

A Lecture-Sermon delivered to the  
Unitarian Fellowship of San Dieguito, Calif.  
May 5, 1968

On Non-Attachment: Some Aspects of  
Asian Thought; A Lecture-Sermon \*

It is an honor to be invited to present you with a lecture-sermon on the topic, Non-Attachment. There is a natural affinity between this virtue, non-attachment, and the rhetorical form called the lecture-sermon. The lecture-sermon resembles a lecture in that it is weighted more toward information than exhortation; yet it reflects the sermon, also, in that it must lose nothing of edification in attempting to clarify concepts that cross confessional lines. Here, one must somehow find the middle way between analysis and persuasion, between what is merely interesting and what is essential. According to his temperament one finds himself often attached to one or other of these alternatives. And what could be more comical than an attached speaker speaking on, of all things, non-attachment?

English possesses at least two common synonyms for 'non-attachment'. They are 'detachment' and 'disinterestedness!'. If, however, we wished to include a reference to the spiritual as well as the moral our intention would be better conveyed through the concept, non-attachment. This cardinal distinction requires further reflection. Our English prefix non- expresses negation more neutrally than we commonly think and this is markedly the case in our concept, non-attachment. We might concern ourselves then in the importance of this distinction for the spiritual life; and we ought so to concern ourselves in what it points to if we claim to have any intellectual care for our growth in spirit.



Since the decline of the Middle Ages--with the notable exception of the 18th century--our culture has not distinguished itself by its care for this virtue. In fact we might say that our culture has notoriously caricatured itself by its neglect of it, and this despite our Scriptures' commands that we achieve non-attachment. What other virtue would the Christ have had more prominently in mind when he commanded us to "take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."? (Matt. 6:34)

Perhaps this unfortunate, if not perverse, neglect might account for our curious notion that we must rather recur to the great non-Christian traditions for essential light on this virtue. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Yet so difficult is this notion to dislodge and so urgent is our need to strive for this virtue that we should lose no time in devoting ourselves to it wherever we find scriptural illumination upon it. And if reverently we contemplate it through non-Christian sources of revelation, not the least of our gains will be a discovery of the light that they bring upon the ways our own Bible counsels us toward this beautiful virtue.

Were it not for 'the shocks and arrows of outrageous fortune' we should not require to practice the virtue of non-attachment. And yet, when we have said that, we have not yet said enough. Afflictions and tribulations could not of themselves incline us to practice distance upon the whole flux of coming-to-be and passing-away. Nor is it

sufficient merely to know that we are suffering. Some non-human animals seem to share with us this simple awareness. It is rather that we know it twice-over. We are able to reflect upon the fact that we know we are suffering; and this reflection becomes more urgent when we suffer acutely and personally. Precisely at this point we might or might not make a philosophical and theological discovery, and if we make this self-discovery we shall no longer experience the world as we did before.

It comes to a question of power--the power we think peculiar to knowledge. Commonly we distinguish between two types of knowledge: 'knowing--how' and 'knowing--that'. Knowing that one is in difficulties can be coincident with knowing how to get out of them. It can also be coincident with not knowing how to escape the difficulties or how to overcome them. About the latter situation we say in English, "I just have to put up with it," and we resign ourselves to last through it all as best we can, or at least until we can find some remedy for it. But what if it should turn out to be the case that there is some form of suffering for which there is no remedy whatsoever--no, not to all eternity? We should then have discovered we know that such a suffering exists in ourselves but also that we do not know how to eliminate it. Clearly, the resigning of ourselves to this suffered discovery in no way distinguishes our relation to it from our accustomed relation to the crowd of inconveniences which we put up with from day to day. Yet, this discovery introduces us to the heart of the human condition.

It is essential to the human condition that we should have intimations of immortality while remaining in and of ourselves quite

powerless to achieve it as such; that we find ourselves compelled to choose, for good or ill, our ways of life while powerless to annihilate <sup>SP?</sup> one step within the courses we have run. We might extend indefinitely this description of our impotence. It is enough for now to observe that our double self-reflection will lead us inevitably to the heart of the human dilemma: free we are, but only finitely; we sense within us the infinite and eternal, yet we cannot make the work of our hands prevail beyond a season.

