

# **THE MYSTICAL TRADITION**

**by Swami Abhayananda**

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# THE MYSTICAL TRADITION

by Swami Abhayananda

## 1. Introduction to The Mystical Tradition (Part One)

Mystical experience is the bedrock source of all religion. It is the source of the Upanishads; it is the source of Buddhism; it is the source of the teachings of Abraham and Moses; it is the source of the teachings of Jesus; and it is the source of the teachings of Muhammed in the Quran. Why is it then that there is so little public acknowledgement of the existence of mystical experience and its importance in the lives of the great representatives of human spirituality? Mystical experience has occurred throughout our history to a few extraordinary individuals, who having told of their experience, have deeply affected the course of our spiritual traditions and the history of human development.

Because the underlying source of the occurrence of mystical experience is invisible and undemonstrable, any speculation about the origin of mystical experience is regarded as unscientific and beyond our ability to confirm. Indeed, it is only those who have *experienced* it—those who are known as “mystics”—who are able to speak authoritatively about mystical experience, its source, and its content. To all others, it is an unfathomable mystery, whose existence is a matter of one’s personal belief or disbelief.

### 1. The History of Mysticism<sup>1</sup>

Mysticism is that point of view which claims as its basis an intimate knowledge of the one source and substratum of all existence, a knowledge, which is obtained through a revelatory experience during a rare moment of clarity in contemplation. Those who claim to have actually experienced this direct revelation constitute an elite tradition, which transcends the boundary lines of individual religions, cultures and languages, and which has existed, uninterrupted, since the

beginning of time. It is, as Aldous Huxley points out, the source of the “perennial philosophy” that resurfaces again and again throughout history in the teachings of the great prophets and founders of all religions.

When we study the many speculative philosophies and religious creeds which men have espoused, we must wonder at the amazing diversity of opinions expressed regarding the nature of reality; but when we examine the testimonies of the mystics of past and present, we are struck by the unanimity of agreement between them all. Their methods may vary, but their ultimate realizations are identical in content. They tell us of a supramental experience, obtained through contemplation, which directly reveals the Truth, the ultimate, the final, Truth of all existence. It is this experience, which is the hallmark of the mystic; it goes by different names, but the experience is the same for all.

In the Hindu tradition, this experience is referred to as *samadhi*, or "Self-realization"; Buddhists call it *nirvana*, or "Enlightenment". By many of the Christian tradition, this experience has been called "The mystic marriage" or "The vision of God"; yet it must be stated that such a vision is not really a "vision" at all in the sense in which we use the word to mean the perception of some 'thing' extraneous to ourselves. Nothing at all is visually perceived in "the vision of God"; rather, it is a sudden expansion, or delimitation, of one's own awareness which experiences *itself* as the ultimate Ground, the primal Source and Godhead of all being. In that "vision," all existence is experienced as Identity.

We first hear of this extraordinary revelation from the authors of the Upanishads, who lived over three thousand years ago: "I have known that spirit," said Svetasvatara, "who is infinite and in all, who is everyone, beyond time."<sup>2</sup> "He can be seen indivisible in the silence of contemplation," said the author of the Mundaka Upanishad.<sup>3</sup> "There a man possesses everything; for he is one with the ONE."<sup>4</sup> About five hundred years later, another, a young prince named Siddhartha, who was to become known as the Buddha, the enlightened one, sat communing inwardly in a forest in northern India, when suddenly, as though a veil had been lifted, his mind became infinite and all-

encompassing: “I have seen the Truth!” he exclaimed; “I am the Father of the world, sprung from myself!”<sup>5</sup> And again, after the passage of another five hundred years, another young man, a Jew, named Jesus, of Nazareth, sat in a solitary place among the desert cliffs of Galilee, communing inwardly, when suddenly he realized that the Father in heaven to whom he had been praying was his very own Self; that he was, himself, the sole Spirit pervading the universe; “I and the Father are one!” he declared. <sup>6</sup>

Throughout history, this extraordinary experience of unity has repeatedly occurred; in India, in Rome, in Persia, in Amsterdam, in China, devout young men and women, reflecting on the truth of their own existence, experienced this amazing transcendence of the mind, and announced to everyone who would listen that they had realized the truth of man and the universe, that they had known their own Self, and known it to be the All, the Eternal. And throughout succeeding ages, these announcements were echoed by others who had experienced the same realization: “I am the Truth!” exclaimed the Muslim, al-Hallaj; “My Me is God, nor do I recognize any other Me except my God Himself,” said the Christian saint, Catherine of Genoa. And Rumi, Jnaneshvar, Milarepa, Kabir and Basho from the East, and Eckhart, Boehme and Emerson from the West, said the same.

These assertions by the great mystics of the world were not made as mere philosophical speculations; they were based on *experience*—an experience so convincing, so real, that all those to whom it has occurred testify unanimously that it is the unmistakable realization of the ultimate Truth of existence. In this experience, called *samadhi* by the Hindus, *nirvana* by the Buddhists, *fana* by the Muslims, and “the mystic union” by Christians, the consciousness of the individual suddenly becomes the consciousness of the entire vast universe. All previous sense of duality is swallowed up in an awareness of indivisible unity. The man who previously regarded himself as an individualized soul, encumbered with sins and inhabiting a body, now realizes that he is, truly, the one Consciousness; that it is he, his eternal self, who is manifesting as all souls and all bodies, while yet remaining transcendently undisturbed and completely unaffected by the unfolding drama of the multiform universe.

Even if, before, as a soul, he sought union with his God, now, there is no longer a soul/God relationship. He, himself, he now realizes, is the one Existence in whom there is neither a soul nor a God, but only the one eternal Self, within whom this “imaginary” relationship of soul and God manifested. For him, there is no more relationship, but only the eternal and all-inclusive I AM. Not surprisingly, this illuminating knowledge of an underlying ‘I’ that is the Soul of the entire universe has a profoundly transformative effect upon the mind of those who have experienced it. The sense of being bound and limited to an individual body and mind, set in time and rimmed by birth and death, is entirely displaced by the keenly experienced awareness of unlimited Being; of an infinitely larger, unqualified Self beyond birth and death. It is an experience, which uniquely and utterly transforms one’s sense of identity, and initiates a permanently acquired freedom from all doubt, from all fear, from all insecurity forevermore. Little wonder that all who experience such liberating knowledge wish to share it, to announce in exuberant song to everyone who will hear that, through the inner revelation of wisdom, “You shall know the truth, and the Truth will make you free!”

If we can believe these men, it is this experience of unity, which is the ultimate goal of all knowledge, of all worldly endeavor; the summit of human attainment, which all men, knowingly or unknowingly, pursue. It would seem, then, a valuable task to study and review the lives and teachings of those who have acquired this knowledge. In my book, *History of Mysticism*,<sup>7</sup> I have sought to present just such a study and anthology; it is presented in an historical perspective in order to better view the long-enduring tradition of mystical thought, and to reveal more clearly the unity underlying the diversity of its manifold expressions.

## NOTES:

1. This, and many other portions of *The Mystical Tradition*, are taken directly from Swami Abhayananda’s 1987 book, *History of Mysticism*.
2. Svetasvatara Upanishad, 3
3. Mundaka Upanishad, 3:1
4. Svetasvatara Upanishad, 1
5. *Saddharma bundarika*, 15:21; Radhakrishnan, S., *Indian Philosophy* (Vol. I), London, Geo. Allen & Unwin, 1962, p.600.
6. New Testament, *Book of John*: 10:30.

7. *History of Mysticism*, from which this Introduction is excerpted, is available for download as a PDF document at my website:[www.themysticsvision.com](http://www.themysticsvision.com).

## II. A Gift To Be Shared

I think that most of us realize that we all live within a self-imposed illusion in which our perspective on the world is entirely self-centered. Each of us is the center of our own world, the subjective focal point round which everything else turns. In this egocentric perspective, my experience is different from your experience; yours is different from mine. And, while we can verbally share our experiences and our perspectives with one another, those alien experiences and perspectives are not personally acquired, and therefore they remain mere hearsay and do not affect us in the same way that *personal* experiences do.

Despite this acknowledged incommunicability of personal experiences, I have spent a good portion of my life attempting to convey to others some sense of my own experience that I feel has some real importance for everyone, and therefore needs to be communicated.<sup>1</sup> It is an experience that occurred to me nearly fifty years ago, and yet it is a timeless one, in that it was an experience of eternity itself. Strangely enough, I had vowed to God to give pronouncement to this experience even before it was given to me: “Let me be one with Thee,” I prayed, “not that I might glory in Thy love, but that I might speak out in Thy praise and to Thy glory, for the benefit of all Thy children.” I can only explain the uncharacteristic selflessness of this prayer as being itself the work of God. And, of course, since God granted my request, you can well understand that I am not only obligated but am resolvedly committed to praising and glorifying God for your benefit and for the benefit of everyone.

I am well aware that it is as true today as it was in the time of Jesus and the time of Plotinus that the great majority of the people are ignorant of the existence of such mystical experience. Despite the many learned studies and the many available accounts of mystical experience by well-reputed people throughout the ages, the ignorant majority of the people remain as ignorant as before. Why is this so? It is so because the people comprising the

ignorant majority do not have personal knowledge of mystical experience in their own lives and are therefore extremely reluctant to believe that such experiences are possible or relevant to their own lives. I understand this well, as I was once a member of that ignorant majority. And yet, today, I would say to that majority: the very fact that a few souls have experienced divine revelations *does* have a major relevance to your own lives. Mystical experience is a revelation of the nature of the reality in which all of us live. It is as relevant to you as it is to those who are the direct recipients of that experience.

I view my own mystical experience as a gift of God. And I believe that His gracious gift to me of mystical vision was undoubtedly meant for all of us. It was a rare gift of the knowledge that this world is His own, that you are His own, that nothing in the universe is outside of His Divine domain; that if we can fully comprehend this truth, we will be able to see His love, and His wisdom in all that is created and know His blissful presence in our own lives. For He is the air that fills our lungs; He is the awareness that allows us to experience and to know; He is the kindness that overflows in our hearts. Open your mind to Him, and know the unlimited wonder and joy of being, for your being is *His* being; your being is the expression of His infinite love.

This God-given vision was my own personal experience, to be sure, but I ask you to please accept my experience as your own. It is His wish, and therefore it is my wish as well, that you come to know Him in yourself. Look to Him for all that you wish for in this life, and you will be fulfilled beyond your wildest dreams. And, if you are very fortunate, He may also grant to you, as He did to me, the vision of your timeless divinity in Him. So, may it be.

## NOTES:

1. If you would like to read a detailed account of my experience of God, please see my book, *The Supreme Self*, available on my website as a free download at: [www.themysticsvision.com/Downloads](http://www.themysticsvision.com/Downloads).

### III. Mystical Experience

Nearly everyone comes to the conclusion that there is a Divine Reality that is our Source and Father, the Ground of our being, an all-embracing One, Lord and Ruler, permeating and coordinating all. One may arrive at this conclusion through the exercise of one's logical intelligence, or one may *experience* this reality directly as a 'mystical' experience or revelation. The intellectual formulation of this knowledge through logical analysis is capable of providing a basis for a reasonable certainty of the basic premise outlined above, but the direct 'mystical' experience of the One brings a person to the conscious *awareness* of that One as the immediate reality of one's own being, one's ultimate identity.

The question that many feel it is necessary to ask is, 'How does one attain to that direct 'mystical' experience of the One?' And I have had to confess that I have no idea how to answer that question—except to say that the one thing you can be absolutely certain of is that *you* can't make it happen. Only the eternal Lord of all can make it happen. Therefore, learn to rely upon His unfailing will. If He wishes to draw you to Him, He will reveal it as a divine urge, an implacable yearning, guiding you from within your heart. So be true to your own heart, and you can't go wrong. A guru or teacher may serve as the instrument by which the knowledge of God's presence is awakened in you, but it is God Himself who kindles the flame of heavenly desire within you, and who leads you to union. We are able to reduce all multiplicity to two: the subject and the object of awareness, or I and Thou; but only He can reduce the two to One. And so, it is not to a human teacher that you must turn, but it is to Him within yourself that you must turn.

