

This is a collection of superior Think Pieces from a number of different courses I have offered over the years. Every Think Piece here received the grade of ✓+.

By reading through these various papers, you should be able to get a sense of what I am looking for in this assignment.

One thing you should notice is that the Think Pieces are often very different from one another in style or approach. There is no “formula” for success.

What are the effects of memory on experience?

Memories are the flicker of a moment gone by. They are shadows of what has happened before, often bigger or smaller than the event itself and yet truly convincing of the reality of their deceptive forms. A memory can affect point-of-view, attitude, and a number of other psychologically significant variables but what encompasses all of these is the idea that memory has a direct effect on experience, whatever it may be. These effects are not only real but are also essential to the developing human person.

Experience is not just the perception of what is going on in this case but more notably what humans *feel* is going on. As Freud wrote it is no easy task to deal with matters of emotion in a scientific way (36, *Civilization and its Discontents*) and so the topic of experience, this mystical and poignant occurrence or occurrences in a person's life, must be dealt with in a completely subjective manner and interpreted thusly. The intensity that stems from experience is a direct result of the individual account of that experience whether outrightly religious or not. There are two times that experience occurs: the past and the present. The present is a time of consciousness. It is a time when the individual has an awareness of the moment-to-moment activities occurring in both the internal and external environment and is largely impacted by culture. The past is a time of memory (127, Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*). Often embellished and melodramatic or full of holes and lacking crucial information, memory affects the way humans reflect on life and on experiences. Memory also influences the ways humans experience the "now." The present is therefore fairly dependent on the past; consciousness is fairly dependent on memory.

What happens when a memory is not only a distortion of reality but a distortion of itself? In the case of Joel and Clementine in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Joel is experiencing his memories as if they were new events in his life. In this case his past and present coincide creating a crisis of experience in his mind. Through his trials he realizes that his memories are sacred and they are what he holds as truth in a world that is otherwise meaningless for him. Though his memories are ultimately erased some glimmer of them remains allowing him to experience Clementine in the same way he did with the memories fully in place. Both experiences, though not religious in nature, hold that “otherness” which makes religious and mystical experiences so awesome. It holds true that “in one sense at least the personal religion will prove itself more fundamental than either theology or ecclesiasticism” (33, James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*). His memories, these sacred pieces of his life, allow him a sort of extra awareness about the past, the present, and ultimately what the future holds for him based on what has already been.

Memory is the cornerstone of experience. It makes real that which has already passed and instills meaning into that which, under other circumstances, may have had none. Experience of the past and in the past is when meaning is given. Significance is almost never attributed in the moment of first experiencing because judgment must come after the fact and not before or during. If experience is to be thought of as a mystical occurrence then memory is the bridge between the intuitive and the sentiment. Memories are where the two are reconciled and where experience gets its power.

From The Modern Study of Religion

What are Humpty Dumpty's ultimate presuppositions? Does answering that question clarify how the term "religion" works in contemporary discourse?

Firstly, it should be clarified that Humpty Dumpty, in his discourse with Alice, ultimately has only ONE presupposition, for "directly and immediately, any given question involves *one presupposition and only one*, namely, that from which it directly and immediately 'arises'" (25, RG Collingwood *An Essay on Metaphysics*). A presupposition is an assumption that leads one to question a certain phenomenon. In this case, Humpty Dumpty's ultimate presupposition is that words mean only that which the author or speaker of the words intended them to mean, nothing more and nothing less. By raising this presupposition, Humpty Dumpty then leads us directly to the question "what does the word mean?" depending on what word we wish to be discussing at any given time. In this case, we will discuss the term "religion" and ask, "what does the word *religion* mean?" with respect to Humpty Dumpty's stated presupposition.

Humpty Dumpty's presupposition is not a novel one. In fact, many academics make it their life work to introduce new topics based upon a definition of a word that has never been considered before. From these "new" definitions, we are taught axioms, theorems, and postulates that can only arise with the acceptance of the specific definition of the word given to us. This practice of nominalization (the process of naming) was first introduced by the ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and others, especially Euclid. They devoted countless hours to establishing definitions of words that they found to be "true knowledge" and from which sprang many of the truths that we hold as infallible today (for instance: A triangle is a three-sided, three-angled closed shape. Henceforth, every triangle must have 180 degrees.) The difference between Aristotle and Humpty Dumpty is that Aristotle rejected the idea that one could define anything how he or she wished. Aristotle was only concerned with true knowledge, and would therefore reject Humpty Dumpty's assertion that words mean only that which the author intended them to mean and can henceforth have countless definitions.

