

Fingers Pointing at the Moon

Readings: 'For Once, Then, Something' by Robert Frost
'The Second Music' by Annie Lighthart
'Monet Refuses the Operation' by Lisel Mueller

Like any old teaching worth telling again and again and again, the parable I'm telling today has many versions. In one, the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, is teaching a group of his followers on a moonlit night. He points at the moon and says, "All I have taught you is just fingers pointing at the moon. The truth is the moon. Follow the truth, not the teachings." In other versions of the story the teacher is a Central Asian Buddhist monk named Bodhidharma, a Chinese monk named Huineng, and an unnamed elderly Japanese nun. Martial artist Bruce Lee says it to a student in the film *Enter the Dragon*. Each version has a slightly different meaning, but all encourage the hearer to seek the truth without distraction.

In some versions, the teaching is more about the limits of language than the limits of teachings, one teacher says, "Truth has nothing to do with words. Truth can be likened to the bright moon in the sky. Words, in this case, can be likened to a finger. The finger can point to the moon's location. However, the finger is not the moon. To look at the moon, it is necessary to gaze beyond the finger."¹

This story is particularly popular in the Zen or Chan schools of Buddhism, which are a form of Buddhism with roots in China and Japan. This is a part of Buddhism that is particularly suspect of language, that knows the limits of language when it comes to the spiritual quest. Zen practitioners have been known to say that if you can put the truth into words, it isn't really the truth. I shared this idea with the world religions class that met on Wednesday afternoon. One member of the class said I should preach on this idea. I think a sermon, twenty minutes of words, might be the worst tool to use to explore the limits of words, but I shall try to touch on this today.

The teaching of the fingers pointing at the moon is about seeing things properly, about aligning one's thinking to cut through the illusions of life, illusions that we often project before us. The teaching encourages us to know the truth as it really is, not as it is reflected in words or teachings. Metaphor is the best way I know to talk about this – whether it is the fingers pointing at the moon or the metaphors presented by our poems this morning. In Buddhism – and other wisdom traditions, especially ones with roots in India – the spiritual life is about developing the clarity to know things as they are, to see the world as it is. Metaphorically, that might mean getting ourselves still enough to see past the surface of the water in a well – the image that Robert Frost gives us. It might mean hearing the second music that subtly plays through all of life that Annie Lighthart describes in her poem. It might mean following the fictional example of painter Claude Monet in the Lisel Mueller poem and refusing the operation, recognizing the blurred vision of cataracts that makes everything join together is truer than crisp lines and finite edges of so-called perfect vision. In truth, Monet had one of his eyes operated on and refused the operation on the second, a fact that lends itself to even more metaphors.²

¹ 'The Meaning of the Finger Pointing at the Moon.' *Tu An Temple*. May 30, 2012. Retrieved from <https://sites.google.com/a/tuantemple.org/tu-an-temple/news/themeaningofthefingerpointingtothemoon>

² 'Monet, Claude Oscar (1840-1926).' *University of Calgary*. Retrieved from <http://psych.ucalgary.ca/PACE/VA-Lab/AVDE-Website/Monet.html>

There are real limits to all of these metaphors. Whether they are about seeing or hearing, they are all rooted in physical ability – and we know that physical ability is not necessary to do spiritual work. One does not actually need to see or to hear to know or perceive truth. I searched and searched this week for other ways to talk about this – and I couldn't find language that isn't rooted in physical ability, that doesn't talk about seeing the truth or hearing the truth or sensing it in some other ways. These metaphors have their limits – and I try to use them sparingly. Our language contains so many metaphors rooted in physical ability; I strive to not use them as much as I'm able – and today I couldn't figure out another way to be.

Back to the fingers. This is a powerful teaching that is worth lingering with. The Buddha telling his followers that his teachings are just fingers pointing at the moon, not the moon itself. The teachings are just guides towards finding the truth, not the truth itself echoes much of what he taught. He told his followers that what he said was true only so far as it was useful – and encouraged people not to take his teachings on faith, but to see how they fit with their lived experiences. Do the teachings and techniques make your life better, give you more meaning? That is why they should be followed, not because the Buddha said so. Buddhism's symbol is the wheel with eight spokes, symbolizing the eightfold path of the ethical life, the life that allows one to overcome suffering and the friction of life. You can see the symbol on our quilt. As one might expect of a tradition that encourages people not to take things on faith, Buddhism traditionally has no creed or catechism. A white American convert to Buddhism did decide to write one himself in the late 19th century, as he thought all religions needed to have creeds and catechisms.³

Separating the finger from the moon is also about seeing things correctly, not mistaken the third hand glow of the moon off some fingers for the light of truth. Much of Buddhism is about training the spiritual eye to see things as they are, about waking up to truth. This is done through meditation, through ethical living, through spiritual practices like chanting mantras or making mandalas or sitting with koans. There is so much worthy of your attention in this tradition. One of the most challenging teachings is about a pattern of thinking and communicating that most of us hold.

Almost every branch of Buddhism teaches that there is no such thing as a personal "I." There is no self. There is no soul. "I" or "you" doesn't mean anything, doesn't actually exist. It's a convenient shorthand, a shorthand for the amalgamation of things that make us who we are – including sensations, thoughts, matter, perceptions, and consciousness. There is no enduring "I," which means there is no soul, no enduring personality, no "I." The language we use makes us think that there is some independent, enduring, "I," enduring self or soul or I, something that binds us to who we were when we were six years old and will be the same until we die. Buddhism would tell you that is all an illusion, that speaking or writing about ourselves as though there is some particular essence about that endures from minute to minute or day to day or year to year is an illusion. It is a finger, but it is not the truth. We need to gaze beyond this language to understand the truth. I find this idea so compelling and so challenging. I offer it up as a challenge for all of you. As Unitarian Universalists, we seek meaning in many sources. This does not mean that you need to believe all the ideas you come across, but sitting with ideas that might be unfamiliar and challenging, seeking to understand them, and letting that wrestling inform your thoughts going forward is an important religious practice. I invite you into this wrestling – and remember that the Buddha reminds us that the teaching is true only so far as it is useful.

