



**Spirit Matters  
A Personal View**

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*I have been in that heaven, the most illumined by light from him and seen things which to utter,  
he who returns hath neither skill nor knowledge, for as it nears the object of its yearning our  
intellect is overwhelmed so deeply that it can never retrace the path that it followed. But  
whatsoever of the holy kingdom was in the power of memory to treasure, it will be my theme  
until the song is ended.  
-- Dante, Inferno*

## **Introduction**

This is a manifesto of sorts. Having wrestled with the spiritual questions of human life, mostly alone and privately, for the last half century, I thought I would find it interesting to set down the conclusions I've come to in some kind of systematic order. It's really a dialogue with myself (which is why there are many quotations but no footnotes). Readers will certainly discover nothing original here. There are no new ideas in what follows, although I don't think new ideas

are usually of much value when it comes to the basic questions of existence. In any case, for anyone who might be interested, here it is.

It is divided into five parts.

The first section begins with the mystical awakening which I experienced when I was twenty. It proceeds to a defense of mysticism as a valid source of knowledge and then describes the view of existence – the “Perennial Philosophy” – which I believe naturally flows from mystical experience.

The second section is a refutation of philosophical materialism, the dominant world view of educated people in our time. I wrote this section because I believe this worldview is inconsistent with the insights of mystical experience, and also because I think that it is the least plausible of the metaphysical views on offer, despite its popularity.

The third section discusses the question whether it is plausible to believe in life after death. It looks at the question from the standpoint of western philosophy and Buddhism, and also examines various claims that scientific evidence exists for human immortality.

The fourth section concerns enlightened beings, spiritual geniuses who incarnate the truths of the spirit, and whose lives are revelations of its power.

The fifth section concerns the path of awakening. It describes, first, what I believe I’ve learned about the necessary ethical foundations of a spiritual life, and second, some of the practices which I believe lead, first, to a deepening of spiritual understanding, and finally to the ultimate goal of enlightenment.

### **One: Thou Art That**

*Life is this simple: we are living in a world that is absolutely transparent and the divine is shining through it all the time. This is not just a nice story or a fable, it is true.*

— Thomas Merton

*“Humans are amphibians...half spirit and half animal...as spirits they belong to the eternal world, but as animals they inhabit time. This means that while their spirit can be directed to an eternal object, their bodies, passions, and imaginations are in continual change, for to be in time, means to change. Their nearest approach to constancy, therefore, is undulation--the repeated return to a level from which they repeatedly fall back, a series of troughs and peaks.”*

— [C.S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters](#)

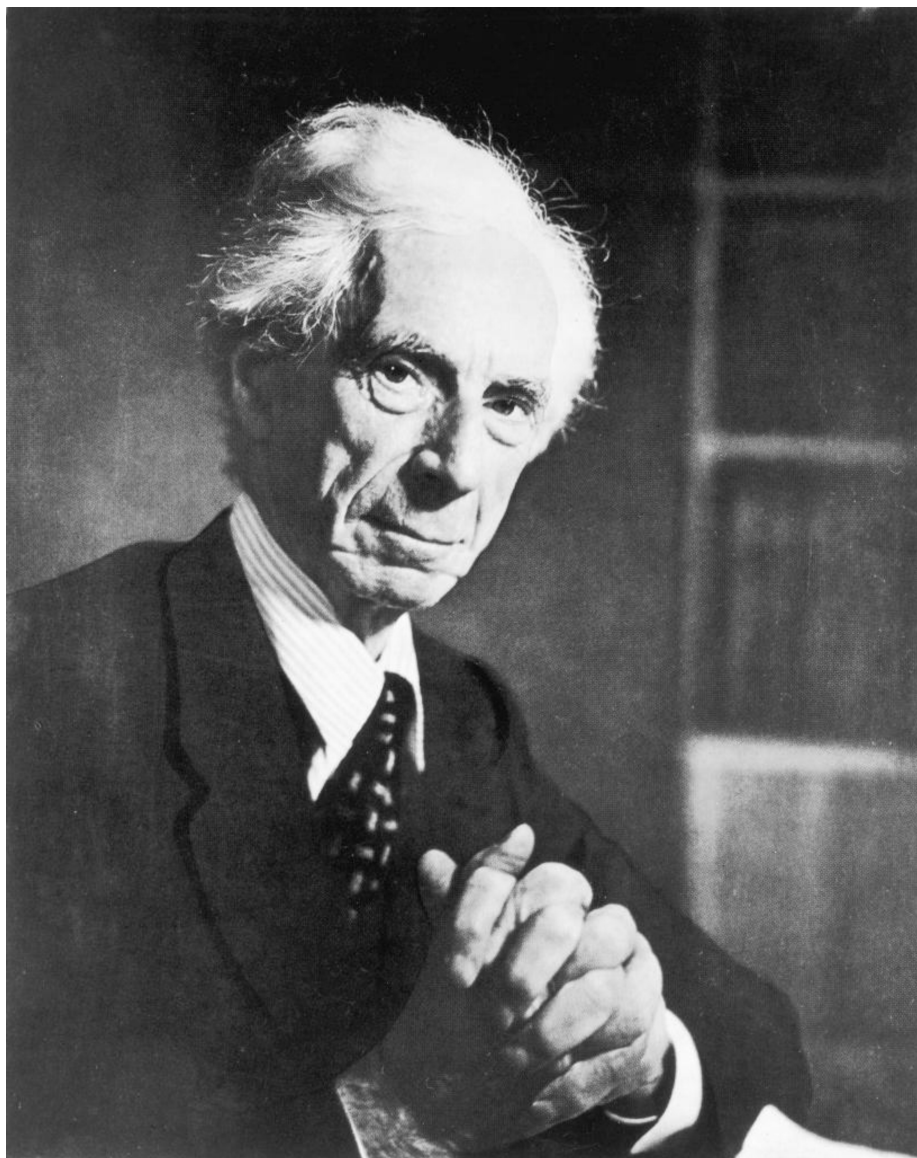
Overview

Human beings are spiritual amphibians: we inhabit two worlds simultaneously. One world lies mostly outside of ourselves, and discloses itself through the senses and the mind's capacity for abstract reasoning. The other world we find within; it is discovered by the heart.

In our everyday experience of the phenomenal world, we are "skin encapsulated egos" struggling to survive in a vast material universe which appears to be completely indifferent to us. It is a harsh world; dazzlingly beautiful, nightmarishly ugly, restless and constantly changing. Everything in it, including ourselves, is ultimately engulfed and annihilated.

In a famous passage in his 1912 essay "A Free Man's Worship," Bertrand Russell paints a stark picture of this world:

"That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins--all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built."



Bertrand Russell

Russell presents the human heart with a task which is self-evidently impossible. Despair is an abyss, not a foundation; and it is an unfathomable mystery how a “soul” could arise in the universe he describes in the first place, much less find a place to inhabit within it. In this world we will always be strangers in a strange land.

But when we look within, we can intuit another realm, which we sense is deeper, more fundamental and more enduring than the world given to us by our senses. Our first encounters with this world are liable to be fleeting; and we may initially see it as insubstantial and not as real as the world our senses reveal. But in time we come to understand that this world is, in fact, the only real world. It is here that we find our true home; it is here that we find our way out of terror and anguish and alienation. In this world we see that our real nature is oneness with life, with consciousness, with the whole of the universe. Here we find the ground of our being in an

ultimate reality which can never be comprehended by the mind, but can be intimately known and loved by the heart. In his essay, “The Over-Soul,” Emerson gives a moving description of his view from this world:



Ralph Waldo Emerson

“The Supreme Critic on all the errors of the past and the present, and the only prophet of that which must be, is that great nature in which we rest as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man’s particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all right action is submission; that overpowering reality which confutes our tricks and talents, and constrains everyone to pass for what he is, and to speak from his character and not from his tongue, and which evermore tends to pass into our thought and hand and become wisdom and virtue and power and beauty. We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One. And this deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul.”

What I believe can be summed up in five propositions:

1. *Atman is Brahman.* These three words – *tat twam asi* – *That art Thou* – contain within themselves all of the truths of the spiritual life. What they mean is that your individual soul is the soul of the universe. They don't mean that you are "one" with ultimate reality: they mean that in some sense that is incomprehensible to the intellect, you *are* ultimate reality. The kingdom of heaven is within you, and not in some metaphorical sense, but literally, actually. What you have been looking for is what you have been looking with. In the depths of your own being, you are eternal consciousness, fathomless love, infinite joy. This truth is not something to attain through leading a moral life, or through rigorous spiritual practice. There is nothing to attain, because *Thou art That*, today, always, and forever.

2. *The fundamental human problem is not sin, but ignorance.* One of the great mysteries of life is that almost all of us come into this life ignorant of who we are. We suffer because we have forgotten that we are identical with the Ground of Being, and that our true nature is wisdom and compassion. Because of our ignorance our minds are clouded by the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion; but behind these clouds there is an eternal light.

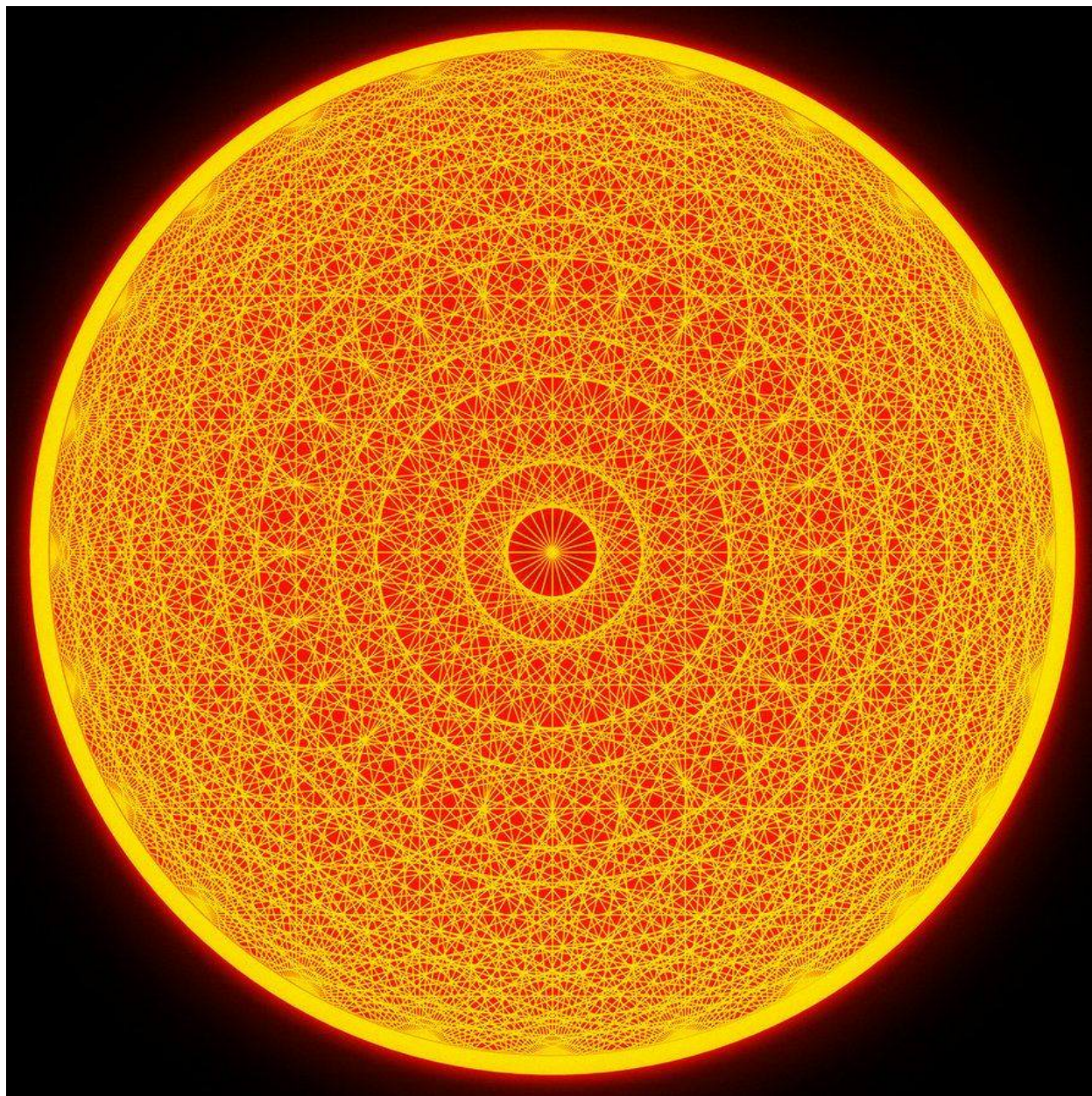
3. *There is an inherent meaning in human life.* Our task is not to create meaning, but to find it, and then to live in alignment with what we discover. The single purpose of human life is variously called "salvation," "enlightenment," "realization," "illumination." What these terms refer to is the process of awakening from our deluded state, connecting consciously with the ultimate reality and learning to live our lives in accordance with what that connection teaches us.

4. *There is a saving principle in the universe.* We know that we are pushed from behind by our instinctual and egoic drives for food, sex, love, belonging, safety, power, and so on. But there is more to our nature than our finite desires. In countless ways, something draws us forward. There is a disquiet in human nature, a restlessness that the finite cannot satisfy. Most of the time, the voice of the spirit speaks softly, but until we listen to it we remain restless and unfulfilled.

5. *There are paths which lead to union with Reality.* We don't have to find the way home by ourselves. Down the centuries there have been spiritual geniuses who have travelled ahead of us, and have left us maps which we can follow to find what they found. In every culture there are communities which teach the ethical foundations and the practices which lead to enlightenment. Despite their cultural differences, all of the great religions prescribe essentially the same way of life. We are guided to align ourselves with the saving principle through cultivating awareness of what we experience in the immediacy of the present moment. We are taught contemplative prayer and meditation to awaken us from our delusions and to turn the mind inward, in search of the truth which dwells within. All of the great traditions teach that union with ultimate reality is increased by love and diminished by hatred, and that the final end of human life can only be realized through living a life based on love, compassion, non-harming, generosity and service. These values are also the outward signs of the awakened heart.

## **Mysticism**





### 1. *My Awakening*

*In direct knowing, you can feel yourself one with the One that exists.*

*The whole body becomes a mere power, a force-current. Your life becomes a needle drawn to a huge mass of magnet; and, as you go deeper and deeper, you become a mere center and then not even that; for you become a mere consciousness.*

*There are no thoughts or cares any longer, they were shattered at the threshold. It is an inundation. You are a mere straw, you are swallowed alive, but it is very delightful. For you*

*become the very thing that swallows you. This is the union of the individual with the Absolute, self with Reality, the loss of ego in the real Self, the destruction of falsehood, the attainment of Truth.*

*-- Crumbs from Sri Ramana Maharshi's Table, Swami Ramananda Saraswati*

*I live my life in widening circles  
that reach out across the world.  
I may not complete this last one  
but I will give myself to it.  
I circle around god, around the primordial tower.  
I've been circling for thousands of years  
and I still don't know: am I a falcon, a storm, or a great song?  
-- Rainer Maria Rilke*

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you. Don't go back to sleep.  
-- Rumi

I began to become philosophically aware at about 15 years of age, and within a year I'd come to the conclusion that there is no God, that life on earth is a meaningless accident, and that the natural world is all that exists. These conclusions seemed obvious and all but self-evident to me for several years, and I couldn't imagine ever holding any other beliefs.

But when I was 20 I had a spontaneous mystical awakening that changed all that. One warm, bright Sunday afternoon, while visiting my parents I went for a solitary walk in an area of hills and brush in Belmont, California, that was undeveloped at that time. Suddenly, and without any premonition that something unusual was about to happen, I felt my individuality dissolve into something vast and incomprehensible. Before the experience, I had been feeling confined and constricted and depressed; as the experience washed over me I realized that all my boundaries were illusions, that I was eternally *free* and unbounded; and my mood changed to one of joy and wonder and excitement. I felt as if I were seeing something that is perfectly obvious, but which I had somehow always overlooked. What that something was I couldn't say because I had no framework to make sense of what was happening; but I knew immediately that a life-changing event was happening to me. I felt that I suddenly understood what conscious existence is *for* – not the gratification of finite desires but union with some tremendous reality that transcends all finite desires. In a way it was like suddenly getting the punch line of a joke, except that this punch line wasn't funny but joyful. It didn't occur to me to describe the experience as having anything to do with God – atheism was mere common sense to me in those days – but I felt that it was perfectly obvious that the entire universe is one infinite living being. I drove back to college still in a state of awe and wonder, and described the experience to a dorm mate. He said that it sounded as if I'd had a "peak experience," and suggested I read Abraham Maslow, a psychologist who had written extensively on the phenomena. I did, and also read *The Way of Zen* by Alan Watts. His description of *satori* seemed to fit what I had experienced.

It was clear to me from the beginning that what I had seen had something to do with the nature of consciousness. I felt that I had been brought face-to-face with something limitless and fathomless and inherently joyful about my own awareness, but I was confused about what it meant.



Since that first mystical opening, the experience has returned more times than I can count, and has gradually become an ever-present background to what I experience in the foreground of my daily life. Over time I discovered that Hinduism and Buddhism had detailed vocabularies for describing these experiences, and systems of practice for deepening them. That is why I have been practicing meditation and yoga since my 20's. What I gradually learned is that mystical experience is most likely to arise when the mind is quiet, when we withdraw from personal preoccupations and become absorbed in awareness itself. When we withdraw from the foreground of our grasping and preoccupations, we begin to notice something that is always present, but usually remains unnoticed. When awareness becomes aware of awareness, a new world begins to open up. Awareness is the royal road into the transcendental.

At first, mystical consciousness did nothing to disturb my atheism. But after about five years, the facts of experience made atheism more and more untenable. When I felt myself dissolve into the ocean of consciousness, into the bliss of being, it seemed clear to me that I was seeing into the ground of my own being, but also that I was sensing the ground of *all* being. Over time I couldn't deny that, in sensing my own depths I was simultaneously sensing a Presence that loved and enveloped me. By the time I was 25, I had come to recognize the Brahman of the Upanishads as the source of my experiences.

## 2. *The Experience of Awakening*

*In mysticism that love of truth which we saw as the beginning of all philosophy leaves the merely intellectual sphere, and takes on the assured aspect of a personal passion. Where the philosopher guesses and argues, the mystic lives and looks; and speaks, consequently, the disconcerting language of first-hand experience, not the neat dialectic of the schools. Hence whilst the Absolute of the metaphysicians remains a diagram —impersonal and unattainable—the Absolute of the mystics is lovable, attainable, alive.*

— (Mysticism, Evelyn Underhill)

*O Nobly Born. O you of glorious origins, remember your radiant true nature, the essence of mind. Trust it. Return to it. It is home.*

— *Tibetan Book of the Dead*

*Leave the senses and workings of the intellect, and all that the senses and intellect can perceive, and all that is not and that is; and through unknowing reach out, so far as this is possible, towards oneness with Him who is beyond all being and knowledge. In this way, through an uncompromising, absolute and pure detachment from yourself and from all things, transcending all things and released from all, you will be led upwards towards that radiance of the divine darkness which is beyond all being. Entering the darkness that surpasses understanding, we shall find ourselves brought, not just to brevity of speech, but to perfect silence and unknowing.*

*Emptied of all knowledge, man is joined in the highest part of himself, not with any created thing, nor with himself, nor with another, but with the One who is altogether unknowable; and, in knowing nothing, he knows in a manner that surpasses understanding.*

— *St. Dionysus the Areopagite*

Mysticism is the experiential heart of religion. Without mystical experience, the other elements of religious life – tradition, ritual, mythology, ethics – become dry, empty and meaningless. Tradition becomes mindless conformity; ritual devolves into rote; mythology into superstition; and ethics into mere obedience. Without at least a minority of contemplatives who realize the truths of spirituality, the religious life of a civilization dies.

Mystical experiences are known by a variety of names: *awakenings*, *satori*, *illuminations*, *raptures*; they are typically described as numinous, supernatural, beatific, and sacramental. They are always recognized as significant. Sometimes, as in Ramana Maharshi's awakening (see the description of his awakening below in the section on Avatars), they are completely life-changing. But despite the variety of descriptions, all mystical experiences do seem to have obvious family resemblances and to be a recognizably distinct class of human experience. The easiest way to demonstrate this is to give concrete examples. Below are five of my favorite reports of mystical awakenings:



Alfred Lord Tennyson

### 1. *Alfred Lord Tennyson*

The British poet Tennyson was subject to spontaneous mystical openings throughout his life. He wrote "...a kind of waking trance -- this for lack of a better word -- I have frequently had, quite

up from boyhood, when I have been all alone. This has come upon me through repeating my own name to myself silently, till all at once, as it were out of the intensity of the consciousness of individuality, individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this not a confused state but the clearest, the surest of the surest, utterly beyond words -- where death was an almost laughable impossibility -- the loss of personality (if so it were) seeming no extinction, but the only true life. I am ashamed of my feeble description. Have I not said the state is utterly beyond words?"

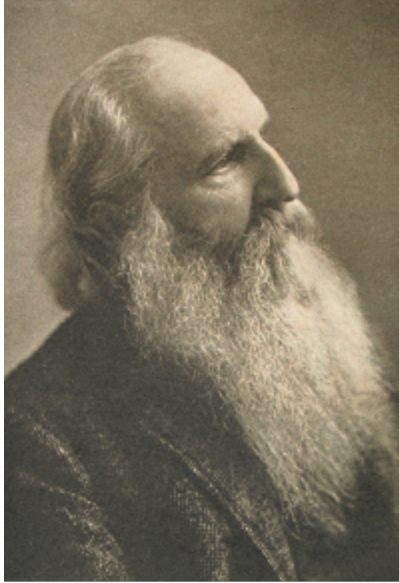
In his poem, *The Ancient Sage*, he describes his experience in this way:

*The mortal limit of the Self was loosed,  
And passed into the Nameless, as a cloud  
Melts into Heaven. I touch'd my limbs, the limbs  
Were strange, not mine — and yet no shade of doubt,  
But utter clearness, and thro' loss of Self  
The gain of such large life as match'd with ours  
Were Sun to spark — unshadowable in words,  
Themselves but shadows of a shadow-world.*

Tennyson had no doubt that his experiences were revelations of the true nature of reality. Professor Tyndall, in a letter, recalls him saying of these experiences: "By God Almighty! there is no delusion in the matter! It is no nebulous ecstasy, but a state of transcendent wonder, associated with absolute clearness of mind." (*Memoirs of Alfred Tennyson*, ii. 473.) And, in 1869, Tennyson wrote, "Yes, it is true that there are moments when the flesh is nothing to me, when I feel and know the flesh to be the vision, God and the Spiritual the only real and true. Depend upon it, the Spiritual is the real: it belongs to one more than the hand and the foot. You may tell me that my hand and my foot are only imaginary symbols of my existence, I could believe you; but you never, never can convince me that the I is not an eternal Reality, and that the Spiritual is not the true and real part of me."

## 2. Richard Bucke

*"Deep in the soul, below pain, below all the distractions of life, is a silence vast and grand – an infinite ocean of calm, which nothing can disturb; Nature's own exceeding peace, which 'passes understanding'. That which we seek with passionate longing, here and there, upward and outward; we find at last within ourselves."*



Richard Bucke

In 1872, Canadian psychiatrist Richard Bucke had a life-changing experience of awakening which he called “cosmic consciousness,” and which ultimately led him to write the famous book by the same name. Here is his description of what happened:

“I had spent the evening in a great city [London], with two friends, reading and discussing poetry and philosophy. We parted at midnight. I had a long drive in a hansom to my lodging. My mind, deeply under the influence of the ideas, images, and emotions called up by the reading and talk, was calm and peaceful. I was in a state of quiet, almost passive enjoyment, not actually thinking, but letting ideas, images, and emotions flow of themselves, as it were, through my mind. All at once, without warning of any kind, I found myself wrapped in a flame-colored cloud. For an instant I thought of fire, an immense conflagration somewhere close by in that great city; the next, I knew that the fire was within myself. Directly afterward there came upon me a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination impossible to describe. Among other things, I did not merely come to believe, but I saw that the universe is not composed of dead matter, but is, on the contrary, a living Presence; I became conscious in myself of eternal life. It was not a conviction that I would have eternal life, but a consciousness that I possessed eternal life then; I saw that all men are immortal; that the cosmic order is such that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all; that the foundation principle of the world, of all the worlds, is what we call love, and that the happiness of each and all is in the long run absolutely certain. The vision lasted a few seconds and was gone; but the memory of it and the sense of the reality of what it taught has remained during the quarter of a century which has since elapsed. I knew that what the vision showed was true. I had attained to a point of view from which I saw that it must be true. That view, that conviction, I may say that consciousness, has never, even during periods of the deepest depression, been lost.” (*Cosmic Consciousness*, pp. 7-8)

### 3. Arthur Koestler



Arthur Koestler

A third example impressively exemplifies the *saving* power of mystical experience. In his autobiography, Arthur Koestler (author of *Darkness at Noon*) describes an experience that occurred when he was captured by the Fascists during the Spanish Civil War and imprisoned in solitary confinement:

“I was standing at the recessed window of cell No. 40 and with a piece of iron-spring that I had extracted from the wire mattress, was scratching mathematical formulae on the wall. Mathematics, in particular analytical geometry, had been the favorite hobby of my youth, neglected later on for many years. I was trying to remember how to derive the formula of the hyperbola, and was stumped; then I tried the ellipse and parabola, and to my delight succeeded. Next I went on to recall Euclid's proof that the number of primes is infinite...”

“Since I had become acquainted with Euclid's proof at school, it had always filled me with a deep satisfaction that was aesthetic rather than intellectual. Now, as I recalled the method and scratched the symbols on the wall, I felt the same enchantment.

”And then, for the first time, I suddenly understood the reason for this enchantment: the scribbled symbols on the wall represented one of the rare cases where a meaningful and comprehensive statement about the infinite is arrived at by precise and finite means. The infinite is a mystical mass shrouded in a haze; and yet it was possible to gain some knowledge of it without losing oneself in treacly ambiguities. The significance of this swept over me like a wave. The wave had originated in an articulate verbal insight; but this evaporated at once, leaving in its wake only a wordless essence, a fragrance of eternity, a quiver of the arrow in the blue. I must have stood there for some minutes, entranced, with a wordless awareness that “this is perfect---perfect”; until I noticed some slight mental discomfort nagging at the back of my mind---some trivial circumstance that marred the perfection of the moment. Then I remembered the nature of that irrelevant annoyance: I was, of course, in prison and might be shot. But this was immediately answered by a feeling whose verbal translation would be: “So what? is that all? have you got nothing more serious to worry about?”---an answer so spontaneous, fresh and amused as if the intruding annoyance had been the loss of a collar-stud. Then I was floating on my back in a river of peace, under bridges of silence. It came from nowhere and flowed nowhere. Then there was no river and no I. The I had ceased to exist.

“When I say ‘the I had ceased to exist,’ I refer to a concrete experience that is verbally as incommunicable as the feeling aroused by a piano concerto, yet just as real---only much more real. In fact, its primary mark is the sensation that this state is more real than any other one has experienced before---that for the first time the veil has fallen and one is in touch with "real reality," the hidden order of things, the X-ray texture of the world, normally obscured by layers of irrelevancy.

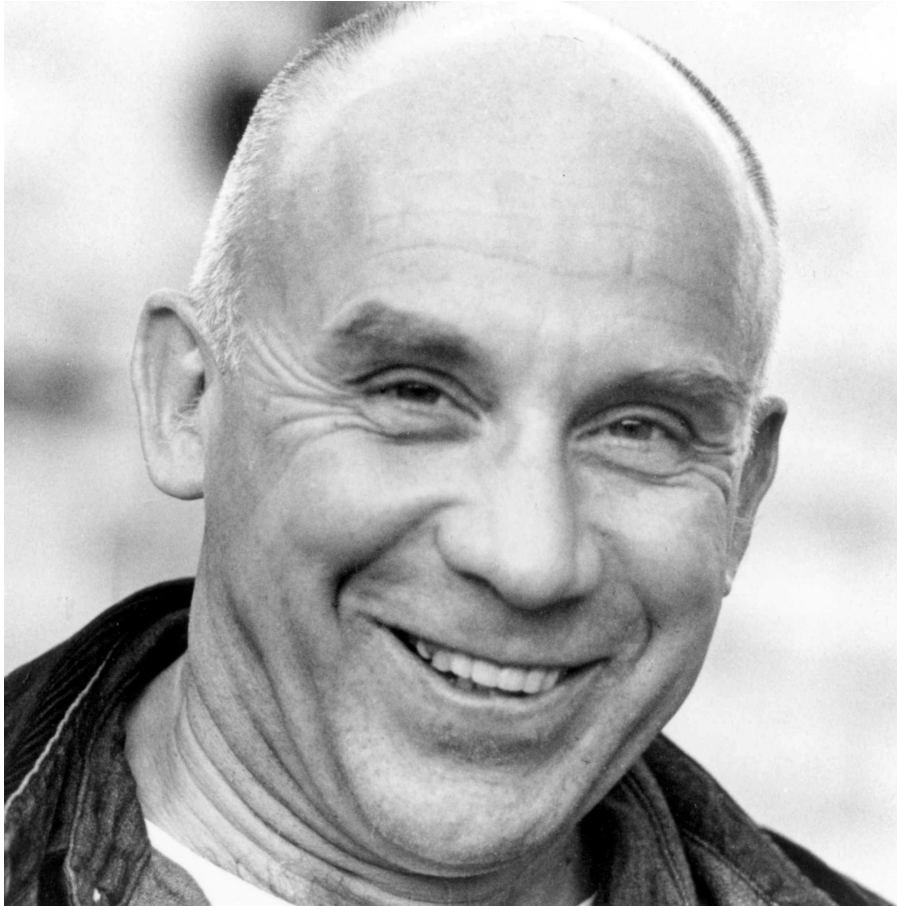
“What distinguishes this type of experience from the emotional entrancements of music, landscapes or love is that the former has a definitely intellectual, or rather noumenal, content. It is meaningful, though not in verbal terms. Verbal transcriptions that come nearest to it are: the unity and interlocking of everything that exists, an interdependence like that of gravitational fields or communicating vessels. The "I" ceases to exist because it has, by a kind of mental osmosis, established communication with, and been dissolved in, the universal pool. It is the process of dissolution and limitless expansion which is sensed as the "oceanic feeling," as the draining of all tension, the absolute catharsis, the peace that passeth all understanding.

“The coming-back to the lower order of reality I found to be gradual, like waking up from anaesthesia. There was the equation of the parabola scratched on the dirty wall, the iron bed and the iron table and the strip of blue Andalusian sky. But there was no unpleasant hangover as from other modes of intoxication. On the contrary: there remained a sustained and invigorating, serene and fear-dispelling after-effect that lasted for hours and days. It was as if a massive dose of vitamins had been injected into the veins. Or, to change the metaphor, I resumed my travels through my cell like an old car with its batteries freshly recharged.

“Whether the experience had lasted for a few minutes or an hour, I never knew. In the beginning it occurred two or even three times a week, then the intervals became longer. It could never be voluntarily induced. After my liberation it recurred at even longer intervals, perhaps once or twice in a year. But by that time the groundwork for a change of personality was completed.”  
(Koestler, Arthur, *The Invisible Writing* pp.350-35)

#### 4. *Thomas Merton*

My fourth example is Thomas Merton's famous account of his moment of awakening in the middle of an ordinary day in downtown Louisville in 1958 (today there is a marker on the spot), while he was running errands for his monastery:



Thomas Merton

“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream. ... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in the words: ‘Thank God, thank God that I am like other men, that I am only a man among others.’ It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: ... A member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun. They are not ‘they’ but my own self. There are no strangers! Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed... I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other.” (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Thomas Merton).



## 5. Byron Katie



Byron Katie

Finally, I include Byron Katie's account of her awakening. Katie is today a world-renowned spiritual teacher, but in the two years before her awakening she was so depressed that she rarely got out of bed. She was full of rage and was an alcoholic. She wound up in a half-way house in Bakersfield, California for women with eating disorders, where, one morning she woke up on the floor and saw a cockroach climbing on her foot. In that instant "All my rage, all the thoughts that had been troubling me, my whole world, was gone," she recalls. "It was the most amazing thing. I looked at the foot and the leg and I had never seen anything so beautiful and marvelous. It was the same with the floor, with the cockroach, and with the light, seeing it for the first time...and the unfolding of it was so incredible...total, total joy." In another context she said "... in that moment, it's like IT opened its eyes and it looked and it had never been born before, and it was awake, and it saw everything. It had no name, no recognition, no identification, for it or what it saw, there was nothing. And then I noticed the mind just bombarded, and in that moment laughter was born, it just rolled out because it recognized that none of the thoughts were true. And it was wisdom that could see past everything. So actually I inquired within that moment – before the thought, no problem – and then the thought comes and when we believe it, that's where the whole world is created. And thought brought imaginary form with it and a whole world, basically." She summed up what this moment of mystical insight taught her in this way, "I discovered that basically *when I believe my thoughts I suffer, when I don't believe my thoughts I don't suffer*. And I've come to see that this is true for every human being."

In all of these cases, the mystical awakening occurs spontaneously and unexpectedly, and leaves in its wake joy and a deep sense of safety. But these experiences are not just moments of ecstasy: the ecstasy is a consequence of what the experience unveils. It presents itself as a revelation, as an opening into the true nature of reality. In every case, those having the experiences suddenly



understand that they are not who they had taken themselves to be and that the world is not as it had seemed. While the experience is happening doubt about what one sees is typically impossible. We can, and often do, doubt later, when the experience cools and becomes a memory. That is what happened to me. But once we've had a mystical awakening, we're never the same again. Something has shifted; something hidden has been seen; something new has been sensed, if not comprehended. The compass of the heart has been set. We now know where we have always been unconsciously trying to go, even if we still don't know how to make the journey.

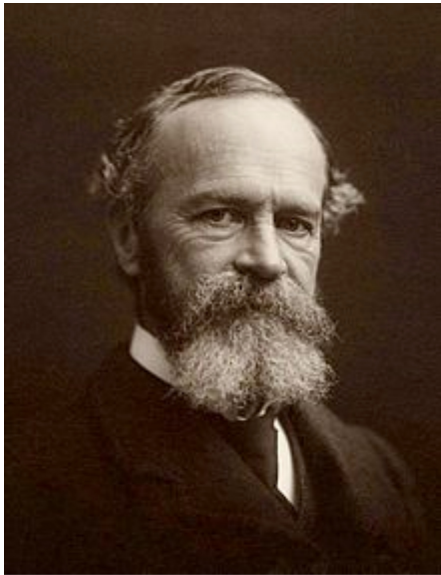
Mystical experiences are not uncommon, although not all of them are as intense as the ones described above. The surveys that are available suggest that only a minority experiences them, albeit a sizable one. Estimates vary, which isn't surprising, given the variability of the definitions. On January 26, 1976, *The New York Times Magazine* published an article on the subject. It included the results of a survey showing that 25 percent of the population have had at least one experience which they described as "a sense of the unity of everything," and "a sense that all the universe is alive." A Gallup survey in 1976 found that about one third of adults have had such experiences. In a 2009 Pew survey, Religion and Public Life, nearly half of all respondents (49%) reported having had a religious or mystical experience, defined as a "moment of sudden religious insight or awakening." These experiences were somewhat more frequent among people age 30 to 64 (53%) than in people who were older and younger (43%). A survey in the 1970's found that 33% of adult Americans have had at least one experience in which they sensed "a powerful spiritual force which seemed to lift you out of yourself." A British poll found that a similar percentage have been "aware of, or influenced by, a presence of power."

### 3. *Is Mystical Experience a Valid Source of Knowledge?*

The truth claims of mystical spirituality rest ultimately on the belief that our personal spiritual experiences can be trusted, and that the human heart/mind is capable of seeing into the true nature of existence. It is as if we have spiritual senses in addition to the five that show us the phenomenal world, which enable us to see into the meaning of the whole display.

Is it reasonable to place our trust in the validity of our spiritual experiences? In a culture which overvalues the objective and denigrates the subjective, it seems, to many, to be mere common sense that these "subjective experiences" are simply positive moods, or wishful thinking, or even hallucinations, and can't possibly teach us anything about the nature of the "objective" world. I don't agree.

The phrase "subjective experience" is redundant, since experience of any kind only happens for a subject. The notion of "objectivity" refers to the fact that, as in scientific measurements, we can all come to consensus that some of our individual experiences are registering the same perceptions (even if this unity of experience consists of nothing more than a confluence of pointer readings). These regularities convince us that our perceptions show us something about the real nature of an objective world "out there." But mystical experience is no less subject to this kind of "objective" verification. It is true that many mystics down the ages have experienced extravagant and wild visions, but there is a common core in the world's mystical insights that is every bit as unanimous as any of the observations on which science relies.



William James

William James argues, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, that spiritual experience is powerful evidence for the reality of a spiritual dimension in the universe. He documents the fact that the "sense of presence" of a spiritual reality beyond what the five senses reveal is a common human experience. Experiences of personal revelation, communion, a sense of meaning and oneness with a larger whole regularly arise in every culture. These events have powerful psychological effects. They unify the personality, create a sense of safety and peace, lift us out of despair, and confer a capacity for zest and for heroic action. James concludes that the need for spiritual fulfillment is as biologically fundamental as sex and hunger, and he argues, philosophically, that where there's smoke there's fire. That is, something which exerts such a potent influence on us must itself be real and potent. His conclusion is that the power of spiritual experience reflects a spiritual power in the universe. Prayer and meditation aren't empty rituals but "a process wherein work is really done, and spiritual energy flows in and produces real effects, psychological or material, within the phenomenal world."

Of mystical experience in particular, he writes:

"As a matter of psychological fact, mystical states of a well-pronounced and emphatic sort *are* usually authoritative over those who have them....They have been "there," and know it. It is vain for rationalism to grumble about this. If the mystical truth that comes to a man proves to be a force that he can live by, what mandate have we of the majority to order him to live in another way? We can throw him into a prison or a madhouse, but we cannot change his mind – we commonly attach it only the more stubbornly to its beliefs. (Example: Mr. John Nelson writes of his imprisonment for teaching Methodism: "My soul was as a watered garden, and I could sing praises to God all day long; for he turned my captivity into joy, and gave me to rest as well on the boards, as if I had been on a bed of down. Now could I say, 'God's service is perfect freedom,' and I was carried out much in prayer that my enemies might drink of the same river of peace which my God gave so largely to me." Journal, London, no date, p. 172.2). It mocks our utmost efforts, as a matter of fact, and in point of logic it absolutely escapes our jurisdiction. Our

own more ‘rational’ beliefs are based on evidence exactly similar in nature to that which mystics quote for theirs. Our senses, namely, have assured us of certain states of fact; but mystical experiences are as direct perceptions of fact for those who have them as any sensations ever were for us. The records show that even though the five senses be in abeyance in them, they are absolutely sensational in their epistemological quality, if I may be pardoned the barbarous expression – that is, they are face to face presentations of what immediately seems to exist.

“The mystic is, in short, *invulnerable*, and must be left, whether we relish it or not, in undisturbed enjoyment of his creed. Faith, says Tolstoy, is that by which men live. And faith-state and mystic state are practically convertible terms.” (“Mysticism,” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.)

Here is an analogy which may shed light on the epistemological issues that arise with mystical experience:

Suppose that I and everyone else I know suffer from a disease which renders us all incapable of perceiving color. Everything we see looks like a black and white movie. None of us have any reason to believe that anything is missing or incomplete in our perceptions.

Then, unexpectedly, I begin, for some unknown reason, to recover from the disease. One day the world suddenly bursts forth into color. The new vision is accompanied by an inner conviction that in some sense my new perceptions are more complete and more “real” than the old ones. They are also accompanied by a feeling of pleasure, a sense of joy, and wonder. It is as if I was asleep and now understand, for the first time, what it means to be awake.

The initial perception of color isn’t stable. Gradually it fades away and the familiar black and white world returns. Everything is as it was, and yet, something has irrevocably changed. I no longer see color, but I remember it; and when I do I faintly re-experience the sense of joy and wonder that came with it. In my mind’s eye I understand a new possibility which was hidden from me before, and this brings with it a new sense of purpose. I have seen a fuller truth, and it temporarily filled me with joy. I want to go there again.

I try to communicate this new vision to others, but since no one else has seen color, no one can imagine what I’m talking about. Those who are scientifically trained tell me that what I’m trying to describe is impossible. Light consists of waves, they tell me, and different wave lengths are known to correspond to different shades of gray. My claim that I’ve experienced different *qualities* of light which are somehow discontinuous from one another is inconsistent with scientific understanding. I’m imagining things. I have no answer to this objection and even begin to doubt whether I actually experienced what I seem to remember experiencing.

But then the experience returns again, and this time it lingers a little longer. Soon it is coming and going, apparently all on its own. Later, and quite by accident, I begin to notice that I can make colors more likely to appear by practicing various physical and mental exercises. I find that when I practice these exercises regularly, color stays longer and is more vivid. A hopeful new ideal begins to form – that I might one day, through my own efforts, learn to live permanently in a world of color.

I teach these exercises to others, and some of them – but not all of them, for reasons that I don't understand – also begin to see colors. We begin to organize and to meet with one another to support each other in our efforts to see more clearly. Our efforts are controversial. Some people think we're wasting our time in an impractical pursuit. A few people suspect that we might be on to something, but others tell us that we're merely deluding ourselves into thinking we are experiencing what we want to experience. What independent proof do we have, after all? We are only reporting "subjective experiences," which can never be considered proof of anything. We are told that we rely on nothing but "faith," as opposed to sensible people who place their trust in what can be "objectively verified." We protest that what we are doing is facing the facts of experience every bit as much as the most hard-headed scientist, but those who have never seen color cannot be convinced.

The point of view on mysticism that I'm outlining has been strongly influenced by reading Richard Bucke, William James, Aldous Huxley, W.T. Stace, Huston Smith and Evelyn Underhill. Philosophers refer to these writers as "perennialists" because collectively they present a powerful *prima facie* case that there is a Highest Common Factor among mystical experiences at every time and in every culture: and that the content of mystical experience is a revelation of the actual nature of existence. William James again:

"In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed. In Hinduism, in Neoplatonism, in Sufism, in Christian mysticism, in Whitmanism, we find the same recurring note, so that there is about mystical utterances an eternal unanimity which ought to make a critic stop and think, and which bring it about that the mystical classics have, as has been said, neither birthday nor native land." ("Mysticism," in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.)

