

A Very Condensed
Traveler's Guide
for the
Spiritual Quest



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*For all those who have been my teachers and guides,
And especially my family,
With gratefulness.*

EVERY JOURNEY BEGINS WITH A QUESTION

A question = a **QUEST – I – ON**: The “quest” the “I” within us is eternally “on.”

Look at the question mark: **?**

Turn it sideways. It looks like an empty cup, a begging bowl – with a point to it. A good question, a useful question, will be an emptiness, a seeking, a longing to know contained within the form of an inquiry. Why a point? A question that is not “pointed” generates ambiguous and broadly generalized answers. This is not very helpful. A question with a point to it selects and shapes the available responses into a more specific answer or answers.

On the spiritual journey, it is much more important to have a good question than it is to have a collection of answers. Remember the saying, “Nature abhors a vacuum.” A useful question is a vacuum-like emptiness, continually drawing in potential answers. These answers help to map the journey itself, as new vistas open, new realities are perceived, and new experiences present themselves – which in their turn evoke even more revelations. One well-conceived question may expand into an entire cosmos of emergent possibilities – the first step in a journey of 10,000 miles, the journey of your own lifetime.

Some questions, over the millennia, have been found to be universally useful for souls seeking to explore their spiritual origins. These initiate the timeless journey:

“Who am I?”

“What am I?”

“What is life?”

Or as a popular song put it a generation ago, “What’s it all about, Alfie? Is it just for the moment we live?”

One could fairly claim that the instant one of these questions first occurs to an individual soul is in fact the first moment of Spirit awakening that soul from its life-slumber. It is the beginning of the beginning of the journey home, from self to Self.

If you haven't done so already, choose your question – carefully. Begin or continue your journey. Open to a continuously expanding experience of self, life and Self. Enjoy the companionship of other travelers now and then, knowing that each journey is unique and incomparable even as the ultimate point of arrival is the same.

In these pages we will explore common themes and experiences of the spiritual journey. The ideas expressed here are not intended to meet rigorous academic theological standards, nor to conform dogmatically to any prescribed religion or tradition. They are rather the explorations of a soul in progress, lines of inquiry emanating from one heart, discovering the practical as well as the thoughtful aspects of living a Spirit-centered life. So come along, enjoy, as a – questing we will go!

ASPIRE TO DESIRE

Do you want to know a secret? Do you promise not to tell? ;-)

Desire is the dynamic, the fuel of existence, the internal combustion that powers every action. Without desire, there is no movement, no journey, no true existence.

When it comes to the spiritual journey, desire has a very bad reputation. In fact, it is often seen as the serpent in the garden, the corrupting element, the many-headed monster which must be defeated before “enlightenment” can be achieved. In many traditions, desire has been viewed as insidiously associated with the seductive power of the all-too-willing visible feminine principle (ma, mater, matter, material world) to entrap pure light, spirit, intelligence (the invisible masculine principle) in a prison of time, space, form and substance. As if pure light, spirit, intelligence was helpless to resist! As if the masculine principle EVER manifests without its consort, the feminine principle.

I see a very big paradox here. What is this “enlightenment” which we so ardently DESIRE to “achieve?” Enlightenment is imagined to be the state of being which has remembered itself as pure, unadulterated spirit, untouched and unlimited by the world of existence and desire. What does this really mean to most of us? We have a DESIRE to be inoculated against life! Enlightenment is the salvation-inoculation that will protect me from experiencing pain, misery, loss, frustration, horror and fear. Therefore, I want (!) to achieve it – and better sooner than later!

“Achieve”? This word implies attaining or arriving at something that is not immediately present – something that is separated from us by time, space or substance. So already, even in how we think about enlightenment, we are anchoring ourselves to the world of space, time, form and substance – i.e., existence. The world of the serpent and the feminine.

Buddha described this world of existence with the word, **dukkha**, which means suffering – or, more precisely, **dislocation** (which is the literal meaning of

the word, “*dukkha*”). Buddha described our lives as similar to trying to move with a joint that is out of socket, dislocated – for example, trying to walk with a dislocated hip or lift a child with a dislocated shoulder. Such a life is one of suffering and pain. Enlightenment, then, is re-location, perfect coordination and synchrony – and therefore, no resistance or pain. All parts of the self are able to work together smoothly, without friction or resistance. Then *samsara* (the world of matter and form) is seen to be *nirvana* (immaterial and formless). What causes this dislocation in the first place? According to Buddha, it is DESIRE that is the root cause of all *dukkha* – specifically, the desire to isolate and seek fulfillment through the personal self, or “selfish craving.” Perhaps you are noticing that both Christian and Buddhist philosophies agree that desire is critical to the experience of life as we know it – and, when focused on the egoic self, the greatest obstacle to uninterrupted purity of consciousness and being!

Uh oh! Do you see how the trap has been not only set but sprung? Life is fueled by desire. Selfish desire causes suffering. Therefore, life is suffering. No desire = no suffering = no life (why even get out of bed in the morning?). Suffering in life stimulates a desire for a state or condition **beyond** desire and suffering – a return to the Garden, or the cool and serene emptiness of *nirvana*...a state or condition of being that is **beyond life**. A kingdom of heaven. While still in the body, of course. And that desire precipitates a question from the heart: “What **IS** life?” “Who **AM** I?” “**WHAT** am I?” The spark of aspiration ignites the fuel of longing/desire, and the journey accelerates.

As spiritual beings on this human journey, what must we do then to keep a steady state of internal combustion for the long, long journey-that-doesn’t-really-go-anywhere-since-there’s-really-nowhere-to-go-but-here-and-now? We must keep our desires well-mixed with the oxygen of breath, of spirit, of **aspiration**, of questing for that elusive destination of pure being, pure spirit, pure light. The literal meaning of “aspire” is “to breathe toward.” It is that inner yearning that keeps moving us toward the Divine, like a plant toward the sun, even though the Light is already present within us and around us. The dilemma is that WE do not know how to be present with IT.

You are already on the adventurous journey of a lifetime. Maybe it's time to step on the gas! Aspire to desire. Desire to aspire. Fire up your question. Breathe toward your deepest desire. Move forward as if your life depended on it. Because it does.

;-) Shhhhhhh!

ORIENTATION

“Seek ye wisdom, even to the Orient”

-Sufi saying

In order to move in any direction at all, one must first be “oriented.” The word “orient” is instructive. It’s from the Latin word, *oriri*, which means “to rise.” By association, it also means “east,” to face or point toward the east, and “a pearl of great luster: glowing, radiant.” In spiritual lore, the “journey to the East” or the “journey to the Orient” is the journey toward wisdom, the “pearl of great price” – toward enlightenment and illumination. This journey is also, by definition, one of “rising.”

How then can we find our way to the unknown destination where the soul within us, that which desires and moves, will rise into wisdom, awaken as a lustrous, radiant being?

Our first clue lies in the fact that this “orient” we seek requires “rising.” That immediately suggests that the course we must follow is not through the outer horizontal dimensions of space and time along the surface of the earth, but rather the inner vertical dimensions of the timeless, universal Self. An inner journey, more than an outward one. But perhaps it’s not an either/or situation. Perhaps the outer and the inner are always interlaced, like the masculine and the feminine, mirroring and reflecting each other in myriad perceptions of light and dark.

Yet even to begin to move, we must have a POINT of orientation – an aim – a distant light toward which we organize our energies. I wrote earlier of the necessity for a question, an “empty cup with a point to it” as an impetus to action. I also spoke of desire to fill that emptiness as the moving force that gets the show on the road. Now we must lift our vision to that which lies above and beyond us, as we direct our steps along the way, hungering for answers. For thousands of years, travelers on sea and land have oriented their journeys to the pole star, the North Star, as an unmoving center and anchor point in the sky above. While the other constellations wheel through the sky with the changing seasons, the Pole Star dances in place, a still center in a moving cosmos.

In the quest we are undertaking, the inner equivalent of the Pole Star is the spiritual center within us around which the dynamic and seasonal life of the soul revolves. Some would call it the Light of God. Some would call it the Christ within. Some would call it the Buddha Nature. Some would call it the Great Spirit or Great Mystery. Or the World Axis. Or the Heart's Ideal. In any case, it is that still center which is everywhere present even as we imagine it to be infinitely remote. It is both the source of all movement and the magnetic destination toward which all movement gravitates. It is that which inspires your whole being to move forward with devotion, however you describe it to yourself or it appears to you.

Those who follow the religion of Islam are required, as an act of their faith, to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime...if at all possible. Faithful Muslims around the world turn and face "east" toward Mecca to pray five times every day. The Ka'aba at Mecca (a large, black square structure with the Stone of Abraham imbedded in it) is their Pole Star, their Divine Center, their place of Orientation. When they make the pilgrimage to Mecca, they circumambulate the Ka'aba much as the constellations and stars seem to circumambulate the Pole Star.

I have a friend who had the very great privilege of making the pilgrimage to Mecca in the company of his shaykh, or spiritual guide. Once there, after circumambulating the Ka'aba, he was able to enter within the Ka'aba itself – the equivalent of arriving at the Pole Star and entering its atmosphere, or of arriving at the Divine Center of Being and entering within. Once inside, he made a great discovery. Whichever way he faced, at this center of all centers, he found himself facing back out into the world from which he had come. His first step away from the center, his inevitable next step, would be back into life, back into the world, back into existence once again. Yet he would not have realized this had he not made the journey first.