It seems He has unique plans for each of us, and He brings each of us along the journey's path according to His own design. No one can know how or when He will lead a person to His presence. You must make your intimate acquaintance with Him entirely by your own efforts within your own consciousness. Needless to say, even your own efforts are prompted by His Grace. So, just follow His inner promptings. Know that He is aware of your desire—in fact, He has initiated it; and He will eagerly meet you in the still of your heart when the time is right. Keep your mind on Him and He will continue

to be mindful of you. And, when the time comes, when He has brought you to the purity of heart that is required, then He will bring you into His pure land, and you will be filled with His presence and know unlimited Being.

This is without doubt the greatest attainment possible in this life, providing complete and unremitting inner fulfillment. To be sure, it will not bring you wealth or worldly success; in fact, it is much more likely that you will experience economic privation and social isolation. But it is the greatest attainment possible in this life, and it will fill you with gratitude and provide you with unending peace and abundant happiness in every circumstance.

#### **IV. Realistic Religion**

Current popular religious ideologies tend to idolize one or another historical religious figure whose spiritual wisdom is attributed to their unique Divine origin and status. But as our understanding evolves, we are learning that each of us is of Divine origin and that we too are able to access the fountain of spiritual wisdom within ourselves. Today, we understand that a number of people throughout history have experienced a revelation on the psychological level that transcends the spatio-temporal world, and essentially unites the individual consciousness with the all-embracing eternal Consciousness. This unitive ‘mystical’ experience is still regarded as uncommon, and yet is estimated to occur to one person in every million, which amounts to around 7000 people in today’s world population of seven billion. Perhaps that is a generous estimate, but certainly a great number of people throughout the world have experienced at least a momentary breakthrough in consciousness that revealed a deeper, spiritual, level of reality underlying this apparently concrete world of material phenomena.

A more realistic approach to our religious understanding, therefore, would be to reject the deification and worship of a few historical religious figures, to see them rather as inspirational exemplars; and to embrace the ever-present possibility that we and all men and women might experience in ourselves an awareness of our own divine source in this very lifetime, and know firsthand the certainty of our own divine Self. The willingness to follow this path will not appeal to everyone, of course; but only to those

few who are called to it. For we are not able to seek or bring about the experience of ‘union with God’ of our own will; it is clearly the will of God Himself that sets us on the path and brings us to that ineffable experience.

Nor is it possible to know whom He will choose, but He seems to choose the very intelligent, the very compassionate, those selfless souls surrendered to His will; and He inevitably draws them within themselves through introspection and contemplation to His meeting place where those souls are merged in His eternal awareness. But this ‘mystical’ path is not without obstacles; it is a path that demands much courage and sacrifice, for the mystic will undoubtedly face much opposition from a skeptical world. Nor should he expect any worldly rewards, for the only rewards obtainable in the mystic’s life are the seeds of hope, faith and joy that he is able to plant and blossom in the hearts of those he touches. And his greatest happiness and satisfaction comes from his lifelong service in the praise of God and to His glory for the benefit of all His children.

## **V. The Ascent of The Soul**

One of the most celebrated mystics of all time was the Egyptian-born Roman mystic-philosopher, Plotinus (205-270 C.E.). He may be said to be “the father” of Western Mysticism. Plotinus had experienced “the vision of God”, had ascended in awareness to the transcendent Ground, the absolute Self; and he described in his writings the interior ascent from body consciousness to God consciousness. According to Plotinus, Consciousness is on a graduated scale from the highest transcendent state to man. We are not separated from God; rather, we live in a continuum (or spectrum) of consciousness, where the pure Consciousness of God rests at a higher, but accessible octave. On that variable scale of Consciousness, we may know ourselves as an individualized soul at one moment, and as the undifferentiated Source at another.

From the standpoint of the human experience, the various levels of our being are not clearly separated off from one another with clear demarcations to indicate where one ends, and another begins, but tend to merge one into the other in a gradual and vaguely perceived manner. We are aware of being identified with one or another level of Being according to the activities which follow upon it. When we are identified with the physical body, we are

operating almost solely through our senses, and we find our gratification in things of sense. When we identify with the mental realm, we are conscious of the inner play of random thoughts and images, and we delight in the play of thought. When we ascend a bit to the intellectual realm, we identify with the critical intelligence which discriminates, censures, and deliberates; thereby elevated in concentration above the rambling mind, we take pleasure in the clarity of discernment. Above this intellect, we experience our soul—at its lower level the repository of our karma, and at its higher level the bearer not only of our highest moral directive and purpose, but the driving impetus guiding us toward our own Source with a heartfelt longing, like that of a moth to a flame. The soul is drawn to the Light within it,<sup>1</sup> and looks, not below to the realm of mental activity or the realm of sense, but above toward the Divine whence it comes.

Borrowing from Plato, whose philosophy he advocated, Plotinus asserts that man, as an evolute of the One, contains within himself all levels of manifestation, from the absolute Unity to the creative Energy, to the soul, to mind, and finally to the gross physical body; and is capable of returning in consciousness to his Origin. It is in relation to man that this out-flowing radiance from subtle to gross is described in the Eastern yogic tradition as well. Man, who is at his center the unqualified Self (*Atman*, or *Brahman*), manifests from the supracausal (*Turiya*), to the causal (*Prajna*), to the subtle or astral (*Taijasa*), and lastly as the gross physical body (*Vishva*). Soul, for Plotinus, is an outpouring of the Divine Mind, a living radiance which fills the cosmos and manifests as individual souls.

The levels of human reality, from the gross physical body inward, have been variously named and described; and in all true metaphysical systems the primary teaching has been that one is able to reach to and experience that Self by way of the inner journey only, seeking it by way of self-examination, purification, contemplation and selfless devotion. Self-examination reveals to us that we are more than the physical body with which the immature consciousness identifies. We are more than the effusive mind with which some others identify; more than the intellect which reasons and oversees the mind; more than the individual soul which evolves from lifetime to lifetime. The purification of the soul occurs through the grace of God, causing the soul to desire only God; and the absence of all other desires is the soul's purification, leading it naturally to contemplation and selfless devotion.

From the perspective of those who have experienced it, the ascent of

consciousness occurs, quite unexpectedly in a moment of concentrated awareness focused inwardly. The individual soul ascends to what Plotinus calls the "All-Soul," all the while drawn on by its inherent thirst to know its Source. When it comes inwardly to a perfect, concentrated stillness, it emerges from its time-bound isolation as an individual creature and awakes to its participation in the consciousness of an all-inclusive creative Power. And yet above that creative Power, at a yet subtler stage of consciousness, it knows itself as the eternal One from which the Creative Power takes its origin. It knows this, not as an object is known to a knowing subject, but as the subject's own primary and eternal Identity.

The soul, seeking God, scans the inner darkness, as though to discover another, as though awaiting something external to itself to make its presence known. But as the concentration focuses within, the mind becomes stilled, and suddenly the seeking soul awakes. No external has made its appearance; it is the soul itself, no longer soul, which knows itself to be the All, the One. Like a wave seeking the ocean, the seeker discovers that it is, itself, what it sought. Through contemplation and selfless devotion to that highest Self, we discover that we are the Life in all life, the integrated Whole of which all manifest creatures and things are a part. And, at last we awake to the supremely ultimate Identity, knowing ourselves as the one Light of existence, the Source of all manifestation, the one God who is the true Self of all, and from Whom all else follows.

Those who have experienced the union of their souls with the Divine Mind experience themselves no longer as individual separate identities, but rather as ideational wave forms on the one integral ocean of Cosmic Energy. They no longer identify with the composite of body, mind, and soul, but know themselves as having their real identity in the entire undivided ocean of creative Energy in and on which these temporary forms manifest. The conscious awareness focused on this clear vision of the subtler level of its own reality then moves forward, as one moving through a fog comes to a clearing where the fog is no more, to the ultimate and final level of subtlety, the Divine Source, the Unmanifest. Then, it knows the pure unqualified Consciousness that is the Father, the One, prior even to the creative Power which acts as Creator; and it knows, "I and the Father are one."

From that vantage point in Eternity, one sees one's own Creative Power manifesting all that has manifest existence in a cycle of creation and dissolution. There is a bursting forth, just as the spreading rays of the Sun

burst out from their source, and then a returning to that source in a cyclic repetition, much as the cycle of the breath's inhalation and exhalation. One witnesses this from that transcendent vantage point, aware of one's Self as the Eternal One, totally unaffected and unaltered by the expansion and contraction of the out-flowing creative Force—as a man might watch the play of the breath or the imagination without being at all affected by its rise and fall. That One is the final irreducible Reality, and It is experienced as identity. Nothing could be more certain than the fact that It is who one really is, always was, and always will be.

#### NOTES:

1. “From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things, and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all.” (from Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Over-Soul”, *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Tudor Publishing Co., p. 174).

#### VI. We Who Have Been Blessed

If we reason clearly and correctly, we must come to the acknowledgment of our utter dependence on God's blessings. We have no power, no intelligence, no sweetness, and no illumination of our own; all that we know as ours is in fact the gracious gift of God. For that reason, we cannot claim to have earned spiritual wisdom or vision by some worthiness of our own making. Whatever comes to us does so of His power and His grace. And so, though I would gladly offer instruction and advice in the endeavor to assist others in joining their soul to God, I am too clearly cognizant of the fact that He alone can bring each soul to His embrace; and that He alone, whose Light illuminates all, can peel away the blinders of the illusory ego, and show Himself as the true and everlasting Self of all.

So, what am I to say to those who ask the way to God? ‘Follow the noblest that's in you; that will lead you home to Him. Revere silence, solitude, reflection, and deep thought. Read the lives and words of those who found their way to His door, and thus purify your heart. Above all, converse with Him; He'll guide you from within and lead you every inch of the way. Rejoice often in His great love in looking after you and all good souls. He is the inner life, the inner heart, of you; and He seeks only what is your highest

joy and light. Turn your face to Him, your mind to Him, your heart to Him; and nothing else at all needs to be done. When it is your time to know your eternal identity, the whole universe, including the stars in the heavens, will conspire to bring about your awakening. Do not fear; no one will be forgotten or left behind.'

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## 2. Introduction To The Mystical Tradition (Part Two)

### I. The Pre-History of Mysticism

Where, we must wonder, did mysticism begin? Who was the first to experience the transcendent vision? To these questions, there are no answers; but it is reasonable to assume that the experience of unity is as old as man himself and occurred to a few searching souls even in the most primitive of times. The mystical experience of unity is entirely independent of advancements in learning or civilization. Indeed, it would seem, if anything, to be more likely to occur in a simpler, less "civilized" environment, since such an experience requires a totally interiorized state of mind, undistracted by external stimuli. One can easily imagine how spending one's nights beside a fire under the canopy of the stars might enhance one's contemplation of eternity. It is perfectly reasonable, therefore, to suppose that seers of the Infinite existed even in the very remotest unrecorded period of man's history. Unfortunately, however, these ancient mystics are lost to us forever in the dark abyss of time.

Yet, while we do not possess the written testimonies of the mystic sages of the dim past, there is some evidence for the antiquity of mysticism to be found in the popular religious symbols, which have come down to us as the artifacts and mythologies of primitive cultures. When we examine the mythologies of these earliest civilizations, especially those myths, which describe the origin of the cosmos, we find a curious similarity in the religious symbols used by widely separated cultures. In almost every instance, we may discover the legend of an original Father-God, whose first Thought or Word, symbolized in the form of a Mother-Goddess, is said to have given birth to all creation.

In nearly every part of the globe these two have appeared, albeit with many names. He, the Father-God, has been called An, Apsu, Huan, Prajapati, Purusha, Yahweh, El, Tem, Atmu, Ptah, Ra, Shiva, Brahman, Dyaus, Zeus, Vishnu, Ahura Mazda, Ch'ien, and Tao, among countless other names. He is the absolute Stillness, the pure Consciousness, the unclouded Mind, the unmanifest Ground, who exists as the substratum upon which all this universe is projected. Likewise, in nearly every recorded mythology, we find the Mother-Goddess; She has been called Inanna, Isis, Shakti, Kali, Devi, Chokmah, Durga, Maya, Teh, Cybele, Athena, Astarte, Mylitta, Tara, Juno, Prthivi, Freia, Sophia, Prakrti, Semele, Ishtar, and many, many other

names as well. She is the creative effusion of the Father; She is Mother Nature, the creative, manifestory Power of the Father-God, who is manifest as the entire cosmos.

