

The three books

The monk Tetsugen had a dream: to publish a book in Japanese, containing all the sacred verses. Determined to transform this dream into reality, he began to travel the country in order to raise the necessary money.

However, just as he had managed to get together enough money to begin work on the project, the river Uji flooded, provoking a catastrophe of gigantic proportions. When he saw the victims of the flood, Tetsugen resolved to spend all the money he had collected on relieving the sufferings of the people.

Afterwards, he resumed his struggle to make his dream come true: he went from door to door, he visited the various islands of Japan, and once more he managed to raise the money he needed. When he returned, exultant, to Edo, a cholera epidemic was sweeping the country. Again, the monk used the money to treat the sick and to help the families of the dead.

Undeterred, he returned to his original project. He set off again and, nearly twenty years later, he published seven thousand copies of the sacred verses.

They say that Tetsugen actually published three separate editions of the sacred texts, but the first two are invisible.

Another name

A man said to a friend:

'You talk about God as if you knew him personally, down to the colour of his eyes. Why do you need to create something to believe in? Can't you live without that?'

His friend replied:

'Do you have any idea how the Universe was created? Can you explain the miracle of life?'

'Everything around us is the result of chance. Things just happen.'

'Exactly. Well, "Things just happen" is merely another name for God.'

Respect my wishes

On his deathbed, Jacob summoned his wife, Sarah, to his side.

'Dear Sarah, I want to make my will. To my first-born, Abraham, I am going to leave half of my estate. He is, after all, a man of faith.'

'Oh, don't do that, Jacob! Abraham doesn't need all that money, he's got his own business; besides, he has faith in our religion. Leave it to Isaac, who is in such turmoil about whether or not God exists, and who has still not found his way in the world.'

'All right, I'll leave it to Isaac. And Abraham can have my shares.'

'Like I said, dear Jacob, Abraham doesn't need anything. I'll have the shares and I can always help out the children as and when.'

'You're quite right, Sarah. Now about the land we own in Israel. I think I'll leave it to Deborah.'

'To Deborah! Are you mad, Jacob? She's already got land in Israel. Do you want to make her into a businesswoman and ruin her marriage? I think our daughter Michele is much more in need of help.'

Mustering his last ounce of strength, Jacob sat up indignantly.

'My dear Sarah, you have been an excellent wife, an excellent mother, and I know you want the best for each of your children, but, please show some respect for my opinion. After all, who's dying here, you or me?'

Joy and love

A believer approached Rabbi Moche of Kobryn and asked:

'How should I best use my days so that God will be contented with my actions?'

'There is only one possible option: to live with love,' replied the Rabbi.

Minutes later, another follower approached him and asked the same question.

'There is only one possible option: try to live with joy.'

The first follower was taken aback.

'But the advice you gave me was different!'

'Not at all,' said the rabbi. 'It was exactly the same.'

Certainty and doubt

Buddha was gathered together with his disciples one morning, when a man came up to him.

'Does God exist?' he asked.

'He does,' replied Buddha.

After lunch, another man came up to him.

'Does God exist?' he asked.

'No, he doesn't,' said Buddha.

Later that afternoon, a third man asked the same question: 'Does God exist?'

'That's for you to decide,' replied Buddha.

As soon as the man had gone, one of his disciples remarked angrily:

'But that's absurd, Master! How can you possibly give such different answers to the same question?'

'Because they are all different people, and each one of them will reach God by his own path. The first man will believe what I say. The second will do everything he can to prove me wrong. The third will only believe in what he is allowed to choose for himself.'

The screwdriver

Shortly before he died, my father-in-law summoned his family.

'I know that death is only a passageway into the next world. When I have gone through it, I will send you a sign that it really is worthwhile helping others in this life.' He wanted to be cremated and for his ashes to be scattered over Arpoador Beach while a tape recorder played his favourite music.

He died two days later. A friend arranged the cremation in São Paulo and - once back in Rio - we went straight to the beach armed with a tape recorder, tapes and the package containing the cremation urn. When we reached the sea, we got a surprise. The lid of the urn was firmly screwed down. We couldn't open it.

The only person around was a beggar, and he came over to us and asked: 'What's the problem?'

My brother-in-law said:

'We need a screwdriver so that we can get at my father's ashes inside this urn.'

'Well, he must have been a very good man, because I've just found this,' said the beggar.

And he held out a screwdriver.