Clearly, as with every dilemma, we find the middle the place of pain; for we are prone to the illusion that one alternative or the other will resolve the issue. Were we able to resolve it so simply, despite however painfully, we should not have faced a life-dilemma at all but a matter for simple option--calling at most for prudence. But a life-dilemma presents us always with two equally unsatisfactory and unfavorable alternatives; and no amount of clever gabble or excursions into the distractions of pure feeling will alter the case in the slightest degree.

If, up to this point, our thinking has not led us astray, we should have rightly concluded that it seems we must next try to find whether our position in the middle of the dilemma has within it some hint of a favorable possibility which neither of the alternatives provides. A sober review of the history of religious and secular thought and practice should warn us against the evils inherent in two alternatives, namely, damning the world in the interest of other-worldliness or, on the other hand, whitewashing a merely secular life with the amiable

SP

notion that the warm puppy of happiness still waits for us around some sunny corner--it's just a matter of time and skill in our getting there. There is no need to rehearse the woeful train of failures in spirituality which these alternatives have come to represent in the history of religions, both of East and West.

Let us for a few minutes try to contemplate ourselves as creatures-of-the-middle. In so doing we shall have recurred to one of the most ancient religious and philosophical doctrines--a doctrine stressed equally in all the basic Scriptures of the great traditions. One among these Scriptures is the Chinese classic, the Book of Changes which is both an oracle and a book of wisdom. As an oracle it counsels us to right action, and as a book of wisdom assists us also to right vision. In the hierarchy of being it conceives man as a creature stanced between the primal powers called heaven and earth--participating in their virtues if he will, but always subject to their transcendence. On that account it makes much of the virtue of modesty, and quoting from the Wilhelm-Baynes translation teaches that "Modesty creates success, for it is the way of heaven to shed its influence downward and to create light and radiance. It is the way of the earth to be lowly and to go upward. It is the way of heaven to make empty what is full and to give increase to what is modest. It is the way of earth to change the full and to augment the modest." This Scripture does not counsel modesty as an opportunistic means to success. It is rather that by acting modestly one grasps good character and makes it his own. In

order to do this though, one must consent and submit himself to the creative will of heaven as devotedly and compliantly as the receptive earth takes heaven into itself and follows heaven's way; for one invites good or evil influences according to his conduct.

This sublime three-fold conception of the world and man's place in it is reflected in the Japanese art of flower arrangement--a beautiful and edifying practice which fortunately is becoming more familiar to the American home. Let us examine briefly how this visionary concept stances man, since it has cogent implications for the virtue of non-attachment.

The Book of Changes observes that there are three kinds of shock: that of heaven, of fate and of the heart. The shock of heaven pre-disposes man for his spiritual birth--what in religious language we call 'rebirth,' or "getting born again." And thunder is its natural analogue. This form of shock reminds man how ephemeral is his passage and promotes in him that fear and trembling which duly chastens him and marks the limits of his little sovereignty. Such is shown by the natural, political and social cataclysms of history or by great personal afflictions--proverbial in the case of Job. During such times--and recent events in our own nation should recall us to review them--one must not be so attached to his own cause that he loses his hold on a deep and inner seriousness, nor so withdrawn from any cause--so un-attached as distinguished from non-attached--that he is lost to all duty and command. For non-attachment is not a floating free in some olympian balloon from which one peers down upon a world he counts well lost. It is being not possessed by the world while yet concretely

immersed within it, so that the sacrifice peculiar to his unique person-- which every man must come to face--will be carried out uninterrupted and made complete.

The shock of fate prepares a man for self-reflection on his relation to the practical order. It should induce movement within his mind and awaken resolution in him to take arms against a sea of troubles. He must act with presence of mind resolutely discerning and grasping all opportunities for action or he will not survive the external blows of fate's mindless course. And yet this is precisely where we are most likely to indulge ourselves in a false renunciation, preferring to deceive ourselves that we do not want that which we need. Such self-martyrdom is not non-attachment but a craven weakness. There is a lovely, small poem repeated in the Analects of Confucius which reads in the Wayley translation:

The flowery branch of the wild cherry  
How swiftly it flies back!  
It is not that I do not love you;  
But your house is far away.

