

Feature Article: JAF7363

DEEPAK CHOPRA'S COSMIC ENLIGHTENMENT: Eastern Ideas in a Western Culture

by Robert Velarde

This article first appeared in CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 36, number 03 (2013). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

A fortuitous appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* propelled Deepak Chopra, M.D., toward fame and fortune. The day after the program, more than 130,000 copies of his book *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind* were sold. A prolific author—including the recent *Super Brain: Unleashing the Explosive Power of Your Mind to Maximize Health, Happiness, and Spiritual Well-Being*¹—Chopra maintains a multimedia empire that now includes a presence on smartphones, social media, video content, printed materials, his own foundation, and more.

In the early 1980s, Chopra visited his homeland, India, where he rediscovered *ayurveda* (Indian medicine), as well as Transcendental Meditation (TM).² TM helped Chopra see the value in repackaging Eastern beliefs for popular Western consumption—something TM's founder, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, had discovered. Chopra later met Maharishi while visiting New Delhi, which led to Chopra working to promote Maharishi Ayur-Veda. Later success resulted in Chopra breaking formal ties with Maharishi, ready to begin his meteoric rise in the West.

CHOPRA'S "FOUR SPIRITUAL LAWS"

You've no doubt heard of the famous "four spiritual laws," made popular via the ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ. These laws succinctly present key principles of the gospel. Chopra's teachings can also be summarized by four (very different) laws or principles: (1) All is one; (2) We are, at our core, perfect and divine; (3) We must become enlightened about the unity of everything and our true, perfect nature; and (4) Enlightenment leads to healing and other major benefits.³

Chopra himself readily documents these four beliefs. A chapter in his book *Creating Health* is titled, "One Is All, and All Is One." This is textbook monism, the belief that all reality is one.

As for Chopra's belief that we are perfect and divine, he writes in *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*: "Our essential nature is one of pure potentiality. Your body is not separate from the universe....The larger quantum field—the universe—is your extended body...all processes of creation are processes through which the Self or

divinity expresses itself.”⁴ In a multimedia CD-ROM, Chopra states, “The infinite flow of the universe is within me. My body is ageless, timeless and boundless. I am in touch with my divine nature every day.”⁵

Enlightenment

When it comes to the matter of spiritual enlightenment, Chopra appears to hearken back to his experiences with TM, writing in *Journey Into Healing*: “The practice of meditation takes our awareness from the disturbed state of consciousness in the realm of soul and spirit. Through regular practice we gain access to the infinite storehouse of knowledge—the ultimate reality of creation. We have the experience of who we really are—pure unbounded consciousness.”⁶

What about the results of enlightenment? Chopra urges readers to maximize potential: “I would like you to join me on a voyage of discovery. We will explore a place where the rules of everyday existence do not apply. These rules explicitly state that to grow old, become frail, and die is the ultimate destiny of all. And so it has been for century after century. However, I want you to suspend your assumptions about what we call reality so that we can become pioneers in a land where youthful vigor, renewal, creativity, joy, fulfillment and timelessness are the common experience of everyday life, where old age, senility, infirmity and death do not exist and are not even entertained as a philosophy.”⁷ In *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*, he remarks, “You can think of your physical body as a device for controlling energy....If you know how to generate, store and expend energy in an efficient way, then you can create any amount of wealth...success also includes good health, energy and enthusiasm for life, fulfilling relationships, creative freedom, emotional and psychological stability, a sense of well-being, and peace of mind.”⁸

CHALLENGING CHOPRA

So what’s wrong with Deepak Chopra’s ideas? Doesn’t he just want to help people lead more fulfilling lives? If so, what’s the big deal? Before we address his teachings, let’s pause to look at some positives.⁹ First, Chopra’s teachings remind us that human beings are meant for something more—the material world is not all that exists. Second, spirituality is important, so neglecting this aspect of our nature is unwise. Third, seeking to improve ourselves is a worthwhile endeavor. Who doesn’t want to live a meaningful, fulfilled life? Fourth, desiring to cultivate and encourage the power of the intellect is admirable and something Chopra strives to encourage in *Super Brain*. All of these points, however, come with caveats, because the worldview underlying his teachings is fundamentally flawed and diametrically opposed to Christianity.

