

I was born in Brussels, Belgium, during WWII. One of the earliest scenes I remember was at the end of the war, when the lady of the flower shop below was holding me amid cheering people, pointing to little planes in the blue sky on their way to bomb Nazi Germany.

After a few years we moved to the province of West Flanders, where my father became a successful banker. My mother was a devout Catholic; her elder sister was a nun, and her younger brother was a politician. The high school I went to was called "Little Seminary." It was run by priests who had to teach for some years before being assigned to a parish. Almost half of my year joined a religious order; I chose the Missionaries of Scheut (CICM) founded by a Jesuit "to convert China."

In high school I was not a very diligent student, but the best in writing, singing, and drawing. Whenever there was an inter-school writing contest, I was sent to represent our school. One of the topics was about the need for a European union. I had a good soprano voice and was a solo-singer in church. I remember singing in a loudspeaker car during a "Three Kings" (Epiphany) procession. At the seminary I conducted church- and choir-singing.

We had to go to church every morning, and three times on Sundays. I was skeptical about traditional religion and thought that life's questions were not really answered by believing that God was the "answer" for the unsolved questions (from creation to eschatology). I became interested in Eastern philosophy for its humanist culture and natural mysticism, without the intervention of church and supernatural revelations. As a result of my critical attitude, my superiors doubted if I was well suited to become a priest.

Their doubt changed, however, and they made me an example for the others because of my "pastoral fervor." During the last years of seminary we went out to do parish work, and I was assigned to a university hospital. There I had to visit young people who were dying of cancer and kidney failure. This confronted me sharply with the facts of life. I enjoyed preaching, both for the sick and the nuns who were in charge of the hospital.

As a teenager, my hobby was photography. When leaving for the Far East the first time, my airplane ticket, expensive at that time, was supposed to be paid for by the proceeds of preaching in our parish. Instead, I organized photo-exhibitions and sold a lot of self-made enlargements.

Since China was still closed for the outside world, most of us went to the Belgian Congo. After learning Japanese for two years, I was sent to Taiwan ("Republic of China"). There I learned Mandarin for two and a half years, and was assigned to a parish church in a poor neighborhood of Taipei. I was quite disillusioned when my main job was daily mass for a few old ladies. I was allowed to have an audio-visual studio and I produced programs that were still shown at Chinese schools years later. These were synchronized three-screen slide shows, mainly about nature's beauty and Daoist nature poetry. To prepare the Chinese text, I had an assistant, and I also advised a group of university students. That is how I met and married Liman, the love of my life... and the end of my missionary career.

“Culture of Silence”

Back in Belgium I gave public lectures about “Eastern Wisdom for the West.” One of the adult education centers, at the border of a forest, hired me full-time. I organized weekend- and 5 day-courses about nature-experience, Daoist philosophy, Haiku poetry, Zen meditation, spirituality and mysticism. These courses, under the name of “Culture of Silence,” attracted a lot of people, including two visits by a television crew. One of the activities was at night: we went to the forest to sit under a tree and watch the moon moving from one branch to another. After an hour or so, some people remained sitting and told me the next morning: “The trees have told me!”

My lectures for these courses were mainly about Chinese classics, such as the *Dao De jing* (*Tao Te ching*), *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (translated by Thomas Merton) and stories about Chinese Zen masters *Finger Pointing to the Moon*. These were invigorating years, when many people were inspired by the wisdom and beauty of an Eastern culture they hardly knew. We often had long discussions into the night, and when I realized that I could not answer many questions, I decided to go and study with a teacher in the East.

With our two little sons we went back to Taiwan where my father-in-law, a professor at the Chengchi University, recommended a highly regarded Zen master and specialist in Daoist philosophy and I Ching, Nan Huai-chin.¹ He invited us to join a seven-day retreat: sitting in meditation, standing still, walking briskly – for most of the day and part of the night. It was hard and painful, but it changed my life.

