

**Melbourne Existentialist Society, Melbourne Cup Day Lecture, Nov. 2009.**

So I wrote a book called Buddhism Existentialism, which some like, some don't. But I don't want to talk about the book though. I'll approach the content from a slightly different angle.

**Truth, Emptiness, Art.**

There is a saying that Pontius Pilate interrogating Jesus asked the question "What is truth?" but did not stay for an answer. He wasn't a philosopher, I guess. He didn't want to continue the critical inquiry. He cut it off too soon, returning to his routine conventional assumptions.

But don't most of us do this too? From time to time we may half-humorously ask, "What is the *real* truth of things?" – but we soon set the question aside to return to our more familiar daily affairs and reality assumptions. So here we are living and acting, pursuing our careers, pursuing our goals, etc. But honest inquiry prompts us to ask: *Is any of it based on truth?*

Is Buddhism the truth? Is material reality the truth? Does anyone *really* know the answer to this? Or are we merely kidding ourselves, accumulating more knowledge. But how can we say we know anything if we have shirked the first and most fundamental inquiry: What *is* truth?

We don't stick to it. We tend to quit too soon, skimming it, taking a less challenging path, slipping back into everyday thoughts. We like to get back to so-called real life as soon as possible. We say we want to be sensible, get on with things, and be practical.

But what *is* practical? What does the word mean? Won't it depend first on what we take to be real – living in the *real* world, being *realistic*, etc? But what *is* reality? – That's the very question at issue. Is our reality based on any solid truth? If not, what is the truth of so-called practicality?

What are we doing with our lives? So-called Buddhism, so-called commonsense – everything – it could be utterly false! That's an unnerving thought, but don't we have to first get down to basics, whether disturbing or not? Back to the direct and profound question: What is true? Until we have addressed that how can we even consider anything else? But how proceed?

The process – it is simply fundamental philosophy, is it not? It is relentlessly asking the basic question of philosophy: *What is true?* One can meditate deep and long on this, probing it this way and that, not clutching at some convenient cultural answer or knee-jerk personal opinion. Such opinions, after all, seem like mere guesswork, dubious interpretation – prejudice, slant, bias.

Well, for example, let's say a feeling of so-called *guilt* arises. But what *is* guilt? What is really *true* in it? What reality assumptions are being made that support the feeling? Does it presuppose a belief in personal freewill perhaps? Can we prove freewill exists? Does it overlook the possibility that everything that happens must happen by interconnected causality, cause and effect?

Is everything governed by some kind of divine plan, hidden destiny, or providence? If that's possible, then why accept the concept of guilt? Why reinforce this feeling of guilt with a firm belief in it if the belief is not well founded in a solid truth? But on the other hand, is *innocence* the real truth? What *is* the truth?

Or let's say a sense of so-called *depression* arises. What is depression anyway? What meaning does it have and what is true in it? Is what I call feeling depressed the same as what you, or someone from another culture, would call depressed? Is it a biological thing or a socially constructed thing? Is it normal or bad? Is it considered a kind of existentially *authentic* anguish perhaps? What belief is the feeling associated with? What outlook on the world?

Is dualism true? Is it true that we are separate self-identities persisting through time? Do we have a real self at all? Or is life really a kind of dream and the self a kind of optical illusion? Is it all delusion and Maya? Is everything perhaps actually all one and good?

Is there a God testing us? Should we take obstacles as opportunities to show our mettle? Or does everything happen by luck or chance or accident or blind material cause and effect? If bad things happen to me am I paying off karma from a previous life, and is this then a good thing? What is good anyway? What is bad? What are these ideas based on? Is it truth? What *is* true?

Maybe you are beginning to get the idea. It's basic philosophy, or what philosophy should be. Not academic, not technical and obscure, not the history of ideas, not reporting what others have said or written, nor analysing or comparing texts. Nor directly aiming at a so-called practical application either: one that might get university or government funding, for instance.

It is not about results. After all, one can ask: What authority defines what a good result is? And by what authority does it get its authority? Is there a true authority anywhere, or an infinite regress of authorities? Is there a truly good or useful result? Why *this* rather than *that*? Why even a result at all? Who is it that wants results and why?

