

A STONE-BRIDGE VIEW OF FANATICISM

KNOW YOUR FRIEND

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I would like to put fanaticism into some kind of perspective. I will call it a stone-bridge view of fanaticism because it is descriptively based on a koan about a stone bridge. Working our way through this koan, then through the elements of fanaticism and finally through a story from Winnie the Pooh, I hope to show that fanaticism is not something alien to us. It is something that is very much a part of the way we think. If we can regard it in this way, as one would a friend, then I think we have a better chance of being able to understand it.

Koans

It might be useful to say a few words about koans before I introduce the koan, because some people might not be familiar with what koans are. The term 'koan' comes from 'kung an' which means 'public cases'. These very brief stories are part of the teachings of ancient Zen masters. The stories are always very brief, sometimes little more than a phrase, and never more than a few sentences. Sometimes they appear terribly mundane, sometimes terrible enigmatic, but they are always very profound. However, their profundity is usually very elusive and it may take weeks, months or even years to fully grasp their significance. Classically they were given to students to meditate upon and the masters could gauge the spiritual attainment of students by the students conveying their understanding of these koans. Sometimes the students' understandings were as mysterious as the koans themselves, with some students walking out or even slapping their teachers. In time these responses too sometimes became a part of the koan. The popularity of koans has brought them outside classical Zen Buddhist circles and has served to puzzle generations of people studying the inscrutable orient. So it is well to be reminded by Robert Aitken that 'Koans are not riddles or puzzles whose trick is in their clever and obscure wording. They are the clearest possible expression of perennial facts which students grasp with focused meditation and guidance.' (1) What Robert Aitken means by 'perennial facts' are the truths about our everyday existence, including such things like fanaticism. Since students use koans to express their understanding, there is no correct or official interpretation of them. The understanding of the koan that I will give is thus a very personal one, and you have complete freedom to understand it differently.

The stone-bridge koan

So I will now describe the koan which forms the fifty-second case of a very famous collection of koans, called 'The Hekiganroku or The Blue Cliff Record'. This is how it goes –

A monk asked Chao Chou, 'For a long time I've heard of the stone bridge of Chao Chou, but now that I've come here I just see a simple log bridge.'
Chou said, 'You just see the log bridge; but you don't see the stone bridge.'
The monk said, 'What is the stone bridge?'
Chou said, 'It lets asses cross, it lets horses cross.' (2)

To understand the significance of the monk's opening statement, we need to be aware of the fact that Ch'an or Zen masters were often known by the place they came to reside in. This usage is very similar to the way English or Indian aristocrats were known, not by their names, but by the region they ruled. So in our present koan Chao Chou is the name of the Master, but it is also the name of the place where he resided. The stone bridge that the monk is talking about was an ancient and famous stone bridge that existed in Chao Chou at the time of the koan, more than a thousand years ago. It is possible that this stone bridge still stands. So the monk is actually having a dig at the Master saying that he had come to study with Chao Chou because he was by then very famous, but when he got there all he found was a very ordinary person, a simple log bridge.

Chao Chou's response to this insult is very interesting. He doesn't get angry or upset. He puts himself in the shoes of the monk and merely states the truth of the matter. And the truth of the matter is that the monk can

after all only speak only for himself, as indeed any of us can. Chao Chou says to the monk, 'You just see the log bridge; but you don't see the stone bridge.' He is in effect saying to him, 'My friend that is all that you can see, a simple log bridge or just an ordinary simple person.'

But the monk is not easily satisfied, he challenges Chao Chou further and asks, 'What is the stone bridge?' He is saying in effect, 'Okay, so you say you are just no ordinary person, so tell me who are you?' Now what can Chou say in response to this challenge? Should he enumerate his qualities and attributes? Should he list all the people he has successfully trained? Or should he attack the monk for his stupidity and insolence? Chou chooses to do nothing of the sort. Again he states the truth simply and beautifully. And in answering, he leaves us this profound teaching, which is as valid today as it was then. He says quite calmly and simply, 'It lets asses cross, it lets horses cross.'

This very simply is the perspective on fanaticism that I want to talk about. But before we can fully appreciate the wisdom of this koan, we need to understand something about fanaticism. So I will define some of the elements that constitute fanaticism and then I will return to the koan and see how these elements are embedded in this koan that is so skillfully conveyed by the Zen master.

The elements of fanaticism

There are basically four interrelated elements that constitute fanaticism – 1) an inability to see the whole, 2) intolerance, 3) narcissism and 4) a prevalence of ideation over realism. Though these elements are interrelated and to some extent interdependent, for the sake of clarity I will describe each one in turn.

