



The Academy of Mystical Illumination

Offering a Western Path to Eastern Wisdom

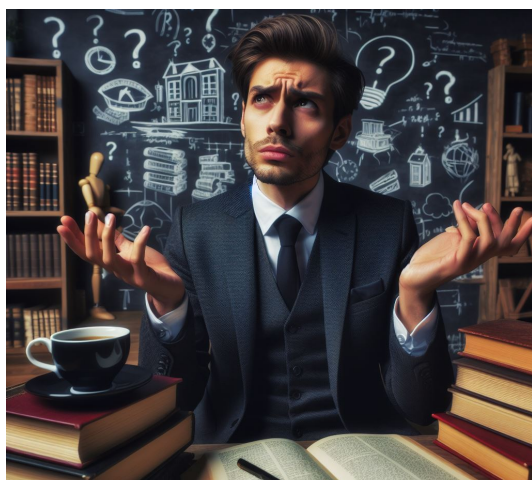
Lesson 2:

The Conservation of Suffering Principle

“What is it about life that there always seems to be something missing?” — Epicurus

By Mark Dillof

Preface: The Conservation of Suffering Principle contends that try though we may, we can't have the good without the bad, the positive without the negative, and life without adversity. Consequently, any enhancements that we make to our life merely change the form that the negative takes, without eradicating the negative itself. Might there be a road beyond the Conservation of Suffering Principle? We shall see! Anyway, this essay is basically in three parts. The first explains the Conservation of Suffering Principle. Then, beginning on page 11, we explore the mystical origin of this principle. Finally, beginning on page 14, there's a postscript that explores questions of theodicy.



Something's always missing. What could it be?

The ten-thousand forms of human suffering are but the transformations of a single dark force. Endlessly it displays itself, and yet it remains unknown! At times, though, its existence may be suspected. Surmount any of life's difficulties and another one takes its place. Overcome that problem, and a new problem arises. Human suffering is truly the most elusive of shape-shifters.

In its plasticity, suffering bears a curious resemblance to matter. Like matter, it can be neither created nor destroyed. Efforts to eradicate it succeed only in changing its form.

We free ourselves from anxiety but now feel bored. We're no longer lonely but now suffer from conflicts with others. Within these transformations, the magnitude of

suffering remains constant. Consequently, no matter what we do to find fulfillment, we still find that our world is “out of joint,” that something is lacking. The law guiding these changes is, “The Conservation of Suffering Principle.”

The Central Premise of Endless Delusions

Man’s guiding star is his belief that changes can make him happier. He dreams, “My life will improve after I move into the new house, receive a promotion, or retire from work. Or after I have something to eat, buy a car or win the contract. Or after my children are grown, the new president takes office, the snow melts, the heat wave ends, we win the war...”

Endless are the images of freedom and fulfillment that captivate us, feeding our hope that tomorrow can be better than today. We are easily mesmerized by the advertiser’s siren song, “It’s new and improved!” If our faith lies in the new and improved, we have not yet grasped The Conservation of Suffering Principle.

You may protest, “It’s obvious that changes do make a difference! If I win the lottery, I won’t have to work for my demanding boss. If I move, I’ll be free of my noisy neighbors. Progress is possible!” Yes, a change improves our lives in a relative sense, by ending a particular hardship. But here is the rub. We satisfy a desire, or overcome a difficulty, and almost immediately the familiar hunger for “we know not what” returns.

This hunger does not linger, for a mental image soon appears and declares: “I’m really what you’re looking for!” Hopeful, we search for what corresponds to the image. Our search might lead us to the distant corners of the globe or perhaps no further than the inner recesses of our kitchen refrigerator. We obtain our desideratum, but immediately our lack returns. Our imagination then cooks up a new magical image.



Searching for true reality; convinced it's edible.

The cycle of frustrated hunger begins in childhood. The joyous excitement of Christmas Eve is followed by, “Okay. What’s next?” after we open the presents. In school, we long to be free of exams. But when summer arrives, we are pursued by the demon of boredom. We grow up, and drunk with love’s promise, we’re soon sobered by family responsibilities. We look forward to retirement, but when it arrives...

Why Do the New Episodes Seem Like Reruns?

Perhaps you have reached the point in life where you have no expectations. You no longer believe in those magical images that you formerly thought could satisfy you. You are disillusioned. It comes about because you increasingly grasp the identity, or sameness factor, amid a host of differences. You perceive that the changes that occur are merely variations on an all too familiar theme. Consequently, before embarking on the evening's entertainment, you already have anticipated the ensuing "lack." You know, before meeting him, that husband number four will not be essentially different from the first three. On an intuitive level, you apprehend the conservation of suffering.