Chopra wants a heaven on earth, but not the Christian heaven. He wants it without the messy business of sin, the need for repentance, or the atonement of Christ as “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). There are a number of critical points where Chopra’s teachings contradict the basic tenets of Christianity, not to mention common sense.

Although Chopra has done much to Westernize and at times seemingly disguise his Eastern philosophy, making it palatable to the masses, the heart of Chopra's worldview remains squarely planted within monistic pantheism. This worldview sees all as one and everything as part of a divine force—an impersonal energy flowing through everything and everyone. There are many problems with this belief. Obviously, it contradicts Christian theism, which holds that the world is both real and essentially distinct from its Creator. In addition, Christianity teaches that God is personal and transcendent, yet active in his creation. He is not an impersonal energy or force.¹⁰

Still, this doesn't conclusively settle the matter. After all, perhaps Chopra is right, and all is one and all is a divine force. A detailed refutation of monistic pantheism is beyond the scope of this article. However, the logical consequences of monistic pantheism demonstrate that it lacks coherence when it comes to explaining reality. Followed to its conclusions, if all is one and all is divine, then there is no real good or evil—all moral distinctions collapse into relativism within monistic pantheism. Chopra himself admits of good and evil, "However, to the visionary these are two sides of the same force. God created both because both are needed; God is in the evil as much as in the good."¹¹ Ethics disintegrate within the worldview of monistic pantheism.

Confusion about Christ

Perhaps the greatest area of concern for Christian theists in relation to the teachings of Deepak Chopra is his views of Christ, Christianity, and the Bible. Although Chopra sometimes uses language that appears to make God a personal being, in reality he denies this. He is contradicting himself, either unconsciously borrowing capital, so to speak, from the theistic worldview, or deliberately redefining his terminology in order to appeal to an audience that still largely has roots in Christianity, however weak those roots may be. To Chopra, though, we are, at our core, perfect and divine.

Chopra's attempts to interpret the Christian Scriptures are, similarly, flawed. He commits what James Sire refers to as the fallacies of "World-View Confusion" and "Esoteric Interpretation." Worldview confusion is defined as follows: "Scriptural statements, stories, commands or symbols which have a particular meaning or set of meanings when taken within the intellectual and broadly cultural framework of the Bible itself are lifted out of that context, placed within the frame of reference of another system and thus given a meaning that markedly differs from their intended meaning."¹² In other words, Chopra reads monistic pantheism *into* the text of the Bible, rather than drawing monotheism *out from* it. Esoteric interpretation, another one of Chopra's errors in reading the Bible, is "the assumption that the Bible contains hidden, esoteric, meaning which is open only to those who are initiated into its secrets." The interpreter, then, "declares the significance of biblical passages without giving much if any explanation for his or her interpretation."¹³

Perhaps the best example of Chopra committing hermeneutical errors has to do with his understanding of John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In John 1:14 we are told precisely who the author was talking about: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen

his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (ESV). In short, Christ is the Word. But not to Chopra, who writes, "Clearly, no ordinary word is implied. Something like the following is meant: Before there was time and space, a faint vibration existed outside the cosmos. This vibration had everything contained in it—all universes, all events, all time and space. The primordial vibration was with God. As far as we can fathom, it *is* God. Divine intelligence was compressed in this 'word,' and when the time came for the universe to be born, the 'word,' transformed itself into energy and matter....In India the sound of the divine mother took the name *om*, and it is believed that meditating on this sound will unlock all the mother's secrets. Perhaps *om* is the very word John is referring to."¹⁴