1. An inability to see the whole

What one notices about fanaticism is how totally preposterous it's beliefs are. But actually they are not. For there is always an element that one can relate to. It is just that this element seems to swell up and fill the whole picture. What is striking then are not so much the presence of the element, but the almost complete absence of awareness that it is only part of a much greater truth. The world that we live in is very large in terms of space, time and complexity. Let me say a few words about each to show how completely fanaticism ignores all these dimensions.

Geographically and spatially the world is a very large place, but fanaticism reduces it so that what may be true and useful for a small group of people living in a certain place and under certain conditions, is not necessarily true for people living in distant places under different circumstances. Yet fanaticism in a very determined kind of way, refuses to entertain this possibility. Likewise the fanatically held beliefs might have some validity at a particular period in time, but what is lost sight of is the fact that the dimension of time extends enormously both before and after the currency of that validity. Ignoring the millions of years of dinosaur history, species homo sapiens has been around a long time, and for none of that period did the beliefs of fanaticism have any validity whatsoever. Their limited validity belongs to a very thin sliver of time. It is a feature of our current civilization, which has been in existence for no more than a few thousand years. Some time in the future, provided homo sapiens survive that long, fanaticism will be mercifully extinct for it will be totally irrelevant to the needs of future civilizations. Yet fanaticism has no sense of history or any sense of its place in history.

The world is also very large in terms of its complexity, biodiversity and inter-relatedness, yet fanaticism has absolutely no awareness of this complexity. It forcibly reduces this complexity and diversity to an austere homogenous simplicity. Not only that but it then makes a virtue of this bare-boned simplification, for it regards diversity and complexity as being nothing other than a distraction and hence they are regarded as essentially sinful. Holiness is equated with a blind obedience that shuts everything else out.

2. Intolerance

This is the most striking feature of fanaticism and the most dangerous. On account of the destruction and devastation it causes, it should be at the top of our list of elements. But I mention it second because it needs to be seen in some kind of context. Intolerance is what draws attention to fanaticism and it is intolerance that is of most relevance to others, but the fanatical believer generally does not regard himself as being

intolerant. Nor is the fanatical believer aware of what the intolerance is based upon. For hidden from view of both the fanatical believer and others is the great fear that underlies fanaticism. Yet if one were to undertake an in-depth study of fanaticism one would inevitably come across a great number of fears and anxieties. A fanatical believer is a very insecure and fearful person. He is frightened by the enormity of space and time for he fears that if he were aware of them, he fears he would fall into them and dissipate like a handful of sand blown over the edge of a cliff. One's place in space and time must of necessity be ignored if one is to have any sense of significance, no matter how artificial that sense of significance might be. Likewise if one were aware of the enormous diversity and complexity of life as it exists, one would realize how utterly insignificant one's individual place is in the greater order of things. The truth of the matter is that we are very fragile, transient creatures, totally dependent on the complexity of those around us, human and non-human, animate and inanimate. It seems most of us cannot bear to witness this truth for very long before we very quickly move to some kind of belief that augments our belief in ourselves as enduring significant creatures. Fanaticism is only an extension of this attempt to find security and significance. The fact that it is an extreme way to find security suggests that the fear that underlies it too must be extreme. What we experience as intolerance is only the fear of the fanatical person turned towards us. He is terrified what damage we might do him because of our difference and our complexity. Our difference is dangerous because it is alien and not under the control of our fanatical friend and our complexity is dangerous because it beckons the mind to ever widening horizons. In the interests of safety the world must be narrowed and reduced such that there is no dangerous ambiguity that might creep out of control by its sheer diversity. The emotions of fear and hatred also reduce the mental landscape to a very narrow place such that what happiness or pleasure that can be found in this desolate place is equally restricted. Whatever pleasures or satisfactions can be found are highly dependent on things being exactly the way they are desired. Any change or even any threat of change brings with it fear and then the outpouring of intolerance, rage and hatred that so mark fanaticism.

3. Narcissism

This is a very important element of fanaticism but it is usually not noticed. This is probably because it is hidden behind the views being espoused. It seems as if it is merely that the views being stated are important, but the narcissism becomes apparent when we notice that the views are not only regarded as being important, but their importance is exaggerated enormously. So enormously in fact that it is believed that it is only those views that have any validity whatsoever. All other views are ignored, dismissed or derided. Not only are the espoused views believed to be all-important, there is usually a total devotion to them. These are of course the hallmarks of narcissism – an inflation of oneself, the devotion to oneself and the denigration of others. Another pointer to narcissism is the fact that the individual strongly identifies himself with views being expressed. It is a curious fact about religion that one tends to adopt the religion that one is born into. So when one observes people that are quite fanatical about their religious beliefs one tends to think that had the person been born to another religion, they would have been just as fanatical about that particular religion, probably in much the same way as they are to this one. So it is not so much the religious belief that is fanatical, but the holder of the belief. So fanaticism is all about the person and how he values these opinions, which he identifies himself with, as being the most important things on the face of the earth. And this kind of valuing of oneself is invariably associated with the disparaging of others and their beliefs.

