

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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### PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

#### *“We Gather Together”: A Thanksgiving Hymn in Historical Perspective*

This is Thanksgiving weekend and it is appropriate in this edition of *Issues in Perspective* to focus on Thanksgiving. To that end, I want to concentrate on the Thanksgiving hymn, “We Gather Together.” Melanie Kirkpatrick of the *Wall Street Journal* offers an instructive history about this traditional hymn. The hymn, “We Gather Together,” is actually of Dutch origin and speaks of religious persecution that predates the first Thanksgiving. The melody can be traced back to 1597. It began as a folk song but was transformed into a hymn dealing with overcoming religious persecution on 24 January 1597. That was the date of the Battle of Turnhout, in which Prince Maurice of Orange defeated the Spanish occupiers of a town in what is now the Netherlands. At this point, the Dutch Protestants, who were prohibited from worshiping under the Spanish king, Phillip II, celebrated the victory by borrowing the familiar folk melody and giving it new words. “We Gather Together” connoted a heretofore forbidden act—Dutch Protestants gathering together for worship. It first appeared in print in a 1626 collection of Dutch patriotic songs.

How did this Dutch patriotic song get from a Dutch songbook to the American hymnbook? Dutch settlers brought the hymn with them to the New World, as early as the 1620s. Dutch Calvinists, like most Calvinists, rarely sang anything in their church services that was not directly from the Bible. Indeed, they normally put the Psalms to music. But in 1937, the Christian Reformed Church made the controversial decision to permit hymns to be sung at church and “We Gather Together” was chosen as the opening hymn of the hymnal. Furthermore, Theodore Baker, an American scholar studying in Leipzig, where the choirmaster had published an arrangement of the hymn, translated it into English in 1894 as a thanksgiving “prayer” to be sung by a choir. According to the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, which maintains a database of popular hymns, “We Gather Together” first appeared in an American hymnal in 1903. Over the next three decades it appeared in an assortment of hymnals in the Northeast and the Midwest and in school songbooks. In 1935 it was added to the national hymnal of the Methodist-Episcopal Church, then the largest denomination in the US. It is one of the most memorable of Thanksgiving hymns and fits with the American religious culture, for it ends with the fitting and uplifting conclusion, “O, Lord, make us free!”

This Thanksgiving weekend, I trust you will find time to give thanks to Almighty God for His blessings and for the fact that we live in the United States of America. It is a nation with severe problems and challenges. But it is a nation that continues to be a beacon of freedom to the world. The freedom of which the hymn speaks can mean political freedom, with all rights and liberties that go with that freedom. But it also can mean spiritual freedom; that is freedom from the bondage to sin and the freedom to now serve the risen Lord. “O, Lord make us free!”

See Melanie Kirkpatrick's intriguing history of the hymn in the *Wall Street Journal* (19-20 November 2005).

## PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

### *Zen Buddhism and Steve Jobs*

With the death of Apple founder, Steve Jobs, and the subsequent release of the biography of Steve Jobs by Walter Isaacson, we have gained a new insight into the mind and heart of Apple CEO Steve Jobs. A few thoughts about this remarkable man.