The power of Humpty Dumpty's claim, however, has been far reaching, regardless of its truth. Paul Bovens. In his article on "Discourse" describes the effects of a group of New Critics collectively defining the term "discourse" in terms of their own views concerning genre, poetry, and the like. Their definition was "functional," meaning it served a specific advantageous purpose for those who arrived at the definition. Specifically, according to Bovens, this new definition "helped transform their real historical experiences of concrete political and cultural deprivation into a conservative expression of their mythic desire to recover a lost origin, a supposed premodern state of innocence best named by TS Eliot as "an undissociated sensibility" (45, Paul Bovens

"Discourse"). In accordance with Humpty Dumpty's presupposition, the New Critics showed the literary world that "key terms are finally more important for their function, for their place within intellectual practices, than they are for what they may be said to "mean" in the abstract" (45, Paul Bovens, "Discourse").

With Humpty Dumpty's presupposition and the New Critics functional definitions in mind, let us now turn to the term "religion" and clarify how this term is used in contemporary discourse. What does the word "religion" mean? Most religion classes do not seek to define the term. Most religionists cannot define the term. Why is it that those who work closest to religion cannot seem to pinpoint or agree upon a definition of this term? This word religion has fallen victim to academics who use Humpty Dumpty's presupposition and the New Critics methods of argument. The term religion has been for centuries defined by those who study it, practice it, talk about it, and write books on it as that which will help them to organize a field of knowledge, "discipline the judgement, and thereby the response of students and teachers" (45 Paul Bovens, "Discourse"). By defining the term "religion" in a functional way to suit their needs, those academics have tapped a source of power that have effects upon the actions of others. When Billy Graham defines religion as the Almighty God tugging at your soul, pulling you toward himself to love Him and serve Him, those who listen to Billy Graham and heed his definition will mold their lives according to this definition, will "feel" the force of religion in their hearts and will claim that this is the "true" definition of religion. But Billy Graham defined the term "religion" in that particular way to serve a purpose. Some critics of religious practices define "religion" as the attempt of some mortals to find a connection with the supernatural, to find significance and order in this world full of chaos. Each person who defines religion is not necessarily trying to get at what the *essence* or *areté* of religion, rather they are capitalizing on the presupposition that has become very popular in modern discourse that words mean only that which the author intended them to mean. This presupposition serves as a factor to limit the scope of discussion concerning a topic like religion. Humpty Dumpty's presupposition begs the question "what does the word mean?" and in terms of the word "religion" this presupposition has led to infinite discussions and arguments and persuasive speeches and sermons and critiques. Our job is to wade through the myriad documents purporting to define religion and determine which of those seek to define the abstract concept of religion or simply wish to create their own personal definition of the term for a functional purpose.

From Wisdom: Literature of Authority

Of all the pages in Be Here Now, I think page thirty-five contains the most wisdom. On this page Dr. Alpert quotes the Buddha's first Noble Truth and claims that life is inherently flawed due to the fact that gains are not permanent and losses occur; life will contain suffering regardless of what one does to avoid it. I think this is the bottom line that all people who have either spiritual or philosophical lives accept. It is like a "given" in a math problem acceptance of which makes it possible for one to begin to solve the problem. I believe it is wise because it is based on experience, sees life as a whole rather than a part, and because as a belief it serves as a base for the practice of non-attachment. Ancillary support for the claim that this view is wise can be found in the lives of those who are commonly accepted to have been wise people.

Firstly, wisdom is something more than knowledge. I believe it is knowledge that has been experienced to a deep degree; knowledge that is so real that its validity can never be questioned because it is felt to be inherently true. Furthermore wisdom should be a truth that is meaningful and is the source and explanation of one's actions and perception of life. It is meaningful knowledge that has become a part of an individual rather than intellectual baggage that is liable to be forgotten, re-interpreted or disbelieved one day. The idea that life is inherently flawed fits this definition because everyone experiences the truth of it. No one is able to avoid all suffering. Only those who chose not to define suffering as such can claim to have avoided it. Negative events are a so-called "fact of life" or a truth that is so widely experienced that few if any would deny its reality.