4. An Overvaluation of Ideas at the Cost of Reality

This is a difficult element to delineate, because it can very easily get confused with some of the most valuable ideas that we have as humans. Speaking very generally I think ideas can be grouped under three headings –

1. Ideas that have little to do with reality.
2. Ideas that reflect the reality of our world.
3. Ideas that attempt to mould the world to themselves.

1) Ideas that have little to do with reality are our fantasies and our imagination. This is the world of fiction and a large proportion of feature films. This group portrays our world or people, which through identification, we wish the world or ourselves to be. We know the fictitious nature of these ideas and we also know that they express nothing other than our aspirations. We seem to spend a lot of time in them or in

daydreams. Generally there is no attempt to live these ideas. Once we try to live these ideas or take them too seriously, then we start to move out of this group.

2) Ideas that reflect the reality of our world are the world of physics and science. The ideas are about reality and though they at various points in the human mind seem to be severed from reality, they never really are. For they are being constantly evaluated against reality to see how they approximate to it and hence they are being constantly modified to adjust to reality. Included in this group are some of the softer sciences like psychoanalysis which insist they are about the reality of our mental worlds. Sometimes the connections may not be obvious or clear, but the link is necessarily there and consequently psychoanalysis keeps getting modified.

3) Ideas that mould the world to them are a very large and heterogeneous group. Included in this group are the various forms of government, financial systems and most of the world's religions. These are all ideas that have their origins in the minds of people, though all the revealed religions insist that these ideas have an extraterrestrial origin and are only revealed to humans at certain times. Since they have little or nothing to do with the reality of the world as it is, they cannot be corrected by reality and hence are open to enormous distortions. The greatest miseries that humans have perpetrated on other humans, have probably all been on account of such ideas. Some of these ideas have some connection with reality, for instance commonsense suggest that any group of people are probably best able to decide what is best for themselves or that what facilitates ordinary commerce, is probably commercially wise. But many of these ideas have absolutely nothing to do with reality. They are ideas that originate in human minds, but ideas that insist the world must conform to them. There is in this way an overvaluation of ideas over the reality of the world as it is. Plus there is always an element of force involved, which attempts to force the world or other individuals to conform to the dictates of these ideas. We can see how fanaticism must necessarily belong to this group. Or to put it another way, it is difficult to be fanatical about reality. One doesn't have to insist on the reality of the world as it is. It exists just as it does. One can ignore this reality if one chooses to, but inevitably, reality will assert itself, not because anyone insists that it do so, but merely because it is in the nature of things to exist just as they are.

So these then are the elements of what I think constitutes fanaticism. I had to do a bit of thinking to come up with this small list. If you did a bit of thinking you might come up with another list that maybe different from mine. But if you were not concentrating very hard when I spoke, you might not have heard my list or forgotten it already. My list is after all a bit arbitrary, but fanaticism is not. So to try and capture the elements in a less intellectual way, let me tell you a little story that you might find easier to relate to. It comes from 'Winnie the Pooh' (3) and it's about catching a Heffalump.

Catching a Heffalump

I presume you all know what a Heffalump is. Piglet and Pooh certainly knew what it was when –

Christopher Robin finished the mouthful he was eating and said carelessly: 'I saw a Heffalump today, Piglet.'

'What was it doing?' asked Piglet.

'Just lumping along,' said Christopher Robin. 'I don't think it saw me.'

'I saw one once,' said Piglet. 'At least, I think I did,' he said. Only perhaps it wasn't.'

'So did I,' said Pooh, wondering what a Heffalump was.

'You don't often see them,' said Christopher Robin carelessly.

'Not now,' said Piglet.

'Not at this time of the year,' said Pooh.

You see the trouble is that I, like a lot of other people, don't really know what a Heffalump is, but like Piglet and Pooh we try to cover our lack of understanding and pretend very casually to know exactly what it actually is. We dare not expose our ignorance. If you are having trouble imagining what a Heffalump is, try spelling it in a simpler way, perhaps with three letters G-O-D. These and similar words after all refer to the same thing – something that no one has ever seen, but something that we all pretend to know everything about the moment the word is carelessly or casually mentioned. If we didn't pretend to know what these words refer to, what asses we would seem!