Once I went to ask him the Zen question “Who am I” (since our mind and body are changing). He asked, “Where do you hear that sound?” (the cook was stir-frying in the kitchen). “In the kitchen” I said. “No, in your mind” he answered and continued for an hour or so. I smiled and smiled, for a few days and nights. There was a marvelous feeling of clarity and energy all around, but that disappeared after having sex. There and then I learned *the main reason for celibacy and chastity*, something the churches in the West seem to have forgotten. He also warned that my experience was not enlightenment, only an initial insight (*jian-di*, seeing the ground): “Keep striving diligently.” Since then, I have been meditating regularly. One of the first results was some “clairvoyance” and a heightened sense of truth and beauty.

Mind-body Transformation

Meditative concentration power, called *dhyana-samadhi* in Buddhism, is still unknown in the West (although it was practiced by medieval mystics). It is a method of systematic focus on one point, to clear the mind and reach a higher-than-normal level of attention. It is the indispensable method to gain insight into the meta-physical order of reality. Spirituality proper starts only here, at the *dhyana*-level – called *chan* in Chinese and *zen* in Japanese. Religious truth and church authority should be based on this achievement, rather than on “blind faith.” Even in Buddhist circles it is often forgotten that real *vipassana* or *insight* meditation comes only after *samatha* or calm, tranquility without thoughts. In Eastern literature, the comparison is a water mirror; a water surface reflects only clearly when still.

¹ Author of *Working Toward Enlightenment, To Realize Enlightenment* and many more.

Actual knowledge and vision of heaven, of karma and rebirth in past and future, and various mental powers, are possible when the mind is rid of distractive thoughts. Such *unmoving* concentration or *samadhi* (Sanskrit, *ding* in Chinese) is not interrupted even if one would try to think a thought. This higher state of expanded consciousness is only possible in the absence of sexual activity, when the body does not lose its vital energy (*chi* in Chinese). The human phenomenon of mind-body is an indivisible whole; the body's energy is like the battery for the mind to shine.

Learning Process

After we went back to Taiwan, Master Nan gave a series of lectures to explain the basic teachings of Buddhism (later published in two volumes: *Working Toward Enlightenment* and *To Realize Enlightenment*). Thomas Cleary, a foremost author and translator of Eastern classics, once wrote that “Master Nan’s work is a cut above anything else available, both academic and sectarian.”

Master Nan came to live with us for a while in Hong Kong on The Peak. In Taiwan he had already given me the guidelines to write a book on the basics of Buddhism. In preparation, I also read the main scriptures of the Theravada and Mahayana traditions, and the works of other Chinese masters such as Yin Shun and Sheng Yen. The West is now predominantly interested in Tibetan Buddhism, which is a later development of Indian Buddhism. My teacher spent some years in Tibet but always advised us to follow one or more of “the ten schools” of China. “Zen” is commonly misunderstood; it arose only *after* a few centuries of traditional Buddhist practice.

Over the course of a decade I wrote: *The Mind Experiment: On the Universal Relevance of Buddhist Theory and Practice*. It contains many translations from the Pali, Sanskrit, and Chinese canons. One chapter in particular gives a detailed description of the different gods in different heavens. This explains the differences among religions and could alleviate some serious problems in our world. All religions are valid to a certain extent, but no one holds the monopoly of truth; they are *approaches*, like paths going up the spiritual mountain, where only the view from the top, enlightenment, sees it all, the same for all.

Beijing and Hong Kong

While working at the Belgian Embassy in Beijing, China, there was a constant flow of official visitors, from the King and Queen of Belgium to delegations of Senators, professors, journalists and businessmen. They were invited to endless banquets (then a rare occasion for communist cadres to enjoy good food), where I functioned as interpreter. China had been closed for a long time and was still poor and backward. Western delegations were visiting out of curiosity, and from the Chinese side they served to sign bilateral agreements and business deals, to obtain “technology transfer” as part of Deng Xiao-ping’s “four modernizations.” That is how China caught up with the West and became rich, by producing “made in China” at low wages.