In order to understand the vision of the earliest seers and mythologizers, we must look beyond the various names given to this primordial Pair and try to grasp the meaning behind the words and myths. The reason for the similarity of view among the various primitive cultures is that the Reality, which their pictorial symbols are contrived to represent, is the common and universal Reality *experienced* in the mystical vision, a Reality that is the same for all who “see” It. Scholars who know nothing of the mystical experience of Unity postulate some cultural interchange to account for such similarities between the various primitive cosmologies or postulate an “archetypal memory” from which these many identical images supposedly arose, it never dawning on them that the direct knowledge of the one Absolute and Its projection of the universe is an actual *experience* common to all seers of all times.

In this “vision” or “union,” the mind is somehow privileged to experience itself as the eternal Consciousness from which the entire universe is projected. It knows itself as the unchanging Ground, or Absolute, and the world as Its own projected Thought or Ideation. The individual who contacts, through prayer or deep meditation, that universal Consciousness, experiences It as his (or her) own identity. He (or she) realizes, in those few moments, that he (or she) is indeed nothing else but that one Being manifest in a singular individual form; and that all this universe is the manifestation of that one Being, flowing forth from It as a wave of love streams out from a loving heart.

One who has known It sees clearly that this mystically experienced Reality has two distinct aspects; It is the pure, eternal One, beyond motion or change; and It is also the world-Thought, which emanates from It, like the rays of a Sun, or the thoughts of a Mind. In this clear realization of Reality, the mind, while knowing itself as the undifferentiated Absolute, concurrently experiences the projection and reabsorption of the universe in a continuous cycle of outflowing and returning. The universal manifestation appears and disappears in a cyclic rhythm extending over eons of our temporal reckoning, but the eternal Awareness, along with Its Creative Power, never changes. It is ever immersed in Its own bliss.

So difficult is this two-in-One to speak of—since It cannot be spoken of without differentiating the two aspects, and making It appear to be two when It is always One—that the ancient seers tended to characterize the two aspects as male and female complements. In their attempts to explain this ineluctable duality-in-Unity, the seers of early cultures relied upon pictorial symbols—such as the yin-yang symbol of the Chinese or depicted the projection of the world of matter upon the Absolute in anthropomorphic or animistic images. In nearly every such instance, the unmanifested Absolute was depicted as Male, and Its Creative Power, co-existent with It, was regarded as Female. He is the Father-God, the one Mind, the ultimate Source and Controller; but She is the Creatrix, the Mother-Power from whom all manifest creation flows.

That these two aspects of Reality should be so commonly symbolized as male and female should not surprise us; for what better pair of symbols can be imagined as representative of the duality-in-Unity experienced by the mystic than the two sexes who, while retaining their individual characteristics, are joined as husband and wife, forming an indivisible unit? The human male seems an apt symbol for the immovable Absolute, the unchanging Consciousness, who witnesses, as the subjective Self, the drama of universal manifestation. He represents the Absolute in mythology as the wise and just Father and King, aloof and impersonal, the pillar of constant strength, governance, and protection. The human female seems equally well suited to symbolize the creative Force, which emanates from the witnessing Self. She is the Womb of Nature from whom all life is born; She is the Source and Nourisher, and She is also the object of desire. She represents the Creative Power in mythology as the ever-young maiden, the warm and tender Mother, the Giver of mercy, and the Fountain of all beauty and grace. Perhaps, in some mysterious way, these two—the human male and female—really *are* intended as representative images, or manifestations, of the two complementary aspects of the one Divine Reality.

Evidence exists to show that, by the 3rd millennium B.C.E., and no doubt long before that, worship of a transcendent Father-God and Mother (Nature) Goddess was widespread. The genuine mystics, the seers of Unity, were no doubt few then, as they are today, but there is repeated evidence in the Creation myths of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon that such seers did exist. In the cosmologies of many of these early civilizations we find the common conception of the One Reality as consisting of two aspects: the eternally

transcendent Mind, and the dynamically Creative Power, which is responsible for the formation and substantial appearance of the relative world. Representing this creative Energy of manifestation in the 3rd millennium B.C.E., the Sumerian Goddess, Inanna, is made to say:

“Begetting Mother am I. Within An (the Father-God) I abide, and no one sees me.”<sup>1</sup>

Since She, the Mother, is actually the Creative Power of the Father, and therefore indistinguishable from Him, they are frequently pictured together, locked in an inseparable embrace; two, yet inextricably One. As we shall see, this mythic image of the Father-God and His ubiquitous Consort is one which recurs again and again in the metaphysical formulations of all cultures. It is this recurring conception, which hints to us of mystical experience as the common origin.

When we delve even further backward, into the upper Paleolithic era (ca. 35,000-9,000 B.C.E.), we find it difficult to imagine how one might have communicated mystical experience in that time, long ago, even to one's peers, considering the limited language skills of the peoples of that time. But the challenge of communicating it to future generations without the benefit of a written language was even more immense. The transcendent Absolute is beyond even the most eloquent speech; how then was one to represent It in myth or legend?

Here is one possible answer: Let us suppose that many thousands of years ago some nameless mystic told his comrades of his experience of the great Unity. And, for century after century, that tale was passed down orally as an authentic description of the origin and beginning of all things; until, around 700 B.C.E., it finally appeared in written form as an allegorical tale, or myth, of creation. Here is that tale as it appears in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*:

In the beginning, there was only the Self. ... He reflected, and saw that there was nothing but Himself, whereupon he exclaimed, “I am” (*Aham*). Ever since, He has been known within as “I.” Even now, when announcing oneself, one says, “I am ...,” and then gives the other name that one bears.

He was afraid. Even today, one who is alone is afraid. But then

he realized, “Since there is nothing else but myself, what is there to fear?” It is only from [the presence of] a second [entity] that fear need ever arise. However, he was still unhappy. Even today, one is unhappy when alone. He desired a mate. And so, he took on the form of a being the size of a man and woman joined in a close embrace; and then He separated into two individuals: a man and a wife. Therefore, as the sage Yajnavalkya has declared, this body, by itself, is like half of a split pea. [In order to become whole again,] this empty space must be filled by a woman. The male [half] then embraced the female [half], and from that the human race arose.

But the female wondered: “How can he unite with me, whom he has produced from himself? Well then, let me hide!” She became a cow; he became a bull and united with her, and from that cattle arose. She became a mare; he became a stallion. She an ass, he a donkey and united with her; and from that solid-hoofed animals arose. She became a goat, he a buck; she a sheep, he a ram and united with her; and from that, goats and sheep arose. In this way, he poured forth all pairing creatures, down to the ants. Then he realized: “All this creation is actually myself; for I have poured forth all this.” One who knows this truth realizes that he, himself, is truly the creator [living] within his own creation.<sup>2</sup>

A distorted version of this tale shows up a few centuries later in Plato’s *Symposium*,<sup>3</sup> where Aristophanes recounts the legend of the original androgynous creature who was both male and female rolled in one, and who was then divided into two by Zeus as a means of checking its power. But Plato’s version is without the profound allegorical meaning of the original myth as retold in the *Brihadaranyaka* Upanishad. Let me attempt to explain:

In the One, there is no form, no experience at all. There is no vision, and no knowledge. For, in order for there to be experience, there has to be two: the experiencer and the experienced. For vision, there has to be a seer and a seen; for knowledge, there must be a knower and a known, a subject and an object. For any of these things to be, the One must pretend to be two, must create within Itself the semblance of duality. If there is only a seer and no seen, there can be no vision. And if there is only a seen and no seer, again,

vision cannot be.

Figuratively speaking, the One is lonely being alone; so, It creates (images forth) a second, in order to experience (enjoy) Itself. This is the primal division, the primary creation: it is an *apparent* bifurcation of the one Consciousness into subject and object, seer and seen. In all existence, there are only these two—and they are really both the One. This Self-division of the One into subject and object is the primal dichotomy alluded to in this allegory. The subject is, in actuality, the One; the object is, in actuality, the One. That One is, naturally, beyond gender; but, in Its (pretended) roles as subject and object, It becomes regarded as the male principle and the female principle.

The male principle, the subject, cannot be seen, touched or sensed in any way; only the object, the female principle, is sensed. The male principle is the unchanging witness, or seer; it is the pure, unmanifested, awareness that knows “I am.” When there is the impulse of desire, a thought-object is produced to satisfy it; and as soon as that thought-form is manifested, that is the object of experience; that is the seen. This creation of duality occurs at the macrocosmic level, and it occurs at the microcosmic level. Mankind, the image of God, operates in the same manner as God, the universal Self.

Keep in mind that neither the seer nor the seen can exist without the other. They are complements. They depend upon each other for their own existence. The seer without a seen or the seen without a seer—neither exists. When they are together, then we have experience. We have the enjoyment of life. We have the expression of the One as many. This is the meaning of the two “halves” seeking each other for the purpose of delight. Unless It becomes two, the One has no experience, no universe of forms, no delight.

This same bifurcation is continued throughout creation; the subject and object, as male and female, become the multitude of living forms, and through delighting in each other, continue to recreate themselves. This is the allegory of the cow and the bull, the mare and the stallion, the jenny and the jack-ass. “Then he realizes, ‘all this is myself!’” This is the wondrous knowledge that comes to man when he knows and understands his own true nature and the nature of all ‘objective’ reality. He is, indeed, the one Self of all, who lives within his own creation, experiencing the play of duality, while remaining the forever-undivided One.

This is the tale told by all who have been graced with the knowledge of the One who is their source and origin. It is, no doubt, the tale that was told by some mystic of the Paleolithic era, a tale which had the power of truth, and spread, becoming the archetypal myth or tale of the mystery of Being that was told ‘round the nightly fires and in the holy caverns across the continent of Old Europe, across the steppes of Central Asia, and eventually written down somewhere in the upper Gangetic plain.

The primitive artifacts brought to light by archaeology seem also to bear out our suspicion of a mystical influence going back thousands of years. For, today, archaeologists, having unearthed thousands of objects of representative art—some of which date to over 20,000 years ago—have greatly expanded our vision of man’s prehistory from that of a century ago. Some of the most striking examples of this early figurative art come, not from the so-called “cradle of civilization,” but from Europe—an “Old Europe”—which spawned a rich independent culture whose primary religious symbols turn out to be the same Father-God and Mother-Goddess who appear in a thousand guises in the East and, in fact, in every significant culture that appeared on earth.<sup>4</sup>

When we gaze in awe at the magnificent painted beasts stampeding ‘cross the walls of the great Magdalenian caves of Altamira in Spain, of Lascaux and Les Trois Freres in France, dating from 17,000 to 12,000 B.C.E., we see a great preponderance of cows and bulls, mares and stallions, goats and rams, marked with symbols as to gender. In a chamber of the Tuc d’Audoubert cavern, stand a pair of coupling bison made of clay, from ca. 14,000 B.C.E. Can we help but wonder if it is not this very same allegory of the origin of life that is illustrated in the art of these many ancient sites? How frequently in both Paleolithic and Neolithic sites do we find representations of the bull, and sometimes just its two horns, to be the premier symbol of the Divine! Is it only coincidence that it also figures as the premier creature in our ancient tale of creation?

There are other artifacts which seem to illustrate the familiarity of early man with that mystical tale of the One who became two. The most interesting was found near one of the oldest (ca. 20,000 B.C.E), and most familiar examples of Paleolithic art yet discovered: “The Woman With A Horn” (*Figure 1*), a 17” high relief carved into a sheltering overhang of limestone

just above a 100 meter-long ledge, or terrace, at Laussel, in the Dordogne region of France, only a few miles from the spectacular caverns of Lascaux. Sometimes referred to as “the Venus of Laussel,” she is a corpulent naked female, who is holding in one upraised hand a bull or bison’s horn. The other hand is over her protruding belly. That she is intended to represent the great Mother (Nature) Goddess seems clear. In fact, it is evident that the site where this Goddess figure appears was a Paleolithic shrine, or sanctuary, to the great Mother-Power; other emblems, symbolic of the female generative organ, are etched into the stone overhang adjoining the Goddess, along with several other female and one male form as well.

