

SIDDHARTA AND ST AUGUSTINE: FROM DEBAUCHERY TO ASCETICISM AND ENLIGHTENMENT

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Abstract

Hence we see the similarities with Augustine and Siddharta. While Buddha encourages renunciation as the path to enlightenment, Siddharta says that it is necessary to experience the fullness of life and to err and sin in order to reach equilibrium and find the way. There are different paths to enlightenment- Govinda follows teachers but doesn't reach a true state of nirvana, while Siddharta who does not renounce the world finds enlightenment through experience. The final conclusion of the novel Siddharta is a mix of Buddhism, Taoism and Christianity- finding salvation through the renunciation of sin and experiencing desire in order to renounce it. The novel is about the complexity of spiritual enlightenment, which comes through experience of the complexities of life rather than renunciation of the world. It is necessary for Siddharta and Augustine to experience sin and debauchery before they renounce the sensual and material life for more spiritual and enlightened experiences.

Keywords: Siddharta, Augustine, Sensual, Material, Ascetic, Enlightenment

The Novel Siddharta is about the quest for meaning, truth and peace: Siddharta searches for the meaning of life, and enters into the way of the Samarans and ascetics. However after a few years he finds himself stagnating and unable to attain further spiritual fulfilment

He seeks the counsel of the Buddha, and finds himself unsatisfied with the Buddha's answers about how to achieve spiritual enlightenment. After turning himself away from the sensory world, he plunges back into it by finding sensual love with a courtesan Kamala. Kamala is a skillful lover and teaches him the intricacies of sexual love and satiates Siddharta in his senses. Instead of turning away from the sensory world, he indulges in sensual love and grows materially prosperous

But he finds himself wearying of it and nauseated by it, turns away from the sensual and material world. Siddharta finds that though he has prospered materially and is steeped in sensual love and sexual conquest, he feels that all is meaningless and that he is spiritually barren.

Eventually he meets Govinda and tells him this journey was necessary- he had to sin and experience a satiation of sensual pleasures in order to renounce it for spiritual fulfilment. This is similar to the path St Augustine goes through for salvation.

In the autobiographical ‘Confessions’ of St Augustine, a journey is made from darkness and a life of sin and debauchery to light and gradual acceptance of divine truth. St Augustine pursued a life of lust and hedonism as a youth, taking on a mistress out of wedlock with whom he fathered a child and engaging in affairs outside marriage. He also pursued rhetoric and perpetuated lies and injustice therein. He consulted astrology rather than God about his future. It was a gradual journey however towards light and divine truth when he realized how spiritually barren and lost he was, and how he needed the sanctifying grace of Christ to redeem himself from the cesspool of sin he was mired in.

Indeed the entire autobiography is a movement from lies to truth. A rampant thief when he was young, Augustine was not an honest person in his youth. He loved sin, darkness, indulged in carnal affairs purely for pleasure, and became a professor of rhetoric, mastering the art of disseminating lies and persuading people away from objective truth by twisting and manipulating language.

Gifted in the liberal arts, St Augustine accumulated a wealth of knowledge which he was eventually to find empty and worthless when compared to the light and truth of knowing Christ as saviour. He was well versed in philosophy, but eventually discovered that the endless quarrels of the philosophers and infighting amongst themselves led people away from, rather than closer to the truth. Augustine was steeped in materialism and greed and pursuing the empty and hollow things of the world, which he eventually deemed worthless in comparison with knowing the light of Christ.

Augustine as a youth was steeped in the ways of the world. He pursued wealth, fame, women and prestige. He sought to be esteemed by those around him in the world, and to be measured by worldly standards. He rose high by these worldly standards, acquiring the status of a professor of rhetoric and living with a mistress out of wedlock with whom he fathered a child for many years. Upon dissolving the relationship out of hopes for marriage, he engaged in a loveless affair with another woman out of wedlock.