When I met with Chinese friends and Liman’s distant relatives, I learned about the gruesome facts of the Cultural Revolution, and wondered when the world would learn about it. When I

informed journalists and academic delegations, they would often not believe the real situation in the countryside: the poverty of the common people, the political “gulags” (*laogai*), the one-party corruption, and the horrors inflicted upon the intellectuals. Most Westerners were duped by Maoist propaganda about the “Great Leap Forward” (millions of people died); in Belgium there was even a Maoist political party, run by activists who had never been there. I knew the facts firsthand from survivors of starvation as political prisoners. These facts were carefully hidden from the outside world. Especially diplomats were forbidden to travel freely, to keep them from reporting “state secrets” to their governments.

We lived in closed, guarded compounds. When we invited local family and friends, I had to smuggle them under a blanket when passing the military sentries at the gate (of every diplomatic compound; every elevator had a telephone with an informer). Our cook was a party member. Every time we made or received a phone call, we heard a click, signaling an outside listening device. At the Peking Hotel, where many foreigners were stationed, there was a whole floor not accessible; it was a monitoring center of the secret service, it was rumored. All rooms had hidden microphones; one story was about a couple who, around midnight in bed, complained that the blankets had not been changed for days; ten minutes later there was a knock at the door, with fresh blankets. We had a friendly maid, but after we brought her home with some kitchenware we had given her, she never came back; she was reported by neighbors and disappeared in a northern work-unit (*laogai*, “reform through labor”) because of illegal contact with foreigners.

In Hong Kong things were totally different. At the Consulate General, my first task was to report about the “Sino-British Negotiations on the Future of Hong Kong.” One day, an ambassador came to thank me for my reports, “the best he ever read.” That was thanks to a First Secretary at the British Governor’s office. He told me that initially the Chinese side did not even want to negotiate, because “Hong Kong belonged to China.” “The wall crumbled,” he said, when Geoffrey Howe, Margaret Thatcher’s Foreign Secretary, warned the Chinese side that their threats and intimidations would be made public if they refused to come to an agreement. It has become clear, in the meanwhile, how the promise of “Fifty Years no Change” to Hong Kong’s democracy is faring.

My bosses in Beijing and Hong Kong were Belgian career diplomats, and quite special. The ambassador in Beijing was a workaholic and sex maniac. He employed me because he needed my “eyes, ears, and mouth.” We had to take turns and pick up the diplomatic pouch at the airport on Sunday afternoons. The secretaries were among his bedroom employees. When I visited the Foreign Service headquarters in Brussels, I was told not to mention this to anyone. In the end, he married a young Chinese mistress, seemingly forced to do so by the Chinese side. Then my wife Liman had to give him Chinese lessons, free of charge, because his new wife spoke only Chinese. After I refused to work on Sundays, he put me on isolation without any tasks, except when he needed me to translate.

The general atmosphere was quite fearsome under an ambassador who assumed unlimited power and did not care about Belgian work laws. We were living on a dictator’s island, shut off from the rest of the world. My situation became difficult after we had an inspection from Brussels, supposed to be confidential, and I complained about it. When he had learned about it, he made me vacate my office and give him daily summaries from the Chinese press.

The first consul general in Hong Kong was an alcoholic; when he came home for lunch from the office, his butler was waiting outside to give him his whiskey. The second consul general was a homosexual and lived with his younger friend. One day he invited our young son and when I went to pick him up, they were drinking champagne; he said afterward that the boss liked his “nice legs.” When we moved to Singapore (where the language is only English), the reason was that I had to make place for the daughter of an important ambassador. When the Belgian Foreign Affairs Secretary-general came to visit us, to make an inspection into the dealings of the trade commissioner, he warned me that I could not stay forever. After paying a visit to the department in Brussels, I was posted to the embassy in Singapore.

Life was pretty boring in the city-state. There were unending regulations. One day all chewing gum was banned, after a student stuck a piece in a metro door; drug dealers and other offenders were flogged so that they could not sit down for days; the main newspaper read like a catechism, praising the one-party system; the parliament had no power; and the university researchers were under constant pressure to perform – Singapore was “number one.” But an interesting part of my job was organizing film weeks for European film festivals. We also had the opportunity to travel to Malaysia, Indonesia, Bali and the islands. One of the official visitors was Ilya Prigogyne, the Belgian Nobel Prize winner. When we visited Borobodur, the famous Buddhist complex in Java, he remarked about the joyous scenes and made a few dance steps: “Je suis au pre-Nirvana!”