Disillusionment is potentially a very good thing; it can be the route to spiritual awakening. But unless accompanied by a deeper understanding of life, it usually leads to a spiritual malaise. Your weakened psychic constitution then becomes susceptible to the contagion of world-weariness and cynicism. We hear this cynicism in expressions like: "You just can't win;" or "Six of one, half a dozen of another;" or "Same shit, different day." We suspect that Baudelaire was correct when he wrote, "Life is a hospital, in which all of the patients are continually trying to change beds." For "beds" we can substitute jobs, homes, husbands, etcetera. Mark Twain summed it up when he said, "Life is one damn thing after another." But while many wind up skeptics, if not cynics, they have not gone on to ask why "life is one damn thing after another."

Rounding Up the Usual Suspect Answers

For many people it isn't really a question. Bad things happen and there's no explanation. But they do have sort of an explanation. They presume that something external comes about to ruin one's happiness. In the Biblical tale, Job asks why. But even that profound story begins with the sense that Job was doing quite nicely until tragedy struck. People today are less inclined to blame God for their present woes than they are to blame their childhood experiences, parents, past lives, political leaders, society, and so on. In all cases, the implication is that the negative came and eclipsed what is normally a sunny state of affairs. Others assume that they suffer because of something that needs to happen that has not happened, and may never happen. "I haven't met the right person yet," or, "I haven't hit it big."

Is unhappiness fundamentally due to something in particular — that has or has not happened? If someone were asked why he was unhappy and he answered, "Because I lost my business," or "Because my cat died," his response would be quite reasonable. If he then declared, "It didn't have to happen!" he would still be right. But he would also be naive, because his focus would only be on his suffering's immediate cause. He would have failed to consider its ultimate cause.

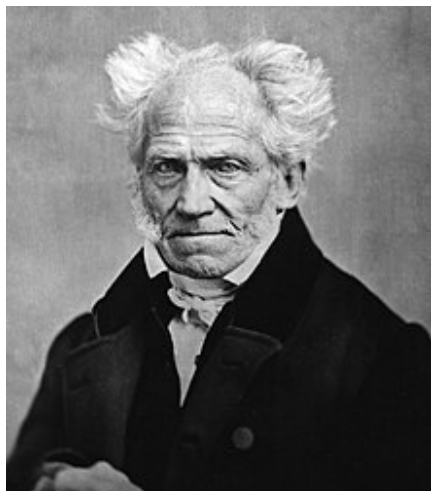
The immediate cause is always something in particular, and the fact that it happened may be purely accidental. But the fact that we suffer at all — apart from the particular

form that our suffering may take — is not accidental. If it's not a lost business, or a dead cat, it must, out of necessity, be other things, equally negative, that plague us. What is this dark necessity? To discover the ultimate cause of human suffering, we need to perceive — behind the myriad shapes of suffering — the shape-shifter itself.

Good and Bad: Separated at Birth

There must be something intrinsic to life's pleasures, joys and satisfactions that makes them evanescent, thus bringing us back to the state of dissatisfaction. Their evanescent quality is not due to the fact that things fade and then vanish, like flowers with the coming of the winter frost. Time is not the real culprit, because even when life is in full bloom, life disappoints us — especially then. What is it about happiness that makes it evanescent?

Examine the relation between the good things in your life and the bad things. You will discover, not that the bad destroys the good, but that, on the contrary, the good entirely depends upon the bad! The pleasure of eating depends upon the preceding



Schopenhauer, philosopher of suffering

hunger pangs. The pleasure of friendship depends upon the experience of loneliness. Those who most truly appreciate wealth are those who have known poverty. The father in the biblical story showed greater love for his returning prodigal son than for his obedient son who never strayed. Those who have been to death's door can most appreciate life. As Schopenhauer noted, "good" is nothing more than "the removal of the bad."

As the bad departs, with the satisfied desire or the solved problem, so does the good! When our hunger vanishes, the pleasure of eating fades. The pleasure of a warm house vanishes as we forget what it was like to be shivering outside. Forgetting our loneliness, we begin to take our friend for granted. Our newfound joy in being alive diminishes as our near-death encounter begins to fade from memory. Positive and negative are inextricably joined. For as the bad departs, the good must also take leave of us. And as the fleeting moment of satisfaction departs, our ever-present sense of lack returns.

What makes happiness evanescent, therefore, is that it is always dependent upon the awareness of a concomitant dissatisfaction. Consequently, the very achievement of happiness, which ends the particular dissatisfaction, paradoxically ends our happiness.