If we were prepared to let the matter pass, it might not be such a bad thing, for Heffalumps (or God) might just go lumping along and it really wouldn't trouble anyone. But the trouble is that we can't let it pass. We try to capture it. This is where fanaticism comes in. For fanaticism is nothing other than an attempt to catch Heffalumps. To put it another way, fanaticism is a concrete attempt in the real world to capture an abstract idea created by no one other than ourselves. This idea does not exist apart from ourselves, but we can't see that. We treat it as something quite outside and apart from us, so we go to great lengths to capture it. Piglet and Pooh's attempt to capture a Heffalump is very instructive. This was their plan –

Pooh's first idea was that they should dig a Very Deep Pit (Deep Pits of Ignorance are after all the best places to catch Heffalumps in) and then a Heffalump would come along and fall into the Pit, and –

‘Why?’ said Piglet.

‘Why what?’ said Pooh.

‘Why would he fall in?’ (An excellent question, don't you think?)

Pooh rubbed his nose with his paw, and said that the Heffalump might be walking along, humming a little song, and looking up at the sky, wondering if it would rain, and so he wouldn't see the Very Deep Pit until he was half-way down, when it would be too late.

Piglet said that this was a very good Trap, but supposing it were raining already? (Another very good question!)

Pooh rubbed his nose again, and said that he hadn't thought of that. And then he brightened up, and said that, if it were raining already, the Heffalump would be looking at the sky wondering if it would clear up, and so he wouldn't see the Very Deep Pit until he was half-way down ... When it would be too late.

(This illustrates how fanaticism being constructed of abstract ideas is a closed system. It cannot be logically refuted, for there are always explanations around its central beliefs. Once the existence of Heffalumps has been accepted, even the most preposterous explanations of giving reality to these beliefs can be logically argued. But to continue with our story -)

Piglet said that now that this point had been explained he thought it was a Cunning Trap.

Pooh was very proud when he heard this, and felt that the Heffalump was as good as caught already, but there was just one other thing, which had to be thought about, and it was this. Where should they dig the Very Deep Pit?

Piglet said that the best place would be somewhere where a Heffalump was, just before he fell into it, only about a foot further on.

‘But then he would see us digging it,’ said Pooh.

‘Not if he was looking up at the sky.’

‘He would Suspect,’ said Pooh, ‘if he happened to look down.’ He thought for a long time and then added sadly, ‘It isn't as easy as I thought. I suppose that's why Heffalumps hardly ever get caught.’

‘That must be it,’ said Piglet.

They sighed and got up; and when they had taken a few gorse prickles out of themselves they sat down again: and all the time Pooh was saying to himself, ‘If only I could think of something!’ For he felt sure that a Very Clever Brain could catch a Heffalump if only he knew the right way to go about it. (This is of course an ancient idea that if only one knew the right way to go about things, fasting, devotion, fanaticism then one could surely catch the elusive Heffalump.)

‘Suppose,’ he said to Piglet, ‘you wanted to catch me, how would you do it?’

‘Well,’ said Piglet, ‘I should do it like this. I should make a Trap and I should put a Jar of Honey in the Trap, and you would smell it, and you would go in after it, and – ‘

‘And I would go in after it,’ said Pooh excitedly....

Pooh is absolutely captivated with this idea and goes into a dreamy trance thinking about all that honey! This again is a brilliant description of how the fanaticist dreams of catching his Heffalump. He uses as bait the things that are dearest to him. He projects his lust, greed and hatred onto others and then joyously cuts them down with the sword of righteousness.

I will summarize the rest of the story. Winnie the Pooh gets the largest jar of honey that he can find to use as bait, but being the greedy bear that he is, he is unable to resist eating most of the honey before putting the jar into the deep pit. He wakes up early the next morning feeling very hungry and remembering that he had put his jar of honey in Very Deep Pit he goes to eat it. He gets to the jar all right, but then there is only a tiny bit of honey left at the bottom. When he tries to lick it he manages to get his head trapped in the jar such that no matter how hard he tries he cannot get the jar off his head. Piglet, when he comes looking for the Heffalump next morning, hears the great commotion of Pooh in the pit and terrified he goes and gets Christopher Robin to come and see the Heffalump they have captured. Christopher Robin of course recognizes who the Heffalump is. Pooh bear is finally able to break the jar and hence release his head. So the story has a happy ending. But unfortunately that is not the case with our fanaticist. He not only falls into the traps of his own thinking, baited with his own unrecognized and unconscious yearnings, but he is unable to extract his head from these ideas. The noise that his own blind flailing creates, only serves to convince him that he has indeed trapped his much sought after Heffalump. The outcome is tragic. He damages or destroys the carriers of his own projections and sometimes destroys himself in the process. And he does all this for what purpose? It is all done to catch a Heffalump.