USA

In 1997 Liman started teaching Chinese at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, at the invitation of her sister who was coordinating the Chinese language program. When I met with Prof. William Rowe, a renowned China scholar and then head of the history department, he invited me to teach too. My classes about Chinese classical philosophy -- the “three teachings” of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism -- became very popular; one year I had 186 students, after I came back from my father’s funeral and had forgotten to put a limit on my course attendance. The classical Chinese teachings are still little known but they have, in fact, a universal and perennial value that can solve the Western contradictions between religion and science, fundamentalism and scientific agnosticism.

After 18 years I left the university, when I was dismissed for three semesters, because I remarked to some LGBT student group who were propagating their cause (outside my class) not to promote homosexuality and “pervert” young students. The dean who interrupted my teaching career was later fired for good.

It was a very liberal environment where I had little contact with other professors, but most of my students enjoyed learning about Eastern values and principles, without religious dogmatism. Eastern wisdom is based on rational humanism and universal insights that arise from “mental clarification,” based on *secular* (“empty”) meditation.

Spiritual Journey

After I left the priesthood, I found that many ex-priests had problems and looked back questioning or even regretting their decision, stranded without professional training and feeling a spiritual vacuum, after years of religious practice/indoctrination. When I left, however, it was because I had found a greater strength. Eastern spirituality is about self-realizing, not just believing (others).

Blind faith in divine interventions and biblical or church authority, does not provide the answers to questions such as:

Where do I come from and where do I go;

why am I as I am and why can't I change;

why is there so much inequality and suffering in the world;

who is to blame, God or Nature;

are the many contradicting beliefs and opinions not proof of error;

why can't we know for sure?

If God is almighty, all-knowing and all-loving, why does He allow for a mess on earth, while He enjoys ineffable bliss and glory in heaven?

In the Eastern view, gods are heavenly *beings*, and no being is exempt from being caused and conditioned, finite and not infinite, impermanent and not eternal, limited in power, not almighty and omnipresent, and not enlightened. They are superior to humans, thanks to an exceptional human life in the past. But when their positive karma runs out one day, they have to come down again, and expiate negative karma (nobody accumulates exclusively positive karma). Heavens and gods are created by such excellent karma that this world is not good enough to deliver its superior qualities. Having a specific cause and beginning, all gods also have an end; because they *exist*, they are limited in space-form-time. The Buddha, who knew them well (he was not an atheist), did not worship them, but sometimes criticized their arrogance and ignorance.

Karma and Modern Ignorance

“L’homme c’est rien, l’oeuvre c’est tout” (Gustave Flaubert) “Man is nothing, the work is everything.” Karma means act, intention and result. Man is the outcome of his/her former conduct. Whatever we think or do has consequences in this and in later lives, not only for us but *also for the environment*. The basic fact of reality is *oneness*; all and everything belongs to one and the same reality.

Economics and ethics, physics and metaphysics are not loose ends, unrelated aspects of life and the world. On the contrary, *the physical qualities of climate and environment*, for instance, *correspond to the moral quality of the beings they provide for*. This is little known but it may become more obvious, as both morality and the environment continue to deteriorate.

Ignorance about the importance of *natural* morality is a serious problem. Ethics has traditionally been the domain of religion, and since religious beliefs have declined, spiritual-moral clarity and discipline have also disappeared. The message of the East is that morality is part of The Way (*Dao*) the universe works, not a supernatural agenda for believers only.

The Buddhist enlightenment teachings have been called “the science of sciences.” They explain the underlying natural order of life and the world, while the sciences are “still scratching the surface.” *Spiritual truth has a universal validity*, and should not depend on the beliefs or opinions one may adopt or not. Verifiable insight into the higher and deeper layers of existence is possible; it offers answers to many unsolved questions about life and the universe, and solutions for many modern conflicts.

