizes. Not all groups in America need be strong but some must. The strong groups must cooperate. Religious groups need not reach perfect accord but they must agree on a set of core principles that they can “really get behind”.

The new core principles will echo the historic principles from America's past from Northwestern European Christianity but the new values will not actually carry out the old values. The relation between the historic core principles and how they are carried out is like the relation between the Judeo-Christian idea of social justice and how it is (not) carried out. Americans will call for individual freedom but the actual freedom, and how different groups are differently free, will depend on relations to the rest of the world and relations among groups in the country. Individual freedom will have to balance against group solidarity, and will not often prevail. For middle class people, freedom and responsibility will mean theoretically being able to find any job you want on the open market except for some of the highest jobs, and being responsible for your family given what programs and subsidies are available to your group.

The state will work through business firms to make sure a minimum percent of parents have secure jobs that pay enough to get their children well educated enough to take similar jobs. Not everybody has to be taken care of and so not everybody will be taken care of. Unemployment and under employment will not go away. The actual levels of employment, wages, and benefits will depend on the world economy, America's relation to the world economy, and political-ethnic relations in America. Through business firms, the state will extend medical care to children. Through business firms, employed people will be able to get some health insurance. Many markets will become too big, or too important, to fail, and so the state will make sure firms don't fail and financial markets remain stable. The state will pick key players that it supports. Firms will jockey for state patronage. People will not feel entirely secure, and so will compete with each other as members of socio-economic classes and-or ethnic groups. The state will use their competition to bolster institutions. Some groups will bear the brunt of unemployment and under employment, and will cultivate the people and ideas that keep them in that role.

Business firms of all kinds, big and small, will become like secular churches. With their ability to create jobs and wealth, business firms will be like grades of angels in the Middle Ages, with the most powerful, such as investment banks and venture capital firms, being like archangels. Any old religion can easily participate in this new religion simply by being a part of America without causing much trouble. It is not necessary to be Christian, and, in fact, religious diversity helps people to think beyond old ideas to see God as the Spirit of the Future.

Any religion could be re-interpreted to support an America like this, and likely that will happen. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism will be interpreted so as to support the new America. There will be too few Taoists or Zen followers to worry about.

Although any religion can participate, a generalized religion that stresses the Spirit and a vague God is most likely to come to the fore and become the core. People who "feel spiritual but not religious" will come to feel spiritual about the new Spirit of America and the future of America as leader of the world. God the Spirit will resemble the Dharma. God the Spirit will support social and economic relations, so social and economic relations will come to be like social Dharma. The teachings of Jesus, and Western values, will be made relative. When those values are useful, they will be invoked. When they are not useful, people will overlook them in favor of new values about success, destiny, security, and the power of our particular group. Any group that insists on its principles from its past, and so cannot support the new order, will be relegated to the economic bottom, and so reduced.

5. This version is like version four but played out on a global arena instead of nationally. This version is like the dystopia in the novel "Brave New World" by Aldus Huxley.

America will muddle along and slowly will become just another large modestly well-developed nation with all the troubles of other modestly well-developed nations, such as France and Brazil. America will have pockets of high development surrounded by pockets of decay. America will have more internal strife and disparities of wealth than most modestly developed nations, so it will be more like Brazil than France and more like the Philippines than Japan. America will have some strife between socio-economic classes and between races. As America becomes just another nation, rates of unemployment and under employment will stay at levels that we find now in England or France, that is, at least 10%. Working and middle class people will use ploys to make sure they keep their jobs, including making sure some ethnic and religious groups bear the brunt of the problems. The upper middle class and upper class of America will see they have more in common with those classes in other countries, such as Japan, Korea, Iran, Russia, China, and Germany. When they sense their international ties, they will lose touch with the working class, under employed, and unemployed in their own country. They will be less citizens of America than the world. As long as they benefit enough, they will take pride in feeling like citizens of the world even if the world is unfair and ecologically despoiled. They will accept whatever measures are needed to keep the world socio-economic order and their secure place in it. The end result will not be quite as in movies such as "District 9" and "Elysium" but that will be the underlying trend.

Once a country has a huge military apparatus, as America does in 2014, the country has a hard time dismantling that apparatus, but America will not be able to afford the present huge military apparatus. I don't know what might happen. The outcome depends in part on the rise of other nations such as China, Brazil, and India, and their military pushes. For example, America might have to cede control of the far Pacific Ocean to China. The global middle and upper classes might agree to a tacit division of the world into spheres of influence.

Old ideas of God, the Dharma, or Heaven will matter little. Religion will matter little, although particular groups within countries will cling to old religions and make a fuss from time to time. Anti-abortion religious activists in America might succeed in banning abortion in some states but middle class and upper class Americans won't mind as long as they can send daughters to get abortions in other states or in other countries. Nevertheless, people will pride themselves on a deft combination of religious fundamentalism and public religious tolerance.

People will feel that the world has a destiny, the world will share in cosmic order and development, and human society will be the local representative of cosmic order and development. The ruling class will feel as if they represent the God of destiny, cosmic order, and cosmic development. The ruling class will allow the rest of the world to have local beliefs because that will make control easier rather than harder. The end result will be hard only in a few places. In most places, control will be maintained through the media, drugs, and enlisting people in causes rather than through the police.

Real Needs.

America has a real need for some of the same solutions that can lead to fascism if the solutions carry too far. Other countries share America's situation. America needs a sense of purpose. Americans need to

feel they are going somewhere when they go into the future. Americans need to feel they are part of a big country but a country that also cares about them despite its bigness. Americans need to feel they are various, but, even so, all the varieties can work together, fit together, and make something better than any variety alone. They need a better balance of cooperation and competition than they have had since the 1970s. They need a role for business firms without allowing business firms too much power. Think about how to find these things and fit them together without going too far into fascism.