But most significant of all, and the artifact to which I wish to call your attention, is an adjoining carved relief, which stands out from the rest: it is of a male and female united in a single emblem, or symbol (*Figure 2*). It has been suggested that the two figures are in a position of intercourse, with the female sitting atop a prone male. If so, it is reminiscent of certain modern representations from India of Shakti sitting atop the prone corpse of Shiva, symbolizing the dynamic activity of the creative Energy whose foundation and support is the unmoving Absolute. And if this is the case, the two works of art, though 20,000 years apart, may be fundamentally related. However, when one examines the ancient rock-carving closely, the two figures, female and male, seem not to be joined in intercourse, but seem rather to be designed to represent the two Principles joined into a single unit. It is not a realistic joining; in fact, certain elements of the arrangement are difficult to explain: if one looks at it reversed, with the (bearded) male at the top, his legs seem to extend along her left side, merging into and becoming her arm and breast, his feet becoming her head. Thus, each figure merges into the other, with a unifying border clearly designed to encompass them both.

Set as it is into this sanctuary of worship, this integrated male-female symbol would appear to be the earliest known example of the representation of the divine two-in-One upon which later mystics would so amply elaborate. Is this conjoined pair intended as an illustration of our primal myth of the original androgyne, prior to its separation into male and female principles? Some would protest that this is a concept too abstract, too sophisticated for a Cro-Magnon *homo sapiens* with a flint chisel. But, as stated earlier, mystical experience is not dependent upon intellectual sophistication, and, without a written language, how else would some early mystic tell of his revelation to future generations except through myth and symbol?

But what are we to make of the bison's horn in the upraised hand of the Goddess? It is evidently intended as a prominent and recognizable symbol. But for us, 20,000 years removed, the tale told in that gesture must forever remain a mystery. Is it, as some scholars believe, a symbol for the moon? Or is it related to the fact that the bull, and sometimes just its two horns, was regarded in Paleolithic as well as Neolithic times as symbolic of the transcendent God? Could it be that the single horn in the uplifted hand of the Great Mother of Laussel serves to announce that She, herself, is one of the two complementary aspects of Divinity? We shall never know for certain. We may feel relatively certain, however, that She is intended to represent the female principle, the universal Mother, the great Womb of Nature, who produces all this (objective) universe from Herself.

Another artifact depicting the great Mother (Nature) as a pregnant naked female was found in the same region: it is a fragment of reindeer bone from 12,000 B.C.E. on which is engraved a scene showing the Father-God, symbolized by a bull, standing over the Mother-Goddess. The Mother, symbolized by the pregnant female, is below, suppliant, and receptive of the fecundation of the Father (*Figure 3*). An inconceivable 8,000 years had passed since the nearby 'Woman With a Horn' was created; but the bull was still the primary symbol for the Male principle, the transcendent Father-God, as it would remain for at least another 10,000 years.

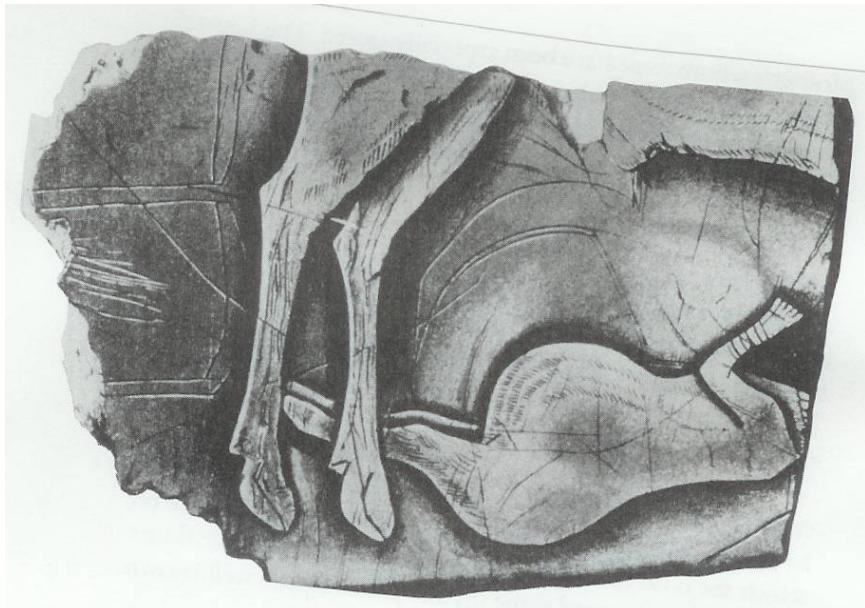
In the mystical experience of unity, there is seen, of course, neither male nor female. The One, which contains in Itself all pairs of opposites, is Itself beyond gender. However, It is apprehended under two different aspects: It is the transcendent, quiescent Consciousness, beyond the manifestation of time and space; and It is the Creative Force, which cyclically manifests and de-manifests the entire universe. And it is evident that, in almost every early culture, these two aspects have been commonly represented in word and picture by those who have apprehended them both, as the Father-God and the Mother-Goddess (*Figures 4-6*). These two symbols of the primary duality-in-Unity appear in abundance in the earliest myths and cultural artifacts of preliterate civilization, and they hint to us of the existence of *mystical experience* transmitted orally and pictographically in the early days of man's history. The transmission of actual personal testimonies of mystical experience had to await the written record of man's thought; and this occurred in various parts of the world during the third millennium B.C.E., when hieroglyphs, ideograms, and cuneiform writing first began to appear.



**Figure 1.** Limestone bas-relief of the great Goddess, known as “The Woman With A Horn,” from Laussel (Dordogne region), France (ca. 20,000 B.C.E.). She is the great Mother Nature, from whom all creation flows, the Energy of the transcendent Self, which manifests as the objective universe.



**Figure 2.** Opposing male and female figures from a limestone shelter at Laussel (Dordogne region), France (ca. 20,000 B.C.E.), possibly intended to be symbolic of the one Reality experienced in the mystical vision, which is both transcendent and immanent.



**Figure 3.** Engraving on reindeer bone (ca. 12,000 B.C.E.), from Laugerie Bass (Dordogne), France. The story illustrated is unknown, but the symbols are familiar: The Father-God is symbolized here by the bull; the creative aspect, or great Mother, symbolized by the pregnant female, is below, suppliant, and receptive of the Father's fecundation.



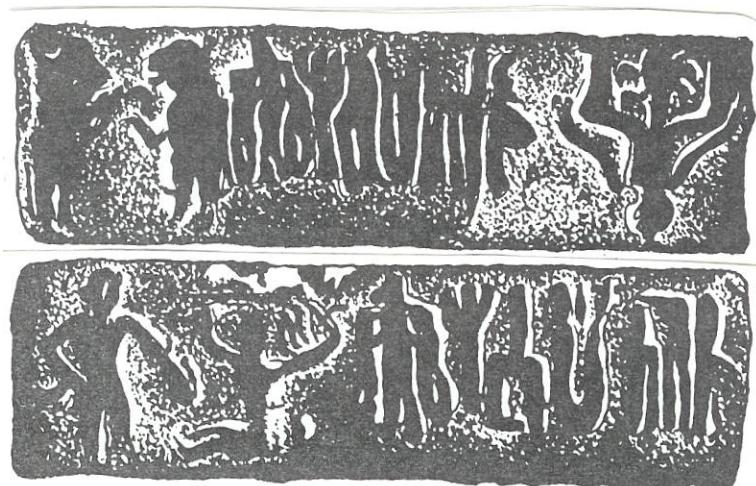
**Figure 4.** God-sculpture (4.5" high) from a grave-site in Cernavoda, at Hemangia on the edge of the Black Sea, present-day Romania (5000 B.C.E.). Often referred to as "The Thinker," He is clearly laboring in thought as the pure Mind from whom the world-thought emanates.

**Figure 5.** Goddess-sculpture found alongside the God-sculpture at a grave-site in Cernavoda (5000 B.C.E.). Appearing to be a modern abstract work, this ancient figurine represents the Great fecund Mother Nature, the creative thought-Power of the Father, the source and nourisher of all manifest

creation.



**Figure 6.** Wooden carving of Zeus and Hera from Samos (ca. 625-600 B.C.E.). Zeus (the Father-God) is holding forth the breast of Hera (Mother-Nature), signifying that, while it is She who nourishes the world, it is by *His* hand, since She is, indeed, *His* manifestory Power. In an Orphic hymn, Zeus is referred to as 'the foundation of the earth and of the starry sky, ... male and immortal female, ... the beginner of all things, the God with the dazzling light. For He has hidden all things within himself, and brought them forth again, into the joyful light, from His sacred heart, working marvels.'



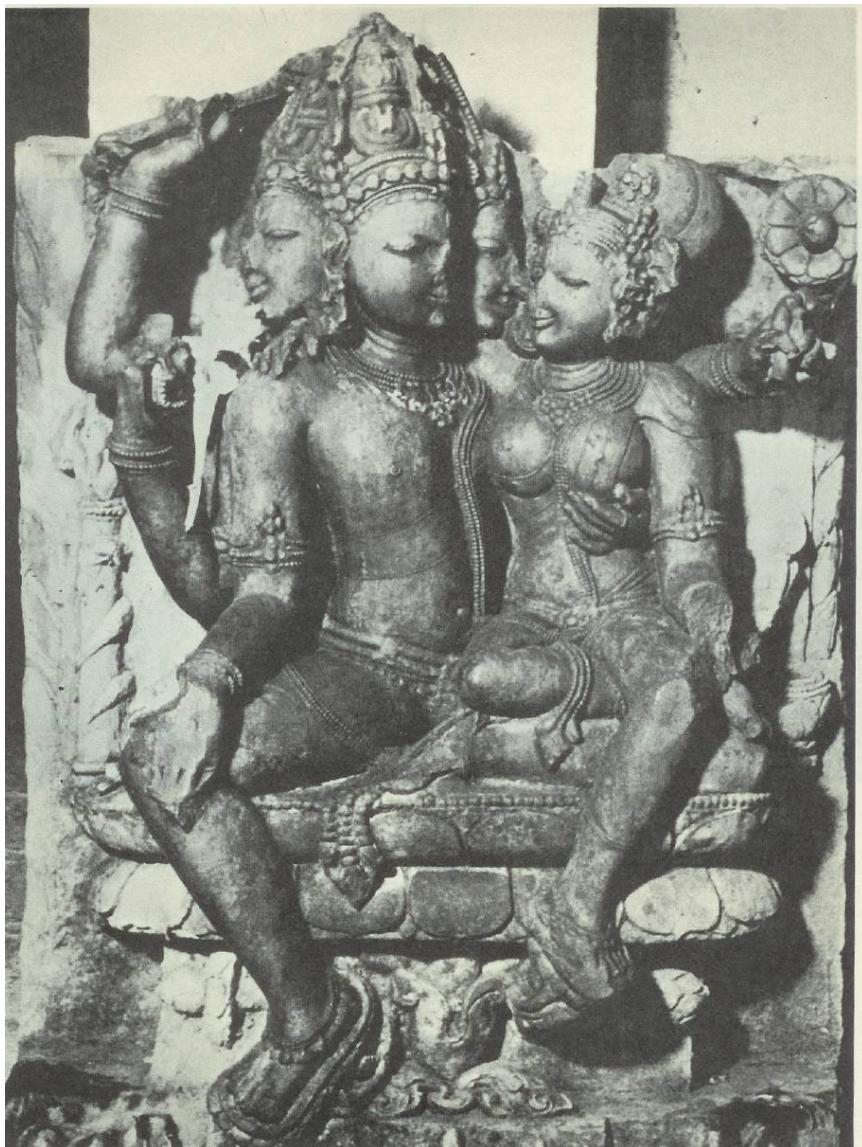
**Figure 7.** The “prototype Shiva,” an ithyphallic figure on a seal from the Indus Valley city of Mohenjo-daro (ca. 2500-1800 B.C.E.), is represented as a yogi, transcending the world of creation, while yet sustaining all creatures as *Pashupati*, “Lord of all creatures.” Note the three faces and the carry-over of the bull’s horns.

**Figure 8.** A sealing found in the excavated Indus Valley city of Harappa (ca. 2000 B.C.E.) On one side (top), two man-bull figures, and to the right the upside-down figure of the great Mother (Nature) from whose womb a tree, representative of all creation, grows. On the reverse (bottom), a female obeisant to a male figure. The lettered inscription is the same on both sides

and has not been deciphered.



