

# Self Knowledge: The Most Brilliant Light of Being

James Noyes  
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“When you know yourselves, then you will be known,  
and you will understand that you are children of the living father.  
But if you do not know yourselves,  
then you dwell in poverty, and you are poverty.”  
- - *The Gospel of Thomas*<sup>1</sup>

The true purpose of teaching is not to educate, but to instill a desire in students to know themselves. For while we are all our own best teachers, we are often never made aware of this fact and believe the answers to life’s most pressing questions lie somewhere from without. Engaged in a life of distractions, most are too busy or afraid to look within, finding it far easier instead to believe in something other than oneself. The worship of money is one common result; faith in the “right” religion is yet another. However, without labor-intensive knowledge and awareness of self, these offer nothing more than a false sense of security and false hope.

It is said the two greatest teachers in the Western sphere were Socrates (469-399 B.C.) and Jesus Christ (c.6 C.E. – c.29 C.E.). Neither is credited with leaving any written record of their own, thus, we are left with the interpretations of Plato and of certain apostles/disciples to bring us closest to each source. According to W. H. D. Rouse, “Socrates himself described his object as that of a midwife, to bring other men’s *thoughts to birth*, to stimulate them to think and to criticize themselves, not to instruct them.”<sup>2</sup> The Socratic dialogues (as recorded by Plato) are filled with open-ended questions and metaphors, and conclude without a given solution. Here, followers are encouraged to continue themselves the search, “to take every care and thought for understanding, for truth, and for the soul, so that it may be perfect.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus, who according to John said, “Unless one is *born anew* [of water and the Spirit], he cannot see the kingdom of God.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus spoke only in parables, short

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<sup>1</sup> Marvin Meyer, trans., *The Gospel of Thomas*, interp. Harold Bloom, (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 23.

<sup>2</sup> W. H. D. Rouse, trans., *The Great Dialogues of Plato*, Warmington and P. G. Rouse, eds., (New York: Mentor, 1956), IX.

<sup>3</sup> Rouse, 435. *The Apology* (The Defense of Socrates).

<sup>4</sup> John 3:3 [5].

stories or comparative statements with allegorical meanings, which similarly provided no definite answers. Here, followers are encouraged to continue themselves the search for truth, to “be perfect, as your Heavenly father is perfect.”<sup>5</sup>

The difficulty with these open-ended approaches is they require a commitment from the student to seek further, “for the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”<sup>6</sup> This means asking difficult questions of oneself. It means challenging long-held assumptions and changing one’s mind, sometimes frequently. (As Tolstoy has remarked, “Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.”<sup>7</sup>) It means being alone with one’s thoughts to confront the fear and denial that lie therein. It means coming face to face with one’s own *vulnerability*.

We are *born* vulnerable. Jesus says we must “turn and become like children [to] enter the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>8</sup> Socrates points out that if the soul is not “hammered at from childhood [to serve virtue, then the] leaden weights of the world...[will] grow into the soul from gorging and gluttony and such pleasures, and twist the soul’s eye downward.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, when one gains money and influence, one feels less vulnerable. When one gains allure and sexual prowess, one feels less vulnerable. When one gains ideas of religious and intellectual superiority, one feels less vulnerable. However, none are the truth. Socrates asks us to *shake off these leaden weights*, for the “virtue of understanding everything really belongs to something certainly more divine.”<sup>10</sup> Jesus tells us “do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on.” He sends us out “as sheep in the midst of wolves.” He also tells us to “judge not,” “forgive your debtors,” and “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, *accept vulnerability, for this is the truth*.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 5:48.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid 7:14.

<sup>7</sup> James Jordan, *The Musician’s Soul*, (Chicago: Gia Publications, Inc., 1999), 29.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 18:4.

<sup>9</sup> Rouse, 317. *The Republic*, Book VII, (518-519C).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 6:25, 10:16, 7:1, 6:12, and 5:44 respectively.

It is said that vulnerability can neither be defined nor taught; it can only be experienced.

Both Socrates and Jesus Christ (miracles notwithstanding) were vulnerable by example, sacrificing their own selfish interests for the benefit of others. Socrates states:

That I am really one given to you by God you can easily see from this; for it does not seem human that I have neglected all my own interests, that I have been content with the neglect of my domestic affairs, all these years; while always I was attending to your interests, approaching each of you privately like a father or elder brother and persuading you to care for virtue.<sup>12</sup>

Jesus states: He who has seen me, has seen the Father.<sup>13</sup> (yet another parable!)

So, too, we are vulnerable in death. Socrates and Jesus Christ were both tried for impiety.

Socrates was indicted for “corrupting the young...by teaching them not to believe in the gods which the state believes in, but in other new spirits.”<sup>14</sup> He was convicted by a jury on a majority vote (281-220) and sentenced to die. He accepted his fate saying, “Life without enquiry is not worth living for a man.”<sup>15</sup> He received death in prison by drinking hemlock. Jesus was indicted for teaching a “new covenant” contrary to established Jewish law and for impersonating the Christ, the Son of God. He was convicted in the court of public opinion and sentenced to die. He accepted his fate in silence and received death by public crucifixion on a cross. *Was there ever a greater symbol of vulnerability?*

The paradox of self-knowledge is contained in the words, “He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.”<sup>16</sup> Those who deny their own vulnerability seek not the truth; the body will die. Those who accept, embrace and profess their own vulnerability gain the truth; the spirit will live!

“Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren,  
for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness.  
For we all make mistakes, and if any one makes no mistakes in what he says  
he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also.”

- - James 3:1-2

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<sup>12</sup> Rouse, 437. *The Apology* (The Defense of Socrates), (29E-32A).

<sup>13</sup> John 14:9.

<sup>14</sup> Rouse, 432. *The Apology* (The Defense of Socrates), (26A-27D).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 443.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 10:39.