- First, Steve Jobs was a man of much inner turmoil and unsettledness. He told Isaacson that “For most of my life, I’ve felt there must be more to our existence than meets the eye.” Much of his early childhood was spent searching for that “unseen something.” Isaacson relates that when he was 13 years old, he talked with a Lutheran pastor about human suffering and starving children. The pastor did not give him satisfactory answers so he refused to attend church again. He then turned to Eastern mysticism, to meditation and to even psychedelic drugs. He also began to study Zen Buddhism. He especially focused on the lectures of Shunryu Suzuki, a Zen master from America. In 1974, Jobs travelled to India in search of a guru that could serve him personally. According to Daniel Burke of *USA Today*, “Upon returning [from India] he found one in his hometown of Los Altos, California, where a Suzuki disciple, Kobun Chino Otagawa, had opened the Haiku Zen Center. Jobs and this Zen master quickly forged a bond, discussing life and Buddhism during midnight walks. ‘I ended up spending as much time with him as I could,’ Jobs told Isaacson. ‘Zen has been a deep influence in my life ever since.’” In 1976, Steve Jobs ended his regular practice of Zen Buddhism. His work at Apple was consuming more and more of his time. Nonetheless, his contact with Kobun continued. Indeed, Kobun officiated at his wedding in 1991. When Kobun died of drowning in 2002, evidence indicates that Jobs took this death very hard. According to Isaacson’s biography, as reported by Burke, Jobs believed that Zen meditation taught him to concentrate and ignore distractions: “He also learned to trust intuition and curiosity—what Buddhists call ‘beginner’s mind’—over analysis and preconceptions. More visibly, Apple’s sleek, minimalist designs reveal Jobs’s zeal for Zen aesthetics—the uncluttered lines of calligraphy and Japanese gardens, according to Isaacson’s book.”

Further, to boost creativity among Apple’s engineers, Jobs began offering meditation classes at Apple in 1999. However, Jobs was known as a ruthless, mean, manipulative and egocentric CEO, for, as Isaacson reports in his book, “Unfortunately, his Zen training never quite produced in him a Zen-like calm of inner serenity, and that is part of his legacy.” Isaacson quotes one of the meditation teachers in California as stating that “He got to the aesthetic part of Zen—the relationship between lines and spaces, the quality and craftsmanship, but he didn’t stay long enough to get the Buddhist part, the compassion part, the sensitivity part.” In short, Steve Jobs did not practice what he believed, a common struggle for all humans, due to sin. But sin is not part of the Zen equation. Enlightenment is gained by turning inward and when you do that, the Bible teaches, you find nothing but more darkness, not true enlightenment.

- Second, what exactly is Zen Buddhism? “Zen” is actually a Japanese word for meditation (in China it is *Ch’an*), a form of religion which developed out of, and in a reaction to Buddhism. It originated in India, rose to prominence in China and now flourishes in Japan. As you might expect, it is very difficult to arrive at a clear understanding of all that Zen Buddhism teaches. Each Zen leader has his own applications. Nonetheless, here are a few tenets that seem to apply to all Zen leaders:
  1. The Buddha-nature is in all men, so that all can become Buddhas; and the Buddha-mind is everywhere. Anything can occasion its realization at any time. Enlightenment (called *satori*) can be attained in ordinary living, under ordinary circumstances and in ordinary situations. *Satori*, sudden illumination, can occur at any point in life.
  2. According to one writer, *satori* involves a return to one’s original nature, to one’s original relations with the world of nature. This *satori* is not normally attained via rigorous asceticism (as in traditional Buddhism) and it is not conceptual in nature. In fact, concepts and ideas are not what motivate the Zen Buddhist. Instead, it is characterized by the absence of conceptions, the absence of thought.
  3. In fact, the power of Zen is released in the *koan*, a problem designed to baffle one’s ordinary intellectual apprehension, forcing a new orientation of awareness. The *koan* poses a dilemma capable of arresting the mind, of calling up analogies; but the point is to pass beyond this symbolic formulation, to move through the *koan*, emerging on its other side with a unity of mind and spirit one had not possessed before. When a *koan* is solved, typically a flash of enlightenment comes. With greater periods of enlightenment, one eventually becomes a “Buddha in this very body.”
  4. For the Zen Buddhist, meditation (called “Za-zen”) incorporates Yoga-like techniques to promote the atmosphere of inner peace, allowing the individual to conserve his psychic energy for the sake of concentrating attention more effectively in the struggle with his *koan*.
  5. The simplicity of Zen is reflected in architecture and painting in Japan and China. It is this that influenced Jobs and his designs at Apple.
- Third, how could one possibly reach someone like Steve Jobs, who was so influenced by Zen Buddhism? The ultimate reason for seeking an intelligent understanding of Zen Buddhism is to find bridges we can build to reach the Zen Buddhist with the gospel. Jesus did this constantly, as He regularly adapted His message to His hearers.