The stone-bridge view

I am sorry to have taken you through this rather circuitous journey, to bring you back to our koan. But I think the journey was necessary to prepare you for our final assault on the koan. To refresh your memory, I will re-capitulate the koan –

A monk asked Chao Chou, ‘For a long time I’ve heard of the stone bridge of Chao Chou, but now that I’ve come here I just see a simple log bridge.’

Chou said, ‘You just see the log bridge; but you don’t see the stone bridge.’

The monk said, ‘What is the stone bridge?’

Chou said, ‘It lets asses cross, it lets horses cross.’

The monk is a very clever but very small-minded person. He is clever enough to equate Chao Chou with the famous bridge and sharp enough to then try and cut him down. Chao Chou’s first arrow is a compassionate one for it goes to the heart of the monk’s lack of understanding. Chao Chou is saying to him in effect ‘My dear friend, you can see the particular but not the whole. You can see this particular and ordinary person in front of you, but you cannot see the whole truth of which I am a part. You are using your narrow and partial views to create your own partial world-view. You come looking for a Heffalump, but all that you are able to

see is the particular me, which is no different from the particular you. And there is no doubt an element of truth in what you say. But you then elevate this partial truth, to encompass the whole truth. To do so is not only profoundly mistaken. It is profoundly mistaken because it is driven by your narcissism to elevate yourself at my expense. When you do that you are seeing me as being as narcissistic as you are and you feel that I am proclaiming myself as being this wonderful teacher, which makes you feel small. So you try to cut me down. You are acting just like Pooh Bear. You dig a trap to catch the Heffalump you have come here looking for, but all you catch is yourself. You are trying to stump me but little do you realize you are stumping yourself with your own blindness. Wake up my friend and do not see only the log bridge, but see the stone bridge and understand that the stone bridge as ancient as it is profound. It bridges ignorance with reality, not with an imagination rich in Heffalumps'

But the monk does not understand or maybe he understands only partially. Is there a slight element of deflation in his second question, 'What is the stone bridge?' So perhaps Chao Chou's first arrow has softened him enough to at least ask a question, instead of making, as he initially did, his arrogant and blind assertion. We know that narcissism in full flight will admit of no understanding other than its own narcissistic understanding. To be prepared to listen, and to accept that there may be some understanding that is beyond one's comprehension, is a considerable achievement. Instead of brandishing our own shining understanding and just be receptive to another's, is a great achievement. So the monk is now hopefully prepared for Chao Chou's second arrow. It is this second arrow that really goes to the heart of the matter. Chao Chou says that the stone bridge is one that lets asses cross and one that lets horses cross. It offers no obstruction to the slow-witted or the quick. The truth is there for all of us to see it, though most of us generally can't. The stone bridge was there long before Chao Chou came to that place and it is still around, right here in this room if you are prepared to look for it. Whether you are foolish or clever it will let you pass, for the truth offers no obstruction to anyone. We need to understand that each one of us is part of that truth and that truth does not occupy some different elevated place. Yet we tend to think that the truth is separate from us and when we think it is separate from us, we try to dig pits to trap and capture it. If we look carefully we will find the fanaticist in us, for we will not find it hard to locate how often we see things partially and how we usually cannot see them as being one interconnected whole. We don't need pits to capture this understanding. Digging pits out of fear only deepens our fear and our intolerance. All we need do is to try and examine ourselves honestly. If we do, we will come to see and understand our narcissism and we will come to see and understand how fearful and intolerant we are of each other and of people called fanaticists. We will come to understand that these are all ideas, all inflated Heffalumps. If we can see fanaticists as being our friends because they are not very different from ourselves, then we might let Heffalumps just lump along. Fanaticists and the hefty Heffalumps they carry around on their backs like asses, are parts of our world. Clever people, with reasoning that is as swift as horses, are also part of our world. If we have Chao Chou's wisdom we will not feel terribly fazed by them or anything else in this enormous, complex and beautiful world of ours. For they are a part of us and we are a part of them and we are all very brief fragments of this enormous and interconnected teeming world. Do we really have any choice but to let asses pass and to let horses pass?

ENDNOTES/REFERENCES

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