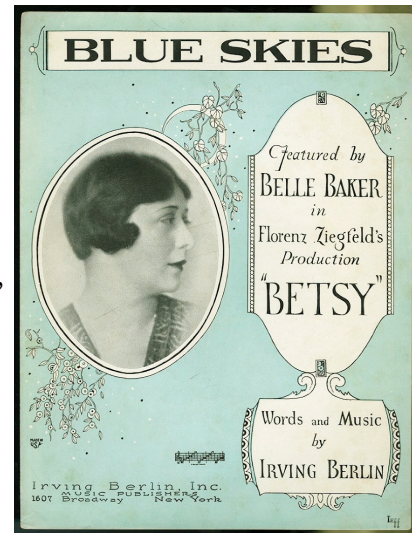
We shall briefly explore some of the startling implications of the correlative nature of good and bad. Then we'll face the ultimate question, "What lies behind our unremitting sense of dissatisfaction; what do we really want?"

Critique of Pure Sunshine

Insights can be unsettling, sobering, and wondrous — all three at once. That is what it feels like to perceive deeply that the good has no reality apart from the bad, that the two are joined at the hip. The perception is unsettling because it undermines our hope for a happy life, free of hardships and woes.

A person who concludes that a happy life isn't possible, because the conditions are not right, will either feel anxious, if he still has hope, or depressed, if he has lost hope. But to realize that even under the best of circumstances, a lasting happiness isn't attainable, because the problem is intrinsic to the nature of happiness itself, is deeply unsettling and disorienting. That's because one's guiding star, the pursuit of happiness, no longer shines so brightly.

A person might still seek to be happier, but "happier" pales before one's original inner image of an everlasting and unalloyed state of perfect happiness, the happiness suggested in Irving Berlin's 1930's song, *Blue Skies*.¹ When there is "Nothing but blue skies from now on," as the lyrics go, suffering soon returns in the form of a restless boredom. As it's been said, "Nothing is more unendurable than a succession of sunny days." But this is the very thing that most people earnestly and naively seek.



The Monster Returns!

One of the salient features of modern life is the effort to deny the inseparability of these polar opposites, the good and the bad. This is seen in the attempt to have sex without the responsibilities that result from procreation, to have money without work, to create without having to clean up the consequent mess that is intrinsic to creation; in other words, to divide the part of life that we want from the part that we do not want.

For example, since the negative dimension of acquiring things is paying for them, a person may seek to separate the good (buying) from the bad (paying) by means of a credit card, or in the case of the government, by means of deficit spending. When the bad returns, it usually returns with a wallop. It's as if the bad were lonely, and comes rushing back to join its missing half, the good.

¹ It's curious that Mr. Berlin wrote lyrically cheerful "Blue Skies" in a minor key.

The advance of technology is, to a large extent, driven by this effort to enjoy the goods of life without experiencing a concomitant bad. We can have heat and hot water, for example, without having to chop wood and fetch water. But not chopping wood means we become flabby, we do not appreciate the warmth of our house nearly as much, and of course there is the fuel bill.

Technology has caused the negative to transform in a more frightening way, creating problems of a global magnitude. These include: air and water pollution, as well as the threat of nuclear and chemical warfare, to say nothing of traffic jams, minds weakened from excessive television and social media watching, and an alienating loss of contact with life's fundamental realities. This isn't a Luddite argument against technology. Rather, our concern here is to explore how the effort to be free of the bad causes the bad to return in new and monstrous forms.

Another example of the effort to separate the good from the bad is "positive thinking." Motivational speakers are the evangelists of positive thinking, but everyone from life coaches to business leaders also espouse the gospel. Here is a religion in which negative thoughts are anathematized. Negative thoughts are the product of self-doubt. And self-doubt is condemned as the voice of the devil.

Authentic self-doubt springs from genuine insight about the nature of egocentricity, selfhood, and the meaning of life. What we see about ourselves at such moments is often difficult to face. But emotional and spiritual evolution to higher levels of consciousness is not possible without self-doubt. To flee from self-doubt by means of that self-lobotomy called positive thinking is a sure sign of desperation, both for a person and for a nation.

Good and bad, positive and negative, happiness and sadness, are correlative. They are no more separable than up and down, right and left or heads and tails. The effort to have the good without the bad merely causes the bad to shift its shape and suffering to be conserved.