**Figure 9.** The Male and Female principles in the form of Vishnu and Lakshmi, Parsvanath Temple, Khajuraho (950-1050 C.E.). The playful eroticism of these figures reflects the intimacy of the Absolute with the relative, the transcendent with the immanent, the Divine with the mundane.



**Figure 10.** Shiva and his consort as *Purusha* and *Prakrti*; Brahmashvara temple, Bhuvaneshvara (Orissa province), 11th century C.E. Here the metaphor is mixed: He is represented as both the Creator-Preserver-Destroyer, and the transcendent *Purusha* to His Creative Power, *Prakrti*.



**Figure 11.** Adi-Buddha (“original Consciousness”) and His Shakti. Tibetan bronze Yab-Yum (18th century C.E.). Locked in an eternal loving embrace, the Absolute and His Power of manifestation create the relationship of subject and object, while remaining forever one. Such images of the God and Goddess are intended to evoke remembrance of the one Mind and Its Creative Power of world-manifestation, the undivided One who appears to be two, the nameless Reality as It has been experienced within by countless mystics throughout history.



**Figure 12.** Shiva *Ardhanarishvara*, “The Lord as Male-Female.” Relief from the Shiva Cave Temple, Elephanta, India (8th century C.E.). He is both male and female in one, signifying the Unity which is both the subject and the object, the transcendent and the immanent Reality.

Where, then, do we find the earliest records of mystical experience? We know that some of the most advanced early civilizations existed concurrently in the Nile, Mesopotamian, and Indus valleys; and, while we may only conjecture about the development of a mystical philosophy in ancient Egypt, Sumeria, and other Middle Eastern regions, it is in **India** that we find the earliest explicit testimonies of the mystics and the earliest development of an advanced mystical philosophy, and so it is there we shall begin.

When we attempt to discover the origins of mysticism, previous to the existence of written testimonies of mystical experience, we enter a dim, dark realm. For it is extremely difficult to ascertain whether or not a mystical philosophy was possessed by men living in a preliterate period. Without the evidence of written documents, one must rely only on the slim evidence provided by the scattered artifacts taken from the ruins of ancient cities. In the case of India, the surprisingly large and elaborate cities unearthed at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro prove the existence of the remarkably developed civilizations of the Dravidian people who lived in the Indus Valley perhaps as far back as 2500 B.C.E.

Among the artifacts found in these cities was a seal containing a male figure which may be the prototype of the Father-God, Shiva (*Figure 7*), whose epithets are *Pashupati*, “Lord of all creatures,” and *Yogeshvar*, “Lord of yoga.” He is shown in his three-faced aspect, with a large crown of horns, sitting cross-legged in contemplation, with an erect penis; and he is surrounded by Shiva’s traditional symbol, the bull, and other animals. In addition, there were found a number of phallus-shaped stones, known as *lingams*, which are also traditionally representative of Shiva, the world-transcending Absolute.

Along with these representations of the Father-God, however, were found a number of figurines and emblems of the Mother-Goddess, identifiable as Shakti, the fertile Mother of all creation. She is shown in one figure in a dancing pose, and in a seal from Harappa she is shown standing on her head, her legs apart, with a plant or tree growing from her womb (*Figure 8*). There were also found a number of ring-shaped stones, called *yonis*, which are traditionally associated with Shakti, the Female principle of generation. And even a few figurines were found which appear to be androgynous, having breasts as well as what appear to be male genitals.

From the scant evidence found in these excavations we may assume that a mystical religious view which recognized the dual principles of the Absolute and Its Creative Power as complementary aspects of the one Reality existed and flourished even in so remote a time. We are led to believe, therefore, that the religious view of these ancient peoples was inspired by one or more seers of the ineffable duality-in-Unity which has been described in more explicit and intelligible terms by mystics of a later era. Yet, however convincing this evidence may be, it cannot be considered conclusive, but must remain forever a matter of conjecture.

Nevertheless, if we do accept this evidence, from the pre-Aryan (Dravidian) civilization, of a full-blown Shiva-Shakti mythology, we may trace the manifestation of the Shaivite tradition to these pre-Aryan peoples, and account for the appearance of two separately developing traditions among the early Indian peoples: one, the long-established tradition of the aboriginal races, and the other, the imported Vedic pantheon of the invading Aryans. For the Dravidian population, the Absolute Being came eventually to be known as *Shiva*, and His world-manifesting Power was called *Shakti*; while the Aryan tradition eventually adopted the name, *Brahman* for the Absolute principle, and *Maya* for Its world-manifesting Energy. And, while these two traditions eventually intermingled and became recognized by the wise as representative of a common and identical worldview, for many centuries each retained a semblance of independence while coexisting alongside one another.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

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8. Marshall, Sir John (ed.), *Mohenjo-Daro and the Indus Civilization*, London, Arthur Probesthain, 1931; Vol. I, pp. 51.
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### 3. The Mystical Tradition of Vedanta (Part One)

#### I. The Vedic Hymnists

The earliest written records from India to convey the mystical view of Unity are found in the collection of songs of devotion and ceremonial liturgy known as the *Vedas* (“Wisdom”). The *Vedas* were originally part of an orally transmitted legacy of the Aryans, dating from 2000-1500 B.C.E., which was only transmitted to writing centuries later. The *Aryans* (“Kinsmen”) entered India from the northwest via Persia and Afghanistan, originating from somewhere in Central Asia. They were a light-skinned race who conquered and absorbed the earlier Indus Valley civilization of the dark-skinned Dravidian peoples, the builders of the vast complex cities at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. What later came to be called the civilization of the “Hindus” (a corruption of *Sindhu*, the name of the river which once served as the nation’s northernmost perimeter), is an amalgam of these two cultures, a sifting and blending of two independent traditions whose individual traces can still be found in the divergent racial and religious traditions of present-day India.

For the early Aryan interlopers, the one God of all was called by a great variety of names, according to the qualities intended to be praised. Here, for example, in the following Vedic verses, He is addressed as *Visvakarma* (“the all-Creator”):

O Visvakarma, Thou art our Father, our Creator, Maker;  
 Thou knowest every place and every creature.  
 To Thee, by whom the names of the gods were given,  
 All creatures turn in prayer.<sup>1</sup>

The Female Divinity was called *Prthivi* (“Nature”); and in a prayer to Her, the seer cries:

May Earth pour out her milk for us, as a mother unto me  
 her son.  
 O Prthivi, beautiful are Thy forests, and beautiful are  
 Thy hills and snow-clad mountains.<sup>2</sup>

In yet another song from the Rig Veda, in which the Father-God is spoken of

as *Prajapati* (Lord of all creatures), His Female Power of manifestation is called, not *Prthivi*, but *Vac* (Speech or Word):

In truth Prajapati is the Father of the world;  
 With Him was Vac, the other aspect of Himself.  
 With Her, He begat life.  
 She conceived; and going forth from Him, She formed all  
 creatures. And then, once again, She is re-absorbed into  
 Prajapati.<sup>3</sup>

This is a depiction of Creation almost identical to the Egyptian and Judaic ones appearing around the same time (ca. 1500 B.C.E.) and is amazingly similar to the opening paragraph of the Fourth Gospel by the Christian evangelist, John. Here, once again, we have a symbolic representation of the perennial vision of the mystic who perceives the Absolute and Its Creative Power as an ineffable duality-in-Unity and characterizes It as the universal Father-Mother.

We find in the Vedas many different names for the Father-God, each representative of a special power or quality of the one Being. Sometimes He was called *Dyaus*, “the Almighty”, or *Varuna*, the power of the wind; sometimes He was *Indra*, whose thunderbolts brought the rain. But as time went on, these various epithets came to be recognized as but various aspects of the same one Lord:

They call Him Indra, Mitra, Varuna, or Agni, or  
 Garutmat, the heavenly bird. Reality (*Sat*) is one; learned  
 men call It by various names, such as Agni, Yama, or  
 Matarisvan.<sup>4</sup>

Too often, men take the names of God, which accumulate over the centuries to represent separate and distinct entities, and then pit them one against the other. This was true of the early poets and mythologizers of the Vedas as well. As soon as one tribe or civilization absorbed another, it established its own name for God as the superior and relegated the subjugated people’s name for God to an inferior position. In this way, a polytheistic mythology accumulated in no time, peopled with all manner of anthropomorphized gods. This, however, is the work of the priests and mythologizers, not of the seers. As one Vedic mystic put it:

With words, priests and poets make into many the hidden Reality, which is but One.<sup>5</sup>

The Vedas are an amalgamated collection of many songs written by priests, sages, legalists, rulers and poets of the early Aryans, and they run the gamut from lyrical devotion to ceremonial doctrine, from primitive superstition to high philosophy. They represent not only a broad extent of time—perhaps a thousand years of development—but also a wide divergence of intellects. It was the poets and priests contributing to the Vedas who fashioned the liturgical and legal traditions of subsequent generations, but it was some unnamed mystic or mystics who gave expression to the exalted vision of Unity which is the cornerstone of the Vedas and the foundation upon which rests the great non-dual tradition of Vedanta.

Others may attempt to speak of such things, but it is only the mystic whose words are capable of conveying the certainty and authority which is born of true experience. Here, in the *Creation Hymn* (X:129) from the Rig Veda, we have a description of the primal Reality prior to the manifestation of the world by a sage who had seen It for himself. In one of the oldest extant declarations of a true mystic, that one Beginning-place of all things is described:

1. Then, neither the non-Real (*asat*) nor the Real (*sat*) existed.  
There was no sky then, nor the heavens beyond it.  
What was contained by what, and where, and who sheltered it?  
What unfathomed depths, what cosmic ocean, existed then?
2. Then, neither death nor deathlessness existed.  
Between day and night there was as yet no distinction.  
That ONE (*tad ekam*), by Its own power (*svadha*) breathlessly breathed.<sup>6</sup>

First, let us understand that “the Real” (*sat*) refers to the Absolute, the pure Mind, the one Origin and Father of all; and “the unreal” (*asat*) refers to this illusory universe of form and apparent substance that is, at bottom, truly only the Creative Energy (*svadha*) of the Real. Elsewhere we shall meet up with this same pair referred to as “Brahman and Maya,” “Purusha and Prakrti,” or “Shiva and Shakti.” Such terms conceptually separate out the two aspects of the one Reality perceived in the “mystical experience” of

which our seer speaks. It is a conceptual division only and does not represent an *actual* division in the ultimate Reality.

Then the Hymnist goes on in an attempt to explain how, within the Nondual Existence, the creative impulse arises, bringing about the manifestation of the universe:

3. In the beginning, darkness lay wrapped in darkness.  
All was one undifferentiated (*apraketa*) sea (*salila*).  
Then, within that one undifferentiated Existence,  
[Something] arose by the heat of concentrated energy (*tapas*).
4. What arose in That in the beginning was Desire (*kama*),  
[Which is] the primal seed of mind (*manas*).  
The wise, having searched deep within their own hearts,  
Have perceived the bond (*bandha*) between the Real  
(*sat*) and the unreal (*asat*).

Mystics of succeeding generations, who have seen THAT in the depths of contemplation for themselves, have recognized the author of the above Hymn as one who had also known “the mystical vision.” He was, himself, one of those sages described, who, searching deep within themselves, perceived “the bond between the Real and the unreal.” He had seen THAT from which all Creation emanates; for in that mystical experience of unity, one goes back—not temporally, but causally—to the Beginning of things, to that eternal, unmoving Consciousness from which the world-manifestation springs forth. There, in that perfect Stillness, night and day, life and death, do not exist; they are indistinguishable in that state prior to the coming into being of all such opposites. All these opposites, these complements, rely for their existence on an initial differentiation within the One, creating a perceiver and a perceived.

The subtle source of that differentiation, says our mystic, is “Desire;” i.e., the impulse within the One to create within Itself an object, an “other,” for the purpose of experiencing enjoyment. Is it not the same with us? Does not the same subtle process occur in all our own mental constructions? First, arises a desire, followed by the formation of a thought or fantasy to gratify the desire, and then delectation. It is this subtle movement of desire which comes into expression as mind (*manas*) or mentation; and, by the production of mental imagery, we have created within our integral consciousness an

artificial duality: a *seer* (the witnessing subject) and a *seen* (the object of inner vision). And so, within ourselves, we experience a microcosmic reproduction of the process, which occurs as universal Creation within the one Mind. Universal Destruction is likewise mirrored in the dissolution of a thought within the mind, as we return to self-awareness.

