

The Better Angels of Our Nature!

This is the title of a book by Steven Pinker. Pinker has many books, most of them crammed with facts; his approach is predominantly one of naturalism, which is not all wrong. The above book of the title is a great one. His thesis is that violence has declined in our present age. The facts he marshals are persuasive and astonishing. The book in paperback is 800 pages and I could not read through it all, only browsed through the pages. Still I get the gist of the thesis. Let me give some quotes from him:

“But no historian who takes in the sweep of human history on the scale of centuries could miss the fact that we are now living in a period of extraordinary brainpower. We tend to be blase about moral progress as well, but historians who take the long view have also marveled at the moral advances of the past six decades. As we saw, the Long Peace has had the world's most distinguished military historians shaking their heads in disbelief. The Rights Revolutions too have given us ideals that educated people today take for granted but that are virtually unprecedented in human history, such as that people of all races and creeds have equal rights, that women should be free from all forms of coercion, that children should never, ever be spanked, that students should be protected from bullying, and that there's nothing wrong with being gay. I don't find it at all implausible that these are gifts, in part, of a refined and widening application of reason” (657).

He calls the decline of violence the pacifying effect or civilizing process. Our first nature, so to say, is selfish, greedy, nasty and brutish; our so-called second nature he calls 'the better angels of our nature.' The major two reasons for the civilizing process are the top-down rule of law and the bottom-up rule of morals. The state and the rule of law include individual rights, universal laws, commerce, cosmopolitanism, communication, education and science and so on. The moral sense will include increasing cooperation and sympathy, justice and fairness, self-control and delaying of gratification, feminine friendly values and humanism and so on. Many of us cherish some romantic notions of primitive peoples and ancient times. We need to be shocked out of our innocence and ignorance—the lives of the ordinary people were poor, mean and wretched; the great empires and glorious civilizations were built on untold cruelties, injustices, oppressions and genocides:

“Our ancestors... were infested with lice and parasites and lived above cellars heaped with their own feces. Food was bland, monotonous, and intermittent. Health care consisted of the doctor's saw and the dentist's pliers. Both sexes labored from sunrise to sundown, whereupon they were plunged into darkness. Winter meant months of hunger, boredom, and gnawing loneliness in snowbound farmhouses.

But it was not just mundane physical comforts that our recent ancestors did without. It was also the higher and nobler things in life, such as knowledge, beauty, and human connection..... .. nostalgia for a peaceable past is the biggest delusion of all. We now know that native peoples, whose lives are so romanticized in today's children's books, had rates of death from warfare that were greater than those of our world wars. The romantic visions of medieval Europe omit the exquisitely crafted instruments of torture and are innocent of the thirtyfold greater risk of murder in those times. The centuries for which people are nostalgic were times in which the wife of an adulterer could have her nose cut off, children as young as eight could be hanged for property crimes, a prisoner's family could be charged for easement of irons, a witch could be sawn in half, and a sailor could be flogged to a pulp. The moral commonplaces of our age, such as that slavery, war, and torture are wrong, would have been seen as saccharine sentimentality, and our notion of universal human rights almost incoherent. Genocide and war crimes were absent from the historical record only because no one at the time thought they were a big deal” (693-4).

What about religions? Were they not humanizing forces for righteousness and compassion? Every institutional religion is the manifestation of the contemporary ethos and mores; each carries the banner of universal love but their underside is inhumanity, irrationality and injustice. We need some dose of disillusioning medicine:

“Speaking of ideologies, we have seen that little good has come from ancient tribal dogmas. All over the world, belief in the supernatural has authorized the sacrifice of people to propitiate bloodthirsty gods, and the murder of witches for their malevolent powers (chapter 4). The scriptures present a God who delights in genocide, rape, slavery, and the execution of nonconformists, and for millennia those writings were used to rationalize the massacre of infidels, the ownership of women, the beating of children, dominion over animals, and the persecution of heretics and homosexuals (chapters 1,4, and 7). Humanitarian reforms such as the elimination of cruel punishment, the dissemination of empathy-inducing novels, and the abolition of slavery were met with fierce opposition in their time by ecclesiastical authorities and their apologists (chapter 4). The elevation of parochial values to the realm of the sacred is a license to dismiss other people's interests, and an imperative to reject the possibility of compromise (chapter 9). It inflamed the combatants in the European Wars of Religion, the second-bloodiest period in modern Western history, and it continues to inflame partisans in the Middle East and parts of the Islamic world today. The theory that religion is a force for peace, often heard among the religious right and its allies today, does not fit the facts of history” (676-7).

It was rather some minority religious sects as the Quakers and some Protestant Peace Churches that were truly committed to nonviolence, peace and justice. Of course there are individuals in the major religions who are inspired from their own religious ideals as well as from other sources and who against all odds sacrifice their lives for the others in the cause of justice, freedom and peace. Religions have good sides and bad sides, and which side comes to the fore depends much on contemporary ideas and forces; individuals have to follow their moral sense and choose whatever is good, true and beautiful. Gerald May is wise to advise individuals not to be identified with one's religion but to be located in the tradition and community (Ch. 11).

Buddhism, too, in its history and in its current forms, has both a good side and a negative side. Zen has its roots in Mahayana

Buddhism, and has also been influenced by Taoism and Confucianism. Zen as institution, with its different branches and with teachers of varied depths and maturity, has its own share of problems as any religion. However, in spite of all its problems and difficulties, zen has a saving grace, beauty and depth, all of which make it the spirituality of the coming world. Zen's strength has to be seen in its spirituality and practice rather than in its institutional set-ups. Zen practice is body-centred, community-oriented and world-affirming. Its core is Awakening, which has to be actualized in compassion for all beings. The heart of zen is awakening, and awakening is the presencing of the world in suchness. Let me first make a few remarks on Pinker.

Steven Pinker's thesis is persuasive and convincing. He wonders about the mysterious arrow of time and history towards goodness and justice (see pp.168, 694-5). Yet he cannot postulate some divine agency. He will confine himself only within the domain of reason and nature. His framework is fine, but he does not go far enough nor deep enough. Let me explain a few things.

Pinker talks about moral choices and reason, but fails to see their ground and their horizon. For, from what standpoint can you make moral choices, or perform self-control, or reasoning? How do you discern, and with what reasons, right from wrong, good from bad, reason from unreason? Why be moral at all? What empowers you to discern, to judge and to follow with action? We are not some calculating machines or computers. Our calculating reason alone will not do. Utilitarian calculuses cannot touch our hearts and souls. We experience, reflect, understand, judge and act. We are aware of awareness. As Pascal said, our heart has reasons that reason cannot comprehend. Our mind has depths which mind cannot fathom. These are not realms of the unconscious or subconscious as Freud and others have hypothesized.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith has some deep things to say about the essential human quality called faith, which is the human capacity for ultimate meaning: "Faith is beyond apprehension because it is the human potentiality for being human. It is our strange dynamic towards becoming our true selves, or becoming divine. Those who have said traditionally that faith is supernatural may in our century be heard by some as affirming that persons are, that personality is, non-reducible, more than mundane, faith is that quality of or available to humankind by which we are characterized as transcending, or are enabled to transcend, the natural order—an order both in and beyond which,