As T. S. Eliot wrote in his poem "Little Gidding" in The Four Quartets:

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

It is not enough to read about this and think you understand it. You are called to **realize** it. To **REAL-I-ze** it yourself. So seek your own source of wisdom, even to the Orient! Look up and out. Follow your heart. Spiral into the still center of illumination. Your hidden treasure lies beyond the horizon of your expectations, above and within your deepest longings. Find YOUR star and follow it. It is both compass and map for your pilgrimage to the East, to the center of all centers, to the pearl of great price, to the fully risen and radiant Self we all are in “REAL-I”-ty.

HITTING THE ROAD

Perhaps you recognize now that the destination of our seeking – the center toward which we direct all our efforts – is in fact the **source** of our seeking, firing our desire for unity from within. Because it is within us, it is essentially present in every step of the journey. We now know this philosophically – but not in reality. It's like hearing about swimming when your only experience with water is drinking it from a cup. There is some vague notion of what swimming might be, because you know what water is; but it is far from the reality of swimming as you will one day experience it if you find a large body of water and immerse yourself in it.

So it is with the spiritual journey. After sipping Spirit, we develop a thirst for more, not realizing that eventually we will be plunged into it, immersed in it, dissolved in it, like a salt doll in the ocean. But these are only words, empty words at that – hollow concepts about an intensely alive and rich experience that is purely imaginary at the beginning.

Other seekers throughout history have explored art, architecture, scriptures, music and myths while looking for clues or guideposts to help them on their way. Perhaps you also seek out teachers or living guides, who are reputed to know the way. Perhaps you listen within for the hints and impressions that subtly direct you here and then there. Looking. Listening. This workshop. That book. A visiting guru with glowing references. Trying yoga. Breathwork. Chanting. Praying. Sitting in the silence. Fasting. Going to a sweatlodge ceremony, satsang at the ashram, high mass at the cathedral, a vipassana retreat, sufi zikr, singing bajans all night long. Making a prayer wheel, a prayer arrow, a meditation mandala, an altar, an icon, a prayer shawl. Lighting a votive candle, a sacred fire, a bed of hot coals. Shopping for the Spirit. Taking practices home on a trial basis, keeping the ones you like and returning the rest. Making choices as you make your exploratory way: this is “right” for me, that is not. Coming to know yourself better and better as you directly experience what “fits” for you and what doesn't. Gathering bits and pieces of spirituality like fragments of stained glass through which you have glimpsed a certain tone and hue of light, hoping

that eventually they will form together into your transcendent, transparent image of Self.

This is the new spirituality, blessed by the availability of all the spiritual treasures of the world, gathered over many centuries by countless seekers before you. We have been given a treasure trove through which you can sort and select just exactly those elements that reflect your own individual soul. Some see this as the worst sort of consumerism, a shallowness and superficiality that belies any spiritual depth or discipline. In some cases, that is exactly what happens – a sort of endless window-shopping that never goes anywhere at all.

Some bemoan this individual process as the ultimate in self-delusion because it occurs beyond the safeguards and boundaries of the great spiritual traditions. In some cases, that is also exactly what happens – beautiful and magnificent traditions that have been refined over centuries of time and practice are desecrated, cannibalized, and trivialized into self-serving ego trips and entrepreneurial bastardizations. People get lost, get hurt, get exploited when they travel beyond the safe walls of tradition. But sometimes injuries occur within those walls as well.

Ultimately, whatever way you choose, the journey is full of risk, inevitably producing pain, struggle, loss and gain, darkness and light. Because the road is Life – not something separate or apart from living. Whatever the path you choose, ruggedly-individual or within the protective arms of a tradition, it will be YOUR path, the unfolding of YOUR soul, the expansion of YOUR life from cup to ocean. And you can be sure of one thing: it will bring you **exactly** what you need at the very moment you need it – like it or not!

The ego's agenda is "Easy Street;" the soul's agenda is "Hard Road" (but a Good Road, as Native Americans say again and again). As Rodney Collin wrote in The Theory of Conscious Harmony:

The whole thing lies in the relation of body, soul and spirit. Body vibrates – more in some than in others, but it vibrates. Spirit vibrates – somewhere. But the soul is very inert, it usually quivers only on the surface, not deeply. We have to

make it vibrate throughout, right to its deepest part. It is shaken by joy, pain, loss, discovery, hard decisions, payment, all kinds of things...All these belong to the coming alive of the soul. When the whole soul vibrates as strongly as the body and spirit, then the three vibrate as one. We are one. We are real. We have integrity.

People ask for peace in their souls – they should ask for turmoil in their souls, so that they may find real peace in their spirits.

So know that your journey will involve struggle, sacrifice, complexity, confusion – and that, as a result, you will be shaken awake again and yet again. That IS the journey. That is how your soul will open, stretch, expand, gain flexibility, strength and resilience. So embrace your path. If it hurts at times, don't think you have lost your way or fallen off your path. How could you? Your path is wherever YOU are! It is your life unfolding. So shake yourself awake, look around, and take the next step. It is your journey home, and you will make it in your OWN way and in your own time. Trust yourself, no matter how things look on the outside. You are on the road, and you are exactly where you need to be, at any given moment.

RESISTANCE: Partner on the Path

Does this idea strike you as odd? Were you expecting to be partnered on your spiritual journey by hearts and flowers, angels and ascended masters?

How would being carried to your goal on the wings of ecstasy build in **you** the necessary strength, discipline, courage and commitment – the CAPACITY – to sustain prolonged exposure to higher spiritual energies? Clarity and humility are required to embody infinite love and joy without being overwhelmed, blown completely away – or worse, becoming ego-inflated and self-magnified. In an age of “instant enlightenment,” the allure of an effortless helicopter ride to the spiritual peaks sells very well. However, unless you’re willing to settle for being a bliss-ninny-woo-woo, it just isn’t that easy.

Luckily, we have all been provided with the perfect servant/companion for this journey. This we know as our “Resistance.” Our “drag-coefficient” **carries the baggage** and wears many masks, including procrastination, distraction, fatigue and confusion. As you begin your journey, most likely you are bringing a lot of baggage with you, dragging it along and staggering under its weight as if your survival depends on having it all with you at all times. Of course you will procrastinate – who wants to hoist that load every day? Of course you will get tired and confused – carrying all your stuff with you unexamined is hard, exhausting work. Instinctively, you recognize that you can’t leave it behind until you have sorted through every bag. But the journey calls you, the path lies urgently in front of you – so you begin, baggage and all. And your Resistance carries it for you – very s l o o o w l y.

Another way of thinking of Resistance is to recognize it as your Shadow – the unrecognized, unacknowledged and unresolved dimensions and aspects of your self. As long as these parts of you remain mostly unconscious, they weigh you down and slow you down. Which is, in MY view, a Very Good Thing indeed. In fact, I would propose that the journey in large part will turn out to be the slow and systematic exploration of your own baggage! And in the early stages of

spiritual awakening, it is the absolutely *necessary* ballast that anchors the soul to the living ground so that you don't just get "high" and float away into the infinite ethers like an un-tethered helium balloon. Escaping like hot air is NOT the point of why you are here...in my humble opinion. My observation is that most of us haven't even fully **arrived** here on earth yet – but, as souls, are hovering tentatively somewhere a few feet off the ground and half out of the body, waiting to see if it's safe to land. **We need to fully arrive before we start planning our departures!** It's like the old saying that you can't transcend an ego that you haven't yet developed. So our Resistance/Shadow is in fact our greatest ally, ever calling us into becoming more Real rather than more surreal.

As your very own Resistance accompanies you, you may chafe at the apparent slowness of your progress – or castigate yourself for procrastinating or distracting yourself again and again. These reactions are not particularly useful. Usually, when Resistance is fully activated, it is because something in your baggage requires your immediate attention. Rather than wasting energy beating yourself up, it makes a lot more sense to look inside and see what the issue really is. We are all full of conflicting needs, desires and agendas. One set of needs pulls in one direction, alarming another set of needs which immediately pull in the opposite direction – and our energies lock up! We are at "impasse." Nothing that we want to move will move – most especially, ourselves. Thrashing around and feeling bad won't help. The impasse is a powerful indicator that you are now ready to go deeper, to become aware of a previously buried issue or potential. Do the inner work, liberate the trapped energy by consciously absorbing its "weight" or importance for you – and then the released energy will carry you forward again. Until the next impasse, of course.

Are you getting the idea that the journey actually moves in fits and starts? Good! The truth is that you couldn't handle all the transformations required any faster than that. It takes time, energy, effort, persistence, commitment to keep working through and integrating all the Stuff in your Baggage. As you begin to "lighten up," to become more "weightless," the pace will pick up accordingly. Then you may find yourself longing for the good old days when heavy, reluctant Resistance dragged you down.

In the meantime, C. J. Jung in Aion (p.8) gives us our final word for now:

*The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential condition for any kind of self-knowledge, and it therefore, as a rule, meets with considerable **resistance**. Indeed, self-knowledge...frequently requires much painstaking work extending over a long period.*

If you've been hoping that a spiritual search would bring you instant gratification, this wisdom is likely to disappoint you. If you understand that your whole being must be transformed, bit by bit, into conscious self-hood as the essential container for Spirit, then you are ready for the journey, knowing that your very own Resistance will be carrying the baggage, at your elbow, loaded with everything YOU need to awaken to your true nature. Bon voyage!

THE MUDDLE WAY

“Divine Guidance is to lead us to perplexity.” -Sufi saying

Someone, somewhere, started a rumor that the spiritual path is easy to find and relatively simple to follow – a sort of “tiptoe through the tulips,” if you will. The implication is that if you can just lock on to the Divine Heart, then you will make your way straight home – to enlightenment – like a heat-seeking missile. And live happily ever after.

