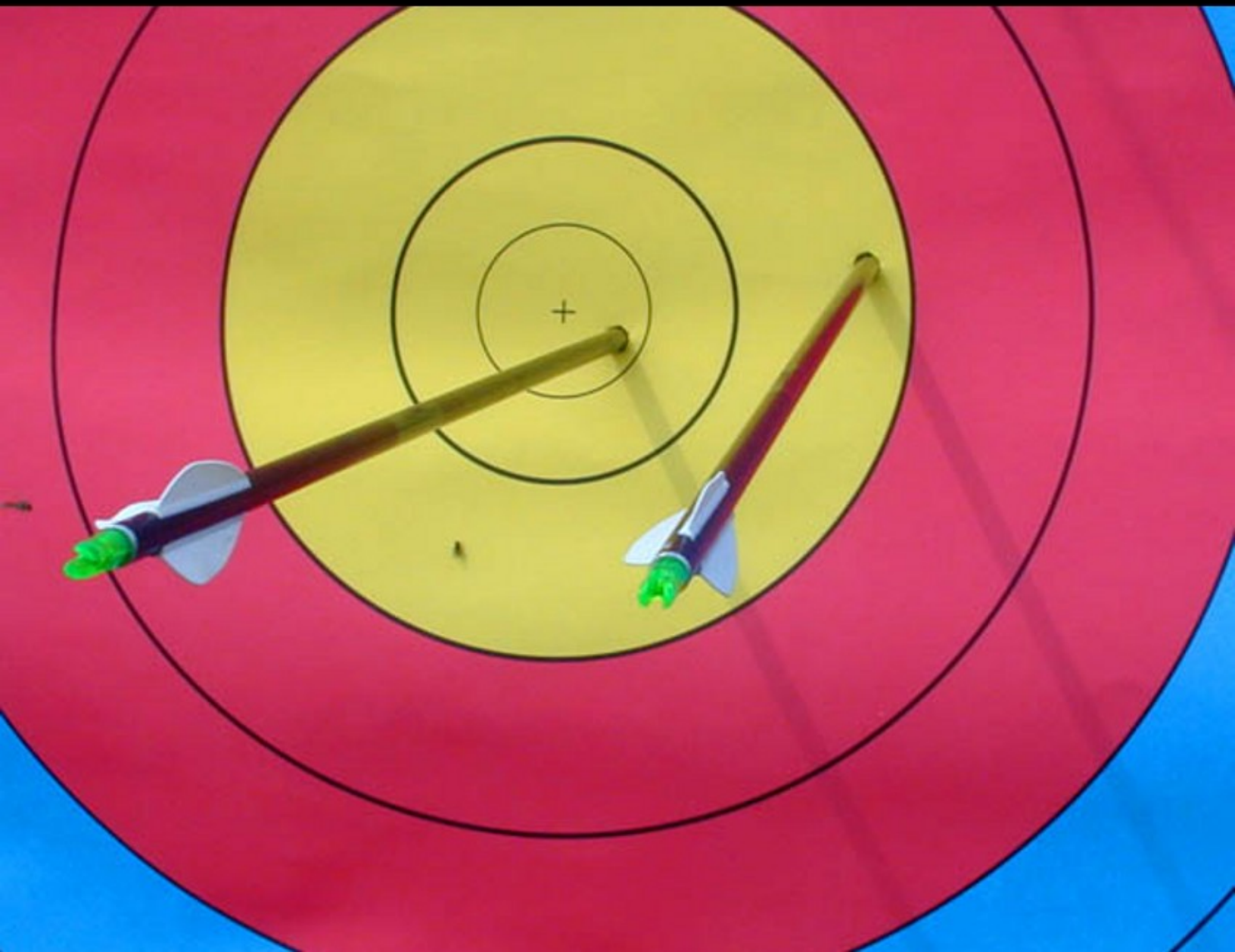
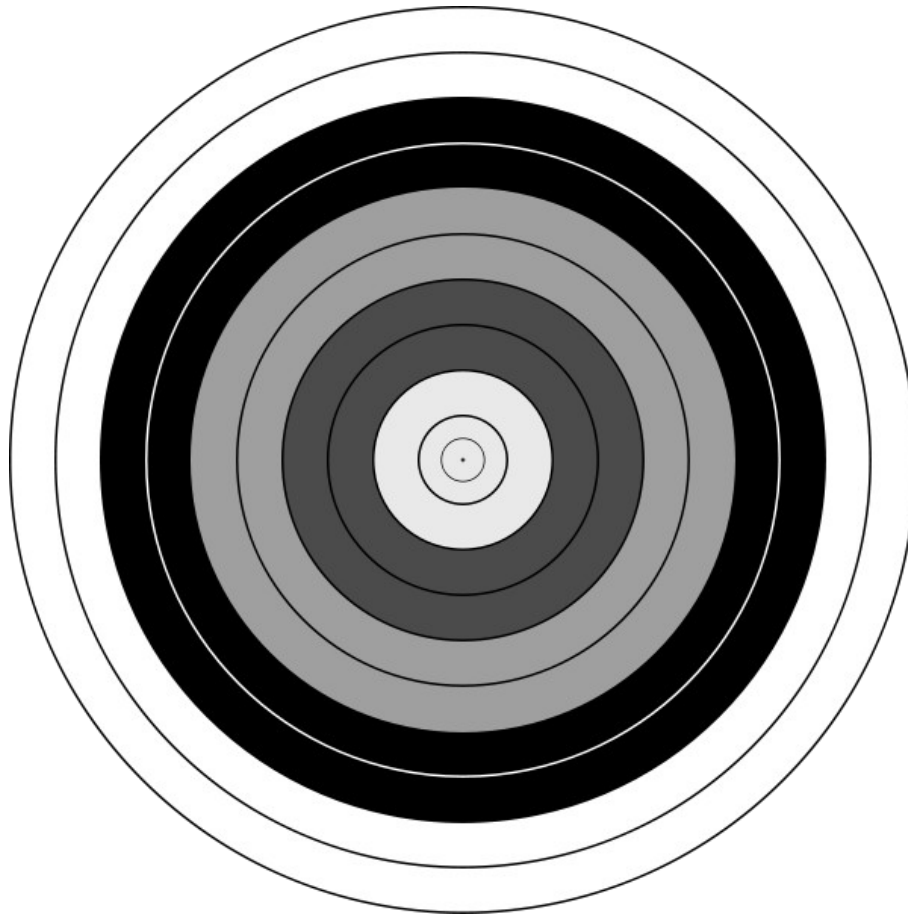