Secondly the view that life contains suffering sees the whole picture of one's life and of collective lives in general and is thus a complete view. It seems wiser to see all of something rather than a part of it. This view doesn't seek to weigh the positive aspects of life against the negative ones it merely claims that all lives will have negative aspects. Those who read it are free to decide whether they are willing to put up with those negative aspects or whether they want to find a way to eliminate the effects they produce. In India they use an analogy of a chain to show the contrast between a person who is ignorant and sees only a part of creation and fails to understand it and one who is wise and sees it as a whole and is thus able to understand it. If a chain is placed in water with only one link protruding above the surface those who see only the link will only understand that limited part of the chain and will not see it as it is and understand its true form and uses. On the other hand those who see the entire chain will have a much more complete understanding of it.

Thirdly the view that life contains suffering serves as a base for the practice of non-attachment. Because it directly leads to a wise practice, the first Noble Truth is also wise in that it facilitates wisdom. The idea that life is full of suffering can be compared to Madison's claim that nations always suffer from faction. He writes that because factions are inevitable it is childish to try to prevent their existence. Rather one should "control their effects." Similarly one should try to control the effects of suffering, namely unhappiness. By changing one's expectations one changes what can be considered negative. For example, from one point of view disease is very bad because it prevents one from enjoying life, but from another it is insignificant because one does not identify with the body as oneself ~~as~~ and is not hurt by its destruction.

Throughout history wise men have espoused this view that life is full of suffering (and it's derivative that one should be non-attached). Dr. Alpert quotes Jesus as saying that one should not become attached to earthly things due to the fact that they lack permanence. His deeply held belief in non-attachment caused him to renounce everything. Similarly despite being brought up in a relatively wealthy home St. Francis renounced material possessions and saw more value in being a beggar. St Thomas More also discusses the transitory nature of life in his book, Utopia, in which he argues against materialism, calling the wealth of kings "trinkets" and "baubles" and makes them the playthings of children. Gandhi also gave up a successful law practice in South Africa to practice non-attachment in India. And Socrates, one of the most famous wise people of all time argues that a true philosopher should not be attached even to his body. Examples of non-attachment among people who are commonly considered wise are widespread and numerous.

The view that life is inherently flawed is wise because it sees the whole of life rather than a mere part and corresponds to the reality that is experienced by all human beings. Furthermore belief in this view leads to the wise practice of non-attachment that seeks to alleviate the effects of suffering.

From Wisdom: Literature of Authority

I would want to live my life according to the precepts of Proverbs in as much as I would want to live my life according to the precepts of my longtime friend Dr. Laura Schlässinger. While at first glance/listen both appear to laudably endorse (for the most part) agreed upon socially sanctioned truths for (at least) the good and (at best) the Godly life, upon spending further time with both they in fact reveal little more than an obnoxiously pious and authoritarian attitude, in the long run serving no one's best interest but their own. "Hear *my* instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. Happy is the man *who listens to me . . .* For he who finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord; *but he who misses me injures himself; all who hate me love death.*" This quote from Proverbs 8:33-36 pretty much sums up why I dislike this text. I've taken the liberty of italicizing the particularly offensive parts and I will explain why.

For one, this entire quote reinforces a locative world vision grounded in unrealistic dualities. You are either righteous or wicked. Wise or foolish. Rewarded or punished. And, secondly, as the world is so unnaturally cut up, of course, it requires authoritative knowledge to be correctly navigated. I'm not trying to imply that we all don't need a little help in figuring life out, but is it really very productive or healthy to use threats of death, destruction, and casting out of the community to get one to pay attention and listen? Further, the firm insistence on listening to this specific message, even to the point of ignoring the prescribed counsel ("A prudent man conceals his knowledge, but fools proclaim their folly." 12:23), makes me suspicious of what "*me*"s

position is and what “me” has to gain in all of this. For example, by only listening to Dr. Laura, we know that not only her ego inflates but so does the cost of her advertisements, the sales of her books, and her bank account. And lastly, in only listening to “me”, we are only provided one set of tools. I much prefer the Little Prince’s technique of asking a lot of questions to a lot of different people, developing a fullness in his own wisdom.

Which is also why I prefer the message of Ecclesiastes. For Dr. Laura is to Proverbs as my classmate Shannon is to Ecclesiastes. Unlike Dr. Laura and the “me” of Proverbs for who life is dualistically and cosmically meaningful, Shannon and the author of this text express a much more nihilistic position (“Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” 1.2b) which allows for wisdom to be found in the grays of reality, in the lived in experiences of one who has “tested” “all the things that men say” (7.23 and 7.21) .