In reaction to the perennialists, an opposing view arose in the last century called *constructionism*, and its arguably most well-known representative is Steven Katz. His essential argument, in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, is that, in mystical experience, we encounter what our cultural conditioning leads us to expect to encounter. Or, as his colleague Robert Gimello puts it, "A mystical experience is simply the psychosomatic enhancement of religious beliefs and values..." It's "simply" that, and nothing more. This is the "nothing-but-ery" academic dismissal of spirituality on full display. What is a "psychosomatic enhancement"? Does it really mean anything more than "delusion?" So, the self-sacrifice of Jesus, the God-intoxication of a St. Francis or a Ramakrishna, the amazing spontaneous awakening of a Ramana Maharshi, or the countless lives of spiritual service and devotion of so many down the centuries, really boil down to nothing more than deluded people working themselves up into a froth over their religious beliefs. Is this even remotely plausible? For my part, I can't seriously doubt that all of these saints and realized beings experienced *something* that is real and potent.

I don't want to spend too much time on constructionism, because I find the view too unconvincing to take very seriously. I mention it because it's a good example of how the Western academic world typically treats the spiritual dimension of life. As far as I know, none of the proponents of constructionism have bothered to take the time to practice meditation or yoga,

or contemplative prayer, or any discipline which mystics argue is essential for mystical realization. They stay completely outside of any personal acquaintance with mystical experience and only seem able to recognize as “data” the classical accounts of mystical awakening. They don’t even seem interested in examining first-person contemporary accounts. Moreover, when they discuss mysticism psychologically or philosophically, they refer only to sources that are entirely within the Western intellectual tradition, a form of cultural myopia which really is inexcusable in this day and age. This is a terrible shame, because Eastern philosophers have developed a vast literature that examines mystical experience with deep psychological subtlety. To neglect literature like Shankara’s *Vivekachudamani*, for instance, or the vast heritage of Buddhist psychology codified in the *Abidharma*, or the Mahayana Yogacara tradition, is inexcusable.

My perhaps overly optimistic hope is that, as yoga and meditative disciplines become more established in the West, academic philosophy will someday adopt a less dismissive approach to the study of the phenomena. One indication that this may be already happening is the publication, in 1999, of Robert Forman’s *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*. Forman’s refutation of constructionism is philosophically competent, and is also informed by his life-long experience as a meditation practitioner.

In summary:

I see no alternative to trusting that my guiding light through life really is what it presents itself to be: a personal revelation of the transcendental order. Just as we have been given senses to perceive the external world; and minds to comprehend what we perceive; so have we also been given spiritual senses to give us both ethical direction and insight into the meaning of the entire display.

#### 4. *The Stages of Mystical Development*



Evelyn Underhill

In her monumental study, *Mysticism*, Evelyn Underhill distills from the writings and experiences of Western mystics what she considers to be the five characteristic stages that mark the progress of the mystic.

1. *Awakening*: In the first step toward enlightenment. One awakens to the existence of a divine order in reality. "This experience, usually abrupt and well-marked, is accompanied by intense feelings of joy and exaltation." Psychologically, this awakening of transcendental consciousness is a form of conversion. My own initial experience and the five examples which I included in the section on mysticism belong to this initial stage.
2. *Purgation*: In this phase, one increasingly realizes his or her imperfection and finiteness in contrast to the sacred and attempts by means of discipline and or mortification to eliminate all that stands in the way of coming into deeper contact with the transcendent. "The first thing that the self observes when it turns back upon itself in that awful moment of lucidity [of awakening] is the horrible contrast between its clouded contours and the pure sharp radiance of the Real; between its muddled faulty life, its perverse self-centered drifting, and [the clarity of the transcendent]." In this phase, the mystic follows a path of moral and spiritual discipline with the goal of bringing the finite self more in alignment with the mystic vision.
3. *Illumination*: This phase results from having purged oneself of attachments to the things of the senses and having substituted for them an attachment to the transcendent. It is "a state which includes in itself many of the stages of contemplation, visions and adventures of the soul described in the writings of the great mystics." But deep as its joys may be, illumination is not finally true union with the absolute, and Underhill warns of its dangers: "In persons of feeble or diffuse intelligence...and above all in victims of self-regarding spirituality, this deep absorption in the sense of Divine Reality may easily degenerate into a monoideism. Then the 'shady side' of Illumination, a selfish preoccupation with transcendental joys, the 'spiritual gluttony' condemned by St. John of the Cross, comes out. Awakening, purgation and illumination form the "first mystic life" and many mystics never go beyond it. (Many people not usually considered "mystics" have shared to some extent at least the experience of the Illuminated state.)
4. *The Dark Night of the Soul*: In the strongest mystics, illumination gives way to what St. John of the Cross called "the dark night of the soul." This fourth phase of mystic development is the final, deepest and most radical purgation the mystic experiences in his movement into the divine. The heart and mind are arid; no longer does the mystic experience the joys (the mere pleasures) of Illumination. The task now is to learn to "dissociate the personal satisfaction of mystical vision from the reality of mystical life." In other words, the mystic must overcome all attachment to self and ego (to selfish ego) in order to merge with the great Reality which lies in, under, behind and through all things. To do this, the mystic must finally give up the greatest good he or she has ever known – the powerful attachment to the transcendent pleasures and visions of Illumination. Giving them up, all things seem at first to have become ashes – the Divine seems to have fled.

5. *Union*: But passing through the dark night, the mystic enters at last into Union, the fifth and last phase of mystic expansion into the transcendent. Union is essentially ineffable. In it, one no longer merely perceives and enjoys the transcendent (as with Illumination) but becomes one with it.

I find schema like this one interesting and instructive, but I'm not sure how literally to take them. I'm reminded of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' five stage process of coming to terms with dying – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. In my experience, people don't neatly pass through these five stages in linear order. They skip steps, circle back to prior stages, get stuck in denial or anger, and so on. Still, her map is useful, if only to remind us that dealing with severe grief is a *process* which takes time. In the same way, the value of maps of spiritual evolution is that they remind us that spiritual development is also a process. Awakening isn't enlightenment (a misconception that so many of us had in the sixties), but the first stage in a lifelong process of development. Nor is the joy of spiritual experience all there is to the spiritual life. True spiritual life is arduous, and involves three elements: moral discipline, service to others, and regular spiritual practice.

## The Nature of Awareness

Awareness is obviously present as the basis of every experience we have, and because of that it is easy to miss how utterly strange and unique it is. Below are three reflections on awareness that I believe bring its essential mystery into sharp relief. Awareness is transcendental; it is one; and it is self-originating.

### *1. Awareness is Transcendental*

*In its true state consciousness is naked, immaculate, clear, vacuous, transparent, timeless, beyond all conditions. O Nobly Born, remember the pure open sky of your own true nature.*  
– Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation

Awareness is clearly unlike anything else that we encounter, because it is that by means of which we encounter everything else. Awareness knows itself in a direct and unmediated way. In the experience of self-awareness, the knowing subject, the means of knowing, and the known are all the same thing. The knowing subject – awareness – through the medium of awareness – knows awareness. What that means is that the self-knowing of awareness transcends the subject/object dualism inherent in all other forms of knowledge. Awareness does not know itself as an object, because it isn't any kind of object. We know that we are aware because awareness is transparent to itself. We know we are aware because awareness is our *being*.

Awareness is *non-material*. It illuminates the contents of the five senses, but cannot itself be detected by any of them. Nor can it be weighed, measured, or detected by any physical means.

It both follows from the above, and is consistent with experience, that awareness is *non-local*. Most people assume that it is located "in" the brain, but a little reflection shows that it's the other

way around. The brain and all other objects of knowledge arise “in” awareness. Since every location we can know is known “in” awareness, it follows that awareness itself has no location.

Awareness is *timeless*. It observes the arising and passing of every experience, which means that time “passes through” it. But awareness itself is always simple *presence*. It knows the passage of time, but is not itself “in” time. It subsists in an eternal Now.

Awareness is *unaffected by its contents*. The awareness of fire isn’t hot. The awareness of light is no brighter than the awareness of darkness. The awareness of a star is not larger than the awareness of a molecule. The awareness of fear isn’t itself afraid, the awareness of anger isn’t angry, and the awareness of suffering does not itself suffer. This truth is of tremendous psychological importance. What it means, for all of us, is that no matter how much pain or trauma we’ve experienced, some part of us has never been touched by any of it. That is why experienced meditators often refer to awareness as a “secure refuge.”

Taken together, all of the characteristics of awareness show that it is *deathless*. Since it is non-material, has no location, is outside of time, and is not affected by its contents, there is no conceivable way anything could create, change, or destroy it. I conclude that *awareness simply is, always and forever*.

#### 1. *Awareness is One*

*The total number of minds in the universe is one.*  
-- Erwin Schrodinger

How many “awarenesses” are there? Is there one for each sentient being? The question immediately strikes us as absurd. Awareness obviously can’t be counted, because it isn’t any kind of “thing.”

In mystical experience, as W.T. Stace describes it:

“...the boundary walls of the separate self fade away, and the individual finds himself passing beyond himself and becoming merged in a boundless and universal consciousness....The conclusion which the mystic draws – not however by way of a reasoned conclusion, but as something immediately experienced – is that what he has reached is not merely his individual pure ego but the pure ego of the universe; or, otherwise put, that his individual self and the universal self are somehow one and the same.”

Stace thinks (correctly, I believe) that there is good reason, philosophically, for accepting the mystic’s perception as an accurate one. The principle involved here is Leibniz’ logical principle of “the identity of indiscernibles,” which states that entities x and y are identical if every property possessed by x is possessed by y, and vice versa. In the case of awareness, then, if any two persons have realized a state of pure, unitary, undifferentiated awareness, there is no longer any property which could distinguish the states from one another. They are, therefore, one and the same.



This principle is completely consistent with what mystical experience reveals. Once we become aware of awareness, it immediately becomes apparent that there is only one of “it.”

The significance of all of this reveals itself in silence. In deep meditation, when we pull back from the foreground of our experience and notice the background which illumines it all, the amazing healing power of awareness reveals itself. When awareness remembers awareness, we let go. We surrender. Then a fathomless peace arises, and a deep compassion for ourselves and others. This is the sense in which awareness is a secure refuge.

Awareness is the royal road into the divine. It is through our own awareness that God touches us and draws us toward Himself.

### *3. Awareness is Self-Originating*

It seems that most modern philosophers and scientists assume consciousness must somehow emerge out of unconsciousness. That is, the universe outside of conscious beings is assumed to be dead and unconscious, and somehow living matter evolves in such a way that in beings like ourselves, consciousness “emerges.” No one can explain how this might happen, and I think there are good reasons to believe that it is not possible in principle for consciousness to arise from unconsciousness. Below are the philosophical considerations that lead me to this conclusion.

Most modern philosophers, from Descartes to Kant, more or less assumed what might be called the “reflection theory” of self-awareness. This theory rests on two related assumptions. The first is that the existence of the self precedes any consciousness it can have of itself, so that the self is initially without self-consciousness. The second assumption is that the self only achieves self-consciousness by redirecting its attention away from external objects and onto itself, so that it comes to know itself in the same way that it comes to know any other object.

It was the seventeenth century German idealist philosopher, Johann Fichte who showed that this more or less commonsense view of self-awareness can’t be correct. In so doing, he highlighted just how unique and mysterious self-awareness really is.



Johann Gottlieb Fichte

To recapitulate what I wrote above, in the experience of self-awareness, the knowing subject, the means of knowing, and the object of knowledge are all the same thing. The knowing subject – awareness – through the medium of awareness – knows awareness. In other words, the self-knowing of awareness transcends the subject/object dualism inherent in all other forms of knowledge. In self-awareness, the knowing subject is identical with the known object, and it knows itself as one with itself.

Fichte's insight was that this identity of subject and object cannot be explained on the reflection theory without circularity. On this theory, the self as subject is originally unaware of itself until it redirects its intentionality onto itself as object. But an object known in this way can never *coincide* with the knowing subject, because the latter was originally unknown or unaware of itself. The original subject that is unaware of itself cannot know itself *as* unaware of itself, since that would be an obvious contradiction. Thus, on the reflection theory, subject-object identity cannot be achieved. Additionally, if the self starts out unaware of itself until it redirects its intentionality away from external objects onto itself, then how can it know that its new object is itself? If the self comes to know itself in the same way that it comes to know external objects, how then does it know that its new object is not just an external object but is rather itself? Obviously, such recognition is only possible if the self already knows that the object is itself. This means that the reflection theory can only explain self-consciousness in a circular way.

This circularity of the reflection theory also shows up in other ways. For example: if the self starts out unaware of itself, then what impels it to redirect its intentionality onto itself to begin with? If the self does this with the intention to know itself, then obviously the self must already have some self-awareness, however dim. Otherwise it could not even know about itself as a possible object of knowledge. Thus the reflection theory can only explain self-consciousness by presupposing an initial level of self-consciousness on the part of the subject. It is only because the subject already vaguely knows about itself that it can be motivated to reflect on itself. Only in

this way, moreover, can the earlier problem of failed subject-object identity be solved – that is to say: only if the original subject already knows about itself will the known object be identical with the knowing subject. But of course this only shows that the reflection theory cannot explain self-consciousness, since the explanation already presupposes self-consciousness. This means that the reflection theory is inherently circular. All that the theory can hope to explain is how the subject, by turning its intentionality onto itself, can make its original self-consciousness clearer and more explicit. Reflection, then, can only be a clarification of prior self-consciousness, not the cause of it.

Fichte was the first philosopher to recognize these paradoxes and circularities in the reflection theory and to understand the strange implication – that the self cannot exist prior to and apart from its self-consciousness. If the self cannot exist apart from its self-consciousness, then the emergence of self-consciousness is also the emergence of the self. In that sense "selfhood" turns out to be synonymous with "self-consciousness," such that to be a self *is* to be conscious of oneself as oneself. As Fichte put it: "*What* was I, then, before I came to self-consciousness? The natural answer to this question is: *I* did not exist at all, for I was not an I. The I exists only insofar as it is conscious of itself." This bootstrapping of the self through self-consciousness Fichte called "self-positing," saying things like: "the self begins by an absolute positing of its own existence."

On Fichte's account, the self ceases to be a substantial entity in the traditional sense (for example in the way Kant defined the subject as a thing-in-itself underlying empirical consciousness). With Fichte, the self becomes rather an *activity*, a pure act of awareness. Moreover, this act of awareness has no other object than itself. Thus the self *is* its own self-intuition: it is the intuiting subject, the intuited object and the act of intuition all in one.

As already noted, Fichte coined the awkward term "self-positing" to designate this unity of self-consciousness and the existence of the self. Fichte used the verb "to posit" to mean both "to affirm" and "to produce". Thus, in self-positing, the self not only affirms its own existence by being aware of it ("I exist"), it simultaneously produces that existence through this very act of affirmation. In this sense the self is nothing but its own self-affirmation.

The self-grounding structure of self-consciousness is not just a theoretical artifact concocted by 'German philosophers to meet some obscure metaphysical need. In recent cognitive science the bootstrapping structure of self-consciousness has been a well-studied phenomenon, one that is commonly explained in terms of feedback processes in the brain. A notable example of this is the work of cognitive scientist Douglass Hofstadter, who has famously focused on self-referential structures of all kinds as offering the key to unraveling the "mystery of consciousness".

Hofstadter coined the term "strange loops" to refer to such self-referential structures. In his description of self-consciousness as a strange loop, Hofstadter often sounds surprisingly similar to Fichte, except that he transposes Fichte's idealist language of self-positing to the materialist language of cognitive science. Commenting on the circular structure of self-consciousness, Hofstadter writes: "It is almost as if this slippery phenomenon called 'self-consciousness' lifted itself up by its own bootstraps, almost as if it made itself out of nothing." (Douglas Hofstadter, *I am a Strange Loop*, 2007) Note Hofstadter's reservation: "almost as if". What gets in the way of

his full endorsement of the bootstrapping of self-consciousness is his scientific materialism, which forbids self-causation. Because of this he takes the self-generating nature of self-consciousness to be ultimately an illusion, a surface appearance produced by myriad micro-feedback processes in the brain, processes that obey the standard laws of physics: "The problem is that in a sense, an 'I' is something created out of nothing. And since making something out of nothing is never possible, the alleged something turns out to be an illusion, in the end, but a very powerful one." As a scientific materialist, Hofstadter takes consciousness to be ultimately reducible to physical processes. Hence his conclusion that the self-generation of self-consciousness, and self-consciousness itself, must be illusory, because physical processes can never be absolutely self-causing. Hofstadter, like many other philosophical materialists, is driven to regard "I's" as illusions. In doing this, he falls into what I regard as the philosophical trap of "eliminativism" (see the discussion of eliminativism in the section on the refutation of materialism, below) because, for a materialist, self-awareness is so downright weird that it must in some way be an illusion. So his attempt to understand self-consciousness results in the conclusion that self-consciousness is some kind of mirage. It isn't really there! (But who or what is it who witnesses thus mirage?)

If I understand Fichte, his arguments show that consciousness cannot be reduced to non-conscious elements, whether these elements are "selves" or strange neural loops. Awareness is something "irreducible" – no reductionist project can succeed in accounting for it. It is not made of parts, which means that Hofstadter's attempt to reduce it to neural processes cannot succeed. Nor can any other materialist explanation.

This line of thinking suggests a startling conclusion. Awareness, like the God of traditional theology, is its own cause. It is self-grounding and self-originating. It "posits itself."

In fact, this very claim is central to all Idealist philosophy, from Plotinus ("The One [...] made itself by an act of looking at itself") to Fichte ("The I exists only insofar as it is conscious of itself"). It can even be found in the speculations of physicists such as John Wheeler ("the universe exists because it observes itself").

We are aware of the fact *that we are self-aware*. In other words: self-awareness must itself be one of the objects of which it is aware. This follows from the essence of self-awareness, since "a self-awareness unaware of itself" would be a contradiction in terms. Self-awareness must therefore have a circular structure: it must include *self-awareness of self-awareness*. This circularity of self-awareness fits the circularity of self-causation: *just as the self-causing cause is its own effect, so self-awareness is its own object of awareness*. Self-awareness cannot exist without being aware of itself. This circularity is therefore a *necessary* condition of self-awareness. And, clearly, it is also a *sufficient* condition, since if there is an awareness that is its own object of awareness, then that awareness *ipso facto* amounts to self-awareness, however empty it may otherwise be. Thus the essential circularity of self-awareness implies its self-causing capacity, since it is both a necessary and a sufficient condition of its own existence.

Since we cannot without circularity conceive of awareness as arising from anything that isn't aware, we must, I think, conclude that awareness is simply a "given." It cannot be explained or understood in terms of anything other than itself.

## Identity

### 1. *Mind*

Most of us, most of the time, assume that mind and consciousness are co-extensive. But mind and awareness of mind are clearly two separate things. Psychologists have long known that there are complex mental processes which are *subliminal* – literally “below the threshold” – or *unconscious*. Our conscious minds become aware that unconscious cognitive processes are at work in all kinds of ordinary activities. William James beautifully describes one example:

“Suppose we try to recall a forgotten name. The state of our consciousness is peculiar. There is a gap therein; but no mere gap. It is a gap that is intensely active. A sort of wraith of the name is in it, beckoning us in a given direction, making us at moments tingle with the sense of our closeness; and then letting us sink back without the longed-for term. If wrong names are proposed to us, this singularly definite gap acts immediately so as to negate them. They do not fit into its mould. And the gap of one word does not feel like the gap of another, all empty of content as both might seem necessarily to be when described as gaps....The rhythm of a lost word may be there without a sound to clothe it; or the evanescent sense of something which is the initial vowel or consonant may mock us fitfully, without growing more distinct.” (*The Principles of Psychology*)

Many findings in psychology demonstrate the importance of “unconscious” mental processes. Amnesiacs, for instance, who can no longer form conscious memories, can still learn to play golf with increasing skill, while nevertheless believing that every tune they pick up a club it is for the first time. What this shows is that *intelligence* and *awareness* are separate “things.”

Another example: According to Control Mastery Theory, a psychodynamic theory of psychotherapy, patients have unconscious plans for disconfirming their pathogenic beliefs. They carry out their plans, in part, by subjecting the therapist to “tests” of these beliefs. If, for instance, they expect other people to be critical, they may say or do things to evoke criticism from the therapist. If the therapist responds in a non-critical way, he or she has “passed the test,” which has the effect of weakening the strength of the pathogenic belief. When the therapist fails the test, the patient re-presents it, and may even “coach” the therapist in the correct response. All of these purposeful behaviors of patients happen outside of conscious awareness.

“The unconscious” is the usual term usually used in psychology to describe cognitive activity which is outside of the ego’s awareness, but this is a misleading term, because as purposeful and goal-directed activities, these processes are clearly conscious in some sense. F.W.H. Myers used the term “subliminal self” to describe this aspect of the mind, a term that William James also adopted.

The conscious ego and the subliminal self are not distinct entities: the conscious mind shades off into unconsciousness, and there is no strict line of demarcation. When I decide to go out for a walk, I make a distinct, conscious decision, and that decision immediately sets into motion a series of unconscious, but purposeful and intelligent activities. I cannot say how I make my legs

walk; or how I make my heart rate increase as I walk up a hill; or how I cause my organs to coordinate their activities with such marvelous precision. Of course, “I” don’t do any of these things at all; somehow they occur and align with my conscious decision to walk. The way we usually speak of the mind suggests discrete boundaries that don’t actually exist. The Cartesian ego that was supposed to be an utterly distinct kind of substance from the body it inhabited was a figment of Descartes’ imagination. Mind and body aren’t really separate at all; the entire body is suffused with “mind,” in every cell, because every cell is directed toward intelligent ends. At the apex of the mind, we experience consciousness as a singular and indivisible reality; and this consciousness is also the portal through which the mystic rises into the Light from which the world proceeds. At the highest level, mind merges with God, and at the lowest level it is simply “world.”

Exploration of the subliminal mind led both Myers and James to the belief that the brain is not an organ which produces consciousness, but is instead a kind of reducing valve, which *narrows* the range of conscious awareness to those mental activities which are necessary for survival and for managing daily activities. Henri Bergson had a similar theory of consciousness, and Aldous Huxley, based on his experiments with psychedelic drugs, believed that these drugs made it possible to bypass the filter to some degree, and open us to what he called “Mind at Large.”

In the following remarkable passage, William James poetically describes his view of the vastness of the subliminal self:

“Out of my experience, such as it is (and it is limited enough) one fixed conclusion dogmatically emerges, and that is this, that we with our lives are like islands in the sea, or like trees in the forest. The maple and the pine may whisper to each other with their leaves, and Conanicut and Newport hear each other’s fog-horns. But the trees also commingle their roots in the darkness underground, and the islands also hang together through the ocean’s bottom. Just so there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother-sea or reservoir. Our “normal” consciousness is circumscribed for adaptation to our external earthly environment, but the fence is weak in spots, and fitful influences from beyond leak in, showing the otherwise unverifiable common connexion.” (“Confidences of a Psychical Researcher” 1909).

Carl Jung, based on his explorations of the unconscious mind, also came to the conclusion that the conscious mind emerges from, and is connected to, some larger living reality; and he, too, used a plant metaphor to describe it:

"Life has always seemed to me like a plant that lives on its rhizome. Its true life is invisible, hidden in the rhizome. The part that appears above ground lasts only a single summer. What we see is the blossom, which passes. The rhizome remains. (*Memories, Dreams, Reflections*)

And in *Answer to Job* he sums up the spiritual implications that he derives from this point of view:

“Even the enlightened person remains what he is, and is never more than his own limited ego before the One who dwells within him, whose form has no knowable boundaries, who encompasses him on all sides, fathomless as the abysses of the earth and vast as the sky.”

## 2. *Self, No-Self, Not-Self*

*Two people have been living in you all your life. One is the ego, garrulous, demanding, hysterical, calculating; the other is the hidden spiritual being, whose still voice of wisdom you have only rarely heard or attended to.*

– Sogyal Rinpoche

*Man's unhappiness, as I construe, comes of his greatness; it is because there is an Infinite in him, which with all his cunning he cannot quite bury under the Finite.*

-- Thomas Carlyle

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,  
there is a field. I'll meet you there.*

*When the soul lies down in that grass,  
the world is too full to talk about.*

*Ideas, language, even the phrase each other  
doesn't make any sense.*

-- Rumi

*How much suffering and fear, and  
How many harmful things are in existence?*

*If all arises from clinging to the "I",  
What should I do with this great demon?*

-- Shantideva

*Whilst I adore this ineffable life which is at my heart, it will not condescend to gossip with me, it will not announce to me any particulars of science, it will not enter into the details of my biography, and say to me why I have a son and daughters born to me, or why my son dies in his sixth year of life. Herein, then I have this latent omniscience coexistent with omnignorance. Moreover, whilst this Deity glows at the heart, and by his unlimited presentiments gives me all Power, I know that to-morrow will be as this day, I am a dwarf, and I remain a dwarf. That is to say, I believe in Fate. As long as I am weak, I shall talk of Fate; whenever the God fills me with his fullness, I shall see the disappearance of Fate. I am defeated all the time; yet to Victory I am born.*

--- Ralph Waldo Emerson, from his Journals

*A human being is part of a whole, called by us the 'universe', a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest - a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affectation for a few people near us. Our task must*

*be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.*  
 – Albert Einstein

The problem of the self is one of the thorniest issues in philosophy and psychology. To the questions “Does the self exist?” and (if it does) “What is its nature?” I should probably just answer “I haven’t the slightest idea,” and leave it at that. Any attentive reader who reads what follows will surely notice enough contradictions and vagueness to see that, in fact, I don’t have the slightest idea. My only justification for not just saying that is that I find wading into these speculative waters compelling and fascinating. But the one indubitable fact I’ve discovered from doing this exercise is that the waters are really deep.

So,



David Hume

In one of the most famous passages in philosophy, David Hume argues that the self is an illusion:

“For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception. When my perceptions are remov’d for any time, as by sound sleep; so long am I insensible of *myself*, and may truly be said not to exist. And were all my perceptions remov’d by death, and cou’d I neither think, nor feel, nor see, nor love, nor hate after the dissolution of my body, I shou’d be entirely annihilated, nor do I conceive what is farther requisite to make me a perfect non-entity. If any one upon serious and unprejudic’d reflexion, thinks he has a different notion of *himself*, I must confess I can reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, that he may be in the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular. He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continu’d, which he calls *himself*; tho’ I am certain there is no such principle in me... But setting aside some metaphysicians of this kind, I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different



perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.” (David Hume, *Of Personal Identity*)

I don't understand why so many philosophers find this argument persuasive. Hume correctly points out that the self is not directly perceived in the way that sensations or feelings are directly perceived. But this shows the non-existence of the self only if it is true that what isn't directly perceived doesn't exist. Why should I accept that assumption? Kant certainly did not. He argued that the self (he called it the Transcendental Ego), whose function is to synthesize perceptions according to the categories of understanding, cannot be directly known, because it is a condition, not an object, of knowledge.

The self is not an object of experience because *it is the subject which experiences*. A useful analogy here might be the experience of seeing. When I look at the world, I don't see my eyes, because they are the means by which I see everything else. We cannot observe the self because, as the knowing subject, it cannot present itself as an object. If it could, to whom would it present itself except another self? That would lead to an infinite regress. The self is an "immediate given", an intrinsic dimension of the fact of experiencing anything.

Hume's argument is a little like arguing that Mark Twain doesn't exist, because he can't be found on any page of *Huckleberry Finn*. I don't think that it is plausible to deny the reality of the selfhood that we all experience because it can't be an object of perception, or because it sometimes sleeps. As for what, if anything, it experiences after death, we simply don't know.

In contrast to Hume, William James finds plenty of reasons to believe in the self. The self is something we constantly feel as the innermost depth of our being. James admits that its ultimate origin is a mystery. He traces it to the depths of subliminal consciousness, and speculates that the ultimate foundation of our individualized selves might be a World-Soul. But however it arises, the self is the active element in the stream of consciousness, and is the dispositional and intentional basis of our conscious mental life. He writes, "The universal conscious fact is not 'feelings and thoughts exist' but 'I think' and 'I feel.'" No psychology can question the *existence* of personal selves. The worst a psychology can do is so to interpret the nature of these selves as to rob them of their worth." He characterizes the self in this way: "It is what welcomes or rejects. It presides over the perception of sensations, and by giving or withholding its assent it influences the movements they tend to arouse. It is the home of interest – not the pleasant or the painful, not even pleasure or pain as such, but that within us to which pleasure and pain, the pleasant and the painful, speak. It is the source of effort and attention, and the place from which appear to emanate the fiats of the will." (*Principles of Psychology*)

In this debate, modern psychology sides with Hume. This was inevitable because selves, if they exist, are very difficult to reduce to material processes, and the materialistic bias of psychology makes it tempting just to rule out their existence. The sense we have of being some kind of unified whole which persists throughout our lives must be illusory: there can be only the flow of experience itself. There really is no one in charge: we are subjectless packs of self-organizing neurons.

But we aren't, and we all know it from direct experience. We aren't compounds, or a multiplicity of separate elements – we are some kind of unity – and everyone not infected by philosophy or psychology takes this for granted.

The Humean view of the non-existence of the self is sometimes seen as corresponding to the doctrine of *anatman* or (in Pali) *anatta* (“no self” or “not-self”) in Buddhism, but I believe that the similarity is superficial. The two men spoke to entirely different concerns. Hume was a Western philosopher, whose argument concerned a metaphysical idea. The Buddha was a “physician of the soul,” concerned with the cessation of suffering.

The idea of *anatta* is generally considered one of the most poorly understood ideas in Buddhism. When people try to take it literally as a metaphysical doctrine, they find themselves confronted with unanswerable questions, such as who experiences the fruits of karma, who it is who is reborn, or who it is who attains Nirvana.

Contrary to widespread belief, nowhere is there any record in which the Buddha said, “There is no self.” In the one place in the Pali Canon (the Ananda Sutta, SN 44.10) where he was asked point-blank if there is no self, he refused to answer. The same questioner then asked if there was a self, and again he refused to answer. When later asked why he hadn't answered either question, he replied that to assert either that there is a self or that there is no self is to fall into extreme forms of wrong view (annihilationism and perennialism) that make the path of Buddhist practice impossible. Thus the question should be put aside. American-born Buddhist monk Thanissaro Bhikku explains:

“No matter how you define the line between “self” and “other,” the notion of self involves an element of self-identification and clinging, and thus suffering and stress. This holds as much for an interconnected self, which recognizes no “other,” as it does for a separate self. If one identifies with all of nature, one is pained by every felled tree. It also holds for an entirely “other” universe, in which the sense of alienation and futility would become so debilitating as to make the quest for happiness – one's own or that of others – impossible. For these reasons, the Buddha advised paying no attention to such questions as “Do I exist?” or “Don't I exist?” for however you answer them, they lead to suffering and stress.

“To avoid the suffering implicit in questions of “self” and “other,” he offered an alternative way of dividing up experience: the four Noble Truths of stress, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. Rather than viewing these truths as pertaining to self or other, he said, one should recognize them simply for what they are, in and of themselves, as they are directly experienced, and then perform the duty appropriate to each. Stress should be comprehended, its cause abandoned, its cessation realized, and the path to its cessation developed. These duties form the context in which the anatta doctrine is best understood. If you develop the path of virtue, concentration, and discernment to a state of calm well-being and use that calm state to look at experience in terms of the Noble Truths, the questions that occur to the mind are not “Is there a self? What is my self?” but rather “Am I suffering stress because I'm holding onto this particular phenomenon? Is it really me, myself, or mine? If it's stressful but not really me or mine, why hold on?” These last questions merit straightforward answers, as they then help you to comprehend stress and to chip away at the attachment and clinging – the residual sense of self-

identification – that cause it, until ultimately all traces of self-identification are gone and all that's left is limitless freedom.

“In this sense, the anatta teaching is not a doctrine of no-self, but a not-self strategy for shedding suffering by letting go of its cause, leading to the highest, undying happiness.” (“*No-Self or Not-Self*” in his book *Noble Strategy*.)

In other words, the Buddha was interested in the practical question of how to end suffering, and all his teachings were directed to that single purpose. Viewed through that practical lens, it is clear that the concepts of “self” and “no-self” imply ownership and identification, and create a mindset in which we categorize things as “me” or “mine” and “not me” or “not mine.” The controversy itself creates a false dichotomy that inevitably causes clinging to one extreme or the other. The road to freedom, according to the Buddha, involves letting go of this clinging.

Buddhism began as a Hindu heresy, and, especially in the early years of the new religion, when it was struggling to establish its own identity, it was probably natural for the new religion to exaggerate the doctrinal differences between the two. I say that because, when I look closely at what both traditions actually say, I don't find as much difference between their views on self as is often claimed. In both religions, the ego is considered a snare and a delusion, and attachment to it is understood as a chief cause of suffering. Hinduism does affirm the reality of the atman, but also that “Atman is Brahman.” That is, the individual self is identical with the universal Self, which means that my self is the same as your self. There is ultimately only one self, one World Soul. Does this not mean that the idea of an independent and separate self is a delusion?

When Buddhists interpret the doctrine of *anatta* to mean that the idea of an independent self is a delusion must they not also acknowledge that, if there is no “self” then there is no “other,” either? “Self” and “other” arise together: it is no more possible for one to exist without the other than for a fence to exist with only one side. To many American Buddhists, “anatta” sounds depressing and nihilistic, as if it is an assertion that you don't really exist. But in Asia and India, this idea doesn't sound nihilistic at all, but liberating, because it actually affirms that you have no boundaries. This idea helps us understand some of the enigmatic and mystical statements of some Buddhists, such as this famous quotation from Kalu Rinpoche, “We live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality. You are that reality. When you understand this, you see that you are nothing, and being nothing, you are everything. That is all.” The great irony, then, is that both sides of this 2,500 year-old doctrinal dispute really arrive at the same point. Whether we hold the view that “Atman is Brahman” or that “Atman is unreal”, in both cases reflection and practice bring us to the same realization – that we are boundless, limitless Being.

Moreover, the path to liberation is virtually identical in both religions. In the *Katha Upanishad*, for instance, we read, “When one rises above I and me and mine, The Atman is revealed as one's real Self. When all desires that surge in the heart are renounced, the mortal becomes immortal. When all the knots that strangle the heart are loosened, the mortal becomes immortal. This sums up the teaching of the scriptures.” It also sums up the teachings of the Buddha. Rise above I and me and mine. Free yourself from the desires that surge in the heart. Loosen the knots that strangle the heart. Where is there room in any of this for doctrinal disputes?

My own experience is that, in meditation, when I achieve enough inner silence and concentration that I can observe my experience without judgment or clinging, I see that everything arises, stays for a while, and then passes away. The things I identify as “mine” – my thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations – are not exempt. As I examine my experience in this way, it is clear that my thoughts, feelings, and sensations are “not self” and I (temporarily, at least) release my attachment to them. I begin to understand that *nothing which can be an object of perception is me or mine*. If I then ask “Who am I?” the response of the spirit in me is sometimes “I am the Mystery,” sometimes it’s “I am boundless Being,” sometimes it’s “I am That” and at other times it is simply stillness.

## God

*i thank You God for most this amazing  
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything  
which is natural which is infinite which is yes  
(i who have died am alive again today,  
and this is the sun’s birthday; this is the birth  
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay  
great happening illimitably earth)  
how should tasting touching hearing seeing  
breathing any—lifted from the no  
of all nothing—human merely being  
doubt unimaginable You?  
(now the ears of my ears awake and  
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)*

*e.e. Cummings*

*Those who have entirely lost the ability to see the transcendent reality that shows itself in all things, and who refuse to seek it out or even to believe the search a meaningful one, have confined themselves for now within an illusory world, and wander in a labyrinth of dreams. Those others, however, who are still able to see the truth that shines in and through and beyond the world of ordinary experience, and who know that nature is in its every aspect the gift of the supernatural, and who understand that God is that absolute reality in whom, in every moment, they live and move and have their being—they are awake.*

*— David Bentley Hart, The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss*

*God is not a hypothesis derived from logical assumptions, but an immediate insight, self-evident as light. He is not something to be sought in the darkness with the light of reason. He is the light.*

*— Abraham Joshua Heschel*

*The great Light always existed,  
even long before the creation of the universes,  
and it will continue to exist after their destruction.*

*This light is so wondrous that even if all the universes expounded upon it for a zillion years, they would still not be able to even begin to describe it.*

*Yet this great light is something that cannot be seen even by the most precise microscope or the most powerful telescope. It is something that can only be seen by the Eye...*

*--Tong Songchol (1912-1993), one of the great Zen masters in the last century was also called the Living Buddha of Korea*

I use the word God to refer to that ultimate reality which mystical experience reveals. I could just as easily use words like the All, the Light, Great Spirit, Ground of Being, Form of the Good, Unborn, Unconditioned, Deathless, Unnamable, Dharmakaya, Source, Infinite, Self, Absolute, One, Tao, Being, Beloved, or Brahman; or I could call it, with Alan Watts, "the which than which there is no whicher." Whatever I call it, I readily admit that, just as when I talk about the self, I really haven't the slightest idea what it is I'm talking about.

Nevertheless, I have two kinds of reasons for calling myself a theist:

The first is sufficient and fundamental: I trust in the reality of my personal experiences of God, as described above.

The second is philosophical; it seems much more likely to me that the universe is conscious and intelligent than that it isn't. It has a rational structure; parts of it are teleological, and it produces conscious beings who can comprehend it rationally. We seem to have two choices here. We can believe that the rational structures we observe just inexplicably happen to be there as one aspect of a fundamentally dead, unconscious and purposeless universe; or we can believe that they are expressions of a Universal Mind. The first choice is a shrug of the shoulders; the second is a fairly straightforward and commonsense deduction based on the evidence that is all around us.

### *1. The Nature of God*

*No one is forgotten. It is a lie, any talk of God that does not comfort you.*

*— Meister Eckhart*

*The eye by which I see God is the same eye by which God sees me. My eye and God's eye are one and the same, one in seeing, one in knowing.*

*-- Meister Eckhart*

*The positivists have a simple solution: the world must be divided into that which we can say clearly and the rest, which we had better pass over in silence. But can anyone conceive of a more pointless philosophy, seeing that what we can say clearly amounts to next to nothing? If we omitted all that is unclear, we would probably be left completely uninteresting and trivial tautologies.*

*— Werner Heisenberg*

*God is not so much the object of our knowledge as the cause of our wonder.*

*— Kallistos Ware*

The great dilemma of theology is that, on the one hand, the truths that are its subject matter can never really be put into words; but that, on the other hand, there isn't much else that's worth talking about.

This section and the next two are a combination of a little reasoning, and a great deal of intuition, myth, and guesswork. It consists of my best guesses about the answers to questions which by their nature have no definitive answers. We are condemned to be "peeping Toms at the keyhole of eternity," as Arthur Koestler put it. In these areas, there can be no certainty. We are each entitled to our beliefs, but we're deluding ourselves if we think that our best guesses are knowledge. Doubt, ambiguity, and skepticism are in some ways painful feelings, which give rise to a strong temptation to close our accounts with reality prematurely, as William James said. The human weakness for pretending that we have knowledge in areas where we don't is the root of the human vulnerability to the claims of the various fundamentalisms, including scientism. The mystery of existence is at times terrifying, but it also opens us to experiences of awe and wonder, which are the foundation of humility in intellectual life, and inoculate us against dogmatism in religious life.

That said:

God is not "the supreme being" or any kind of being among other beings; God is Being itself. God doesn't "exist" as you and I exist: rather, *he is existence itself*. He isn't composite and is therefore indissoluble; he is infinite and unconditioned and therefore not dependent on anything else; he is eternal and so does not come into being; he is the source of his own being and hence in him there is no division between *what* he is and *that* he is.

(This view of the nature of God, by the way, removes one of the most common objections to cosmological arguments for the existence of God. If the universe comes from God, it is often argued, then where does God come from? If we say that God has no cause, aren't we guilty of special pleading? If we're going to argue that God can subsist from all eternity, why not just avoid multiplying steps and say that the universe subsists from all eternity? The answer to this objection is in the identification of God with Being or Existence itself. To ask where God comes from is then to ask where Being comes from, or what is the cause of Being. But the question is absurd. The only candidate for a cause of being would have to be non-being, or nothingness. We'd have to say that non-being "causes" being. But a "nothing" which could "cause" anything could not be nothing, because it would have to contain creative potential – that is, it would already have to be "something," or have being. This is why the ancient logical principle "Out of nothing, nothing comes," is a necessary truth. The conclusion is that, while individual beings have causes, Being itself, the ground of all possible causes and effects, can itself have no cause. All coherent discussion of causes and effects must stop at the Ground of Being, or God.)

God's nature is, as it is described in classical Hindu philosophy, *Sat, Chit, Ananda* – infinite being, infinite consciousness, and infinite bliss. This third characteristic means that Being is inherently joyful, and that the closer finite beings come to infinite Being, the more joy they experience.

The term “panentheism” best describes what I understand God to be. The term literally means “all in God.” Pantheism identifies God with nature. Panentheism does the same, but also affirms that God transcends nature. That is, nature is identical with God, but God is not identical with nature. On a personal level, it doesn’t mean “I am God,” but it does mean “God has become myself.” The Upanishads teach that *Atman is Brahman* – my soul is identical with the World Soul; and *tat tvam asi* – That art Thou, you are that which you seek. Anyone who has had a mystical experience will, I think, intuitively understand these ideas. Orthodox Christian theologian Kallistos Ware describes it in this way: “All things are permeated and maintained in being by the uncreated energies of God, and so all things are a theophany that mediates his presence. At the heart of each thing is its inner principle or logos, implanted within it by the Creator Logos; and so through the logoi we enter into communion with the Logos. God is above and beyond all things, yet as Creator he is also within all things – “panentheism”, not pantheism.”