CHRISTOPHER STEWART

ON THE MEANING  
OF SIN



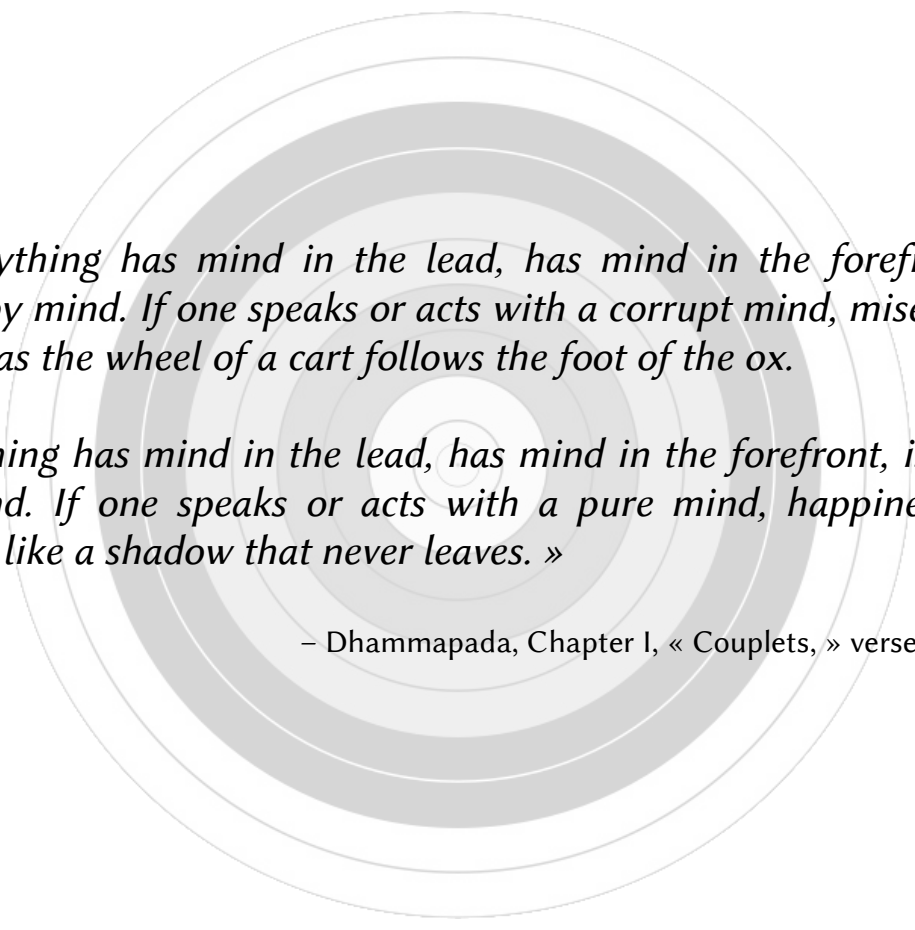
# ON THE MEANING OF SIN



AN ESSAY BY

CHRISTOPHER STEWART

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*« Everything has mind in the lead, has mind in the forefront, is made by mind. If one speaks or acts with a corrupt mind, misery will follow as the wheel of a cart follows the foot of the ox.*

*Everything has mind in the lead, has mind in the forefront, is made by mind. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness will follow, like a shadow that never leaves. »*

– Dhammapada, Chapter I, « Couplets, » verses 1 and 2.



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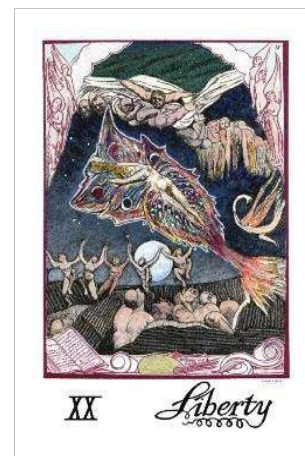
## 1. Introduction

### »→ Liberation

In the week preceding my decision to tackle this essay, upon interpreting one of the daily tarot readings using which I confirm my direction and evaluate my progress, I discovered the extended description of the *Liberty* card from the *William Blake Tarot of the Creative Imagination*, including the following excerpt :

« For Blake, Judgment, or human liberation, occurs whenever error is eliminated, and this can happen at any time, individually or societally. »

[source : [Facade](#)]



In many tarot decks, the equivalent of the *Liberty* card is the *Judgment* card, typically depicting trumpet-blowing angels waking up the dead from out of their graves. The imagery in Blake's version is very similar, but it prominently features a butterfly rising up to embrace the entire universe, after having completed its metamorphosis.

While the mystic ideal of unification with the divine represented in the artwork has its appeal, the question remains nonetheless pragmatic in its essence, as far as I am concerned anyhow. In short, the enigmatic part of the endeavour consists in identifying error. Once this is done, ridding oneself of it gets, if not necessarily easy, at least achievable. And thus, finally tasting the sweet nectar of liberation gradually becomes less of a farfetched aspiration, and more of a distinct possibility, until it eventually turns into an unavoidable fate.