I am always for the easy way, myself, being naturally lazy and comfort-driven. The path of least effort holds great attraction for me. But as I’ve mentioned previously, this journey just does not work that way. Once we have taken the first steps, following the call of the heart’s question, we soon find ourselves moving deeper into confusion with every movement we make. Fog sets in, clouds descend, the footing is obscured and doubt begins to dim the light of purpose. Right on the heels of doubt may come fear: “What on earth do I think I am doing? Where on earth do I think I am going? Am I nuts? Have I finally, completely, LOST IT!?!” Your companion, Resistance, helps your feet to start dragging. The mind, at this point, begins to work overtime, like a hamster on a wheel, trying to “figure it out.” Who, what, where, why, how? People in your life obligingly reflect back your uncertainty and indecision by giving you peculiar looks and asking you solicitous questions that add fuel to the fire of doubt now burning in your mind.

“But I was CLEAR about wanting to become more spiritually open and aware!” Were you? Really? Or were you hoping that declaring yourself on the spiritual journey would somehow lighten your load, brighten your soul, put wings on your feet?

The moment you leave the conditioned beliefs of your past behind by questioning them, looking beyond them, you are already in the unknown. Because it is a new world, your mind CANNOT guide you, since it only knows the past...so instead it sets off all the “red alert” buttons. Thoughts of going crazy,

being rejected and abandoned by others, of somehow becoming forever lost and alone may begin to invade your previously-excited and anticipatory awareness. Without a map and a guide, you have no way of knowing what dangers may lay ahead at the very next step, let alone farther down the road. You begin to notice the incredible amount of phoniness and commercialization pervading the “spiritual consciousness” of many you encounter. Enthusiasm begins to evaporate. It becomes obvious that you don’t know who or what to trust. You are perplexed, confused, even dismayed. Good!

There is an old saying, “Man’s extremity is God’s opportunity.” It’s only when we finally realize that we DON’T know, that we haven’t even a clue about where to go or what to do, that we at last become more available to inner wisdom and guidance. And by that I do NOT mean your mind. The thinking mind has to be rendered more or less impotent, before we find ourselves freed up to access a deeper and truer source of intelligence – one that seems to rise up from the heart, richly integrative and complete, rather than descend from the head pontificating. We have to be thoroughly muddled before any true change can begin. Otherwise, it is simply a case of old paradigms finding different angles, appropriating them, and then flashing them before your awareness as if they were actually new and original instead of old notions re-costumed.

The ego is a devoted parent – it will bend you to its control and protection through whatever means it can devise! It is utterly convinced that there is no greater power than the conditioned intellect. That’s why it must finally undergo a “meltdown” before anything greater can surface and influence you. Remember, the mind ONLY KNOWS THE PAST, and can only foresee the future in terms of what is already known. It cannot originate.

Spirit, however, is always utterly original – and more than that, **elegant** in its revelations to the perplexed soul. But Spirit within doesn’t shout, it whispers. It is subtle. Its guidance must be caught on the wing, as it arises from the depths. It is easily blown away by the turbulence of an agitated, anxious, overprotective mind.

When you try to listen to all the messages bombarding you from spiritual “masters,” along with all the admonitions of the mind, how could you be anything but muddled? Yet, “Divine Guidance is to lead us to perplexity.” When you close your outer and inner ears, and retreat into the still and silent sanctuary of your own inner center of being, you become available for the first time to the Presence within. You may image this Presence as a guide in human or animal form, or experience it as a light, or as a voice, or a sound. But here’s the key: inner wisdom is NOT TALKATIVE. It will come to you as a Presence, it will “indicate” something to you, or “impress” an understanding on you, but always with simplicity, clarity, warmth and resonant truth...in as few words as possible. Often with none. You just suddenly become aware of something new – a perception or a point of view that had never before occurred to you. And the second test to verify that this communication comes from your highest self, is that it will never direct you to any thought, feeling or action that alienates, divides, antagonizes or further separates you from Spirit, from others or from yourself. When you are silent, it speaks. When your mind or emotions speak, it is silent.

As you become inwardly silent, still, open and receptive, the guidance to which you can entrust your life and your soul will become Present. Until then, embrace perplexity, accept your muddled state, and wait with humility (not-knowing).

T. S. Eliot described this beautifully, in the poem “East Coker” in The Four Quartets:

*I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God...
I said to my soul be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.*

Every bit of wisdom and intelligence you need for this journey lies WITHIN YOU, ready to guide you as soon and as often as you can make yourself available –

to open, to listen silently, to receive. So when you become muddled, perplexed, confused, dismayed – this is your ***call to prayer***, to enter within, into darkness, into stillness, into silence, into not-knowing, into communion with the Spirit of God. Then you can surrender and entrust yourself to the guidance that will never fail you – and which is ALWAYS with you. Then the fog, the clouds will lift, and you can safely, surely continue on your way.

When I have trouble becoming still and quiet, I silently repeat the Unity prayer of James DilleTT Freeman which affirms:

*The light of God surrounds me,
The love of God enfolds me,
The power of God protects me,
The presence of God watches over me.
Wherever I am, God is.*

PERSEVERANCE FURTHERS

“Darkening of the Light: in adversity

It furthers one to be persevering.” -#36, Ming I, I Ching

In many respects, the early stages of the spiritual quest are the most difficult. The self is wonderstruck one moment and plummeting into an abyss the next. One of the overlooked features of “opening” oneself up, of breaking through limiting patterns into greater freedom, is that the range of new experiences expands in a circle. Opening does not happen in one direction only.

In a greater state of openness, we experience more darkness to the same degree that we experience more light. This often comes as an unpleasant and unexpected surprise. The expectation is that we can open to light **only** – but in fact it is the degree of **wholeness** which increases, and with it the entire spectrum of possible experiences within it.

Bombarded with new and intense perceptions, both positive and painful, the self is easily thrown off-center, seesawing from highs to lows and back again, like a ship in high, stormy seas without a rudder. It is at this point that real ego disintegration becomes a danger. And a **dis**-integrated ego is NOT the point to your quest. The idea is to transcend a robustly healthy and functioning ego – to go beyond it, not to lose it altogether. This is exactly the reason why Jung refused to do individuation work with anyone under the age of 45. He required his clients to have established themselves in work, relationship, family, church and community – to have built a mature and stable ego that could both **withstand** and **integrate** the intensity of experience that accompanies diving into the deep unconscious. A mature ego also implies a strong sense of self, and knowledge of one’s own character. Of greatest importance is personal integrity.

What is personal integrity in the context of the spiritual quest? First and foremost, it is the ability to keep your word, to honor your commitments – no matter what. There is a Sufi saying: **“Agreement is a stronger word than God.”** What this suggests is that we must consider our agreements or commitments carefully before making them – because, once made, we are **spiritually** bound to follow through, to honor our own pledge. If we break or fail to keep our word, the injury is not so much to others as it is to our own souls. We build a track record of distrust of our own intentions. We teach ourselves that our promises

mean little and can be easily broken. We rationalize our bailouts when the winds of comfort and convenience shift. But – when a storm hits and we need that strong center within us, the rudder of character and will – there is nothing there we can rely on. On the other hand, if agreement is a stronger word to you than God, then you know that – having given your word – your will to abide by it is unchangeable and unshakeable because it is the manifestation of God within, a spiritual pledge.

*God is not a man, that he should lie,
nor a son of man, that he should change his mind.
Does he speak and then not act?
Does he promise and not fulfill?* - Numbers 22:19

If you have built this self-trust, that you WILL abide by your commitments, that you WILL be a person of integrity to yourself and to others, no matter what the personal expense or cost (because you recognize that the cost to your soul of walking away would be so much greater) – then you have a rudder that will steer you through every storm. This doesn't mean you have to deny or repress your feelings. It means that you feel and honor your feelings fully – but they are **not** the **deciding** factor. The deciding factor is your word, your promise or pledge, your commitment, your agreement.

I will happily give you a money-back guarantee that your spiritual journey is going to test your capacity to keep your word, to honor your commitments, to act with integrity. Another Sufi saying fits here: **“We shall try them until we know them.”** You will be tried in the fire of daily life, to see if the steel of your character becomes tempered – made strong and resilient by fire – or if it crumbles and cracks under the intensities you will face. It is your choice: make your agreements carefully, then keep them even if it costs you everything; or promise anything in the moment, then do whatever feels good at the time. God doesn't care what you choose – but you certainly will, when the storms hit.

This doesn't mean that you parade your virtue. Remember, YOU are the one who needs to trust your own word, to have a strong rudder for steering your way through the waves. The I Ching goes on:

One must not unresistingly let himself be swept along by unfavorable circumstance, nor permit his steadfastness to be shaken. He can avoid this by

maintaining his inner light, while remaining outwardly yielding and tractable. With this attitude he can overcome even the greatest difficulties.

In some situations indeed a man must hide his light, in order to make his will prevail in spite of difficulties in his immediate environment (in your case, your will is to follow your question). Perseverance must dwell in inmost consciousness and should not be discernible from without. Only thus is a man able to maintain his will in the face of difficulties.

Without a will – which I’ve also called character and personal integrity – embarking on the spiritual journey will lead to disintegration as the intensity and variety of experiences expands. Your will is your essential tool for this journey. It is the perseverance that furthers. It is the self-trust which centers you in yourself no matter where you are or what is going on. Make sure you either have or build this tool for yourself before you venture too far, for you will not survive the disintegrative forces without it. It’s not that Spirit is out to do you harm – far from it! It is that your container of self is too fragile to endure the trials that must come in order to forge a soul that is a clear, strong, resilient, transparent vessel for the Divine light.