5. They (the wise) have stretched the cord (*rashmi*) of their vision [to encompass the Truth],  
And they have perceived what is higher and lower:  
The mighty powers [of Nature] are made fertile  
By that ONE who is their Source.  
Below [i.e., secondary] is the creative Energy (*svadha*),  
And above [i.e., primary] is the Divine Will (*prayati*).

It is, we are reminded, the one Divine Consciousness, which is the primary Reality (*sat*); the thought-creation is but illusion (*asat*). The Divine Will (*prayati*) is superior, or above; and the creative energy (*svadha*) of thought-imagery is subordinate, or below. This has been seen in contemplation by all the mystics of every time.

6. [But, after all,] who knows, and who can say whence it all came, or how this creation came about?  
The gods, themselves, came later than this world's creation, so who truly knows whence it has arisen?
7. Whence all creation had its origin, only He, whether He fashioned it or not —He, who surveys it all from highest heaven—He knows.  
Or perhaps even He doesn't know! <sup>7</sup>

Why on earth, we must all wonder at some time or another, would God have given birth to this dream-like realm, where individualized souls struggle for wisdom and contentment while continually buffeted by passions, blinded by ignorance, assailed by pain, and threatened with death? What could be His motive? As there were no witnesses to the initial Creation, there is no one to tell. But what of the mystic? Surely, while he is lost in the depths of the Eternal, he is in a unique position to explain the 'why' of Creation! Unfortunately, even the mystic perceives no 'why'. For, in that unitive vision, He alone is. The joyful expression, which is the universal drama, radiates from Himself, the one Mind. He alone is the one Cause. There is

nowhere else to look for causation, for whatever appears from Him and before Him is His own most natural and unquestionable radiation of Bliss.

Another way of expressing this truth is to say that the appearance of the world-manifestation in and on the one Consciousness is simply the nature of That. All questions regarding the how and why of it are therefore alogical. It is like asking, “Why does light shine?” or “Why does a mind think?” Who knows why a desire arises? Who knows how a thought is formed? We are aware that our thinking processes are distinguishable from our background consciousness, which is merely a witness to the mind’s activity. We are aware that the thought-producing aspect of our mind is superimposed on our consciousness, but we don’t know how or why. It simply occurs. We say that it is merely the nature of consciousness to manifest as thought. Similarly, the nature of That, the one Consciousness, is to manifest as the phenomenal world. “Perhaps,” says our Vedic author, “even He doesn’t know the how or why of it.”

Here is another passage from the Rig Veda (X:90: 1-5) that points up the difficulty of explaining the relationship between the two complementary aspects of Reality:

All this is He—what has been and what shall be. He is the Lord of immortality. Though He has become all this, in reality He is not all this. For truly, He is beyond the world. The whole series of universes—past, present, and future—express His glory and power; but *He transcends His own glory*. All beings of the universe form, as it were, only a portion of His being; the greater part is invisible and unchangeable. He who is beyond all predicates *appears* as the relative universe; He *appears* as all sentient and insentient beings.<sup>8</sup>

In the above Hymn, we are taught the perennial paradox of duality-in-Unity: “Though He has become all of this, in reality He is not all of this.” He is the transcendent, the Unchangeable, the Eternal; yet conjunctive with the absolute, unqualified voidness of that one Consciousness, is the shining forth of His “glory.” This ‘shining forth’ as the universe of forms is not He, yet it is He. His “glory” stands in relation to the Absolute as the Sun’s radiating light stands to the Sun. They are different, yet they are one. The rays of the Sun have no independent existence and exist only because of the Sun; the

glory of God, which appears as the phenomenal universe, also has no independent reality, but exists only as a radiation or emanation from that pure Sun of Consciousness. “He transcends His own glory,” says the seer; remaining forever One, unchanging and pure, He appears as the multiform universe.

Such an understanding comes not from the mind of a speculative philosopher, but from the vision of the mystic. Only one who has plumbed the depths of his own mind and passed beyond the mind to the Source of all mind and all manifestation, can know the truth of this unity-in-duality, this duality-in-unity. It is the knowledge of the Vedic seer, which, as we shall see, has been throughout the ages the common knowledge of all who have passed beyond the “glory” of God, and have seen in the depths of inner contemplation the one Beginning and Ending of all things.

### NOTES:

1. *Rig Veda*, x.82
2. *Rig Veda*, v.84
3. *Tandya Maha Brahmana*, xx.14.2
4. *Rig Veda*, i.164.46
5. *Ibid.*, x.114
6. *Ibid.*, x.129.1
7. *Ibid.*, x.129.2-7
8. *Ibid.*, x.90.1-5; from Prabhavananda, Swami, *The Spiritual Heritage Of India*, Hollywood, Vedanta Press, 1963; p. 32.

## II. The Upanishadic Seers

In India, sometime during the first millennium B.C.E., the Vedas were finally collected and put into an organized written form; and an additional, much later, collection of philosophical writings by the *rishis*, or seers, who had known God, were appended to those earlier hymns and religious precepts, and thereafter regarded as an integral part of the *Vedas*. These philosophical appendages, addressed to a more learned and intellectually sophisticated audience, were called the *Upanishads*. The Sanskrit word, *upanishad*, means “sitting beneath,” and refers to those teachings which are received at the feet of a spiritual Master, or *Guru*. The *Upanishads* are also “sitting beneath” the *Vedas* as the final portion of the collection and are therefore known as the *Vedanta*: the end (*anta*) of the *Vedas*.

Of the one hundred and eight Upanishads said to exist, twelve are regarded as of primary importance and merit. In philosophical purity and persuasiveness, these few represent what, for most of us, are the Upanishads. Their names are the *Isha*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Prasna*, *Mundaka*, *Mandukya*, *Chandogya*, *Brihadaranyaka*, *Aitareya*, *Taitiriya*, *Svetasvatara* and *Maitri Upanishads*. The authors and exact date of authorship of these separate spiritual treatises are unknown; we know only that they were written, by various anonymous sages who had realized that Truth of which they speak, sometime between ca. 1200 and 400 B.C.E. While they vary in length and in style, their one common theme is the inner realization of the identity of the *Atman* (Self) and *Brahman* (the one universal Consciousness). We may strive to know God, or we may strive to know our Self; but, say the Upanishads, when you find the one, you shall also find the other; and it is this discovery which constitutes Enlightenment.

It has long been recognized as a fact of mystical psychology that, as a man comes to know God in the unitive vision, he knows in that some moment, his own true Self. This intriguing fact is expressed most succinctly in a passage from the ancient Indian epic, the *Ramayana*; in it, Rama, who represents the Godhead incarnate, asks his servant, Hanuman, “How do you regard me?” And Hanuman replies:

*dehabhavena daso’smi  
jivabhavena twadamshakah  
atmabhavetwamevaham*

(When I identify with the body, I am Thy servant;  
When I identify with the soul, I am a part of Thee;  
But when I identify with the Self, I am truly Thee.) <sup>1</sup>

These three attitudes represent progressively subtler stages of self-identification: from the identification with the body, to identification with the soul, until, finally, one comes to know the Divine, and thereby one’s eternal Self. While each of these three relational attitudes finds expression as the prevailing attitude within various individual religious traditions, they are essentially representative of the viewpoint from these different stages of self-awareness.

We have seen, in the Vedas, how religious thought progressed from a primitive sort of nature-worship to monotheism, and finally to a monistic conception of reality. This progression of understanding is a duplication of the progression of understanding that takes place in the mind of every individual as well. We all begin as materialists, taking for granted that the phenomenal world before us is the sole reality. The idea of a transcendent God, or a unifying Principle inherent in the world, seems but a remote and hazy notion. Then, as our religious sense awakens, perhaps through some shocking reminder of our mortality, or a dawning clarity of mind while viewing the starry heavens or some quiet stretch of seacoast, we begin to reflect. And some inner logic seems to demand a Creator for so vast and mysterious a universe. We begin to sense an Intelligence beyond our own, an Intelligence with whom we can communicate, and of whom we are increasingly aware in all our thoughts and actions.

The second stage of our religious development comes when, after some deliberation and inner probing, we come to the conclusion that there is something within ourselves, a moral spirit, a guiding light, which is, itself, Divine, and partakes of God Himself. We call it our “soul,” and we sense the longing of that soul to rejoin the Divine beauty and goodness from which, like a spark from a blazing fire, it emanated.

Finally, we experience the third stage in our journey when, in a moment of longing, contemplating our Divine Source, we know “the peace that passes all understanding,” and suddenly, in a moment of unprecedented clarity of Intelligence, we know that one Divinity face to face. In that clear knowing, we realize that the seeker and the Goal, the knower and That which it sought to know, are one. Like the king of a vast kingdom, awakening from a dream in which he is poor and lost, we awake to the realization that we were never separate from the One, but only imagined a separateness where none existed. Then we know who we have always been—the one all-pervading Being, who, while transcending this world of light and shadow, is Itself the substratum and essence of all being.

It is in the Upanishads that we first hear from those fully illumined seers who have reached the final stage of knowledge regarding God and the Self, declaring to us that the Self and God are one:

Even by the mind this truth is to be learned:  
There are not many, but only ONE.<sup>2</sup>

We are easily able to understand the idea of an underlying Unity intellectually, but that remains an imperfect and ultimately unsatisfactory knowledge so long as we do not directly experience that Unity as *I*. Our very knowledge stands in the way of experiencing the Truth, because we retain the limited awareness of “I know”. That very intellect which knows establishes a separation between the knower and what is known. Hear what the seers of the Upanishads say on this point:

He is known by those who know Him beyond thought,  
not to those who imagine He can be attained by  
thought. ... If you think, “I know Him well,” you do not  
know the Truth. You only perceive that appearance of  
Brahman produced by the inner senses. Continue to  
meditate.<sup>3</sup>

What cannot be thought with the mind, but That whereby  
the mind thinks: know That alone to be Brahman.

... It is not what is thought that we should wish to  
know; we should know the thinker. “He is my Self!”  
This one should know. “He is my Self!” This one  
should know.<sup>4</sup>

And *that* knowledge, of the Self, or *Atman*, is obtained only through the direct experience that occurs when the knowing mind is transcended, and the knower and the known are directly realized to be one. No amount of reasoning, no amount of philosophical understanding, can approach this directly apprehended knowledge:

He cannot be seen by the eye, and words cannot reveal  
Him. He cannot be realized by the senses, or by austerity  
or the performance of rituals. By the grace of wisdom  
and purity of mind, He can be seen in the silence of  
contemplation.<sup>5</sup>

When a sage sees this great Unity, and realizes that his  
Self has become all beings, what delusion and what  
sorrow could ever approach him?<sup>6</sup>

When awake to the vision of one's own Self, when a man in truth can say: "I am He," what desires could lead him to grieve in fever for the body?

... When a man sees the *Atman*, his own Self, the one God, the Lord of what was and of what shall be, then he fears no more.<sup>7</sup>

This "vision" of the Self is described in the Upanishads as Liberation (*moksha*). It is a freedom, a release, from doubt, from uncertainty, from the fears attending ignorance, forever. All questions are answered; all desires and causes for sorrow are put to rest; for thereafter, a man knows the secret of all existence. All previous notions of limitation and mortality, all darkness of ignorance, is swept away in the all-illuminating light of Truth:

When the wise man knows that it is through the great and omnipresent Spirit in us that we are conscious in waking or in dreaming, then he goes beyond all sorrow. When he knows the Self, the inner Life, who enjoys like a bee the sweetness of the flowers of the senses, the Lord of what was and what will be, then he goes beyond all fear.<sup>8</sup>

When a man has seen the truth of the Spirit, he is one with Him; the aim of his life is fulfilled, and he is ever beyond sorrow.

... When a man knows God, he is free; his sorrows have an end, and birth and death are no more. When in inner union he is beyond the world of the body, then the third world, the world of the Spirit, is found, where man possesses all—for he is one with the ONE.<sup>9</sup>

It is these truths, that "Brahman is the *Atman*,"<sup>10</sup> "Atman is Brahman,"<sup>11</sup> and that the realization of *Atman/Brahman* is man's ultimate "Liberation," which constitute the great message of the Upanishads. But a further question remains: "How is this realization to be attained?" In answer to that question, the various authors of the Upanishads offer various answers, which to a perplexed student may appear contradictory and mutually exclusive. But, with a little explanation, it can be easily understood that their directives are not contradictory at all, but complementary. For example, in the *Katha Upanishad*, we are given three different explanations of the way to know

God. The first is “by the grace of God”:

The man who surrenders his human will leaves sorrows behind and beholds the glory of the Self by the grace of God.