On this, the Master said, <sup>ly</sup> He did not really love her. Had he done so, he would not have worried about the distance. The translator notes, "Men fail to attain Goodness because they do not care for it sufficiently, not because Goodness 'is far away' (4.15)." 

Then thirdly there is the shock of the heart when one is robbed of all reflection and clarity of vision. Presence of mind is not immediately available and resolution is without an object. We experience such an occasion upon receiving the first blow of calamity or some

*Position of  
quotation  
marks?*

affliction. We reel like one drunk, bereft of inner bearings. All around us others are agitated either on our account, or their own or both. Unless we withdraw from the situation in time we shall surely blunder. Yet this is when our acquaintances and friends urge upon us that we must do something about it now, and without delay. Without having achieved non-attachment we cannot summon the strength of will to ignore them in order to withdraw from the affair in time despite their displeasure in us.

In our culture this is one of the most difficult of situations in which to find oneself and overcome. Activists we are, and vainly imagine that if enough put their shoulders to the wheel we shall somehow move beyond the difficulty. Notoriously, we later discover that no one had found time to check in what direction the wheel had begun to move. It is the time that calls most plaintively for the correlative virtue to non-attachment namely, patience, which calls for remaining behind the stampede until we are restored to clarity and composure.

Indian spirituality is no less explicit in its counsels toward non-attachment. One of the most celebrated verses in the Bhagavad Gītā expresses the essential principle of non-attachment. *The Radhakrishnan translation* reads: "To action alone hast thou a right and never at all to its fruits; let not the fruits of action be thy motive; neither let there be in thee any attachment to inaction." A sound and successful meditation on this luminous verse should lead us to discern that the fruit of any action is not necessarily its proper consummation but merely its consequence. All depends on how we relate to the consequence of action; for action and result are mere elements in the everlasting flux of

coming-to-be and passing-away. Neither action nor inaction, nor their consequences are of themselves able to determine our proper destiny. They are just perishable seed and perishable fruits. But what is not perishable is the causal order which governs their passage. Now it does not follow from this that a man must reap only from such seed as he himself once sowed; but assuredly, and let us make no mistake about it, at least what he sows he must also reap.

Since in our own strength we cannot alter in the least the consistency of this causal order and since at best our foresight is so weak there is nothing for it but to offer up our actions to the Lord while nonetheless devoting ourselves humbly to right action. And in the story of the Gītā this is exactly what the Lord Kriṣṇa advises the prince. It is this very resolve to offer up our actions to the Lord that is the basis of the yoga of this Scripture. Any other basis, no matter how disciplined it might be, will lead only to further bondage. Nothing but this firm resolve and its devout execution saves us from losing ourselves and eternity in our dark concern for the fruits of our actions. Such is the gravity of our need for non-attachment.

One of the greatest treasures of all verses of all Scriptures is found in the Great Forest Upaniṣad called in Sanskrit the Bṛhadāraṇyaka. I shall try to paraphrase it without corrupting its meaning. "Yonder, the transcendent, the invisible Source is full; here, the same Source as immanent and visible among us is also full. The full comes out of the full. Even in taking fullness out of the full, nonetheless the full itself remains." Without imagining that we have adequately brought

this over into our manner of speaking we should say this means, at the very least, that God's integrity is not diminished or shaken by the birth and course of his creation; that he remains ever constant among us, nearer than hands and feet.

If one could truly believe this would he not more easily achieve, maintain and express the lovely virtue of non-attachment? Yet non-attachment will not abide a moment without her sister patience. Ought we not then to pray that patience and non-attachment should share their perfect work presenting us whole preserving our integrity that we might be found wanting in nothing. And that to this end may God help us all.

Allen W. Anderson  
etc.