³ Prothero, Stephen. *God is Not One*. New York: HarperOne, 2010. page 172-3

Like any worthwhile metaphor, the fingers pointing at the moon can be used to mean many things in many contexts.

The first time I heard this metaphor, it was from a Unitarian Universalist colleague. She was complaining about a language of reverence debate that had sprung up in her congregation. Language of reverence debates happen from time to time in Unitarian Universalist congregations. They are usually about the words we use when we gather on Sundays. Do we use the word worship? Do we use the word God? What about prayer? Religion? Church? Worship? And on and on and on. Now, you all here at People's Church are generally quite gracious about this. Some of you let me know when the words I use or the text of a hymn don't sit right with you. You usually begin by asking what I mean and it leads to an interesting conversation. Sometimes I adjust my words or hymn selection and sometimes I don't. I always value those conversations and appreciate the chance to understand one another better. Sometimes, your questions about why I said something help me clarify my own thinking in ways that lead me to greater wisdom and compassion.

These conversations were not what this colleague was talking about that day; she was talking about an all-out fight about what words the congregation and minister were allowed to say together, with dictionaries and etymology being wielded as weapons and people keeping tallies in their orders of service of how often particular words were being said. There were meetings upon meetings as people tried to come to consensus about what sort of common language might be appropriate. She was lamenting that they weren't doing something better with their time. Just think of how that energy could have been better spent. In the midst of this, my colleague was yearning to help the congregation expand their vision. How could they see that they were fighting about the fingers, the words we have that are so limited in their ability to communicate the truth, and not the moon, the truth itself. She longed, at the very least, for her community to be fighting about the truth, not their inadequate tools for describing it.

It is not just Unitarian Universalists who have borrowed this metaphor. A few weeks ago, as Rev. Nathan Dannison, who preached here last week, and I met to talk through the logistics of our pulpit swap last Sunday, I mentioned that I'd be preaching on this Buddhist teaching. He said, "for me, as a Christian, I think about how the Bible are the fingers and Jesus is the moon." He decides which parts of the Bible are worth holding up for reverence, by discerning if they point to the life, ministry, and redemptive work of Jesus. Though I doubt all of them would use the same Buddhist metaphor, many liberal and progressive Christians approach the Bible in this way, as though it is the fingers. To worship the bible instead of Jesus is idolatry, they would argue.

Idolatry is worshipping the wrong thing – and I know that not all of us think of ourselves as worshippers, but we all need to hold something true at the center of our lives, a moon, not the fingers, not the false idols. And it is so easy to fall into the trap of worshipping the wrong thing, of putting the wrong thing at the center of our lives. David Foster Wallace, a white American writer, reminded the graduates of Kenyon College about this in his commencement address in 2005.

He said, 'This, I submit, is the freedom of real education, of learning how to be well adjusted: you get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn't. You get to decide what to worship.

Because here's something else that's true. In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as... not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort God or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it J.C. or Allah, be it Yahweh or the Wiccan mother goddess or the Four Noble Truths or some infrangible set of ethical principles – is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and

things – if they are where you tap real meaning in life – then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they plant you. On one level, we all know this stuff already – it's been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, bromides, epigrams, parables: the skeleton of every great story. The trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness. Worship power – you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart – you will end up feeling stupid, afraid, always on the verge of being found out. And so on.

Look, the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they're evil or sinful; it is that they are *unconscious*. They are default settings. They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing. And the so-called real world will not discourage you from operating on your default settings, because the so-called real world of men and money and power hums along quite nicely on the fuel of fear and contempt and frustration and craving and the worship of self. Our own present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom. The freedom all to be lords of our own tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation. This kind of freedom has much to recommend it. But of course there are all different kinds of freedom, and the kind that is most precious is the kind you will not hear talked about much in the great outside world of winning and achieving and displaying. The really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day. That is real freedom.⁴

Wallace reminds us that it is easy to see the fingers and other things that don't matter, rather than the moon, the truth. It takes constant effort to keep ourselves, our hearts, our vision focused on the truth. So many of the forces of our world, be they consumer capitalism or nationalism or our own internal tendencies toward inertia try to keep us focus on the fingers, on what doesn't matter as much. We must strive to keep our energy focused on the moon, the truth, as best we understand it.

I want to leave you with one final image. It is of a Buddhist Temple in Japan. In most Buddhist Temples, a statue of the Buddha holds the central place and is revered. In this one, instead of a Buddha, there is a statue of fingers pointing at the sky, reminding all who come to focus their attention on the truth, not the person who brought the truth.

So may we distinguish between the moon and the fingers, the teachings and techniques and the truth itself.

May we recognize the limits of language – and seek to find a deeper understanding of one another.

May we know the world as it is, seeing below the surface of the water, hearing the second music, knowing that there are no finite edges, that all are bound together in the web that connects us to all that exists.

May we train our hearts to expand infinitely to claim this world.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.

⁴ Wallace, David Foster. 'Kenyon Commencement Speech.' *The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2006*. Boston: Mariner Books, 2006. pages 362-363