“I turned my mind to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the sum of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness which is madness.” (7.25) So where Proverbs advocates gaining wisdom by listening to those at the top of a hierarchical system of belief (“do not rely on your own insight” 3.5b), in Ecclesiastes the author sets the example of one who trusts the process of his own mind, allowing himself, like the Little Prince, to actively seek out wisdom: “walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes” (11.9b). Further, where wisdom is one sided in Proverbs, here it is a summation of experience, allowing for learning through discernment, instead of through dogmas: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven” (3.1). For after all, “there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins” (7.20).

This being the case, Shannon and I will “go, eat your bread with enjoyment and drink your wine with a merry heart” (9.7a) while Dr. Laura, in “the babbling of a fool, brings ruin near” (Proverbs 10.14).

From Wisdom: Literature of Authority

In many respects, I, like Socrates, ~~would prefer~~ not to answer any question directly, although one could not ask for anything more straight forward as this: “When it comes to virtue, is Socrates wise?” When given prompts the likes of this, I often wish that I had a Meno of my own to pester and torpify like a torpedo fish. I suppose I must look to the Meno within and begin this charade with no further ado.

Many students enter a classroom with the cloudy mantra set on repeat in their minds of “I know nothing,” but few recognize the Socratic quality of such thoughts, and even fewer would venture so far as to call him wise who has these thoughts circling around in his skull (pardon the male pronouns). Yet after doing the assigned reading of Plato’s Meno, most students may feel confused beyond the par of the typical university mental fog, struggling to maintain sanity as the ashes settle from the intellectual bomb that has just been dropped.

This is the third time I’ve read this particular selection, and again it has succeeded in utterly torpifying me; Meno is a man I can sympathize with. Aside from the intensity of the reading, the dizzying logic, there is something there behind it all that looks a lot like wisdom. One may argue that this dialogue could’ve been condensed into a single paragraph had the ancient Greeks had access to a good dictionary. Of course dictionaries are merely reflections of language in its common use. Through the years our dictionaries have forgotten old words and acquired new ones. But can a word, followed by a colon, followed by a clinical reference do justice to the idea behind it all? What is virtue? And what is wisdom?

The fact that these terms are so intangible, so slippery and elusive should be a clue as to their power and greater social significance. “So if virtue is a thing in the soul and must necessarily be beneficial, it has to be wisdom, since none of the things in the soul are either beneficial or harmful in themselves, but it’s the addition of wisdom or folly which makes them either harmful or beneficial.” (Philosophers are so hyperloquacious, don’t you think? Always sputtering out these complex sentences in an attempt to be lucidly articulate.) Virtue and wisdom are unmistakably intertwined; virtue is molded, with the help of wisdom, into something that may be viewed as beneficial.

This idea of beneficence, of course, goes back to the ultimate problem of trying to put one’s finger on wisdom. What is good? I mean, I feel a Nietzsche quote coming on, but I won’t give in to that impulse. Every society has its own set of values and intellectual precepts which

confer upon it an idea of wisdom. Perhaps Socrates was not viewed as wise in his time. I'm sure not all cultures value the loss of one's life for the sake of intellectual curiosity. Socrates' curiosity was a passionate one, no doubt, but his pursuit of truth, his 'love' of 'knowledge', were still rooted in curiosity.

I find Socrates to be wise. I'll grant him that adjective. I'll grant it to anyone who relentlessly seeks knowledge of the truth, who is willing to stop at nothing to continue questioning every conclusion made, every theory proposed, every hypothesis conceived. Virtue lies in one's desire to 'know' (in the Be Here Now sense of the word). I guess it's that committed passion that I find admirable. These kinds of people are rare, few and far between; they float through history like "something real among shadows."

From Death and Desire in South Asia

Men, Women, and the Sanctioned Codes of Conduct

Seeing his brother Lakshmana laid out upon the battlefield, Rama finds thoughts of both doubt and sorrow surfacing within his mind. Gone is the unwavering sense of sanctity that has heretofore characterized his psyche. Driven by amorous devotion, Rama's quest for Sita has resulted in the "death" of his most loyal companion. Having realized his faltering, Rama laments over the fact that he has surrendered his judgment too far in the name of love. Now, as a direct result of his mortal shortcomings, his own sibling with whom he is tied by blood and brotherhood has suffered.