God is *nondual*, which means that he has no opposite, and that nothing is outside of him. Hindu philosophers use the term *advaita*, which, in English translation means the awkward-sounding *nonduality*. They don’t simply speak of the *one*, because the one has an opposite – the many. Nonduality means that God transcends all distinctions, including the distinction between the infinite and the finite and between self and other. To say that he transcends the distinction between the infinite and the finite means that he is fully present at every point in the finite universe. He is fully present in me and in all sentient beings. To say that he transcends the distinction between self and other means that I can know him through *kenosis*, through a process of self-emptying and absorption into him in mystical experience; but that I may also have an *I-Thou* relationship with him. He is both the Beloved and my own deepest self. When I am absorbed in him in mystical experience, I experience no distance between myself and God. When I am identified with my ego, however, the All is experienced as other, and is appropriately addressed through prayer.

Many people, especially if they’ve never experienced mystical union, object to the first form of experience of God as “impersonal,” but impersonal in this context needs to be understood as “closer than personal” not “less than personal.” Every personal relationship, no matter how beautiful and gratifying, remains imperfect, because wherever there are two selves, some distance, some inability to achieve complete understanding, will always be present. Union with God in mystical awakening is free from such imperfections.

When I speak or think about God, I usually use male pronouns. This is only a habit, and it is due to nothing more than my sexist conditioning. I have experimented with thinking of God as the Great Mother, and have addressed her as “she”, but that way of thinking and speaking doesn’t feel natural to me, even though I know it is no less accurate than to speak of God as “he.” Certainly, the nondual Infinite transcends all gender distinctions.

## 2. *The Bliss of Being*

*Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.*  
– Teilhard de Chardin

*O the joy of my spirit--it is uncaged--it darts like lightning!  
It is not enough to have this globe or a certain time.  
I will have thousands of globes and all time.  
— Walt Whitman*

*You never enjoy the world aright, till the Sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars: and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world, and more than so, because men are in it who are every one sole heirs as well as you. Till you can sing and rejoice and delight in God, as misers do in gold, and Kings in sceptres, you never enjoy the world.*

*Till your spirit filleth the whole world, and the stars are your jewels; till you are as familiar with the ways of God in all Ages as with your walk and table: till you are intimately acquainted with that shady nothing out of which the world was made: till you love men so as to desire their happiness, with a thirst equal to the zeal of your own: till you delight in God for being good to all: you never enjoy the world.*

— [Thomas Traherne, Centuries Of Meditations](#)

In *A Brief History of Time*, Stephen Hawking writes, “Even if there is only one possible unified theory, it is just a set of rules and equations. What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe? The usual approach of science of constructing a mathematical model cannot answer the questions of why there should be a universe for the model to describe. Why does the universe go to all the bother of existing?”

What is the universe *for*? What is its meaning? What is its purpose? When we ask questions about purposes, we are asking about the ends or goals toward which something is moving. So where is the universe going? What is the end-state toward which it is evolving? It seems fairly clear that, while the universe produces purpose-driven organisms, the system as a whole isn’t trying to “go” anywhere. The endless cycles of night and day, life and death, creation and dissolution do not serve any discernible goal or goals outside of themselves. Does this thought lead to despair? Are we to conclude that existence is simply pointless and meaningless?

Theology comes to a similar impasse when it tries to understand what could motivate God to manifest the universe at all. A being that subsists in completeness and perfection through eternity could not feel any lack, any needs, desires, fears, or hopes. What motive could he ever have for doing anything?

But living organisms engage in purposeless and “pointless” activity all the time. They do it when they play, and perhaps the metaphor of play might give us some clue as to why the universe goes to all the bother of existing.

When we dance, we are not trying to arrive at some point on the dance floor. When we sing, our goal isn’t to get to the last note; if it were, then the fastest singers would be the best. We dance and we sing *for their own sake*. Another way of saying it is that we do these things because we enjoy them, because they are “fun.”



Maybe there is another way of asking the question of meaning which might actually get to the heart of the matter, despite its apparent flippancy. The question is, “What’s the point if we can’t have fun?” This happens to be the title of a fascinating, speculative (and playful) article by American Anthropologist David Graeber in *The Baffler*, in 2014. He writes:

“My friend June Thunderstorm and I once spent a half an hour sitting in a meadow by a mountain lake, watching an inchworm dangle from the top of a stalk of grass, twist about in every possible direction, and then leap to the next stalk and do the same thing. And so it proceeded, in a vast circle, with what must have been a vast expenditure of energy, for what seemed like absolutely no reason at all.

“All animals play,” June had once said to me. “Even ants.” She’d spent many years working as a professional gardener and had plenty of incidents like this to observe and ponder. “Look,” she said, with an air of modest triumph. “See what I mean?”

“Most of us, hearing this story, would insist on proof. How do we know the worm was playing? Perhaps the invisible circles it traced in the air were really just a search for some unknown sort of prey. Or a mating ritual. Can we prove they weren’t? Even if the worm was playing, how do we know this form of play did not serve some ultimately practical purpose: exercise, or self-training for some possible future inchworm emergency?

“This would be the reaction of most professional ethologists as well. Generally speaking, an analysis of animal behavior is not considered scientific unless the animal is assumed, at least tacitly, to be operating according to the same means/end calculations that one would apply to economic transactions. Under this assumption, an expenditure of energy must be directed toward some goal, whether it be obtaining food, securing territory, achieving dominance, or maximizing reproductive success – unless one can absolutely prove that it isn’t, and absolute proof in such matters is, as one might imagine, very hard to come by.

“I must emphasize here that it doesn’t really matter what sort of theory of animal motivation a scientist might entertain: what she believes an animal to be thinking, whether she thinks an animal can be said to be “thinking” anything at all. I’m not saying that ethologists actually believe that animals are simply rational calculating machines. I’m simply saying that ethologists have boxed themselves into a world where to be scientific means to offer an explanation of behavior in rational terms – which in turn means describing an animal *as if* it were a calculating economic actor trying to maximize some sort of self-interest – whatever their theory of animal psychology, or motivation, might be.

“That’s why the existence of animal play is considered something of an intellectual scandal. It’s understudied, and those who do study it are seen as mildly eccentric.

“...those who do look into the matter are invariably forced to the conclusion that play does exist across the animal universe. And exists not just among such notoriously frivolous creatures as monkeys, dolphins, or puppies, but among such unlikely species as frogs, minnows, salamanders, fiddler crabs, and yes, even ants – which not only engage in frivolous activities as individuals,

but also have been observed since the nineteenth century to arrange mock-wars, apparently just for the fun of it.

“Why do animals play? Well, why shouldn’t they? The real question is: Why does the existence of action carried out for the sheer pleasure of acting, the exertion of powers for the sheer pleasure of exerting them, strike us as mysterious? What does it tell us about ourselves that we instinctively assume that it is?”

Maybe play “is simply what life is. We don’t have to explain why creatures desire to be alive. Life is an end in itself. And if what being alive actually consists of is having powers – to run, jump, fight, fly through the air – then surely the exercise of such powers as an end in itself does not have to be explained either. It’s just an extension of the same principle.”

And perhaps, if this principle of play is fundamental to life, could it be that it is fundamental to existence? “If an electron is acting freely – if it, as Richard Feynman is supposed to have said, ‘does anything it likes’ – it can only be acting freely as an end in itself. Which would mean that at the very foundations of physical reality, we encounter freedom for its own sake – which also means we encounter the most rudimentary form of play.

“Let us imagine a principle. Call it a principle of freedom – or since Latinate constructions tend to carry more weight in such matters, call it a principle of ludic freedom. Let us imagine it to hold that the free exercise of an entity’s most complex powers or capacities will, under certain circumstances at least, tend to become an end in itself. It would obviously not be the only principle active in nature. Others pull other ways. But if nothing else, it would help explain what we actually observe, such as why, despite the second law of thermodynamics, the universe seems to be getting more, rather than less, complex. Evolutionary psychologists claim they can explain – as the title of one recent book has it – why sex is fun.” What they can’t explain is why fun is fun. This could.

“I don’t deny that what I’ve presented so far is a savage simplification of very complicated issues. I’m not even saying that the position I’m suggesting here – that there is a play principle at the basis of all physical reality – is necessarily true. I would just insist that such a perspective is at least as plausible as the weirdly inconsistent speculations that currently pass for orthodoxy, in which a mindless, robotic universe suddenly produces poets and philosophers out of nowhere.”

I’m reminded of something I read decades ago in one of Alan Watts’ books (I can’t remember which one), to the effect that “A universe not born in light and joy would have found some way of committing suicide long ago.” I am aware that this is an incredibly silly thing to say – and I am also aware that this would not have troubled Alan Watts very much. He saw philosophy as one of the most enjoyable forms of play.

What both Graeber and Watts, each in their own way, are attempting to express is an ancient intuition that is found in every mystical tradition. The nature of God is existence, consciousness, and *bliss*; and the manifest universe is *lila*, the *play* of consciousness. Existence is purely gratuitous. Nothing *has* to exist to serve some grand purpose. And if there were some grand purpose, we could then ask “What is *that* purpose for?” If we want to avoid an infinite regress,

the question can only end where it begins. The answer to Stephen Hawking's question about why the universe goes to all the bother of existing – and if any answer does exist, what else could it be? – is that the universe exists because, and only because, it delights in its own existence.

### *3, The Problem of Evil*



*What is to give light must endure burning.*  
-- Viktor Frankl

*He who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.*  
– Aeschylus

*There is a brokenness  
out of which comes the unbroken,  
a shatteredness  
out of which blooms the unshatterable.*

*There is a sorrow  
beyond all grief which leads to joy  
and a fragility  
out of whose depths emerges strength.*

*There is a hollow space  
too vast for words  
through which we pass with each loss,  
out of whose darkness  
we are sanctioned into being.*

*There is a cry deeper than all sound  
whose serrated edges cut the heart  
as we break open to the place inside  
which is unbreakable and whole,  
while learning to sing.*

*-- The Unbroken, Rashani Réa*

The most vexing theological issue facing theists in the Western tradition is the problem of evil – that is, how can we reconcile the existence of so much evil in the world with the existence of a God who is all good? Because he is omnipotent, God presumably could have created a world without suffering, which makes it difficult not to see the creator of *this* world as a sadist. Many of the atheists I meet don't deny the existence of God primarily because they find the materialistic alternative more plausible, but rather because they find it offensive to be told that a universe filled with so much suffering and evil comes from a beneficent deity.

I find it amusing to read the many ingenious ways in which theologians jump through the hoops in their efforts to get around this problem. None of the proposed solutions actually do solve the problem, and when confronted with the difficulties, most believers, in my experience, resort to mystification. The Lord moves in mysterious ways.

In one way, however, the problem of evil is much more difficult for atheists than it is for theists. As C. S. Lewis pointed out, on the materialist account, neither good nor evil can have any objective existence at all (see the section on Ethics). To affirm the real existence of evil is already to concede that reality exceeds the material.

I think the problem of evil is logically unanswerable as long as we believe that God is separate from his creation, as is the case in all three of the Abrahamic traditions. In these traditions, we may be “like unto” God; we may be created in his image, but, in the end we are fundamentally separate from him. He is the sovereign ruler who judges, rewards and punishes. Since the power difference between God and humanity is infinite, this view inevitably makes him the Big Bully in the sky, the Boss who moves in mysterious, but still often undeniably pernicious, ways. It is this view of God that makes the problem of evil such a philosophical puzzle and a theological nightmare.

This problem isn't much of a dilemma in the Eastern religions, however, because in those traditions the view of God is fundamentally different. In Hinduism as in all forms of panentheism, the ultimate reality is nondual. Nothing is separate from God, and nothing is outside of him. God is the Self of all, which means that he alone is the one who experiences all experience. Wherever there is suffering, it is God *alone* who experiences it. If I experience God as identical with my own deepest self, then it becomes psychologically impossible to experience myself as in a perpetrator/victim relationship with him. I won't protest the injustice of the mountain that blocks my path if, ultimately, I know that I am one with him who put it there in the first place.

In one Hindu myth, when God first created sentient beings, he gave them full awareness of their identity with him. As soon as they came into existence, they immediately sat down and

meditated on God, took no interest whatever in finite existence, and let themselves starve to death. God then understood that no finite world could even get off the ground unless he introduced *concealment* into His creation -- unless created beings forgot that they were really God. Finite creation required that God conceal himself from himself. Creation, in this myth, is a game of hide and seek, in which God forgets who he is and imagines himself as you and me and all the other creatures in the universe. This is the meaning of *maya*, the veil of illusion which makes creation possible. (It is, by the way, this concealment which necessitates its opposite, *revelation*.) But eventually, all beings melt back into their Source. That is to say, all sentient beings are heirs to *sat chit, ananda* – absolute existence, knowledge and bliss. But why would God go to all the bother of concealing himself from himself? In Vedanta, creation is understood as *lila*, the play of consciousness. God eternally plays hide-and-seek with himself, and his play is the manifest universe. Fundamentally, creation isn't "serious." It's like music, or dance, or song.

One objection to this point of view, which comes especially from people who were raised in one of the Abrahamic religions, is that it renders life meaningless. If it's all just a dream, or a game, then it seems to have no ultimate significance at all. The answer to these objections is that our goals and struggles do have meaning within the realm of the finite, but only there. As the timeless bliss of being behind the marvelous display of the phenomenal universe, God himself has no need of goals or purposes.

Shiva, the Destroyer, is a Hindu God who is pictured as fierce and terrifying. He dances on the body of a dwarf. He is surrounded by a ring of world-destroying fire. He wears a necklace of skulls and raises a sword, preparing to strike. His teeth are sharp and his mouth is dripping blood. At the same time, he holds one of his hands in front of his heart with thumb and forefinger touching in a *mudra* whose meaning is "Fear not." It is only a dream.

There is some part of us which no loss, no pain, no suffering of any kind, can ever touch. Even the worst horrors of life occur only on the most superficial layers of existence; they never touch the Ground of Being. When the surface of the ocean is agitated and stormy, the depths remain still. The highest purpose in life is to find this sacred stillness within ourselves, and to live from it. When we do this, we may still suffer, but we do not despair.

### **The Perennial Philosophy**

What I have been outlining is essentially what Aldous Huxley, following Leibniz, called the Perennial Philosophy, which he summed up in four propositions:

"First: the phenomenal world of matter and of individualized consciousness – the world of things and animals and men and even gods – is the manifestation of a Divine Ground within which all partial realities have their being, and apart from which they would be non-existent.

"Second: human beings are capable not merely of knowing *about* the Divine Ground by inference; they can also realize its existence by a direct intuition, superior to discursive reasoning. This immediate knowledge unites the knower with that which is known.

“Third: man possesses a double nature, a phenomenal ego and an eternal Self, which is the inner man, the spirit, the spark of divinity within the soul. It is possible for a man, if he so desires, to identify himself with the spirit and therefore with the Divine Ground, which is of the same or like nature with the spirit.

“Fourth: man's life on earth has only one end and purpose: to identify himself with his eternal Self and so to come to unitive knowledge of the Divine Ground.” – (Introduction to the *Bhagavad-Gita*, translated by Prabhavananda and Isherwood)



Aldous Huxley

William James, in his concluding lecture in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, describes “in the broadest possible way the characteristics of the religious life” as follows:

- “1. That the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance;
- “2. That union or harmonious relation with that higher universe is our true end;
- “3. That prayer or inner communion with the spirit thereof – be that spirit "God" or "law" – is a process wherein work is really done, and spiritual energy flows in and produces effects, psychological or material, within the phenomenal world.”

He elaborates in this way:

“ the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come. ... The further limits of our being plunge, it seems to me, into an altogether other dimension of existence from the sensible and merely "understandable" world. Name it the mystical region, or the supernatural region, whichever you choose. So far as our ideal impulses originate in this region (and most of them do originate in it, for we find them possessing us in a way for which

we cannot articulately account), we belong to it in a more intimate sense than that in which we belong to the visible world, for we belong in the most intimate sense wherever our ideals belong. Yet the unseen region in question is not merely ideal, for it produces effects in this world. When we commune with it, work is actually done upon our finite personality, for we are turned into new men, and consequences in the way of conduct follow in the natural world upon our regenerative change. But that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself, so I feel as if we had no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal.”

Finally, Ken Wilber offers this succinct summary of the same philosophy:

1. Spirit exists.
2. Spirit is found within.
3. Most of us don't realize this Spirit within.
4. There is a way out.
5. The way leads to direct experience of Spirit.
6. This experience marks the end of sin and suffering.
7. Social action and compassion result.

– Ken Wilber, *Grace and Grit*, 1991

The Perennial Philosophy essentially sums up everything I believe about metaphysics and ethics.

## **Buddhism**

I call myself a Buddhist because I feel deeply at home in the atmosphere of that tradition, and because I have found Buddhist ethics and meditation practice so immensely helpful in my life. But I do seem to be at odds with what most Buddhists regard as core doctrinal elements of Buddhism. As I explained above, I interpret the concept of “anatta” as a “not-self” practice strategy rather than as a “no-self” metaphysical doctrine, and I also believe in God. I have no trouble admitting that, in the contingent universe, nothing has “self-nature,” but I also believe that the contingent universe rests on a transcendental background. I grant that everything in the contingent universe is impermanent, but believe, with Huxley and the perennialists, that there is something in the core of our being which is one with the changeless Ground of Being that is God. In this regard, I still have never left the Western theological tradition in which I was raised.

In my early years of Buddhist practice, I was very much troubled by these apparent contradictions, and I once brought it up in a private meeting with Jack Kornfield. I told him that I wasn’t sure I could call myself a Buddhist, and explained, almost in a whisper, that the reason was that “I believe in God.” When I said “God,” he inhaled deeply, closed his eyes, and had a moment of ecstasy with the word. When I saw him do that I thought, “Well that’s a good answer.” Then, he came back to himself, opened his eyes, and said, “Oh, I wouldn’t worry too much about being a Buddhist,” (this from one of the foremost Buddhist teachers in the West). “Become a Buddha!” I realized that he wasn’t interested in debating the catechism with me, only in encouraging me to awaken. I thought, “I can trust these people. I can be in this club.” Since that meeting I’ve never worried again about whether I qualify as a Buddhist.

I often wonder what the Buddha really meant when he spoke of the Unborn, the Unconditioned, the Deathless, etc. These sound very much like the terms that theists had traditionally applied to God. The interpretation of most Theravadans, however, seems to be that they only refer to the ending of suffering, and that to give them any additional meaning is just to reify them.

But does Nirvana mean *only* the cessation of suffering? Is it only freedom *from*, or is it also freedom *in* some larger reality? Many of the texts in the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions seem to imply the latter. In the Mahayana tradition, for instance, the *tathagatagarbha* sutras sometimes identify the Buddha with the Dharmakaya, or Supreme Reality, which possesses the god-like qualities of eternality, inscrutability and immutability. Dr. B. Alan Wallace writes of this doctrine:

"The essential nature of the whole of samsara and nirvana is the absolute space (*dhatu*) of the *tathagatagarbha*, but this space is not to be confused with a mere absence of matter. Rather, this absolute space is imbued with all the infinite knowledge, compassion, power, and enlightened activities of the Buddha. Moreover, this luminous space is that which causes the phenomenal world to appear, and it is none other than the nature of one's own mind, which by nature is clear light."

In the light of such doctrinal elements, Wallace believes that it may be too simple to define Buddhism unconditionally as "non-theistic." He writes, "Samantabhadra, the primordial Buddha whose nature is identical with the *tathagatagarbha* within each sentient being, is the ultimate ground of *samsara* and *nirvana*; and the entire universe consists of nothing other than displays of this infinite, radiant, empty awareness. Thus, in light of the theoretical progression from the *bhavanga* to the *tathagatagarbha* to the primordial wisdom of the absolute space of reality, Buddhism is not so simply non-theistic as it may appear at first glance."

The Rinzaï Zen Buddhist master, Soyen Shaku, speaking to Americans at the beginning of the 20th century, discussed how in essence the idea of God is not absent from Buddhism, when understood as ultimate reality:

"At the outset, let me state that Buddhism is not atheistic as the term is ordinarily understood. It has certainly a God, the highest reality and truth, through which and in which this universe exists. However, the followers of Buddhism usually avoid the term God, for it savors so much of Christianity, whose spirit is not always exactly in accord with the Buddhist interpretation of religious experience ... To define more exactly the Buddhist notion of the highest being, it may be convenient to borrow the term very happily coined by a modern German scholar, 'panentheism', according to which God is ... all and one and more than the totality of existence.... As I mentioned before, Buddhists do not make use of the term God, which characteristically belongs to Christian terminology. An equivalent most commonly used is Dharmakaya. When the Dharmakaya is most concretely conceived it becomes the Buddha, or Tathagata..."

All of this sounds virtually identical to the Perennial Philosophy to me.

## **Two: The Stuff of the World**



*Reality is not only stranger than we suppose but stranger than we can suppose.*  
 – J.B.S. Haldane

In the previous section I described the Perennial Philosophy as I have come to understand it. To many modern educated people, however, all of this sounds archaic, even quaint. It is commonly assumed that modern science has rendered this understanding of existence obsolete. This section attempts to show why that view is incorrect. It grapples with the fundamental metaphysical question of what is “the stuff of the world” as Sir Arthur Eddington phrased it. The conclusion I will reach is that the universe is mental and spiritual in nature, not material.

### **A Refutation of Materialism**

*...physics explains everything, which we know because anything physics cannot explain does not exist, which we know because whatever exists must be explicable by physics, which we know because physics explains everything. There is something here of the mystical.*  
 – David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being Consciousness, Bliss*

When philosophers imagine what the primary substance of the world is, they find themselves in one of two camps – materialism and idealism. The fundamental reality is either more like matter or more like mind; we seem unable to imagine a third alternative. Materialism is the majority view among modern educated people, I think because it *seems* to provide a satisfying and complete picture of the world. The laws of physics describe the behavior of matter. Chemistry shows how the fundamental building blocks of the world combine into complex substances. The concept of natural selection shows how organic matter spontaneously organizes itself into ever more complex living forms, resulting finally in self-conscious beings who can reflect on the whole process. The picture appears to be complete and satisfying. But the devil is in the details. It’s only when we look closely that the inadequacies of metaphysical materialism become apparent.

#### *The Fallacy of Scientism*

Materialism is as old as Democritus, but in its modern form it evolved out of the research paradigm of empiricism developed by Descartes and Francis Bacon. Science was to commit itself to a rigorous austerity by restricting itself to asking only those questions which can be answered through observation, controlled experiment and measurement. (Notice that this paradigm essentially commits science, in practice if not in principle, to materialism.) This meant that Aristotle’s fourfold scheme of causality was to be abandoned. Science was to concern itself with efficient and material causes only, and put aside questions of final or formal causes. The domain of science was to consist of questions about how things and events arise, not what they mean or why they’re there. The empirical project required not addressing the qualitative dimensions of the world and focusing, instead, exclusively on the quantitative – on what can be weighed, counted, measured.

Because of the astonishing success of this project over the last four centuries, the temptation was apparently irresistible to convert this methodology into a metaphysical doctrine – into the strange

view that only that which can be measured *exists*. The claim was audacious, since virtually everything that matters to us – values, purposes, meanings, qualities – lie outside the scope of what can be measured. Empiricism in the sciences is a method; materialism in philosophy is a metaphysic, and the latter does not follow from the former. But when the limited methods of science are elevated to the status of the sole criterion for truth, then the art of humble questioning becomes its very opposite – the arrogant belief that one possesses ultimate conclusions. What resulted from this confusion was the philosophical fallacy of *scientism*, the view that only the methods of science can yield valid knowledge.



David Bentley Hart

David Bentley Hart writes: “Quite a few otherwise intelligent men and women take it as an established principle that we can know as true only what can be verified by empirical methods of experimentation and observation. This is, for one thing, a notoriously self-refuting claim, inasmuch as it cannot itself be demonstrated to be true by any application of empirical method. More to the point, though, it is transparent nonsense: most of the things we know to be true, often quite indubitably, do not fall within the realm of what can be tested by empirical methods; they are by their nature episodic, experiential, local, personal, intuitive, or purely logical. The sciences concern certain facts as organized by certain theories, and certain theories as constrained by certain facts; they accumulate evidence and enucleate hypotheses within very strictly limited paradigms; but they do not provide proofs of where reality begins or ends, or of what the dimensions of truth are. They cannot even establish their own working premises—the real existence of the phenomenal world, the power of the human intellect accurately to reflect that reality, the perfect lawfulness of nature, its interpretability, its mathematical regularity, and so forth—and should not seek to do so, but should confine themselves to the truths to which their methods give them access. They should also recognize what the boundaries of the scientific rescript are. There are, in fact, truths of reason that are far surer than even the most amply supported findings of empirical science because such truths are not, as those findings must always be, susceptible of later theoretical revision; and then there are truths of mathematics that are subject to proof in the most proper sense and so are more irrefutable still. And there is no one single discourse of truth as such, no single path to the knowledge of reality, no single method that can exhaustively define what knowledge is, no useful answers whose range has not been

limited in advance by the kind of questions that prompted them.” – David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God, Being, Consciousness, Bliss*

Once the limited scope of the scientific project came to be viewed as the sole criterion of truth, materialism was the natural result, since the non-material aspects of the world could not be explored using measuring equipment. Matter began to be understood as the brute “substance” of the world – defined only by its measurable characteristics, such as mass, position, and velocity. Matter was imagined to be featureless and dead – colorless, odorless, soundless, and tasteless. Its behavior was strictly determined by the laws of nature; hence it could have no “final ends” -- no purposes or intentions.

When I debate with materialism in what follows, what I am taking issue with is this popular (and, by the way, scientifically out-of-date) notion of matter, and with the view that this brute “substance” is the fundamental stuff of the world. Noam Chomsky refers to this view as “intuitive physics.” I will argue against the validity of this metaphysic in three steps. First, I will attempt to show that any attempt to construct a plausible picture of the world we actually live in using only this basic “stuff” is a non-starter, a philosophical impossibility. Second, I will argue that this classical picture of reality was long ago superseded by science, and that science has in fact abandoned all hope of deriving, from the application of empirical methods, any picture at all of the ultimate nature of reality. Finally, I will argue that, this being the case, the facts of our experience are easier to comprehend if we envision the substance of things as more “spiritual” or “mental” than “physical.”

### *Five Challenges to Materialism*

To begin, then, there are five features of the world which cannot be explained on the assumptions of materialism:

#### *1. The existence of a contingent universe. “Why is there something rather than nothing?”*

Leibniz’s famous question has probably occurred to almost everyone at one time or another. Even though many philosophers contend that it’s a meaningless question, it persists because we have some intuition of what might be called “the gratuity of being.” There seems to be no reason why this particular world *had* to be here. It doesn’t seem to be logically necessary; we can easily imagine other worlds that might have existed instead of this one. To compound the mystery, this world cannot account for itself. That is, nothing in the manifest universe has “self-existence,” to use a Buddhist term. Everything we know is dependent for its existence on something outside itself. All forms of the classical *argument from contingency* begin with some version of this axiom: “Whatever is not the cause of its own existence must be brought into existence by something outside of itself.” Since it is apparent that nothing in the material universe is the cause of its own existence, it must also be true that the entire material universe, being only the composite of all contingent realities, is also a contingent reality (although a number of naturalistic philosophers have come up with some very bad arguments to get around this deduction). The conclusion is that we don’t live in a “stand alone” universe. The finite universe must rest on a transcendental background. Contingent being implies necessary being. The natural world derives its being from the supernatural.

2. *The laws of nature.* The laws of nature aren't just regularities: they are mathematically precise, universal, and "tied together." Einstein described them as "reason incarnate." The human mind and the physical world are amazingly and inexplicably fitted one to the other: it is an amazing mystery that "mind" and "world" seem to form one seamless reality. The truths which mathematicians discover through pure thought turn out to be the language of the laws of nature. Either these laws are brute facts which just happen to exist, or they are evidence that "nature" is intelligent. I believe the latter is far more likely than the former.

3. *The fine-tuning of the laws of nature.* In addition, the laws of the universe give every impression of having been rather carefully thought out with life in mind. Physicist Paul Davies writes "Scientists are slowly waking up to an inconvenient truth - the universe looks suspiciously like a fix. The issue concerns the very laws of nature themselves. For 40 years, physicists and cosmologists have been quietly collecting examples of all too convenient "coincidences" and special features in the underlying laws of the universe that seem to be necessary in order for life, and hence conscious beings, to exist. Change any one of them and the consequences would be lethal. Fred Hoyle, the distinguished cosmologist, once said it was as if 'a super-intellect has monkeyed with physics.'

"To see the problem, imagine playing God with the cosmos. Before you is a designer machine that lets you tinker with the basics of physics. Twiddle this knob and you make all electrons a bit lighter, twiddle that one and you make gravity a bit stronger, and so on. It happens that you need to set thirty something knobs to fully describe the world about us. The crucial point is that some of those metaphorical knobs must be tuned very precisely, or the universe would be sterile.

"Example: neutrons are just a tad heavier than protons. If it were the other way around, atoms couldn't exist, because all the protons in the universe would have decayed into neutrons shortly after the big bang. No protons, then no atomic nuclei and no atoms. No atoms, no chemistry, no life. Like Baby Bear's porridge in the story of Goldilocks, the universe seems to be just right for life."

David Bentley Hart again: "The whole of nature is something prepared for us, composed for us, given to us, delivered into our care by a 'supernatural' dispensation." This is not an endorsement of the conceit that a universe of two hundred billion galaxies was designed solely for the benefit of the human race. It *does* mean that we are meant to be here.

4. *Life.* All living matter possesses a teleological organization that is totally lacking in everything that preceded it. Nothing in physics or chemistry can explain or even describe what makes this possible. The teleology inherent in life is nowhere more obvious than in genetic material. The genetic message in DNA is duplicated in replication and then copied from DNA to RNA in transcription. Then there is a translation in which the message from RNA is conveyed to the amino acids, and finally the amino acids are assembled into proteins. The cell's two fundamentally different structures of information management and chemical activity are coordinated by a universal genetic code. A code is a symbolic language which conveys semantic information. Cells appear to be capable of interpreting the *meaning* of the code. Living cells are information storing, processing and replicating systems. We cannot even talk about them without using teleological language and we have no plausible theory that would explain how such

obviously intelligent and goal directed living processes could arise solely from blind and purposeless forces. (See the section on Evolution, below.)

### 5. *Mind.*

The existence of conscious minds is the greatest of all the challenges to materialism. Theories which try to derive mind from a substance that is presumed to be unconscious and devoid of purposiveness usually commit the pleonastic fallacy, which is the attempt to overcome a qualitative difference by means of a large number of quantitative steps. In other words, we are told that when a certain threshold of complexity in a purposeless and unconscious system arises, a mysterious alchemy takes place, and the system rises to consciousness. We don't have even the outlines of a theory as to how that might happen, but we are assured that neuroscience will discover it any day now. Another kind of strategy is not to try to explain mind, but to deny that it exists at all. Perhaps nothing in the history of philosophy has been more absurd than the modern movement called "eliminativism," which solves the problems of consciousness and subjectivity by arguing that they don't really exist – that all such notions are merely the naïve myths of "folk psychology." I won't bother to debate this view; I will only say that it is a *reductio ad absurdum* of materialism. To be consistent, materialism must come to some conclusion such as this. But we know that consciousness and subjectivity exist. Therefore, materialism is false.

In any case, assuming that mind does, in fact exist:

A close look at the phenomenology of mental life effectively demonstrates that any attempt to explain it as nothing but brain activity cannot, *in principle*, succeed. Below are six reasons why I believe this to be true.

*a. The Hard Problem of Consciousness.* Nothing is more basic to mental life than what philosophers of mind call *qualia* – the private and personal impressions we have whenever we experience anything. No purely material description of brain events can account for this subjectivity, which is the essence of all mental life, and there is nothing in neuropsychology which, by itself, would suggest that neural events are correlated with conscious experience if we didn't already know, from that very experience, that they are. Australian philosopher of mind David Chalmers calls this the "hard problem of consciousness," and has spent his professional career holding his colleagues' feet to the fire when they attempt to evade the issue.

It is a basic philosophical error to equate the activity of the neural networks with mental phenomenon. There is an absolute abyss between the data of neuropsychology and the subjective experience of being a conscious self, which means that the idea that the latter is wholly reducible to the former can never be more than a conjecture. Electrochemical events *are not* mental events, even if, as is increasingly clear, they are inseparably associated with mental events; and no empirical inventory of such events will ever disclose to us either the content or the experiential quality of an idea, a hope, an intention, or any other mental event. To say that a given thought is one specific neural transaction is like suggesting that the idea of justice is nothing but some marks of ink on paper. It is no more plausible to say that the brain produces the mind than it is to say that the mind makes use of the brain; and in neither case can we imagine how this happens.

One way to appreciate why the hard problem is so hard is to consider the so-called “knowledge argument,” which is that conscious experience gives us knowledge which cannot *in principle* ever be reduced to scientific knowledge. There are complicated forms of this argument, but Bertrand Russell gives a very simple example of it: “It is obvious that a man who can see knows things which a blind man cannot know; but a blind man can know the whole of physics. Thus the knowledge which other men have and he has not is not a part of physics.” (*The Analysis of Matter*, 1954) In other words: even if a blind man knows all there is to know about the brain as a physical object, even if he has complete scientific knowledge, there is still something his knowledge leaves out, namely, what *it is like* for the seeing man to see. We can generalize from this example to conscious experience in general. There is no way around the conclusion that *conscious experience is something over and above brain activity*.

I am not denying the obvious fact that consciousness somehow correlates causally with the brain: stimulate the brain and consciousness changes; and a conscious exertion of the will can somehow move the body. Brains and minds are clearly related, but the “hard problem of consciousness” is that the relationship between the two is a mystery. But it is clear that conscious experience cannot be *reduced* to brain activity.

Where does that leave us? I believe that if mind and brain aren’t identical, then we have only two other alternatives. The first is “substance dualism,” the view, most famously championed by Descartes, that mind and brain are two fundamentally different substances. The second view is idealism – the idea that consciousness is the fundamental reality, and that what we experience as matter is somehow “made of” consciousness. I think we can rule out substance dualism at the outset, because it is inconceivable that two fundamentally different substances could ever interact with each other. That leaves us with only the third alternative, idealism. In summary, then, “matter” cannot produce mind. Dualism is ruled out by the interaction problem. The only coherent alternative is idealism. “Matter” derives from “mind.”

*b. Intentionality.* The concept of intentionality was introduced into modern philosophy by philosopher and psychologist Franz Brentano, and further developed by Edmund Husserl. The term comes from the Latin *intendere*, which means “to aim at,” “to direct toward,” or “reach for.” Brentano used the term to describe the ubiquitous truth that all mental activities are directed toward ends or meanings outside of themselves. The mind is not merely a passive *tabula rasa* which only receives experience and is shaped by it. Intentionality, Brentano wrote, is “the mark of the mental.” But physical reality, according to materialistic metaphysics, is fundamentally devoid of meaning or purpose. How can we derive the one from the other across such an immense qualitative divide?

Philosopher Alex Rosenberg, in his book *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality*, admits that intentionality and materialism are incompatible. As he puts it, one clump of matter cannot be “about” another clump of matter. As a self-described physicalist, who asserts that all mental phenomena are brain activity, he must then conclude that thoughts aren’t really “about” anything at all. Amazingly, he does just that. He seriously tries to convince his readers that their thoughts aren’t really “about” anything at all. This is a truly stunning example of the triumph of ideology over common sense. I do believe Rosenberg is correct when he argues that intentionality cannot exist in a purely material universe (as matter is usually understood). But the conclusion I draw is

the obvious one -- that, since intentionality self-evidently does exist, it must follow that materialism is false.

*c. Universals and Abstract Reasoning.* I first encountered the “problem of universals,” in my early twenties, and was stunned and amazed, because it seemed obvious that the existence of universals was by itself sufficient to show that no purely materialistic account of reality can be complete. Plato introduced universals into western philosophy two and a half thousand years ago, and to this day, the problem remains unsolved.

To understand the problem, imagine that I’m holding a red apple in my hand. In philosophical language, the apple is an *individual*, something which has a specifiable location in space and time. But what is *red*? Obviously, it has some kind of existence, but it doesn’t exist in the same way that individuals do, because since many apples are red, redness doesn’t exist in one place or time. When I eat the apple, that individual ceases to exist, but “red” is not affected. We can try to dispense with the mystery by saying that general nouns don’t describe anything which actually exists; they only refer to similarities. But what is “similarity”? It, too, is a universal because it doesn’t exist in only one place and time. Thus, if we try to eliminate universals, we fail, because any attempt to do so inevitably uses universals in the argument, thus assuming the very existence of what was supposed to be shown not to exist.

Universals are obviously not physical objects; but they aren’t merely “ideas” either (whatever ideas are). We don’t just invent them; in logic and mathematics, we discover them. And what we discover, purely through our own mental activities, somehow turns out to be the language of the laws of the universe. Abstract ideas, then, clearly have some kind of extra-mental existence. They “subsist, or have being” as Bertrand Russell put it in *The Problems of Philosophy*. But what does that mean? He doesn’t say.

Further problems arise when we consider how we use universals in our reasoning. David Bentley Hart explains, better than anyone I’ve read, the impossibility of reducing the reasoning process to exclusively material processes:

“To reason about something is to proceed from one premise or proposition or concept to another, in order ideally to arrive at some conclusion, and in a coherent sequence whose connections are determined by the semantic content of each of the steps taken—each individual logical syntagma of the argument, each clause or sentence or symbol. In a simple syllogism, for example, two premises in conjunction inevitably produce a conclusion determined by their logical content. “Every rose in my garden is red; the rose I am looking at now is in my garden; therefore, the rose I am looking at now is red.” But then the series of steps by which the mind arrives at the conclusion of a series of propositions simply cannot be identical with a series of brute events in the biochemistry of the brain. If the mechanical picture of nature is correct, after all, any sequence of physical causes and effects is determined entirely by the impersonal laws governing the material world. One neuronal event can cause another as a result of physical necessity, but certainly not as a result of logical necessity. And yet the necessary connection that exists between the addition of two numbers and the sum thereby yielded is one produced entirely by the conceptual content of the various terms of the equation, and not by any set of biochemical contingencies. Conversely, if the tenets of mechanistic materialism are sound, the mere semantic

content of a thought should not be able to affect the course of physical events in the cerebrum. Even if the long process of human evolution has produced a brain capable of reason, the brain cannot produce the actual contents of reasoning; the connections among the brain's neurons cannot generate the symbolic and conceptual connections that compose an act of consecutive logic, because the brain's neurons are related to one another organically and therefore interact physically, not conceptually. Clearly, then, there are mental events that cannot be reduced to mechanical electrochemical processes." (*The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss*)

*d. The Unity of Consciousness.* The physical realm is devoid of simple entities on the macroscopic level. Nature consists of compounded things, with extension in space and time. Consciousness, on the other hand, always arises as a single, unified presence, without extension or parts, subsisting in its own simplicity. It is in and by this unity that the incalculable complexity of the brain's processes, as well as the infinite diversity of the world perceived, are converted into the simple awareness of a single subject. But this simple unity which knows "I am" and which illumines the vast complexity of the world cannot have arisen from that diversity. (See *The Transcendental Nature of Awareness*, above). A living, embodied mind is obviously no incorporeal intellect, as in Cartesian dualism; nor can it plausibly be described as a mechanical function. Somehow, it exceeds material causality without being free of the conditions of corporeal life.

*e. Freedom of the Will.* To affirm the freedom of the will is to claim that we have real *options*, that the future is open, and that our decisions, our moral conflicts, our efforts, struggles, resolutions and commitments have real effects on the future, and are part of what determines it. No one denies that this is how we all experience our lives. Even those who believe that the experience of freedom is an illusion cannot actually behave as if they believe that to be true. To believe in determinism, then, is to commit ourselves to a doctrine which can never affect the actual conduct of our lives. It is also true, I think, that no account of free will is consistent with materialism, if matter is understood as described above, and this incompatibility is the fundamental reason that so many people see determinism as a plausible philosophical viewpoint. It would never have arisen otherwise, because it so radically flies in the face of our direct experience.

Materialism has no way of making a coherent model of free will. The human mind seems to be limited to two basic ideas about how events occur. This first is *determinism*, the idea that all events are caused by previous events. The second is *randomness*, the idea that some events are simply chaotic and have no explanation. Neither of these ideas fits our experience of free will. Obviously, we aren't thermostats – our actions aren't simply mechanical; but neither are they simply random. Our most direct and immediate experience is that we have free will, but we don't have, and perhaps cannot have, any model that could explain or even describe it.

We are faced with a contradiction that can only be resolved in one of two ways. Either we conclude that free will is real and that materialism is false, or that materialism is true, and that our direct, lived experience is somehow illusory. Which conclusion is more likely to be correct? To deny the reality of our lived experience on the grounds that it is inconsistent with our theories is to put the cart before the horse. Something is wrong when we find ourselves trying to edit reality to conform to our theories.



I conclude, then, that free will is a reality, and accept the consequence that materialism is an inadequate account of the world. The widespread modern belief in determinism strikes me as another example of the triumph of ideology over common sense.

*f. Mental causation:* If materialism is correct, then all mental causation should be “bottom-up,” and conscious events ought to be epiphenomenal. But this is not the case. In the placebo and nocebo effects, for instance, measurable changes in brain chemistry are produced by *expectations* and *beliefs*; a reminder that causation is also “top-down.” Depression can sometimes be successfully treated by using anti-depressant medication, an example of bottom-up causation. But it can also sometimes be successfully treated by using cognitive therapy, in which patients examine their habitual cognitive distortions and work to disconfirm pathogenic beliefs; a clear example of top-down causation. Both forms of treatment can produce measurable changes in brain chemistry.

In daily life, the brain regularly alters the mind and the mind regularly alters the brain; “mind” and “brain” don’t seem to be distinct entities, but a mysterious and seamless whole. Somehow, it all fits together; somehow being and consciousness form one reality. These facts of experience point away from materialism, but they seem also to point away from any form of dualism as well, and toward some kind of monism. “Mind” and “matter” are so seamlessly connected that both must be expressions of a single reality which is able to manifest them both.