Some may talk about being authentically human, true humanity. But what does *that* mean? Is our recent ideal of it the right one? Why should we aim for that ideal? Why that ideal rather than some other ideal? What would Julius Caesar think of it? What would Gandhi think? What about the first emperor of China? Well, how then *should* we humans be? Does anyone *really* know?

There is a kind of logical priority, is there not, to self-inquiry: *the examined life*, questioning if our practical endeavours and professions are built on solid foundations or not. For, after all, we could be off on a wild goose chase with our lives. Climbing up the wrong gum tree.

Heavens! Here's a thought: maybe we should all be taking that dramatically mind-altering chemical used by shamans and others, called ayahuasca? Is *that* what we really need? – as one of my friends argues. Or maybe we should all be praying to Allah and reciting the Qur'an every day? It may sound annoying, but really: Do we know that this is *not* the case? Can we *prove* it?

What happens when the mind gets started on this kind of process of critical self-inquiry and keeps at it, not quitting too soon or clinging for comfort to a culturally convenient self-serving local assumption, but pursuing it relentlessly to the very end?

An initial question begets some kind of answer in response. But then this answer begets another question, perhaps slightly more refined. Which prompts another answer, perhaps more comprehensive, more carefully thought out. Even so, it begets another question that probes still deeper and takes issue with something even more fundamental. The mind attempts another answer, more detailed, or perhaps more cautious. Yet it sets off another series of questions, perhaps setting up radically different perspectives, hitherto unconsidered.

Perhaps the mind now attempts an answer that comprehends as many of these perspectives as possible in some sort of higher synthesis. Maybe it constructs a grand theory of everything. But the mind is still rather unconvinced, restless, curious, vital, inquiring. It reconsiders, it re-examines, and when it does so it finds sudden jumps in the reasoning, hidden flaws, covert assumptions, unprovable premises. The so-called true theory starts to crumble. It cannot establish its truth after all.

Against it, other completely different systems of so-called truth are again argued. The mind cannot tell from among them which system contains the real truth, for they seem to be incommensurable, starting from radically different premises, containing their own self-circular justifications, and begging the question at key points.

The mind begins to turn on itself like a snake biting its own tail. It begins to question itself and its own process, even its own reasoning. For it raises the question of whether human reason itself is valid or deceived or deluded. It could be, for all we know.

So the reasoning mind begins to swallow itself up. Reflexivity problems abound: the mind realises that it cannot even say it knows there is no knowledge, for that would be a claim to knowledge.

Maybe the mind wants to say now that there is no truth: the truth of no-truth. But it cannot say it is true there is no truth, as that would be a claim to truth. That would be, perhaps, the last anchor in the mind, the last gasp for truth. But it too wobbles and crumbles.

Mind is at an impasse. It has foiled itself. In the most important of quests, the quest for truth, it has unmasked one truth after another, like peeling the layers of an onion. It finds there is nothing at the centre: nothing to cling on to, no nugget of truth to abide in. The mind dissolves down into its own vortex. It has thought its way through thought to the very end of thought. Truth-seeking thought ceases. Silence descends. Mind without judgment... *dumbfounded*.

Mind could find no resting place, and turning in on itself, fully self-critical now, it cannot even find a starting place. Wow! No starting place! How then can the mind get started again on its truth seeking, on its true reality quest? It cannot. As soon as it would start up with some new truth-seeking project, some true reality, the project and reality collapses back in on itself. *Initiating itself, truth-seeking mind aborts itself*.

Where? Right there at the centre of the onion. Which is what? Like a nothing, like a nowhere, like a no-when, like nobody: non-person, non-truth, non-duality. In short, like a kind of emptiness – the emptiness at the core of thought, heart of the mind. Groundlessness – thought spinning around an empty vortex. All the constructs of thought as well – eg, the personal self, the duality, the otherness, the world, the past, the present, the future. In fact, all interpreted reality as such goes up in smoke. All and everything – emptied of truth. Judgment voided.