Saving one's energies

Two rabbis are doing all they can to bring spiritual comfort to the Jews in Nazi Germany. Though in mortal fear of their lives, they nevertheless manage to fool the Gestapo - Hitler's fearsome police - and perform religious ceremonies in various communities.

They are finally discovered and imprisoned. One of the rabbis, terrified at the thought of what might happen next, spends all his time praying. The other rabbi, however, spends the whole day sleeping.

'How can you do that?' asks the first rabbi in alarm.

'I'm saving my energies because I know I'm going to need them.'

'But aren't you afraid? Don't you know what might happen to us?'

'Until we were imprisoned, I was scared to death, but now that I'm here in this cell, what's the point of being afraid of something that has already happened. The time for fear is past; now the time for hope has begun.'

We don't need you any more

One afternoon, the novices at the monastery of Sceta witnessed a monk insulting another monk. The superior, Abbot Sisois, asked the monk who had been insulted to forgive his aggressor.

'Certainly not,' came the reply. 'He did wrong and he'll have to pay.'

At that moment, Abbot Sisois raised his arms to heaven and began to pray:

'Jesus, we do not need You any more. We are perfectly capable of making aggressors pay for their offences. We can take vengeance into our own hands and deal with Good and Evil too. Therefore, O Lord, You need not worry about us any more.'

Ashamed, the monk who had been insulted immediately forgave his brother.

Thinking about future generations

When he was a young man, Abin-Asar overheard a conversation his father had with a dervish.

'Be careful how you act,' said the dervish. 'Think about how your actions might affect future generations.'

'What have I got to do with future generations?' said his father. 'I won't ever meet them. When I die, that will be that, and I don't care what my descendants say about me.'

Abin-Asar never forgot this conversation. All his life, he tried to do good, to help people and to carry out his work with enthusiasm.

He became known as a man who cared about others. When he died, he left behind him a large number of charitable projects which considerably improved the standard of living in his city.

He had ordered the following epitaph to be engraved on his tomb:

'A life that ends with death is a life not worth living.'

The monk and the prostitute

A monk lived near the temple of Shiva. In the house opposite lived a prostitute. Noticing the large number of men who visited her, the monk decided to speak to her.

'You are a great sinner,' he said sternly. 'You reveal your lack of respect for God every day and every night. Do you never stop to think about what will happen to you after your death?'

The poor woman was very shaken by what the monk said. She prayed to God out of genuine repentance, begging His forgiveness. She also asked the Almighty to help her to find another means of earning her living.

But she could find no other work and, after going hungry for a week, she returned to prostitution.

But each time she gave her body to a stranger, she would pray to the Lord for forgiveness.

Annoyed that his advice had had no effect, the monk thought to himself:

'From now on, I'm going to keep a count of the number of men who go into that house, until the day the sinner dies.'

And from that moment on, he did nothing but watch the comings and goings at the prostitute's house, and for each man who went in, he added a stone to a pile of stones by his side.

After some time, the monk again spoke to the prostitute and said:

'You see that pile of stones? Each stone represents a mortal sin committed by you, despite all my warnings. I say to you once more: do not sin again!'

Seeing how her sins accumulated, the woman began to tremble. Returning home, she wept tears of real repentance and prayed to God:

'O Lord, when will Your mercy free me from this wretched life?'

Her prayer was heard. That same day, the angel of death came to her house and carried her off. On God's orders, the angel crossed the street and took the monk with him too.

The prostitute's soul went straight up to Heaven, while the devils bore the monk down into Hell. They passed each other on the way, and when the monk saw what was happening, he cried out:

'Is this Your justice, O Lord? I spent my whole life in devotion and poverty and now I am carried off into Hell, while that prostitute, who lived all her life steeped in sin, is borne aloft up to Heaven!'

Hearing this, one of the angels replied:

'God's purposes are always just. You thought that God's love meant judging the behaviour of your neighbour. While you filled your heart with the impurity of another's sin, this woman prayed fervently day and night. Her soul is so light after all the tears she has shed that we can easily bear her up to Paradise. Your soul is so weighed down with stones it is too heavy to lift.'

The older sister's question

When her brother was born, Sa-chi Gabriel begged her parents to leave her alone with the baby. They refused, fearing that, as with many four-year-olds, she was jealous and wanted to mistreat him.