"The Ramayana has lessons in the presentation of motives, actions and reactions, applicable for all time and all conditions of life," (pp. xi-xii). In the passage presented it must be assumed that the teachings being discussed involve the timeless notions of devotion, judgment, and the sanctioned codes of conduct that definitively represent the culture of India. Emphasizing the importance of an existence marked by strong morals and spiritual progress, the Ramayana uses the journey of young Rama (the human incarnation of Vishnu) as a vehicle through which to explore the higher powers of fate that ultimately determine the path of one's existence.

Rama's feelings upon seeing his brother slain on the battlefield are as much a reflection of the Ramayana's spiritual philosophy as they are commentary on the representation of women in Indian society. Similar to the Spanish representations of "La Malinche", Indian women are seen as sinful temptations, traitors of the human race that remain inferior to men despite their ability to lure the opposite sex astray with a single lustful glance. "Women can lead one to death," (pp. 116) and effectively embody one of the five-fold evils (lust). In denouncing Sita and claiming that he "can always find another wife like her", Rama is effectively condemning the entire female race, insinuating that women, despite their inner and outer beauty, are all alike and cause nothing but emotional and physical strife for men such as himself. Throughout the entire epic Sita's imminent beauty is emphasized and thus lies at the core of her persona. Though a meager mention of her devotion surfaces when she agrees to accompany her new husband into the forest of exile, that which Lakshmana exudes measures far greater than any loyalty exhibited by Sita.

As a result of the lack of depth given to Sita's character (with the exception of her appearance), that which serves to develop Lakshmana's persona proves immense. Portrayed as a loyal, loving, and devoted follower of Rama, Lakshmana abides by the sanctioned codes of conduct readily embraced by Indian culture and thus assumes a position of spiritual superiority. Whereas fate determined that Sita, like all women, would cause the men in her life great pain, it also determined that Lakshmana would forever and unconditionally serve his brother. Well aware of his brother's pre-destined role, Rama finds comfort in the fact that his most loyal compatriot is also his closest blood relation and, upon seeing Lakshmana strewn across the battlefield, is forced to question his own fate. Has Rama's spiritual progress been hampered by his love for Sita? Has he been shielded from the guidance of the higher powers by this woman? Have his own shortcomings caused the death of his brother?

Ultimately the divine creator, Rama eventually collects his thoughts and regains his unwavering sense of being. Indeed, he could comb every inch of the earth and find a woman of equal beauty to his beloved Sita but never would he be given the opportunity to replace his own brother. Similarly, I think that Rama questions the purpose of his own life because this is truly the first sense of failure that he has ever experienced and the only time that he has completely lost his sense of self. Being that Rama is Vishnu in human form I think that one could justifiably argue that his faltering was simply a result of his mortal stature rather than a flaw of his innermost psyche. Humans have the capacity to love and are often torn apart by the very emotion that once promised so much joy. In a sense I think that Rama has fallen victim to an intrinsically human quality, that of infatuation. As in love as he believed himself to be with Sita, his heart truly lay with his brother and it was not until he was presented a glimpse of life without Lakshmana that he was truly able to recognize the varied capacities of love.

Despite the turmoil that has ensued, Lakshmana of course does not die and Rama is eventually reunited with Sita. Because Rama and Sita were destined to rule the kingdom of the gods together there simply could be no other outcome according to the teachings of the Ramayana. Emphasizing the circularity of life, the sanctity of spiritual purity, and the capacity of one man to save the world through nothing more than gentle speech, the Ramayana presents a cultural icon to which the entire nation of India aspires.

From Death and Desire in South Asia

Humor, in “The Great Circle Dance,” serves as a device to challenge existing social mores and religious norms, creating a vehicle to a utopian moment where the lack of conventional boundaries permits a certain empowerment of disenfranchised members of society as well as the realization of the “mood” the author seeks to present. Rather than being an end in itself, it is a conduit to the central message of the text--that elevates *prem*, selfless love, over *kam*, desirous selfish love, in tandem with a critique on the social thought and organizational structures which are seen as misguided in their value investments. The instrument of humor engages in an assault on traditional rationalizations with an approach that appears benign.