### *The Fallacy of Reductionism*

There can be no form of self-consistent metaphysical materialism that isn’t reductionistic. Materialism is, after all, the view that matter/energy is all that exists, that every compound entity in the universe is nothing but matter and energy, and ought, therefore, to be explainable in material terms. But even within the practice of science, reductionism has been found, again and again, to be an inadequate model. Psychology is not being reduced to biology, biology is not being reduced to chemistry, and chemistry isn’t being reduced to physics. Moreover, many scientific principles are resistant to reductionism. The principle of natural selection, for instance, is simply meaningless at the atomic level. But if materialistic reductionism is correct, then all questions we could possibly ask should ultimately be answerable using only the laws of physics. So the question “What is the meaning of Hamlet?” should be reducible to some question about the movements of matter and energy. This is the kind of absurdity we come to if we believe that reality consists only of “atoms and the void.”

### *What is Matter?*

One of the reasons that materialism appears, superficially, to be a plausible philosophy is that we feel so familiar with matter that we reflexively assume that we know what it is. Matter is the “stuff” that is all around us. The philosophical term is “substance,” which means exactly the same thing but sounds more respectable. The notion of substance apparently arose from our experience of pulling and pushing things. I take it for granted, when I try to push something and feel it resist, that the substance of my hands is in contact with the substance of what I’m trying to push. But physics tells us that what is really happening is that the electrons in my hands and the

electrons in the object are repelling each other. No “things” are ever actually in contact with each other at all. (This is why Alan Watts described the entire phenomenal universe as “a vast electromagnetic mirage.”) In modern physics, the commonsense concept of substance nowhere appears.

There was a time when philosophers and scientists believed that they knew what matter is. For Descartes, it was just that which has “extension” – length, breadth, and depth – and geometry was sufficient to give a complete account of it. The “mechanical philosophy” – the idea that the universe is a vast, complex machine – was based on this intuitive physics, in which bodies persisted in fixed time and space, and moved only as a result of direct contact with other bodies. Locke summed up the intuitive view of the world in this way “...body, as far as we can conceive, being able only to strike and affect body, and motion, according to the utmost reach of our ideas, being able to produce nothing but motion.” Descartes, Hobbes, and Locke all separated matter into its primary, measurable, qualities; and secondary qualities, such as color, which didn’t inhere in matter, but was created by perception. According to Newton, the universal properties of matter were “extension, hardness, impenetrability, mobility, and inertia.” The mechanical model of the world was based on this picture of matter. “The mechanical philosophy,” writes Noam Chomsky, “aimed to dispense with forms flitting through the air, sympathies and antipathies, and other occult ideas, and to keep what is firmly grounded in common-sense understanding and intelligible to it.” (*What Kind of Creatures Are We?* P. 92.)

But this neat picture began to fall apart almost as soon as it was proposed. It is often said that twentieth century physics overthrew the mechanistic model, but in fact, Newton did it, and this fact was recognized by his contemporaries. When he introduced the concept of action-at-a-distance in his theory of gravity, his critics protested that he was re-introducing the banished occult entities into science. Newton acknowledged this concern, and in fact agreed with it. Action-at-a-distance, he wrote “is so great an Absurdity, that I believe no Man who has a competent Faculty of Thinking, can ever fall into it.” But the theory worked so well in predicting motion that, in time, science came to accept the real existence of a “force” of gravity. Once we have a name for something, it is easy to make the mistake of thinking that we know what it is, but in fact, the idea of a non-material something-or-other which apparently emanates from objects to pull them toward each other, is a complete violation of the common-sense that was supposed to be the foundation of science.

But even with mysterious and invisible forces acting between objects, it still seemed reasonable to expect that we might understand the physical world by creating a comprehensible picture of it.



Sir Arthur Eddington

Sir Arthur Eddington: “It was the boast of the Victorian physicist that he would not claim to understand a thing until he could make a model of it; and by a model he meant something constructed of levers, geared wheels, squirts, or other appliances familiar to an engineer. Nature in building the universe was supposed to be dependent on just the same kind of resources as any human mechanic; and when the physicist sought an explanation of phenomena his ear was straining to catch the hum of machinery. The man who could make gravitation out of cog-wheels would have been a hero in the Victorian age.” (This and all quotations from Eddington below come from *The Nature of the Physical World*, 1928.)

In the twentieth century, of course, General Relativity replaced Newton’s idea that objects tug at each other at a distance with the concept of a “space-time continuum” which is bent and curved by mass. So now, instead of a “force” of gravity we have a space which is some kind of elastic medium that expands and bends. But this idea is obviously also in complete violation of our commonsense notion of what space is. Some of Einstein’s contemporaries, as happened to Newton before him, complained that he was positing an absurdity when he proposed that space is expanding. “What could it be expanding into if not more space?” they asked. From the standpoint of common-sense, that question is unanswerable. So much the worse for common-sense. The human mind can’t picture expanding space, but the evidence from astrophysics consistently confirms General Relativity.

Relativity and quantum physics were the final death-blow to the mechanical philosophy, as well as to the expectation that the universe could be explained in terms of pictures and concepts which could be consistent with common-sense. Today we have to be content with mathematical explanations which can’t be pictured. But even the mathematical symbols in physics can no longer always be comprehended, i.e., reduced to arithmetic. “Nowadays we do not encourage the engineer to build the world for us out of his material, but we turn to the mathematician to build it out of his material. Doubtless the mathematician is a loftier being than the engineer, but perhaps

even he ought not to be entrusted with the Creation unreservedly. We are dealing in physics with a symbolic world, and we can scarcely avoid employing the mathematician who is a professional wielder of symbols; but he must rise to the full opportunities of the responsible task entrusted to him and not indulge too freely in his own bias for symbols with an arithmetical interpretation. If we are to discern controlling laws of Nature not dictated by the mind it would seem necessary to escape as far as possible from the cut-and-dried framework into which the mind is so ready to force everything that it experiences.” (Eddington, Chapter 10).

Moreover, in modern physics, the solid “stuff” it once thought it was studying has disappeared entirely and has been replaced by symbols. Eddington again: “What we are dragging to light as the basis of all phenomena is a scheme of symbols connected by mathematical equations. That is what physical reality boils down to when probed by the methods which a physicist can apply. A skeleton scheme of symbols proclaims its own hollowness.” Physics has surrendered all hope of ever understanding what matter is “in itself.” “In science we study the linkage of pointer readings with pointer readings. The terms link together in endless cycle with the same inscrutable nature running through the whole.”

Bertrand Russell comes to the same conclusion. “It is not always realised how exceedingly abstract is the information that theoretical physics has to give. It lays down certain fundamental equations which enable it to deal with the logical structure of events, while leaving it completely unknown what is the intrinsic character of the events that have the structure.... All that physics gives us is certain equations giving abstract properties of their changes. But as to what it is that changes, and what it changes from and to – as to this, physics is silent.” (Bertrand Russell, *My Philosophical Development*).

But if all we can really know of matter is a collection of equations giving abstract properties, then what warrant do we have for assuming *a priori* that “matter: isn’t “mental?” Eddington argues:

“The Victorian physicist felt that he knew just what he was talking about when he used such terms as matter and atoms. Atoms were tiny billiard balls, a crisp statement that was supposed to tell you all about their nature in a way which could never be achieved for transcendental things like consciousness, beauty or humor. But now we realize that science has nothing to say as to the intrinsic nature of the atom. The physical atom is, like everything else in physics, a schedule of pointer readings. The schedule is, we agree, attached to some unknown background. Why not then attach it to something of spiritual nature of which a prominent characteristic is thought. It seems rather silly to prefer to attach it to something of a so-called “concrete” nature inconsistent with thought, and then to wonder where thought comes from.” He offers his own bold alternative, “To put the conclusion crudely, the stuff of the world is mind stuff.” As if to remind us that naming something does not make it any less mysterious, he then adds this hilarious qualification: “...by “mind” I do not here exactly mean mind and by “stuff” I do not at all mean stuff.” So there you have it. With equal humor, he also sums up what quantum physics reveals about the subatomic world as follows: “Something unknown is doing we don’t know what.”

*The Quantum Measurement Problem*

*“I think that modern physics has definitely decided in favor of Plato. In fact the smallest units of matter are not physical objects in the ordinary sense; they are forms, ideas which can be expressed unambiguously only in mathematical language.”*

— Werner Heisenberg

There is no mystery in science more fascinating or mind-bending than the question of how to interpret the strange findings of quantum physics. Unfortunately, in recent decades, quantum physics has been enlisted in support of every conceivable kind of New Age nonsense. Quantum physics proves Buddhism. It proves God. It proves that you can create any reality you want. There is “quantum” psychology and “quantum” healing. Add the word “quantum” to any notion and you can make it sound scientific to the gullible. I don’t want to join that chorus, and so I have hesitated to wade into these waters. What convinced me to do it was reading *Quantum Enigma, Physics Encounters Consciousness*, by Bruce Rosenblum and Fred Kuttner, two physicists at the University of California at Santa Cruz. They teach classes in which they outline for laypersons the “undisputed facts” of physics and then discuss the various philosophical explanations that have been proposed to explain them. In their view, “the skeleton in the closet” of modern physics is the encounter of physics with consciousness. The encounter is very real, they write, but how to interpret its meaning is not something that physics alone can determine, because the question is metaphysical, not scientific. In that area, they argue, laypersons who are armed with a basic understanding of the findings can join the debate.

I’m also encouraged because some of the conclusions which seem reasonable to me were also endorsed by some of the greatest physicists in the world, such as Sir James Jeans, and Sir Arthur Eddington. Eddington’s book, *The Nature of the Physical World*, contains one of the most lucid explanations of relativity and quantum mechanics ever addressed to a lay audience, and also includes his famous defense of mysticism. Eddington is the most philosophically sophisticated physicist I’ve read, and I believe his conclusions merit serious attention.

So, what follows is a brief overview of the quantum measurement problem, and a discussion of what I believe are the implications.

In the famous double-slit experiments, light behaves as a wave or as a particle, depending on how the experiment is designed; and this paradoxical wave/particle duality has also been found in neutrons, electrons, atoms, and even some larger molecules. Stranger still, until a measurement is actually made, all possible outcomes exist as “superpositions,” or waves of probability. The wave only “collapses” into a definite experimental outcome when a measurement is made. In other words, measuring creates a reality which didn’t exist before. The conclusion seems to be that conscious observation participates in the creation of the reality that it observes.

Critics of this conclusion have argued that consciousness isn’t necessary to collapse the wave function; any measuring device – a Geiger counter, for instance – can do the trick. But physicist Mauritus Renninger proposed thought experiments which seem to refute this idea. Suppose you set up an experiment in which a photon must go down one of two paths, and set up a measuring device along one of the paths to detect if the photon travels down it. The absence of the photon on that path will collapse the wave function every bit as much as if the photon had been found. In

the former outcome, nothing is actually measured and only an absence is observed, indicating that it is *conscious observation*, and not measurement, which collapses the wave function.

Even more mind-boggling are the “delayed choice” experiments, which seem to show that an observation made in the present can *create the past*. Physicist John Wheeler, (who, among other notable accomplishments, gave black holes their name) proposed a double-slit experiment with a twist. In this variation, sensors are set up to observe photons going through the slits, but a barrier is also set up which prevents the sensors from “seeing” the photons or the slits. If you leave the barriers up, the photons seem to go through both slits simultaneously and create a wave interference pattern. If you lower the barrier, the sensors measure the photons, which then go through one slit or the other as distinct particles. But suppose you wait and lower the barrier just *after* the photons go through the slits. In that case, the sensors then observe the photons traveling definite paths, and having come through one slit or the other. This means that the decision to lower the barrier determines what the photons did *before the barrier was lowered*. What happened in the past is determined by a decision in the present.

Wheeler also proposed a thought experiment which shows that the same phenomenon can be observed on a galactic level. Imagine a distant quasar that is emitting light. Between it and Earth are two large galaxies, whose gravity bends the light as it travels toward us. We then have an immense version of the double-slit experiments, in which the quasar is the light source, and the galaxies substitute for the slits. Astronomers on Earth could set up telescopes to observe the photons as they were deflected by the galaxies, in which case they would see that each photon had gone through one galaxy or the other. Alternatively, they could set up mirrors in such a way that photons deflected by the galaxies wouldn’t be observed, but would instead hit a piece of film, producing the alternating light and dark bands characteristic of wave interference patterns, even if the quasar was so distant that light could only hit the film one photon at a time. The wave patterns would show that the light had somehow gone through both galaxies simultaneously, even though they were light-years apart.

This means that the astronomer’s contemporary decisions determined which routes the photons took *billions of years ago*. That is, observers on Earth can determine what happened billions of years earlier by choosing what kind of observations they want to make today. They can do this, not because they have the power to reach into the past, but because a wave function, even the part of it in the distant past, does not collapse until an observation is made. The history of the photons is only determined at the point when it is known by observers. The conclusion seems inescapable: no definite past exists without conscious observers to make measurements in the present.

Another example of what is often and justifiably called *quantum weirdness* is *non-locality*. Multiple experiments confirm that separate particles can influence each other instantaneously over great distances — as if they have some kind of ESP. For instance, when born-together pairs of photons are created in a special kind of crystal, observing one member instantly influences the behavior the other — even if they are separated by enormous distances. They are intimately linked in a manner suggesting there’s no space between them, and no time influencing their behavior. Einstein called non-locality “spooky action at a distance,” and, to the end of his life, he

couldn't accept that it could actually be happening. But so far, all the experimental evidence indicates that it is.

In 1935, Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger proposed a now-famous thought experiment intended to show how bizarre the implications of the prevailing understanding of quantum physics were. He proposed a scenario with a cat in a sealed box, wherein the cat's life or death depended on the state of a radioactive atom, whether it had decayed and emitted radiation or not. According to Schrödinger, the Copenhagen interpretation implies that *the cat remains both alive and dead* until the box is opened. Schrödinger didn't want to promote the idea of dead-and-alive cats as a serious possibility; his purpose was to illustrate the absurdity of the existing view of quantum mechanics. However, since his time, other interpretations of the mathematics of quantum mechanics have been advanced by physicists, some of which regard the "alive and dead" cat superposition as quite real. Intended as a critique of the Copenhagen interpretation (the prevailing orthodoxy in 1935), the "Schrödinger's cat" thought experiment remains a defining touchstone for modern interpretations of quantum mechanics. Physicists often use the way each interpretation deals with Schrödinger's cat as a way of illustrating and comparing the particular features, strengths, and weaknesses of each interpretation.

These are some of the bizarre aspects of modern physics which collectively constitute the "quantum measurement problem." The 'problem' here is not the measurements; the problem is how to interpret their *meaning*. In what kind of universe can these experimental results arise? Some of the greatest physicists have described these findings as impossible to intuit. How is it that quantum physics can be so impervious to metaphor, visualization, and language?

Observer-created reality certainly does suggest that the universe is mental in nature. When quantum physics first appeared in 1925, both Sir James Jeans and Sir Arthur Eddington understood this implication immediately. Jeans wrote: "the stream of knowledge is heading towards a non-mechanical reality; the Universe begins to look more like a great thought than like a great machine. Mind no longer appears to be an accidental intruder into the realm of matter... we ought rather hail it as the creator and governor of the realm of matter." In an address to the British Association in 1934, he said, "I incline to the idealistic theory that consciousness is fundamental, and that the material universe is derivative from consciousness, not consciousness from the material universe... In general the universe seems to me to be nearer to a great thought than to a great machine. It may well be, it seems to me, that each individual consciousness ought to be compared to a brain-cell in a universal mind.

"What remains is in any case very different from the full-blooded matter and the forbidding materialism of the Victorian scientist. His objective and material universe is proved to consist of little more than constructs of our own minds. To this extent, then, modern physics has moved in the direction of philosophic idealism. Mind and matter, if not proved to be of similar nature, are at least found to be ingredients of one single system. There is no longer room for the kind of dualism which has haunted philosophy since the days of Descartes."

And Eddington, in *The Nature of the Physical World*, wrote: "Recognizing that the physical world is entirely abstract and without "actuality" apart from its linkage to consciousness, we restore consciousness to the fundamental position instead of representing it as an inessential

complication occasionally found in the midst of inorganic nature at a late stage of evolutionary history.”

Albert Einstein was adamantly skeptical about quantum physics. As a philosophical realist, the great scientist regarded it as axiomatic that the act of measurement could not create what it measured. He wrote “I think that a particle must have a separate reality independent of the measurements. That is, an electron has spin, location, and so forth even when it is not being measured. I like to think the moon is there even if I am not looking at it.” In 1927, at the Solvay conference, he turned thumbs-down on the Copenhagen interpretation of the newly-minted theory. Niels Bohr, the Copenhagen interpretation’s chief architect, rose to its defense, and for the rest of their lives, the two debated the issue as friendly adversaries.

There is no ambiguity about who won the debate. Bohr soundly defeated every objection Einstein raised, and, when physicists discovered how to bring Einstein’s thought experiments into the laboratory, his predictions were shown to be wrong. Realism, the idea of a world which “really exists” “out there” totally collapses in quantum mechanics; moreover, consciousness appears in some way to be fundamental to the structure of the world.

Realism, however, will not die with a whimper; it is too ingrained in the human mind to disappear without a fight. One interpretation of quantum physics which saves realism is Hugh Everett’s “many-worlds interpretation.” In this account, all possible alternate histories are realized along with the one result we get when we make a measurement. The way this happens is that, for every quantum possibility, a new universe springs into being in which that possibility is realized. Everything that could happen does happen somewhere. This view does eliminate observer-created reality, but at what a cost! We must posit an infinity of unobservable parallel universes simply to explain the behavior of a single electron – and the interpretation brings us no closer to understanding what an electron is than we were before. This must be the least parsimonious scientific theory (if it can be called that) in human history.

Yet this view is taken quite seriously by a large number of mainstream physicists, including the great Stephen Hawking. In a conversation with the American author Timothy Ferris in 1983, Hawking said “I regard it [the many worlds interpretation] as self-evidently correct.” Ferris responded “Yet some don’t find it evident to *themselves*.” Hawking replied, “Yeah, well, there are some people who spend an awful lot of time talking about the interpretation of quantum mechanics. My attitude — I would paraphrase Goering -- is that when I hear of Schrodinger’s cat, I reach for my gun.” I wonder whether he has ever found another occasion to paraphrase a Nazi war criminal on any other subject. This shows with what passion so many otherwise brilliant minds cling to realism.

One contemporary American physicist who almost gleefully grabs the bull by the horns and accepts fully the implications of quantum physics, is Richard Conn Henry. He is a Professor in the Henry A. Rowland Department of Physics and Astronomy at Johns Hopkins University. He taught physics for forty years and was an avowed atheist before reflecting on the quantum measurement problem changed his mind. He published a short article in *Nature* in July, 2005 titled “The Mental Universe,” in which he asserts that the universe is purely mental in nature. He writes “We have no idea what this mental nature implies, but — the great thing is — it is true.



Beyond the acquisition of this perception, physics can no longer help. You may descend into solipsism, expand to deism, or something else if you can justify it — just don't ask physics for help. There is another benefit of seeing the world as quantum mechanical: someone who has learned to accept that nothing exists but observations is far ahead of peers who stumble through physics hoping to find out 'what things are'. If we can ...get people believing the truth, they will find physics a breeze. The Universe is immaterial — mental and spiritual. Live, and enjoy. “

Elsewhere he asks, “Why do people cling with such ferocity to belief in a mind-independent reality? It is surely because if there is no such reality, then ultimately (as far as we can know) mind alone exists. And if mind is not a product of real matter, but rather is the creator of *the illusion of material reality* (which has, in fact, despite the materialists, been *known* to be the case, since the discovery of quantum mechanics in 1925), then a theistic view of our existence becomes the only rational alternative to solipsism.” He reports that he was led to belief in God entirely through pondering the implications of physics.

Whether or not we go the whole distance with Henry, it is surely significant that when mainstream scientists are discussing such possibilities as an infinitude of universes, live/dead cats, the unreality of the material world, solipsism, etc., then something very important is up. The metaphysical implications of quantum physics are still in dispute, but one thing is certain — they are vastly greater than those of any previous scientific breakthrough. I believe that, at a minimum, they force us to conclude that if consciousness can force reality to assume a specific form, or if it can create a definite past simply through observation, then it simply cannot be an epiphenomenon of any material system. I conclude that quantum mechanics is inconsistent with any form of materialism.

### *A Footnote on Evolution*

*Physico-chemical reductionism in biology is the orthodox view, and any resistance to it is regarded as not only scientifically but politically incorrect. But for a long time I have found the materialist account of how we and our fellow organisms came to exist hard to believe, including the standard version of how the evolutionary process works. The more details we learn about the chemical basis of life and the intricacy of the genetic code, the more unbelievable the standard historical account becomes. — Thomas Nagel, Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*

The *rational* debate over evolution was settled long ago. All living beings on Earth are descended from a common ancestor, and all the complex life forms alive today have evolved from simpler forms. It is a wondrous fact that, when conditions are right, the stuff of the world begins to organize itself spontaneously into living organisms. And this is probably going on throughout the universe -- nature never seems to make just one of anything. In a universe of two trillion galaxies (the latest estimate as of September, 2017) there must be hundreds of trillions of worlds that are teeming with life, and every possible form of living being must somewhere be actualized.

The religious cultural wars over evolution are based on the notion that evolution is in conflict with religion; that it eliminates, not only God, but any possibility of meaning or purpose in the

world. *Creation Science* is an attempt to deny the reality of the whole process of evolution by means of arguments so sophomoric that no reasonable person can take them seriously. To attempt to pass this off as *science* is to perpetrate a fraud.

*Intelligent Design*, which is often and erroneously conflated with Creation Science, doesn't deny the facts of evolution, but argues that there are *irreducible complexities* in even the simplest living systems which could not have arisen through chance alone. Evolution, so the argument goes, is evidence *for* the existence of an intelligent Designer. None of this is quite as foolish as some would have us believe. The distinguished modern philosopher, Thomas Nagel (who is a lifelong atheist), in his controversial book *Mind and Cosmos*, acknowledged as much, and has had to endure howls of derision in response.

But Intelligent Design is philosophy, not science. Two intelligent people can look at the same biological system – say, a DNA molecule -- and see very different things. Most biologists see a system which arose through random mutations, although a few see it as an obvious expression of the intelligence of nature. I'm with the latter group, but what we see reflects our metaphysical presuppositions far more than most of us realize. Through the fossil record we "see" complex living forms emerging over time – we don't "see" this process occurring either randomly or intelligently. I doubt that there are any conceivable scientific measurements or experiments which could really settle the issue. At least, Intelligent Design has not, as yet, proposed any. Maybe someday biology will find, as Nagel suggests, that there are teleological laws in nature. But, as yet, his suggestion remains a mere hope. No one has even the slightest idea of what a teleological law would look like. For now, at least, the debate here is essentially about how we interpret the findings of biology, not about biology itself.

My issue with Intelligent Design is that it seems to posit the God of Deism – an Intelligence outside of nature which molds the mindless clay of the world to its own ends. This is a dualistic view which posits a material world and a guiding hand that shapes it. It assumes that matter is stupid, that living organisms are essentially machines and that God is separate from the world. It reduces God to being a tinkerer.

But the materialistic account of evolution has problems of its own. Even the simplest of living beings are purpose-driven creatures. How do trillions of supposedly purposeless atoms, each responding only to local influences, somehow organize themselves into complex systems which clearly behave purposefully? Materialists are required to see purposiveness as a kind of illusion. Since it is assumed *a priori* that there are no final causes in nature, then randomness is the only explanatory alternative. That conclusion is required, in other words, not by scientific evidence, but by metaphysical presuppositions. A materialist *must* say, for instance, "Yes, the eye certainly looks as if it is *for* sight, but that is an illusion, because matter has no purposes. The eye arose through a series of random mutations, and survived because sight had a survival advantage."

In actual practice, biologists find teleological thinking indispensable in their work. Darwinian philosopher Michael Ruse writes "We treat organisms – the parts at least – as if they were manufactured, and then try to work out their functions. End-directed thinking – teleological thinking – is appropriate in biology because, and only because, organisms seem as if they were manufactured, as if they had been created by an intelligence and put to work." It really can't be

otherwise. It isn't possible to make sense of, say, intracellular communication without the idea that the messengers and their recipients are engaged in the intentional behavior of transmitting information – because it is fairly obvious that, in fact, that is what they *are* doing.

Biologists generally grant that organisms behave “as if” they are designed, but often add that the idea of design is, of course, just a “metaphor.” A metaphor for what? Only loyalty to the materialistic world view makes it necessary to say “as if,” when the evidence clearly suggests “is.” Eyes are “for” seeing, wings are “for” flying, legs are “for” walking.

Do we really have a complete account of what drives evolution? I don't believe that the Darwinian account can be a complete explanation. Natural selection, the mechanism which is supposed to drive the whole process, has a purely negative function. It eliminates those organisms which aren't “fit” for survival. So far so good. There is no doubt that natural selection does favor the survival of the fittest. But the all-important question is “How do all these amazing adaptations which *are* selected for survival arise in the first place?” The basic Darwinian theory answers this question with two words – “chance variation.” Surely random mutations are expected to do way too much work to account for the amazing ingenuity and complexity of life. On the materialistic account, no other explanation could ever be given. But for those of us who believe that the matter of Newtonian physics is, literally, a figment of the imagination, and that the stuff of the world is “mind stuff,” there is no *a priori* reason to assume that “matter” is incapable of spontaneously organizing itself intelligently and purposefully. That is certainly what it *seems* to be doing.

But again, this doesn't mean that we need to posit the “guiding hand” of a Designer separate from matter to mold it like clay into sentient beings. In panentheism, the “designer” and the “designed” are one. We also don't need to posit any kind of *elan vital* to explain life. Vitalism was based on the metaphysical assumption that something had to be added to matter to bring it to life. When you already believe that, in some mysterious sense, the entire universe is alive, the idea of a vital force to account for life becomes superfluous.

I don't think that evolution itself is in any way hostile to a spiritual understanding of life; it is only the materialistic account of the process that rules out spirituality. Once we dispense with that explanation, the vast spectacle of evolution shows itself as a fathomless source of wonder and awe. We can view it as a process of *unfolding*, in which the infinite Being reveals, first, the most superficial aspects of the Great Chain of Being, and the deeper aspects incarnate over time.

But does evolution have an overall direction or purpose? When the theory first emerged, sects such as the Theosophists combined the theory with nineteenth century ideas of progress and Eastern notions of reincarnation to produce a worldview in which all beings are evolving through lifetime after lifetime to grow closer and closer to union with God. The physical record of evolution, in this view, is the outward, material sign of this process. In this view, the universe is, in a sense, prejudiced in our favor. In every lifetime it presents us with just the tests and challenges we need in order to progress spiritually. Evolution is rigged. The universe is on our side. It unfolds exactly in the way it needs to in order for us all to become enlightened. This is a world view which appeals to many people.

It is also a view which differs radically from traditional Hindu and Buddhist ideas about rebirth. In those religions, the universe has no overall direction. It is, instead, going around in circles, manifesting endless cycles of creation and dissolution. The law of karma in these religions is not, as we often think in the West, a law of justice; it is an impersonal law of cause and effect. Like produces like. We reap what we sow. In Buddhism, an understanding of the law of karma can be used to bring ourselves closer to Nibbana, but that is a matter of personal choice. The universe as a whole is not going in any preordained direction.

All the evidence that I can see is more consistent with the latter than the former view. Evolution seems to be going in every direction at once, that is, in no direction whatsoever. The idea that human beings are the summit and goal of the whole process strikes me as hopelessly parochial. We are part of the dance, and yes, we are meant to be here, but we are not the sole purpose of creation. It seems to me that the only metaphysical idea with which the facts of evolution are consistent is the idea that the phenomenal world is *lila*, the divine play of consciousness. The almost infinite multiplicity of living forms is the divine consciousness enjoying itself in every possible variety. Evolution is the dance of life. What is the meaning of dance? Well, what is the meaning of ‘hallelujah’? The meaning of existence is never in the future, and never in time at all. It is found only in and as the joy that manifests as the present moment.

### *Conclusions*

As I wrote in the overview, I believe that materialism is a completely implausible metaphysical doctrine, despite its popularity. It requires us to imagine, either that the finite contingencies of the universe are really somehow infinite and non-contingent, or that the universe simply popped into existence, for no reason, out of nothing. It requires us to believe that the amazing fine-tuning of the laws of nature is just a fortuitous accident. It requires us to believe that living, conscious and purposeful beings can somehow arise from elements which are themselves unconscious, random, and unable to experience anything. It requires considerable faith – in what Karl Popper called *promissory materialism* – in order to believe that the basic activities of the mind, such as awareness, intentionality and abstract reasoning, will, any day now, be shown to be reducible to matter in motion.

In what ought to be its own domain, the science of physics, materialism confronts a reality which seems to be brought into existence by the very consciousness which was supposed to be an epiphenomenon of matter. The reductionist project of the last four centuries now seems like a long shaggy dog story which finally meandered to its punch line in 1925 – mind reduced to brain; brain to biology; biology to chemistry; chemistry to physics; and physics to – mind.

Materialism is the doctrine that the world is made out of whatever it is that physics studies. Or, to evoke Eddington again, it is the metaphysical view that the substance of reality is something unknown doing we don’t know what. If it’s put that way, there’s not much of “substance” left to debate. It is often believed that, when it comes to “the ghost in the machine” as Gilbert Ryle derisively characterized Cartesian dualism, science has dispensed with the ghost. In fact, as Noam Chomsky quips, physics has dispensed with the machine. (*What Kind of Creatures Are We?* p. 98)

In the light of modern physics we can now say with confidence that the matter of intuitive physics – this solid “stuff” which occupies definite locations and persists through uniformly flowing time – does not exist. The “material world” that we have believed in is parochial – it’s a kind of display – a model, a creation of the brain/mind, a useful fiction that works well enough in our own neighborhood, but it breaks down as soon as we try to use this model to understand the domains of the very large or the very small. When physics investigates those other domains, it comes upon realities that we can neither imagine nor picture, such as curved space, relative time, non-locality, particle-wave duality, and so on.

We have come to appreciate the limitations of the human brain. It didn’t evolve for the purpose of dispassionately comprehending the “real world,” but for aiding us in the business of survival. The rough and ready approximations of things that it displays are constructs that were adequate enough to make us the dominant species on the planet; but the more we try to use them to *understand* the world, the more we are misled.

When the Western world fell into the delusion of scientism, and began to conflate the methodological limits of scientific method with the sole criteria for establishing truth, we inevitably imagined that this “matter” with which we thought we were so familiar consisted only of its measurable characteristics – and then we created endless philosophical troubles for ourselves when we tried to derive the world we actually live in using only this imagined stuff. By denying that materialism is true I am only asserting the rather obvious fact that in the world of our lived experience there are many things of great importance to us which cannot be subjected to quantification or measurement. They are not “material” as we have traditionally defined matter.

Once we grasp that the matter of common-sense is a fiction, and that all we can know of this stuff is “a schedule of pointer readings,” then the many philosophical perplexities that arise when we try to derive “mind” from “matter” or try to explain how mind and matter, as two distinct substances, can interact with one another, all disappear. If we cannot know what “matter” is, then we cannot dogmatically set any limits on what it can do. We can’t conclude that it is unconscious or that it can’t think. We do know that consciousness is somehow intimately involved in the outcome of quantum experiments; and it is apparent that brain and mind are intimately intertwined with each other, even though we can’t imagine how. I conclude that the stuff of the world is one “substance”, sometimes appearing to us as matter and sometimes as mind. In the case of our brains, the stuff of the world seems to jut out into the physical world as it were; but most of what constitutes our minds is not visible.

If we admit that Eddington’s “inscrutable nature” is somehow capable of manifesting consciousness, of having hopes and dreams and beliefs – and we have to if we are going to make this “whatever it is” the basis of existence – then we effectively obliterate any meaningful distinction between “matter” and “spirit.” When I follow the logic of materialism consistently I find, as Eddington did, that it loops around and lands me right back in something more like idealism. It can hardly be otherwise. The facts of experience suggest that the metaphysical order of things is exactly the opposite of what materialism proposes. Something at least analogous to human consciousness lies at the ontological root of all that exists. I return to the conclusion

which mystical experience discloses: that the nature of the “stuff of the world” is spiritual, and that both “mind” and “matter” are expressions or manifestations of spirit.

But what is spirit? This question reminds me of Alan Watts’ story of how he explained God to his children. He defined God to them as “what is on the inside of everything.” His children went through the house, opening the refrigerator, opening bags, looking for the God that was supposed to be inside. Watts pointed out that whenever you open something, you don’t see anything that is *inside* – all you do is uncover a new surface. It soon became apparent to his children that the senses can never show them what is “inside” of anything – the only inside they can ever know is what their awareness discloses is within themselves.

Spirit cannot be directly detected by the senses, nor can the mind construct any model of it. Yet, the heart can know spirit intimately, because, when we take the time to look within, it is evident that spirit is what we *are*.

It might be asked at this point “What difference does any of this make?” I think it does make a big difference in the way we experience ourselves and the world. The materialist world-view entails the belief that the universe outside of ourselves is fundamentally alien to us – blind, purposeless, featureless and dead. Somehow, completely by accident, we have come into this world, but in such a world we will always be strangers in a strange land. In fact, however, we don’t come into this world, we emerge from it. As Alan Watts liked to put it, just as an apple tree “apples,” the universe “peoples.” We are not intruders or strangers here; our nature and the nature of the universe are continuous.

On a bright spring day I stand on a hill overlooking the residential meditation hall at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, where I’ve just spent a week on retreat. Having practiced mindfulness for seven days my mind is finally still; the doors of my heart are open, and the cool spring breeze seems to be wafting through it. Then, in an instant it is here – the mysterious Presence that lifts me up and out of myself – the spirit that flows through me, through the hawks flying overhead, through the warm sunlight and the grasses waving on the hills. Now I remember that I belong here, that this world is my home. This joy that I feel is no mere sentimentality, it is an opening into the timeless bliss of being. We are all made of this gladness.

## Alternatives to Materialism

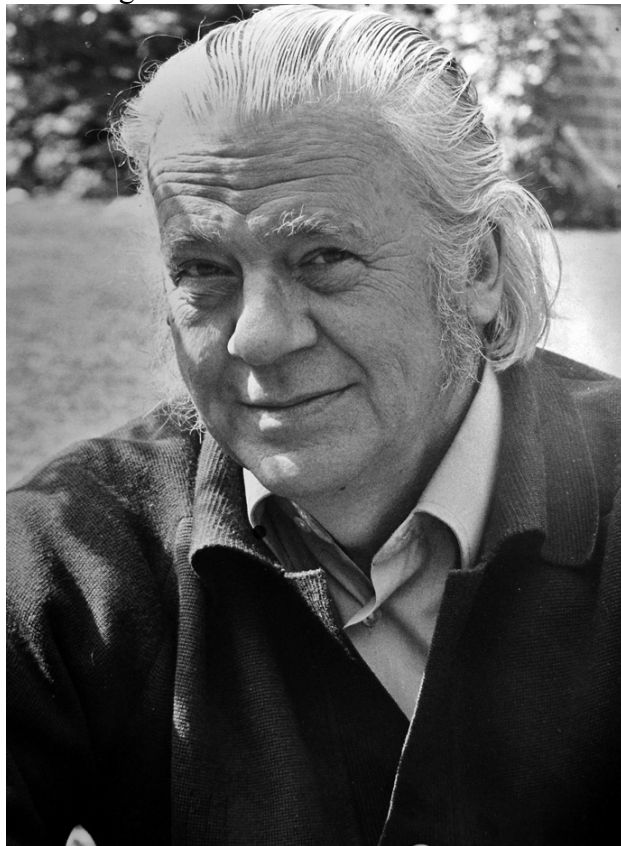
### *The Great Chain of Being*

*In Western philosophical tradition...neither Platonists, nor Aristotelians, nor Stoics, nor any of the Christian metaphysicians of late antiquity or the Middle Ages could have conceived of matter as something independent of “spirit,” or of spirit as something simply superadded to matter in living beings. Certainly none of them thought of either the body or the cosmos as a machine merely organized by a rational force from beyond itself. Rather, they saw matter as being already informed by indwelling rational causes, and thus open to – and in fact directed toward – mind. Nor did Platonists or Aristotelians or Christians conceive of spirit as being immaterial in a purely privative sense....If anything, they understood spirit as being more substantial, more actual, more “supereminently” real than matter, and in fact being the pervasive reality in which*

*matter had to participate in order to be anything at all....The material order, is only, it was assumed, an ontologically diminished or constricted effect of the fuller actuality of the spiritual order. And that is why it is nearly impossible to find an ancient or medieval school of thought whose concept of the relation of soul and body was anything like a relation between two wholly independent kinds of substance: the ghost and its machine... -- David Bentley Hart, The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss*

Philosophy, from Plato and Aristotle, through the Middle Ages, and until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, pictured the universe as a hierarchical system, a Great Chain of Being. The same idea also seems to be at the center of all the world's major religions. In this view, reality is multi-layered, the layers are interconnected, and each level contains but transcends the level below it. In Christian terms, matter is the lowest level of being, and the successive layers are body, mind, soul, spirit, and God.

With the rise of science, the Western world discarded the Great Chain, collapsing all of existence into the lowest rung, matter, which was alone regarded as "really real." This collapse is obviously devastating to the spirit, because it eliminates the *vertical* dimension of the world, and leaves only the horizontal. But in recent decades, writers like Huston Smith and Ken Wilbur have sought to revive this ancient idea as an alternative to materialism.



E. F. Schumacher

The British economist and philosopher E.F. Schumacher, in his classic *A Guide for the Perplexed*, argues for a return to the earlier tradition. He points out that the visible universe

manifests a four-tiered hierarchical structure. The first level is inanimate matter, or the “mineral realm” (which he designates as *m*). The second is the plant level. It’s easy to recognize the difference between a living plant and one that has died and thus fallen to the lowest Level of Being, but what is the *power* that has been lost? We call it “life.” Scientists warn us against vitalism, because no *elan vital* has ever been found to exist. Nevertheless, the *difference* between “alive” and “dead” clearly exists. A living plant can extract nourishment from the ground, grow, and reproduce itself, but a dead one cannot. Schumacher calls this life factor *x*, to indicate that there is something there to be noticed and studied, but which we can’t explain. We are faced here with an *ontological discontinuity*, that is, a jump in the Level of Being. He writes “To say that life is nothing but a property of certain peculiar combinations of atoms is like saying that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is nothing but a property of a peculiar combination of letters. The truth is that the peculiar combination of letters is nothing but a property of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.” He adds, “It may well be that modern science has no method for coming to grips with *life as such*. If this is so, let it be frankly admitted; there is no excuse for the pretense that life is nothing but physics and chemistry.”

There is a similar jump from plant to animal. Animals have a new power, which enables them to do things that are beyond the range of plants. Strictly speaking, this power is mysterious and nameless, but since we must use words to refer to it, he calls the new factor *consciousness*. It’s easy to recognize this power in an animal. If a dog is knocked unconscious, this animal power disappears, while the vegetative plant powers remain. Schumacher calls this factor *y*.

When we move from animal to human there is another ontological discontinuity, and a new power emerges, which enables us to do innumerable things which animals cannot. These abilities seem to be due to the fact that a human being is able to be conscious of being conscious. We have a capacity for *self-awareness*. In humans there is an “I” with the power to direct consciousness in accordance with its own purposes, a power higher than consciousness itself. “This power, *z*, consciousness recoiling upon itself, opens up unlimited possibilities of purposeful learning, investigating, exploring, and for formulating and accumulating knowledge.” Self-awareness introduces an element of open-endedness in life. “The powers of self-awareness are *essentially* a limitless potentiality rather than an actuality. They have to be developed and “realized” by each human individual if he is to become truly human, that is to say, a *person*.”

To sum up, the four great Levels of Being can be represented as follows:

Mineral can be written: *m*

Plant can be written: *m + x*

Animal can be written: *m + x + y*

Man can be written: *m + x + y + z*

As we move up the chain, we notice at least three progressions:

The first progression is a movement from *passivity* to *activity*, which is correlated with a progression from *necessity* to *freedom*. At the mineral level there is nothing but necessity. Inanimate matter can never be other than what it is; it never “develops” into anything beyond itself. At this level, there is no “inner space” – which is the dimension of freedom. Inner space is



created by the powers of life, consciousness, and self-awareness. In human beings, intentional development of self-awareness can give us a level of freedom unknown at the lower levels of being. "...most of us, most of the time, behave and act mechanically, like machines. The specifically human power of self-awareness is asleep, and the human being, like an animal acts – more or less intelligently – solely in response to various influences. Only when a man makes use of his power of self-awareness does he attain to the level of a person, to the level of freedom. At that moment he is living, not being lived. Numerous forces of necessity, accumulated in the past, are still determining his actions, but a small dent is being made, a tiny change of direction is being introduced. It may be virtually unnoticeable, but many moments of self-awareness can produce many such changes and even turn a given moment into the opposite of its previous direction."

The second movement is a progression toward *integration* and *unity*. At the mineral level, there is no integration; matter can be divided and subdivided without any loss. At the plant level, inner unity is still so weak that parts of a plant can be cut off, and yet grow as separate beings. Animals are a unity, and parts of an animal can't survive separation. There is, however, little integration on the mental plane. Human beings have more inner unity than any beings below, but integration isn't guaranteed to us at birth. It remains a life task. As a *person* he is generally so poorly integrated that a man experiences himself as a collection of different sub-personalities, each feeling that it is "I." "Integration means the creation of an inner unity, a center of strength and freedom, so that the being ceases to be a mere object, acted upon by outside forces, and becomes a subject, acting from into own 'inner space' into the space outside itself."

The third progression is a movement from *visibility* to *invisibility*. I find this progression the most interesting. What it means is that the powers of life, consciousness and self-awareness are wholly invisible. They cannot be detected by the physical senses, and yet they comprise almost everything that is of interest to us. The hard sciences are really adapted only to the lowest level of being, the level which can be detected by the senses. As we ascend the chain, each level becomes increasingly difficult for the current methods of science to grasp. Yet, almost everything that is of value to us is "invisible" in this way. "...'higher' always means and implies 'more inner,' 'more interior,' 'deeper,' 'more intimate'; while 'lower' means and implies 'more outer,' 'more external,' 'shallower,' less intimate."

Values and ethics are built into the structure of reality. In the materialistic account there can only be horizontal movements, as from less to more. But the Great Chain introduces the *vertical* dimension. According to Schumacher, it is simply impossible to understand ethical truth without first understanding the Great Chain (see the section on Ethics, below.) "The ability to see the Great Truth of the hierarchic structure of the world, which makes it possible to distinguish between *higher and lower levels of Being*, is one of the indispensable conditions of understanding. Without it, it is not possible to understand every thing's proper and legitimate place."