But Sa-chi showed no signs of jealousy. And since she was always extremely affectionate towards her little brother, her parents decided to carry out an experiment. They left Sa-chi alone with their new-born baby, but kept the bedroom door ajar so that they could watch what she did.

Delighted to have her wish granted, little Sa-chi tiptoed over to the cradle, leaned over the baby and said:

'Tell me what God is like. I'm beginning to forget.'

Shelley and the drunk

After an exhausting morning spent talking to children, I go and have lunch with my lawyer friend, Shelley Mitchel. In the restaurant, we are given a table next to one occupied by a drunk, who insists on talking to us. He speaks of his pain when his wife left him, tells us how sad he is and asks us what he should do.

At one point, Shelley asks the drunk to be quiet, but he says:

'Why? I spoke of love as a sober man never would. I revealed my joys and my sorrows. I tried to make contact with two strangers. What's wrong with that?'

'It's not the right moment,' she says.

'Do you mean that there is a right moment to suffer for love?'

At these words, we invite the drunk to join us.

The reflection in the physical body

In the days when I practised Zen meditation, there always came a moment when the teacher would go over to one corner of the dojo (the room where the students gathered) and return carrying a bamboo cane. Any student who had failed to concentrate properly was asked to put up his or her hand; the teacher would then come over and strike each one three times on each shoulder.

On the first day, that seemed to me absurd and medieval. Later, I understood that it is often necessary to place spiritual suffering on a physical plane in order for us to see the evil that it causes. On the road to Santiago, I learned an exercise which consisted of digging the nail of my index finger into my thumb whenever I had any harmful thoughts.

We only see the terrible consequences of negative thoughts much later, but by making them manifest on the physical plane - through pain - we soon come to realise the evil they cause and end up avoiding them.

In the queue at the shopping market

A priest from the Church of the Resurrection in Copacabana was patiently waiting his turn to buy some meat at the supermarket when a woman tried to jump the queue.

A stream of verbal insults burst forth from the other customers, and the woman responded with equal vehemence. Just as the situation was beginning to get out of hand, someone called out: 'Hey, lady, God loves you!'

'It was amazing,' the priest told me. 'At a moment when everyone was thinking about hate, someone spoke of love. All the ferment disappeared as if by magic. The woman walked back to her rightful place in the queue, and the other customers apologised for having reacted so aggressively.'

How to see the All in everything

When Ketu was twelve, he was sent to a teacher, with whom he studied until he was twenty-four. When he had finished his apprenticeship, he returned home, feeling very proud.

His father said to him:

'How can we know something that we cannot see? How can we know that God, the Almighty, is everywhere?'

The young man began reciting the scriptures, but his father interrupted him:

'That's far too complicated. Isn't there a simpler way of learning about the existence of God?'

'Not that I know of, father. I'm an educated man now and I have to apply the education I was given in order to explain the mysteries of divine knowledge.'

'I wasted my money sending you to that monastery,' cried his father.

And grabbing Ketu by the hand, he dragged him into the kitchen. There, he filled a basin with water and added a little salt. Then they went out for a walk around the town.

When they got home, his father said to Ketu:

'Bring me the salt that I put in the basin of water.'

Ketu looked for the salt, but couldn't find it because it had already dissolved in the water.

'So, you can't see the salt any more?' asked his father.

'No. The salt has become invisible.'

'Taste a bit of the water on the surface of the basin. What's it like?'

'Salty.'

'Taste a bit of the water from the middle. What's that like?'

'As salty as the water on the surface.'

'Now try the water at the bottom of the basin and tell me what that tastes like.'

Ketu tried it and it tasted exactly the same.

'You studied for all those years and yet you cannot explain in simple terms how the Invisible God can be everywhere at once,' said his father. 'By using a basin of water and calling God "salt", I could make even a peasant understand. My son, forget the kind of knowledge that separates us from men and go in search of the kind of inspiration that brings us closer.'

The thieving student

A student of the Zen master Bankei was caught stealing during a class. The other students demanded his expulsion, but Bankei decided to take no further action.

Days later, the student stole again, and the master still said nothing. Enraged, the other students demanded that the thief be punished, since such behaviour could not be tolerated.

'How wise you are!' said Bankei. 'You have learned how to tell right from wrong and can go and study anywhere. But this poor brother does not know right from wrong and only has me to teach him.'

The students never again doubted Bankei's wisdom and generosity, and the thief never stole again.

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