... Not through much learning is the Atman reached, nor through the intellect and the sacred teachings. It is reached by those whom He chooses; to His chosen the Self reveals His glory.<sup>12</sup>

The second is “by purity of heart”:

He is seen by a pure heart and by a mind whose thoughts are pure.

... When all desires that cling to the heart are surrendered, then a mortal becomes immortal, and even in this world he is one with Brahman.<sup>13</sup>

The third is by “one-pointed contemplation”:

Not even through deep knowledge can the Self be reached, unless evil ways are abandoned, and there is rest in the senses, concentration in the mind, and peace in one’s heart.

... When the wise man rests his mind in contemplation on our God beyond time, who invisibly dwells in the mystery of things and in the heart of man, then he rises above both pleasures and sorrows.<sup>14</sup>

These three, apparently diverse, methods or means to attain the realization of God appear in one form or another throughout all the Upanishads. And, in order to understand the integral relationship of these three apparently different “paths,” we must examine them in the light of the experience of those who have reached the goal of Self-realization. First, let us understand what is meant by “the grace of God.”

Those who have known that absolute Self realize that whatever exists, and whatever occurs in this universe, is His doing. There is nothing whatsoever

that is apart from Him. This the sages have clearly seen. Where, then, is that which is outside of His doing? Can we suppose that the awakening of our understanding about God is something apart from His doing? Or that our efforts, our devotion to Truth, our desire for knowledge, is something other than God's own activity within ourselves? It is God's grace which inspires within us the effort, the desire. The vision of God is not attained without effort, but the effort itself is a manifestation of His grace. And the revelation of Himself—could that be accomplished without His doing it? We are within God, and everything—even our doubting, our rejection, our foolishness—is He. Can that inward journey to Self-realization be inspired by someone other than He?

Regardless of what steps we take toward the realization of God, it is God Himself who is playing out the drama. The light that fills a room is nothing but light; how could we find a portion of that light that is acting independently from the rest? Likewise, all this universe is the glory of God, and nothing but Him. What, then, is not Himself? What is not a manifestation of His grace? The authors of the Upanishads, like all true seers of God who have come after them, have acknowledged the fact that, ultimately, their turning to God, their thirst for Him, and their eventual Self-realization, are all inspired and accomplished by His grace. “He is indeed the Lord supreme whose grace moves the hearts of men. He leads us unto His own joy and to the glory of His light.”<sup>15</sup>

Now, in the light of this understanding, let us examine the qualification of “purity of heart.” Though it is a vague and broadly generalized phrase, it is one used repeatedly by the sages of the past and present, including Jesus of Nazareth, to describe the state of mind prerequisite to the “vision” of God. Pure heartedness suggests guilelessness, simplicity and childlike humility. “He is unknown by the learned and known by the simple.”<sup>16</sup> It implies tenderness, compassion, sincerity, and all those qualities we associate with “goodness.” It is the state of the heart of one who knows that God is universally present, and who regards nothing in this world as divorced from, or other than, God.

“Purity” suggests a single, uncontaminated, element or quality. “Purity of heart,” therefore, is an undeviating regard to God alone, who has become the center and focus of all one's thoughts, words and actions. Only by such purity of heart is the mind of man readied and prepared for the perfect

concentration of mind, which is known as contemplation.

The mind of man is of two kinds: pure and impure. It is impure when in the grip of worldly desire, and pure when free from such desire. ... If men thought of God as much as they think of the world, who would not attain liberation?<sup>17</sup>

Contemplation, the third stipulated precondition, is the result of mental purity, and the open gateway to the experience of the Eternal. It is not attained by allowing the mind to dwell on sense-pleasures, nor by the calculating of philosophers, nor by the proud and complacent; it is attained by the mind that dwells solely and intently on God, who knows its own darkness, and longs solely and purely for the light of clear vision.

When a wise man has withdrawn his mind from all things without, and when his spirit has peacefully left all inner sensations, let him rest in peace, free from the movement of will and desire.... For it has been said: There is something beyond our mind, which abides in silence within our mind. It is the supreme mystery beyond thought. Let one's mind and subtle spirit rest upon that and nothing else.

...When the mind is silent, beyond weakness and distraction, then it can enter into a world, which is far beyond the mind: the supreme Destination. ... Then one knows the joy of Eternity. ...Words cannot describe the joy of the soul whose impurities are washed away in the depths of contemplation, who is one with the Atman, his own Self. Only those who experience this joy know what it is .... As water becomes one with water, fire with fire, and air with air, so the mind becomes one with the infinite Mind and thus attains Freedom.<sup>18</sup>

If we are to know that Freedom, say the authors of the Upanishads, we must leave behind the world of speculation and philosophizing, and enter into the devout life of grace, purity of heart and contemplation. Thus, they assure us, with a full trust in His loving guidance, with a sincere and naked surrender of all thoughts not of God, and all actions not in His service, and finally in

the constant flow of the mind to Him in the intimacy of silent contemplation, we shall enter the depths of our being, and know the glory of our own eternal Self.

When first one discovers these exalted thoughts in the Upanishads, one is startled and wonderstruck that such sublime thoughts were penned so many hundreds of years ago—long before anyone in the West had come near to such heights of knowing. We discover that the knowledge of the Spirit is not dependent upon the so-called ‘progress of civilization,’ but has always been the same for all humanity in every age.

In the annals of spiritual knowledge, the testimonies of the *rishis* who authored the Upanishads may perhaps be equaled, but they have never been, nor will ever be, surpassed. They have the last as well as the original say in spiritual knowledge. All that has been said since regarding the Source, nature, and final Goal of man is but so many footnotes to the Upanishads; for, in them, the furthest reaches of knowledge have been explored. They have reduced all existence to One, the final number beyond which there is no more reduction. And they have shown the path whereby this supernal knowledge may be attained. Whatever came after the Upanishads, in the way of spiritual knowledge, is only the echoing cries of those who have rediscovered the same Truth, by the same path, and have raised their voices to sing the same joyous song.

## NOTES:

1. Valmiki, *Ramayana*
2. *Katha* Upanishad, IV; based on Mascaro, Juan, *The Upanishads*, Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1965.
3. *Kena* Upanishad, II; *Ibid.*
4. *Kaushitaki* Upanishad, III.8; *Ibid.*
5. *Mundaka* Upanishad, III.1; *Ibi*
6. *Isha* Upanishad, I.7; *Ibid.*
7. *Brihadaranyaka* Upanishad, IV.4.25; *Ibid.*
8. *Katha* Upanishad, IV; *Ibid.*
9. *Svetasvatara* Upanishad, II.1; *Ibid.*
10. *Taittiriya* Upanishad, I.5; *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, II.6; *Ibid.*
12. *Katha* Upanishad, II; *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, VI; *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, II; *Ibid.*
15. *Svetasvatara* Upanishad, III; *Ibid.*
16. *Kena* Upanishad, II; *Ibid.*
17. *Maitri* Upanishad, VI.24; *Ibid.*
18. *Maitri* Upanishad, VI.19-23; *Ibid.*

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## 4. The Mystical Tradition of Vedanta (Part Two)

### I. Introduction To Vedanta

All people of intelligence eventually awaken to some degree to the presence of God in their lives, and, depending on what religious or philosophical environment they happen to be in at the time of that awakening, they tend to interpret their spiritual experience in that context. The person living in a Moslem intellectual environment interprets his experience through the Koran, and worships Allah; the Hindu gives his heart to Krishna or Shiva; the person inundated with Buddhist ideas sees his awakening in Buddhist terms; the Jew relates strongly to the religious history of his forefathers and looks to Yahweh; the Christian describes his path in Christian terms, and the Platonist in Platonist terms. But, of course, they are all turning in the same direction. If they reach the object of their yearning, they transcend sectarian interpretations and come to know directly the Source of their attraction, and realize that It is beyond every religious tradition, containing all traditions and yet transcending them all.

We may picture the many spiritual seekers of various traditions as a group of men widely scattered around the base of a peaked mountain; each starts up the mountain from his own place and wends his way along his own mountain path. From their individual perspectives, each appears to be far apart from the other, with different destinations. But each, as he nears the top, draws nearer the others, and eventually all reach the very same mountaintop. It is then they realize that the destination each sought, though each along his own unique pathway, was ultimately the same for all. And once they have reached the pinnacle of their quest, they come to know directly the One they sought, and realize It as the eternal and universal Self of all. As the 16<sup>th</sup> century mystic, Dadu, said so well: “Ask of those who have attained God; all speak the same word. ... All the enlightened have left one message; ... it is only those in the midst of their journey who hold diverse opinions.”

This book is intended to reveal the perspective of the enlightened, those who have reached the pinnacle at the end of their journey, all sharing a common vista. We find today many who have attained that summit of knowledge and who espouse a common perspective based on that universal knowledge; they are to be found in every religious tradition that exists. However, it only rarely that we find an acknowledgement that this unitary knowledge was

originally expressed in its fullness and perfection in the written scriptures of that most ancient of lands, India, in a tradition known as *Vedanta*, perhaps the most concisely expressed understanding of Nonduality. *Vedanta* is not Hinduism; Hinduism is a religious tradition, with its own rites and customs; but *Vedanta* is an expression of the direct knowledge of Unity. Of all the Indian philosophical traditions, *Vedanta* is undoubtedly the most overtly mystical. It is founded on the written expressions of the mystical realizations of Self-realized sages, and its stated objective is the mystical realization of the eternal Self.

*Vedanta* means “the end of the *Veda*,” and was originally intended to signify the collection of writings called the *Upanishads*, which were written nearly three thousand years ago by some anonymous Indian sages and appended to the earlier *Vedas* as their final portion. But the word, *Veda*, simply means “knowledge,” or “wisdom”; and so, the real meaning of *Vedanta* is “the end of knowledge,” “the ultimate wisdom.” In this broader interpretation, *Vedanta* refers, not only to the *Upanishads*, but covers the whole body of literature which explains, elaborates, and comments on the *Upanishadic* teachings from their conception to the present day. It is synonymous with “the perennial philosophy,” that universal knowledge of Unity possessed by all the mystics and sages of past and present. In this sense, *Vedanta* is the culmination of all knowledge seeking. It is the final philosophy, recurrently discovered by seekers of Truth in every age.

Because it is the highest knowledge possible to the man, the philosophy of *Vedanta* does not appeal to those without the courage and desire to ferret out the Truth for themselves. But those minds long accustomed to enquiry and Truth-seeking will experience a thrilling surge of joy upon discovering the philosophy of *Vedanta*. For it provides all the missing pieces to the puzzle of life and makes the total picture puzzle at last intelligible and perfectly clear. What a moment it is for the long-searching intellect when it finally comes across the truths expressed in *Vedanta*! What excitement it feels on having all its doubts dispelled, like cobwebs swept from the newly lighted corner of a room. How happy it feels on looking out upon a world perceived as for the first time bathed in clarity and light!

What is it then, about *Vedanta* that infuses the mind with such delight and happiness? Reduced to its elements, the philosophy of *Vedanta* consists of three propositions: First, that man’s real nature is Divine. Second, that the aim of human life is to realize this Divine nature. Third, that those first two

propositions constitute what we know as “religion,” and that, therefore, all genuine religious traditions are essentially in agreement. It is the teaching of all genuine religion that our separative ego, our vaunted individuality, is but a flimsy charade; and that who we really are beneath the ever-changing tide of thoughts and impressions which flood our minds, is that one, bright, undivided Consciousness whom men call *God*. He is the one Self of all selves, “the One who has become many”; and the realization of our eternal and ever-joyful Self is the realization of the Truth that shall make us free.

It is the aim of Vedanta to show men the way to realize and become established in the awareness of their true, Divine, Self. A thousand years before Jesus asserted, “I and the Father are one,” the Upanishads declared: *aham brahmasmi*, “I am Brahman”; and *tat twam asi*, “That thou art.” These assertions are not merely high-flown theories or mere suggestions to bolster the ego, but are the confident declarations of those who, in a moment of rare quietude and clarity, have seen through the veil of appearance and come face to face with their eternal Identity.