How do you build your will, your inner gold standard? Step by step, day by day, promise by promise. It’s best to start very small, with commitments you **KNOW** you can and will keep. You need to build a track record, a history with yourself, of reliability, of dependability – that you will in fact do what you have said you will do. It takes a lot of time to grow that seed of determination into a will that cannot, will not fail. Many tests will come. Just remember the essential truth of the I Ching: **perseverance furthers**.

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

“Real spiritual practice is not something we do for twenty minutes a day, for two hours a day...once a day in the morning, or once a week on Sunday. Spiritual practice is not one activity among other human activities; it is the ground of all human activities, their source and their validation.”

-Ken Wilber, No Boundary

Our journey takes place, step by step, moment by moment, on holy ground. What is holy ground? It is the point of conscious connection between the spiritual and the material worlds. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” (Exodus 3:5, Joshua 5:15) Spiritual practice is continuous awareness of that connection, wherever you stand or walk, whatever you are doing, moment by moment, step by step. It is the ground itself.

When you walk along a path, I’d be willing to bet that you’re usually trusting the ground to be underneath your feet. Unless the path is known to be risky or dangerous, you probably don’t give the ground that supports you much attention or thought. Yet without it, you would fall, collapse in an instant. It is the same with the spiritual ground of our being. It is the secure base which upholds our lives at every step – yet even as we rely on it, we generally fail to notice how well-supported we are. Our “soles” are thick, rubbery – allowing our contact with the ground to be nearly imperceptible. **Bare** “soles” cannot help but be aware of every step. So when we remove our sandals, our cushioning layers of conditioning and unconsciousness, sensitivity returns and awareness happens – then the spiritual and the material may be united in human consciousness.

Wilber quotes the great Zen Master Hakuin:

*Not knowing how near Truth is,
People seek it far away – what a pity!
They are like he who, in the midst of water,
Cries in thirst so imploringly.*

Uh oh, wait just a minute here. Does this mean that this spiritual journey is a journey without inches, steps, miles, magnitudes of distance and time? How can we ever measure our progress then, or know where we are in relation to beginning and end? Ah but you remember, I am sure, the words of T. S. Eliot, about the end being in the beginning, but knowing it for the first time. What

often happens is that people seek the Spirit for thousands of miles, over years of time, seldom dreaming that the holy ground they seek is directly beneath their “soles,” holding them up, at every step, every moment. Were we to stop for even a moment and cease looking out – beyond this time, this place, this circumstance – for our heart’s desire...we might discover it! Yet it may well take some of us an extraordinary amount of effort to exhaust all efforting, only to subside into the present moment and discover what has been “closer than your jugular vein” all along. That is the moment when spiritual practice actually begins.

I’m sure you recall the dictum that the three most important factors in business success are “location, location, location.” It doesn’t take too long at this point to realize that the three most important factors in the spiritual quest are going to be “practice, practice, practice.”

“Practice” can have two meanings: the first is to develop skill by repetition or practice, as in practicing the piano; the second is to practice skillfully one’s art, as in practicing medicine. The spiritual quest engages both forms of practice. First we must learn and develop the skills involved in subsiding mentally, emotionally, and sensually into stillness and silence – into the present moment, here and now, wherever we are. However, this doesn’t even make sense as something to practice until that moment when you see that it is your own thoughts, feelings and sensations that pull you into past or future, into journeys east or west. Secondly, we discover that the way to sustain and maintain unity with Spirit (to remain bare-soled, so to speak) is by “remembering,” by practicing being in the Presence of God. Wilber expresses it succinctly in No Boundary:

“Even if, in our spiritual practice, it appears we are trying to *attain* enlightenment, we are actually only *expressing* it.”

The more we express it, the more we become one with it. Yet this sounds much easier than it turns out to be. As we begin to value practice, in whatever form that may take for each of us (being simply whatever keeps us awake in the moment), the obstacles and impediments multiply. This is our traveling companion, Resistance, at work making sure that we recognize the profound levels of desire, commitment and perseverance that are required to establish spiritual awareness of the ground of human existence. We forget, we remember; we get lost, we come back; we fall out of the center, we crawl back into it. I’ve always been reassured by the information I heard somewhere that the Apollo spacecraft, on the way to the moon, had to correct its course every few minutes.

It was no more able to stay on the straight and narrow trajectory without deviation than we are. But the point is, we keep coming back: remembering, returning to center.

The more we thus “practice” the easier it gets, until we are no longer “practicing” to get closer to Spirit but are in fact the Spirit “practicing” reality-creation through us – and the soul recognizes herself as God’s holy ground. As Rumi so tenderly puts it:

He possesses such gentleness that were it possible he would die for you so that duality might vanish, but since it is impossible for him to die, you die so that he may manifest himself to you and duality may vanish.

This “dying” is nothing tragic or painful, but rather the natural absorption of the part into the whole, the self into the Self, the ray into the light source with which it was always and already one.

Whatever your practice may be (and the form is far less important than the doing of it), it is the heart of the journeying. It is the activity that best helps you to remember yourself as Spirit, drawing back together the fragments of body, emotions, mind and soul into wholeness until there is only One. You may sit zazen, sing bajans till dawn, do zikr till you’re transported, punctuate every action of the day with ritual prayers, or crochet, cook, garden, sweep, do dishes. It is all divine love in action, practicing the art of life – the Presence practicing in us, through us, as us. There is an old Sufi saying: “Either you eat the shaykh or the shaykh eats you.” Pray that you may be a tasty morsel. And then practice, practice, practice!

TRUST WITHOUT RUST

Trust in Allah, and tie up your camel. – Mohammed

Pray as if it all depends on God, and work as if it all depends on you.

– George Washington Carver

If the spiritual quest is a movement that is independent of the measures of time and space, what is it then that moves? The alchemists would tell us that it is rather a process of “transmutation,” a process of emergence where the duller, common matrix or “material” becomes, through a variety of transformations, “converted” into that which is rare, beautiful, illumined.

We are all familiar with the story of the ugly duckling which becomes, with time, the elegant and beautiful swan. That is a process of transmutation, dependent on time. Our souls, in the course of a lifetime, may undergo a similar transmutation. Webster’s Dictionary gives us an example of **transmutation**: *the conversion of base metals into gold or silver*. This conversion comes about through a process of change and transformation they called “alchemy.” Judaism, Christianity and Islam speak of the “conversion” of the soul or “heart,” and how it may be transmuted from a “heart of stone” to a “heart of flesh,” pliable and receptive to having the name of God engraved upon it. So the movement of this spiritual quest may be seen as a movement that is without space, beyond time, occurring within the crucible of the human personality – a conversion or transmutation of a human soul from unconscious to conscious, from instinctual to enlightened, from self-centered to centered Self.

For the transmutation to occur, the crucible must be able to withstand both heat and pressure. Similarly, the personality must be strong enough to endure the heat and pressure of the changes brought about by spiritual commitment. Otherwise, instead of a more highly integrated and sublime state, the outcome may be one of disintegration and collapse if the personal vessel crumbles. The “heat” must be transformed into prayer, and the “pressure” transformed into work.

In this context, prayer becomes an attitude of trust, of remembering again and again through prayer and meditation that the individual ego is not the doer. This means that the spiritual practice or prayer practice is one of continually

letting go, “turning it over” to a power greater than ourselves, re-membering our inclusion in Self. Otherwise the “heat” of negative emotions – fear, anger, bitterness, grief, greed – magnified by spiritual energies will lead to either explosion or implosion, abolishing the quest. Prayer becomes trust, an **inner action**, made solid and real through constant reiteration and re-cognition of the Source. Molecule by molecule, prayer engraves the name of God on the human heart.

“Work,” on the other hand, is the essential partner of prayer. It takes the pressure, that builds up as negative thoughts and feelings are exposed by the fire-light of awakening awareness, and releases it through **inter-action**. Monasteries, ashrams and spiritual communities worldwide are living testimonials to the efficacy of linking work and prayer. Physical work, such as gardening, scrubbing, building, and anything else that works with physical or material objects (including works of art) is a way of taking the excess pressure and turning it into living prayer – especially when every action is done as a sacrament, as sacred activity. It calls forth our talents, exercises our intellectual and physical muscles, and connects us in a grounded, practical manner to the world and the beings around us. And at the same time, as the Benedictine monks remind us: “To work is to pray.”

Work and prayer are both expressions of spiritual service. The first, work, is doing all that is within your power to do while the second, prayer, is relinquishing, in trust, to your Source all that is NOT within your power to do. Together, they form the two hands of worship coming together in humility and devotion – or the two wings with which the soul, the heart, learns to fly. And so, we practice, practice, practice as the heat and pressure of our practice (i.e., living ever more consciously) bring to the surface all that must be recognized and transmuted or redeemed by conversion from coarse to fine, dull to bright, stony to pliable.

Our practice, then, is not simply to pray and passively wait upon the Divine to give our lives shape, structure and value. Nor is it to work excessively, thinking that we alone can wrest from the world around us a life shaped and structured to our own choosing. Rather, our practice is to seek again the balance – to trust **and** to act, to pray **and** to work, to surrender **and** to unfold ourselves completely into the world. To join in perfect union the spiritual and material domains of the Divine through a human heart made flesh and engraved by love, a human soul refined and made beautiful in the fiery cauldron of life.

