

2016 06 06

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REINCARNATION-AS-A-WAY-TO-GET-IT-RIGHT DOESN'T WORK OUT

I heard somebody on TV say how good it would be to do your life over-and-over until you get it right. I agree with the sentiment. But you can't build a religion, way of life, world view, or way of acting on it. This is one problem with Dharma systems, and one reason why I can't join a Universalist church (they believe everyone will be saved in the end). This problem is one reason I don't like some kinds of systems and am wary about all systems.

Here, the term "world" means everything, that is, this universe. "Person" and "people" refer to sentient beings whether Homo sapiens or otherwise. I do not guess if "get it right" and "enlightenment" are the same. Sometimes I use "awake" and "asleep" to mean "got it right" and "not yet got it right" but I don't mean to imply enlightened or not enlightened.

Suppose that there is now, and will be, a finite number of sentient beings in the world. Suppose they all eventually wish to live over-and-over until they get it right. Then what? What happens to an individual as he-she gets it right, and then what happens to everyone and the world? Sentient life exists on many planets but I see no reason why distinct planets should differ for this issue so let us use our planet Earth to stand for the whole world.

The traditional old pre-Hindu pre-Mahayana idea about what happens to each individual after getting it right is that he-she ends. He-she winks out of the reincarnation system. This answer developed at a time when smart people thought living was not great, and when getting off the "wheel of Dharma" was good. Suppose it is still true. For the world to be fair, it has to exist long enough for everybody in it to live enough lifetimes to get it all right, and the world has to sustain the conditions that are amenable for each person to learn to get it right. As each person gets it right, eventually the total number of people will dwindle. As Earth goes on long enough, the number of people on Earth will get smaller and smaller. This is not happening. I can't see this happening for any reasons having to do with people getting it right and so no longer needing to be reborn. I can imagine it happening due to war or ecological catastrophe but that is not "getting it right". In fact, the number of people is continually getting larger.

Suppose the total number of people remaining finally began to dwindle due to getting it right. People that remain would notice. People would figure it out. Then people would see that life was all about getting it right. People would rush to find how to get it right. Whether this rush is the mass spiritual awakening that people dream of, I do not know, but I doubt it. A whole lot of people all desperately trying to get it right is not the correct condition for anyone to get it right. If all remaining people did get it right, then they would all go out at once. I find all this end-game odd. It does not seem to go along with "getting it right". It is like a spiritual "Big Bang" in reverse; a spiritual "Big Shrink".

To get life right, we have to interact with many people and many different kinds of people. Most of the people that we need to interact with have not yet gotten it right. We learn from their mistakes and from how they treat us. We learn to get it right partly by learning how to treat them even though they don't have it right.

Suppose the number of people who have not yet gotten it right is always enough to help make sure that the people who do get it right get it right in the correct sense that the fellow on TV meant, I mean, and people in general mean. This result takes a lot of people who still don't have it right and seem never to get it right. Where do they come from? Why are there always many people around if some (admittedly only a few at a time) are always getting it right?

I hope some people (sacrificed stooges) aren't manufactured by the Dharma system just so other people (the lucky saved) can have enough context to get it right. I hope God doesn't make sure there always are enough stupid, naughty, selfish, misguided, and bad people so that some few good lucky people can learn. Nobody could get it right in those situations - which are essentially the same situation.

The only way to make this situation fair is for people who have gotten it right not to go away but to stay and help people who have not yet gotten it right. They have to stay through multiple lifetimes, as long as it takes to make sure everyone gets it right. In this case, it doesn't matter if the total number of people does not dwindle. Then, when everybody finally gets it right, we can all go together happily in one big all-inclusive rapture.

Now we have a world made up of people who have not yet gotten it right and people who have gotten it right but stay to help. More-and-more people have gotten it right already while fewer-and-fewer have not yet gotten it right. The ratio of "not yet" to "already" (or the whole) gets smaller while the ratio of "already" to "not yet" (or whole) gets bigger. The "already" group has to help the "not yet" group get it right in the correct way. This situation too does not seem likely to succeed. People who have gotten it right already would have trouble acting like people who have not gotten it right yet. That is part of why we want to get it right, so we can act well. If people in the "already" group all act like saints, then "not yet" people really can't get it right. Oddly enough, a community of saints is not conducive to getting it right. This does not seem to be what "getting it right" is all about.

We can fix the situation but the fix is odd. It comes in two steps.

(1) In the first step, the "already got it right" people pretend not to be "already" people. They pretend not to be themselves. They pretend to be "not yet" people. Then the "really not yet" people have the correct context to get it right.

Problems arise. (A) How does an already got it person know what character to take on so as to best help not yet people? What mix of characters is needed? If I am an already got it person, how do I know which character I should take on in the overall drama? Most already got it people would not want to be a rapist or child pornographer yet those roles might be needed so other people can work on life and get

it right. (B) I, Mike, personally, am not adept at pretending. If I was among the people who got it right already but I had to play a banker that forecloses on an old couple because they can't make their last house payment on a 30-year mortgage, I could not do it, no matter how much the world needs that role for other people to get it right. I could not pretend to be an asshole who drives around spewing racist sexist ugly boompah whoompah fake music out of a car. I could not beat up my girlfriend or her children. Of course, I don't have it right yet. (C) All this pretending doesn't go along with what it means to get it right. People who get it right and want to help do have to adjust their methods to the situation and for the person they are trying to help; but this much pretending just seems like too much even when the heart is in the right place and the cause is good. (D) People who get it right do want to help people and are willing to endure stress to help people. But getting it right just so you can pretend not to have it right and endure a lot of stress seems like a bad reward for getting it right even if the pretending does help other people. Now getting it right seems less like a good thing. (E) Even in a good cause, acting not as yourself is still a self-contradiction. It still lowers integrity. All religious leaders have stressed the need for integrity. I dislike not being integral, not being "together".