Traditional ethics, upheld for a few thousand years, have taken an opposite turn. In 2008 Obama and Hillary Clinton still declared that “marriage is a matter of a man and a woman,” for example. As the Buddha foresaw, this trend of confusion and immorality will worsen until, after a long time, human life will shrink significantly (science already found that our descendants will not be able to live as long and well as we do). “Global warming” will become so severe in the end that “this planet will go up in a puff of smoke;” even the lower heavens will perish, according to the Buddhist worldview.

That is why Zen masters have recommended faith in one of the Pure Lands; once reborn there one can be sure of “final salvation.” According to the Buddha, earlier cosmic Buddhas (Sakyamuni is not the only one) have created extra-universal domains where nothing but the truth and practice of Dharma prevails. “Dharma” means the moral and metaphysical principles of reality, as discovered – not invented – by the Buddha.

Enlightenment means “perfect, clear, and complete *understanding*.” It does not rely on believing or supernatural revelations but on an *immediate* -- without thought-intermediate -- perception of ultimate reality. This experience is called “awakening” because it is like coming out of a dream, like the sun rising and revealing all there is to be seen. The way to realize such awakening has been spelled out in a vast amount of literature, not only in the words of the Buddha but also the testimonials of those who successfully followed in his footsteps.

One question that is most surprising and worrying is why the West has not yet acknowledged the potential of the human mind to realize enlightenment. That current beliefs and opinions contradict each other should be a warning. There seems to be no other choice than between two *incompatible* extremes, either blind faith in supernatural revelations of the past, or agnosticism based on the findings of modern science. Why do people *believe* (also) that life evolved from unpredictable particles, that we are mutant apes?

According to Zen masters, spirituality is at its lowest level in history. Contemporary Buddhist literature has no impact, because it does not provide the full scope of doctrine and practice; some authors even omit or deny such central themes as karma and rebirth. And nobody seems to be capable of the initial level of *samadhi*, the pre-condition for *wisdom*. That means that few people speak with authority, not only because of their lack of experience and insight but also because people nowadays are burdened by heavier karma. Wrong views and deviant habits are confusing our “common sense” ever more; modern myths and superstitions are not only not refuted but keep growing in scope and stupidity. The result of permissiveness and liberalism is cheered as “political correctness,” creating the idea of the “equivalence of opinions” – *as if there is no truth*.

Teaching Experience

When dealing with Buddhism, one first has to be clear that it is not a belief system or a religious faith. The Buddha was a very intelligent man who was interested in *understanding* (*budh*) what life and the world are all about. Initially he followed the most influential teachers in India, who proposed different theories and practices in their search of meaning and “liberation”. After a few years of learning he went off on his own to practice silent meditation. Based on plain mind power, he reached ever-higher/purer states of concentration, to the highest levels of “expanded” consciousness. These coincide with the highest levels of heaven, characterized by infinite space, consciousness, and nothingness. But he was not yet satisfied.

He then remembered the meditative state he had experienced as a boy and he “entered the tranquility and joy of *dhyana*.” In one night he went to the fourth and highest level of *dhyana* concentration, and witnessed a series of phenomenal insights: *he remembered innumerable former lives, in detail, he recognized the universal power of karma, and he gained a cosmic vision of the universe with all its hells, heavens and gods* (he even “stood and talked with some of them”). When realizing how life and the universe work, he also knew how to liberate himself and become a *Buddha*. His “amazing” (sic) conclusion was not about his achievement but the fact that we all possess the same potential for awakening. He spent the next decades explaining what to do (rather than believe) in order to develop in the right direction (“the eightfold path”).

Contrary to popular beliefs, Buddhism has nothing supernatural or religious. The *dhyana*-heavens that are experienced in *samadhi*-concentration are beyond the heavens of religions. They can be trusted to exist based on the testimonies of “realized ones” – without having to resort to one or another faith (like believing that atoms exist). Different scriptures relate the Buddha’s detailed descriptions of the levels of heaven (Chapter 3 of *The Mind Experiment*). Belief in them is not essential to practice Buddhism, however. They can be “known and seen” when the mind reaches a high level of pure concentration.