AGELESS TRUTHS, TEMPORAL ERRORS

There is much more we could say about the flaws of Chopra's worldview. For instance, he appeals to quantum physics in support of monistic pantheism, but does so only by stretching the scientific evidence. Moreover, his views of Jesus are, to say the least, more in line with the New Age cosmic Christ—an enlightened way-shower on the path to spiritual liberation, teaching his followers "how to reach God-consciousness."¹⁵

Despite his soft-spoken, polished presentation, Deepak Chopra's view of reality remains significantly at odds with Christian theism, as well as reason. No amount of intellectual contortions will allow biblical Christianity to accommodate monistic pantheism. Either God is a transcendent, personal being, actively at work in His creation, who revealed Himself in the person of Christ, or He is not. If all is one divine impersonal force flowing through all of reality, as monistic pantheism believes, then the claims of Christianity are false.

A POSITIVE MESSAGE IS NOT ENOUGH

As we have seen, Chopra's worldview is deficient in significant areas. Its relativistic ethics does not correspond or resonate with what we know about reality. If Chopra's worldview is true, then there is no good or evil because all is one. Furthermore, if Chopra's worldview is true, there is no need for redemption through Christ, since there really is no sin requiring repentance because Chopra claims we are perfect, divine beings. We need enlightenment, says Chopra, not repentance. Fundamental claims of Deepak Chopra's worldview stake out areas of reality that are antithetical to Christian theism. Despite their positive thrust, Chopra's teachings fall far short of the holy, creator God who reaches out to a broken and desperate humanity with the good news of Jesus Christ.

Robert Velarde is author of *Examining Alternative Medicine* (InterVarsity Press), *A Visual Defense* (Kregel Publications), *Conversations with C. S. Lewis* (InterVarsity Press), *The Heart of Narnia* (NavPress), and more. He received his M.A. from Southern Evangelical Seminary.

NOTES

- 1 Coauthored with Rudolph E. Tanzi (New York: Harmony Books, 2012). Other titles by Chopra include, but are not limited to, *Creating Health; Quantum Healing; Perfect Health; Creating Affluence; The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success; Boundless Energy; Everyday Immortality; How to Know God; Grow Younger, Live Longer; The Third Jesus*; and more.
- 2 Transcendental Meditation is an Eastern religious practice, meant to lead to spiritual enlightenment, which includes the realization that all is one and that the practitioner is perfect and divine. Chopra's teachings are not much different than the basic tenets of TM.
- 3 For a detailed analysis of these points see Chapter 9 of *Examining Alternative Medicine: An Inside Look at the Benefits and Risks* by Paul Reisser, Dale Mabe, and Robert Velarde (InterVarsity Press, 2001).
- 4 Deepak Chopra, *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* (San Rafael, CA: New World Library, 1994), 69, 4–5.
- 5 Deepak Chopra, *The Wisdom Within* (New York: Crown, 1997).
- 6 Deepak Chopra, *Journey Into Healing* (New York: Harmony/Random House, 1994), 153–54.
- 7 Deepak Chopra, *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind* (New York: Harmony, 1993), 3.
- 8 Chopra, *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*, 55–56, 85, 2–3.
- 9 There is apologetic value in seeking points of agreement or, if agreement is not fundamentally possible, searching for aspects of a competing perspective that we can compliment or resonate with in some positive way. See, e.g., how Paul addresses the Athenians in Acts 17:16–34.
- 10 Some Christians wrongly argue that the Holy Spirit is a force, energy, or divine wind or breath of God, but biblically this is not correct. The Holy Spirit is the third *person* of the Trinity and exhibits personal qualities, such as the capacity to be lied to (Acts 5:3–4), as well as the capacity to call and send missionaries (Acts 13:1–3), for instance.
- 11 Deepak Chopra, *How to Know God* (New York: Harmony/Random House, 2000), 151.
- 12 James Sire, *Scripture Twisting* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 160. ¹³ Ibid., 159–60.
- 13 Chopra, *How to Know God*, 138–39.
- 14 Chopra, *The Third Jesus* (New York: Harmony Books, 2008), 9.