Giving Two Impostors the Bum's Rush

*"If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same"*
— Rudyard Kipling

It is quite sobering to realize that good and bad are interdependent, making it impossible to attain "nothing but blue skies." Paradoxically, this realization, rather than being heavy, is liberating. It makes you feel lighter and happier. That is because, at the moment when false expectations depart, so does the anxiety that you might miss your

chance for happiness and the depression over having missed it. This is a great relief! Indeed, if you will daily contemplate the true relation of good and bad, you will begin to feel a rare peace of mind, owing to your un-attachment from ceaseless striving, contending, worry, and strife.

Some therapists contend that to achieve psychological maturity, we must accept our status as limited, finite, mortal creatures enmeshed in a life of trade-offs, realizing that we can't have it all, accepting that the bad comes with the good. On the other hand, if that is the extent of our aspirations as a human being, then we have shrunk, or settled. Shrinking involves a degeneration of spirit. The longing for being, fulfillment, happiness, the infinite, can never really be abandoned. But we can change the level in which we seek fulfillment. To get to a new level, requires that we clarify our desires. It's vital, then, to answer Epicurus' question, and discover what is really lacking, for only then can we end our ever-present hunger. Let us, then, continue on this detective adventure, hot on the trail of the elusive shape-shifter of human suffering.

The Void Within

We've seen that when the bad departs, the good follows suit. What happens then? The sense of lack returns, but does so in a new form. As the satisfaction of entering a warm house diminishes, we may search for something to eat, even if we are not really hungry. As the pleasure of eating palls, we are restless for distraction. This perception led Schopenhauer to propose that lack is what is most fundamental to human existence.

Schopenhauer suggests that each person has within him something akin to a void that must be filled with suffering. We solve a major problem, and the void is immediately refilled, since nature abhors a vacuum. The void might be filled with a number of smaller problems, but filled it must. Schopenhauer's metaphor of an inner void is useful, since it calls our attention to a fundamental reality of human existence. But his metaphor still leaves unanswered the question: "What are we lacking?"

From Cosmic Hunger to Concrete Desires

We are involved here in an unusual enterprise: a self-conscious inquiry into "what is lacking." It is important that we distinguish this self-conscious search from the usual unreflective type of search continually undertaken by the mind. We are all involved in an unreflective search, whether or not we realize it. Nor do we have any choice but to carry on this search. Our unremitting hunger for something — we know not what — drives us on. Our search for what is lacking might be envisioned as a hamburger, the ideal mate, a new career, or perhaps a new world order. Then, enraptured by this image, off we go in pursuit of the hitherto obscure object of desire.

Consider an analogy. Freud stated that anxiety is formless or "free floating." Anxiety presents a threat to your existence, one you are unable to fend off in a practical fashion.

If you are anxious over the inevitability of death, or the threat of meaninglessness, what can you do? An unlisted telephone number or health insurance will not save you from meaninglessness. Freud said that we transform such anxieties into fear. Fear is a threat to our existence with a particular shape. Therefore, fear is manageable. If you fear snakes on your property, you can build a fence around it. If you fear flying in a plane, you can take the bus.

The negativity we are discussing is more fundamental than anxiety, which is a threat to our “being.” This original negativity has the character not of a threat, but of an ever-present hunger. Like anxiety, the primordial negativity or lack is formless, shapeless and inchoate. If this underlying negativity remains indeterminate, it is ungraspable. You are probably familiar with those moments when you find yourself restless, but haven’t any idea what you wish to do. You are bored, but not bored with anything in particular. You are longing for something, but have no idea what it is. You long to be in desire, for desire is always directed towards an object.²

How does the mind respond to this painful cosmic hunger? Just as the mind seeks to transform anxiety into fear, it seeks to transform the primordial and indeterminate sense of lack into concrete desires. It seeks to determine what is missing, in the hope that this painful hunger may be satisfied. Consequently, the primordial lack is transformed into any of a thousand and one images. Each is a picture, or representation, of what we perceive to be fundamentally lacking. Thus is born the great variety of human desires. We then have an object for our hunger.

Desire, in turn, is the parent of the legion of cravings, fears, quandaries, griefs, frustrations, and terrors — all the forms of misery that plague us. Consider the human condition. We lust after what we don’t have, fearful that we might not be able to acquire it, or disappointed that we failed to acquire it, or jealous of someone else who obtained it. We worry that we will lose what we already have, or are grieved that we actually did lose it or are disappointed that what we wanted turned out to be empty. The Buddha said that everything, the entire world, is on fire! It’s burning from the heat of desire.

And what is the source of all our suffering? What we think is lacking is not what is truly lacking. Consequently, we are driven in dizzying circles by the whirlwind of endless desires, never finding and satisfying the source of all desire, our fundamental hunger. So we are back to our question: “What are we lacking?”