In many ways, the very non-threatening appearance of the nevertheless very radical tool of humor in the text parallels the traditional innocuous position of women in Indian society and has interesting, though not quite fully taken, moves toward the insinuation of an expanded conception of womanhood. Indeed, an analysis of usage of humor in “The Great Circle Dance” reveals that humor seems to favor women at the expense of men. The Sakhi, females, would seem to have a superior knowledge of the sacred scriptures than does Krishna, a male god, as evidenced when they contradict Krishna’s reiteration of the “common understanding of a woman’s highest duty,” namely the “service of her husband” (209). Humor in this text allows a space for the marginalized voices in society to point out the problems that accompany the status quo. In context of the larger message of the text, it is through this inclusion of perspectives that the locative order has rejected and subjected that allow the text to accomplish its grander purpose of presenting an alternate social order and value system. More than simply a tool for the restoration of women to a more equal footing in society, the humor elevates previously lowered

members of society as a necessary condition for a rethinking and reassignment of social and religious functions. If it were truly a move toward something like gender equality, the protagonists would be female--Radha and the Sakhi would have a more comprehensive role than mouthpieces for various social critique perspectives. Nevertheless, the virtuously portrayed underlying intelligence and morality--astonishing in this vedic society-- allowed to women by "The Great Circle" is far larger than a text like the *Kama Sutra*. This implication and its connection with humor should be duly noted.

Continuing with the notion of humor as vehicle toward greater message, I would like to examine its relationship with the creation of the mood in the text. "Mood" comprises an important aesthetic of Indian art, and humor plays a significant role in its establishment in the text as a sort of utopian device to free the audience from the constraints of their locative mindsets in order for the complete immersion into a new perspective through it. Nowhere is this more evident than in the demise of the couple Kamdev and Rati. The tragicomic aspect of the tearful Rati mourning the fall of her husband releases the audience from very definite social and religious norms. Finding cause for amusement and laughter in the ultimate misfortune of another is typically a very ensconced social and religious taboo. In breaking this boundary down, the audience enters a utopian moment where they are prepared for the "awe and excitement" of the *ras*, the ultimate celebration of breaking of boundaries and connection to the divine, the climax to which the text has been building. A new utopian order is thus established on the locative order.

In "The Great Circle," the use of humor in the text where the audience must first experience humor to have awe parallels the way that Radha must experience pain before she can experience true pleasure with Krishna. Humor is the embodiment of that impulse toward divinity and utopian perspectives. It is a device that engages in social critique and theory.

From Death and Desire in South Asia

In order to understand how Prāṇeśācārya's desires changed or evolved, one must further contemplate the many levels of desire in Indian thought, as illustrated in *Samskara*. Generally put, there seems to be three levels of desire. Prāṇeśācārya's lack of the desire is the first level, while Naranappa is the second example of desire; a desire to be freed from the strictness of the first and enjoy desire without any dharmic entanglements. The other level of desire could perhaps be described as a middle between the extremes of Prāṇeśācārya and Naranappa, neither fully giving into the desires that keep people "in the clutches of death," nor fully giving into the concept of being liberated so that one's present life is without desire, thus no better than death as well. The way I understand how Prāṇeśācārya's consciousness of his own desires undergoes a process of change is by being both extremes, finding a middle ground, but not being comfortable with it because he was still so concerned with his routine and the tradition that cemented that routine. I think this development teaches that desire in Hindu thought is not necessarily an aspect to be conquered and thus no longer present, but an aspect to be controlled and thus allowing one to not be so extreme that they feel uncomfortable or resentful of their dharma.

In the beginning of the novel, Prāṇeśācārya is satisfied with his routine of taking care of his invalid wife because he knows it will reap him good karma, and he becomes ready for death because he conquered his desires that he believes hinder people like Naranappa. However, Prāṇeśācārya was still in the clutches of death because he was acting like he was dead already by living completely without desire. Since Prāṇeśācārya was so devoted to a routine lacking in his own desires, the death of Naranappa made Prāṇeśācārya face the reality of Naranappa's own overwhelming desires, which seemed to transfer over to Prāṇeśācārya because his Brahmin skills could not answer the questions about Naranappa's death, thus leaving a space for desire to act as a catalyst for change in Prāṇeśācārya's life.