A Buddhist, however, does not believe in the positive existence of anything like a “soul.” Nevertheless, Buddhist communities also balance meditation with ordinary “meritless” or “purposeless” activity done with a pure consciousness, especially Zen Buddhism. Think of the Japanese Tea Ceremony. Consider the words of a Zen Master a thousand years ago:

*Empty and spiritual,
Vacant and marvelous!
Chopping wood,
Carrying water...*

Roshi Philip Kapleau is quoted in Chop Wood, Carry Water:

*By undertaking each task in this spirit, eventually we are enabled to grasp the truth that every act is an expression of the Buddha-mind. Once this is directly and unmistakably experienced, no labor can be beneath one's dignity. On the contrary, all work, no matter how menial, is ennobling because it is seen as **the expression of the immaculate Buddha-nature**. This is true enlightenment, and enlightenment in Zen is never for oneself alone but for the sake of all.*

For the Buddhist, the “soul” is simply an unnecessary illusion, creating separation and attachment. Yet the detachment of the enlightened Buddhist and the surrender of the illumined soul may finally be two ways of talking about the same condition of being, the same alchemical result. In both, all separation and division vanishes, disappears into non-duality...and the transmutation is complete. Samsara equals nirvana, earth equals heaven, matter equals spirit, creator equals creation. One is all, and All is one. Now you see it...now you don't!

No-thing now-ever is now-here (existence affirmed - samsara)

Nothing n'ever is nowhere (existence negated - nirvana)

At this point, the Buddha said, “There is nothing left to do but laugh.”

REALITY TESTING 101

La illaha il'Allah. There is no god but God.

– Shahadah, or Islamic Declaration of Faith

Perception IS reality. This is one of the “laws” you learn in the course of the spiritual quest. We can only be conscious of that which we are able to perceive. We are only able to perceive that to which we are conscious or awake. This comes as something of a surprise to those who believe that the world “out there” or around us has some unchangeable objective “reality.”

As we are conditioned through our living interactions with parents, teachers, culture and so on, we may well come to rely on an assumption that the world we live in is solid, “real.” We may, accordingly, believe that what we see, hear, taste, touch with our five senses and our conditioned minds is exactly as we experience it...particularly when others seem to agree.

An early amazement for the spiritual seeker is the emerging experience that “What You See is Who/What You Are.” The psychological term for this is ***projection***. Little by little, the seeker begins to notice that others around are busily projecting themselves onto the canvas of their outer life...and then acting as if what they perceive in others had nothing to do with them personally. I call this “silver screen” reality. Unconsciously, I project my own loves, hates, fears, desires, aversions and appetites onto the people, places and things around me. The inner dialogue might go like this: Since I love chocolate, I assume everyone loves chocolate. Since I despise lima beans, I assume all intelligent beings must also despise lima beans – and that there must be severe character defects in those who claim to like them! Since I am a good student and learning comes easily to me, I assume that those who struggle with school must be lazy, stupid or crazy since they **could** benefit from it as much as I do if they just applied themselves and stopped being ornery. I am able to make a good living and have a stable life, so I assume that those who don’t do the same are just unwilling to do the right thing! On the other hand, people of another culture look scary, suspicious, and strange to me – even downright dangerous! They are probably capable of all sorts of dark deeds that I cannot allow myself to even imagine.

This “silver screen” projection-based consciousness allows us to see the world in simple terms: that which looks like our own self-image or better, we approve and trust; that which appears alien or opposite to our self-image, we fear and resist – never realizing that it is no more than our own unacknowledged self or shadow. We are only perceiving the conscious and unconscious dimensions of our own selves, but fail to recognize this. Instead, we think that these qualities exist independently of us in all around us.

One of the first rules of the psyche that I learned – and it has been my guiding principle ever since – is this: “Ninety-nine percent of all criticism is projection.” We reject our own repressed traits by judging and criticizing others. Similarly, we embrace our own hidden magnificence in our praise of others. Next time you hear yourself saying: “He (she, it) is.....,” try changing the statement to “I am,” and see if it doesn’t somewhere, somehow fit for you.

Now, a new form of perception emerges: “mirror” reality. Instead of perceiving the disowned aspects of ourselves as actual truths about others, we begin to recognize our perceptions of others, objects and even situations as mirrors to the hidden aspects of our own selves. My oldest son put it succinctly at the age of 5, when I was trying to get him to stop criticizing others all the time: “You mean...I **am** what I say about others?” Precisely.

Once you know the truth of this mechanism, it becomes a very valuable source of personal awakening and growth – providing you don’t wither your own soul by turning the harsh chill of judgment and criticism against yourself. To lead to growth rather than a killing frost, the light of awareness needs to become that of the impartial witness – observing the content of our projections onto our world and seeing how it is actually the truth about our own selves. As it happens, I married a man who appeared to be my complete opposite. Early on, I realized that everything he was and did that I rejected or resisted was in fact a hidden or repressed attribute of my own that I was afraid or unwilling to recognize as part of myself (though usually to a lesser degree). He was a mirror to my dark and bright shadows (unacknowledged self) – as I was to his. There is an old esoteric saying, “I am in he and he is in me.” Or in Hinduism, “Tat tvam asi” – “I am THAT.”

Eventually, as we persist in our spiritual follies, even the mirror begins to disappear into “**transparency**.” The world that was the opaque “silver screen” of projected self, then the shiny “mirror” of reflected self, becomes the transparent glassy container of the revealed Self which, like a stained glass lamp, reveals light

streaming from within each and every form and attribute, taking on the infinite shapes and hues and tones of psychophysical reality. One light, infinite transparent lamps. Yet each translucent vessel conveys the light uniquely, no two exactly alike. When we begin to perceive the One Light shining through all things, it becomes obvious that the true REALITY is that which is shining through – the one unchanging Source. If so, then that Light Source must also be shining as the ultimate reality within ME, beyond all appearances and actions. This perception of “transparency” reveals the Divine Light, spirit, God – the One however you wish to name it – as the essential reality radiating through all things, including ourselves.

Teilhard de Chardin, in The Divine Milieu, talks of the “ray that strikes the surface” as **theophany** (literally, a “showing” or “appearance” of the Divine Light) or God reflected in the divine mirror of existence. But de Chardin goes further, and talks of **diaphany**, the Divine Light revealed as the essential, final Reality radiating from **within** all forms – including ourselves. He offers this prayer:

“Lord, we know and feel that you are everywhere around us; but it seems that there is a veil before our eyes...may your deep brilliance light up the innermost parts of the massive obscurities in which we move...”

When, in transparency, all is seen to contain the One Light, all divisions and distinctions become secondary at best. The Light is the purpose of all lamps. Then you are free to love your own lamp and the unique way it shines the light, as well as to like or dislike the way the Light comes through other “lamps” without ever confusing the lamps or your reactions to them with “reality.” Only the One is real. *La illaha il’Ilah*: There is no god but God; there is no reality but Reality.

GREEN GOO

When one is changing, how does one know that a change is taking place? When one is not changing, how does one know that a change hasn't already occurred? Maybe you and I are still in a dream and have not yet awakened... Be content with what is happening and forget about change; then you can enter into the oneness of the mystery of heaven.
—Chuang Tsu

What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the rest of the world calls "butterfly."
-Richard Bach

Following the question, aspiring, desiring, and persevering can lead to a profound transformational process in the individual. I touched on this earlier in my allusions to the alchemical process of transmutation. Another relevant analogy is that of the metamorphosis of the caterpillar into the butterfly – a transformation that unfolds organically from within.

Imagine yourself as a caterpillar, moving through horizontal space, on a more or less flat surface, going about your ordinary daily life of finding and assimilating food. In the meantime, you are discovering information about your environment and your own needs and functions. Everything seems fairly obvious and straightforward. Goals are clear and unambiguous: eat, sleep, move, survive. Is this so very different from our own earlier phase of life? Yes, as humans even our “flatland” existence is more complex, but many of us assume for a very long time that it is all there is to human life. We eat, sleep, work, play, mate, argue, consume and compete. Caterpillar existence.

Then one day, without warning, the caterpillar suddenly experiences a new and strange urge – to go **vertical**. Even though this impulse makes no “sense” in the world of caterpillar reality, still the urge is so overpowering that the caterpillar seeks and finds a structure to ascend, leaving forever the horizontal realm of existence, now entering into the vertical as she inches upward, clinging to the strange structure which is now her “ground.”

Then another startling and strange impulse strikes. She stops suddenly, as her body begins to spin out a silky filament, spontaneously attaching her body to

the branch or structure she has been climbing. Eventually her entire body is encased, swaddled in a cocoon (chrysalis) which has amazingly emerged from within her and which now enfolds her. She is held fast, in place, unable to move in any direction, either horizontal or vertical. Then a new movement, completely unexpected, begins – within the cocoon itself.

Safely sealed within the chrysalis, the caterpillar begins to . . . **DISSOLVE!** All of her existing caterpillar structure begins to disintegrate and turn into green goo. You can well imagine what the caterpillar must be experiencing at this point! “Eeeeeeeek – I’m MELTING!” Yet this is essential to what must happen next in the transformational process. The fluid “green goo” allows all the genetic codes or “imagoes” (!) to be released from their earlier patterns of connection that formed the body and functions of the caterpillar. Now they move easily through the green goo, following strange “attractions” until they coalesce into new clusters, forming new genetically-programmed patterns. These new patterns will eventually harden into the regenerated body of the emergent butterfly – inhabitant of a realm that the caterpillar could not even perceive, let alone anticipate.

Perhaps by now, you are already seeing how the analogy works for the spiritual seeker. Having long ago left the “flatland” of conventional, consensus reality, the seeker has followed his question into the vertical dimension, aspiring and ascending internally toward his spiritual ideal – the seemingly distant radiance of the Divine Ideal toward which he has aimed his search. Yet at a certain moment, the movement suddenly stops. Something new – and often frightening at first – begins to happen. He feels stuck, immobilized, rooted in place. He can’t go forward and he can’t go back. He discovers he can only go **within**. Life as he has known it begins to dissolve. His self-image, his self-concept also begins to dissolve.

