

BUDDHIST STEVE JOBS MEETS MOSES IN HEAVEN; Death as a Friend for Jobs, Mozart, and Don Juan

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As death, strictly speaking, is the goal of our lives, I have for some years been making myself so familiar with this truest and best friend of man that its aspect has not only ceased to appeal me, but I find it very soothing and comforting.

~Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, letter to his father (April 1787)

Death is our eternal companion. An immense amount of pettiness is dropped if your death makes a gesture to you, or if you catch a glimpse of it, or if you just have the feeling that your companion is there watching you.

~Don Juan, *Journey to Ixtlan*

With the passing of Steve Jobs two cartoons got my eye. A recent cover of *The New Yorker* (10/17/11) pictured St. Peter checking off Jobs on his I-Pad, and in the other St. Peter introduces him to Moses with the caption: “Moses, meet Steve. He’s gonna upgrade your tablets.” Interestingly enough, Jobs’ wings are almost as big as Moses’.

Does “upgrade” simply mean a change of format (from stone to silicon chips) or a new version? Many Christians would be offended by the thought of a revised Ten Commandments, and they would also be shocked to see that a Buddhist has made it to

the Pearly Gates. Some non-believers object to Jobs being in Heaven, but, hey, let's have some fun and enlightenment.

I taught Buddhism for 30 years, so let's compare the two religions on the question of ethics. Instead of Ten Commandments, the Buddhists have five precepts: do no violence, do not steal, do not be sexually promiscuous, do not lie, and do not take intoxicants.

Mahatma Gandhi, whose Hindu moral code was similar to Buddhists, was very impressed with Jesus, but the main reason he did not convert to Christianity was that Christians ate meat, drank alcohol, and far too many committed adultery.

In addition to telling his disciples not to deify him or write down his words, the Buddha also wanted no statues made in his likeness—no graven images. Four hundred years would pass before the Buddha was worshipped as God, scriptures were compiled, and images in stone, wood, and pigment appeared.

One of the errors on the internet regarding Jobs' death is that Buddhists passed on their scripture is secret, and this, according to one blogger, is the reason for the "paranoid secrecy that surrounded product development at Apple."

The truth is that right after the Buddha's death, Ananda, a close disciple with a phenomenal memory, recited everything he heard the Buddha preach. These recitations were held in public and 500 monks chanted back the words until all of them knew them by heart. These words now fill hundreds of volumes of Sutras (sayings of the Buddha).

Other than vegetarianism and teetotaling, most Buddhists would embrace all the other Ten Commandments. Parents and holy days must be honored, and coveting material things (even our own) is one of the greatest sins.

For the Buddha the most dangerous form of attachment is "craving for views," and believing that you have the complete truth about any matter. The Buddha would have been very sad to learn that sectarian divisions arose in which one faction claimed to know the real truth of what he preached.

As the Buddha said: "Do not accept it because it is in the Hindu scriptures; and do not accept it because it was said by a holy monk such as I; but if you find that it appeals to your conscience as being conducive to your happiness, then accept it and live up to it." The Buddha's last words were: "I have given you the Dharma (moral law), so now work out your own salvation."

Steve Jobs was a Zen Buddhist and this tradition heeded the warning about deifying the Buddha and making idols of his words. (They do, however, allow beautiful statues of the Buddha.) Zen is distinctive in holding a direct transmission from the Buddha "outside scriptures, not founded on words or letters."

The fear of idolatry was so great among Zen Buddhists that a provocative metaphor was proposed: “If you see the Buddha on the road, you must kill him.” In other words, the temptation to worship him would be so great that people would forget to “work out their own salvation.” I can’t help believe that Jesus would somewhat agree, and at least one passage supports my view: “Why call me good. No one is good but God alone” (Mark 10:18).

Kobun Chino Otagawa, Jobs’ Zen master, once said: “To discover yourself is to discover wisdom; without discovering yourself you can never communicate with anybody.” This is very similar to the Buddha’s saying: “They who know causation, know the Dharma.”

I take these cryptic words to mean that they who know their personal histories well—everything that they have done to themselves and to others and have learned from the consequences—will know what to do. Just think of the moral lessons most of us have learned in one short life-time. According to legend, the Buddha’s yogic powers allowed him to revisit over a thousand past lives and he learned moral lessons from every one of them.

The essence of Buddhism as I see it is humanism and pragmatism. Some scholars have pointed out that the Buddha anticipated many ideas of American pragmatists such as William James and John Dewey. The Buddha’s view of reality as always in flux with nothing being permanent is very much like the quanta of energy in contemporary physics.

Japanese Zen Buddhists are famous for their “death” poems, which are essentially sermons on the elimination of our deepest attachment. Most people cling to life so fervently that they constantly deceived themselves about their own mortality. Citing the passage from Mozart’s 1787 letter to his father as evidence, one could suggest that his magnificent Requiem Mass in D Minor is his own “death” poem.

My favorite Buddhist parable, one that I like to read to Unitarian children, is the story of Kisa Gotami, the wife of a wealthy man who had lost her young son. She came to the Buddha and asked him to bring him back to life. The Buddha answered they he would return the child from death only if Kisa Gotami could bring back a mustard seed from a household that had not experienced death. After many days of knocking on doors, she came back with the obvious realization that death is inevitable. She then took vows to become a Buddhist nun.

One of my graduate students wrote a master’s thesis on Buddhism, and he made a major point about the Buddha’s inability to raise people from the dead. He was a Christian, and for him this proved the superiority of his religion. Well trained yogis

have miraculous powers—enduring incredible pain, flying through the air, and becoming invisible—but none of ever claimed to reverse the inevitable processes of life. The desire to overcome death and attain eternal life is a craving that imprisons people rather than liberating them.

Most Asian philosophy has what I call a Life-Death dialectic, which acknowledges the natural truth that life leads to death and then to new life. Christianity views death as the enemy of life rather than the inevitable result of life itself. This is a Life-Death dualism, rather than a polarity of the two that occurs in the natural world every day.

The Apostle Paul declared that the “wages of sin is death,” but for Buddhists and Hindus the punishment for sin is rebirth in yet another life. Legend has it that the infant Buddha, after taking seven steps cushioned by lotus leaves, gave his first sermon. It was very succinct but powerful: “Hello, I’m the Buddha (the enlightened one), and this is my last life.” For those who had been taught that they would be reincarnated many, many times before final liberation, this was the most profound spiritual message that they could receive. Please note that the Buddha does not claim that he will conquer death. When his end comes at the ripe old age of 80, he accepts it gracefully and peacefully.

In his famous 2005 commencement address at Stanford University, Jobs said: “Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.”

If there is a heaven then Steve Jobs has not only met St. Peter and Moses, but he is also been pitching his great ideas among all the saints of human history. They will learn a lot from him, and perhaps they will teach him a little humility.

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. For his Buddhism lecture notes see www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/307/lecture.307.htm.