He mastered the art of rhetoric, which involved manipulating language and distorting the truth. He gained a wealth of knowledge in philosophy and the liberal arts, which was secular rather than spiritual, and which he eventually found empty and barren. Indeed Augustine was esteemed highly by the world’s standards, but found that he was spiritually destitute and barren. This was changed after his conversion, in which he exchanged wealth, riches and prestige for the truth of God, in which he finally found fulfilment and his spiritual home.

Augustine indeed describes his early life as a famine. While on the surface he seemed to have gained the world by rising to a professor and indulging in wine and women, he found that spiritually he was lost. He was a master of lies, perpetuating deceit in his discipline of rhetoric and teaching students how to perpetuate deceit. He found himself repeatedly falling into sin by being dishonest and stealing.

He had gained the world but lost his soul. His long term relationship with a woman out of wedlock did not come to a good end either, because it lacked the sanctity and legitimacy of marriage. Augustine found himself unfulfilled at the end of rising and conquering fame, wealth, women and prestige because he was living a deeply sinful and decadent lifestyle. Spiritually, he was destitute and lost.

Augustine had imagined a life free from God would be bliss. He imagined that the freedom to pursue and satiate his desires and rise high in the esteem of the world would give him the authentication and self-fulfilment he sought. Paradoxically, he found himself empty, hollow and spiritually barren at the end of his quest to satiate his selfish and egoistic desires. To fulfil oneself spiritually meant paradoxically to die to the self and follow Christ by giving rather than receiving. Augustine then finds infinite riches in denying himself the life of material luxury, women and prestige by abandoning all these worldly pursuits to follow Christ.

Augustine describes his conversion experience as realizing that the riches of the world lie not in sin and conquering wealth and women but in turning to God. He describes the passage that converts him as a passage which instructs him to turn away from the hedonistic ways of the world and the paths of sin, debauchery and lust and forsaking these things for Christ.

Augustine realized that a beggar was infinitely richer than him because while he did not possess the world, he was a child of God. Thereafter Augustine realized how hollow his previous pursuits and material conquests had been. Augustine realizes to truly be a child of God, he has to forsake his life of sin and pursuing material wealth and prestige, which mean little in God's kingdom.

Augustine then heeds Christ's injunction to sell all his material possessions and ultimately pursue the life of serving God. In his riches gained in the ways of the world he was infinitely poorer than when he had taken up the yoke of serving God as a theologian and minister. Augustine realizes that it does not benefit a man to gain the world but lose his soul. He then takes up Christ's injunction to forsake a life of sin, materialism and debauchery and to become a theologian and minister. Augustine thought that being free from God and pursuing his sinful desires of the flesh would bring him fulfilment. But he found himself mired in a relationship which lacked the sanctity and legitimacy of marriage and while there was some attachment to his partner, it was not a relationship that was respected in the eyes of the law and God because it had occurred entirely out of wedlock.

Augustine was eventually to repent of pursuing a life of fornication and seeking after sinful desires of the flesh. He eventually found a life of chastity more fulfilling and an option which brought him closer to God rather than further away from God as the sins of the flesh could only alienate and hold him in bondage rather than bring him closer to God. Augustine then renounces his former life of sin and debauchery to lead a chaste life in which he was no longer enslaved to sin which would hold him in bondage and lead him away from God.

Augustine then moves from a life of dishonesty and deceit to chastity and sanctity in Christ. While to be baptized in Christ made one lowly in the eyes of the world, Augustine discovered in this status infinite riches that he could not have in his former sinful and decadent lifestyle.

Augustine had gained wealth, prestige and women and ranked highly in the eyes of the world, but discovered that spiritually and morally, he was lost. He did not have Christ as his firm foundation and there was no ethical or moral basis to ground his life in, indeed he led a deeply sinful and immoral lifestyle by perpetuating lies through his arts of rhetoric and being an unrepentant thief who would often plunder fruits from his neighbours even though he had no need to steal.