The first dramatic change occurs when, in a state of defeat from his old routine, Prāṇeśācārya has sex with Chandri. Chandri embodies desire, and as a result Prāṇeśācārya deserts his old life and goes into the forest where he contemplates his desire for Chandri and other women, as well as his desire to be back

in his old routine. In addition, I believe Putta can be seen as another catalyst for Prāṇeśācārya's evolution. Since Putta is half Brahmin he could be seen as an actual embodiment of the third level of desire of being somewhere in the middle. He is depicted as generous, kind and nonjudgmental, but also a lower human form since he was not fully Brahmin. The fact that Prāṇeśācārya didn't desert him until the very end when he goes back to the agraharā, despite his efforts to desert him, shows that in a way Prāṇeśācārya was accepting of this middle ground but was too uncomfortable to embrace it fully, since he couldn't really get comfortable with Putta and what he represented to Prāṇeśācārya. So, Prāṇeśācārya first realized his desires on one extreme with his austerities, on another extreme when he had sex with Chandri and was overwhelmed by it in the forest, and somewhat realized the change that more resembles a compromise of the two extremes when he felt he could use Putta in order to see how Prāṇeśācārya really looked to the world if they knew his dilemma (137). However, Prāṇeśācārya, because of his uncomfortability with the middle ground, ended up going back from where he came and the reader doesn't know if he truly accepted the third option.

What this teaches, in my understanding, is that strict orthodoxy and complete heresy have the same end, that person is considered dead while alive, both because there is no control of the desire, only conquering or succumbing to the desire. So when something happens, for example Naranappa's death, both sides are shaken. Prāṇeśācārya questioned and acted upon his desires, and Naranappa while dying called on the gods he was so seemingly comfortable with rejecting in the past. According to the lecture presented on April 3rd, the control of desire enables one (a man) to become immortal. In this sense, control falls under the middle ground of the definitions of desire, in which Putta could have been an example. So, this development shows that in Hindu thought generally, desire keeps one in the realm of death, but lack thereof can also be damaging, so in order to be less extreme and less likely to fall apart when something like desire crumbles one's routine, one must be in a balance between this world and the expectations of the other world and control desire by allowing it to exist, but not giving oneself over to it.

From Readings in Mahayana Buddhism

Staying on the Wheel and the Bodhisattva Ideal

Round and round the wheel goes, where it stops nobody knows. Hopefully, for the Arhat, one of the four types of shravakas or hearers (followers of Theravada), this continuous existence of Samsaric transmigration would soon be coming to an end. Through practice and by following the teachings of the Shakyamuni Buddha (i.e. The Four Noble Truths) these individuals gained insight and sought to personally liberate themselves and achieve nirvana. Achieving nirvana was good enough; the goal was not to become a Buddha. In short, the basic idea here was to simply get off the wheel – the Wheel of Samsara. While this may have been good for the bookish Arhat, many beings were left behind and it was they who provided the grease that kept the gears of this hellish existence in motion. For those associated with the emerging ideas of Mahayana this was viewed as problematic and perhaps even selfish by some. As Paul Williams points out, some of this hostility may have grown from the lay oriented focus on stupa worship and its association with the actual Buddha. What followed was “an alternative religious tradition centered on Bodhisattvas and Buddhas, showing some hostility to the conduct and aspirations of the monasteries, particularly in respect to the definitely inferior status given to the laity in monastic Buddhism (20-21).

Whereas the Arhat seeks personal liberation from Samsara, the Bodhisattva (a buddha in training) stays behind, or postpones liberation, so that they, out of their infinite wisdom and compassion, can help lead others to the goal of enlightenment. It wasn't that the arhat lacked wisdom or compassion but rather it was the way in which that wisdom and compassion was directed. For the Bodhisattva its purpose was solely for the sake of all living beings (Cohen 218). Whereas the Arhat had sensitivity to the suffering of others, the Bodhisattva sought to actively alleviate it.

The way in which wisdom and compassion are employed for the benefit of others (upaya) can certainly be one way in which the Mahayana views their way as being superior but there were specific instances where this attitude manifested itself. Those associated with the Mahasamghika nikaya during the second council questioned the exalted status of the arhat during the dispute over the 10 vinaya rules. The Five Points of Mahadeva illustrate this emerging view of the arhats inferior nature. Among these inferiorities were such things as having nocturnal emissions, being subject to ignorance, and that an arhat can be taught by another person (Williams 17). In addition, sutras such as the Bhadramayakaravyakarana paint a picture of the bodhisattva as being the “true renunciants” as opposed to the monks who give up life as a householder. Sutras like the Vimalakirtinirdesa show lay experts (Vimalakirti) putting monks and other acknowledged experts to shame by means of their superior understanding of Buddhist truths. Insight is also an important area where the bodhisattva is considered superior to the arhat. Because of this their advanced wisdom the bodhisattva can operate within the world to assist in the liberation of others and not be distracted with its trappings. They may even resort to surprising and seemingly contradictory methods to achieve