**Bridge #1:** First and foremost, consistency in what we believe is crucial. Our doctrinal convictions must be matched by the reality of the Christ-like life. Because Zen Buddhism is fundamentally an ethical faith with no real emphasis on the supernatural, the authentic life of Christ speaks volumes to the Zen Buddhist. Authenticity will get the Zen Buddhist’s attention. This is what Steve Jobs was seeking and what he failed to attain.

**Bridge #2** is the issue of suffering. For the Zen Buddhist, suffering encompasses all of life from birth to death. Clinging to the pleasures of life is considered foolishness and vain to the Zen Buddhist. The Christian worldview harmonizes with Zen Buddhism on this point. Christianity recognizes the reality of suffering and ties it to the consequence of human sin (Genesis 3). For that reason the book of Ecclesiastes may be the best starting point, for it

declares the futility of life “under the sun” (1:1-11). This book points out that life is unfair, futile, confusing, and transitory. It is only belief in a Sovereign, personal God that brings sense to all of this, declares the author. For that reason, life is seen, for the Christian, as a good gift from a good God, who ultimately makes sense even out of suffering. Perhaps books like Phillip Yancey’s *Where is God When It Hurts?* or C.S. Lewis’s *The Problem of Pain*, both of which deal with suffering, can be of help to the Buddhist.

**Bridge #3:** When the Zen Buddhist asks the question, “what is life all about?”, he turns inward and answers that it can be found within. When the Christian asks the same question, he turns outward and upward towards God for the answer. For that reason, the Zen Buddhist will focus so much on inward issues. The Zen Buddhist seeks to dwell on and master self in an effort to eradicate self. The haunting question for the Zen Buddhist is how does one achieve *satori* through occupation with self? It is a paradox. Jesus gave the solution to the paradox of Zen Buddhism: “He who has found his life shall lose it and he who has lost his life for my sake shall find it” (Matthew 10:39; Mark 8:35 and Luke 9:24). We find our true identity by losing ourselves in the One who created us, namely Jesus Christ.

**Bridge #4:** Zen Buddhism claims that all humans should be treated well. But why? There is no absolute standard in Zen Buddhism. Zen Buddhists practice respect and dignity for all life to gain personal peace, to live in harmony with the world. But perhaps a person could easily do evil to get ahead and attain personal peace. Why is that wrong? We must press the Zen Buddhist: “What is goodness? How do we know what is good?” Moral law points to a moral Lawgiver, namely the true God.

**Bridge #5:** For the Zen Buddhist, ultimate reality is within the human self. Self is the ultimate. But for the Christian, ultimate reality is in the absolute truth of a God who is outside of man and man knows that truth through revelation. For the Zen Buddhist, reality is thoroughly subjective and inner; for the Christian it is objective and God-centered. Ultimate reality is knowable only through Jesus Christ, Who said, “I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6). This is ultimately the choice the Zen Buddhist must make--is it self or is it Christ?

Reaching a Zen Buddhist, such as Steve Jobs, with the gospel of Jesus Christ is difficult and problematic. These suggested bridges can be used by the Holy Spirit to pierce the heart of the Zen Buddhist. Fundamentally, both the Zen Buddhist and the Christian focus on the metaphor of light as being the path to truth. As the Zen Buddhist journeys into himself and as he learns to negate himself more and more, he is thereby enlightened. The Christian journeys into Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world. To find Jesus is to find true enlightenment. That is the message we must take to the Zen Buddhist.

See Daniel Burke in *USA Today* (3 November 2011); W.L. Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion: Eastern and Western Thought*, pp. 639-41; and James P. Eckman, *The Truth About Worldviews*, pp. 31-39.