A natural question arises at this point. Are there powers that are higher than self-awareness? Are human beings the summit of Being? Are we as good as it gets? Certainly the great majority of humankind, until fairly recently, have believed that the Great Chain extends upward beyond us. Indeed, our ancestors believed that of all truths, this was the most important and the most

profound. If the progressions we see in our world don't simply stop at the human level, but continue beyond us, then we have a hint of the direction in which they must go. The apex of the progression from passivity to activity would be a Being which is pure activity, in which all potentials are realized, completely free and unconstrained, which is one of the Scholastic descriptions of God. The completion of integration would be in a Being of pure simplicity and unity; and the movement from visibility to invisibility would end in the unity of all-pervasive, free, unbounded and invisible spirit.

According to Huston Smith, in the primordial traditions, there are three planes above our own. This first is a kind of intermediate realm that is larger than our world and interpenetrates it and sometimes communicates with it. This is the world in all its invisible aspects. It includes mind and "the vital principle", and is the realm of beings like ghosts, spirits, and angels. The next level is the soul or celestial plane, the level of the manifest God. At the top of the chain is the realm of the Infinite. This is the realm of God unmanifest, the level of Being itself. The Infinite is both the Ground of Being and the summit of perfection. Smith believes that all of these realms can be studied separately. He writes:

"The marvels of the terrestrial plane are being unveiled at an astonishing rate by the physical sciences. The intermediate realm adds life and consciousness: biology helps to understand the former, and for light on the latter we turn to the durable findings of phenomenology, depth psychology, and parapsychology, as well as aspects of shamanism and folk religion. The theologies of the great traditions describe God's knowable nature (the celestial plane) from a variety of cultural angles, and the literature of mysticism carries the mind as far as it can journey into God's absolute and infinite depths."



Alfred North Whitehead

2. *Process Philosophy*: The most sophisticated alternative to materialism is the metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead. I found his *magnum opus*, *Process and Reality* completely impenetrable, and so what little I understand of his metaphysical views I've gotten from secondary sources. But as I understand his critique, he argues that the mistake of naturalism has

been that it imagined something called “matter” as that which lies behind sense experience and is casually responsible for sense perception. This view logically engenders a split between *primary* and *secondary* qualities (as first made explicit by Locke), where secondary qualities are thought to be merely ephemeral and essentially illusory effects caused in the mind by the “objective” primary qualities of objects. Whitehead thinks such a split both unwarranted and undesirable; because if it is true then “the poets are entirely mistaken.” Rather than praising the rose for its scent, or the nightingale for its song, “they should address their lyrics to themselves and should turn them into odes of self-congratulations on the excellency of the human mind.” For Whitehead, nature is not the hypothesized underlying causal substrate of our perceptual experience, but rather nothing more than our perceptual experience itself. The ultimate constituents of reality are not any kind of “things,” but “occasions of experience.” Science should address itself to the relations between perceptual events and do away with the outmoded claim to be studying an underlying abstraction called “matter.” Whitehead’s alternative to materialism is a “process philosophy” which is centered on the concepts of life, organism, function, instantaneous reality, and interaction.

3. *Biocentrism*. I like to think of Robert Lanza as the poor man’s Alfred North Whitehead. He offers what I take to be the same basic idea that Whitehead proposed – that the fundamental reality is not any abstraction called “matter” but is instead life and consciousness – but he does it in a way that is accessible to any educated layperson. Lanza is a physician and scientist in the fields of regenerative medicine and biology. In 2009, he published a best-selling book called *Biocentrism: How Life and Consciousness are the Keys to Understanding the True Nature of the Universe*.

In that book he writes: “Our current scientific model claims that the universe was, until rather recently, a lifeless collection of particles bouncing against each other and obeying predetermined and mysterious rules. This view holds that life harbors consciousness — a concept poorly understood by science — but it is of little relevance in describing the universe. There’s a problem with this supposition. Consciousness is not just a pesky byproduct or irrelevant item, the way a buzzing mosquito might interfere with a biologist’s concentration as she skims algae off a lake. No, consciousness is the very matrix upon which the cosmos is comprehended. It is the movie screen upon which our worldview is projected.”

He uses themes I’ve already discussed above, such as the fine-tuning of the universe and the quantum measurement problem, to argue that we need a new worldview in which life and consciousness are seen as central to the universe rather than as accidental byproducts of lifeless forces. He also argues that the categories of time and space are aspects of the mind and not physical realities.



Robert Lanza

Here is what he does with time:

“To measure anything’s position precisely, at any given instant, is to “lock-in” on one static frame of its motion, as in a film. Conversely, as soon as you observe movement or momentum you can’t isolate a frame — because momentum is the summation of many frames. Sharpness in one parameter induces blurriness in the other. To understand this, consider for a moment that you are watching a film of an archery tournament. An archer shoots and the arrow flies. The camera follows the arrow’s trajectory from the archer’s bow toward the target. Suddenly the projector stops on a single frame of a stilled arrow. You stare at the image of an arrow in mid-flight, something you obviously could not do at a real tournament. The pause in the film enables you to know the position of the arrow with great accuracy — it’s just beyond the grandstand, 20 feet above the ground. But you have lost all information about its momentum. It is going nowhere; its velocity is zero. Its path, its trajectory, is no longer known. It is uncertain.

“It soon becomes apparent that such uncertainty is actually built into the fabric of reality. This makes perfect sense from a biocentric perspective: Time is the animal sense that animates events — the still frames — of the spatial world. Everything you perceive — even this page — is actively and repeatedly being reconstructed inside your head in an organized whirl of information. Time can be defined as the summation of spatial states; the same thing measured

with our scientific instruments is called momentum. The weaving together of these frames occurs in the mind. So what's real? We confront a here-and-now. If the next "image" is different from the last, then it is different, period. We can award that change with the word "time" but that doesn't mean there's an actual invisible entity that forms a matrix or grid in which changes occur. That's just our own way of making sense of things, our tool of perception. We watch our loved ones age and die, and assume an external entity called time is responsible for the crime.

"The demotion of time from an actual reality to a mere subjective experience, a social convention, is evidence against the "external universe" mindset, because the latter requires a space and time gridwork. In biocentrism, space and time are forms of animal understanding — period. They are tools of the mind, and thus do not exist as external objects independent of life. When we feel poignantly that time has elapsed, as when loved ones die, it constitutes the human perceptions of the passage and existence of time. Our babies turn into adults. We age. They age. We all grow old together. That to us is time. It belongs with us."

And here is what he does with space:

"There is a peculiar intangibility about space, as well. We cannot pick it up and bring it into the laboratory. This is because, like time, space is neither physical nor fundamentally real. *It is a mode of interpretation and understanding* — part of an animal's mental software that molds sensations into multidimensional objects.

"In modern everyday life, however, we've come to regard space as sort of a vast container that has no walls. In it, we cognize separate objects that were first learned and identified. These patterns are blocked out by the thinking mind within boundaries of color, shape or utility. Human language and ideation alone decide where the boundaries of one object end and another begins.

"Multiple illusions and processes routinely impart a false view of space. Shall we count the ways? 1. Empty space is in fact not empty. 2. Distances between objects can and do mutate depending on a multitude of conditions like gravity and speed, so that no bedrock distance exists anywhere, between anything and anything else. 3. Quantum theory casts serious doubt about whether even distant individual items are truly separated at all, and 4. We "see" separations between objects only because we have been conditioned and trained, through language and convention, to draw boundaries.

"Now, space and time illusions are certainly harmless. A problem only arises because, by treating space as something physical, existing in itself, science imparts a completely wrong starting point for investigations into the nature of reality. In reality there can be no break between the observer and the observed. If the two are split, the reality is gone. Space, like time, is not an object or a thing."

In summary:

"Space and time are forms of our animal sense perception. We carry them around with us like turtles with shells. Thus, there is no absolute self-existing matrix in which physical events occur independent of life."

Biocentrism is based on seven principles:

1. What we perceive as reality is a process that involves our consciousness. An “external” reality, if it existed, would – by definition – have to exist in space. But this is meaningless, because space and time are not absolute realities but rather tools of the human and animal mind.
2. Our external and internal perceptions are inextricably intertwined. They are different sides of the same coin and cannot be divorced from one another.
3. The behavior of subatomic particles – indeed all particles and objects – is inextricably linked to the presence of an observer. Without the presence of a conscious observer, they at best exist in an undetermined state of probability waves.
4. Without consciousness, “matter” dwells in an undetermined state of probability. Any universe that could have preceded consciousness only existed in a probability state.
5. The structure of the universe is explainable only through biocentrism. The universe is fine-tuned for life, which makes perfect sense as life creates the universe, not the other way around. The “universe” is simply the complete spatiotemporal logic of the self.
6. Time does not have a real existence outside of animal-sense perception. It is the process by which we perceive changes in the universe.
7. Space, like time, is not an object or a thing. Space is another form of our animal understanding and does not have an independent reality. We carry space and time around with us like turtles with shells. Thus, there is no absolute self-existing matrix in which physical events occur independent of life.

Starting from science, Lanza arrives at an ultimate reality which is limitless, unbounded consciousness. He doesn’t say so, but he’s describing the Brahman of Vedanta, the Over-soul of Emerson, the Ultimate Reality of the mystics, the God of the panentheists. He acknowledges that in biocentrism, free-will and immortality are not ruled out – in fact, in his warm and hopeful worldview, almost nothing is.

He writes: “Science, like religion, must work with simple concepts the human mind can comprehend. But if biocentrism is right, nature has much bigger plans for us than just this or that life — plans far beyond anything religion has ever projected to any God. And perhaps, if science is clever enough to see, it will realize that religion may not be too far off with its concrete imagery; and that relative to the supreme creator, we humans are much like the microorganisms we scrutinize under the microscope.”

### **Three: The Undiscovered Country**

If, as I believe, that the core of our being is timeless awareness, then death, imagined as eternal oblivion, never occurs. The core of our being was never born and can never die. On some level we all sense this, because awareness senses its own timelessness.

I also believe that theism entails belief in immortality, not in a logical sense, but in an emotional one. Human life hardly makes sense unless this terrestrial life is part of something that is much vaster. If the purpose of life is to realize union with the divine, then what happens to the billions of people who don't achieve this union before death? What happens to those who die in infancy, before they can ever develop spiritual consciousness? I sometimes think of those victims of the Nazis who were herded by the thousands into gas chambers and suffocated. Were they all just annihilated? Was the last experience they ever knew nothing but the final triumph of murderous lunacy? If the mystical vision is correct and the ultimate truth is life and light, then what sense would it make for the ultimate reality to manifest a universe full of conscious beings only to abandon them all to final annihilation? No atheist can imagine a universe more absurd than this.

The belief that I am one with eternal consciousness does diminish my existential *angst*, and has largely removed my fear of death (at least when I think about it in the abstract). But death still remains an impenetrable mystery. The "I am" or sense of presence that persists after death is that spark of awareness that is in the core of every sentient being. It is the deepest part of who I am, yet it doesn't include anything that anyone might recognize as distinctive about Tom Moon. What would it be like to be pure, unlocalized, disembodied consciousness? I can't even begin to form an idea of what that might be like.

On the other hand, when I think about this question, I realize that I am still operating on the assumption that death is a diminishment, a move from more being to less being, even if there is some kind of survival. How could I think otherwise? A corporeal being could only imagine the elimination of corporeality as a loss. But if there is anything to the idea of the Great Chain of Being, then any movement from the corporeal to the mental or the spiritual is a gain, not a loss; and the bliss of mystical experience while embodied may be only a foretaste of what we are to experience when we leave the body behind.

Most people who believe in life after death believe more than that some kind of impersonal awareness continues. They usually believe that some part of our individuality -- soul, ego, or life-stream -- continues and lives on in some other realm, or is reborn in a new material body. Is there any reason to believe that anything like that happens? I've looked into four areas of inquiry which many people believe can shed light on this question; philosophical arguments, parapsychology, near death experience studies, and the studies of claims of rebirth.

### *Immortality in Philosophy*

Philosophical arguments for immortality usually attempt to demonstrate that the mind or soul is a substance which cannot die. Plato, for instance, argues that the soul must belong to the world of forms because it is invisible, reflective and naturally rules the body. Ideas are not physical things, so they must belong to a spiritual realm which is more real than the material realm. The soul is that which can grasp these ideas and so it too must belong to that realm. Since Forms are immutable; the soul must also be immutable. If the soul can't change, then it can't die. My own

argument for the immortality of awareness (above) is essentially a version of this Platonic argument.

### *Parapsychology*

When Ram Dass met Neem Karoli Baba, the man who was to become his guru, in the foothills of the Himalayas, the man told him that he'd been thinking about his mother the previous evening, and that she had died the year before. Then he closed his eyes, seemed to concentrate deeply, and said "Spleen! She died of spleen." All of this was correct, and Ram Dass was convinced there was no normal way that his guru could have known any of it. This was his conversion moment. The course of his entire life changed radically in that instant.

Here is another story, about the 18<sup>th</sup> century Swedish mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg:

On Thursday, July 19, 1759 a great and well-documented fire broke out in Stockholm. In the high and increasing wind it spread very fast, consuming about 300 houses and making 2000 people homeless. When the fire broke out Swedenborg was at a dinner with friends in Gothenburg, about 400 kilometers from Stockholm. He became agitated and told the party at six o'clock that there was a fire in Stockholm; and that it had consumed his neighbor's home and was threatening his own. Two hours later, he exclaimed with relief that the fire had stopped three doors from his home. In the excitement following his report, word reached the ears of the provincial governor, who summoned Swedenborg that same evening and asked for a detailed recounting.

At that time, it took two to three days for news from Stockholm to reach Gothenburg by courier, so that is the shortest duration in which the news of the fire could reach Gothenburg. The first messenger from Stockholm with news of the fire arrived Monday evening. The second messenger was a royal courier, who arrived on Tuesday. Both of these reports confirmed every statement to the precise hour that Swedenborg first shared the information.

Stories like these have been told from time immemorial. In the nineteenth century, F.W.H. Myers collected thousands of such accounts, which were published after his death in the two-volume *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* in 1903.

How do we explain such events? I'm sure that some of them are explained by fraud and deception; that other reports are embellished; and that still others are just remarkable coincidences. But should we conclude that all of them can be explained away in that manner? That is what we are compelled to believe if we are philosophical materialists, because such events are ruled out by every form of materialism. But since I'm free from such a world view, I have no need to rule them out *a priori*.

I believe that these kinds of strange events lend credence to William James' hypothesis (echoed by Bergson and Aldous Huxley), that the human mind is more like a reducing valve than a generator, one through which Mind-at-Large lets trickle only the kind of information that is necessary for us to survive on the material plane. This way of seeing the mind enlarges our



whole notion of what it is to be human and makes it easier for us to give credence to extraordinary phenomena such as Ram Dass and Swedenborg describe.

Parapsychology attempts to go beyond anecdotal reports and demonstrate through controlled experiments that phenomena such as telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition are scientifically demonstrable and measurable realities. If it could succeed in doing that, the achievement would be momentous, because it would overthrow materialistic accounts of the mind once and for all, and would also lend plausibility to the idea that some part of the mind may survive death.

But a century and a half of parapsychological research has not succeeded in demonstrating to the scientific community that the phenomena it studies (collectively known as “*psi*”) exists. Time and again we hear reports of experiments which show evidence of anomalous information transfer. The effect sizes, while invariably small, are statistically significant. But time and again other researchers replicate the experiments and the alleged effect isn’t detected. Whether it’s J.B. Rhine’s card guessing experiments, the Maimonides dream telepathy experiments, or the ganzfeld research, the results always seem to be ultimately disappointing. Parapsychology has been unable to come up with an experiment which yields replicable results.

Sometimes parapsychologists account for the skepticism of science with the accusation that scientists resist acknowledging the existence of the paranormal because it would require a total revolution of their understanding of the world. The claim is that they would rather hold on to the going paradigm than let in the evidence which refutes it. In view of the revolutions in physics that have happened in the last century, I find this view unconvincing. Mainstream scientists are clearly able to change fundamental assumptions about the world *when the evidence warrants it*. Parapsychology has not been able to produce that evidence. I must conclude that there is no reason to believe that there is an ability called *psi*, which is common enough in the population that it can be detected through standard statistical measures.

But does this mean that paranormal events don’t actually occur? Did Ram Dass’ guru really know what he’d been thinking about on the previous evening? I met Ram Dass once, I followed his public career carefully, and I cannot believe that he was lying. The event in question was the pivotal event of his life. I don’t think there can be any question that he sincerely *believed* that it had happened. He also makes a convincing case that no one who was there in the foothills of the Himalayas when it happened could have known anything about his life. Deception and fraud seem to be implausible explanations.

There are so many people down the centuries who have had experiences like the one that converted Ram Dass. The sheer volume of such reports is difficult to ignore altogether. Such events usually occur under highly emotionally charged and meaningful circumstances. If so, it might not be possible to make the phenomenon appear on demand in a dispassionate laboratory situation.

Jack Kornfield offers another possibility: “Western studies of psychic abilities have failed because these abilities are usually not stable at ordinary levels of consciousness. You can’t invite ordinary graduate students into a lab and expect to study psychic abilities. While there are exceptions with certain gifted individuals, most people need some form of concentration training

for psychic abilities to arise strongly.” (Jack Kornfield, *The Wise Heart*, p. 326.) In Eastern contemplative traditions, there are detailed methods for developing *siddhis*, or powers, including telekinesis, clairvoyance, telepathy, levitation, and bi-locality. *Buddhaghosa*’s thousand page *Visuddhimagga* (The Path of Purification), and the Tibetan practices detailed in *The Six Yogas of Naropa*, for instance, both offer detailed instruction for using the highest levels of concentration to attain such powers. It should be possible to study yogis and contemplatives who have mastered these practices to see if they really do generate paranormal abilities. The Dalai Lama has encouraged scientific research into these claims, but as far as I know, it hasn’t yet been done. Perhaps, as Eastern contemplative practices become more common in the West, parapsychologists will study adepts to see if they really have developed paranormal abilities.

In the meantime, though, paranormal events must be viewed as *miraculous* events, i.e., rare events. David Hume argued that we should dismiss, *a priori*, any claims of miraculous events, on the grounds that miracles are by definition violations of the laws of nature, and that all the evidence we have suggests that these laws are never violated. He concludes that it is always more probable that claims of the miraculous are based on error or deception than that such a violation has occurred.

I’m not willing to accept such a sweeping *a priori* dismissal. In the first place, what we would consider miraculous events might not be violations of the laws of nature at all, but instances of causality on a higher plane. Second, even if we grant Hume’s assumption that such events do violate the laws of nature, his argument is circular. He rests his case on the claim that laws of nature are supported by exceptionless testimony, but testimony can only be counted as exceptionless if we discount any testimony of the occurrence of miracles. We have no grounds for *stipulating* that the miraculous can’t happen. Specific claims of miraculous events should of course be met with skepticism, but not simply dismissed outright as a matter of policy. Certainly claims of the miraculous are, on the whole, implausible, and ought not to be accepted uncritically. But let’s suppose I were to hear a report of a paranormal event from someone with whom I had been acquainted for many years, whose sanity, intelligence, maturity, and honesty I knew indubitably. Would it be rational for me to dismiss his report because I imagined that I knew that such an event is impossible? Skepticism is one thing: closing our accounts with reality prematurely is quite another.

### *Near-Death Experiences*

On a New Year’s morning twenty-one years before he died, my father was rushed to the hospital because of life-threatening internal bleeding. He had been a hopeless alcoholic for decades, and the medications he was taking reacted with the alcohol he consumed on New Year’s Eve to cause internal bleeding sufficient to threaten his life. The story he later told us was that, as he was lying on the emergency room gurney, he floated above his body, and saw it lying below, bloated and ugly. Then he floated into a tunnel, and found himself face to face with a being composed of pure light. The being told him that it was not his time to die, and also that he’d had enough to drink. Then he snapped back into his body and passed out. He awoke alone in the dark in the intensive care unit, full of tubes. He told me that at that moment he laughed, as if he’d gotten the punch line of a joke. My mother (who was also an alcoholic) always claimed that he’d made the whole story up, but until the end of his life he maintained that it was true. What can’t be denied

is that, from that New Year's Day until the day he died, almost twenty-one years later, he never drank again. More amazing still, he never again felt any desire to drink. As soon as he was able to walk, he left the hospital against medical advice and went directly to his first AA meeting. He was apparently still in a blackout, because he could never remember how he found out where the meeting was, or how he got there. Over time, he became one of the leaders in his local AA community. He had many sponsees and service commitments, and he brought the AA message to jails and hospitals. When he died, his memorial service, as he'd requested, was an AA meeting.

The natural explanation for this amazing course-correction is that it was the fear of death that caused it, an idea that made him laugh. He claimed that his experience actually removed his fear of death, and that what changed him was that he saw how he was supposed to *live*. In fact, when he did die years later, he chose the time. He asked his doctor to "pull the plug" and he died at peace and without fear.

Dad's NDE is a fairly typical example of the experiences of millions of people all over the world. What are we to make of them? Based on everything that science knows about sensation and cognition, science is almost forced to conclude that such experiences *must* be dreams or hallucinations. How could they be anything else? Sight without eyes? Hearing without ears? Impossible. According to some NDE researchers, even people who are blind from birth "see" things and people in their NDE's, which has led these researchers to coin the term *mindsight* to describe these alleged phenomena. If all mental events are dependent on the brain and sensory apparatus, these events must be "nothing but" delusions.

I once asked my father if he thought his experience could have been a hallucination. His reply was that, having been a drunk for decades, he knew a lot about hallucinations, and this wasn't one of them.

I've read many personal accounts of NDE's, but the one that impressed me the most was Anita Moorjani's, as detailed in her book, *Dying to Be Me*. After four years of battling Hodgkin's lymphoma, in February of 2006, she lay on her death bed, her body riddled with tumors the size of lemons. She slipped into a coma and was expected to die. While in the coma, she had an NDE, and was given the choice to return to her body if she wanted to. She was assured that the cancer would be healed if she did. She elected to return, and within three weeks her body had completely healed. Her miraculous healing is attested to by her doctors.

There are also many reports of "veridical" NDE's, in which people saw or heard things that they couldn't have from the beds in which they were lying. Some of these reports sound credible, but, as with all reports of paranormal phenomena, they are "anecdotal," and there is no way of ruling out fraud, coincidence, or exaggerating to make a better story.

What stands out for me about Dad's experience is how intensely meaningful it was for him, and this seems to be a typical characteristic of NDE's. People who have had such an experience regularly report that it was more vivid and "real" than their normal waking experiences; that it taught them about the meaning of their lives, and also about the meaning of life in general. They often report that it convinced them of the reality of the afterlife, and that it removed their fear of

death. In my thirty years as a psychotherapist, I've never encountered an incident in which a dream or a hallucinations had such profound effects.

Whatever else they may be, I think it's fairly clear that NDE's are similar to mystical experiences in that they convey a subjective sense of having understood something deep and profound about the nature of life. Even the most skeptical must, I think, grant this, because it is part of the raw data of the experiences. I see these events as acts of grace, as personal revelations, as instances of the "saving principle" in the universe that draws us forward.

But do these experiences prove that there is life after death? No. People who believe in an afterlife will probably see NDE's as confirming what they already believe, and those who don't will see them as dreams or hallucinations, however "real" or meaningful they feel.

Since I'm already, on other grounds, inclined to believe in survival, I don't have too much trouble entertaining the possibility that these experiences are manifestations of the initial phase of an afterlife. The "impossible" sensory experiences could be another manifestation of Mind-at-Large. It might be that, as the constraints of the physical body lose their grip, the power of the mind dramatically increases, which might also explain the intense lucidity and emotional intensity of the experiences while those having them are "unconscious" by every physical measure. When the person having the NDE returns to his or her body, the constraints of the "reducing valve" could return as well, and the capacity for "mindsight" could disappear, while the memory and meaning of the experiences could be retained. I realize that all of this is pure conjecture on my part.

### *Rebirth*

I have had "memories" of a former life for my entire adult life. I remember being a Polish Jew who lived in a rural village and was shot by the Nazis at the age of 24. I have two memories. In the first, I am in the snow in a forest, and I have to watch as everyone I've ever known goes down into a pit to be machine-gunned. I was in the last group to go into the pit. The second memory arose just a few years ago. In this memory, it is the night before we were all killed. I am huddled in a cold attic with my relatives. I remember my father, an uncle, and my grandfather. We are all awake and sitting in silence, and we all know what is going to happen to us in the morning. At some point I leave the attic and run desperately through the snow-covered streets of the town, looking for some place to hide. But there is no place. Anyone who dares to shelter me will also risk being shot. I return home and accept my fate.

Interestingly enough, my sister once told me that she, too, has memories of being a Polish Jew caught in the Holocaust. After her first son was born, she developed intense anxiety about thoughts of losing him. In the "memory" which she "recovered" she had to watch while her children were all loaded onto cattle cars to be transported to a death camp. She said to me "Don't you feel an affinity for that time?" I had to admit that I do. I mention this because of the common notion that family members go through clusters of lifetimes together.

This young man that I "remember" being feels like a part of me, and the images that I recall feel just like any other memories. But that doesn't mean that I believe that I "really was" this man.

On that point, I remain agnostic. I'm aware of the fallibility of memory, and the ease with which false memories can be implanted, and so I can't accept memories *alone* – even my own – as proof of rebirth, or of anything else, for that matter. It would be another matter if my memories could be shown to be “veridical.” If, for instance, I remembered where I buried the treasure before I was shot, and if I could now go to Poland and find what I'd buried; and if what I found was exactly what I remembered burying – then I'd have no doubt that something paranormal had happened, and I'd be much more strongly inclined to believe in rebirth than I am now. But of course, memories with that degree of specificity don't seem to arise in people who claim to remember former lives.

Is there any evidence which we could regard as “scientific” that might validate the reality of reincarnation? In parapsychology, there are two primary sources of “evidence” which allegedly support reincarnation. The first are the past-life memories of young children; and the second are the recovered memories of people who are regressed under hypnosis.

### *1. Past-Life Memories of Young Children*

It is apparently not uncommon, especially in countries like India and Sri Lanka, where virtually everyone takes reincarnation for granted, for young children to describe memories of former lives. Most of the time adults don't take these reports any more seriously than we take children's stories about imaginary friends. Sometimes, however, children describe past-lives of people who actually lived, and seem to have accurate information about them, despite the fact that these people are unknown to them and to their families.

One of the more famous of these cases is that of Shanti Devi, a girl who was born in Delhi in 1926. She didn't start to speak until she was four years old, and when she did she told her family, “This is not my real home! I have a husband and a son in Mathura! I must return to them!” She claimed that her husband's name was Kedar Nath. One of her teachers at school sent a letter to the address Shanti Devi gave as her “real home” in Mathura, which was about 145 km. away, inquiring if the woman described had died there not too many years ago. He soon received a reply from a man named Kedar Nath who wrote that his young wife Lugdi Devi had indeed passed away nine years earlier, after giving birth to their son. The details Shanti Devi had given about her old house and members of her previous family were all confirmed. Kedar Nath traveled to Delhi, pretending to be his own brother, but Shanti Devi immediately recognized him and Lugdi Devi's son. As she knew several details of Kedar Nath's life with his wife, he was soon convinced that Shanti Devi was indeed the reincarnation of Lugdi Devi.

Mahatma Gandhi heard about the case, and set up a commission to investigate. The commission traveled with Shanti Devi to Mathura. On her own, she was able to lead them to her previous home, and correctly described what it had looked like years earlier before its recent refurbishing. She was also able to relate extremely intimate information, such as extramarital affairs of family members that no one outside the family could possibly have known. She also recognized several family members, including the grandfather of Lugdi Devi. She found out that Kedar Nath had neglected to keep a number of promises he had made to Lugdi Devi on her deathbed. The commission's report concluded that Shanti Devi was the reincarnation of Lugdi Devi.

Another well-known case is that of Dhammaruwan, who is today an internationally known Buddhist teacher. He was born in a small village near Kandy, Sri Lanka in November, 1968. From the age of about two, before he could read or write, it is alleged, he spontaneously chanted ancient Buddhist scriptures in the original Pali language. These chants were known only to a few scholarly monks. Each day, somewhere around two o'clock in the morning, after sitting in meditation with his adopted Buddhist foster father for about twenty to forty minutes, he would spontaneously chant Pali suttas. On the Poya (lunar observance day), he would sometimes chant for two hours.

This boy claimed to remember a life from the 6th century, during a phase in medieval Sri Lanka when Buddhism flourished and Pali learning and scholarship reached a peak. He said that in 6th century A.C., together with a few monks, he accompanied the scholar monk, Bhadanthachariya Buddhagosa to Sri Lanka. He said that including him (Mudithagosa) the others were monks who had memorized the tripitaka or part of it. He claimed that it was from these memories that he was able to chant the suttas. When he was three years old, his foster father started making recordings of the chanting and invited a prominent scholar monk to listen. The monk verified that it was indeed the ancient Pali language and that the boy was chanting it in an ancient style which was no longer used. Recordings of this young boy chanting still exist, and can be accessed on the internet. I've listened to them and found them melodious and moving, although of course I can't recognize or understand any of the words the young boy is chanting.

## *2. The Research of Ian Stevenson*



Dr. Ian Stevenson

The first Westerner to do systematic research on children's former-life memories was Dr. Ian Stevenson, a psychiatrist who worked for the University Of Virginia School Of Medicine for 50 years. He began to do reincarnation research in 1960 when he learned of a case in Sri Lanka where a child reported remembering a past life. He thoroughly questioned the child and the child's parents, including the people whom the child recalled were his parents from his past life.

This led him to conclude that reincarnation might actually occur. Thanks to a grant from Chester Carlson, inventor of the Xerox machine, he was able to devote the rest of his professional life to reincarnation research. He traveled extensively over a period of 40 years, investigating 3,000 cases of children around the world who recalled past lives.

He found that children usually begin to talk about their memories between the ages of two and four. The memories gradually fade when the child is between four and seven years old. Most of the children talk about their previous identity with great intensity and feeling. Often they cannot decide for themselves which world is real and which one is not. They often experience a kind of double existence in which one life is sometimes more prominent, and at other times the other life takes over. This is why they usually speak of their past life in the present tense saying things like, "I have a husband and two children who live in Jaipur." Almost all of them are able to describe the events leading up to their death. Such children tend to consider their previous parents to be their real parents rather than their present ones, and usually express a wish to return to them. When the previous family has been found and details about the person in that past life come to light, then the child often begins to exhibit conspicuous or unusual behavior. For instance, if the child is born in India to a low-caste family and was a member of a higher caste in its previous life, it may feel uncomfortable in its new family. The child may ask to be served or waited on hand and foot and may refuse to wear cheap clothes.

In 35% of cases he investigated, children who died an unnatural death developed phobias. For example, if they had drowned in a past life they frequently developed a phobia about going out of their depth in water. If they had been shot, they were often afraid of guns and sometimes loud bangs in general. If they died in a road accident they would sometimes develop a phobia of traveling in cars or buses.

Another frequently observed unusual form of behavior, which Dr. Stevenson called philias, concerns children who express the wish to eat different kinds of food or to wear clothes that were different from those of their culture. If a child had developed an alcohol, tobacco or drug addiction as an adult in a previous incarnation he may express a need for these substances and develop cravings at an early age. In addition, many of these children show abilities or talents that they had in their previous lives.

Stevenson concluded that his cases were "suggestive of reincarnation." He argued that the large number of witnesses and the lack of apparent motivation and opportunity make the hypothesis of fraud extremely unlikely; that the large amount of information possessed by the child is not generally consistent with the hypothesis that the child obtained that information through investigated contact between the families; and that demonstration of similar personality characteristics and skills not learned in the current life and the lack of motivation for the long length of identification with a past life make the hypothesis of the child gaining his recollections and behavior through extra-sensory perception improbable.

Stevenson's first book, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* summarized the best cases he had found at the time it was published in 1966. The book is detailed and methodical to the point of pedantry, which may contribute to its scientific credibility, but which also rendered it one of the most boring books I have ever attempted to read.

In any case, no less an authority on science than Carl Sagan referred to examples from Stevenson's investigations in his book *The Demon-Haunted World* as an example of carefully collected empirical data, though he rejected reincarnation on the grounds that it was not a parsimonious explanation for the stories. In 1977, the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* devoted most of one issue to Stevenson's work in which psychiatrist Harold Lief described Stevenson as "a methodical, careful, even cautious, investigator, whose personality is on the obsessive side...Either he is making a colossal mistake, or he will be known . . . as 'the Galileo of the 20th century'." On the whole, however, most scientists don't take his work seriously. Some question his objectivity, others describe him as credulous and still others suggest his investigations were flawed. Skeptics such as Paul Edwards have analyzed many of these accounts, and called them anecdotal while also suggesting that claims of evidence for reincarnation originate from selective thinking and from the false memories that often result from one's own belief system and basic fears, and thus cannot be counted as empirical evidence. According to the research of Dr. Robert Baker many of the alleged past-life experiences investigated by Stevenson can be explained in terms of known psychological factors. Baker has written that past life memories are a mixture of cryptomnesia and confabulation.

Another criticism of Stevenson's work is that he obtained his examples in cultures in which the reality of reincarnation is assumed by almost everybody. This criticism has been answered by Stevenson's successor, Jim B. Tucker, who has researched some strong cases in Europe and the United States. He does demonstrate that some children spontaneously report past-life memories even in families in which no one believes in rebirth.

So how do we evaluate these claims? I would say that we have some evidence for rebirth, but we have a theory against it. Most skeptics will dismiss this evidence outright, because it is "anecdotal." But what evidence could we ever have for rebirth that wouldn't be anecdotal? Skeptics will also argue that we must accept the most parsimonious explanations of the evidence, i.e., that fraud, exaggeration, wishful thinking, cryptomnesia, etc., are always to be preferred as explanations unless they can be definitively ruled out. But that is an impossible standard. So-called "veridical" past-life memories face one difficulty which can never be completely surmounted, which is that any knowledge of other lives which can be validated through ordinary means can also have been obtained in the first place through ordinary means. We can argue in specific cases that it is *implausible* that such ordinary information-transfer happened, and in Stevenson's best cases he seems to have shown implausibility. But neither he nor any other researcher can ever demonstrate *impossibility*, which means that any purported evidence for reincarnation will always be open to doubt. And if it is open to doubt at all, then skeptics will invoke Occam's razor to dismiss the evidence out-of-hand, because it simply cannot be squared with the dominant naturalistic paradigm.

For my part, I am inclined to accept that Stevenson's and Tucker's research does suggest that some children do have memories of people who lived before they were born, and that this evidence is, as Stevenson claimed, *suggestive* of reincarnation. Of course, I can do this because I don't accept the dominant paradigm, and because I already am inclined to believe, on *a priori* grounds, that some part of us does survive physical death. And if some part of us does survive death, then something like reincarnation *must* happen. Unless we are completely absorbed into the Absolute at death, we must "incarnate" as separate beings somewhere and in some fashion.



Skeptics argue that we cannot all have been human beings in our former lives, because there are currently seven billion of us on the planet, far more than have ever lived in the past. They are right about this, but the objection hardly troubles Hindus or Buddhists, because in both religions, we can be reborn as animals, or on other planets, or in non-physical realms of existence. In these cosmologies, there are an infinite number of other worlds in which we can reincarnate.

### 3. *Past-Life Hypnotic Recall*

American interest in recall of past-lives through hypnotic regression began with the famous case of Bridey Murphy. In 1952, Morey Bernstein, who was a Colorado businessman and amateur hypnotist, put Virginia Tyghe into a trance and she spontaneously regressed to a former life as an Irish woman born in 1806 in Cork. I've listened to the dramatic moment on the tape in which she first identifies herself as Bridey Murphy. She very suddenly begins to speak in a thick and (to me) authentic-sounding Irish brogue. Bernstein's book on this subject, *The Search for Bridey Murphy*, was made into a movie in 1956.

The "facts" about Bridey Murphy weren't checked out before the book was published, but once it was a best-seller reporters went to Ireland and checked out almost every detail, with mixed results. Some details checked out, but many did not. But what is most important to me about this case is that no one was ever able to demonstrate that Bridey Murphy had ever existed in the first place. Bridey said she was born on December 20, 1798, and that she died in 1864. No record of either event ever turned up.

In any case, the past-life regression craze was on. Today you can find therapists in almost every city in the country who – for a fee – will help you remember your previous incarnations. I've read several books describing case histories of patients whose phobias, depression, or anxiety were supposedly relieved through past life regression therapy. Proponents of this kind of treatment argue that the therapy is effective, which they see as evidence that the memories are veridical. They report that, when past-life traumas are remembered, there is catharsis, working through, and symptom relief, which is the same process that happens when traumas from this life are effectively treated. There has been, as far as I know, no systematic research into this kind of therapy (which most people in my profession, including me, regard as quackery), so the positive claims for it have never been validated.

But even if the claimed effects were validated, what would that prove? Similar experiences of catharsis and symptom relief are also reported when people "remember" their alien abduction, or that everyone in their family was in a satanic cult and practiced ritual murder of babies. For reasons that aren't well-understood, powerful emotional experiences do sometimes seem to produce symptom relief, independently of whether or not the remembered event ever actually occurred.

Moreover, research shows that it is very easy to plant "recovered memories" in subjects. If you hypnotize a group of people, for instance, and instruct them to remember the time their mothers lost them in a mall, most of the subjects will obligingly "remember" such events. This is why the

courts don't accept testimony obtained under hypnosis unless it is also verified by an independent source.

My conclusion is that, while hypnotic past-life regression can sometimes produce interesting and entertaining stories, on its own it is worthless as evidence for the reality of reincarnation. It can acquire the same degree of "suggestiveness" as Ian Stevenson's work if the remembered people and events can be independently validated, and if it can be shown that the information is unlikely to have been acquired by ordinary means. A small number of cases meet this standard, but very few.

#### 4. *The Research of Helen Wambach*

The work of psychologist Helen Wambach was a novel approach to studying past-life regression scientifically. In the 1960's, she conducted a 10-year survey of past-life recollections under hypnosis among 1,088 subjects, and published her findings in *Life Before Life* in 1979. She asked very specific questions about the time periods in which people lived and the clothing, footwear, utensils, money, housing, etc. which they used or came in contact with. She found peoples' recollections to be amazingly accurate and wrote that "fantasy and genetic memory could not account for the patterns that emerged in the results. With the exception of 11 subjects, all descriptions of clothing, footwear, and utensils were consistent with historical records." She argued that the memories of her subjects "accurately reflected the past."

She found that 50.6 % of the past lives reported were male and 49.4 % were female, which reflects biological fact; and that the number of people reporting upper class or comfortable lives was in exactly the same proportion to the estimates of historians of the class distribution of the period. Between 60-77% of the ancient population lived at or below the poverty level. They wore homemade clothes and lived in simple, even primitive, abodes. The majority were farmers who labored every day in the fields. None of the hypnotized individuals recalled being a famous historical figure. Those who recalled a high social position seemed highly dissatisfied with their lives, as if it was a burden to be alive. Those who recalled being a farmer or a member of a primitive tribe appeared to be content.

One of her conclusions was that her research disproved the idea that past-life memories were "wish fulfillments" because most people were not Cleopatra or Napoleon in their former lives. The vast majority remembered very mundane, even grim, lives.

In the late '70's I attended one of Wambach's workshops. She did a hypnotic induction and "regressed" the group back to three former lifetimes. There were about fifty of us in the workshop, and all but two of us obligingly remembered former lives. I remembered a lifetime thousands of years ago in Siberia. I was a man who died in his twenties, surrounded by my mate and many clan members. We were all completely covered with dried mud to keep warm. What I remembered was that life was very physically uncomfortable, but that, emotionally, I never felt lonely. I died bathed in the love of everyone around me.

I asked Wambach what she had concluded about the meaning of her work, and she replied that she firmly believed that reincarnation was the simplest explanation for the data.

The first observation I would offer about Wambach's work is that the research was, as far as I know, never replicated; so we cannot know whether her claim that recovered memories statistically mirror the past accurately would have stood up. The one conclusion I'm willing to draw from it is that Freudian notions that past-life memories are "wish fulfillments" is probably false. This, however, will not raise many eyebrows among psychologists because Freud's theory that dreams and fantasies are wish-fulfillments has long-ago been largely discarded by most psychologists.

### 5. *Rebirth in Buddhism*

Throughout Asia, rebirth is simply assumed. It is central to popular Buddhism in a way that is the complete opposite of what the Buddha taught. For him, the cycle of becoming was bondage, and the purpose of the eight-fold path was to get off the wheel of birth and death. But in popular Buddhism in Asia, Buddhism is about acquiring "merit" which you can cash in for a better life next time around.

Among many Buddhists in the United States, rebirth is something of an embarrassment. Buddhism here is, for many, just rational materialism in drag. Anxious to have some kind of spiritual life without superstition, they've invented a Buddha who is a thoroughgoing empiricist – a kind of Indian David Hume. But this isn't the Buddha of the suttas. That Buddha may have denied that there was a Creator, but he was most definitely a polytheist. The suttas are full of stories about his interactions with beings from the God realms.

When it comes to rebirth, the story is often told that the Buddha didn't argue with the consensus of his time, but that he didn't think the doctrine of rebirth was vital to the dharma. In fact, rebirth was hotly debated in his time; it wasn't simply taken for granted. And the Buddha himself saw death and rebirth as the cycle of becoming which it was the whole purpose of the dharma to escape.

Rebirth is integral to the story of the night of his enlightenment. During the "first watch" of that night, countless of his own previous lifetimes unfolded before his eyes. He saw that the process had been going on "from beginningless time." During the second watch, he saw the past lives of countless other beings, and understood that he was not unique: rebirth is the destiny of all sentient beings. In the final watch, he realized the paradoxical truth that rebirth there is, but none who are reborn. In realizing the emptiness of all conditioned phenomena, he found deliverance from the cycle of becoming. Without rebirth, the path to the ending of suffering makes no sense, because in that case, death is already the absolute end of suffering for all of us, no matter how we live our lives. The easiest "path" to the end of suffering would in that case be simply to wait out the clock.