their noble goals. By contrast, the arhat can never be entirely sure, as Mahadeva points out, that he will not be swayed (Williams 21). At once the bodhisattva seems to be a product of the world yet not of the world. This is a key point and illustrative of the careful way the Mahayana and the bodhisattva ideal balances the two interdependent aspects of wisdom and compassion. As Richard S. Cohen writes, "the arhat's path and goal both entail the elimination of karmic attachments to samsara through the accumulation of insight; the bodhisattva actively cultivate attachments, for his pursuit of wisdom is not privileged over his pursuit of compassion" (218). The shift of focus from the individual to the incalculable multitudes is what characterizes the Bodhisattva ideal and why the arhat seeks to get off the wheel whereas the bodhisattva stays on.

From Readings in Mahayana Buddhism

Of Emptiness and Blue Jay's

For some time now two blue jays¹ have been faithfully coming to my kitchen window each morning to request their daily ration of Rudy's organic-honey-sweet-whole-wheat-bread. As soon as I see them I rush to the refrigerator and get the bread, cut it into bite size pieces, and throw it off the balcony. That they come to visit me each day makes me feel very special. However, I also wonder if I am just one of the many rounds they make to homes around my eco-friendly canyon. The latter is more likely. In any case, we've become so familiar with each other (me and the blue jays) that I can now get quite close when I feed them off the balcony railing. I know the day will come when they won't return and this makes me a bit sad. However, this is the changing nature of life – the impermanence of everything – and it is with this knowledge that I am able to remember the time I spent with my blue jays with fondness for without such change life as we know it would not be possible.

It is with the idea of impermanence that we turn to the passage from the Heart Sutra that states: “form is emptiness, and the very emptiness is form” (Conze 86). Is this statement paradoxical? Many wonder how anyone can find happiness in emptiness? This seems nihilistic and negative. Actually, the reality of emptiness is quite positive. As Thich Nhat Hanh tells us, “emptiness is the ground of everything. Thanks to

¹ Actually they are of the Western Scrub-Jay variety (*Aphelocoma californica*) but I think of them as a Blue Jay. Very similar, however.

emptiness, everything is possible.” He goes on to tell us that, “emptiness is impermanence, it is change” (17). What does he mean when he says this? In science they say “matter cycles and energy flows.” Matter is never destroyed it merely changes form or is moved from one place to another. The amount of matter, as far as we know, remains constant. Whereas matter is ‘recycled’ energy flow differs in that the energy is not returned to the sun but is used by living things to live. In a forest dead leaves, rotting trees, animals, and, yes, blue jays, at the end of their life cycle, are crucial as they return important substances, during the process of decomposition, back into the soil. These substances provide nutrients for new plants, which, in turn, provide food for new animals and new blue jays. Thus, without emptiness and change there would be no cycle of life and no more blue jays.

Whether we like it or not it appears that we are just part of one big cosmic compost pile. In this way it makes perfect sense when the Heart Sutra speaks of the arising and ceasing of all phenomena. Because blue jays are dependent on other factors (conditionality) for their arising and ceasing, we say that the blue jay is empty of self-nature. This is true of all phenomena. When we think of impermanence what we are witnessing is simply the substitution of one phenomena for another – nothing is created or destroyed. With this in mind the idea that “form is emptiness, and the very emptiness is form” makes perfect sense and does not (or should not) pose a logical paradox for anyone who can “penetrate” the true nature of things. After his “penetration” into the five skandhas (finding they were empty) Avalokiteshvara “overcame all pain” (Hahn 1).

Edward Conze points to that “fusion of the Conditioned and the Absolute, of the world of emptiness” as key to understanding (83). When we think of the world as it appears to

us we see impermanence or conditionality. When we investigate its true nature we understand emptiness (as did Avalokiteshvara). In this way we see how both apparent reality and ultimate reality are really two sides of the same coin. In other words, nirvana is samsara correctly perceived. While I may be sad when my blue jays decide to move on I find solace in the idea we find in the Heart Sutra when it describes the characteristics of all dharmas in that they are “marked with emptiness; they are neither produced nor destroyed, neither defiled nor immaculate, neither increasing nor decreasing” (Hahn 1). In this way we are always close to our blue jay, whoever they may be.

Sources

- Conze, Edward Buddhist Wisdom – The Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra. New York: Vintage, 2001.
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