Emptiness. There was a Buddhist philosopher called Nagarjuna – 3<sup>rd</sup> century, Northern India – who sought to get back to the original teaching of the Buddha. He called it the art of shunyata, the meditation of shunyata – usually translated as emptiness, voidness: the void at the core of thought, heart of the mind. Like smoke – nothing to cling to. Hence: a radical way of non-dogmatism, non-attachment, and pure agnosticism – the Buddha being *agnostic* in the most radical possible sense of the term. “*Not this, not that*” – such is the way.

Let us probe for truth first before we jump in with our personal fancies – eg, about what spirituality is, what practicality is, what existential authenticity is, how people should be, etc.

Otherwise what? – Otherwise, we are not being guided by critical intelligence but driven by our cultural and personal biases masquerading as truth. And then the truth of a real self goes unchallenged, for it never gets voided by critical inquiry, rather re-expressed, reinforced.

This will be so, no matter how many retreats people go on, how many altered states they experience via chemicals or yoga or chanting or meditation techniques, how much psychotherapy they do, or how well they learn to function socially, etc. By not dealing with the issue of “what is truth” first, we ignore the unnerving nothingness at the heart of the programme: the lack of a true grounding, the lack of a centre: the lack of a so-called true authentic self.

Emptiness mind: a truth-free zone. Enlightenment mind: a truth-free zone. Like smoke, nothing to cling to: no true self even to do the clinging. Zen-like “*mu*” – nothingness: no-thing-ness. It may seem quite scary at first, but as mind acclimatises to it, there is a kind of luminous clarity. *A kind of fundamental wonder, a silent beauty in judgment suspended, plays like an aura over everything when the mind dwells in stillness in the pure mystery of existence at its empty centre.*

The momentum of critical inquiry has drawn the mind along and inwards, biting its own tail, swallowing itself, regardless of the wishes of the personal self. Truth-seeking thinking dissolves in the vortex and takes the self with it – cancelled in the process of *un*-knowing everything. There remains only a *void schematism* of self and world.

As perhaps the last straw, the question may be posed: Is emptiness the truth then? Is shunyata or enlightenment a matter of so-called truth-realisation? How can that be? The mind would be setting up a truth in a truth-free zone. Reflexively problematic: there can be no truth of no-truth.

Ultimately, then, shunyata is not about truth. Rather, there is this sudden switch from truth-centred thinking and acting to something subtly different: spontaneous aesthetic response – creative art, comic ironic spirit, free play for itself, influenced by the mysterious beauty of pure existence in emptiness.

Consider the overall process to be like a Zen koan. Zen Master says: What is truth, what is enlightenment? Speak, say something, and you’ll get hit with the stick. Remain silent, say nothing, and you’ll get hit with the stick. Now – what do you say?

What is said, what is done, at this point? The sudden switch: mind gives a spontaneous, creative, aesthetic response. For example, perhaps a genuine laugh, like getting the punch-line of a joke; or perhaps a wild howl, letting off steam; or perhaps a comic action: putting your rice bowl on your head and walking off, etc. Or perhaps a quick brushstroke or two: an expressive painting. Or a song sung for its own sake, or a verse scribbled on a wall. Whatever. The thing is, it is not a *right* or *wrong* kind of answer, for it is not a truth-centred response, an essentialist response, but an expressive, emotive, aesthetic, playful action: non-essential as such.

With the switch, essentialism, truth-centred theory, all that old seeking and thinking, comes to its end, displaced by an artistic and comic free spirit. Ah, let the games begin! *The Games Zen Masters Play* – as a familiar Zen book title has it. Even the overall process of shunyata itself, by which we arrived at this pivotal point, reverses from being truth-centred theorising to being itself artistic play. In short, not a *theory* of shunyata but an *art* of shunyata: an aesthetic practice of enjoying the mysterious beauty of pure existence in emptiness. Mind is no longer seeking. Mind is playing.

It makes a big difference whether a mind is moving *toward* enlightenment – hence, is truth-centred, achievement-centred, moralistic, essentialist, etc – or whether it is acting *from*

enlightenment – hence is non-truth-centred, non-achievement-centred, non-moralistic, non-essentialist, etc. Enlightened mind is mind in a state of play. Hence: unattached to this or that so-called essential truth or value or goal, and expressing itself as art, enjoying the creativity and artistic expression for its own sake. This mind is nobody going nowhere, celebrating existence in emptiness as it pleases. It has laid down its heavy load. Its work is over. Now it's playtime.

