

Daily Meditation 01/29/2022

Aquinas on “Revelation” from Thich Nhat Hanh & His Teachings

Good morning.

We are continuing our meditations on Thich Nhat Hanh and Thomas Aquinas.

And I apply another statement from Aquinas to Thich Nhat Hanh in today's meditation, where he says, "Revelation has been made to many pagans; the old pagan virtues were from God."

Now, "pagan" in medieval context usually means anyone who's not Christian, or Jewish. And so that would include Aristotle, who Thomas spent his life bringing science into religion. And it was very controversial in his day, and that science was Aristotle, who had just really been discovered in the West, in Europe, thanks to Islam, because Muslim scholars and translators were translating his works in Baghdad 24 hours a day, seven days a week, they were so excited about discovering Aristotle and bringing him into Latin, into Europe through Spain.

And Aquinas was thrilled to move from the Platonic view of the world, which was essentially dualistic, to Aristotle's view of the world, which was essentially holistic. And interesting, Aristotle's receiving a lot more attention today from scientists and cultural historians, because they are seeing that Aquinas, of the 13th century, that he speaks in a much more non-dualistic way than did Plato and his followers.

So here's another dimension to Aquinas' teaching, which is very much like Thich Nhat Hanh, where he's talking about contemplation and wisdom. And he's sharing practices like Thich Nhat Hanh was committed to doing, and this is what Aquinas says (This is page 92 of my book, *The Tao of Thomas Aquinas; Fierce Wisdom for Hard Times*). He says,

For contemplative practice, there are three steps. First: The first requirement for the contemplation of wisdom is that we should take complete possession of our minds before anything else does, so we can fill the whole house with the contemplation of wisdom.

The whole house means your mind, or soul. So to take complete possession of your mind before anything else does, that's very Buddhist. That's about emptying the mind, isn't it? And finding the ways by which you empty the mind, of course, Thich Nhat Hanh and other Buddhists have a number of practices that allow us to do this.

But the point that Aquinas is making is very, very Buddhist, the first thing to do is to empty your mind, don't let anything else get in there, empty it all. And that's the first step for wisdom to arrive. The second step:

"...it is also necessary, that we be fully present there--"

...fully present,

"...concentrating in such a way that our aim is not diverted to other matters."

So focus is everything. And that, I think, is clearly what the Buddhist tradition is saying as well. Now remember that Meister Eckhart -- and I have a whole chapter on Meister Eckhart and Thich Nhat Hanh in my book on *Meister Eckhart, Mystic-Warrior for Our Time* -- Meister Eckhart says very similar things in his own language, about being so focused...he even tells a story about a pagan scientist who was so focused on his mathematics when he was doing his mathematics. But someone came in and said, something like, if you don't pay attention to what I have to say, I'm going to kill you. And the scientist stayed utterly focused on his work. And the story ends with the poor scientist losing his head. But again, it's a story about the importance of focus...and maybe the danger of it, too.

And then the third step, says Aquinas -- but you see, Eckhart, I'm bringing Eckhart in, because Eckhart was also Dominican, like Aquinas, and he stood on Aquinas' shoulders and he was utterly ecumenical. In my whole book, the third book I did on Eckhart, the one I'm referring to, he is praised by Buddhists as a Buddhist. He's praised by Hindus as a Hindu. He's praised by Sufis as a Sufi. And so he's utterly ecumenical.

And then the third step, says Aquinas, in his path of mindfulness, is this: "Scripture says: return quickly, return home quickly and gather yourself together and play there and pursue your thoughts. To 'gather yourself together there' is to draw together your whole intention."

Those are Aquinas' words, all that is Aquinas' words. So scripture is telling us to gather your whole intention. And this is a threefold practice that is very, very Buddhist, the silence, the presence, the letting be, the gathering. And then he says, when you've done all this gathering, then the next step is to play, to play with wisdom. He says play is the nearest word to contemplation.

I think Thich Nhat Hanh would agree.

Thank you. We'll see you tomorrow.