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Zen and ‘The Myth of Sisyphus’

By Matthias Esho Birk

I have always had a special love for the writing of Albert Camus, the French-Algerian Nobel Prize-winning author and philosopher. From an early age, I felt disturbed and confused by what appeared to be the inherent meaninglessness of life. I became preoccupied with the inevitability of my own death, the certainty of losing or being separated from everyone I ever loved, and the stark realization that there was nothing I could do about any of it. It seemed like my parents had played a bad joke on me—bringing me into this world. I felt gut punched when the full scope of life’s apparent futility dawned on me. But most of all, I felt completely alone with it. Like someone had put me on a cosmic spinning wheel, then pushed me off and left me to tumble into a cold, dark universe.

A few years later, I would encounter the writing of Albert Camus, and it would be nothing short of an epiphany: I was not alone. His debut novel, *The Stranger*, explored a seemingly senseless world; his book *The Plague* took on the inevitability of human suffering; and the most dearly tender and gentle of Camus’s oeuvre, his last unfinished autobiographical novel, *The First Man*, laid out his own very personal quest for identity and meaning in a world marked by colonialism and poverty. Camus, often labeled as an “absurdist,” a label he himself regretted, was deeply interested in the conflict between our human desire for meaning and the world’s perceived lack thereof. In reading Camus, I felt understood in my own confusion and existential angst. Like no one else, Camus allowed me to see through the eyes of his characters and experience my angst through them—thereby experiencing a community, a form of human union. Camus didn’t necessarily offer solace—I wasn’t sure there was any—but what he did offer was companionship.

My own angst, despair, and confusion ultimately led me to discover Zen, and despite holding Camus’s writing dearly, it had been a while since I had endeavored to dive back into his work. That is, until recently. While I had known about his nonfiction essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*—often considered the central expression of his philosophy of the absurd—I had never actually read it. Perhaps it was the companionship that I found and cherished about his novels that made me shy away from his philosophical treatise, which I had written off with preconceived notions that no philosophy could possibly provide answers to these existentialist dilemmas his novels illustrated so well. So it was with some surprise and even a bit of wonder, when recently stumbling over that very essay in a literary magazine, how clearly I could see core tenets of Zen practice expressed there within. It felt like coming full circle; it felt like coming home.

Sisyphus, we are told, was the first king of Corinth and was known for his trickery. He was ultimately punished by the Greek gods for cheating death (if you can believe it...), and, as a result, they condemned him to ceaselessly rolling a rock up to the top of a mountain, at which point the rock would immediately fall back to the bottom. This process would then repeat, ad nauseam, for eternity. “They had thought with some reason,” Camus writes, “that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.” Sisyphus’s story is our story. The story of our life and the **human condition**. And just like a Zen koan, it confronts us with the deep delusions of our mind and invites us to break open to a deeper reality. “Of course,” we might think, “this is a terrible punishment.” Sisyphus’s task seems meaningless, devoid of purpose, ultimately repetitive, and boring. There is no achievement or progress and nothing to gain. All the things our mind is so fixated on—gone. And to make matters worse, the gods

condemned Sisyphus to his task for all of eternity. Our mind cannot even find solace in the idea that eventually it will be over.

Our **habitual mind** (newsflash!) has a deeply ingrained tendency to seek happiness outside ourselves. Salvation, it believes, comes from things happening to us on the outside: experiences we have, progress we make, things we gain. Take those away and happiness seems unachievable. That is why Sisyphus's story is such a perfect mirror for the way our mind creates our world. Camus concludes his essay with the following lines:

“One always finds one’s burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the Gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain in itself forms a world. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

Let’s replace the Gods in the story with our thinking mind. The mind that craves approval, progress, possessions, has a million preferences and aversions, and seems to generally be in charge of most of our lives, just as the ancient Greeks imagined their Gods. If we replace Sisyphus in this metaphor with ourselves, it becomes clear that the one that is punishing us is our very own mind. So what does Sisyphus do? He negates the Gods. Is that not what we learn to do in Zen practice? We don’t negate our thinking minds (after all, thoughts are just thoughts) but we negate their godship. We commit to seeing beyond the world of thought. By focusing on the breath, the present moment reality of our belly moving in and out, we allow thoughts to arise and dissipate without clinging to them. We start to look at what is, without the attachment to our thoughts. And just like the wizard in *The Wizard of Oz*, who turns out to be none other than an ordinary small man, the God-likeness of our thoughts seems to crumble. Our mind may be telling us “this is futile, boring” or simply “I don’t like this,” but we pay this no attention. In Zen practice, we gradually wake up to a reality that is not mediated by our thoughts, where we no longer buy into the narratives our minds create. And how do we do that? By raising the rocks, as Camus writes. By focusing on what it is that is right in front of us: this breath, this step, this task.

So what happens when we learn to live a life beyond the tyranny of our thinking minds? That thinking mind, that posits happiness as existing on the outside, utterly dependent on what we can gain, achieve, and create in our lifetime? *“This universe henceforth without a master,”* Camus writes, the master here being none other than our thinking mind, *“seems to him neither sterile nor futile.”* You may have even had that experience during or after a meditation session: your mind quiets down, and all of a sudden you seem to be able to experience the “same old” environment with completely fresh eyes, as if you saw it for the very first time (you indeed do—as you are seeing without the filter of your thinking mind), and it is more rich, full, and alive than ever before. *“Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain in itself forms a world.”* This is the reality we can start to experience in Zen practice: namely, that whatever we thought of as a struggle, dull, or meaningless a moment ago, when we wake up to the physical reality of it, *“each atom of that stone”* is a world in itself. Vast and boundless. *“The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart.”*

It is not what our mind falsely believes—the outcome, the impact, the thing—that makes us happy. It is the moment-to-moment lived reality of being alive. Our intention and attention focused on the actual “raising of the rock.” This “raising of the rock” is what we practice in zazen: moving our attention from the wandering mind that deals in dualities (meaning, no meaning) to the **present moment reality experienced in the body**. “Returning” again and again, to the ever new present moment, like coming home again.

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