How does this kind of Buddhism connect with Existentialism? Simple. The foundational principle of Existentialism is Sartre's famous motto: *Existence precedes essence*. As he said in his public lecture in Paris 1946 titled *Existentialism Is A Humanism*, we find ourselves first in pure existence and then we attempt to define ourselves afterwards. In doing so we must choose this or that interpretation of existence, but we choose without guarantees, because we cannot establish the essential truth or value or rightness of our choice.

Thus Existentialism is presented as the alternative to Essentialism: i.e., to all philosophies based on so-called essential truths, worldviews, interpretations, values, and goals. Moreover, Sartre goes on to state that the sense that life and reality will have will be nothing more or less than the sense we choose to give it. The sense is up to us and it is not an essential or objective or given or revealed truth at all. It is non-essentialist, non-essential.

Therefore, we could just as soon say it is a mode of free artistic play. If so, free artistic play, as non-essentialism, as pure creative art, is the core meaning of Existentialism – if properly and consistently understood.

What follows logically from this is that the rest of Sartre's philosophy is rubbish. No kidding. It is self-contradictory as a whole because it is undermined by his own foundational principle. After all, he goes on to talk about, eg, ontological dualism, subjective freewill, moral accountability, as if it is an essential truth, and likewise about authenticity, existential anguish, and facing up to the so-called meaninglessness of life, as if they are essential values. After boldly announcing Existentialism, he then proceeds to talk like a dreary Essentialist.

Other Existentialists are just as bad. They never get free of truth-centred residual essentialism. They all defer to some kind of truth or true value. At most they transform objective truths into subjective truths – “truth is subjectivity”, and so forth – thus turning subjectivity, freewill, selfhood, moral accountability, phenomenological experience, angst, and the like into essential truths and values. What kind of a con job is that?

Let's call that old-school Existentialism. If we want to free Existentialism from its self-contradictions, and at the same time bring it up to date in a topical postmodern context, then we need to radically reform old-school Existentialism by going back to its foundational principle and insisting on its logical corollary: namely, that everything thereafter becomes pure art – not theory at all, not even critical theory.

Some may claim that the most extreme form of postmodernism, such as we find in Jean Baudrillard's texts, is a new and disturbing development because it implies that truth is dead. It kills off truth-centred theory, replacing it with what Baudrillard sometimes calls pataphysics, sometimes theory-fiction, and sometimes seduction – poetic prose artworks, in effect. But actually Existentialism already implied this too, way back in 1946 – if this had only been clearly seen and understood at the time. We've squandered the last 60 years or so harping on about critical theory when theory was always already outmoded. Talk about flogging a dead horse!

Of course, the problem is that people find it hard to let go of their deep-rooted attachment to truth and hence to truth-centred theory. Some likely reasons for this might be:

First, personal insecurity – people may think they’ll feel personally lost or insecure without an anchor in some fixed truth-assumption about life and reality. It’s not just the religious that want to be true believers, after all. True believers are found in every nook and cranny. Dogmatism is as pandemic as ever.

Second: thinking people, especially academics, want something to do and some true platform to do it from. They think they need a true ideology, a morally privileged position, from which to launch their critical assaults on everything else that they happen to dislike. They want to exhibit the falsity and wrongness of other views in comparison with their own supposedly more essential truth. Indeed, their career path may depend on it.

Third, people tend to get impatient with critical inquiry into truth. They say they want to be sensible, active, practical, and they want to fit in, more or less, with other people, the current consensus, or, in other words, the comfortable conventional assumptions in their generation or their neck of the woods. So they cut off inquiry too soon and quickly revert to their taken-for-granted reality assumptions.

It doesn’t matter whether the theories are orientated more toward the so-called physical reality of science, or toward social power and cultural institutions, or toward language and language games, or toward subjectivity and existential phenomenology – they are all defunct in emptiness, as Zen Buddhism would say, or in the existence that precedes essence, as pure Existentialism would say. It is on this point that pure Buddhism and pure Existentialism come together as one: hence Buddhist Existentialism.