I’ve Been Expecting You, Mr. Bond

Our search for the ground of the negative requires the collection of clues and the identification of a culprit, as in any other detective or spy story. We, like James Bond,

² There’s an interesting discussion of this dynamic, of vague longing giving birth to actual desire, finding artistic expression in certain operatic music by Mozart, in Volume I of Kierkegaard’s, “Either/Or.”

are on a mission to find “Mr. Big.” At first we only encounter Mr. Big’s soldiers or henchmen. These are the legion of particular negativities that we encounter in life. If we spend our time, as most people do, battling with life’s particular problems, we never win, for Mr. Big has endless numbers of soldiers at his command.

If we’re unable to cut through appearances, to perceive the true nature of this protean monster, a hopeless war of attrition ensues, and we die of exhaustion. This is the usual pathetic scenario for human existence. The heroic alternative is to find the



Mr. Big’s son, in a strategy session, with the boys

elusive Mr. Big, and discover his true identity. If we are to be free of suffering, we must look beyond suffering’s myriad expressions, and see the essential negativity.

But how can we know the ultimate lack if it is formless and characterless? It is possible for us to “read” our delusive images. By reading these images, we mean penetrating the depths of our various desires and difficulties to see what it is that we really want. This is comparable to finding and confronting Mr. Big’s higher-ups, our more fundamental formulations of life’s negativities.

What is a more fundamental formulation? It is to see, for example, that your romantic difficulties result, not from the flaws or faults of your partner, but from the way you relate to the opposite sex, no matter who he or she may be. Deeper still is to see that the problem lies in the nature of erotic union in general. Each formulation or, to continue our analogy, each higher-ranking officer, seems to be more dangerous than the last. You realize, in other words, that the problem runs more deeply than you expected.

It is one thing to perceive that your difficulties are due to the war between the sexes. It is quite another to perceive that your difficulties stem from the very requirements of selfhood being contradictory. In the first case, you might attempt to work out new arrangements of male and female union. But if you see that erotic problems are a species of a fundamental negativity — one cutting to the core of human existence — you realize that you are faced with a far more difficult question.

If you manage to survive each successively more powerful opponent, you enter into the most dangerous region, a place where no ordinary mortal dares set foot. You enter the inner sanctum of Mr. Big, or to use a more classical analogy, into the center of the maze, where you encounter the Minotaur. If you survive this encounter, you will finally come to know the answer to Epicurus’ question. And, you will have overcome your suffering.

Mission Impossible

How are we to begin our search for Mr. Big? If we become self-conscious of our desires, we see that the exchange of troubles at the core of our being — to use Schopenhauer’s analogy — is not arbitrary. There is logic to the sequence of shapes that the negative assumes. To read this logic would be comparable to deciphering the code that determines the shape of human suffering.

Examining our life, we perceive that our solutions to previous problems are often the very source of our present difficulties! How startling, indeed how downright sublime, to catch the Proteus of human suffering in the midst of his transformations! Psychoanalysis, for example, in freeing us from feelings of guilt, has saddled us with the problem of meaninglessness; having becoming a responsible person we now no longer feel carefree; having managed to escape the kinds of conflicts that our parents experience in their relationship, we have become saddled with problems endemic to a new kind of marriage. It takes some time to recognize the haunting connection between our present problems and those we have solved.

Suspecting that solving one problem simply causes another one to appear doesn’t mean we give up on finding a solution. Economists know, for example, that raising the tax rate initially brings in more revenue, but, in fact, it may ultimately shrink revenue when marginal businesses become insolvent. Still they hope to finesse the delicate balances in the economy.



Having read Schopenhauer, Humpty Dumpty, is looking rather philosophical.

Puzzles and games can symbolically picture to the mind our effort to “get it together.” There are certain puzzles in which, if we get one piece in order, we may cause another piece to be out of place. Such puzzles dramatize this dilemma: if we are not careful in our solution, the negative will reappear somewhere else in our life. There is a sense that although a solution is difficult to effectuate, it is possible.

The Rubik’s Cube puzzle accords with our a priori sense that life starts out “whole,” and that somehow it all gets disarranged. The primordial unity is symbolized by each of the colors being in place. The blues are on one side, the reds on another, greens on a third and so on. The jumbling of the cubes has a mythic significance. It symbolizes life hopelessly mixed up in a chaotic multiplicity or just a mess.

It's akin to Anaximander's cosmogony. There's an original unity called, "The Boundless" — the "Apeiron," in ancient Greek — out of which emerges the four elements: earth, air, fire and water. The elements then fight with each other, creating strife and chaos, and as a punishment, it all returns back to the boundless.