(2) The second step cures the first step but it isn't much better. Long before Oscar Wilde said it, people knew that the best way to fool others (lie to them) is to fool yourself first (lie to yourself first). So the people who have already gotten it right agree to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the people who have not yet gotten it right. They agree to forget that they have gotten it right already and to take on whatever role is needed to help other people get it right - even if that role is rotten. How the roles are assigned (A) and all the pretending (C) does not matter here. Hopefully the forgetting takes care of (D) some of the stress, the feeling that getting it right might not be such a good thing, and the (E) conflict of not being yourself. The key is (B) willingness to sacrifice and to forget yourself for the sake of others. That sounds good. Agreeing to sacrifice yourself in this way might be part of really getting it right.

At first, this commitment sounds like something that a person who has already gotten it right would do. But it doesn't work out that way. It doesn't feel right.

(2A) How does an "already got it right" person know when to quit pretending, get back to being a person who already has it right, and then go on with whatever happens to a person who has it right? How many more lives do you have to save before you can just be a person who got it right: one, ten, a hundred, a million, a billion? The end point of this reasoning is that you have to save all of them. Only then can you quit fooling yourself and being asleep so you can help others. So all the people who already got it right have to say asleep until all the people who don't have it right yet do get it right, and then everybody gets it right all together. At the end, everybody will have it right and will be self-fooled except for one person. When that one person gets it right, suddenly everybody will know what has been going on, wake up, stop pretending, and do what is appropriate for a person who has it right. Then, presumably, we all wink out together. That sounds quite odd to me.

(2B) To save the situation again, add another twist. One big point of getting it right is to see how you should be useful and help other people. One big point of getting it right is to be continually helpful in the ways best suited to you and in the ways required by the role of getting it right. If that works out

well, then, somewhat paradoxically, we don't really want the system to end. We don't want people to stop helping other people. We want people to keep on helping other people. We want everything to keep on going with everybody helping out somebody else sometimes and everybody needing help from somebody else sometimes. We want everybody to be both half asleep and half awake all the time continuously. We want everybody who gets it right to fall back asleep again so that not only can he-she help others in the correct way but also can get help from other people, both people who have gotten it right already but gone back to sleep and people who have not gotten it right yet but do help. We want a whole lot of people who are asleep enough to need help but awake enough to want to help. We want a whole lot of people who get it right enough to want to help each other but don't ever get it right enough so that they step out of the system and the system ends entirely.

In effect, we end up with no difference between people who have gotten it right and fallen back half asleep versus people who have not gotten it right. Maybe after a person gets it right, for a short time, he-she feels good about him-herself. But then soon enough he-she hides from him-herself that he-she got it right.

Besides hiding success in this lifetime, more importantly, he-she should hide success for all future lives. When he-she gets born to another life, he-she forgets that he-she got it right in a previous life.

In this situation, there is no difference between good people and bad people. Of course, we prefer that bad people are never too bad. We prefer that people who got it right and voluntarily forget never be too bad. But we can't guarantee this good limit, and, in the real world, this good limit does not hold. So we have a system in which even a person who once got it right can be really bad as part of his-her role in helping other people to get it right. This result leads to a bad kind of moral relativism. The really bad people are the really good people in disguise, they should be revered, and should be followed; while the apparently good people are not really fully good and really mislead you. The people that want to get it right for themselves come off as extremely selfish, and so are far from getting it right.

In the end, what we have is something like the present world in which few people ever feel that they get it right. But the situation is worse because of the moral relativity.

Little seems to be gained by letting people live over-and-over until they get it right, and, in particular, until everybody gets it right. This result takes the joy even out of getting it right and even out of trying to get it right.

There is little difference between what I described versus the Dharma (God) forgetting itself so as to separate into lots of little finite beings, so the Dharma can remember and then forget, over and over, so the Dharma system can go on. There is little difference between what I described and the bodhisattva system of Mahayana. There is little difference between what I described and the idea that the goal is not the end of any road but continuing on the road itself no matter what the road is like.

Maybe you like this kind of system. To me, it mocks getting it right, trying over and over until you get better, helping other people, and getting helped.

Instead of this kind of system, I prefer:

-Only a very few lucky people ever fully get it right. Don't worry about them.

-The vast majority of people never get it fully right.

-People who care about getting it right continually struggle toward that goal.

-This situation is good enough. In particular, continually struggling to do better is good enough.

-Stop worrying about getting it right and instead work to get better. Stop trying to be perfect and instead try to be useful right here and now.

-When you die, God assesses you.

-Thinking like this will help you stop wasting time and resources trying to get it perfectly right and instead will help you use your time and resources to do it better.

-Sometimes adversity helps people to get better but sometimes adversity is just bad or just evil.

-Not all people who do bad (evil) are really agents of the system making us all better because we strive against their badness (evil).

-Sometimes good people are just simply good.

-As we all know, sometimes people put on an air of goodness and are not really very good inside. Don't let them confuse you. Don't worry about them. Just avoid them.

-There are real differences between people. We are not all equally agents of the system.

-Learn to tell the differences as best you can.

Someone determined to find a Dharma-like system could see in what I advise as the code of a person who almost got it right, has forgotten, and wants to stay and help. I don't feel like that. To see it this way is wrong. I can't stop people from assessing the above advice in that way but it mildly annoys me.