

Ancient Wisdom for These Times
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Readings

The words of Jesus:

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

Matthew 13.31-32

The words of the Buddha:

Do not underestimate good, thinking it will not affect you. Dripping water can fill a pitcher, drop by drop; one who is wise is filled with good, even if one accumulates it little by little.

Dhammapada 9.7

The words of Jesus:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

John 15.12-13

The words of the Buddha:

Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, even so, cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings. Let your thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world.

Sutta Nipata 149-150

Sermon

As we turn the calendar from 2020 to 2021, there is much to read in the daily news: A new president soon to be inaugurated, vaccines being distributed as the pandemic rages on, issues of racial justice and economic inequities that must be addressed, the climate crisis accelerating. The headlines scream at us with all this and more...

Yet at the same time... people (including me!) still take time to read not only the daily news... but books like the Bible, the Bhagavad Gita, the Buddhist Dhammapada, the Confucian Analects, the Tao Te Ching, the Quran.

A form of escapism from all the issues that press upon us? Or essential grounding for these times... for any times?

Well, I suppose it could be escapism. But I don't think so. I lean towards grounding.

In any case, I've been reading these texts for most of my life – from Bible stories in Sunday school, and as the years rolled on to all those other scriptures of the world's religious traditions.

What draws me back over and over to words written two and three thousand years ago and more?

First, for whatever inborn reason I've always been curious about the nature of things, of the universe. How did it all start... or was there even a beginning? What's it all for... or is it random? And how should we live... or does how we choose to live matter in any grand sense?

Well, with those sorts of questions tugging at me, my early interests turned in directions that I imagined might offer answers: astronomy and religion.

As for astronomy, I spent hours gazing through a telescope. I still remember vividly the first time I saw through that lens the moons of Jupiter and the rings of Saturn. I had a "map" of the solar system on my wall. And I was riveted, as much of the world was, to news and images of the first manned missions to space and eventually to the moon.

At the same time I was curious about religion – curiosity piqued to begin with, as far as I remember, by the coffee table book my parents had about the world's religions, featuring intriguing images from around the world – from Christian cathedrals to Hindu temples, from Buddhist monks in Tibet to Muslim worshippers circling the Kaaba in Mecca.

Well, all this early curiosity, in both astronomy and religion, led to my studies of philosophy and religion in college (I gave up on astronomy as an area of study when I realized it involved more time spent with equations than with telescopes).

As for philosophy and religion, over time I widened my view well beyond the Christianity of my early upbringing, and have never stopped reading the old texts.

How is it that they do still have meaning – to me and billions of others – after all these centuries?

The simple answer is that the essentials of the human condition haven't changed in the past several thousand years. Sure, we live differently when it comes to all sorts of technologies that could barely have been imagined all those years ago; I hardly have to make the list.

But putting aside electric light, cars, phones, internet, and the rest... the basic human condition has not changed: We need food and shelter, we crave and need love and intimacy, we need to find ways to cooperate with one another; and in the midst of all this we often suffer and grieve; and we struggle with our own selfishness and ego: for though we mostly know what it is to be good and decent human beings, we find ourselves more often than we'd like not being as good and decent as we'd like.

And we are, as humans have always been, profoundly curious about the meaning of the whole business!

In other words, all those who wrote the ancient texts – from the Tao Te Ching and Upanishads to the Bible and Quran – had the same basic needs and questions as we do, and they suffered and wondered as we do.

Did they get the cosmology wrong – how the universe began and all that? Yes, they apparently did: At worst, bad science. Though at best, mythology that still carries profound spiritual and psychological meaning.

Yet when it comes to the question of "how shall we live," apart from the sorts of cultural norms that are outdated, the essential guidance from the old scriptures endures because the human condition endures. And the guidance is often – for me anyway – precisely the grounding we can benefit from any time, but certainly need more than ever in the midst of tumultuous times, whether personal or national and global.

Just the readings this morning, brief passages from the words of the Buddha and Jesus, I find to be grounding, even inspiring, reminders of how I would like to live and why it matters:

To love and feel compassion for all people, all beings. Yes.

To be reminded that the things we each do, the ways we behave, all add up, that we don't have to do everything. Yes.

I preach this sort of thing all the time, but it is hardly original with me, not at all. It is rooted in the ancient wisdom of all the traditions, expressed in different ways, but carrying the same message, a saving message really: That our love, our kindness, our compassion all does add up. And I don't know about you, but I need that reminder.

Most profoundly, all the traditions and texts are designed to help us transcend our small self, our ego, and live from the larger self, from the experience of being part of one body, as St. Paul put it, part of the one web of Indra, as Buddhists describe it. In a recent book, one of my college philosophy professors, Ashok Gangadean, describes this as moving from ego mind to global mind. So that more naturally we will behave with more kindness and compassion.

Prof. Gangadean goes on to affirm that this shift from ego-mind to global-mind is a shift, a growth, that must happen (he believes it is happening) not only for scattered individuals following one or another religious path, but for all humanity if we are to survive and flourish into the rest of this century and beyond.

Escapism? Hardly. Indeed, essential. As scholar of religions Karen Armstrong writes (in *The Lost Art of Scripture*): “Given our current problems, the scriptures’ faith in the divine potential of all human beings seems particularly relevant.”

So whether we get the message through the example of the self-surrender of Jesus or the infinite compassion of the Buddha, through the model of Mohammed serving his community of faith or the invitation of Confucius and Lao-Tzu to align with the great Way, the Tao... doesn't matter... as long as we get the message – the message that we are more than an individual self, more than bones wrapped in a sack of skin, separate from all other individual selves, that we are in fact part of one body of humanity, one interdependent family of life... “part or parcel of God, as Emerson put it – “Universal Being”.

And you know what? This message really isn't *ancient* wisdom. Because the time of the Hebrew prophets, of the Buddha, of Jesus, of Mohammed... isn't really so long ago in the context of the span of human existence, not to mention the span of life on earth. So we could think of the teachings of these sages and the scriptures as seeds planted not so many generations ago (like the mustard seed of Jesus's parable), still growing, still with the chance to flower, to inspire us to make the more harmonious and beautiful world that is the dream of the ages.

In any case, how else, after all, would we want to live other than aligned with the wisdom and dreams of the ages? This year 2021 or any year.

And here's one more thing worth noticing: Though many have behaved badly during this year past and even in these first few days of the new year (what else is new in the human story), many, many, many more have behaved well, in the spirit of these never out-of-date wisdom teachings – rising for justice and for the need for a better way of living on our small planet sailing around the sun in this wondrous universe... and simply being kind to the next person and then the next.

May we, then, each and all, grounded in universal wisdom, the ageless wisdom of our hearts, rise as best we can to our better angels, our higher selves, to love, to compassion, to kindness.

So may it be. Amen. Blessed be.