

Wind on the Water

A Viewsletter To Encourage
Unitarian Universalist
Theology and Spirituality

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Welcome

Welcome to the first issue of the third year of *Wind on the Water*, a viewsletter of Unitarian Universalist theology and spirituality. "Theology" we define as "reflections on the meaning and purpose of life and the articulation of those reflections." (This definition comes from Diane and Michael Brown and Pat Guilbeault.) "Spirituality" we prefer not to define at all. We will point towards it by saying that there is much more to the individual human than the conscious mind and that life is, at its heart, a mystery.

These issues will contain reflections and suggestions for reflections on life, religion, and spirituality, and will, from time to time, suggest activities to be performed alone or in small groups.

Cogito Ergo Sum?

Rene Descartes lived in a time much like our own. There were continual religious conflicts, rapid social changes, and the new scientific world view sweeping away old beliefs. Many of his contemporaries in Paris doubted whether it was possible to obtain reliable knowledge. He went off to a retreat in Holland in a desperate quest for certainty.

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In his *Meditations* he recorded his philosophical quest. It went something like this (I have paraphrased):

-- I know that I have held many false beliefs, and I am searching for a reliable means of knowledge. Now I do not have enough time to examine each belief individually, so I will cast out whole categories of beliefs if there is any reason to doubt any of them.

-- What about data I derive from my senses? I know my senses often deceive me. And there are people who are wandering the streets seeing and hearing things that nobody else does. Could I also be insane? Ah, and another thought: I sleep and I dream. Could this all be a dream? Could there be no time and no space and no physical objects? Well, there is reason to doubt, and I must conclude that I cannot rely on my senses for absolute certainty.

-- But is there anything I can rely on if this is all a dream? Well, dreams are populated with images that have forms. I can identify their shapes, rectangles and circles and whatever, and what names the images have. It is not just blobs and swirls. Can't I count on these forms that I can identify? Aren't they reliable?

-- Ah, "count on them," I said. That's a problem. In geometry, rectangles have four sides. In arithmetic, two plus three equals five. I believe that God is good, but what if God, for his own amusement, has decided to deceive me? He can give me the illusion of a physical world. He can make me misidentify images in my dream. He can even make me miscount the sides of a rectangle, and miscount the sum of two and three. How could I possibly be sure of anything if there is such a God deceiving me? How can I be sure anything exists at all?

-- But as I ask the question, I see the way out. Suppose the God were to try to deceive me and make me think I did not exist? Whenever I ask the question, I experience my asking it. No matter what the deity does, he cannot deceive me about that: I think, therefore I am!

Kwang Tsu fell asleep and dreamt he was a white butterfly. When he woke, he wondered, "Am I Kwang Tsu, who dreamt he was a white butterfly, or am I a white butterfly dreaming he is Kwang Tsu?"

In this way, our cultural hero Rene Descartes descended into the great doubt. Then he returned. Being sure he existed, he then started to find other things he could be sure of. He asked what made him so sure he existed. Well, the idea was clear and distinct. It was not murky overall, or contain any murky parts,

Cogito, continued

or blend into a murky background. Since he was sure he existed, it was impossible that any clear and distinct idea could be false, because that would cast doubt on his existence too.

He soon realized he had a clear and distinct idea of a god who was good and would not deceive him. After that, certainty came much more easily.

But really, Rene Descartes panicked and stopped short on the edge of the Great Doubt. It is actually quite easy to cast doubt on the idea that we exist.

You may think Descartes settled the matter. "I think therefore I am." But in Indo-European languages, a verb requires a subject. Thinking was experienced. "To think" is a verb. Descartes needed a subject. "I think." We're willing to accept that. But we would feel rather silly saying "It's raining, therefore *It is*."

What is this *I* that Descartes decided existed. Is it any more substantial than the *it* that rains?

And even if thoughts must have a thinker, are we like Kwang Tsu who dreamt he was a white butterfly, or the white butterfly who is dreaming he is Kwang Tsu?

Well, it's pretty complicated figuring out what the *I* is when *I think* (or the *o* when *cogito*). There's a lot of doubt about it. By Descartes' rule, maybe we should just cast out the idea that we exist.

Actually, Descartes could have gotten past this problem by arguing, "Thoughts are, therefore something is." Why didn't he?

In the midst of his descent into one great reality, the great doubt, he encountered another, death. It was the terror of non-existence, of oblivion, that finally caused him to

Flux

Buddhists meditate on the impermanence of the Five Aggregates: sensations of physical forms, feelings, perceptions, mental functioning, and consciousness.

The first aggregates are sensations and physical forms. The Buddhists consider together physical objects, our sense organs, and our mental sensations. The physical objects we deal with are obviously assembled from components. If you pay attention to your sensations, you can observe them fleeting into and out of existence.

The second aggregates are feelings, positive, negative and neutral, that arise attached to sensations and thoughts.

The third are perceptions, classifying experiences. We are always classifying things, relating them to other things. We treat nothing as just itself, but are always associating it with what we have come to know before. This is implicit in the use of common nouns.

The fourth aggregates are mental functions, giving or withdrawing attention, acts of volition. We attend to parts of our experiences, aggregating what we are aware of out of what is available. Attention shifts very easily, and when most impermanent, when out of control, the Buddhists sometimes refer to it as "monkey mind," the mind being like a drunken monkey.

Consciousness includes the other four aggregates, and hence is aggregated from them. As the contents of consciousness come into and go out of existence, so consciousness itself shifts and flows and changes.

All these aggregates, which seem to sum up normal human experience,

are impermanent. They come into existence as they are put together, last a while, and go out of existence as they fall apart.

When Descartes went looking for something of which he could be certain, he wanted truth to be something stable. He thought he had found it in the clear and distinct idea of his own existence.

When the Buddha went looking, he found utter flux. And nowhere in all this flux is the soul, Descartes' *I* that thinks and therefore is.

Buddhists speak of the Three Signs of Being, impermanence, suffering, and the lack of a permanent soul.

Impermanence is observed by meditating on the Five Aggregates.

As a special case of impermanence, we ourselves are impermanent. We have no permanent souls. The experience of being an individual who continues from moment to moment is an illusion.

The suffering the Buddha spoke of, *dukkha*, is a particular kind of suffering. "Dukkha" was used in the Pali texts not only to refer to suffering, but also to a bone pulled from its joint or a wheel with its hub off center. It is the disjointedness, the out-of-kilterness, that occurs when we try to hold onto impermanent experience as if it were lasting, in particular when we try to hold ourselves as separate beings apart from the flux. This desire to be separate and apart is called *tanha*.

It is *tanha* and the resulting *dukkha* the Buddhists would like to overcome. Here in the mysterious Occident, we cherish *tanha* and glorify it.