The children's rhyme, Humpty Dumpty, tells the same story. The One, the cosmic egg, falls, splinters and splatters into a mess. Whether the truth is told cosmologically, mythically, in a puzzle, or in a children's nursery rhyme, it's the same story. We start out whole; life becomes a mess. Somehow it must come together again if we are to inhabit a universe, and not a chaotic confusion of conflicting opposites.

What is the driving force of your life? Is it not the assumption that you can "get it together?" If you run into difficulties, you think that you must work harder or that you need to be cleverer. You are confident that you have a solution, but then you realize that your new solution has caused — continuing our Rubik's Cube analogy — one of the colors to be misplaced. You realize that you do not have it together. You succeeded in getting your mother-in-law to vacate your premises, but now you have no one to baby-sit. The result is that your suffering is conserved. But "hope springs eternal;" you remain confident, and try again.

Over time, the dark thought may come to you that pertinacious efforts to make life work are to no avail. This is because in life, unlike in Rubik's Cube, it is not simply a matter of difficulty in getting it together, in bringing the conflicting opposites into a unity. You suspect that it cannot be unified at all, that what you are attempting to accomplish in life is simply contradictory. Could it be, then, that the game that we have been handed to play, at birth, is a contradiction? Will there always be Rubik's cubes out of order? Must all attempts at a solution merely alter the form that suffering takes? Is man's effort to find self-fulfillment really a "mission impossible?" Here, then, is a great paradox: The perception that what you're trying to accomplish is impossible — because it's predicated on a contradiction — elevates your awareness to a level beyond the contradiction and therefore beyond despair. The silver that can be found lining every cloud is liberating self-knowledge.

[The reader will note a shift to a more casual writing style. That is because I wrote the first part of my essay over twenty-five years ago. And now, having entered more fully into the heart of the mystical — to experience life beyond the conservation of suffering — I continue. Yes, that magic word "beyond," adored by Madison Avenue and mystics.]

The Mystical Origin of the Conservation of Suffering

I began my essay with a quotation from the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus, who asked why there always seems to be something lacking. Interestingly enough, the Zen master, Rinzai Gigen, used to ask his assembled students a similar question, "At this

moment, what is lacking?” It’s significant that Rinzai asked about the present moment, for it’s our experience of lack, in the present moment, that prompts our mind to jump back into the past or forward into the future, in a desperate search to fill the hole in our being, so as to end our metaphysical-hunger.

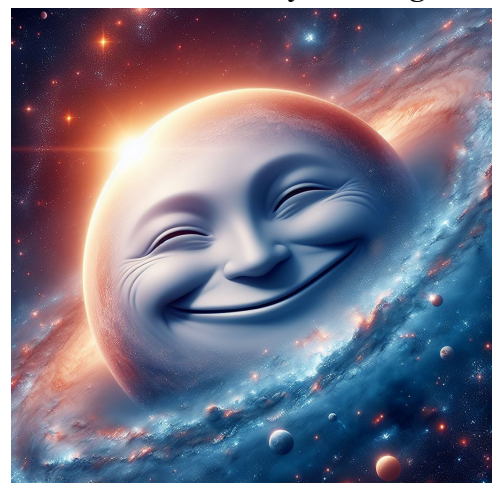
It’s an excellent practice to sit with Rinzai’s question, sometimes amidst the turbulence of the day. It should be remembered, at such times, that the ego isn’t the ultimate source of the lack. Indeed, the lack exists prior to the ego. Rather, the ego is an answer to the lack, albeit an inadequate one. Ah, but without the ego, there can be no awakening.

Let’s now switch gears and consider the sense of lack not from the perspective of the ego, but from the standpoint of what the Eastern mystics call, “the Self,” also known as, Brahman, Vishnu, It, the Absolute, the Void, etcetera. What, then, does the Self lack such that it dreams this world of suffering beings? The ancient answer to that riddle is that the Self lacks knowledge of itself. The philosopher, George Berkeley, famously stated that “*Esse est percipi*,” which means that to be is to be seen. Indeed, we’re invisible and not quite real, until we’re seen.

Thus the Self seeks to become real by being seen. But how can it be seen if there is nothing other than it to see it. Furthermore, for something to be seeable, known, or intelligible, it must have borders, a shape, a form, which limits it. Ah, but the Self is infinite and absolute. Consequently, as infinite, it is unintelligible. The Self therefore seeks to see itself reflected in the mirror of the finite. That’s where we, human beings, enter the story. We’re destined to be finite mirrors, in which the infinite Self sees itself.

What, then, happens is that the ego, not realizing that it’s a reflection of the Self, regards itself, in all its finitude, as infinite and absolute. That’s essentially the origin of egotism. But, despite the ego’s endless folly, it intuits in moments of doubt that it’s not the absolute, but merely the finite.

