

# The Finger and the Moon

THERE IS AN OLD CHRISTIAN PHRASE—*Crux medicina mundi*—the Cross, the medicine of the world—a phrase which is rather remarkable in that it suggests that religion is a medicine rather than a diet. The difference is, of course, that medicine is something to be taken occasionally—like penicillin—whereas a diet is regular food. Perhaps this analogy cannot be pressed too far, since there are medicines like insulin which some people have to take all the time. But there is a point to the analogy—a point expressed in another Latin saying, not at all Christian, since its author was Lucretius: *Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum* (Too much religion is apt to encourage evil). I am not thinking so much of the exploitation of the poor by a corrupt priesthood, or of the obvious evils of zealotry and fanaticism. I am thinking, rather, of the old Buddhist metaphor of the doctrine which is like a raft for crossing a river. When you have reached the opposite shore, you do not carry the raft on your back, but leave it behind.

There is something here which applies not only to the mere handful of people who might be said to have reached the opposite shore, but to most of us. To carry out the metaphor a little: if you are going to cross the river, you must make haste, for if you dally on the raft, the current will carry you downstream, and out to the ocean—and then you will be stuck on the raft forever. And it

is so easy to get stuck—on the raft, on religion, on psychotherapy, on philosophy. To use another Buddhist simile: The doctrine is like a finger pointing at the moon, and one must take care not to mistake the finger for the moon. Too many of us, I fear, suck the pointing finger of religion for comfort, instead of looking where it points.

Now it seems to me that what the finger of religion points at is something not at all religious. Religion, with all its apparatus of ideas and practices, is altogether a pointing—and it does not point at itself. It doesn't point at God, either, for the notion of God is part and parcel of religion. I might say that what religion points at is reality, except that this merely puts a philosophical notion in place of a religious one. And I can think of a dozen other substitutes for God or reality. I could say that it points at one's true Self, at the eternal Now, at the nonverbal world, at the infinite and ineffable—but really none of this is very helpful. It's just putting one finger in place of another. When Joshu asked his teacher Nansen, "What is the Tao, the Way?" Nansen replied, "Your everyday mind is the Tao."

But this doesn't help, either, for as soon as I try to understand what is meant by my everyday mind, and then try to latch on to it, I am just sucking another finger. But why does this difficulty arise? If someone actually points his finger at the moon, I have no difficulty in turning and looking at the moon. But the thing at which these religious and philosophical fingers are pointing seems to be invisible, so that when I turn to look there is nothing there, and I am forced to go back to the finger to see whether I understood its direction correctly. And sure enough, I find time and time again that I made no mistake about its direction—but for all this I simply cannot see what it's pointing at.

All this is equally exasperating for the person who is doing the pointing, for he wants to show me something which, to him, is so obvious that one would think any fool could see it. He must

feel as we all feel when trying to explain to a thick-headed child that two times zero is zero and not two, or some other perfectly simple little fact. And there is something even more exasperating than this. I am sure that many of you may, for a fleeting moment, have had one clear glimpse of what the finger was pointing at—a glimpse in which you shared the pointer's astonishment that you had never seen it before, in which you saw the whole thing so plainly that you knew you could never forget it . . . and then you lost it. After this, there may be a tormenting nostalgia that goes on for years. How to find the way back, back to the door in the wall that no longer seems to be there, back to the turning which led into paradise—which wasn't on the map, which you saw for sure right here. But now there is nothing. It is like trying to trace someone with whom you fell in love at first sight, and then lost touch; and you go back to the original place of meeting again and again, trying in vain to pick up the threads.

If I may put it in a way which is horribly cumbersome and inadequate, that fleeting glimpse is the perception that, suddenly, some very ordinary moment of your ordinary everyday life, lived by your very ordinary self, just as it is and just as you are—that this immediate here-and-now is perfect and self-sufficient beyond any possibility of description. You know that there is nothing to desire or seek for—that no techniques, no spiritual apparatus of belief or discipline is necessary, no system of philosophy or religion. The goal is here. It is this present experience, just as it is. That, obviously, is what the finger was pointing at. But the next moment, as you look again, the instant in which you are living is as ordinary as ever, though the finger still points right at it.

However, this irritatingly elusive quality of the vision to which the finger points has an extremely simple explanation, an explanation which has to do with what I said at the beginning about getting rid of the raft when you have crossed the river, about

taking religion as a medicine but not as a diet. For purposes of understanding this point, we must take the raft as representing the ideas or words or other symbols whereby a religion or a philosophy expresses itself, whereby it points at the moon of reality. As soon as you have understood the words in their plain and straightforward sense, you have already used the raft. You have reached the opposite bank of the river. All that remains now is to do what the words say—to drop the raft and go walking on the dry land. And to do this, you *must* drop the raft. In other words, you cannot, at this stage, think about religion and practice it at the same time. To see the moon, you must forget the pointing finger, and simply look at the moon.

This is why all the great Asian philosophies begin with the practice of concentration, that is, of attentive looking. It is as if to say, "If you want to know what reality is, you must look directly at it and see for yourself. But this needs a certain kind of concentration, because reality is not symbols, it is not words and thoughts, it is not reflections and fantasies. Therefore to see it clearly, your mind must be free from wandering words and from the floating fantasies of memory." To this we are probably apt to reply, "Fine, but this is easier said than done." There always seems to be a problem about translating words into action, and this problem seems to be peculiarly acute when it comes to the so-called spiritual life. Faced with this problem, we back up and start to busy ourselves with a lot of discussion about methods, techniques, and other aids to concentration. But it should be simple enough to see that this is nothing but procrastination and postponement. You cannot, at the same time, concentrate and think about concentrating. It sounds almost silly to say it, but the only way to concentrate is to concentrate. In actually doing it, the idea of doing it disappears—and this is the same thing as saying that religion disappears when it becomes real and effective.

Now a great deal of the talk about the difficulty of action, or

This sort of thing is not Zen or Yoga; it is just a fad, just religiosity, and is precisely self-consciousness and affectation rather than unselfconsciousness and naturalness. If, however, you can really do the thing itself—that is, if you can learn to wake up and concentrate at the drop of a hat—you can take or leave the trimmings as you will. For the fear of exoticism should not prevent us from enjoying the really beautiful things which Asian culture has to offer—Chinese painting, Japanese architecture, Indian philosophy, and all the rest. But the point is that we cannot really enter into the spirit of these things at all unless, in the first place, we can acquire the special kind of relaxed concentration and clear-sightedness which is essential for their proper appreciation.

Of themselves, they will not give us that capacity—which is something innate. If you have to import it from Asia, you do not have it at all. Therefore, the important thing is simply to begin—anywhere, wherever you are. If you happen to be sitting, just sit. If you are smoking a pipe, just smoke it. If you are thinking out a problem, just think. But don't think and reflect unnecessarily, compulsively, from sheer force of nervous habit. In Zen, they call this having a leaky mind—like an old barrel with open seams which cannot contain itself.

Well, I think this is enough medicine for tonight. So let's put the bottle away, and go out and look at the moon.