In light of this: *What now?* This seems like the most interesting question. What do we do after the death of theory? Answer: we switch to art – free artistic play with life and reality. Artistic play need not be about truth or self-rightness or self-righteousness. Rather, it is more a case of an emotionally pleasing self-expression and creative freethinking for its own sake. One sings a song if one is a singer. One poetises life and reality if one is a poet philosopher.

For instance, one Zen Master (Shunryu Suzuki, 1904-1971) said, “*From true emptiness, wondrous being.*” One can choose the free artistic play of making life and reality wondrous for no particular reason, if one likes. Well, why not? It’s an interesting game to play after all. Or another Zen Master (Bunan, 1603-1673) wrote:

*“Die while you are alive,  
And be absolutely dead.  
Then do whatever you want:  
It’s all good.”*

Truth, even the idea of a true self, dies in emptiness. Then all can be made whole and perfect. Indeed, why not? If it pleases us we can create reality as a perfect unity and see the parts as perfect too – regardless of whether they appear relatively good or bad if considered separately – insofar as they all interconnect and contribute together to the beauty of the One.

For instance, taking our cue from Shakespeare, we might practice an art of seeing the whole of life as one world-theatre and drama in which we are the masked players, the personas or persons, up on the stage acting out our unique parts and contribution to the whole: the world-play, the

artwork. The villains are just as necessary to the whole play as the heroes, for indeed without the villains there would be no heroes. Likewise, without the bad bits, the stuff to overcome in life, there would be no need for courage and compassion, triumphing over tragedy, and the like. Any good game needs potential hazards, and any good drama needs potential conflicts of interest. Like Feste in *Twelfth Night*, we'd say: "*It's all one.*"

However, regarding this Shakespearean scenario, some may say it is not so good insofar as it *could* imply that we players, placed in our roles and given our scripts, are in effect the mere *victims* or *puppets* of the almighty playwright or whatever has created the play. However, that will only be so if we assume the playwright is a being separate from ourselves, tyrannically imposing its will and purpose upon us without our consent. In short: the standard view of God.

Is there an alternative? Yes. Don't see the playmaker as separate but as our own Self. In his classic text, *Games Zen Masters Play*, Zen scholar R. H. Blythe presents the idea this way:

*"There is a Hindu myth about the Self or God of the universe who sees life as a form of play. Since the Self is what there is, and all that there is, and thus has no one separate to play with, he plays the cosmic game of hide-and-seek with himself. He takes on the roles and masks of individual people such as you and I and thus becomes involved in exciting and terrifying adventures, all the time forgetting who he really is. Eventually, however, the Self awakens from his many dreams and fantasies and remembers his true identity, the one and eternal Self of the cosmos who is never born and never dies."* – pg. 5

Well, well. While it is widely recognised that Existentialism can be traced back to the likes of Soren Kierkegaard and Max Stirner who very deliberately rebelled against the Hegelian idea of an Absolute Spirit or Self, it seems that by exercising the kind of freedom in emptiness that such existential thinkers in effect pointed towards, one can reinstate an Absolute Self after all. That is, not as a dogmatic rationalist system, the way Hegel intended, but as an agnostic art, theory-fiction, or preferred mode of play.

To sum up: Buddhist Existentialism is not a truth or theory. It is *an art of life*. One practices an art of aesthetic contemplation in the voided state and an art of recreating reality according to existential preference – eg, as wondrous, as perfect for no particular reason, or as one good and beautiful dramatic artwork created by one's own transpersonal Self. Thus Existentialism transforms from being the gloomy angst-ridden thing it was under Sartre's baneful influence into being an extremely positive re-enchantment of life.

This seems to be the only enlightenment possible, as any other approach will be truth-centric and will merely set off the process of critical inquiry once again, spinning like a ball of knives.

Final note. It is not that we reach enlightenment and then there's nothing left to do. Rather, as with all arts, practice makes perfect. In the art of guitar we might never become Jimi Hendrix, but with practice we may approximate. Similarly, in the art of enlightenment we might never become a virtuoso at all times, but we may approximate. And however we are at any time will be part of the one perfect whole.

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