

Chapter 6

Liberation from Oneself

What is that single pivotal change that will enable us to change course?

This first chapter exploring outer wholeness will introduce the shared aim of great world religions, as Buddhadasa saw it.

But what about reincarnation?

Doesn't Buddhism, as other religions do, teach that suffering is an inextricable part of life; and that the only way out of it is *to the hereafter*?

This is where Buddhadasa's interpretation of Buddha's teaching departs most distinctly from Buddhist orthodoxy: What Buddha called "birth" is not *physical* birth, Buddhadasa explained; that's too crude, too *materialistic*! ***Birth*** is the inception of a certain *way of being*; where we conceive of ourselves as *separate* from the world; and reduce ethical dilemmas to *What's in it for me?*.

Birth is the inception of ***self-centeredness***.

Which can happen many times *in a day*!

According to ***origination of conditioning***, "suffering" or ***dukkha*** originates from ***self-centeredness*** *directly*!

Buddhadasa's interpretation of Buddha's teaching is indeed *opposite* from reincarnation—which postulates that we humans have an identity that remains for us *forever*, even when we die.

According to Buddhadasa—the aim of Buddhism is our liberation *from that very identity*!



"Therefore I say unto you,
Be not anxious for your life,
 what ye shall eat, and what ye shall drink;
Nor yet for your body,
 What ye shall put on.
Is not the life more than food

and the body than raiment?
Behold the birds of the air:
For they sow not, neither do they reap, nor
gather into barns;
And yet your heavenly Father feedeth them.
Are ye not of more value than they?
Which of you, by being anxious, can add one
cubit to his stature?"

It is not difficult to see that Buddhism shares the mentioned aim, and the *ecology of mind* that is conducive to it, with other world religions; but *not* with *materialism*!

That's an opportunity to put *transdisciplinarity* to a test.

So here is what I'll do: In the remainder of this chapter I'll share a sequence of short *vignettes*; and offer them to you as dots to connect—and see *why self-centeredness* leads to *dukkha*, or “suffering”; and why *liberation* from *self-centeredness* is the *way* to *personal wholeness*.

In the chapters that remain we'll see that the liberation from *self-centeredness* is also key to *outer wholeness*; to making society-and-culture *whole*.



“For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”

Grandmaster Shim was especially fond of this word of wisdom from Sun Tzu's Taoist classic *The Art of War*; whose *point*, as I came to understand it, is the one we've been talking about in this chapter:

It is by *relinquishing self-centeredness* and the strife and struggle it brings along that one becomes capable of seeing open doors where others see solid walls.

Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido, rendered the same *point* even more concisely:

“If you are fighting, you have already lost.”

F. M. Alexander identified the attitude he called “end gaining” as *the* core cause of pathological tensing up; and instructed his students to focus on the “means whereby” physical action is performed. Aldous Huxley had *this* to say about our theme—in *The Art of Seeing*, under the chapter title “Basic Principle Underlying the Practice of Every Art”:

“‘Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all the rest shall be added.’ This saying is as profoundly true on the plane of psycho-physiological skills as it is upon the planes of spirituality, ethics, and politics....The great truth discovered on the spiritual level by the masters of prayer, that ‘the more there is of “I”, the less there is of God,’ has been discovered again and again on the physiological level by the masters of the various arts and skills. The more there is of the ‘I’, the less there is of Nature – of the right and normal functioning of the organism.”



To Grandmaster Shim, effortlessness, and even *Do*, were only means to an end.

Which was to develop what he called “leaders”—men and women capable of making a difference. Grandmaster had an uncommon idea of what that meant; at the beginning of each class we recited this (modernized) paraphrase of Lao Tzu as part of the pledge:

“A leader is best when people barely know he exists.
Not so good when people obey and acclaim him.
Worse when they despise him.
But of a good leader, who talks little,
When his work is done, his aim fulfilled,
They will say: We did it ourselves!”



The motility of the *mind* is at its high only when the *mind* is not bound by *self-centeredness*.

As a rule, the visionary thinkers who saw the *elephant* did that after they liberated themselves from *self-centeredness*.

Aurelio Peccei for instance.

Who was a *highly* successful business leader. Why of all people did *he* find the presence of mind to ask the *big* question, about humanity's future?

In 1944 Peccei was imprisoned as a member of Italian Resistance; and tortured by the Gestapo. Aware that Gestapo had ways to make people talk, he decided try and hold out for one week, and give his comrades the chance to see that he was missing and relocate.

Peccei *never* talked.

A month after he was released from prison he wrote that he was *grateful* for this experience; because it *formed* him.

Buddhadasa didn't use the word "enlightenment" to describe the cognitive effects of liberation; he talked about "seeing the world as it is" in-

stead; and Goethe had *this* to say about out theme, in *West-Eastern Diwan*:

“Und so lang du das nicht hast,
dieses Stirb und Werde,
bist du nur ein trüber Gast
auf der dunklen Erde.”

(And as long as you don't have that
Die and Become
You are but a dismal guest
On the dark Earth.)



Liberation from **self-centeredness** is *the* aim of Sufism.

Conceived in Sufi folklore as liberation from “separate existence” in order to experience the “union” with Divine Beloved.

In a memorable conversation in his office at Schumacher College, where he created and taught a graduate program in “holistic science”, Brian Goodwin told me, without knowing about my related interest:

“In nature we must be like Sufis—*nonexistent*!”