The philosophical "proof" of rebirth in Buddhism is very simple. Observation clearly shows that every mind moment is conditioned by the previous mind moment, which in turn conditions the next mind moment. That means that every mind moment has one that precedes it and one that succeeds it; and that means that the flow never begins and never ends. Therefore, when our bodies die, the last mind moment of this lifetime conditions the first mind moment of the next.

## *Conclusions*

My conclusion after reviewing the various claims of “scientific” evidence for life after death is that nothing close to conclusive proof exists, nor can it exist. There are some well-documented cases of former-life memories which make one’s eyebrows rise, and which appear to me to be “suggestive” of rebirth, as Ian Stevenson claimed, but these stories are unlikely to convince anyone who isn’t already convinced that rebirth is a reality. The same thing is true for all claims of post-mortem survival. Death, for us, must always be the undiscovered country.

Some years back, I discussed the question of rebirth with a Western Zen priest. He asked a question I’d never considered before: “What good is it?” His question startled me and changed my view of the question.

Let’s suppose, for the sake of argument that we do reincarnate. That still means that I am going to lose everything I value -- this body, all of the relationships with the people I love in this life; this time in history; and all of my memories of this life. One might well ask what the practical difference there is between this kind of survival and complete annihilation.

Moreover, reincarnation doesn’t in any way remove the dread most of us feel when we think about the fact that we will ultimately be separated from everything that we love and everything that is familiar to us. In fact, it potentially worsens our anxiety, because it means that these separations don’t occur just once, but an infinite number of times. It is odd that so many Westerners seem to find the idea of rebirth comforting.. In the East, this has never been so. Hindus and Buddhists have always considered the wheel of birth and death as bondage, and have seen a central goal of the spiritual life as release from it.

Virtually all of the great beings have taught that the supreme purpose of life isn’t to attain everlasting individual existence. True immortality is participation in the eternal now of the divine ground: persistence in time, even in heavenly realms, can never be complete freedom, and must always involve some measure of suffering. The dread of death, and the longing to hold onto what is familiar, are *attachments*. The remedy for our fear of death is to relinquish attachment by coming to terms, deeply, with the truth of impermanence.

At the end of the each day on meditation retreats at Spirit Rock, the teachers often lead us in some chanting. One of the chants makes this promise:

*All things are impermanent.  
They arise and they pass away.  
To be in harmony with this truth  
Brings great happiness.*

The Buddha says in the Dhamaphadda:

*Impermanent are all compounded things.  
When one perceives this with true insight,*

*then one becomes detached from suffering;  
this is the path of purification.  
Dhammapada 20.277*

*Let go of the past, let go of the future,  
let go of the present, and cross over to the farther shore of existence.  
With mind wholly liberated,  
you shall come no more to birth and death.  
Dhammapada 24.348*

And I can't resist quoting these beautiful words from the *Diamond Sutra*:

*Thus ye shall think of this fleeting world: a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream; a flash of lightning in a summer cloud; a flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.*

Beyond that, it is incumbent on us to face the mystery of death as we are to face life, with trust and an open heart. In his essay *Immortality*, Emerson writes "All the comfort I have found teaches me to confide that I shall not have less in times and places that I do not yet know. I have known admirable persons, without feeling that they exhaust the possibilities of virtue and talent. I have seen what glories of climate, of summer mornings and evenings, of midnight sky; I have enjoyed the benefits of all this complex machinery of arts and civilization, and its results of comfort. The good Power can easily provide me millions more as good. Shall I hold on with both hands to every paltry possession? All I have seen teaches me to trust the Creator for all I have not seen. Whatever it be which the great Providence prepares for us, it must be something large and generous, and in the great style of his works."

Or, as Stephen Mitchell puts it more succinctly in *The Gospel According to Jesus*, "...when we trust God completely, we can trust death as well." (p.18)

### *Perspectives on Death*

#### A Letter to a Dying Man

Zen Master Bassui wrote the following letter to one of his disciples who was about to die:

*"The essence of your mind is not born, so it will never die. It is not an existence, which is perishable. It is not an emptiness, which is a mere void. It has neither color nor form. It enjoys no pleasures and suffers no pains.*

*"I know you are very ill. Like a good Zen student, you are facing that sickness squarely. You may not know exactly who is suffering, but question yourself: What is the essence of this mind? Think only of this. You will need no more. Covet nothing. Your end which is endless is as a snowflake dissolving in the pure air."*

#### *No Death, No Fear*

*This body is not me.  
 I am not limited by this body.  
 I am life without boundaries.  
 I have never been born, and I have never died.  
 Look at the ocean and the sky filled with stars,  
 manifestations from  
 my wondrous true mind.  
 Since before time, I have been free.  
 Birth and death are only doors through which we pass,  
 sacred thresholds on our journey.  
 Birth and death are a game of hide and seek.  
 So laugh with me, hold my hand, let us say good-bye.  
 Say good-bye to meet again soon.  
 We meet today.  
 We will meet again tomorrow.  
 We meet at the source every moment.  
 We meet each other in all forms of life.  
 -- Thich Nhat Hanh, Chanting and Recitations from Plum village*

*Nonno's Poem*

*How calmly does the olive branch  
 Observe the sky begin to blanch  
 Without a cry, without a prayer  
 With no betrayal of despair*

*Some time while light obscures the tree  
 The zenith of its life will be  
 Gone past forever  
 And from thence  
 A second history will commence*

*A chronicle no longer gold  
 A bargaining with mist and mold  
 And finally the broken stem  
 The plummeting to earth, and then*

*An intercourse not well designed  
 For beings of a golden kind  
 Whose native green must arch above  
 The earth's obscene corrupting love*

*And still the ripe fruit and the branch  
 Observe the sky begin to blanch  
 Without a cry, without a prayer  
 With no betrayal of despair*

*Oh courage! Could you not as well  
 Select a second place to dwell  
 Not only in that golden tree  
 But in the frightened heart of me?*

– Tennessee Williams, *Night of the Iguana*

*Do Not Stand by my Grave and Weep*

*Do not stand by my grave and weep,  
 I am not there. I do not sleep.  
 I am a thousand winds that blow,  
 I am the diamond glints on snow.  
 I am the sun on ripened grain,  
 I am the gentle autumn rain.  
 When you awake in the morning hush,  
 I am the swift uplifting rush  
 of quiet birds in circled flight.  
 I am the stars that shine at night.  
 Do not stand by my grave and cry,  
 I am not there, I did not die.*

- Mary Elizabeth Frye

*When Death Comes*

*When death comes  
 like the hungry bear in autumn;  
 when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse*

*to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;  
 when death comes  
 like the measles-pox*

*when death comes  
 like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,*

*I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:  
 what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?*

*And therefore I look upon everything  
 as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,  
 and I look upon time as no more than an idea,  
 and I consider eternity as another possibility,*

*and I think of each life as a flower, as common  
 as a field daisy, and as singular,*

*and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,  
tending, as all music does, toward silence,*

*and each body a lion of courage, and something  
precious to the earth.*

*When it's over, I want to say all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.*

*When it's over, I don't want to wonder  
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.*

*I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,  
or full of argument.*

*I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.*

*--Mary Oliver*

*"Perhaps the deepest reason why we are afraid of death is because we do not know who we are. We believe in a personal, unique, and separate identity — but if we dare to examine it, we find that this identity depends entirely on an endless collection of things to prop it up: our name, our "biography," our partners, family, home, job, friends, credit cards... It is on their fragile and transient support that we rely for our security. So when they are all taken away, will we have any idea of who we really are?"*

*— Sogyal Rinpoche*

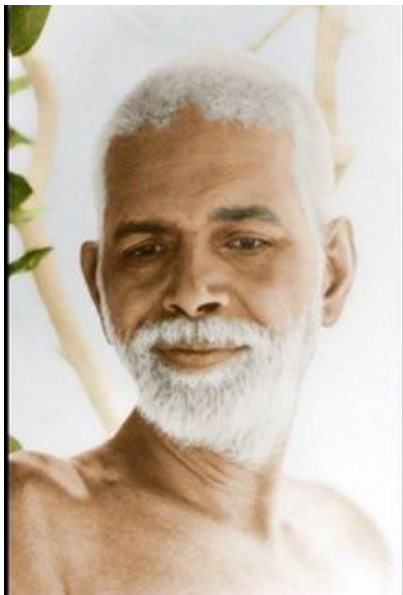
#### **Four: Avatars**

In every generation spiritual geniuses appear – men and women whose connection to the Source of Being is unusually clear and commanding. They serve as guides for the rest of us. They are few in every generation, and the vast majority of them are probably unremembered by history, but they are powerful forces of nature, and they transform the lives of those fortunate enough to be able to recognize them. There is always something mysterious about them: according to the Hindu scriptures, it is as difficult to trace the path a sage pursues as it is to draw a line marking the course a bird takes in flight. Most of us have to be content with a slow and laborious journey toward the goal. But a few are born adepts. They seem to fly non-stop to the common home of all beings. We take heart when such beings appear, and though unable to keep pace with them, we are inspired by their presence and lifted up by the foretaste they transmit to us of the joy of the enlightened state.

Below I talk about two enlightened beings who have deeply influenced my life, Ramana Maharshi, and Jesus Christ.



### Ramana Maharshi



*"The sense of 'I' pertains to the person, the body and brain. When a man knows his true Self for the first time something else arises from the depths of his being and takes possession of him. That something is behind the mind; it is infinite, divine, eternal. Some people call it the Kingdom of Heaven, others call it the Soul and others again Nirvana and Hindus call it Liberation; you may give it what name you wish. When this happens a man has not really lost himself; rather he has found himself.*

*Unless and until a man embarks on this quest of the true Self, doubt and uncertainty will follow his footsteps through life. The greatest kings and statesmen try to rule others when in their heart of hearts they know that they cannot rule themselves. Yet the greatest power is at the command of the man who has penetrated to his inmost depth.... What is the use of knowing about everything else when you do not yet know who you are? Men avoid this inquiry into the true Self, but what else is there so worthy to be undertaken?"*

*--Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-knowledge (Arthur Osborne)*

*In direct knowing, you can feel yourself one with the One that exists.*

*The whole body becomes a mere power, a force-current. Your life becomes a needle drawn to a huge mass of magnet; and, as you go deeper and deeper, you become a mere center and then not even that; for you become a mere consciousness.*

*There are no thoughts or cares any longer, they were shattered at the threshold. It is an inundation. You are a mere straw, you are swallowed alive, but it is very delightful. For you become the very thing that swallows you. This is the union of the individual with the Absolute,*

*self with Reality, the loss of ego in the real Self, the destruction of falsehood, the attainment of Truth.*

*-- Crumbs from Sri Ramana Maharshi's Table, Swami Ramananda Saraswati*

*Without the Infinite Power, God, the true Self, this incense would not burn, this world would not exist. This Self is in all forms. It alone gives them reality.*

*Hence the Illumined One finds himself in all others, for he has found Unity and no longer perceives multiplicity. The universe exists within the Self. Therefore it is real, but only because it obtains its reality from the Self. We call it unreal, however, to indicate its changing appearances and transient forms, whereas we call the Self real because it is changeless. After realization, the body and all else will not appear different from the Self.*

*- Conscious Immortality compiled by Paul Brunton*

If anyone occupies the role of “guru” in my life, it is Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi. Of all the enlightened beings whose lives and influence have crossed my path, none has a more special place in my heart than him. When I call on him, I can always count on sensing his compassionate and protective presence. I have a spiritual lineage which connects me to him through my Spirit Rock teacher, Howie Cohn. His teacher was H.W.L. Poonja, who was, in turn, a direct disciple of Ramana. I keep a picture of Ramana in my office where I can look at it whenever I need to when I’m talking to patients, as a reminder and an encouragement to speak from my compassionate heart.

The story of his life is an amazing example of what is possible for a man or woman who surrenders completely to the divine.

He was born in 1879, in South India, the second of four children in an orthodox Brahmin family. His childhood was unremarkable, but at the age of 17 he had a sudden awakening experience, after which he was forever changed. Here is his description of what happened:

*"It was in 1896... that this great change in my life took place. I was sitting alone in a room on the first floor of my uncle's house. I seldom had any sickness and on that day there was nothing wrong with my health, but a sudden violent fear of death overtook me. There was nothing in my state of health to account for it nor was there any urge in me to find out whether there was any account for the fear. I just felt I was going to die and began thinking what to do about it. It did not occur to me to consult a doctor or any elders or friends. I felt I had to solve the problem myself then and there. The shock of the fear of death drove my mind inwards and I said to myself mentally, without actually framing the words: 'Now death has come; what does it mean? What is it that is dying? This body dies.' And at once I dramatised the occurrence of death. I lay with my limbs stretched out still as though rigor mortis has set in, and imitated a corpse so as to give greater reality to the enquiry. I held my breath and kept my lips tightly closed so that no sound could escape, and that neither the word 'I' nor any word could be uttered. 'Well then,' I said to myself, 'this body is dead. It will be carried stiff to the burning ground and there burnt and reduced to ashes. But with the death of the body, am I dead? Is the body I? It is silent and inert, but I feel the full force of my personality and even the voice of I within me, apart from it. So I am*

*the Spirit transcending the body. The body dies but the spirit transcending it cannot be touched by death. That means I am the deathless Spirit.' All this was not dull thought; it flashed through me vividly as living truths which I perceived directly almost without thought process. I was something real, the only real thing about my present state, and all the conscious activity connected with the body was centered on that I. From that moment onwards, the "I" or Self focused attention on itself by a powerful fascination. Fear of death vanished once and for all. The ego was lost in the flood of Self-awareness. Absorption in the Self continued unbroken from that time. Other thought might come and go like the various notes of music, but the I continued like the fundamental sruti note ("that which is heard" i.e. the Vedas and Upanishads) a note which underlies and blends with all other notes."*

After this event, he lost all interest in school, family and friends. He was unable to concentrate on his studies. He avoided company with others and preferred to sit in meditation. He soon realized that any further attempt to live a conventional life would be futile, but also that his family would never allow him to become a sannyasin and leave home. So six weeks after his awakening, he ran away and traveled south to Tiruvannamalai, a town at the foot of the holy mountain Arunachala, where he remained for the rest of his life.

As soon as he arrived he got rid of all his possessions except a loin cloth. He sat down in a temple, crossed his legs, and surrendered himself to the bliss of Being. He didn't speak again for seven years. In the months and years that followed he became so absorbed in meditation that he was often completely unaware of his surroundings. He didn't respond to the ants which bit him incessantly, and at times others had to put food in his mouth to prevent him from starving to death. Young boys in the town were used to seeing renunciates meditating, but none as young as Ramana Maharshi. They taunted him and pelted him with stones, but he never reacted to any of it. Gradually others began to notice the deep peace that emanated from him, and devotees began to gather around him. A bamboo fence was built to protect him.

Eventually his growing fame reached his family, who realized that the young saint people were praising was Ramana. His uncle came to plead with him to return home, and promised that if he did they wouldn't disturb his ascetic life. He sat motionless and unresponsive. Then his mother came, and found him in an alarming state – filthy, emaciated, hair matted, nails overgrown. She spent day after day crying and pleading with him to come home. Again, he remained unresponsive. Finally, another sanyassin took pity on her. He handed Ramana a piece of paper and a pencil and encouraged him to write a response to her pleas. Ramana took the paper, and wrote:

*The Ordainer controls the fate of souls in accordance with their past deeds, their prarabdha karma. Whatever is destined not to happen will not happen, try how hard you may. Whatever is destined to happen will happen, do what you may to stop it. This is certain. The best course therefore is for one to be silent.*

She left in resignation. In 1916, after an ashram had grown up around him, and having come to see him as a divine being, she returned to live as his devotee. She became a cook at the ashram. He was sitting by her side on the last day of her life, and she died in his arms.

In a sense, what was remarkable about his life was that virtually nothing ever happened in it. He never seems to have needed or wanted anything from anyone. He was fully satisfied with his connection to the divine. By the time he was in his early twenties, a group of disciples had gathered around him, and for more than fifty years, his only occupation was bringing other people to Self-realization.

Ramana treated all beings with equal respect. He always referred to animals as “he” or “she” rather than “it,” and there are many touching stories about his relationships with animals. It was said that animals always behaved intelligently in his presence. The ashram cow, Laksmi, bowed whenever he approached. It was claimed that monkeys brought him their disputes to adjudicate.

Ramana's first Western devotee was F.H.Humphreys, an English man who came to India in 1911 at the age of 21 to take up a post in the Police service at Vellore. Given to the practice of occultism, he was in search of a Mahatma. When he met Ramana, he was greatly impressed. Of his first visit, he wrote “...we sat before him, at his feet, and said nothing. We sat thus for a long time and I felt lifted out of myself. For half an hour I looked into the Maharshi's eyes, which never changed their expression of deep contemplation.... The Maharshi is a man beyond description in his expression of dignity, gentleness, self-control and calm strength of conviction.” Humphry's ideas of spirituality changed for the better as a result of the contact with Ramana. He visited him several more times, and wrote of their impact on him, “You can imagine nothing more beautiful than his smile.” And “It is strange what a change it makes in one to have been in his Presence!”

But it was the British theosophist Paul Brunton who was most responsible for spreading his fame in the West. He first met Ramana in 1931. While sitting with him one day, he had an experience of enlightenment which changed his life forever. Here is how he described it: “I find myself outside the rim of world consciousness. The planet which has so far harboured me disappears. I am in the midst of an ocean of blazing light. The latter, I feel rather than think, is the primeval stuff out of which worlds are created, the first state of matter. It stretches away into untellable infinite space, incredibly alive.” Through his books *A Search in Secret India* and *The Secret Path* he made the great saint known in the West. Publication of these books provoked a flood of Western visitors to Ramana. Perhaps the most famous of these was Somerset Maugham, who used Ramana as the model for the guru Sri Ganesha in his novel, *The Razor's Edge*.

Ramana's teaching was simplicity itself. Your ego is an illusion. Your true nature is the Supreme Identity, the Self of All. Realize this, and know peace. “Know that the eradication of the identification with the body is charity, spiritual austerity and ritual sacrifice; it is virtue, divine union and devotion; it is heaven, wealth, peace and truth; it is grace; it is the state of divine silence; it is the deathless death; it is jnana, renunciation, final liberation and bliss.”

No purpose in life is more important than awakening. “Your own Self-Realization is the greatest service you can render the world.”

Our deepest nature is light. “The greatest error of a man is to think that he is weak by nature, evil by nature. Every man is divine and strong in his real nature. What are weak and evil are his habits, his desires and thoughts, but not himself.”

The path to the truth is also simple. “One of two things must be done. Either surrender because you admit your inability and require a higher power to help you, or investigate the cause of misery by going to the source and merging into the Self. Either way you will be free from misery. God never forsakes one who has surrendered.” Follow the path of devotion to God (*bhakti*) – or the path of self-inquiry, or (*jnana*) – or both paths simultaneously, if you are inspired to do that. Both paths lead to the truth.

Self-inquiry was the practice which he repeatedly recommended as the most direct path to Self-realization. At the age of 23, he dictated instructions for this practice to his devotees, who published it as a little booklet called “Who Am I?” He said:

*Of all the thoughts that arise in the mind, the ‘I’ thought is the first. It is only after the rise of the ‘I-thought’ that other thoughts occur.*

*The thought ‘who am I?’ will destroy all other thoughts, and like the stick used for stirring the funeral pyre, it will itself be burnt up in the end. Then, there will be Self-realization. When other thoughts arise, one should not pursue them but should diligently inquire: ‘To whom do they occur?’ It does not matter how many thoughts arise. As each thought arises, one should inquire with alertness, ‘To whom has this thought arisen?’ The answer that would emerge would be ‘to me’. Thereupon if one inquires ‘Who am I?’ the mind will go back to its source; and the thought that arose will subside.*

*With repeated practice in this manner, the mind will develop the power to stay in its source. When the mind that is subtle goes out through the brain and the sense organs, the gross names and forms appear; when it stays in the heart, the names and forms disappear. Not letting the mind go out, but retaining it in the Heart is what is called “inwardness”. Letting the mind go out of the Heart is known as “externalisation”. Thus, when the mind stays in the Heart, the ‘I’ which is the source of all thoughts will go, and the Self which ever exists will shine.*

Ramana’s death, like everything else in his life, was also a teaching. In November of 1948 a tiny lump the size of a pea appeared on his left arm, and was removed by the ashram doctor. But soon another growth appeared. Another operation was done by an eminent surgeon in March. Radium was applied, and, for a time, his health improved, though this was short lived. The doctor told him that a complete amputation of the arm to the shoulder was required, but Ramana did not agree to this. The third and fourth operations were performed in August and December, still to no avail, and further weakened him. For one operation, he was offered anesthetic, which he refused. After the operation, a devotee asked him, “Didn’t that hurt?” He replied “The body had pain. Am I the body?” Alternative treatments were then tried; but all of them proved fruitless and by the end of March it was clear to everyone that there was no hope of saving his life. But Ramana remained peaceful and alert, and never complained.

During this time, he made sure that he was available for darshan by all who wanted to see him, even when his attendants tried to prevent it. As he lay on his couch, thousands filed by for one more moment in his presence. One woman beseeched him, “Bhagavan, you who are curing others must cure yourself and must spare your life for us, your devotees.” He replied with great

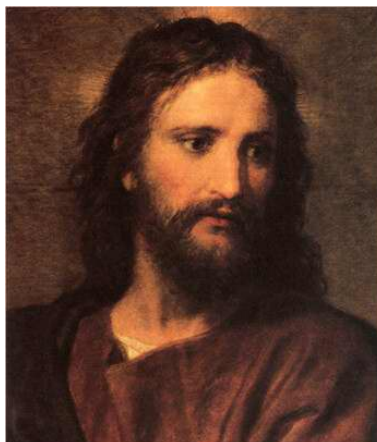
tenderness, “Why are you so attached to this body? Let it go.” To another he said, “They say I am dying. But I am not going anywhere. Where could I go? I am here.” His devotees took this as a promise that, after his death, he would still be with them to guide their spiritual development.

By April 1950, due to his failing health, darshan hours were limited to 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. in the morning and 5 p.m. to 6 p.m. in the evening. Devotees would file past, getting one more luminous look from him. On the evening of 14th April 1950, at about 5 o’clock, he asked his attendants to help him to sit up. The devotees began chanting one of his favorite chants, ‘Arunachala Siva, Arunachala Siva’. When Ramana heard this, his face lit up with radiant joy. Tears began to flow from his eyes and continued to flow for a long time. His breathing became gradually slower and slower and, at 8:47 p.m., it subsided quietly. There was no fear, no struggle, no death spasm. The next breath just never came.

His ashram still thrives to this day, and is a destination for pilgrims from around the world. It is said that a palpable energy emanates from his tomb, and all over the world there are men and women who feel, as do I, lifted up by his deathless, compassionate presence.

What is so remarkable about Ramana is that, once he awakened, nothing in the world ever interested him again. He never traveled, he never had any intimate relationships with anyone, and his life seems to have been completely free of the interpersonal dramas that the rest of us go through. It doesn’t seem to be accurate to say that he renounced the world; rather that once he experienced the bliss of Being the world just dropped away because it could no longer hold his attention. His entire life is a *transcendence* of this world. I love him because he was living proof of the reality and power of the divine, but there is no question of ever being able to emulate his example. His life was a miracle, and he was truly one of a kind. For those of us who still live in the trance of *maya*, he is a reminder that the world that is so solid and real to us is really a kind of dream; and it is a dream from which we all will ultimately awaken.

**Jesus Christ**



*The Father uttered One Word; that word is his Son, and He utters Him forever in everlasting silence; and in silence the soul has to hear it.*  
— St. John of the Cross

I'll begin by talking about who I believe Jesus was *not*.

I've always felt a deep connection to Jesus, but I don't call myself a Christian. "Christian" means different things to different people, but what seems to be common to almost all Christians is a belief in the complete uniqueness of Jesus. He is usually regarded as the one and only incarnation of God, or, at the very least, as a man chosen by God for a role in history reserved for him alone. Most Christians seem to believe that Jesus is the *only* path to salvation. The reason I don't call myself a Christian is because I can't accept that Christianity – or any other religion, including Buddhism -- is privileged in this way. Jesus isn't the exclusive property of Christianity. His life and teaching belong to the common heritage of humanity. I believe there are good reasons to doubt that he ever made any claims of exclusivity about himself; and if he was the enlightened being that I believe he was, it is hard for me to imagine how he *could have* made such claims. The universal lesson of mystical awakening is oneness, never separation and uniqueness.

But he must have been an extraordinary man; probably he was the most enlightened being of his time. Unfortunately, in the process of transforming him from man to Savior, the new church mythologized him; and once he became the symbol of a church, sectarian interests distorted and rewrote his message to serve the needs of the institution. This makes it difficult to be clear as to what the "historical Jesus" actually did say about who he was, and just what were the "glad tidings" which he proclaimed. We know that the canonical gospels that have come down to us are the product of many minds over a span of several centuries. They contain so much that is beautiful and tender, and clearly come from a man who was intimately familiar with the presence and compassion of God. The Sermon on the Mount, the parables of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan, the injunctions against judging others, the saying that we must become again as little children in order to enter the kingdom – all of these things reveal someone who was deeply enlightened. But there is also so much that is so harsh and ugly and sectarian that it simply cannot have come from the same mind.

In *The Gospel According to Jesus*, Stephen Mitchell writes: "Jesus teaches us, in his sayings and by his actions, not to judge (in the sense of not to condemn), but to keep our hearts open to all people; the later "Jesus" is the archetypal judge, who will float down terribly on the clouds for the world's final rewards and condemnations. Jesus cautions against anger and teaches the love of enemies; "Jesus" calls his enemies "children of the Devil" and attacks them with the utmost vituperation and contempt. Jesus talks of God as a loving Father, even to the wicked; "Jesus" preaches a God who will cast the disobedient into everlasting flames. Jesus includes all people when he calls God "your Father in heaven; "Jesus" says "my Father in heaven." Jesus teaches that all those who make peace, and all those who love their enemies, are sons of God; "Jesus" refers to himself as *the* son of God. Jesus isn't interested in defining who he is (except for one passing reference to himself as a prophet); "Jesus" talks on and on about himself. Jesus teaches God's absolute forgiveness; "Jesus" utters the horrifying statement that "whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness but is guilty of an eternal sin." The epitome of this

narrowhearted, sectarian consciousness is a saying which a second-century Christian scribe put into the mouth of the resurrected Savior at the end of Mark: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever doesn't will be damned."

There are also legitimate doubts as to whether Jesus held the apocalyptic view of history that John the Baptist preached, although the majority consensus of Biblical scholars seems to be that he did. In his time many Jews expected an imminent divine intervention in history in the form of the Suffering Servant prophesied by Isaiah -- a Messiah ("anointed one") who would unify the Jewish tribes, end the Roman occupation, and create a universal Kingdom of God on earth. Some kind of fervent belief like this is probably what motivated John, and the record suggests that Jesus' encounter with him precipitated his own awakening. "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:16-17)

But it may also be that the depth of Jesus' awakening fundamentally altered his understanding of the nature of the kingdom. He made statements which suggest that he didn't see it as some yet-to-be realized future state, either at the end of history on earth, or in heaven -- but rather as something already present. In Luke 17:20-21, he says that one won't be able to observe God's Kingdom arriving, because "the kingdom of God is within you." In John 18:36 he says to Pilate "My kingdom is not of this world." In Thomas 113, he says that God's Kingdom "is spread out upon the earth, and people don't see it."

Those who expected him to lead a war of liberation against the Romans were sorely disappointed when he told them to "resist not evil," when he blessed the peacemakers, and when he constantly emphasized the importance of forgiveness. The Jesus Seminar (a group of about 150 scholars and laymen which tasked itself, in 1985, with discerning as much as possible about who the historical Jesus really was) concluded that apocalyptic statements attributed to Jesus could have originated from early Christians, since apocalyptic expectations were common among the early Christians; but that because the statements about God's Kingdom being mysteriously present don't really mesh with the apocalyptic view it is likely that they originated with Jesus himself. Eckhart Tolle conjectures that if Jesus had lived today he would have used a word like "dimension" rather than "kingdom."

So who was Jesus, and what did he teach?

We must frankly admit that we cannot know with any certainty who the "historical Jesus" really was. But I think that a good case can be made for the view that he was a Jewish peasant who had a passionate mystical awakening, and that he did his best to express what he had seen within the limits of the only religious tradition he could have known.

In *The Gospel According to Jesus*, Stephen Mitchell knits together a gospel that contains only those elements which the majority consensus of Bible scholars regards as most likely to be authentic. The picture of Jesus that emerges from this project "speaks in harmony with the supreme teachings of all the great religions; the Upanishads, the Tao te Ching, the Buddhist Sutras, the Zen and Sufi and Hassidic masters... What is the Gospel of Jesus? Simply this: that



the love we all long for in our innermost heart is already present, beyond longing...Like all the great spiritual Masters, Jesus taught one thing only: presence. Ultimate reality, the luminous, compassionate intelligence of the universe, is not somewhere else, in some heaven light-years away. It didn't manifest itself any more fully to Abraham or Moses than to us, nor will it be any more present to some Messiah at the far end of time. It is always right here, right now."

Alan Watts saw Jesus as a mystic who taught the same message -- Thou Art That -- that is found in the *Upanishads*. He discusses one of the passages in which Jesus supposedly proclaims his exclusive identity with God. In John 10:30 Jesus says "I and the Father are one." Immediately his enemies pick up stones to throw at him. Then -- "Jesus said to them 'I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?' 'We are not stoning you for any good work,' they replied, 'but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.' Jesus answered them, 'Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are 'gods.' [Psalm 82] If he called them 'gods,' to whom the word of God came -- and Scripture cannot be set aside --what about the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son'? [the original Greek says 'a son of God.']

Alan Watts comments:

"In other words, the Gospel, or "good news" that Jesus was trying to convey, despite the limitations of his tradition, was that we are all sons of God. When he uses the terms *I am* (as in "Before Abraham was, *I am*") or *Me* (as in "No one comes to the Father but by *Me*"), he is intending to use them in the same way as Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gita:

'He who sees Me everywhere and sees all in Me; I am not lost to him, nor is he lost to Me. The yogi who, established in oneness, worships Me abiding in all beings, lives in Me, whatever be his outward life.'

"And by this 'Me' Krishna means the atman that is at once the basic self in us and in the universe. To know this is to enjoy eternal life, to discover that the fundamental "I am" feeling, which you confuse with your superficial ego, is the ultimate reality forever and ever, amen.

"In this essential respect, the Gospel has been obscured and muffled almost from the beginnings. For Jesus was presumably trying to say that our consciousness is the divine spirit, "the light which enlightens every one who comes into the world," and which George Fox, founder of the Quakers, called the Inward Light. But the Church, still bound to the image of God as the King of kings, couldn't accept this Gospel. It adopted a religion *about* Jesus instead of the religion *of* Jesus. It kicked him upstairs and put him in the privileged and unique position of being the Boss's son, so that, having this unique advantage, his life and example became useless to everyone else. The individual Christian must not know that his own "I am" is the one that existed before Abraham. In this way, the Church institutionalized and made a virtue of feeling chronic guilt for not being as good as Jesus. It only widened the alienation, the colossal difference that monotheism put between man and God." (*Myth and Religion*)

But when we understand the Gospel as the perennial message of mysticism, we can see passages like the following in a new light:

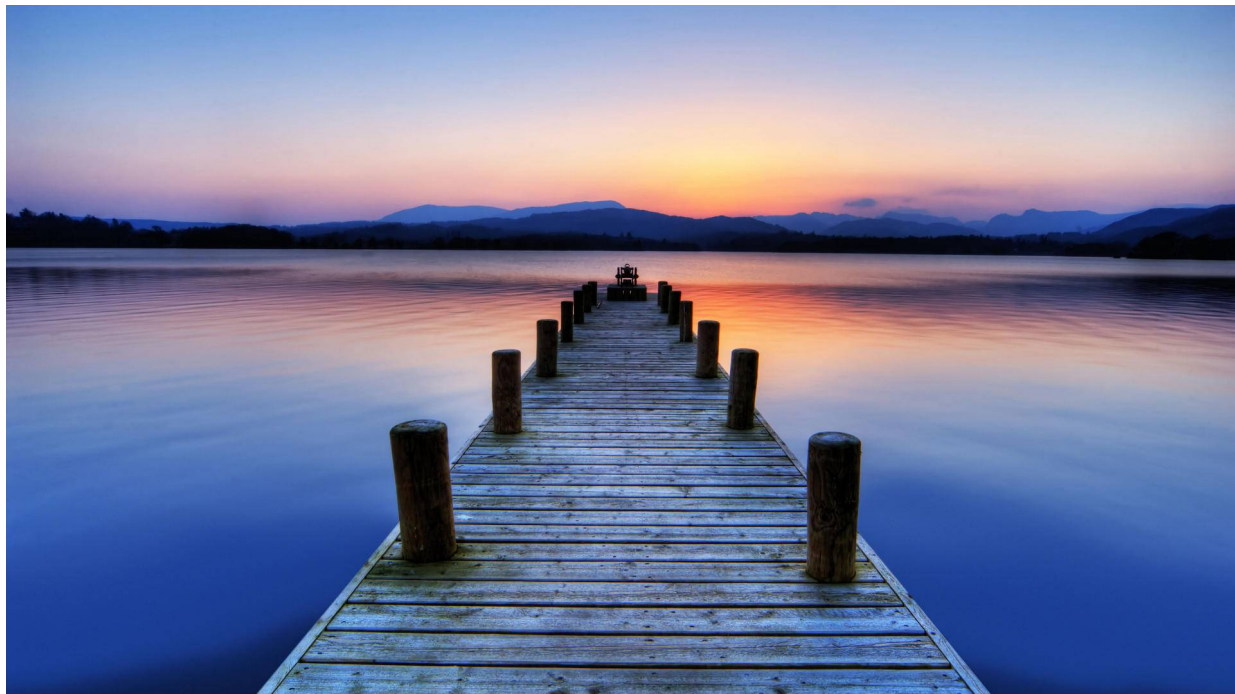
John 14:20 “On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.”

John 17:20-23 “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message. that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one -- I in them and you in me -- so that they may be brought to complete unity.”

It's ironic that probably no one has summed up more succinctly the mystical meaning of Jesus' gospel than that great enemy of Christianity, Friedrich Nietzsche. He wrote “What is the ‘good news’? That true life, eternal life, has been found – it is not something promised, it is already here, it is *within you*, as life lived in love, in love without subtraction, or exclusion, without distance. Everyone is the child of God – Jesus definitely claims nothing for himself alone – and as a child of God everyone is equal to everyone else.” (*The Antichrist*)

In the terminology of yoga, if Ramana Maharshi represents the path of *jnana* (wisdom), Jesus represents the path of *bhakti* (devotion). The truth to which he awakened was no formless Absolute, but the light of infinite, fathomless love. For him, the ultimate reality is our *Father* in heaven. I believe that his glad tidings were that we are all incarnations of God's love; and that the purpose of his ministry was to demonstrate -- by his life – that it is possible for us to manifest that love here and now. He taught his disciples not to resist evil because there is no need for resistance – love alone is sufficient to overcome all the horrors of this world. He inspired Tolstoy, and Gandhi and Martin Luther King – and countless others throughout history who have labored for justice – to have faith in the power of divine love to bring the Kingdom of God to the Earth. He didn't defend himself from the threat of execution, and went to the cross willingly, not to pay some imagined ransom, but to demonstrate that love is more powerful even than death. In that demonstration – for those who have eyes to see – he was successful: after his death his disciples experienced his tangible and loving presence; and down the centuries, so have millions of others. I am among them.

### **Five: The Path of Awakening**



*Groveling, man knows well; despair is seldom alien; yet these are perversities, no part of man's true lot. The day he wills, he is set on the path to freedom.*  
 -- Paramahansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*

*The great mystics of all religions agree that in the very depths of the unconscious, in every one of us, there is a living presence that is not touched by time, place or circumstance. Life has only one purpose, they add, and that is to discover this presence. The men and women who have done this – Francis of Assisi, for example, Mahatma Gandhi, Teresa of Avila, the Compassionate Buddha – are living proof of the words of Jesus Christ, ‘The kingdom of heaven is within.’*

*“But they are quick to tell us — every one of them — that no one can enter that kingdom, and discover the Ruler who lives there, who has not brought the movement of the mind under control. And they do not pretend that our own efforts to tame the mind will suffice in themselves. Grace, they remind us, is all-important. ‘Increase my grace,’ Thomas a Kempis prays, ‘that I may be able to fulfill thy words, and to work out mine own salvation.’*

*“The hallmark of the man or woman of God is gratitude – endless, passionate gratitude for the previous gift of spiritual awareness.... it surrounds us always. Like a wind that is always blowing, said Francis de Sales; like fire, said Catherine of Genoa, that never stops burning.*

*-Eknath Easwaran*

### The Little Duck

*By Donald C. Babcock*

(Originally published in The New Yorker: October 4th, 1947)

Now we are ready to look at something pretty special.  
 It is a duck riding the ocean a hundred feet beyond the surf.  
     No, it isn't a gull.  
     A gull always has a raucous touch about him.  
 This is some sort of duck, and he cuddles in the swells.  
     He isn't cold, and he is thinking things over.  
     There is a big heaving in the Atlantic,  
     And he is part of it.  
 He looks a bit like a mandarin, or the Lord Buddha meditating under the Bo tree.  
     But he has hardly enough above the eyes to be a philosopher.  
     He has poise, however, which is what philosophers must have.  
 He can rest while the Atlantic heaves, because he rests in the Atlantic.  
     Probably he doesn't know how large the ocean is.  
     And neither do you.  
     But he realizes it.  
     And what does he do, I ask you. He sits down in it.  
 He reposes in the immediate as if it were infinity—which it is.  
     That is religion, and the duck has it.  
 He has made himself a part of the boundless, by easing himself into it just where it  
     touches him.

### Samvega and Pasada

In the archetypal story of the Buddha's life, the event that set him on the spiritual path occurred when he left the protection of his palace and wandered outside. There he saw what are called the four heavenly messengers. He saw someone who was sick, someone who was old, and a corpse. He had lived such a protected life that these sights shocked him. He asked his attendant if these things would befall him, too, and the attendant assured him that they would. The fourth of the heavenly messengers suggested that there was a way out – he saw a renunciate sitting cross-legged in peaceful meditation.

The Buddha's encounter with the heavenly messengers engendered in him an experience called *samvega*. In Buddhism, this experience is usually held to be the fundamental motivation for entering on a spiritual path, but there is no exact translation into English. Thanissaro Bhikku describes it in this way: "It's a hard word to translate because it covers such a complex range — at least three clusters of feelings at once: the oppressive sense of shock, dismay, and alienation that come with realizing the futility and meaninglessness of life as it's normally lived; a chastening sense of our own complacency and foolishness in having let ourselves live so blindly; and an anxious sense of urgency in trying to find a way out of the meaningless cycle." (*Noble Strategy*).

I think samvega is something almost all of us experience at some point in our lives – that sudden panic at the suspicion of the utter emptiness and pointlessness of everything we're doing. As Thoreau famously wrote in the first chapter of *Walden*, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go

into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind.” As Thoreau suggests, most of us find *samvega* so uncomfortable that we try to get away from it. We bury it under distractions, or we try to talk ourselves out of it. The Buddha became the Buddha because he resisted the temptation to look away, and the passion to find some way out of suffering took hold of him.

When the Buddha saw the renunciate, the emotion he felt is termed *pasada*, another complex set of feelings usually translated as "clarity and serene confidence." It's what keeps *samvega* from turning into despair. In the prince's case, he gained a clear sense of his predicament and of the way out of it, leading to something beyond aging, illness, and death, at the same time feeling confident that the way would work.

Thanissaro Bhikku continues, “As the early Buddhist teachings freely admit, the predicament is that the cycle of birth, aging, and death *is* meaningless. They don't try to deny this fact and so don't ask us to be dishonest with ourselves or to close our eyes to reality. As one teacher has put it, the Buddhist recognition of the reality of suffering – so important that suffering is honored as the first noble truth – is a gift, in that it confirms our most sensitive and direct experience of things, an experience that many other traditions try to deny.” For this reason, practitioners are encouraged to cultivate *samvega*, by, for instance, doing charnel ground meditation practice to understand the reality of impermanence deeply. From there, we're taught to investigate further, and to see that the true cause of suffering is not *out there* – in society or some outside being – but *within ourselves*.

All of the spiritual traditions agree that a spiritual path is indispensable to overcome the obstacles which lie between us and freedom, but there are fundamental differences about the nature of the obstacles. In the Abrahamic religions, they are more often understood in moral terms as *sin*, while in Hinduism and Buddhism they are usually understood as *ignorance*. In Buddhism, *ignorance of our true nature* is the basis of all human suffering. When we don't know who we really are we are alienated from the source of wisdom and compassion that lies within. As a result, we fall into the fundamental mistake of believing that the causes of our suffering are outside of ourselves, and that the remedy for our suffering must also lie outside as well. We inevitably fall victim to what are known as *the three poisons*, *the three unwholesome roots*, or *the three fires* -- *greed*, *hatred*, and *delusion*. The Buddha describes them as defilements, bonds, fetters, hindrances, and knots. They are the source of all human suffering.

## The Three Poisons

### 1. Greed

Greed is not simple desire, but *burning* desire, unquenchable thirst or *tanha*, craving, and lust; we expect the objects of our desire to provide us with lasting satisfaction so that we'll feel fulfilled, whole, and complete. But as long as we are afflicted with greed, fulfillment always eludes us. The poison of greed creates an insatiable inner hunger, and the result is that we are always striving towards an unattainable goal. We mistakenly believe our happiness is dependent upon gratifying the next desire, but when we do that, no lasting satisfaction follows. Instead,

greed and desire arise for something else, and we're off and running again, looking outside of ourselves for the next thing that we hope will finally bring us lasting satisfaction. Because of our greed, we are never content. We always want more; we want bigger and better and more intense. An inevitable consequence of this state of mind is a lack of generosity and compassion toward others. Greed poisons our personal lives, our professional lives, and the whole world of international relations. Global conflict and warfare, as well as the destruction of our environment are obvious symptoms of our corporate and political greed. Greed is an endless and pernicious cycle that only brings suffering and unhappiness in its wake.