Phrased in more prosaic terms, the above simply means that as long as what provokes undesirable occurrences is unknown, those unwanted hindrances are bound to happen again. And once one begins to eliminate those causes, the process grows increasingly self-refining, as mistakes and their effects become more and more evident, up to the point when it is quite clear that only such and such a deed could have brought on such and such an outcome.

Like Blake, I believe that liberation can be attained at any time, by anyone. I trust that heaven and hell are coextensive, and that both realms can thus be experienced in one and the same location, and in fact regardless of the location, as a function of one's state of mind.

## »→ Motivation

In publishing this essay, I don't aim to convert nor to convince, but I attempt to share knowledge I have acquired along my journey. I readily acknowledge that realities are defined subjectively, and as such that our respective worlds are essentially unique, and thus that the contents suggested therein might not accommodate everyone, nor apply to all. Nevertheless, I hope the document will be of aid to some of those who will consider it.

I obviously assume that most living beings, if not all, would prefer to enjoy an existence wherein they can revel in the activities of their choosing, free of the pains that come with the disagreeable setbacks that life sometimes proposes. Responding to the requirements of one's path is demanding enough as it is without having to address additional annoyances that get in the way of personal development.

Growing up is hard work already, who wants otherwise friendly and dependable people who incomprehensibly start to behave in an antagonistic or detrimental manner ? Who likes devices that stop operating without warning just when they're most needed ? Who strives for public expositions of their limitations ? Who relishes doorways that disappear before one can make it pass their threshold, especially after having toiled forever and a day to witness them materialize from out of the clear blue sky ?