Yet miraculously, if he looks closely enough, he will see that he has somehow managed to provide himself with a cocoon, a chrysalis of sorts for this time of metamorphosis. It could be a safe, non-demanding routine job – or disability – or unemployment payments – or an inheritance – or a supportive mate. Or many other possibilities. Each of us seems to somehow manifest a way to outwardly survive (even though it may not be anywhere near our previous levels of security and sustenance) while we inwardly transform. . . while we, in fact, dissolve and become the equivalent of green goo.

Most people are pretty upset about this process, at first, because they don't understand why it is happening. They may fear insanity or death as the end to which it leads. If we know **why** we are dissolving, and **what** it indicates, and **where** it ultimately leads, then we can relax a little and just trust the process to take a natural and intelligent course. We can "free" our "imagoes" (inherent self-images as well as qualities, traits, characteristics) and let them fluidly move within our psyche until they form the innate patterns that illuminate and liberate the features and beauty of our individual and unique soul. It is good to remember that your true individuality or soul is as different from your ego or self-concept as the butterfly is from the caterpillar. One gets you through the world, the other elevates you into your true existence as a spiritual being lighter than air.

Once the butterfly is formed, the next step is critical. The butterfly must grow large enough and strong enough (still drawing on itself for sustenance) to break free of the chrysalis under its own power. "Help" in emerging leads to a failed transformation. Only through the struggle for freedom from the safety of the cocoon does the butterfly build the strength in her wings that will enable her to one day fly. The struggle forces body fluids into the fine web of vessels in the farthest tips of her wings. Without the struggle of self-liberation, her wings will be limp and she will never fly.

The same is true for us. Whatever the cocoon that has sustained us during our time of transformation, of dissolving and being re-formed, **we alone** must find the strength to extricate ourselves in order to exist as truly individuated souls. No one can – or should – help. Help, at this point, will be crippling (although I love to stand on the sidelines and send love, and cheer madly!)

Yet the metamorphosis is still not finished. Before taking to the air, trusting to the invisible medium that will be her new home, the butterfly must wait – must open her wings and allow them to dry. Premature lift-off will tear and ruin damp wings. So even though she sees a glorious new world before her, and new powers await her, she must wait – wait for the moment of completion, of certainty. Then . . . she may indeed fly. So too it is for us. The struggle of liberation, once successfully accomplished, is not yet the end. We too must wait – for strengthening, toughening, hardening once again into a solid and substantial form. To plunge into the atmosphere of Spirit too soon – while we are yet far too sensitive and vulnerable – will simply tear us apart. We too must wait – for completion, for certainty, for that inner signal that says "NOW!" Then we may

come fully alive in a dimension of life that allows us to know **all** of ourselves, and to live out the full extent of our potentials.

As lighter-than-air souls, we still contain within us the caterpillar of ego, but are now transformed and *“entered into the oneness of the mystery of heaven.”*

SURVIVING ENLIGHTENMENT

The subject must emerge normal in every way from the great ordeal (transformation), metamorphosed but mentally sane and with unimpaired intellect and emotion . . . it is not necessary to depart eccentrically from the normal course of human conduct. —Gopi Krishna

On the spiritual quest, we are seeking “the pearl of great price:” the answer to the question “Who am I?” or “What am I?;” or the Illumined Self, whatever that might be. As one great teacher from India pointed out, the seashore is littered with seashells, often with luminous interiors. Many seekers spend years along the shore of the great ocean of Being, going from shell to shell and imagining that they have found something of the pearl which they seek. However, the pearl doesn’t lie about on the shore, it is hidden within the ocean depths and the seeker must plunge in with his or her whole self if it is ever to be found.

What does this mean, to “plunge in with my whole self?” It is the same as the caterpillar submitting to dissolution in the chrysalis. We are called to self-annihilation. Does this mean death? Not literally, in a physical sense. Only the end of the world as we have known.

Up to a certain point in time, you hold one set of beliefs; and in the next instant, you experience a whole new perspective. —Brugh Joy in Joy’s Way

These experiences of self-annihilation are sometimes called “openings.” They annihilate not so much our essence but rather our conditioning, our habitual frameworks, and our basic assumptions as blinders fall away and new realities are perceived with irresistible force. They help us to melt, dissolve and flow into new patterns of being – to transform. We become like salt dolls in the ocean – losing our sense of boundaries, even separate identity at times, as we awaken as the One, the Ocean of Being . . . and know that we have never truly been other than this One in reality, only in appearance.

Over the years, I have observed that openings may be generalized into three different kinds, each of which occurs with such extreme intensity that the body, ego and personality are completely overwhelmed:

❖ (Kundalini)	Psychophysical
❖ (Enlightenment)	Mental
❖ (Mystical Rapture)	Emotional

The first kind of opening is experienced in and through the body, primarily, as energy awakens at the base of the spine and begins to rise through the psychophysical self, triggering the seven subtle centers or “chakras.” This **immanent** energy ascends until all the chakras have been activated, culminating in the crown and linking up with the transcendent dimension beyond. A **magnetic**, sinuous, sensual energy that rises up the spine, kundalini has long been associated with snakes or serpents. It often triggers many strange and even painful physical symptoms, including “kriyas” or spontaneous yoga postures. It also opens the person psychically, manifesting as telepathy, clairvoyance, and other psychic abilities known in India as “siddhis.”

Spiritual teachers **ALWAYS** downplay these phenomena as distractions on the path, as trivial and even dangerous for a neophyte. The irony is that becoming conscious of the thoughts and feelings of others will not usually be a very enjoyable or pleasant experience! Too many of us are mired in negative thoughts and emotions, and those who open up willy-nilly to other people’s “stuff” are soon quickly searching for ways to turn it all off! Worse yet, some also become open to the energies and agendas of folks who are no longer in their bodies – some of whom can become terrible pests. So much for psychic powers. They are more disruptive than useful until much later in the journey.

The second kind of opening is through the mind, and begins at the crown or top of the head, descending downward into the body. It is highly **electrical** and transcendent in nature, and is often experienced as being “struck by lightning.” It feels like a 220V current is trying to move through a 110V transmission system (the caterpillar body/self). This was the conversion experience of Saul of Tarsus before he became Paul and wrote much of what is now the New Testament. This is also the form of enlightenment experienced by Sri Aurobindo, one of the greatest spiritual teachers of modern times. It is like literally being struck blind by the Light. The mind becomes so illuminated that it transcends far beyond intellect into pure knowing.

In Sri Aurobindo or the Adventure of Consciousness by Sat Prem, we read:

The consciousness fills with a flood of light . . . and simultaneously comes a state of 'enthusiasm' . . . a sudden awakening, as if the entire being were . . . alerted, plunged all at once into a very rapid rhythm and a brand new world, with new values, new beliefs, unexpected correspondences; the world's curtain of smoke is raised, everything is linked in a great joyous vibration; life is vaster, more true, more vivid; small truths kindle everywhere, silently, as if each thing had a secret, a special meaning, a special life. One is in an unutterable state of truth without understanding anything about it – simply, it is.

This kind of opening also has its dangers, however, as the description goes on:

Along with its beauty we find the limits of the illuminated mind: illumination translates itself into a flood of images and revelatory words (because often the vision opens at this stage and also one begins to hear), almost an avalanche of images, luxuriant, often disordered, as though the consciousness was hard put to it to contain . . . this additional intensity – there is too much of it, it overflows. Enthusiasm changes easily into excitement and, if the rest of the being is not sufficiently purified, any lower part whatever may get hold of the light and force which descend to use them for its own ends – this is a frequent danger.

The seeker may find illumination turning into a cascade of meanings that threatens to overwhelm, to inundate consciousness to the point where all grounding is lost, all points of reference to ordinary existence vanish, and collapse becomes imminent. Or the ego may seize control of the light, identify itself as savior or messiah figure, and a kind of megalomania may follow.

Another common outcome is for the ego to see itself as a chosen vessel for some luminous being which overtakes the human personality – a state of unenlightened possession you probably know as “channeling.” As in the psychic “powers” released by the Kundalini-type experience, the visions and “missions from God” unveiled during illumination are to be disregarded as a kind of high-level psychism, unless verified and confirmed by an authentic, grounded and living spiritual teacher. None of us is the “one and only Son of the Great Gull”! (Jonathan Livingston Seagull) The descending electrifying light seeks to ground

and finally connect **in** and **through** physical (the body) and material (the world) experience, linking the highest with the lowest.

These experiences point out clearly why the presence of an authentic teacher is so critical. The great influxes and releases of psychological energy that accompany both the magnetic and electrical (ascending and descending) types of “opening,” whether psychic or visionary – psychophysical or mental – can be extremely intoxicating; and ultimately disintegrative in effect without a very strong life container, a clear center of witnessing self, and /or a teacher who has successfully integrated higher consciousness into a solid, grounded life and knows what techniques to apply at critical moments.

In the next chapter, we will look at the third kind of opening, the ecstatic or mystical opening of the heart. Meantime, Sri Aurobindo gives a glimpse of our true goal and possibility:

. . . the rarely attained summit of human consciousness . . . is a cosmic consciousness but without the loss of the individual. Instead of rejecting all to burst forth in mid-air, the seeker has patiently climbed every rung of the being, so well that the bottom one remains linked to the top, without any break of continuity.