The ego, i.e., the individual person, then projects its longing to be infinite into the world as something graspable, anything from a cheeseburger to a job promotion, from a new coat to a new romance. There’s a dialectic involved here, somewhat akin to the one that Socrates discussed, in Plato’s dialogue, “The Symposium.” Socrates contended that what we seek, without consciously realizing it, is the Form, or Idea, of Beauty. Of course, we can’t immediately grasp absolute Beauty. That’s why Socrates contends that there’s a ladder of



Thank you for awakening and redeeming me! Well-played, good sir!

representations that allows us to ascend upwards — beginning with beauty, in its concrete manifestations — to the non-corporeal eternal Form, or Idea, of Beauty.

Whatever the mystical tradition, you finally realize, quite paradoxically, that you are the Self. You are both the searcher and the object of your search. Yes, it's like that comic play about the detective who finally realizes, to his chagrin, that all along he's accidentally been tailing himself. Anyway, that's the moment of awakening, the moment when suffering ends and inner-peace begins, because the Self has found itself. The birds then break into song, the angels give you a standing ovation, and the entire universe — which at long last has been awakened and redeemed from its anxious slumbers — smiles beatifically in approval.

Hey! Not so fast!

Ah, but if you're a Mahayana Buddhist, you're about to find out the punch line to the joke: At the moment that you attain Self-realization, you realize that you are all of the Self's incarnations. Consequently, you must — if you wish to be free from suffering — you must now free yourself, in all of your billions of faces, which means everyone on the planet, about eight billion people, by the last count, and some hard-ass Mahayanists argue that animals too need to be awakened, and while you're at it, buddy, don't forget rocks, and trees, and spiders. Talk about the conservation of suffering! As Michael Corleone said, "Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in!"

Beyond the Conservation of Suffering: Twofold Awareness

In various mystical traditions, there exists an effort to possess twofold awareness, one layer of our awareness is asleep in life's dream, while **simultaneously** the other layer of awareness is awake to the dream. Consider, for example, the Bhagavad Gita tradition, which emerged out of the Advaita Vedanta school of Hinduism. It posits that the awakened person is not free to only abide in the inner-peace of nirvana, but is morally constrained — at least according to Lord Krishna, in his talk with Arjuna — to continue to participate in the realm of maya, i.e., the realm of illusion. Of course, the awakened person does so from the standpoint of twofold awareness, such that he or she is able to be in this dream called life while awake to its illusory nature. In a certain sense, it would be akin to fully participating in a game of baseball while maintaining a transcendent awareness that it's just a game.

Yes, just when the warrior Arjuna was hoping to beat his sword into a plowshare and retire to the family farm, like Cincinnatus. Indeed, the show must go on, with all its terrible conflicts, wars, and suffering, even though you come to realize, as does Arjuna, that it's ultimately illusory. So it's bad form to attempt to sneak out of the cosmic dance because you claim that your feet hurt.

Anyway, the notion of twofold awareness is akin to the “controlled folly” that Don Juan Matus taught to Carlos Castaneda. Similarly, the Japanese Buddhist philosopher Kitaro Nishida stated, “My joy and my sorrow do not touch my peace.” Here, again, in twofold awareness: we are accessible to life’s joys and sorrows, and therefore subject to the Conservation of Suffering Principle. Ah, but we’re simultaneously awake to it all, and therefore experiencing both the transcendent astonishment and the inner-peace that lies beyond joy and sorrow, and beyond the Conservation of Suffering Principle.

And, of course, we’re not only subject to life’s sorrows — unless maybe we’re living the cloistered existence of a Buddhist monk — but to many other types of negativities, including those that Hamlet lays out,

“...The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to
...the whips and scorns of time,
Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th'unworthy takes...”

Yes, all that and much more. And so, it would have been better had Nishida said, “My joy and my sorrow, frustrations, aggravations, headaches, disappointments, humiliations, horrors, terrors, not to mention ‘the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to’ and so much more — does not touch my peace.” In any case, twofold awareness makes life’s negativities a lot more bearable and increases our love of life, by balancing life’s negativities with a transcendent awareness that views life as a wondrous dream, and makes possible divine laughter.

How, then, to attain a twofold awareness? The first step consists in thoroughly awakening to the Conservation of Suffering Principle. Simultaneously, through an act of imagination — which might eventually transform into insight — realize that you are the Self and so is everyone else. Yes, the one who is, at times, perplexed and frustrated by it all, is the Self having a dream that its you. Then, awake to it for increasingly longer periods of time. It can take years of diligent effort to stay awake. The third step, by far the most challenging, consists in simultaneously being in the dream and awake to it. To have achieved this twofold awareness, which isn’t likely to be accomplished overnight, is to have attained a significant degree of mastery in the art of living.