Since Buddhism is a natural and reasonable “mind science,” my best students were often engineers and science majors. They appreciated the experiential logic and had no difficulty seeing that the human mind is limited due to specific causes (see the “Ten Bonds”, Chapter 6 of *The Mind Experiment*); but also that it can be purified and empowered, to fathom domains of insight, wisdom, and spiritual know-how that are absent in religions and philosophies.

The Buddha’s central message is: “*Avoid evil, do more good, and purify the mind*” – not through faith and worship but by abstaining from wrong views, such as fundamentalist beliefs, and wrong actions, such as killing, stealing, lying, gossip, sexual misconduct.

A simple exercise as sitting quietly and being *only* aware of the body’s breathing, for instance, can change one’s energy and consciousness flow, from witnessing uncontrollable thoughts and feelings in the beginning, to abiding in a state of blissful, empty concentration. That was the amazing discovery of a few students (who were gifted without former training), which attracted students from outside my class whenever I offered meditation sessions. Someone who has never *done* it cannot imagine what meditation can do. Many studies have been peer-reviewed and

published about the healing benefits of meditation, both physical and mental.² The condition to achieve “mind-body transformation” is a normal and healthy mind to begin with, and a long personal history of being good and virtuous.

The main benefit and purpose of meditation, and of Buddhism in general, is not to improve health and peace of mind but to acquire insight and wisdom – to break through our shell of ignorance (non-enlightenment). To understand more about life and how it works, life *after* life, to realize how important morality and karma are, how personal conduct influences life and the environment, how to nurture *selfless* compassion (not just charity), and practice a spiritual competency that extends beyond this lifetime – these factors provide the prospect of final realization, to share the bliss and company of “the eternal sages” (Nirvana).

At a time when morality is declining and the public sphere becomes more confused, Buddhism offers a sure antidote. Morality is the foundation of human existence, not just a matter of belief and opinion. The fact that religions postulate an eternal retribution after life, from heaven to hell, suggests that human conduct has far-reaching consequences. Buddhism points out that these are not reserved for believers but define all our lives. Health and wealth, talent and intelligence, joy and happiness, or their opposites, are not by chance or random distributions by a mysterious *other* power but the exact result of *self*-generated causes.

The tendency of trying to undo the inequality among people is a vain exercise, because it ignores the reality of karma. That “all men are created equal” is a fundamental truth, but it also means that everyone is *self-responsible* for one’s life experience, and that there is no other, “super power” that bestows upon us unequal, undeserved opportunities or handicaps. There is no life history that is not the result of what came before it, of self-created karma.

That does not mean that we cannot or should not help those in trouble or in need, on the contrary. Good karma is built up by virtue and goodness. To enjoy wealth without compassion and goodness spells in fact disaster for the future, because it may use up the (little) good karma one currently has. Nobody or nothing else is to blame for our imperfection, surely not some (non-existing) first ancestor. And nobody else can save us unless we, the wrongdoers, mend our ways.

Religion is a mixed enterprise, half true and half myth. There is no eternal retribution for temporary deeds, and no more pervasive myth/lie than going to heaven when we die to “meet our maker” for eternity.

Reality is all about “naturalness” or cause and effect – for everything, not just for science. To contradict natural moral law goes against our very nature, hurting ourselves and the community. The direction we choose and apply ourselves comes first, and not last, in guiding our destiny and defining *our* DNA. The foremost responsibility of mankind is to “get it right” and “purify the mind,” before enjoying life and exploring culture and science. If our vision is blurred by incorrect conduct, there is no hope for a positive outcome. The law of moral causality is how life works. *If people only realized the seriousness of karma, this world would change overnight.*

² For example, <http://liveanddare.com/benefits-of-meditation> and <http://www.artofliving.org/meditation/meditation-for-you/benefits-of-meditation>

Spiritual Manifesto

The way out of the current impasse, a bridge over dividing and conflicting opinions and beliefs, is to offer society a fundamental unity of spiritual *truth*. Reality itself offers nothing to suggest different interpretations and contradictions. Liberalism and conservatism, materialism and supernaturalism, for example, exist only in the mind. The real task of spirituality is to discern and dissolve wrong views and attitudes.