Still, what if all those insufferable deterrents and myriad other similar irritations were actually the results of one's own faults, and as such as many clues inviting one to reform and to regain the itinerary they have selected for themselves ?

It is with attention to those concerns that I feel impelled to prepare the present text, confident that my perspective on the question will benefit at least some of the readers.

## »→ Mission

In the following sections, I will undertake to provide a concise yet rigorous explanation of my reflections on this matter of liberation from error. Also, in order to supply references to help the interested seeker recognize possible causes of mistakes in their own processes, I will offer a succinct overview of what is conventionally regarded as wrongdoing in Buddhist and Christian culture, along with alternative tracks of inquiry discovered empirically.

But first, please allow me to reveal parts of my trajectory so as to clarify the standpoint from which my observations have been carried out.

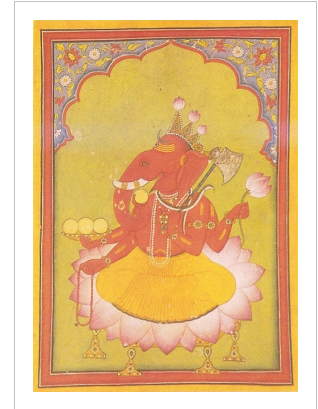


## 2. A Bit of Personal History

### »→ Figurines of the Virgin Mary

Religion wasn't a central theme in the house where I grew up. Not that it was entirely absent, but if my parents were fervent Catholics, they concealed it well, and they certainly didn't impose it on me.

I can vaguely remember there were crucifixes in some of the rooms, figurines of the Virgin Mary and other saintly characters on shelves, and framed images and paintings that either depicted holy scenes, or at least evoked the sacred. And there was also this peculiar Jesus Christ Wanted Dead or Alive poster that struck me as compelling in a subversive kind of way at the time.



On festive occasions, when all the children were present, or when we had guests, my father gave thanks at the beginning of the meals, and we all made the sign of the cross at the end of the prayer. But otherwise, I don't recollect us praying, except before going to bed. We used to recite the same verse I was surprised to hear again upon discovering Metallica's *Enter Sandman* :

*« Now I lay me down to sleep,  
Pray the Lord my soul to keep,  
If I die before I wake,  
Pray the Lord my soul to take. »*

We had catechism class throughout elementary school. Attending church on Sundays was a compulsory observance, and I wasn't particularly fond of it, deeming the ceremonies tedious and protracted. I would often try to come up with reasons for not going, although I think I complied anyhow, usually if not always.

And basically, that was it. I don't recall being preached to nor lectured at home, or not in relation to those questions at any rate. Perhaps it was different for my siblings, but I was pretty much left to my own devices regarding spiritual matters.

I have clear memories of one specific week when I was sick and missed school. I must have been seven or eight years old. There was a copy of the New Testament on the desk in my bedroom, and I eventually grabbed it and read large parts of it, out of boredom at first,



and then with curiosity. In retrospect, I'm quite sure the experience influenced me given my young age, yet it manifestly didn't turn me into a devout faithful.

A few years later, a priest visited our school. At some point during his speech, he asked us to write down one of the things we would like God to assist us with, or something along those lines. My request was that he would help us develop our individual aptitudes, so that we could become better persons. But when the clergyman delivered it out loud in front of the whole group, he said he didn't understand my suggestion. As it seemed simple enough to me already, I didn't bother to explain. Probably, that contributed to my general impression that religion was not for me at the time.

### »→ **For Weddings and Funerals**

After elementary school was over, attending mass wasn't required anymore. Catechism class was still mandatory up until the equivalent of grade eleven or so. Possibly was it before that, but I can't remember precisely.

My family stopped going to church altogether, except for Midnight Mass at Christmas, and occasions such as weddings and funerals. I never inquired about the official justification, but I came to the conclusion that my parents had been going mainly to accompany my sister and I, and now that it was optional insofar as our academic curriculum was concerned, their principal motivation was gone.

From then on, my world remained nearly completely devoid of spiritual preoccupations and activities for many years. They would only resurface much later.

### »→ **Beer is the Mind-Killer**

When I was studying electrical engineering at Université Laval, I subscribed to the view that religion was the refuge of uneducated people who lived in the past, apparently unaware of the recent discoveries of science. In my opinion, their beliefs were crutches to which those folks held on dearly for lack of a more sophisticated way of dealing with reality.