Postscript: Must the Show Go On? A Tasty Theodicy

Let us return to the Mahayanists, for a moment. Although they view suffering as an illusion, they still vow to free all sentient beings from suffering. Yes, they realize the contradiction, but as Walt Whitman wrote, “Do I contradict myself? Very well then I

contradict myself.” The question naturally emerges of why the endless suffering that has been around since the beginning of time, must continue. Let’s consider two answers to whether this painful illusion, called life, should be.

Pessimist that he was, Schopenhauer, like Tolstoy, believed that life was a tragic mistake, and out of a sense of compassion for human suffering, contended that this miserable world of ours should finally come to an end. That dark existentialism harkens back to the ancient Greek Tragedian Sophocles, who contended that the best outcome for a person is never to have been born. Second best is to have a short life. And it runs all the way to Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov, who completely rejects the Hegelian justification for the evils of existence as required to fuel the dialectic of human progress. What, though, would it mean for the world to end? Would it mean that human beings would choose to die out? That’s what Tolstoy and Schopenhauer recommended. Or would it mean that everyone would awaken, such that the dream we call life would end? Of course, in the later case, it would begin again, according to Hindu cosmology, which is circular.

Consider — by contrast to the advocates of the pessimistic vision — the sanguine vision of the English visionary poet, William Blake. In his mystical poem, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” he wrote, “Eternity is in love with the productions of time.” How are we to understand Eternity’s love for that which is finite, imperfect, fallible, fragile, flawed, and transient? Indeed, how are we understand Eternity’s love for this world of ours, in light of the terrible suffering that human beings — who reek of finitude, fallibility, fragility and all the rest — must endure? None of it is justifiable. The effort of theodicy to justify suffering is very unconvincing.

Perhaps, then, if Eternity’s love for the productions of time isn’t justifiable, its love is simply a matter of taste. After all, does my love of strawberries, crazy friends, and card tricks — indeed my love for life itself — need to be justified? Or perhaps, we can expand the meaning of “justification” beyond the moral realm. As a matter of fact, Nietzsche contended that although life couldn’t be justified from a moral perspective, it could be justified as an aesthetic phenomenon, in which case it’s a matter of taste. And speaking of taste, consider the Psalm of David that melds the moral and aesthetic perspectives, in regard to the goodness of God, “Taste and see that the Lord is good.”

So if Eternity tastes good to us, it might be that we taste good to Eternity, warts and all, although I would think that some of us are tastier than others. To continue with Blake’s metaphor, perhaps, then, taste alone is grounds for the marriage of time and Eternity, of the finite and the Infinite, of the relative and the Absolute, of hell and heaven. Yes, just for the taste of it.³

³ In a Philosophy lecture that I attended, Professor William Pizante perceptively related the exuberant love of life, founded on taste, to a commercial for “Diet Coke.” Its famous tagline went, “Just for the taste of it, Diet Coke.”

How about you, dear reader? Do you side with Sophocles, Schopenhauer, Tolstoy, and Ivan Karamazov or do you side with King David, Blake, Nietzsche, and Eternity?

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Further Questions:

1. Can you recall a time when you finally got what you wished for? How long were you elated? Was it longer than twenty minutes? Where did your mind then go? To some new desire? To some new worry or concern?
2. Can you think of a comic film, play, novel in which the protagonist got what he or she was seeking, only to find that it wasn't quite what he or she imagined?
3. What did Baudelaire mean when he wrote, "Life is a hospital, in which all of the patients are continually trying to change beds."
4. Why is Sunday the most boring day of the week?
5. What did Kipling mean when he wrote that triumph and disaster are imposters?
6. Can you discern the connection between a problem that you presently have and a problem that you previously solved? Can you discern the conservation of suffering?
7. How did George Berkeley arrive at the odd notion that to be is to be seen? What was his reasoning?
8. Is there any significance to the fact that Irving Berlin's song, "Blue Skies," has cheerful lyrics, but is written in a minor key?
9. Can knowledge of the conservation of suffering actually put life's uncertainties in perspective? After all, wouldn't you be less anxious about the future knowing that tomorrow is unlikely to be neither significantly better nor worse than today?
10. At this moment, what is lacking?

Several Recommended Books by Schopenhauer

“The World as Will and Idea”

“On the Suffering of the World”

“The Wisdom of Life and Other Essays”