simultaneously, it has been normal, we may observe, for men and women to live". "[Faith] is the capacity to see for oneself the loveliness of what is lovely, to see the difference between justice and injustice; to see the stupendous importance of truth; to see the point of a cup of cold water given in love, or the point of a man dying on a cross. If we see what is there waiting to be seen in our life and in this strange world of ours, waiting not necessarily on the surface but just beyond it, and then more beyond that, then we have faith. If we see even a little, we soon find that there is more and more. If we do not see, if we see nothing beyond the surface at all, which is life's supreme tragedy, then we do not have faith." " One might argue that [faith] is *the* essential human quality: that it is constitutive of man as human; that personality is constituted by our universal ability, or invitation, to live in terms of a transcendent dimension, and in response to it. Certainly the human everywhere is, and from the beginning has been, open to a quality of life in oneself, in one's neighbor, and in the universe that lifts one above the merely mundane and the immediate, and means that one may be always in part but is never totally simply a product or a victim of circumstances" (Qtd in Hughes, pp. 232-5). Through faith, persons have found their lives set free (saved) from mediocrity and made capable of transformed existence: "By 'saved' here, mundanely, I mean....saved from nihilism, alienation, anomie, despair, from the bleak despondency of meaninglessness. Saved from unfreedom; from being the victim of one's own whims within, or of pressures without; saved from being merely an organism reacting to its environment" (In Hughes, p. 26.)

Faith is not merely a matter of believing a doctrine or in some higher power; it is one's openness to the otherness of the other and to the mystery and the unfathomable ground and the boundless horizon of self and world. Further, it is faith and trust that, in zen words, "Everyday is a good day". It is faith and trust in the transcendent goodness at the heart of reality. Still, 'trees wither and leaves fall', as the zen saying goes. There is darkness, untold suffering and evil in the world and even in the heart of oneself. Pinker offers a narrative of history as progressive and meliorative. But that is the history of victors and survivors. Of course, we can be grateful for all the fruits of history's civilizing process; however, what about those in the past and in the present who have been marginalized, repressed, tortured and destroyed? Can we ignore the dark and violent side of history and of evolution? The zen vision is the self as subject that is Emptiness-- the self that is the world and the world that is the self. Mahayana

Buddhism and zen offers the image of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Kanzeon/Guanyin, who hears and bears the cries and sorrows of the world. There is zen koan, "Why is it that the crimson lines of a clearly enlightened person never cease to flow?" ('Crimson lines' refer to passions as well as compassion.) Kanzeon is yourself, who hears and bears the joys and sorrows of the world. The Vietnamese zen Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh's poem, '*Call Me by My True Names*' brings out beautifully this vision of Kanzeon, I quote the last lines:

My joy is like spring, so warm it makes
flowers bloom in all walks of life,
my pain is like a river of tears, so full
it fills up the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and my
laughs at once, so I can see that
my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up, and so the door
of my heart can be left open,
the door of compassion.

The zen vocation is to awaken to one's True Self and 'save the many beings'. It is a call to awaken to the miracle of the world and the unfathomable mystery of the self. Zen's concern with the self is as subject self-presencing and not as some object; when the self is clarified, transformed and illumined, all 'the ten thousand things' will fall in place. The mysterious dimension of the self is shown in this ancient zen incident:

Nan Yueh Huai Jang (J.: Nangaku Ejo, 677-744) who was later to become the successor to the Sixth Patriarch of Zen Buddhism in China, the famous Hui-Neng (Jap. Eno, 637-713), came to visit the latter. Quite abruptly Hui-Neng asked him: 'What **is** *this thing* that has **come** to me in this way?'. This put the young Nan Yueh completely at a loss for a reply. He left the master. And it took him eight years to solve the problem. The answer which Nan Yueh presented to the master after eight years' struggle was a very simple one: 'Whatever I say in the

form of *I am X* will miss the point. That exactly is the real I' (Qtd in Izutsu).