## 2. *Hatred*

Hatred manifests as anger, hostility, dislike, aversion, or ill-will. Aversion means habitually resisting, pushing away, denying, and avoiding unpleasant feelings, circumstances, and people we don't like. We want everything to be pleasant, comfortable, and satisfying all the time. This impossible expectation reinforces our perception of duality and separation. Hatred or anger thrusts us into a vicious cycle in which we always find conflict and enemies everywhere around us. We can never be calm or feel safe, because we are endlessly occupied with strategies of self-protection or revenge. We also create internal conflict because we're also averse to our own uncomfortable feelings. We deny, resist, and push away our own fear, hurt, loneliness, etc., and treat these feelings as internal enemies. We create conflict and enemies in the world around us and within our own being.

## 3. *Delusion*

Delusion refers to our misperception of the nature of things as they are. The *Vipallasa Sutta* (Distortions of Mind) succinctly catalogs these misperceptions:

*Sensing no change in the changing,  
Sensing pleasure in suffering,  
Assuming "self" where there's no self,  
Sensing the un-lovely as lovely*

The result of delusion is that we're constantly looking outside of ourselves for happiness, satisfaction, and solutions to our problems. When we're deluded we're out of sync with ourselves, others, and with life; which means we're not living in harmony with the Dharma. The outward searching creates the vicious circle of even more frustration, anger, and delusion. Because of our delusion, we don't recognize the negative and unwholesome actions that create suffering, nor the life-affirming actions that create happiness.

The Buddha taught that the poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion can be transformed and overcome. He taught that enlightenment is our true nature. Therefore, the goal of spiritual practice is to liberate ourselves from the three fires so that the clarity, radiance, and joy that is the core of our being can manifest.

But the path of awakening is the work of a lifetime. We have – possibly for countless eons – been the slaves of our greed, hatred, and delusion; so this work of purification and

transformation cannot be done hastily, in obedience to our demand for quick results. This work requires patience, faith, care, persistence, guidance and support from others, and deep compassion for ourselves and others.

#### 4. *The Antidotes are the Path*

The path of liberation begins with ethical discernment; we commit ourselves to learn to discriminate those behaviors that lead to more suffering from those that lead to less suffering; and we commit to abandon the former.

Then we begin the work of purification in the place where the hindrances originate – in the mind itself. This purification and transformation begins with the challenge of calming the mind and seeing deeply into ourselves. In order to eliminate the fetters, we first have to learn to recognize them as soon as they arise. Being mindful and aware, we can then discern how these deep-seated poisons influence our everyday thoughts, feelings, speech, and actions. Mindful awareness is the beginning of understanding, the beginning of our ability to put out the fires. To achieve this awareness, we train the mind through meditation. When we are mindful of our experience in everyday situations, we are able to notice when thoughts and emotions arise and begin to disturb us. In this way, we can be conscious of these thoughts and emotions and work with them skillfully before they get out of control, and cause harm to ourselves and others.

In addition to meditation practice, there are other antidotes or alternatives to the three fires. We subdue our destructive habits by cultivating the mental factors that are directly opposed to them. These antidotes are called *the three wholesome roots*: non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion.

To overcome greed, we learn to cultivate selflessness, generosity, detachment, and contentment. If we are experiencing greed, strong desire, or attachment, we contemplate the impermanence or the disadvantages of the objects of our desire. We can practice giving away those things we would most like to hold onto. We practice acts of selfless service and charity, offering care and assistance to others in any way we can, free of all desire for recognition or compensation. There is nothing inherently harmful about enjoying and sharing the pleasures and the beauty of the objects of this material world. The problems associated with greed and attachment only arise when we mistakenly believe and act as if the source of our happiness is outside of us.

To overcome hatred, we cultivate loving-kindness, compassion, patience, and forgiveness. We practice opening to the entire spectrum of our experiences without hatred or aversion. We practice meeting unpleasant experiences in the outer world with patience, kindness, forgiveness, and compassion; and we also practice meeting our own unpleasant feelings in the same way. We learn to meet our own experiences of loneliness, hurt, doubt, fear, insecurity, inadequacy, depression, and despair, with openness and lovingkindness. We practice meeting and embracing ourselves and others with compassion and wisdom.

To overcome delusion, we cultivate wisdom, insight, and right understanding. Learning to experience reality exactly as it is, without the distortions of our self-centered desires, fears, and expectations, we free ourselves from delusion. Deeply sensing and acting in harmony with the interdependent, impermanent, and ever-changing nature of this world – realizing that all beings



are inseparably related and that lasting happiness doesn't come from anything external – we free ourselves from delusion. As we develop a clear understanding of karma, knowing the positive, wholesome actions that bring happiness and the negative, unwholesome actions that bring suffering, we cultivate the wisdom, insight, and right understanding that free us from delusion.

By studying the Dharma and applying the teachings properly in our lives, we gradually wear away even the most stubborn habitual behaviors, liberating ourselves from stress, unhappiness, and suffering. The Buddha calls this the “taintless liberation of the mind.” When the three fires of greed, hatred, and delusion have been extinguished, the sublime bliss of Nirvana shines forth as our essential nature.

## Faith

*Faith is sensitiveness to what transcends nature, knowledge and will, awareness of the ultimate, alertness to the holy dimension of all reality. Faith is a force in man, lying deeper than the stratum of reason and its nature cannot be defined in abstract, static terms. To have faith is not to infer the beyond from the wretched here, but to perceive the wonder that is here and to be stirred by the desire to integrate the self into the holy order of living. It is not a deduction but an intuition, not a form of knowledge, of being convinced without proof, but the attitude of mind toward ideas whose scope is wider than its own capacity to grasp.*

*Such alertness grows from the sense for the meaningful, for the marvel of matter, for the core of thoughts. It is begotten in passionate love for the significance of all reality, in devotion to the ultimate meaning which is only God. By our very existence we are in dire need of meaning, and anything that calls for meaning is always an allusion to Him. We live by the certainty that we are not dust in the wind, that our life is related to the ultimate, the meaning of all meanings. And the system of meanings that permeates the universe is like an endless flight of stairs. Even when the upper stairs are beyond our sight, we constantly rise toward the distant goal.*

*– Abraham Joshua Heschel, “The Holy Dimension,” in Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*

*Religion is the vision of something which stands beyond, behind, and within, the passing flux of immediate things; something which is real, and yet waiting to be realized; something which is a remote possibility, and yet the greatest of present facts; something which gives meaning to all that passes, and yet eludes apprehension; something whose possession is the final good, and yet is beyond all reach; something which is the ultimate ideal, and the hopeless quest.*

*-- Alfred North Whitehead*

*Therefore, dear Sir, love your solitude and try to sing out with the pain it causes you. For those who are near you are far away... and this shows that the space around you is beginning to grow vast.... be happy about your growth, in which of course you can't take anyone with you, and be gentle with those who stay behind; be confident and calm in front of them and don't torment them with your doubts and don't frighten them with your faith or joy, which they wouldn't be able to comprehend. Seek out some simple and true feeling of what you have in common with them, which doesn't necessarily have to alter when you yourself change again and again; when you see them, love life in a form that is not your own and be indulgent toward those who are growing old, who are afraid of the aloneness that you trust.... and don't expect any*



*understanding; but believe in a love that is being stored up for you like an inheritance, and have faith that in this love there is a strength and a blessing so large that you can travel as far as you wish without having to step outside it. — Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet*

In all of the spiritual traditions, faith is understood as an essential foundation for the arduous path of spiritual awakening.

Throughout my early years, and until my awakening, I understood the word to mean belief without evidence in events like the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection. The world of faith was separate from the world of *facts*, which was the domain of science. Science dealt with what could be verified; religion was about beliefs for which there was no evidence.

This simplistic scientism slowly dissolved as I increasingly understood that an authentic spiritual life is based on facts of experience that are no less concrete than the experiences which are the basis of science. I gradually came to understand that the spiritual life is not really so much about belief in improbable doctrines as it is direct experience of a divine element in our lives. Spiritual experience quite naturally leads to beliefs about what our spiritual experiences mean, but once we've understood that the heart of spirituality is *experience*, then our relationship to belief begins to change. I'm quite willing to acknowledge that all of my ideas about ultimate reality and the meaning of life may be completely mistaken. But since the heart of spirituality is experience, this doesn't cause me much anxiety.

I now understand faith in a different sense. Instead of belief in unverifiable doctrines, I see it as an attitude of *trust* and *confidence* toward life and the world. I think it was Einstein who said that the most fundamental spiritual question is whether the universe is hostile or friendly to us. My spiritual life has been a long training in the faith that, ultimately, the universe is friendly to us. So, while all of my specific beliefs may be completely mistaken, I have faith that, whatever the ultimate nature of the universe is, I can meet it with an open, confident, and trusting heart.

It is still true, though, that the most consistent mistake I've made in my spiritual life is that too frequently and for too long I've treated spirituality as if it were an intellectual issue; as if it were primarily about believing or not believing this or that. What I think I now understand is that reason can take us to the door of the spiritual life, but it can't cross the threshold. It can establish the possibility and the reasonableness of belief in the spiritual dimension of experience, but can't by itself take us into that dimension.

All of the great traditions tell us that there are definite practices and qualities of the heart which must be cultivated in order to experience union with the divine. We are told that we must live a simple life; that is, a life without too much attachment to worldly concerns (power, money, fame, sex, etc.). We must live an ethical life; that is, a life based on non-harming, compassion, and generosity. When we live in this way, we acquire what the Buddha called "the bliss of blamelessness." The less we are weighed down by regrets, shame and guilt over our treatment of others, the easier it will be to listen to the quiet voice of the spirit.

The spirit speaks softly. It is always beckoning, and is always present, but the noise of the world and of our worldly desires can easily drown it out. That is why it's important to spend time

practicing silence and stillness -- what the Eastern traditions know as meditation, and what the Western traditions know as contemplative prayer.

Jesus said (Matthew 7:7), “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” These words, I believe, express a spiritual law. Whenever we turn in humility and sincerity to the divine, the divine answers. The appropriate and natural response, when the divine does answer, is gratitude. Another spiritual law is this: “Practice gratitude for the gifts of the spirit, and more will come.” I need have no more faith than that.

## Ethics

### *Wild Geese*

*You do not have to be good.  
 You do not have to walk on your knees  
 For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
 You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
 love what it loves.  
 Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
 Meanwhile the world goes on.  
 Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
 are moving across the landscapes,  
 over the prairies and the deep trees,  
 and the mountains and the rivers.  
 Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
 are heading home again.  
 Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
 The world offers itself to your imagination,  
 calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—  
 over and over announcing your place  
 in the family of things.  
 -- Mary Oliver*

### *1. Ethics and Truth: A Brief Philosophical Digression*

“It is always wrong to torture small children for pleasure.” Is this statement true? Most people would say “Yes, of course!” without hesitation. Yet, among many modern philosophers, it is by no means clear that the statement is true. In fact, the idea that any kind of ethical truth exists at all is seriously challenged in modern philosophy. Ethical statements aren’t *facts* in the same way that “The world is round” is a fact. Ethical statements don’t state what *is*, but *what ought to be*, and what ought to be is not a part of the material world. No statements about what ought to be can ever be logically derived from statements about what is. This is known as “the is/ought problem”, first pointed out by David Hume. Many philosophers since Hume have tried to find ways around this problem, but no one has ever found a satisfying secular solution. I believe that the problem is insoluble: *obligations* cannot be logically derived from *facts*.

It follows that, if the material world is all that exists, there can be no rational basis for any ethical beliefs. If the world consists of nothing but facts, there can be no prescriptive truth, and ethical statements can be nothing more than statements of preferences and wishes. If what I want is different from what you want, there can be no rational basis for adjudicating our differences. (This is another *reductio ad absurdum* of materialism. If materialism is true, there can be no ethical truth. But ethical truth does exist. Therefore, materialism is false. Q.E.D.)

One of the advantages of the idea of the Great Chain of Being is that it grounds values in the nature of the universe itself. In this view, the highest good is Being itself (or God). Every step upward on the Great Chain represents an increase in the fullness of being, and so each rung on the ladder has greater value than the one below it. The universe has an inherent ethical direction, and there are objective ethical truths which must govern our own ethical conduct. In brief, actions which bring us closer to God are good actions; and those which take us farther away from him are evil.

David Bentley Hart writes: “The good is nothing less than God himself; in his aspect as the original source and ultimate end of all desire: that transcendent reality in which all things exist and in which the will has its highest fulfillment. To exist is to be entirely dependent upon absolute being, and every particular being craves ever more of the riches of being in itself, and so to exist is to be drawn to the absolute, where alone one’s nature can find its own perfection. Thus ontology and ethics are one “science,” and the desire for being is inseparable from the desire for the good.” (*The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss*).

The fundamental ethical impulse in all of us is *love*, Dante’s “love that moves the sun and the other stars,” love understood in its metaphysical sense as the longing of the finite for the infinite. (This Platonic sense of love is the reason, I think, that whenever we love deeply and passionately, we have the unmistakable sense of being in the presence of a wider mystery.)

This ancient metaphysical understanding is, for me, sufficient to establish that our moral intuitions are, in fact, objective truths. That conclusion hardly solves all the thorny philosophical questions about ethics, but I find it sufficient to allow me to shift my attention from theory to practice, and to inquire how I can live a good life.

## 2. *The Foundation of Ethical Conduct*

In Matthew 22:36-40, Jesus is asked, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” His reply is: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” I can imagine no more simple or beautiful summation of the basis of all ethical life than this.

I have sometimes heard this criticism of these words: “What sense can it possibly make to command anyone to love? Love is authentic only when it’s freely felt and freely offered. To treat

it as a commandment might make people more hypocritical or more resentful, but it won't make them one bit more loving."

My answer to this objection is that, first, for the truly awakened, there is no commandment in these words. To open, in direct experience, to the bliss of Being, is also to open to boundless love. And to the eye of the awakened spirit, the "I am" which I know as my own identity is the same as the "I am" of every other sentient being. That means that I am one with all other beings, and that we all are one with God. It is no wonder that Jesus says that his second commandment is "like the first." In fact, it can be seen as just another way of restating the first commandment. The fortunate few who, in every generation, realize their oneness with the Ground of Being can do nothing other than love God with their entire being, and they cannot fail to love all other sentient beings as themselves, because they recognize their identity with all other beings. There is no question of obedience to a commandment; because to see the truth is to love the truth.

But the rest of us still live in ignorance, even when we have glimpsed the truth. We still see through a glass darkly, and need ethical guidelines to bring us into closer alignment with the truth. Jesus' two commandments set the compass, and the ethical precepts direct us toward the final goal. The ethical precepts show us how to bring our minds and actions into alignment with the law of love.

### 3. *A Simple Guide to Ethical Conduct*

In the *Majjhima Nikaya*, Sutta 61, *Advice to Rahula at Ambalatthika*, the Buddha advises his 7-year-old son Rahula on the fundamentals of living an ethical life. He tells Rahula that actions of the body, of speech and of the mind, ought only to be taken after certain reflections:

"Rahula, when you wish to take an action with the body, you should reflect on that same bodily action thus: 'Would this action that I wish to do with the body lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both? Is it an unwholesome bodily action with painful consequences, with painful results?' When you reflect, if you know 'This action that I wish to do with the body would lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both; it is an unwholesome bodily action with painful consequences, with painful results,' then you definitely should not do such an action with the body. But when you reflect, if you know: 'This action I wish to do with the body would not lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both; it is a wholesome bodily action with pleasant consequences, with pleasant results,' then you may do such an action with the body." He advises Rahula to reflect in this way before doing a bodily action, while doing it, and after having done it. He is to do the same reflections with actions of speech and of the mind.

I have found these simple directions to be a consistently reliable ethical guide in my own conduct, and I've also found them useful in helping my patients clear up their ethical confusions. When I use these reflections, I substitute the word "suffering" for the more archaic "affliction", and I ask myself, "Will this action that I am contemplating lead to more suffering or to less suffering for myself and others?" I've found that, whenever I pose this question, the answer is almost always clear and unambiguous, and that I immediately know whether or not the action I'm considering is ethical behavior. This simple question: "Will it lead to more suffering or to less suffering?" leads almost always to an understanding of what constitutes right action in any

situation. Unfortunately, right understanding by itself doesn't guarantee that I'll always behave ethically. For that I also need right intention – a commitment of the will to take only those actions which diminish suffering rather than increase it.

This ethical guide can also be useful for a theist. If one believes, as I do, that whatever draws me closer to God is good and whatever distances me from God is evil, I can ascertain in which direction I'm going by using the yardstick of suffering. One of the three basic characteristics of God is *ananda*, or bliss. If that is the case, then paying attention to whether what I am doing increases or decreases suffering is also a useful yardstick in gauging whether I am drawing closer to God or moving away from him.

There is a Buddhist maxim that I also find helpful in guiding my conduct. The maxim is "*Give no one cause to fear you.*" I know of no ethical principle more moving, or more counterintuitive, than this one. As a boy growing up in a working class neighborhood, I absorbed the standard male conditioning. I learned early that it was important to know how to create fear in others. I understood that, on the street, I had to be armored. I had to posture and strut; look dangerous, even menacing; and appear ready to fight (even though that was mostly bluff). I learned that it was essential for my social, and maybe physical, survival, to conceal my vulnerability, fear, and tenderness. When I was older, I learned in the academic world and in the work world more subtle ways of warding off threats and establishing dominance – self-righteousness, irritation, edginess and impatience; caustic, sarcastic or withering tones; condescension, dismissiveness, ridicule, humiliation, and argumentativeness; sighs and eye rolls; prosecutorial questions, high-handedness, put-downs, and on and on. What a way to live! No one really wants to live like this, even though to one degree or another most of us think we have to. Here's a modern translation of a short poem by Hafiz, which expresses another truth, and an alternative vision:

*"Admit something:  
Everyone you see, you say to them, "Love me."  
Of course you do not do this out loud, otherwise someone would call the cops.  
Still, though, think about this, this great pull in us to connect.  
Why not become the one who lives with a full moon in each eye that is always saying,  
With that sweet moon language,  
What every other eye in this world is dying to hear?"*

Words like these evoke an ancient longing for a different kind of life, but they also engender resistance. The suggestion that we can live less defensively can feel naïve and reckless. The world is a dangerous place. Don't we need to know how to defend ourselves? Yes, we do need to be prepared to assert and defend our legitimate rights and to protect ourselves. But other people don't need to fear us in order to understand that if they're abusive, or that if they break agreements with us, there will be consequences. Do we really need to be perpetually armed to the teeth (physically or psychologically) in order to be safe? I believe that there are real advantages *to me* if the people around me feel calmer, more relaxed, safer, and more at peace with me. And it is a noble aspiration: to give "*the gift of fearlessness*" to every other being in my life.

#### 4. Otherizing

If the commitment to diminish suffering leads to the good, unchecked “otherizing” leads to the bad. By “otherizing” I refer to a human tendency which seems to be innate and universal. As soon as we place people outside of the circle of “us” the mind automatically begins to devalue them and to justify bad treatment of them. But why do we do this? Since otherizing lies at the root of virtually all of humanity’s most intractable problems – racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, militant nationalism, religious bigotry, etc., we’d obviously be better off without it. So how did it ever arise in the first place? Anthropology offers some interesting speculations about this question. For several million years, until the advent of agriculture, our ancestors lived in hunter-gatherer tribes which typically had fewer than 150 members. They were threatened by predators, starvation, and disease, and had to compete with other tribes for scarce resources. In these harsh conditions, those who cooperated with others in their tribe typically lived longer and had more offspring, so natural selection favored the evolution of love, cooperation, empathy, loyalty, and fairness *within* tribes. But those same evolutionary pressures also favored ruthless aggression toward members of competing tribes. Cooperation and aggression evolved synergistically: tribes which were more cooperative were also more successfully aggressive, and aggression toward other tribes demanded cooperation within tribes. Hence the strange duality in human nature: we’re capable of deep love and inspiring acts of self-sacrifice; but we’re also capable of limitless cruelty. Tribalism is alive and well in the structures of our brains.

When we otherize, we more or less unconsciously turn off the neural pathways mediating empathy and compassion, which is why virtually everything we do when we’re otherizing is unskillful or evil behavior. That is why I see the regular practice of compassion and loving kindness meditation as my ethical duty. It is an ethical imperative that we do all that we can to keep our hearts open to those around us. I find it helpful to remember Ram Dass’ simple reflection: “There is no us and them. We’re all us.”

## Spiritual Practices

Below are brief summaries of ten practices which I have found helpful in my spiritual life. All but the first and the last are meditative practices. The first practice is self-inquiry, the work of ending attachment to false views of self. The next practice, mindfulness, is the foundational practice for all the others, but all the others strengthen and deepen mindfulness. The next four, compassion (karuna), lovingkindness (metta), sympathetic joy (mudita), and equanimity (upekkha) are collectively known as the Brahma Viharas, or Divine Abodes. These are the four qualities of the awakened heart which the Buddha also called the Four Immeasurables. The next three meditation practices are practices which I’ve learned from Buddhist teachers and on Buddhist retreats, and which I continue to find especially helpful. They are Forgiveness, Taking in the Good, and Gratitude. The final practice is prayer.

### 1. Self Inquiry

*A human being has so many skins inside, covering the depths of the heart. We know so many things, but we don't know ourselves! Why, thirty or forty skins or hides, as thick and hard as an ox's or bear's, cover the soul. Go into your own ground and learn to know yourself there.*

– Meister Eckhart

*An unquestioned mind is the world of suffering.  
– Byron Katie*

*Within yourself you will find no "I," nor will you discover anyone who hears. This Mind is like the void, yet it hasn't a single spot that can be called empty. This state is often mistaken for Self-realization. But continue to ask yourself even more intensely, "Now who is it that hears?" If you bore and bore into this question, oblivious to anything else, even this feeling of voidness will vanish and you will be unaware of anything-total darkness will prevail.*

*Don't stop here, but keep asking with all your strength, "What is it that hears?" Only when you have completely exhausted the questioning will the question burst; now you will feel like a man come back from the dead. This is true realization.  
– Bassui Tokusho, Three Pillars of Zen*

The Buddha taught that one of the chief causes of human suffering is *sakaaya ditthi*, or “views of self.” (I think that would include views about whether the self does or doesn’t exist.) We suffer because we cling to our egos, because we imagine them to be self-existing, autonomous agents, and because we are prone to develop fixed views of the nature of these “selves.” We suffer, in other words, because we cling to this or that as “me” or “mine.”

In my work as a therapist, I see this idea confirmed on a regular basis. Every day I see suffering people who are completely convinced that they know who they are. Most of the people I see seem to have a “story of me” which consists of a conviction that there is something they lack – they’re not lovable enough or powerful or smart enough, for instance – and have a life goal to overcome these presumed deficiencies.

I believe there are “design flaws” built into the brain and nervous system which guarantee that almost all of us have erroneous ideas about who we are. Our ideas of self tend to be faulty because we form most of them in early childhood, when our brains are least developed and we have the least amount of experience from which to draw conclusions.

As children, we are all “self-centric” – not “selfish.” Children are inherently altruistic, and highly motivated to help the people around them. Babies as young as 18 months have been observed trying to wipe the tears away from a mother’s eyes and comfort her. “Self-centric” means that, as children we all believe that whatever happens around us is about us in some way. It’s easy, for instance, for children to believe that, if their parents separate it’s because they’re bad kids. Children are highly motivated to make the people around them happy, but have very exaggerated ideas about how much they can affect the people around them. Because of this distortion, they’re highly susceptible to “omnipotence guilt,” which is the basis of all irrational guilt.

To show how childhood omnipotence and omnipotence guilt create suffering, I’ll discuss a hypothetical patient whom I’ll call Lisa. Lisa’s mother is seriously and chronically depressed. As a child, Lisa tries everything she can to cheer her up: she’s good, quiet, and cute. But none of her strategies for making her mother happy work. When Lisa is happy and exuberant, she sometimes

seems able to cheer her mother up for a while, but at other times that same exuberance irritates and angers her mother.

As the result of her experiences with her mother, Lisa develops at least four pathogenic beliefs:

1. I cause other people to suffer.
2. I am a burden and a disappointment.
3. I am selfish.
4. If I allow myself to be happy, I abandon my mother to her misery.

The result of these views of self is that, as an adult she stays single and isolated in order not to inflict herself on others.

Sogyal Rinpoche sums up, in the language of Buddhism, what modern psychology has been learning:

“So ego, then, is the absence of true knowledge of who we really are, together with its result: a doomed clutching on, at all costs, to a cobbled together and makeshift image of ourselves, an inevitably chameleon charlatan self that keeps changing and has to, to keep alive the fiction of its existence...Ego is then defined as incessant movements of grasping at a delusory notion of "I" and "mine," self and other, and all the concepts, ideas, desires, and activity that will sustain that false construction...The fact that we need to grasp at all and go on and on grasping shows that in the depths of our being we know that the self does not inherently exist...” (*Sogyal Rinpoche, The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying, p. 117*)

Overcoming pathogenic beliefs is not so easy to do because of another “design flaw”: the brain evolved to believe itself. When we’ve had a belief for a long time, it starts to feel like common sense, and we reflexively give more weight to evidence that supports familiar beliefs than to evidence which doesn’t. In addition, most of our pathogenic beliefs are unconscious, not in the Freudian sense, but in the way that breathing is unconscious. For these reasons, studying the mind takes sustained commitment and energy.

There are many therapeutic approaches which are helpful here, but I find the techniques of cognitive therapy particularly useful. The motto of cognitive therapy could be “Don’t believe everything you think.” A patient in this form of therapy must be willing to develop a skeptical attitude toward their long-cherished assumptions about who they are. Many cognitive therapists teach their patients to keep a notebook with them. Every time their mood changes, especially when they find themselves feeling suddenly anxious or depressed, the instruction is to stop and ask themselves what they were just thinking. By exploring their inner self talk they can begin to get a fix on what my spiritual mentor Howard Cohn calls their “top ten tunes” (though most people have fewer than ten.) Once these faulty beliefs are located, the next step is “disputation,” which involves a rational assessment of the evidence which supports, and that which does not support, the beliefs.



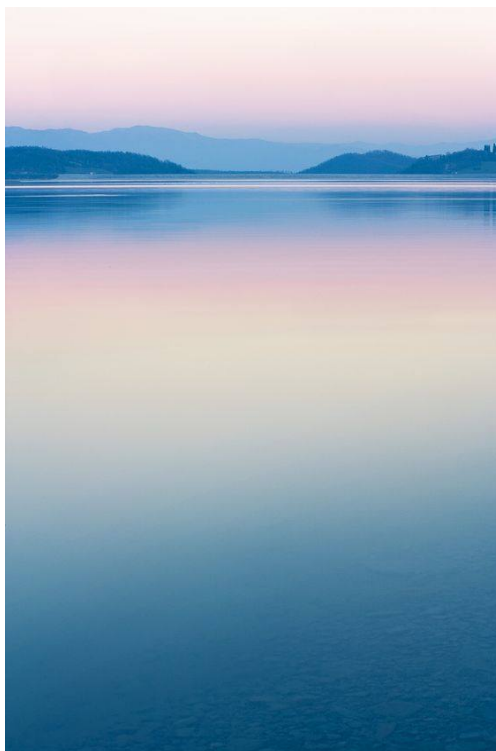
While traditional cognitive therapy can be very helpful, it becomes more powerful when combined with mindfulness practice. Mindfulness makes it possible for us to relate *to* our thoughts rather than *from* them.

One of the first thing people learn when they begin to meditate is that they can't control their thoughts. Practice begins to reveal that thoughts arise according to lawful conditions, like lightning or wind. We can't control them because there is no "thinker." The idea of a "thinker" is just another view of self. Cognitive therapy generally doesn't challenge the idea that there is a thinker separate from thoughts. Buddhist practice does, which is why it can take us deeper into the source of our suffering.

One of the most common fixed ideas of self is that "I am my mind." But if thoughts are impersonal phenomena that arise and pass away according to causes and conditions, then we can begin to see them the way we see clouds in the sky. When we realize that our thoughts are "not self" we don't have to take them so seriously, and they don't torment us so much. To see how this is so, compare these two ideas. "I am a loser," and "The thought 'I am a loser,' is arising. The first thought is a fixed view of self, and the second describes awareness of phenomena that is arising and passing away by itself.

When, through introspection and meditation, we come to a deeper understanding of the changing and ephemeral nature of the ego, we come to understand the changing nature of all that we experience, and we cease to cling to fixed views of who we are. Nothing in our experience is "me" or "mine." But this insight is not the same thing as nihilism, because when we see the ego for the delusion that it is, it also becomes more possible for us to see that in us which is not subject to birth and death.

## 2. *Mindfulness (Vipassana)*



*Can you make peace? Can you be kind? Can you be gentle? If you can, then you can meditate.*  
*– Ajahn Brahm*

*The energy of the mind can be directed in two ways: It can either go into reacting, doing, thinking, struggling and striving; or it can go into letting go, not being involved, not getting entangled, and just being aware without reacting.*  
*– Ajahn Brahm*

*Above all, be at ease, be as natural and spacious as possible. Slip quietly out of the noose of your habitual anxious self, release all grasping, and relax into your true nature. Think of your ordinary emotional, thought-ridden self as a block of ice or a slab of butter left out in the sun. If you are feeling hard and cold, let this aggression melt away in the sunlight of your meditation. Let peace work on you and enable you to gather your scattered mind into the mindfulness of Calm Abiding, and awaken in you the awareness and insight of Clear Seeing. And you will find all your negativity disarmed, your aggression dissolved, and your confusion evaporating slowly like mist into the vast and stainless sky of your absolute nature.*  
*-- Sogyal Rinpoche, The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*

The practice of mindfulness is the foundational meditation practice in every school of Buddhism. All of the more elaborate or complicated practices presuppose a grounding in mindfulness practice.

In Buddhism, the path of awakening is often compared to a bird. One of the bird's wings is wisdom practice, and the other is compassion practice. Together, the two forms of practice carry us in our flight to enlightenment. Mindfulness is generally considered to be a wisdom practice,

because it is about observing whatever arises in the present moment without judgments or discursive thought *about* what one is observing. In the Theravadan tradition, this practice is called *Vipassana*, or insight meditation because it induces “clear seeing” of what is actually happening, and insight into the true nature of phenomena.

But the bird metaphor is only approximately accurate, because the clear seeing in mindfulness is not dry and dispassionate; it is an openness of one’s entire being. “Mindfulness” is an English translation of “sati” from the Satipattana Sutta, *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, one of the foundational suttas, in which the Buddha gives instructions on how to meditate. A more accurate translation of “sati” would be something like “recollectedness” but that translation might make the practice sound like some kind of memory practice. I believe that the term “mindfulness” tends to be misleading to English-speaking people because of the associations we have to the word “mind.” To many people, the term “mindfulness” suggests something analytical, emotionless, detached, aloof, and indifferent. In some ways, the term “heartfulness” is more accurate, because it suggests a practice that is open, warm, affectionate and compassionate. In the Pali language the word for heart and the word for mind are the same – *citta* – so either term could be regarded as equally accurate. But when Westerners learn how to practice *sati*, I think they get the point of the practice better if they think of what they’re doing as “opening the heart to the present” rather than simply “being aware of the present.” In any case, mindfulness is the term we have, so with this *caveat*, that is the term I’ll use in what follows.

Mindfulness is the simplest of the practices, but most of us find it by far the most difficult, at least when we’re just beginning to practice. It can be done while standing, sitting, or lying down, although in formal practice, meditators usually sit in a posture that is relaxed, but erect enough to allow full and unimpeded breathing. In most traditions the eyes are closed, although in Zen they are half-open and the gaze is held at a forty-five degree downward angle.

To do the practice, we begin by anchoring the attention on a specific object, usually the breath. We focus on a specific part of the body where we can watch the breath, such as the rising and falling of the chest, or the feel of the air in the openings of the nostrils. Every time the mind wanders, as it inevitably will, we bring it back to the anchor. The use of this anchor is provisional; when the mind settles and is able to abide in the moment, we can relinquish it.

The first insight that beginners in meditation almost invariably have is that they have no control over their minds. We generally assume that “I” am directing my thoughts, but in fact thinking is more like a river that just flows by itself. It is an illusion to believe that there is a distinct “I” directing the flow. This is the point at which many beginners give up and tell themselves “I can’t meditate,” meaning that they can’t make their minds stop thinking. The answer, of course, is that no one else can, either. One very helpful metaphor at this point can be to think of the mind as like a puppy that we’re trying to housebreak. We put the puppy on the newspaper, and as soon as we let go, it begins to wander away. But we don’t punish it or get mad at it: it’s just being a puppy. We patiently pick it up and put it back on the newspaper. This is the attitude to take toward the mind. Mindfulness, in the first place, is a training in *patience*.

As we become more used to practice, deeper issues begin to arise which can tempt us to drop the whole thing. When we meditate, we begin to recognize how much and how often we are restless

and dissatisfied. The human mind is constantly pushed and pulled by *desire* and *aversion*. We are in constant motion, trying to get what we want and get rid of what we don't want. No state of happiness or pleasure is permanent, because nothing is permanent. The restless mind is constantly leaning into the future, trying to arrive at a state of permanent satisfaction which forever remains elusive. Mindfulness practice brings us face to face with the marvelous futility of this whole process.

When we sit quietly and just watch the unfolding of experience, we gradually begin to see intimately into the three characteristics of contingent existence. The first is *annicca*, or impermanence. Everything that exists in time arises, changes, and passes away. There is nothing in this life which can serve as a secure, unchanging foundation. The second characteristic, *dukkha*, follows from the first. Dukkha is usually translated as “suffering”, but “pervasive unsatisfactoriness”, or “stress”, also capture the idea. Since everything that arises in time passes away, gratifying our desires can never bring us to a permanent state of happiness. Worries, losses, disappointments, and suffering of all kinds are inevitable in this life. The third characteristic, *anatta*, is more subtle. It refers to the emptiness of all phenomena. Every thing, every being, every event in this world arises according to causes and conditions outside of itself. Nothing in the contingent universe has “self-nature.”

The realization of the three characteristics of existence can lead, initially to despair. In time, however, if we are diligent in practice, we gradually learn to rest ever more deeply in the spacious awareness which is never affected by what it observes, and we acquire the capacity to watch the arising and passing away of all things in a state of *calm abiding* or *Samatha*. This is the beginning of our liberation from the bondage of conditioned existence.

### 3 – 6 The Brahma Viharas

“BrahmaViharas” means “heavenly abodes.” Also known as “the four Immeasurables” they are the qualities which characterize the awakened heart. They arise as the practice of mindfulness begins to loosen our attachments to worldly things, but they can also be deliberately cultivated as part of our practice. In mindfulness practice, we simply rest in a choiceless awareness of whatever is arising; but Brahma Vihara practices are concentration practices because they involve “inclining the mind” in the direction of the desired qualities.

#### 3. Compassion (Karuna)

*When I was young, I admired clever people. Now that I am old, I admire kind people.*  
-- Abraham Joshua Heschel

*You may call God love, you may call God goodness. But the best name for God is compassion.*  
– Meister Eckhart

*We do not have any genuine knowledge of those whom we hate.*  
– Kallistos Ware

The Buddha described compassion as “the quivering of the heart” in response to suffering. When we think of compassion, we usually think of it as directed to others, but in fact, compassion for other people is rooted in the capacity to open our hearts to our own suffering. When we can’t feel empathy, acceptance, understanding and forgiveness for what arises in ourselves, we will tend to be blocked when we see the same things arise in others. Compassion for all sentient beings means *all* beings, including oneself. The practice of compassion, then, is to develop, first, empathy and kindness for our own suffering, and then extend the circle of compassion until, ideally, it includes all sentient beings.

The practice of compassion for others requires that we work to overcome the habit of otherizing the people around us. The basic principle here was succinctly enunciated by Longfellow: “If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.” (*Longfellow, Driftwood*, 1857).

When we see the tendency to otherize arising in ourselves, we can counteract it by inclining the mind toward compassion through focusing on reflections like the following:

Like me, this person is seeking happiness in his/her life.

Like me, this person is trying to avoid suffering in his/her life.

Like me, this person has known fear, sadness, loneliness and despair.

Like me, this person is susceptible to the blindness of greed, hatred, and delusion.

Like me, this person is seeking to fill his/her needs.

*Relief of suffering practice:* Once you can empathize with another person, and understand his/her humanity and suffering, the next step is to want that person to be free from suffering. This is the heart of compassion. One exercise to evoke this wish is to imagine the suffering of another person in your life. Now imagine that you are the one going through that suffering. Reflect on how much you would like that suffering to end. Reflect on how happy you would be if another human being desired your suffering to end, and acted upon it. Open your heart to that human being and if you feel even a little that you’d want their suffering to end, reflect on that feeling. With regular practice, that feeling can be strengthened like a muscle that is exercised.

*Act of kindness practice:* To take the exercise a step further, imagine again the suffering of someone in your life. Imagine again that you are that person, and are going through that suffering. Now imagine that another human being would like your suffering to end. What would you like for that person to do to end your suffering? Now reverse roles: you are the person who desires for the other person’s suffering to end. Imagine that you do something to help ease the suffering, or end it completely. Then translate these meditations into actions. Practice doing something small each day to help end the suffering of others, even if only in a tiny way. The actions might be quite simple -- a smile, or a kind word, or doing an errand or chore, or just talking about a problem with another person. Practice doing something kind to help ease the suffering of others. The ultimate goal is to make this a daily practice, and, ultimately, a way of life.

*Those who mistreat us practice:* The final stage in these compassion practices is not only to want to ease the suffering of those we love, but also those who mistreat us. When we encounter

someone who mistreats us, instead of acting in anger, withdraw. Later, when you are calm and more detached, try to imagine the background of that person. Try to imagine what that person was taught as a child. Try to imagine the day or week that person was going through, and what kind of bad things had happened to that person. Try to imagine the mood and state of mind that person was in — the suffering that person must have been going through to mistreat you that way. Understand that their action was not about you, but about what they were going through. Now think some more about the suffering of that person, and see if you can imagine trying to stop the suffering of that person. And then reflect that if you mistreated someone, and they acted with kindness and compassion toward you, whether that would make you less likely to mistreat that person the next time, and more likely to be kind in response. Once you have mastered this practice of reflection, try responding with compassion and understanding the next time a person mistreats you.

#### 4. *Lovingkindness (Metta)*

All of the Buddhist lovingkindness practices are based on the Metta Sutta, one of the most beautiful of all the Buddhist teachings. It is concise enough to reproduce in its entirety here:

*This is the way of those who are skilled and peaceful, who seek the good and follow the path:*

*May they be able and upright, straightforward, of gentle speech and not proud.*

*May they be content and easy wherever they are.*

*May they be unburdened, with their senses calm.*

*May they be wise and not arrogant.*

*May they live without desire for the possessions of others.*

*May they do no harm to any living being.*

*May all beings be happy.*

*May they live in safety and joy.*

*All living beings, whether weak or strong, old or young, man or woman, smart or foolish, healthy or disabled, seen or unseen, near or distant, born or to be born, may they all be happy.*

*Let no one deceive or despise another being, whatever their status.*

*Let no one by anger or hatred wish harm to another.*

*As parents watch over their children, willing to risk their own lives to protect them, so with a boundless heart may we cherish every living being, bathing the entire world with unobstructed and unconditional loving-kindness.*

*Standing or walking, sitting or lying down, in each moment may we remain mindful of this heart and this way of living that is the best in all the world.*

The practice of metta is very simple. Sit in a relaxed state and focus your attention on the heart. Locate that place in you that loves you (always know that it is there, or you wouldn't be alive.) Then silently and slowly repeat some phrases of love and well-wishes to yourself. Below are the ones that are my favorites:

*May I be happy.*

*May I be peaceful.*

*May I be well in mind and body.*

*May I live with ease and well-being.*

*May I be safe from inner and outer harm  
And may I abide in the safety of this moment.*

*May I live in light and love,  
And may I love and accept myself exactly as I am right now.*

*May I rest in an awakened heart.*

The Buddha's instructions are always to begin by directing these phrases to yourself, because, he said, you can search all the realms of existence and you will never find a being more worthy of your love and kindness than you are. Some of my teachers have instructed practitioners to do metta for themselves daily for a year.

As you strengthen the metta muscle, you can extend the circle by offering it in widening circles to loved ones, friends, neutral people, and then "enemies." Finally, it can be offered without exception to all sentient beings.

### 5. Sympathetic Joy (*Mudita*)

The Buddha said:

*Here, O, Monks, a disciple lets his mind pervade one quarter of the world with thoughts of unselfish joy, and so the second, and so the third, and so the fourth. And thus the whole wide world, above, below, around, everywhere and equally, he continues to pervade with a heart of unselfish joy, abundant, grown great, measureless, without hostility or ill-will.*

Mudita has sometimes been called the divine smile on the face of the Buddha. Sympathetic joy contains the qualities of *appreciation* and *sympathy*, which makes it a pre-requisite for both loving-kindness and compassion. We can't appreciate another person without seeing some good in her or him. If we don't appreciate the other person in even the slightest degree, we're hard pressed to experience joy at any good fortune or success that he or she may experience. Thus, mudita tacitly implies looking for the good in others and learning to recognize and admire what good there is. The practice lifts the heart out of its preoccupation with insufficiency. As a result, the buoyant energies of gratitude and generosity begin to restore the human spirit.

To have a sympathetic attitude toward people doesn't mean idealizing humanity. It means having a realistic appraisal: that, though often in error and grievously at fault, human beings have,

nevertheless, the potential to rise above their darkness and ignorance into the light of knowledge and even to the heights of Nirvana. Unless we have that measure of faith and confidence in humankind which the Buddha himself had, the practice of metta and karuna is impossible. Thus, the broadest and most simple aspect of mudita as sympathy towards humankind is also the most basic and important.

When we can view the success of others with the same intensity of joy as the intensity of the loving-kindness and compassion we would extend to those who suffer grief and sorrow, then we are beginning to exercise mudita, and are in the process of eradicating greed and craving. As we become more established in the practice, we can reach the stage of sharing with others their joy of possession, their financial or social successes, their elevation to positions of civic or national importance, or their receipt of titles and honorifics. Mudita counteracts egotism and self-centeredness; and its development checks the grip of craving. Until we have begun to develop mudita, our self-centered joy is small, like the happiness of the miser gloating over his hoard of gold. But the happiness born of shared pleasures, shared love, shared possessions, and shared delights in another's success, is without boundaries.