The individual awareness has opened and expanded to encompass the whole spectrum of being human **and** the ocean of Being – including all possibilities, from dark to light and back again – into one inclusive experience of wholeness which now resides consciously in this particular human individuality and form. Immersed in joy, we remember our zip codes and pay our bills on time. But this is far from realized in the early moments of the opening experience, as I wrote in my first (and only) haiku:

***Ah no, enough! I cannot contain
such exquisite joy . . .
Shadows remain.***

SURVIVING ENLIGHTENMENT II

In...the mystic life, the revelation of an external splendor, the shining vision of the transcendent spiritual world, is wholly absent. The self awakes to that which is within, rather than to that which is without: to the immanent not the transcendent God, to the personal not the cosmic relation. Where those who look out receive the revelation of Divine Beauty, those who look in receive rather the wound of Divine Love.

–Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism

Now we shift our attention to the ecstatic ravishing of the heart/soul which characterizes mystical experiences of the Beloved, the third – and highly emotional – type of spiritual opening.

According to Underhill, “Love, passionate and all-dominant, here takes the place of...joyous awe. In the deep and strong temperaments of the great mystics this love passes quickly – sometimes instantly – from the emotional to the volitional stage.” This indicates that the human soul, utterly captivated by the Presence of Divine Love, first swoons or dissolves, then returns to a life and sense of self completely changed from one of self-centered living to “Thou”-centered serving.

The overwhelming experience of Presence is paradoxically both exquisitely delightful and at the very same time almost unbearably painful. A well-known example is the experience of St. Teresa of Avila, as reported by Underhill:

I saw an angel close by me...in bodily form...He was not large but small of stature, and most beautiful – his face was burning, as if he were one of the highest angels, who seem to be all of fire...I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron’s point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw out them also and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God. The pain is not bodily, but spiritual;

though the body has a share in it, even a large one. It is a caressing of love so sweet which now takes place between the soul and God...

Another mystic, Madame Guyon, called it: “A wound full of delight – I wished that it might never heal.” The Unity minister who trained me, Carol Ruth Knox, relates her experience:

After three years of Practicing the Presence, I had a profound mystical experience. I was awakened in the middle of the night and “sitting” right in front of my breast was a Germanic cross. It was shimmering in luminous metallic color. Gradually, it moved very, very slowly and implanted itself through my chest about one eighth of an inch beneath my breastbone. When I awoke that morning, I could feel the huge force all around me. I was wrapped in Love and I knew it. Within an hour, it went away but left me with a warmth in my chest...

Lifted forever beyond merely personal concerns, the mystic’s heart is now filled with devotion for the Divine Beloved. This devotion turns her heart again toward the world around her, now perceiving her Beloved in all things, and all things in her Beloved. As the initiate of Love, the mystic now seeks to continue that unitive experience with all she meets. Like Mother Teresa, she may behold the Christ shining in the eyes of the poorest of the poor, most wretched of the wretched. Or, like the Sufi saint, say: “Wheresoever I look, I see the face of my Beloved.”

One of the features of the mystical opening is that the soul is touched in a very personal way, one that is intimate and immanent, not so much transcending and ultimate. This personal intimacy may be felt as a “call” to the individual soul, evoking an heroic and selfless response, as when St. Francis heard the figure on the cross call out to him and say, “Repair My Church.”

When we KNOW, with every particle of our being, that we are loved, even cherished – without reservation, beyond any condition or test – our human life is forever transformed. It is amazing to realize how many humans suffer under the concept of a God who is less loving, less generous, less forgiving – not to mention more wrathful and vindictive – than the ordinary person! Once the mystic knows that God is **greater** - not smaller and meaner - than herself, her life can open into reverence, beauty, devotion, celebration. No task is too great or too small in service to the Beloved. With Abraham, she replies to the call: “Who will go for

me?” with a heartfelt “Here am I, send me!” Send me to repair your church, to lift up your abandoned and hopeless, send me to love the loveless, to feed your sheep, to create beauty, to touch tenderly – PLEASE send me!

As my Sufi teacher used to tell us, let your first thought on awakening each morning, before your feet ever hit the floor, be: “Please, may I be allowed to be of service this day!”

This is living in the state of grace. Carol Ruth Knox wrote: ***“There is a picture done by Dali, a picture of only the hands of God reaching down and lifting up two very small people, carrying them and caring for them. That is how you feel when you are in grace...you are totally vulnerable and yet totally incapable of being harmed...at the point of grace, life becomes a dance.”***

Whether the opening and awakening of the soul follows the path of the body, of the mind, or of the heart, it always drives toward an experience of wholeness, a whole-I-ness or hol-i-ness, that awakens, integrates and unites all parts of the personal self with Being. Whatever the beginning point of the spiritual journey, there is only one point of completion, of culmination. Underhill describes this state of unity of the spirit:

Like the story of the Cross, so too the story of man’s spirit ends in a garden: in a place of birth and fruitfulness, of beautiful and natural things. Divine Fecundity is its secret: existence, not for its own sake, but for the sake of a more abundant life. It ends with the coming forth of a divine humanity, never again to leave us: living in us and with us, a pilgrim, a worker, a guest at our table, a sharer at all hazards in life. The mystics witness to this story: waking very early, they have run on before us, urged by the greatness of their love. We, incapable as yet of this sublime encounter, looking in their magic mirror, listening to their stammered tidings, may see far off the consummation of the race.

24-HOUR SERVICE

“I don’t know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know...the only ones among you who will really be happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.”
- Albert Schweitzer

Rising on the wings of prayer and work, guided by the eye of single vision which sees only the One shining through all forms, the transmuted soul now begins to live, to soar, in a new dimension – within and through an awakened human heart.

Beholding only the Beloved in all faces, all places, all circumstances, there is only one course of action possible – a spontaneous response that is an upwelling, an overflow of deep love from the chalice of your own heart. This flow is not one of sentiment, emotion or passion but rather one of **grace** – of Divine Grace pouring into the world through the surrendered, grateful (grace-full) human heart. Reshad Field wrote in The Alchemy of the Heart:

We are here to serve life – to serve humanity and the planet as a whole, which has to do with everyday life. It has to do with everyday people and everyday things. We serve what is nearest to us . . . Either we concern ourselves only with our own salvation, or we consider ourselves as integral parts of the whole . . .

The way of service is to be awake in the present moment. Then we can spontaneously act from love and knowledge for the good of the whole. The action itself is a response to love. You are so in love that there is no hesitation, no thinking about it. You just do or say what is needed at that moment as a conscious, spontaneous outpouring of grace – as a gift for the good of the whole.

It is easy to confuse “service” with “giving,” which comes naturally to all of us in moments of genuine outpouring of self toward others. Worse, it can be confused with “co-dependence,” a buzz term for those of us who seek to control others for our own sense of security or wellbeing by **over-doing** for them or **over-**

giving to them. Co-dependence, at its core, is self-concern and, despite appearances, is not about either giving or service.

True service, to me, occurs at the point where self and selfless meet. Our spiritual service is the most natural and unrehearsed expression of our own individuality – and joyful, because in the midst of pouring out there is a profound sense of fulfillment – a happy paradox. I have always been struck by Mother Teresa’s injunction to the women who came to work with her Sisters of Charity (I’m paraphrasing here): **“If you don’t wake up in the morning filled with joy to be here, then this is not your place of service and you must leave to find where you belong. Your place of service is where your joy is.”** This is the key. Spiritual service doesn’t mean distorting your own nature by forcing yourself to do something against the grain of your own individuality just because it is “good.” Rather it is the activity or action which is the spontaneous, joyful and love-filled flowering of your own self in response to life around you. For years, I had this quote from Rabindranath Tagore on my wall where I could see it every day:

I slept and dreamt that life was joy.

I awoke and saw that life was service.

I acted and behold, service was joy.

We have each been given certain gifts and inclinations. Certainly a rosebush wouldn’t try to be a redwood tree, just because it appears to be “bigger and better.” In the **ecological** view of life as a whole (as differentiated from the **ego-logical** view of me-first), every living thing has a “niche” which is its perfect place in the web of life. In this niche, each can give all its treasures and receive all that it needs to grow and participate. Sometimes that niche is a vocation (such as ministry or art or public service), sometimes it is an avocation (such as prayer, community service, craftsmanship), sometimes it is just being fully in the moment and responding from the heart as the Presence of God moves through you.

In any case, service does not have an agenda or a set of necessary outcomes. Yet it is not mindless. True service requires knowledge as well as love, intelligence as well as willingness. It comes from a heart made wise as well as grateful and aware. Ultimately, it comes from a human heart that has become so **empty of self** that the Divine can use it as a chalice for communion with all living things. There is a beautiful prayer by Frances Nuttal called **The Prayer of the Chalice** which I often use to remember what my life is really about:

The Prayer of the Chalice

*Spirit, to Thee I raise my whole being
--a vessel emptied of self. Accept, Lord,
this my emptiness, and so fill me with
Thyself-----Thy Light, Thy Love, Thy
Life-----that these Thy precious Gifts
may radiate through me and over-
flow the chalice of my heart into
the hearts of all with whom I
come into contact this day
revealing unto them
the beauty of
Thy Joy
and
Wholeness
and
the
serenity
of Thy Peace
which nothing can destroy.*

When I was in Turkey, among the Mevlevi dervishes, as I thanked one man for returning me to my hotel at about 4 a.m. after hours of zikr, I expressed amazement that he was returning to drive other guests home. I knew he had worked all the day before and would be working the day to come – and in fact would be back at 6 a.m. to see us off as we left Konya. His smiling response: “Twenty-four hour service!”

The path of service in the Spirit of God truly has no limit. Wherever we are, God is –and Grace is ready to flow into the moment through an open and willing soul. When you are empty of self (i.e., self-**concern**) you will find yourself full of overflowing Grace as the circumstances of the moment call it forth. All your personal attributes will be called into play to serve the situation. Then, as Albert Schweitzer pointed out, you will be among the “happy ones.”