The self moves on many levels and dimensions, can be said to be even many selves. However for zen we can talk of two major levels, the ultimate, *paramartha satya*, and the phenomenal, *lokuttara satya*. On the phenomenal dimension one is who ordinarily sees, hears, senses, feels, thinks, and acts. This self has its identity in terms of objects and relationships. This is what we call normally 'I'. The ultimate dimension is beyond all these spheres, beyond space and time. It measures and defines all that is phenomenal, itself is beyond all measures and forms. However, it is present to all the phenomenal dimensions, is 'witness' to all that happens and appears. It is present to history and illumines it, but is trans-historical. It can be called Awareness of awareness, or the ground of awareness. This is what Hui-Neng refers to in the above incident, 'What is this thing coming thus...?' The question is: 'Who are you truly and ultimately? How will you define yourself in the ultimate dimension? Are you only the physical and the mental, the phenomenal and the perceptible? Is there not something more to you? Can you be reduced to the measurable, the passing and the finite?' The 'who' question, for example, 'Who is hearing?' Or, 'Who is asking?', will lead finally to the ground of the self that cannot be grasped yet is revealing itself all the time. The verse to case no. 23 in *Mumonkan* proclaims, "There is nowhere to hide the primal face!" This is what comes out in this zen koan: 'Standing nowhere, let the mind come forth.'

Wolfgang Fasching describes this dimension thus: "In this way—as often described in all contemplative traditions—one experiences oneself within every movement as, simultaneously, the stillness wherein all movement takes place. In this sense, for example, the Chinese Zen master Hui-neng says about "non-thinking" (*wu-nien*) in Zen: "No-thought is not to think even when involved in thought". I am there not only as one who is active (who perceives, thinks, desires) but also as the very being of activity (of perceiving, thinking, desiring) itself, which is essentially non-activity in each and every moment of acting. For self-presence is nothing that is done by oneself: there is nothing left to be accomplished, no teleology of coming-nearer, no going from here to there within its immanence"

Further, the ground as well as the horizon of consciousness or of the self is what makes present the presence of phenomena. It is not an

object among objects, it is the 'clearing' (in German, *die Lichtung*) for the objects to come to be there at all. It is 'the light that enlightens everything coming into the world'. It is the horizon that transcends the world and is the home of the world. When zen master Fa Yen was studying with Master Ti Tsang, "having been driven by Ti Tsang into a logical impasse and having finally confessed, 'O Master, I am now in a situation in which language is reduced to silence and thinking has no way to follow!', he heard his master remark, 'If you still are to talk about the ultimate Reality, see how it is nakedly apparent in everything and every event!' Fa Yen is thereupon said to have attained enlightenment." Zen master Hung Chih Cheng Chueh (J.: Wanshi Shogaku, 1091-1157) remarks: 'The Reality [i.e. the Field] has no definite aspect of its own; it reveals itself in accordance with things. The Wisdom [i.e. I SEE] has no definite knowledge of its own; it illumines in response to situations. Look! the green bamboo is so serenely green; the yellow flower so profusely yellow! Just pick up anything you like, and see! In every single thing **IT** is so nakedly manifested' (Qtd in Izutsu).

The ultimate and the phenomenal are two sides of one's very self. The phenomenal is the necessary foundation of the ultimate, but not sufficient one. In the phenomenal dimension there is time and space, history and evolution, growth and decay, birth and death; this is what Steven Pinker describes and enumerates masterfully. In the ultimate level it is Emptiness that is Mystery. How both are related is mysterious, no science or philosophy can decipher it conclusively. We can offer only guesses and glimpses, the rest we have to leave it as wondrous mystery. The self is mystery, we are mystery. The world too is mystery that '*comes thus*'. Zen calls this mystery Emptiness. Emptiness is the self, the self is Emptiness. At the same time, Emptiness is both the self and embraces the self. There is not only my self, but there are other selves, too. They are centres and circles interpenetrating and interfusing with each other; each is other and non-other. Each is mystery and we stand in mystery, mystery that is graciousness. In this dimension, the only answer to 'Who are you?' is what Bodhidharma gave to the Chinese Emperor: 'I don't know!'

Here a zen koan from *Mumonkan* (Case no. 35):

Master Hoen of Goso asked a monk, "Seijo and her soul are separated; which one is the true Seijo?"

*The verse:
 The clouds and the moon are the same,
 Valleys and mountains are different from each other;
 All are blessed, all are blessed,
 Ten thousand things, ten thousand blessings;
 Is this one? Is this two?*

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