The “near enemy” of mudita is often said to be “exuberance.” In Buddhism this term refers to the overly excited, manic state that is the grasping of deprivation at moments of joy. The far enemy of mudita is resentment. Mudita is the medicine for the poisons of jealousy, envy and derision. It heals the cruel urge to suppress happiness. Mudita is exemplified in the mother-child connection when the child begins to express its own creative nature. Mudita is the capacity to join and support this expanding spirit. The Buddha taught that one of our challenges is to cultivate mudita even in a world full of misery.

The practice of mudita meditation is very simple. Choose a specific individual and hold him or her clearly in your mind. Visualize this person at a time you knew they were happy, and acknowledge all the good things in their life. Incline your mind toward joy at their happiness. You can reflect, “This being is indeed glad. How good! How excellent!” Then send the person well wishes, such as the following: “May your happiness continue, may it increase.

## 6. *Equanimity (Upekkha)*

*“Equanimity is the unshakable balance of mind, rooted in insight. Equanimity is the crown and culmination of the four sublime states. But this should not be understood to mean that equanimity is the negation of love, compassion, and sympathetic joy, or that it leaves them behind as inferior. Far from that, equanimity includes and pervades them fully, just as they fully pervade perfect equanimity”*

*—Nyanaponika Thera*

“Equanimity” is the English translation of the Pali term *upekkha*, which means “to look over.” It refers to the quality of peace that arises from the ability to see without being caught up in reactivity to what we see. Equanimity protects love and compassion by guarding them from being dissipated in unskillful quests or going astray in uncontrolled emotion. But it is not a state of cold aloofness. In fact, the “near enemy” of equanimity is indifference. Equanimity is actually



a state of open-heartedness, warmth, and radiance. The Buddha described a mind filled with equanimity as “abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and ill-will.”

Equanimity is a protection from the “eight worldly winds”: praise and blame, success and failure, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute.

Seven mental qualities support the development of equanimity. These are: *virtue or integrity*, which insures blamelessness and freedom from shame, *faith*, or confidence and trust in the dharma; *a well-developed mind*, which comes from practices that cultivate calm, concentration and mindfulness; *a sense of well-being*, the happiness and contentment which arises from following the Eightfold Noble Path; *understanding or wisdom*, which helps us detach from taking the impersonal nature of phenomena personally; *insight* into the deep truths of existence, such as impermanence, and *freedom* from reactive tendencies.

In addition to developing these mental foundations, we can incline our minds toward equanimity through the practice of concentrating on this truth:

*All beings are the heirs of their karma. Their happiness and unhappiness depend on their own actions, more than on my wishes for them.*

We can also focus concentration of these alternative forms of the idea:

*Whether I understand it or not, things are unfolding according to a lawful nature.*

*All beings meet their joys and sorrows according to a lawful nature.*

*All beings have their own journey.*

*I will care for you but can't keep you from suffering.*

*May I (you) accept things as they are.*

*I wish you happiness but can't make your choices for you.*

*Things are just as they are.*

*This moment is just as it is.*

*All joys and sorrows arise and pass away.*

*No matter how I might wish things to be otherwise, things are as they are.*

## 7. Forgiveness

*If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.*

– Longfellow, *Driftwood*

*Forgiveness is realizing that what you thought happened, didn't.*

– Byron Katie

Forgiveness is a conscious, deliberate decision to let go of anger and the desire for vengeance toward those who have harmed you, regardless of whether or not you believe they actually deserve it.

It is really three practices: forgiving others who have caused me suffering; being open to, or seeking out, forgiveness from those I have caused to suffer; and forgiving myself for the ways in which I have caused myself to suffer. In what follows, I will focus primarily on the first type.

Can forgiveness ever be an obligation? Many survivors of childhood abuse seem to believe that their suffering confers on *them* a duty to forgive their perpetrators, but I don't see how victims can have any obligations toward their perpetrators, except to avoid succumbing to the temptations of destructive vengefulness. That said, it is true that there are benefits to practicing forgiveness *for the one who forgives*. But there are also some important misconceptions as to what forgiveness is, which can stand in the way of doing it. Here are four of the most important of these misconceptions:

**1. *Holding onto resentments punishes others.*** Many people won't forgive a wrong that was done to them years ago because "it would be letting her/him off the hook." There is a great deal of magical thinking in this idea, as if someone we haven't seen in years is somehow living "on a hook" if we continue to hold a grudge against them, but would feel undeservedly better if we stopped.

**2. *Forgiveness means condoning bad behavior.*** Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting, nor does it mean denying that real offenses were committed. It is a deliberate decision to let go of the past, and to release feelings of resentment or vengeance toward those who have harmed you, regardless of whether they actually deserve your forgiveness. None of this involves excusing or minimizing bad behavior.

**3. *If I forgive you I have to let you back in my life.*** Forgiveness and reconciliation aren't the same thing. It is usually a lot easier to forgive a wrong if the perpetrator apologizes, but letting go of resentment and vengefulness is still something we can do completely on our own, without the other person even knowing we've done it, because the essence of Forgiveness is simply letting go of the past. Reconciliation, however, is about committing to a future. It means returning to some degree of friendliness, and for that to happen, trust has to be reestablished. We may choose to forgive someone who has abused us, but still recognize that the person might continue to be abusive toward us if we re-opened the relationship. Forgiving doesn't mean being naïve about the character or intentions of others.

**4. *Holding on to anger keeps me in control.*** Anger is an intense energy, and feeling it can make us feel safe and in control. But the bottomless, self-righteous rage of those who feel mired in victimization feels anything but powerful. Those who are caught in that mind-state invariably feel impotent and imprisoned in their own inner hells.

Finally, forgiving requires the maturity to accept some uncomfortable truths: that the past can't be changed; that another person's hurtful actions can never be undone; and that the people who wronged us may never see the error of their ways. But the practice of forgiveness can also reveal another important and surprising truth: that in the end no one else has to change in order for us to be at peace.

#### *a. Forgiveness in Buddhism*

I think it is a fairly safe bet that the Buddha was “pro-forgiveness.” Again, and again, he spoke about the importance of not harboring ill-will. In the sutta “The Simile of the Saw,” for instance, he said:

“Monks, even if bandits were to savagely sever you limb by limb with a double-handled saw, even then, whoever of you harbors ill will at heart would not be upholding my Teaching.

“Monks, even in such a situation you should train yourselves thus, ‘Neither shall our minds be affected by this, not for this matter shall we give vent to evil words, but we shall remain full of concern and pity, with a mind of love, and we shall not give in to hatred.’

‘We shall live projecting thoughts of universal love to those very persons, making them as well as the whole world the object of our thoughts of universal love – thoughts that have grown great, exalted, and measureless. We shall dwell radiating these thoughts which are void of hostility and ill will.

“It is in this way, monks, that you should train yourselves.”

And, in the *Dhammapada*, he said,

“He abused me, he struck me, he overcame me, he robbed me’ — in those who harbor such thoughts hatred will never cease.

“He abused me, he struck me, he overcame me, he robbed me’ — in those who do not harbor such thoughts hatred will cease.”

-Dhammapada 1 3-4

He compared holding onto anger to grasping hot coals with the intention of throwing them at someone else. When you do that, all you do is burn yourself.

Yet, what is surprising is that there are very few direct references to forgiveness in the suttas. The following story may help explain why:

The Buddha was sitting under a tree with his monks when a man approached and spit on his face. He wiped it away and said to the man without anger or offense, “What next?” The man left deeply disturbed; as he was used to receiving inflammatory responses when insulting another. He spent the night agonizing in confusion over the day’s event.

In the morning he returned to the Buddha, threw himself at his feet and begged forgiveness. The Buddha said, “For what? The man you spit upon is gone. Men are like rivers, changing from moment to moment. The river has flowed much since yesterday and though I may look the same, I am not. Likewise, neither are you the man who came to spit upon me. That man was angry, upset. This man before me bows at my feet, is open, willing. So there is nothing to forgive. Those two men, the one who spit and the one on whom he spit, are no more.”

For the Buddha, it seems, his deep understanding of impermanence made forgiveness an unnecessary practice because grievances didn't stick to him in the first place. It is necessary for us only because they do.

Forgiveness is a conscious, deliberate decision to let go of anger and the desire for vengeance against those who have harmed you, regardless of whether they actually deserve it. It doesn't mean forgetting or glossing over the seriousness of the offense. Forgiveness doesn't work as an emotional bypass: the pain of the offense must be thoroughly acknowledged and felt before authentic forgiveness can begin.

I see forgiveness as a five-stage process:

1. Sense the weight of the corrosive anger that you keep alive by refusing to forgive, and realize that it's not in your best interest. Imagine what it would feel like to feel the peace of mind that you'd have if you were free of this burden. See forgiveness as an act of self-compassion.
2. Set a conscious intention to forgive. Decide that you're no longer willing to be a victim by continuing to allow your thoughts and memories of your offender to torment you and deprive you of happiness. By setting a clear intention, you also set the compass of your heart. When you know where you're going you'll recognize what supports you on your journey and what doesn't.
3. See the big picture. Every life includes experiences of hurt and betrayal. It's the inevitable price of being alive. In this sense, your pain is not just yours, it is the pain of humanity. When you see it this way, your pain no longer separates you, but connects you to everyone through your capacity for compassion.
4. Focus on the specific person who harmed you, and instead of seeing this person from the outside as an evil "other," feel into his or her humanity. Try to understand the causes and conditions in their life that led them to act in the way that they did, not to make excuses for them, but to find compassion for the blindness and suffering in them that made them act toward you the way they did.
5. Finally, in your mind's eye, imagine your offender in front of you. Speak to this person as if he or she is actually present and offer them forgiveness. You may say something like "For whatever you have done, intentionally or unintentionally, that caused me pain, I now, to the best of my ability, offer you forgiveness." Feel the relief that follows when you let go, even for a moment, of your grudge against them. The first time you do this, you may not feel forgiving. In fact, you may feel intense resistance or an upwelling of anger. If that happens, focus your attention on yourself, breathe deeply, and offer yourself acceptance. If you are feeling self-critical, offer yourself forgiveness for being harsh toward yourself. Then, later, when you are calm, you can begin the process again.

## 8. *Taking in the Good*

This is a practice I learned from neuropsychologist Rick Hanson. It is a very powerful technique for counteracting what he calls “the brain’s negativity bias.”

If you’ve had a thousand positive experiences with dogs, but on one occasion a dog attacked and bit you, you may have developed a fear of dogs which persisted for years. The one bad experience trumped the thousand good ones. If you were at a party last night and ten people were warm and friendly to you, but one person was rude and insulting, you may have gone home feeling angry and hurt over that one hostile experience, while the warm interactions faded into the background. When you look back on a typical day, or when you survey your life, what experiences capture your attention – your successes and pleasant times, or the failures, hurts and disappointments?

The reason we’re like this is easy to understand. The brain isn’t an organ for objectively studying reality. It’s a tool which evolved to anticipate and overcome dangers, protect us from pain, and solve problems: so dangers, pain, and problems are what capture its attention. This is what Rick Hanson means by “the brain’s negativity bias.” The human nervous system, he writes “scans for, reacts to, stores, and recalls negative information about oneself and one’s world. The brain is like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive ones. The natural result is a growing – and unfair – residue of emotional pain, pessimism, and numbing inhibition in implicit memory.”

Many lines of research show that when we use our *intention* and *attention* in sustained and focused ways, we can do much to overcome the brain’s negative bias. Hanson teaches a four step daily concentration practice to enable the brain to register positive experiences so that they sink into the deepest layers of the mind and alter emotional memory. Here are the steps:

1. Decide to let yourself feel pleasure and be happy, rather than feel ascetic or guilty about enjoying the good things in life. In particular, do your best to release any resistance to feeling good *about yourself*. Momentarily set aside concerns or irritations, or at least nudge them into the background and then, maintaining a relaxed and accepting awareness, spend some time paying attention to a positive experience. Pay special attention to the emotional and sensory aspects of your responses to positive events. Be fully present to the experience and be careful not to drift into ruminations about the past or worries about the future.
2. Extend the experience in space and time by lingering over it and savoring it. Relish the experience and resist the temptation to jump to something else. Let it fill your body with positive sensations and feelings (that’s the space part). By doing this, you allow the positive event to become a positive *experience*.
3. Visualize the positive experience soaking deeply into your brain and body, registering deeply in your emotional memory. See it sinking into your chest, back, and brainstem. Since the brain takes 5 to 20 seconds to register positive experiences, make sure you take at least 20 seconds to do this while relaxing the body (that’s the time part).
4. Visualize the positive experience going down into old hollows and wounds within you, filling them and replacing them with new positive feelings and views. These wounds are

typically places where the new positive experience is the opposite of, and the antidote to, the old one. The “replaced” experiences may be from adulthood, but usually the most important ones to replace are from our early years. The way to do this is to have the new positive experience prominent and in the foreground of your awareness at the same time that the old pain or unmet needs are dimly sensed in the background. Current experiences of worth can replace old feelings of shame or inadequacy. Current feelings of being cared about and loved can replace old feelings of rejection, abandonment, and loneliness. A current sense of one's own strength can replace old feelings of helplessness or weakness.

Hanson emphasizes that this practice isn't about learning to see the world through rose-colored glasses. By countering the brain's negative bias it actually fosters a more accurate and mature assessment of reality. Through regular practice we gradually become less emotionally reactive. As we become more calm and present-focused we begin to access a deeper truth about ourselves. Hanson's describes that truth in this way: “As an inherent property of the nervous system, there's a deep down essence or core in each of us that is awake, present, interested, and quietly happy.”

## 9. Gratitude

*“If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough.”*  
– Meister Eckhart

*Gratitude is what we are without a story.* – Byron Katie

The great modern philosopher, Lily Tomlin, once said “Humanity invented language out of a deep need to complain.” It's sad that *Homo sapiens*, the most intelligent and resourceful beings on the planet, are also, by and large, the most miserable.

We Americans seem to have a particularly acute form of one kind of misery – a desperate feeling of deprivation in the midst of plenty; a constant feeling of always being in a hurry and never being able to relax; an incapacity to feel the safety and fullness of the present. When I visited India some years back, I was astounded at how many smiling, serene, unhurried people I met in the streets – many of whom were in what we would consider desperate conditions. When I came back home and watched my fellow affluent Americans rushing around impatiently, scowling, honking and swearing at each other, I felt a wave of intense sadness for my country. Visitors to Central America, Asia, and other places often have the same reaction. We are the wealthiest nation in human history, but almost all of us believe that we don't have enough. We don't have enough time; but above all else, we believe that what will make us happy is more money, because we've been conned into thinking that our poverty is financial instead of emotional and spiritual.

Dr. Robert Emmons, a U.C. professor of psychology, spent much of his professional life researching gratitude. He described what he discovered in his book, *Thanks! How The New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier*. “Without gratitude, life can be lonely, depressing and impoverished,” he wrote. “Gratitude enriches human life. It elevates, energizes, inspires and transforms. People are moved, opened and humbled through expressions of gratitude.” Here are some of the benefits his research highlighted:

1. Gratitude teaches us to celebrate the present. Research on emotion shows that positive emotions wear off quickly, but gratitude increases our appreciation for the good things in our lives; and the more we appreciate the value of something, the more benefits we receive from it. We're less likely to take the positives in our lives for granted. Instead of taking the good for granted, we celebrate it.
2. Gratitude blocks toxic, negative emotions that destroy happiness, such as envy, resentment, and regret. Recent evidence shows that gratitude can even reduce the frequency and duration of episodes of depression.
3. Grateful people are more stress resistant. A number of studies show that in the face of serious trauma and suffering, people with a grateful disposition recover more quickly. It appears that gratitude gives people a perspective which helps buffer them against post-traumatic stress and chronic anxiety.
4. Grateful people have a higher sense of self-worth. That's because, when we're grateful, we're also more aware of a network of relationships, past and present, of people who are responsible for helping us get to where we are right now. And the more we recognize how much we've been loved, supported, and protected by others, the more we're able to internalize the value that they've seen in us.

But the practice of gratitude can also challenge some deeply ingrained psychological habits. One of these is "self-serving bias," which means that when good things happen to us, we tend to assume that it's solely a result of our own efforts, but when bad things happen, we blame other people or circumstances. Gratitude works against self-serving bias because it involves acknowledging the contributions others have made to our lives.

Finally, when we're grateful we're less prone to assume that we 'deserve' the good things that we receive in our lives. This contradicts an assumption that is pervasive in our culture: that we're entitled to all the good fortune that comes our way. When we deserve everything, we don't feel grateful for anything. Gratitude helps us to overcome the assumption of entitlement, and opens the way to accept the gifts that come our way with grace and humility.

Three gratitude practices:

1. Keep a gratitude journal.

We can work at cultivating "an attitude of gratitude," by making regular, ideally daily, lists of everything in our lives for which we're grateful. This practice counteracts the tendency of the brain to focus on problems, pains and deficiencies by concentrating, instead, on the background abundance that is almost always there, if we'll only look.

2. Write a gratitude letter.

Write a letter to someone you love, telling them all the ways in which you're grateful that they're in your life. If possible, deliver this letter in person, and read it aloud. This is a joyful practice, for both the giver and the receiver.

### 3. Take a gratitude walk.

This is a particularly useful practice when you're feeling down or filled with stress and worry. Set aside 20 minutes (or longer if you can) and walk in your neighborhood, through a park, around your office, or somewhere in nature. As you walk, consider the many things for which you are grateful: loving relationships, material comforts, the body that allows you to experience the world, the mind that allows you to really understand yourself, and your essential spiritual nature. Breathe, pause, and be grateful for the air that is filling your lungs and making your life possible. Pay attention to your senses, everything you're seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling and tasting, and see how many things you can be grateful for. Open to the flow of abundance that surrounds you.

## 10. Prayer and Devotion

*One who is incapable of a reverential attitude will also be incapable of spiritual progress beyond the narrow limits of his present mental condition. One who is so blind as not to see or recognize anything higher and better than the little mud-pool of his petty self and environment will suffer. It is by recognizing and honoring someone or something higher that one honors and enhances one's own inner potentialities. – Nyanapnika Thera*

*The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays. – Soren Kierkegaard*

### *Praying*

*It doesn't have to be  
the blue iris, it could be  
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few  
small stones, just  
pay attention, then patch*

*a few words together and don't try  
to make them elaborate, this isn't  
a contest, but the doorway*

*into thanks, and a silence in which  
another voice may speak.  
– Mary Oliver*

Prayer and devotional practices are by far the most common religious practices in all of the world's religions, including Buddhism. They arise, in part, because dualism is fundamental to most people's experience of life, most of the time, regardless of what our spiritual or ontological views are. We pray because we are identified with our egos, but also because we aren't solipsists: we sense that we are part of something larger than ourselves. Prayer and devotion are efforts to get into right relationship with that larger Whole.

In Catholic theology, the term "prayer" is used to refer to at least four distinct activities: petition, intercession, adoration (or devotion), and contemplation. Petition means asking for something for



ourselves. Intercession means asking for something for others. Adoration means using the intellect, feeling, will, and imagination to express devotion toward God in his personal aspect, or toward an incarnation of God. Contemplation is a condition of alert passivity in which we open to the Ground of Being within and without us. It is sometimes said that, in prayer we speak to God, and in meditation we listen to him. If that is so, then contemplation is more a form of meditation than a form of prayer. In what follows, I'll briefly discuss each of these forms.

I have often been critical of petition and intercession because they seem to involve belief in magic. The idea seems to be that God is willing to set aside the laws of nature and the law of karma to grant our heart's desire, so long as we beg, plead, wheedle, cajole, and argue convincingly and with enough eloquence and passion. When a disaster kills thirty people and the five who escape thank God for sending them a miracle in response to their prayers, I wonder what they can possibly be thinking. Do they believe that God found their prayers worth answering, but not those of the thirty who died? Were they more deserving in some way, or were their prayers more eloquent or heartfelt?

My personal experience, on the other hand, has been that some kinds of petitionary prayers usually are answered. Prayer won't make me rich, or ensure that I don't get cancer, and it seems impotent to manifest a parking space in San Francisco. To believe that it can do such things is spiritual materialism. But my experience has been that my prayers for the things of the spirit are answered.

One of the most dramatic instance of an answered prayer in my life happened in my early forties when I was on a retreat at the Siddha Yoga Ashram in South Fallsburg, in upper New York State. During that period in my life, I was plagued with constant anxiety, and that anxiety seemed especially acute on the retreat. On the second day of the retreat I prayed for understanding of why I was so afraid. In meditation, I heard an inner voice tell me "You're afraid because you don't believe that God loves you." During a break between meditations I responded, "Okay, then if the deal is, ask and ye shall receive, knock and the door shall be opened unto you, I'm asking. God, I need to feel your love." When we went back into the meditation hall, the lights were lowered, and Gurumayi, the guru of the Siddha Yoga lineage, went through the hall striking everyone with a peacock feather. This ritual was called *shaktipat*, literally "the descent of grace," in which the guru's touch awakens the kundalini energy at the base of the spine, and initiates its ascent toward the crown of the head and enlightenment. When she touched me, I felt myself leave my body and merge with an ocean of joy and love. I felt that my prayer had been answered beyond my wildest dreams. I was high for days after this experience, and in the days and weeks that followed I noticed that I was no longer having anxiety attacks.

Whenever I have prayed for clarity or wisdom in a situation, deeper insight has virtually always come to me. When I ask for the things of the spirit, I am confident that my prayer will be answered.

The Prayer of St. Francis which is widely, but incorrectly, attributed to the thirteenth-century St. Francis of Assisi (it actually originated in France, probably in 1912) is a beautiful prayer because it is the kind of petition which I think is answered:

*The Prayer of St. Francis*

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;  
 Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
 Where there is injury, pardon;  
 Where there is discord, harmony;  
 Where there is error, truth;  
 Where there is doubt, faith;  
 Where there is despair, hope;  
 Where there is darkness, light;  
 And where there is sadness, joy.  
 O Divine Master, Grant that I may not so much seek  
 To be consoled as to console;  
 To be understood as to understand;  
 To be loved as to love.  
 For it is in giving that we receive;  
 It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
 And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

The same thing is true of the Serenity Prayer, which the twelve step programs have adopted:

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
 Courage to change the things I can,  
 And the wisdom to know the difference.*

Is belief in the efficacy of these kinds of petitions just as much belief in magic as belief that prayers for worldly things are granted? If so, then perhaps I also believe in magic. It may be that there is a naturalistic explanation for the efficacy of these prayers. When we pray for internal qualities, it may be that all we're doing is "inclining the mind" in their direction, and that this voluntary shift of attention may be what helps create them. That may well be part of the explanation, but my personal experience leads me to believe that more than my solitary will is involved. My inner experience is that my personal will really does connect with something larger than myself that lifts me up when I am in need of hope, and holds me up when I don't have the power to stand on my own two feet. In these experiences I sense a presence that knows and loves me, and I feel that the saving principle in the universe is guiding me. What I'm describing is hardly unusual or unique. It has been the common experience of countless millions of people down the centuries.

One prayer that combines both petition and adoration, and that I love and find consistently effective is the "Golden Key" prayer, which was taught by Emmett Fox, a New Thought minister who taught in New York during the Great Depression. I call it petitionary because it involves turning to God for solutions to problems, but it is a unique form of petition in that it doesn't involve asking for any particular result. Instead, it involves directing attention away from the problem, and toward adoration of God. The Golden Key, as Fox describes it:

“...like all fundamental things, it is simplicity itself. All that you have to do is this: Stop thinking about the difficulty, whatever it is, and think about God instead. This is the complete rule, and if only you will do this, the trouble, whatever it is, will presently disappear. It makes no difference what kind of trouble it is. It may be a big thing or a little thing; it may concern health, finance, a lawsuit, a quarrel, an accident, or anything else conceivable; but whatever it is, just stop thinking about it, and think of God instead – that is all you have to do. The thing could not be simpler, could it? God Himself could scarcely have made it simpler, and yet it never fails to work when given a fair trial.

“Do not try to form a picture of God, which is impossible. Work by rehearsing anything or everything that you know about God. God is Wisdom, Truth, inconceivable Love. God is present everywhere; has infinite power; knows everything; and so on. It matters not how well you may think you understand these things; go over them repeatedly. But you must stop thinking of the trouble, whatever it is. The rule is to think about God, and if you are thinking about your difficulty you are not thinking about God. To be continually glancing over your shoulder, as it were, in order to see how matters are progressing, is fatal, because that is thinking of the trouble, and you must think of God, and of nothing else. Your object is to drive the thought of the difficulty right out of your consciousness, for a few moments at least, substituting for it the thought of God. This is the crux of the whole thing. If you can become so absorbed in this consideration of the spiritual world that you really forget for a while all about the trouble concerning which you began to pray, you will presently find that you are safely and comfortably out of your difficulty – that your demonstration is made.

“In order to ‘Golden Key’ a troublesome person or a difficult situation, think, ‘Now I am going to ‘Golden Key’ John, or Mary, or that threatened danger’; then proceed to drive all thought of John, or Mary, or the danger right out of your mind, replacing it by the thought of God. By working in this way about a person, you are not seeking to influence his conduct in any way, except that you prevent him from injuring or annoying you, and you do him nothing but good. Thereafter he is certain to be in some degree a better, wiser, and more spiritual person, just because you have ‘Golden Keyed’ him. A pending lawsuit or other difficulty would probably fade out harmlessly without coming to a crisis, justice being done to all parties concerned. If you find that you can do this very quickly, you may repeat the operation several times a day with intervals between. Be sure, however, each time you have done it, that you drop all thought of the matter until the next time. This is important.

“We have said that the Golden Key is simple, and so it is, but, of course, it is not always easy to turn. If you are very frightened or worried it may be difficult, at first, to get your thoughts away from material things. But by constantly repeating some statement of absolute Truth that appeals to you, such as There is no power but God, or I am the child of God, filled and surrounded by the perfect peace of God, or God is love, or God is guiding me now, or, perhaps best and simplest of all, just God is with me -- however mechanical or dead it may seem at first -- you will soon find that the treatment has begun to “take,” and that your mind is clearing. Do not struggle violently; be quiet but insistent. Each time that you find your attention wandering, just switch it straight back to God. Do not try to think out in advance what the solution of your difficulty will probably turn out to be. This is technically called “outlining,” and will only delay the demonstration. Leave the question of ways and means strictly to God. You want to get out of your difficulty --

that is sufficient. You do your half, and God will never fail to do His. ‘Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.’”

It seems clear that Emmett Fox had magical expectations for this prayer. He writes that it could cause lawsuits to “fade out harmlessly without coming to a crisis,” for instance. I don’t know whether such miracles occur as the result of this or any other prayer. But my own experience with the Golden Key is that, whenever I use it in response to a problem to which I see no solution, it has the effect of changing my mood. My fear or anger over the problem diminishes considerably and my mind stops ruminating, rehearsing speeches, or pondering solutions. I calm down and feel safer, and what sometimes happens then is that a fresh solution that hadn’t occurred to me, spontaneously arises in my mind. More often, though, I just become less reactive and defensive, and therefore less inclined to destructive behavior. These changes in me effectively “solve” the problem because the real problem was never the person or situation, but my reactive, ego-driven anxiety or anger. Without those reactions, no person and no situation is ever really a “problem” at all. It is possible to see the efficacy of this prayer in purely naturalistic terms, as a form of cognitive therapy in which the positive effects are purely the result of a shift in attention. It is also possible to understand the efficacy as a response of the spirit to the cry of the heart. I’m inclined to see it as both. When the ego stops running around in circles and the mind gets out of the prison of its fearful thinking, a space is created for an inflow of grace.

This form of prayer highlights one of the advantages of a theistic approach to spirituality. When we anthropomorphize the ultimate reality as a personal God, it becomes possible for the heart to relate to it as a Thou. However, it is not necessary for the personal object of devotion to be God in order to be effective. In fact, the Buddha taught a form of devotional practice which is essentially identical to the Golden Key prayer, except that the devotional object is not God, but the Buddha. The practices are called *Buddhanussati*, or “recollection of the Buddha.” In these practices, the devotee constantly inclines the mind away from worldly things, and toward the Buddha. This can be done through ritual offerings of incense or flowers, through prostrations, through pilgrimages, or through meditation. In Mahayana Buddhism, *Buddhanussati* and related mindfulness practices are extended to multiple Buddhas and Bodhisattvas such as Maitreya, Avalokiteshvara, Tara, and Amitabha.

Here is what the Buddha said about these practices:

"When a noble disciple contemplates upon the Enlightened One, at that time his mind is not enwrapped in lust, nor in hatred, nor in delusion. At such a time his mind is rightly directed towards the Perfect One (Tathagata). And with a rightly directed mind the noble disciple gains enthusiasm for the goal, enthusiasm for the Dhamma, gains the delight derived from the Dhamma. In him thus delighted, joy arises; to one who is joyful, body and mind become calm; calmed in body and mind, he feels at ease; and if at ease, the mind finds concentration. Such a one is called a noble disciple who among humanity gone wrong, has attained to what is right; who among a humanity beset by troubles, dwells free of troubles.” – (AN – 6 10)

This is very similar to the benefits that Emmett Fox promised from the Golden Key prayer. But the “magical thinking” elements are also present in Buddhism, with the agent of the supernatural effects being, not God, but the law of karma.

One of the Theravadan suttas which demonstrates the powerful karmic effects of devotion tells the story of Mattakundali, the sixteen-year-old son of Adinnapubbaka, a lay disciple of the Buddha. The young boy became ill with jaundice, and as his health deteriorated, it became apparent that he was dying. In his omniscience, the Buddha saw Mattakundali as he lay dying, and, out of compassion, came to the door of his father's house. Too weak to do anything else, the boy concentrated his will and attention on devout faith in the Buddha. He died in that state of devotion, -- and was reborn among the gods in a golden mansion thirty leagues in extent. When he surveyed his past birth, he saw his father in the charnel ground, weeping and lamenting and preparing to cremate his body. Assuming the form of Mattakundali, he went himself to the charnel ground and, standing near, started to weep. When questioned by Adinnapubbaka, he revealed his identity. Adinnapubbaka invited the Buddha to a meal the next day, and, when it was over, asked if it were really possible to attain to heaven by a mere act of devotion. In order to convince him, the Buddha summoned Mattakundali to appear before him and confirm his statement that this was so. He then said, "When one with one's mind filled with recollection of the Buddha passes away with his/her mind directed to Buddhānussati, and his/her heart in devotion to Buddha, (if one has not reached spiritual attainment in this life), a happy world is waiting for him after death or will be born in a happier realm." At the conclusion of the Buddha's sermon, both Adinnapubbaka and Mattakundali became *sotāpannas* (or one who "enters the stream" and has attained the first of the four stages of enlightenment), and eighty thousand persons realized the Truth. This beautiful myth dramatically illustrates the vast importance and the great benefits which the Buddha attributed to devotional practice.

What about spiritual intercession? When my mind is very quiet and concentrated, and I send a thought of lovingkindness to other people, I sometimes have the distinct feeling that I'm actually reaching out to the souls of these other people, and that, because my mind is powerfully focused and because I am inclining my attention in the direction of their well-being, their well-being is actually enhanced. Is this just a vain delusion? I of course have no evidence that it's anything else. But at the same time, in those moments of quiet clarity it also seems obvious that all minds are joined and are one, and that we are all more intimately connected than we can ever understand.

Adoration is the form of prayer that is easiest to make fun of. When the ego practices this form of prayer, it often looks more like manipulative flattery than adoration, and it feels as if it's being directed to an even bigger ego -- the Great Narcissistic Personality in the sky. I remember a hilarious Monty Python skit lampooning adoration, in which a high Anglican priest intones, "Oh Lord, you are so big! We're all really impressed down here, I tell you."

And yet, I also think that adoration is the natural poetry of the awakened heart when it opens to the divine. The Hallelujah Chorus is one such authentic expression, as is "Amazing Grace." When the heart merges with the Spirit in mystical experience, it naturally responds with joy, wonder, awe, love, and gratitude -- and what it expresses at such moments is adoration of the unspeakable grandeur of existence.

Contemplation, as I wrote above, is very similar to what is called "meditation" in Asia and India. One important difference may be that, in contemplative prayer, the one who prays directs intentionality deliberately to God -- and then listens. This way of becoming silent is different --

and perhaps produces different results – than the practice of simply being mindful of whatever arises in the present moment. In a sense, contemplative prayer goes one step beyond Emmett Fox's Golden Key prayer, in that the one who prays begins with a thought of God, but then drops all thoughts and abides in a state of openness. This kind of openness, however, is an expectant and hopeful openness: we listen in the hope that we will hear.

St. Gregory the Great, who was the pope of the Catholic Church from 590 to 604, A.D., described contemplative prayer as the knowledge of God that is impregnated with love. For Gregory, contemplation was both the fruit of reflecting on God and the gift of God. He referred to contemplation as "resting in God." In this "resting," the mind and heart are not so much seeking God, as experiencing what they have been seeking. This state is not the suspension of all activity, but the reduction of many acts and reflections to a single act or thought in order to sustain one's consent to God's presence and action. It is a process of interior transformation. But this transformation isn't something that can be achieved through the individual will alone. It is, rather, the result of grace, God's gift. It is a relationship with God which leads, if one consents, to divine union.

Thomas Merton, in his book *New Seeds of Contemplation*, describes it in this way:

"Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source. It *knows* the Source, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes beyond reason and beyond simple faith. For contemplation is a kind of spiritual vision to which both reason and faith aspire, by their very nature, because without it they must always remain incomplete. Yet contemplation is not vision because it sees "without seeing" and knows "without knowing." It is a more profound depth of faith, a knowledge too deep to be grasped in images, in words or even in clear concepts. It can be suggested by words, by symbols, but in the very moment of trying to indicate what it knows the contemplative mind takes back what it has said, and denies what it has affirmed. For in contemplation we know by "unknowing." Or better, we know *beyond* all knowing or "unknowing.""

One of my favorite forms of contemplative prayer takes a phrase from the 46<sup>th</sup> psalm and repeats it, eliminating a word or two with each repetition, as follows:

Be still and know that I am God.  
 Be still and know that I am.  
 Be still and know that 'I'.  
 Be still and know That.  
 Be still and know.  
 Be still.  
 Be.

After the last word the one who prays rests in the silence, and trusts that the experience of the Presence will arise in that silence.

### **Six: Final Thoughts**

*There is no conclusion. What has concluded that we might conclude in regards to it? There are no fortunes to be told, and there is no advice to be given. – Farewell!*  
*– last written words of William James*

*I began by wanting to understand life. Now I just want to stand it.*  
*– Sylvia Boorstein*

I said in the Introduction that this is a manifesto of sorts. In a sense it has also been an exorcism.

I've been drawn to philosophical, especially metaphysical, speculation, since I was a teenager, and I've always felt an imperative to find a consistent philosophy of the nature and purpose of existence. Part of this imperative has been simple intellectual curiosity, the sheer pleasure of trying to solve puzzles and figure things out. A deeper driving force, though, has been fear – the fear of loss and death, the fear of suffering, and the fear of the fragility and capriciousness of life. I hoped to master my fears by acquiring an intellectual conviction that I don't need to be afraid. I've tried to reason myself into the certainty that life is not meaningless, and that I am safe and loved. In this quest I have failed completely. What I've discovered is that the spiritual life is not an intellectual exercise, and that the thinking mind is inadequate to find release from suffering and fear. At the end of all my speculations I remain the same person I was at the beginning; no more and no less confused, doubtful, and fearful than I ever was.

So this exercise has been an exorcism in the sense that it has relieved me of my delusions about the power of the mind to free me from my suffering. It has helped me let go of the drive to solve the mystery of existence by showing me that no solution I find can transform me in the way that I once believed it could.

To the degree that any transformation is possible, I have found that it comes from the kind of engagement with life that I've learned in the ethical principles and contemplative practices of Buddhism. We don't find the sure heart's release through the rational mind. What release is possible, we find in the stillness and silence which opens the heart.

*Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
 As I foretold you, were all spirits, and  
 Are melted into air, into thin air:  
 And like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
 The cloud-capp'd tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces,  
 The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
 Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,  
 And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
 Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff*

*As dreams are made on; and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.  
-- Shakespeare, The Tempest, Act 4, scene 1*

## Appendix

### Miscellaneous Thoughts and Quotations

#### **The Past**

I have bad news and good news about the past. The bad news is that the past cannot be changed, an obvious fact which can nevertheless be very difficult to accept. As Jack Kornfield observed, for many of us, our peace of mind depends on giving up all hope of ever having a better past.

The good news is that the past is always over.

#### **The True Believer and the Mystic**

What fanatics, true believers, and utopians have in common is a consuming hatred of the present. As Eric Hoffer wrote in *The True Believer*, the believer does not have to believe in a god, but he does have to believe in a devil. For all true believers, that devil is what exists in the present – the elite, the power structure, the government, the Church, etc. Happiness, for him, can never exist in the present, but only in the golden future that will dawn when the devil is finally vanquished. That is why believers in utopia are so often so destructive of the present, and so cruel to those who inhabit it.

The mystic, on the other hand, may, and usually does, believe in a god, but tends to be dubious about the devil. He loves the present, because it is only in the present moment that his god shows himself. He doesn't seek fulfillment in any future, because he has already found the greatest of all values in the present; and for that reason he loves and honors the present, and all who inhabit it.

#### **Adyashanti**

##### **SUFFERING AND RESISTANCE**

We suffer in the present from past experiences  
In direct proportion to how much identity  
we derive from that suffering.  
The easiest way to keep dreaming  
is thinking your dreaming is true.  
Don't get mixed up with the 'whys',  
they will not help you.  
Whatever you resist you become.  
If you resist anger, you are always angry.  
If you resist sadness, you are always sad.  
If you resist suffering, you are always suffering.  
If you resist confusion, you are always confused.



We think that we resist certain states because they are there, but actually they are there because we resist them.

### **James Baldwin**

Most people discover that when hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with their own pain.

### **Buddha**

Others will kill. We shall not kill. Thus we should direct our hearts.  
 Others will be cruel. We shall not be cruel. Thus should we direct our hearts.  
 Others will speak falsely. We will speak what is true. Thus we should direct our hearts.  
 Others will be fraudulent. We shall not be fraudulent. Thus we should direct our hearts.  
 Others will be hateful. We shall become loving. Thus we shall direct our hearts.  
 Others will be unwise. We shall become wise. Thus we shall direct our hearts.

### **G.K. Chesterton on Mysticism**

The one created thing which we cannot look at is the one thing in the light of which we look at everything. Like the sun at noonday, mysticism explains everything else by the blaze of its own victorious invisibility. Detached intellectualism is (in the exact sense of a popular phrase) all moonshine; for it is light without heat, and it is secondary light, reflected from a dead world.

### **Gil Fronsdal on Happiness**

To sacrifice is to make sacred. To release is to find freedom. And to find freedom is to know a happiness that is not dependent on anything-especially not on having our wishes fulfilled.

### **Allen Ginsberg on Human Nature**

I think everybody has a natural inclination to compassion. It gets covered over by frustration, ignorance, bad experiences, bad karma, but underneath it, as they say, everybody has a buddhanature which is compassionate. This is exactly the opposite of the Hobbesian view, which is that underneath everybody is a snarling animal.

### **Rick Hanson on the Still Small Voice**

Even when we are anxious, sad, irritated, feeling inadequate, or depressed, there is a deeper place that is undisturbed. Awareness keeps working, the peaceful space in which experiences come and go. Deep down there is an inviolate wisdom, a "still, small voice" at the heart of you. To borrow a metaphor from *The Lord of the Rings*, no matter how thick and dark the clouds, stars are always still shining, filling empty space with light.

### **Gabriel García Márquez on the Spirit**

Age has no reality except in the physical world. The essence of a human being is resistant to the passage of time. Our inner lives are eternal, which is to say that our spirits remain as youthful and vigorous as when we were in full bloom. Think of love as a state of grace, not the means to anything, but the alpha and omega. An end in itself.

### **H.L. Mencken on Democracy**

Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard.

**Nietzsche on Self-Righteousness**

No one is such a liar as an indignant man.

**Pascal on the Present**

Let each one examine his thoughts, and he will find them all occupied with the past and the future. We scarcely ever think of the present; and if we think of it, it is only to take light from it to arrange the future. The present is never our end. The past and the present are our means; the future alone is our end. So we never live; and, as we are always preparing to be happy, it is inevitable we should never be so.

**Rilke on Love**

For one human being to love another: that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation.

**Thoreau**

Amid a world of noisy, shallow actors it is noble to stand aside and say, 'I will simply be.' God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages.

I am grateful for what I am and have. My thanksgiving is perpetual. It is surprising how contented once can be with nothing definite – only a sense of existence. Well, anything for variety. I am ready to try this for the next ten thousand years, and exhaust it. How sweet to think of my extremities well charred, and my intellectual part too, so that there is no danger of worm or rot for a long while. My breath is sweet to me. O how I laugh when I think of my vague indefinite riches. No run on my bank can drain it, for my wealth is not possession but enjoyment.

**Mark Twain on History**

History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme.

**Kallistos Ware**

The entire cosmos is one vast burning bush, permeated by the fire of the divine power and glory.

The culture and educational system of the contemporary West are based almost exclusively upon the training of the reasoning brain and, to a lesser degree, of the aesthetic emotions. Most of us have forgotten that we are not only brain and will, senses and feelings; we are also spirit. Modern man has for the most part lost touch with the truest and highest aspect of himself; and the result of this inward alienation can be seen all too plainly in his restlessness, his lack of identity and his loss of hope.

We are on a journey through the inward space of the heart, a journey not measured by the hours of our watch or the days of the calendar; for it is a journey out of time into eternity.

The doors of Hell, insofar as they have locks, have locks on the inside.

**Walt Whitman**

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown, or to any man or number of men – go freely with powerful uneducated persons, and with the young, and with the mothers of families – re-examine all you have been told in school or church or in any book, and dismiss whatever insults your own soul; and your very flesh shall be a great poem, and have the richest fluency, not only in its words, but in the silent lines of its lips and face, and between the lashes of your eyes, and in every motion and joint of your body.

### **Howard Zinn on Optimism**

An optimist isn't necessarily a blithe, slightly sappy whistler in the dark of our time. To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places--and there are so many--where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.