THE GUARDIAN ON THE THRESHOLD

*And one of the elders of the city said,
Speak to us of Good and Evil.*

And he answered:

Of the good in you I can speak, but not of the evil.

For what is evil but good tortured by its own hunger and thirst?

*Verily when good is hungry it seeks food even in dark caves,
and when it thirsts it drinks even of dead waters.*

-Khalil Gibran, The Prophet

No matter how your quest opens and unfolds, there always comes a point where all movement stops – the point at which the question of evil (in the form of death, infirmity, injury, destruction, cruel and malicious aggression) must be faced squarely. This looming presence at the threshold of the Divine can no longer be avoided with escapism, rationalizations, affirmations, proclamations, platitudes or any other human strategy. Implacable, it seems to repudiate the entire journey to this point.

“What about THIS horror?”

“How are going to get around THAT depradation?”

“What kind of God would permit such awful things to happen to innocent or good people?”

“How could God let the Holocaust happen?”

“What was the Divine Plan for all the Cambodians murdered by Pol Pot?”

“Was being tortured and murdered the ‘right thing’ for them at that time?”

“Will human beings ever evolve or rise beyond their willingness to inflict unthinkable evils on others?”

“What can we do? What should we do? And WHAT is God going to do about it!?! ”

Even in the questions themselves, perhaps you can hear the human cry that such things are wrong, that we must transform our world somehow so as to rid it of all evil, pain, suffering, disaster, death. We must together create a “New Age,”

an age of peace, and harmony, and kindness. And in the process, **We Must Help God** – God who seems powerless over Creation. We must fix the Divine errors that lead to such aberrations.

If we are not attributing all disasters to a wrathful and punishing God, then we are suggesting a limited, flawed God – one who is powerless to overcome human evil and the natural catastrophes which destroy multitudes of human lives.

The Cranky Creator or the Limp Light – neither one is very comforting. The first is a tyrant, and the second is inferior in power to both Nature and human nature.

Well, what about a third choice? The Detached Divinity who stands outside His creation and watches dispassionately the play of opposites, the dramatic clashes of life and death, much as a scientist might watch rats in a maze, letting the illusory game play out within the established rules of contest between good and evil.

Or worse yet, a Forgetful Father who created life, then got busy elsewhere and forgot about us. Hmmmm. This is not leading us in a happy direction. In fact, it sounds all too humanly familiar.

It would be easy to make the case that essentially all human religious activity and thought is an attempt to deal with the immutable presence of suffering in life, whatever the source: natural disaster, disease, injury, war, old age, death, murder, brutality and torture. We want some assurance that somewhere, somehow, sometime, it will all make sense, will all be worth it – in this life or the next. We must have an answer of SOME kind. But no matter how we twist and turn – mentally, emotionally or spiritually – the guardian remains firmly ensconced on the threshold, untouched by the echoing “Why?” You can almost see the sign it wears: “Because.”

Yet we KNOW there is something beyond this implacable darkness. We know it because it is *in* us as well as beyond us. It is the essence of what we are. We cannot allow this looming and terrifying perception of Evil to terminate the

quest as if it negates all else we've come to realize. But we are not going to find our way past the guardian with our minds and theories, only with our hearts and the all-encompassing presence of Spirit within them.

There is a story told by the great naturalist Loren Eiseley, in his book, The Immense Journey. He relates an experience he once had while in nature that speaks volumes to me about the mysterious dynamic of "evil" in life. He calls it "The Judgment of the Birds":

...on the edge of a little glade with one long, crooked branch extending across it, I had sat down to rest with my back against a stump. Through accident I was concealed from the glade, although I could see into it perfectly.

The sun was warm there, and the murmurs of forest life blurred softly away into my sleep. When I awoke, dimly aware of some commotion and outcry in the clearing, the light was slanting down through the pines in such a way that the glade was lit like some vast cathedral. I could see the dust motes of wood pollen in the long shaft of light, and there on the extended branch sat an enormous raven with a red and squirming nestling in his beak.

The sound that awoke me was the outraged cries of the nestling's parents, who flew helplessly in circles about the clearing. The sleek black monster was indifferent to them. He gulped, whetted his beak on the dead branch a moment and sat still. Up to that point, the little tragedy had followed the usual pattern. But suddenly, out of all that area of woodland, a soft sound of complaint began to rise. Into the glade fluttered small birds of half a dozen varieties, drawn by the anguished outcries of the tiny parents.

No one dared to attack the raven. But they cried there in some instinctive common misery, the bereaved and the un-bereaved. The glade filled with their soft rustling and their cries. They fluttered as though to point their

wings at the murderer. There was a dim intangible ethic he had violated, that they knew. He was a bird of death.

And he, the murderer, the black bird at the heart of life, sat on there, glistening in the common light, formidable, unmoving, unperturbed, untouchable.

The sighing died. It was then I saw the judgment. It was the judgment of life against death. I will never see it again so forcefully presented. I will never hear it again in notes so tragically prolonged. For in the midst of protest, they forgot the violence.

There, in that clearing, the crystal note of a song sparrow lifted hesitantly in the hush. And finally, after painful fluttering, another took the song, and then another, the song passing from one bird to another, doubtfully at first, as though some evil thing were being slowly forgotten. Till suddenly they took heart and sang from many throats joyously together as birds are known to sing. They sang because life is sweet and sunlight beautiful. They sang under the brooding shadow of the raven. In simple truth, they had forgotten the raven for they were the singers of life, and not of death.

The “singers of life” are the ones who take the final step across the threshold. It is not that they deny the existence of suffering, even of evil; they have mourned their losses. It is not that they have gotten **empowered** and eradicated the “raven” or annihilated the guardian on the threshold. They are not waiting for a “New Age.” They are the ones who refuse to make the destroyer the centerpiece of their existence, even as they accept its presence in the midst of their reality. They refuse to submit their precious quotient of life to the necessary darkness. It is they who sing the song of life again and yet again. They are Spirit, everywhere present – and so are we.

THE END OF THE BEGINNING

***We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.***

-T. S. Eliot, The Four Quartets

Our journey, begun with a real question, fired by aspiration and desire, directed toward the highest and best we can imagine, has now brought us to a new kind of life that looks remarkably like the old life we thought we were leaving behind forever. Yet something is definitely changed, utterly different. Reality remains, yet “reality” has become multi-dimensional, richly textured, translucent – and yet essentially empty of all but the Spirit of God, now manifesting as the light of an awakened human consciousness.

Edward Whitmont, in The Symbolic Quest, writes:

When, by hindsight as it were, we later survey the course of development through several years we cannot escape the impression of an autonomous process of evolution, a definite path...but this path is not direct nor even circular nor spiral. It is a movement toward a center that is more adequately depicted in the ancient and medieval (spiral) labyrinth patterns which are found in many places of worship and burial. The labyrinth is one of the oldest of symbols; it depicts the way to the unknown center, the mystery of death and rebirth, the risk of the search, the danger of losing the way, the quest, the finding and the ability to return...

If we follow the path of the labyrinth...we can observe that in the course of its tortuous evolution it not only connects the periphery with the center (the Self) but actually fills out and covers the total plane surface of the circle; in striving for the center the path integrates the total circle, the total field.

And so we come full circle; but now we know the terrain of the soul intimately, having had the direct experience of living who and what we are into completion, into conscious awareness, into wholeness. As Underhill pointed out, it is a return to the garden – an irrepressible exhilaration in the midst of ordinary life bubbling up joyfully from the wellspring of the human heart. The alchemists called this Al-Iksir, or the Elixir of Life – reputed to confer longevity and health, because the body is no longer the repository of the negative unconscious but is now the vessel of the union of spirit and matter, permeated with love, serenity, gratitude and joy – the chalice of God.

But no one notices. The individual has become like light itself – so totally present as to be invisible except by reflection within all that he contacts in the course of daily living.

The man of understanding is not entranced. He is not elsewhere. He is not having an experience. He is not passionless and inoffensive. He is awake. He is present.

He may appear no different from any other man. How could he appear otherwise? There is nothing by which to appear except the qualities of life.

Therefore, the man of understanding cannot be found. He cannot be followed. He can only be understood as the ordinary. He is not spiritual. He is not religious. He is not philosophical. He is not moral. He is not fastidious, lean and lawful. He always appears as the opposite of what you are...At last, he represents no truth at all.

He demonstrates the futility of all things. Therefore, he makes understanding the only possibility. And understanding makes no difference at all. Except it is reality, which is already the case...

He is overwhelmed with happiness. He says to you: see how there is only this world of perfect enjoyment, where everyone is happy, and everything is blissful. His heart is always tearful with the endless happiness of the world.

Another description of this culmination comes to us from Zen Buddhism:

At that point, the extraordinary and the ordinary, the supernatural and the mundane, are precisely one and the same.

This is the tenth Zen ox-herding picture which reads: “The gate of his cottage is closed and even the wisest cannot find him. He goes his own way, making no attempt to follow the steps of earlier sages. Carrying a gourd, he strolls into the market; leaning on his staff, he returns home. He is found in company with wine-bibbers and butchers; he and they are all converted into Buddhas.”

When you awaken as the Universal One, there is nothing left to be but the ordinary. There is nothing BUT the ordinary. You are it – all of it. It is you. And then there is no problem either. Eating, drinking, playing, sleeping, working – life unfolds – richly, fully, poignantly, delightfully. The Zenrin has the last word:

***Meeting in the forest, they laugh and laugh –
the falling leaves, the babbling brook.***