The pivotal moment in his conversion experience was when he discovered that a beggar was infinitely richer than himself because he possessed the assurance of Christ while he, though esteemed highly in the eyes of the world, led a deeply sinful and decadent lifestyle. This is the point at which he repents his former ways of sin and debauchery and self-seeking fulfilment.

Augustine discovers that riches are to be found in giving rather than receiving. He thus dedicates his life to ministry and serving God, forsaking his former life of sin.

The paradox is thus that those esteemed lowly in the eyes of the world such as the beggar are infinitely richer when they possess the truth of God. Indeed, God's kingdom is one in which the lowly are exalted and the rich and proud such as Augustine are brought to naught because they do not lead an ethical life.

Augustine then discovers that to possess the world held no meaning when it had no ethical or religious basis for he had gained the world but lost his soul by selling his life to sin and death and discovering while he had gained the world, spiritually he was lost and dead because he did not know Christ as saviour.

Indeed, Augustine paradoxically discovers that he possessed nothing in comparison with the beggar because the beggar did not deceive in order to make a living like he did and did not steal or lie in order to gain his wealth as Augustine did. Augustine then discovers that in the eyes of God, the beggar is richer than him because the beggar does not deceive to make his living and even though he possesses nothing, he is honest and possessed the truth of God.

Augustine thought to be free from God meant he would be fulfilled in a life of sin. But Augustine discovered that his adulterous relationship left him with nothing but a motherless child at the end of it because he had not sanctified the relationship before God and the law through entering into marital union.

Indeed Augustine pursued many loveless, carnal affairs and lusted after flesh for its own sake before knowing Christ as saviour. While he thought that he would be free from God, he found himself enslaved to sin and brought closer to demonic bondage through sin. Augustine found himself in an infinite chasm separated from God when he was enslaved through sin. Augustine could only paradoxically be liberated spiritually when he renounced his former life of sins of the flesh and debauchery.

Augustine then emerges from a life of darkness to a life of light in forsaking his life of sin for knowing God. While this meant a life of chastity, Augustine found it brought him closer to God to be chaste than while pursuing sins of the flesh. Augustine found that a secular life divorced from God had only left him spiritually adrift, impoverished and barren as he did not know the saving and redeeming grace of Christ. Augustine eventually emerged to become one of the most influential theologians of the Catholic church, and indeed many are amazed that even he could be redeemed when he had lived in such wanton sin and darkness prior to his redemption.

Augustine then moves from a life of deceit and lies to truth. His journey is one in which he exchanges the lie of worldly glory for the truth of God. While to be a child of God is to be esteemed lowly by the world's standards, Augustine discovers in his pursuit of Christ riches that are infinitely greater than the wealth and prestige he had gained by becoming a professor of rhetoric and indulging in wine and women.

From a heartless thief and perpetuator of lies through his practice and teaching of rhetoric Augustine moves towards the truth of Christ as saviour and redeemer. Augustine then charts a journey from darkness to light, forsaking his worldly ways for the truth and light of knowing and serving God.

While this meant forsaking his sinful and adulterous lifestyle, Augustine found it infinitely more rewarding to know and serve God. Though he had been esteemed well by the world's standards, Augustine found that he was spiritually dead. Augustine then charts a journey of exchanging the lie of worldly glory for the truth of God in his autobiographical 'Confessions'.

Hence we see the similarities with Augustine and Siddharta. While Buddha encourages renunciation as the path to enlightenment, Siddharta says that it is necessary to experience the fullness of life and to err and sin in order to reach equilibrium and find the way. There are different paths to enlightenment- Govinda follows teachers but doesn't reach a true state of nirvana, while Siddharta who does not renounce the world finds enlightenment through experience. The final conclusion of the novel Siddharta is a mix of Buddhism, Taoism and Christianity- finding salvation through the renunciation of sin and experiencing desire in order to renounce it. The novel is about the complexity of spiritual enlightenment, which comes through experience of the complexities of life rather than renunciation of the world. It is necessary for Siddharta and Augustine to experience sin and debauchery before they renounce the sensual and material life for more spiritual and enlightened experiences.

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