Interestingly enough, in hindsight I recognize that this corresponds to the period when I was at my most dissolute. I was in my twenties, and I used to drink excessive amounts of beer and pull quantity of other dishonourable deeds that I would now qualify as missing the mark by more than a fair margin. I'm certain I kept on paying a price for those mistakes, long after I committed them, primarily in terms of harbouring a delinquent, paranoid stance on life. Yet, evidently, I didn't know better at the time.



While I don't recall considering myself an atheist, I was convinced that there could be no such thing as a God and that religions were thus all intrinsically flawed. I obviously had doubts though. My then reason-based approach, as laudable as some might have claimed it to be, just wasn't equipped to properly address the most fundamental problems of existence.

### »→ **Remover of Obstacles**

Thanks to a girl friend who one evening wore a t-shirt she had brought back from Sri Lanka, and which featured a depiction of *Ganesha*, the elephant-headed deity widely revered as the *Remover of Obstacles*, and the *Lord of Beginnings*, I eventually chanced upon Buddhist philosophy. It immediately attracted me because of its numerous similarities with reflections about my own inner workings that I had been entertaining ever since attending a graduate class on *neural networks*.

Following that fateful finding in the mid-nineties, I decided to study Buddhism and to adopt some of its practices. I acquired a version of the *Dhammapada*, an initiatory collection of aphorisms attributed to the Buddha. This primer provided many pointers on the culture, and references to other documents that I also read later on. I experimented with meditation and reciting mantras, and they became part of my daily routine. I even transferred a few of those especially insightful scriptures to electronic format during the introductory years.

In parallel, I explored other avenues, including computer programming, music and the arts in general, and psychology and physics, through which I learned about the endeavours of pioneers such as Carl Jung and David Bohm. It is while perusing the writings of the latter that I ultimately stumbled upon the seed of what developed into the unorthodox perspective on the matter of error, and some of its related notions, that I share via this essay.

### »→ **Through Different Eyes**

While I was manifestly exposed to Christian influence in the course of my childhood, my observations on the issue of liberation thus principally come from a non-Christian point of view.

In the following section, I first state the traditional explanations of sin and hell as they have been presented to me, and I contrast the core concepts with alternative interpretations. Using these new meanings, I then propose a different take on the question, one that better describes how things appear to me when seen from where my hybrid trajectory in the worlds of arts, science, and Oriental philosophy has led me.



### 3. Sin, You Say ?

#### »→ Traditional Views

I can't recollect how early in my childhood the concept of sin was first presented to my mind. I would hazard to say that I spent most of my preadult existence believing, or in fact perhaps a more accurate word would be considering, the idea that sins were some peculiarly bad actions through which one would be condemned to hell. My understanding was that sinners would thus suffer eternal damnation in the underworld once their life would be over. Or at least, such would be their fate, assuming the whole thing wasn't a mere invention of overimaginative religious.

For the purpose of this essay, that's essentially what I would refer to as the traditional Catholic or Christian explanation of the question. In that framework, during the course of their passage on Earth, human beings commit both good and not so good deeds, of which some of the latter are sins. Then, when their time is up, they are judged based on their choices, and those who have sinned are permanently consigned to the nether regions.

Similar notions occur in some of the Buddhist scriptures I have read. For instance, in the *Bardo Thodol*, better known as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, there are descriptions of the *Six Realms of Existence*, including the hell realm that comprises several specific hells. Also, in the *Dhammapada*, there are mentions of evil-doers being reborn in hell as an upshot of their wrongdoing. One fundamental difference with the Christian inferno is that in that particular Eastern cosmology, the denizens are not prisoners of those terrible locations forever, but they can be reincarnated in higher domains once their negative karma is exhausted.

In my opinion, those orthodox ways of approaching the matter don't do much to help individuals improve their experiences. Or in any case, they don't work for everyone. Rather, they raise all sorts of interrogations regarding the actuality of the underworld, and of heaven by the same token, and they hinge on faith, or fear, depending on how one sees the issue. If someone isn't readily convinced that there is an afterlife, those manners of comprehending error seems pointless to me. Why not sin if one is only confronted to the consequences in an hypothetical future that cannot be evidenced and must be taken on trust ? In that context, it is all the more tempting to transgress the rules and to rationalize that there won't be such a place as the netherworld, if there's an hereafter altogether to begin with.



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