Since we have *grown* into certain habits of conduct, thought and action, reinforced over countless lifetimes, this is no easy task but a long and difficult *work* of cultivation, through mindfulness, inspection and *correction*. To counteract the specific energies that make up our personality, specific action is needed, or rather non-action, because whenever we act we may follow habitual tracks. Meditation is the way: to become silent, empty, and aware of what is going on inside, and renew.

Looking to solve man's perennial questions people have reached to heaven, in the belief that one or another divine being is the solution; or they look down, in the *belief* also that matter will produce the answer. When too much faith is placed in one or the other, the human mind excludes itself from "knowing and seeing just as it is." The answer lies in the middle, in the one who is walking between heaven and earth, the only one who is at the helm of our cosmic travels.

Reliance on either supernatural or material sources explains why the West never achieved the spiritual competency of the East, and why "enlightenment" does not even appear on our spiritual radar. The safest way to gain penetrating, meta-physical and transcendental intelligence is to look at those who realized enlightenment, and to set aside the confusion and false prophets that flood the market. Not the "finger pointing at the moon" (Zen saying) but the moon, not the messengers are important but the message. Even the Buddha warned us not to look at him but through him, at the truth he represents.

That the truth he realized is universal (he was not a "buddhist") is not often well understood, even among those who call themselves "Buddhists." The Buddha is the only one known in history who "*fully and clearly understood (budh)*." He is not a god, but he knew more about gods and heavens than religions do; and he does not have to be worshipped or believed in blind faith, but learned from and followed as a human being who fulfilled our mission of being *conscious*.

After Buddhism disappeared from its land of origin -- destroyed by Muslim invaders -- it moved East where it became the leading ideology of the Far East. There it produced a "Golden Age of Enlightenment," an age the West can learn from.

The main points in the Eastern wisdom teachings that are absent in, or contradicted by, Western religions are

- Karma: we are the result of our former activity, not the (deficient) creation of an Almighty.
- Life and the world are not created by God but are part of a beginning-less and never ending process of evolution, of which also the gods are impermanent, not eternal, creatures.

- There are different heavens and gods; the Trinity is actually from a lower level, not a “pure realm.”
- Reincarnation should be called rebirth, because there is no permanent, unchanging, immortal substance or “ego” (a major discovery at the time of enlightenment). We too are part of a beginning- and end-less process of evolution, moving up and down the ladder of existence, now as humans, then as angels, ghosts, or animals.
- There is a way out of this endless process of birth, old age, death and rebirth; enlightenment is the breakthrough, the dissolution of our bondage in Samsara. Nirvana is the name for the dimension that is beyond all dimensions, where “purity, bliss, omnipresence and eternity” prevail.
- The only God or “Ground of Being” in the whole universe and beyond, is Mind, of which we are (feeble) participants.
- The way of recovery is threefold: *1. morality*, *2. concentration*, and *3. wisdom* are like the legs of a tripod; if one leg is missing, the tripod falters.
- This wisdom is called “transcendental” because it is the only means to overcome/transcend the endless cycle of birth and death and rebirth. When it is gained, there is nothing unknown.

Corrections to the common Western worldview:

- *All* is impermanent, including heavens and gods.
- Every human life is a link in a beginning- and end-less chain, going up and down the ladder of existence, experiencing happiness and suffering as the result of former conduct. To “go to heaven and reunite with one’s beloved ones” is a naive myth. People reunite on earth life after life because of karma, to receive some rewards and pay off some debts. Parents receive their children, for example, because they might have been their parents.
- To experience “grace” is no proof that one religion is superior to another. The real and greatest grace is to enter dhyana-samadhi.
- The creative power responsible for life and the world is karma; even the gods are products of their self-created (limited) merit.
- The way out of life’s risky business (Samsara) is “the autonomy, purity, bliss and eternity of Nirvana.” All else is “not-self, impure, unsatisfactory, and coming to an end.”
- Buddhist training is similar to common spirituality, based on mindfulness and meditation, but the goal is insight and wisdom. Real “salvation” does not depend on an Other but on *self*-realization.

Forthcoming:

“The Mind Experiment, On the Universal relevance of Buddhist Theory and Practice”

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