It is of utmost importance to understand that Vedanta is not a mere speculative *theory* about the nature of Reality; it is the account of Reality by those who have “seen” It and known It—much more clearly than you see these words before you. It must be approached therefore as the sacred knowledge that it is. We must open ourselves to be taught, with an eagerness to look beyond the limitations of language and of our own conceptual framework, in order to understand what the seers of Truth have to say. If their words are true, they will not contradict our own rational judgment. If they are true, they will stir us to new heights of mental clarity and intellectual delight; and they will have the power to inspire us toward the realization of our own Divine Self.

## II. Historical Origins

The *Vedas* may be thought of as the “Old Testament” of Indian religion, insofar as they represent, for the most part, the views of an archaic Indian priesthood who had not the benefit of mystical vision, but who taught men rather to accept a conciliatory relationship to a pantheon of warring, jealous gods. The *Vedas*, which comprised the oral religious tradition imported into India at the time of the Aryan invasion (ca. 2000 B.C.E.), tended to hypostasize various natural elements and forces, attributing to them lurid personalities and histories, much as did the mythologies of ancient Greece.

The *Upanishads*, on the other hand, were the esoteric writings of the *rishis*, the seers, the rare sages of ancient times, who had actually realized the unitive Reality through their own contemplative experience.

The *Upanishads*, as well as the *Bhagavad Gita*, may be thought of, therefore, as comprising the “New Testament” of the Indian religious tradition, which, while expanding upon the old Vedic writings, also supplants them by transcending the polytheism and anthropomorphism of the more elementary *Vedas*. However, neither the *Upanishads* nor the *Bhagavad Gita* should be thought of as the “authority” of Vedanta in the same sense as some take the Bible to be the authority of Judaism and Christianity. The authority of Vedanta is one’s own personal experience of enlightenment. But the *Upanishads* are the earliest and clearest expression of the mystical, or unitive, experience and of the knowledge resulting from such an experience; and for that reason, hold an honored place in the world of religious literature. They stand as testimony and proof of the common perennial knowledge available throughout the history of the world to all who earnestly seek to know their origin and their destination in this life; and all who have come to attain that knowledge have acknowledged the authenticity and purity of these ancient testaments.

Of the many recognized *Upanishads*, twelve are regarded as of primary importance and merit. In philosophical clarity and persuasiveness, these few represent what, for most of us, are to be considered “The *Upanishads*.” Their names are: *Isha*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Prasna*, *Mundaka*, *Mandukya*, *Chandogya*, *Brihad-aranyaka*, *Aitareya*, *Taitiriya*, *Svetasvatara*, and *Maitri* *Upanishads*. The authors and exact date of authorship of these individual spiritual treatises are unknown; we know only that they were written, by various anonymous sages who had realized that Truth of which they speak, sometime between 1200 B.C.E. and the first few centuries of the Current Era. While they vary in length and in style, their one common theme is the inner realization of the identity of the Self (*Atman*) and God (*Brahman*). We may seek to know God, or we may strive to know our Self; but, say the *Upanishads*, when you find the one, you will find the other as well—for they are one. It is this inner discovery, which constitutes enlightenment.

In its long history, Advaita (nondual) Vedanta has had many enlightened sages, many holy saints, to serve as its glorious representatives. Indeed, it may be said that even those enlightened souls of other lands and other religious traditions—such as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Roman, Plotinus, or the 13<sup>th</sup>

century Christian, Meister Eckhart, or the Sufi, Ibn Arabi—may be regarded as representatives of that nondual philosophy, insofar as their experiences and their teachings are wholly consistent with the philosophy of Vedanta. But, there is one historical figure who played a most prominent role in revitalizing Vedanta by his writings, his teachings and his very life: that man is the medieval Indian *acharya*, or teacher, known as Shankara.

Shankaracharya lived sometime between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, during a time when Vedanta had become almost forgotten and nearly supplanted throughout the Indian landscape by Buddhism. And even those who clung to the ancient ways tended, for the most part, to make of Vedanta nothing more than a priestly Brahmanism based primarily on the adherence to conventional Vedic ritual and the laws of behavior governing the various castes. It was Shankara who brought, through his single-handed efforts, a return to the unitive philosophy of the *Upanishads* and a reawakening of the Indian spirit to its long-established heritage of spiritual wisdom.

Before his death in the Himalayas at the age of thirty-two, Shankara authored many independent treatises as well as commentaries on ancient Vedantic texts; he re-established the monastic tradition on a firm footing; and he traveled the length and breadth of India on foot, teaching the truth which he had realized in himself, and which corroborated the teachings of the ancient *rishis*. He taught also the means whereby one could realize, as he had done, that eternal Lord of the universe. Here are his own words:

Gain experience directly. Realize God for yourself! Know the Self as the one indivisible Being and become perfect. Free your mind from all unnecessary distractions and dwell in the consciousness of the Self.

This is the final declaration of Vedanta: Brahman is everything; it is this universe and every creature. To be liberated [from ignorance] is to live in the continual awareness of Brahman, the undivided Reality.<sup>1</sup>

Shankara's philosophy, the philosophy of Nondual Vedanta, may be characterized by the use of a simple formula taken from his writings; it is this:

*brahma satyam  
jagan mithya  
jivo brahmaiva napara*

(God is the Reality.  
The world is illusory.  
The soul [or Self] is, indeed, nothing else but God.)

In the following sections, these three subjects: God, the world, and the Self, will be discussed in the light of the above statement.

### **III. God**

The beginning student of Vedanta will have to become accustomed to many different names for God, as it has long been recognized in the Indian religious tradition that God cannot be limited to any particular name or form. It was stated in the *Vedas*: “Truth is one; men call It by many different names.” The important thing to understand is that beneath the various names—*Brahman, Purusha, Rama, Shiva, Hari*—the Reality is one and the same for all.

The word most commonly used in the Upanishads for God is *Brahman*. By “Brahman” is meant the limitless Awareness, the universal Consciousness that is experienced in the contemplative state. That universal Consciousness is, of course, beyond names and images, as It is That which exists prior to the manifestation of name and form; but, from another perspective, every name that can be uttered is God’s name, as there is no name or form that is not His manifestation.

Brahman exists as both the subjective and the objective Reality. He may be intuited in the objective world, but He can only be *directly* known as the *subjective* Reality, i.e., from within, as *I*. The objective Reality is that which is perceived, either as subtle form (on the mental, or psychic, level), or as gross form (on the sensual level). The subjective Reality is the perceiver, the Witness. It is that very consciousness which we experience as our very own existence. That is Brahman; and it is That which is to be known. This is clearly explained in the *Upanishads*:

What cannot be spoken with words, but That whereby words are spoken: know That alone to be Brahman and

not what people here adore. What cannot be thought with the mind but That whereby the mind can think: know That alone to be Brahman and not what people here adore.

What cannot be seen with the eye, but That whereby the eye can see: know That to be Brahman and not what people here adore.<sup>2</sup>

... It is not speech we should wish to know; we should know the speaker. It is not the things that are seen that we should wish to know; we should know the seer. It is not sounds that we should wish to know; we should know the listener. It is not the thoughts that we should wish to know; we should know the thinker.<sup>3</sup>

The experience, or “revelation,” of Brahman is an experience, which changes forever the perceived identity of the experiencer. For, having seen Brahman, he has seen his real, eternal, Self. In that rare awakening, he experiences his own consciousness as the limitless Consciousness of the universe. It is the background Reality to all that is manifest as universal phenomena. While immersed in that infinite Awareness, one is able to perceive that all the various worlds and galaxies of this vast universe are but the spreading rays of love expanding from one’s own Self. All that we call “the world” is nothing but the mental projections of that one Consciousness, which expand to manifest as the evolving universe and then are withdrawn again, back into that unfathomable Consciousness. Like breaths alternating from inspiration to expiration, this creation-destruction cycle repeats itself eternally. Each “breath,” though momentary from the perspective of that Awareness, contains the millions of ages required to evolve and then dissolve the myriad worlds presently evolving their destinies through time and space.

The ordinarily time-bound consciousness which experiences this glimpse into timeless Awareness is overwhelmed by this experience. While deeply immersed in it, he is God, he is eternal, he is alone—without a second; and there is no limited consciousness to distract his attention by responses of awe and amazement. There is nothing but himself; and nothing could be clearer or more obviously true and natural. But after the absorption of the limited identity into the universal has waned, and the time-bound ego resurfaces, then the reflective mind is struck with bewilderment and awe.

With breathless humility and gratitude, it realizes only gradually the immensity of the experience that has come to it. “I am all this!” it exclaims incredulously. “All this universe is only myself. I am the one Consciousness. There is no one but Me!”

Who is this one Self, which includes all selves? What shall we call It? The ancient *rishis* of India who experienced It called It “Brahman.” But because It is always experienced only as the subject, the I-consciousness, It is commonly referred to in the *Upanishads* also as the *Atman*, which means, “the Self.” *Atman* and *Brahman* refer to the same One. In other words, Vedanta declares that God and the Self are one: God is who *you* are. Whether you know it or not, *you* are That; *tat tuam asi*. This is not merely a pleasant and convenient theory; it is the truth that has been experienced directly by countless souls since the beginning of time.

#### IV. The World

The mystic who experiences Brahman, the unitive Reality, in the contemplative state experiences that Unity as himself. In fact, if he were something other than That, it would no longer be a Unity, but a duality. And while experiencing himself to be Brahman, the one pure Consciousness, he experiences also that all the manifested universe is but his own projection, much as a thought-form is the projection of an individual mind within itself. It is his own radiation, his own glory. No matter what words one uses to describe it—whether as a “projection,” an “imaging forth,” a “superimposition,” a “manifestation of Will”—it cannot be adequately described, as we have nothing in our worldly experience with which to compare it.

It is a unique and indescribable experience that the mystic confronts. He knows that he is the unchanging Ground, the Absolute, pure Consciousness; and yet simultaneously, he is exuding an inconceivably complex universe of evolving worlds in which he himself lives, as one lives within his own dream. This creative expansiveness is similar to the expansion of love, which we, as humans, feel in the heart for all creatures, or like the emanation of a thought-image increased to an infinite degree of power and light. It is quite beyond telling, except to say that within the one Being these two complementary aspects exist: the one infinite and unchanging, an unblinking Consciousness, pure and clear, like the vast blue sky; the other, a

Power of manifestation which creates the world in which all creatures and things exist. Seers have called these two aspects by many different names, such as “Godhead and Creator,” “*Theos* and *Logos*,” “Light and Darkness,” *Purusha* and *Prakrti*,” “*Shiva* and *Shakti*”; Vedantists often refer to them as “*Brahman* and *Maya*.”

One who has experienced this complementarity of aspects within the one Reality knows without a shadow of a doubt that the world is a projected Energy-manifestation of the universal Self. In other words, this world is nothing but God. Indeed, if a “world” is seen, that is an illusion—because what is seen is really nothing but God. To postulate a “world” as a second thing is to postulate an absolute Duality. But duality is merely God’s illusion; there is never anything but the One. The forms perceived by the senses, the forms perceived by the mind; the ideas, the images, the pleasures, the pains—all God’s. It is all His dream-like creation; nothing is separate from Him. All is God and nothing but God.

However, we must understand that, so long as we perceive a “world,” there is an apparent duality; *apparent*, because, while there is always One and One alone, there is the appearance of two-ness. Take, for example, the Sun and its rays: it appears to be two things, but, in fact, it is one thing. Or take the mind and its thoughts: they are apparently two. But no, there is only the mind. Shall we say, then, that the rays are unreal, imaginary? Or that the thoughts are non-existent? No. Nor can we say they are real. They have no independent reality; that is to say, they do not exist independent of their source. It is like that also with God and the world. The world is a manifestation of God; and from that perspective, the two are one. But God is eternal, while the world has but an ephemeral transient appearance, like a thought. Therefore, like a thought, the world is neither real nor unreal. Vedantists call it “*Maya*.”

*Maya* is just another name for God’s Power of manifestation, His Power of world-projection. That Power is inherent and co-eternal with God—whether there’s a creation or not. But *Maya* is both the (eternal) Cause and the (temporal) effect. *Maya* is God’s Power (*shakti*); and it is also the world-illusion produced by that Power.

Anyone who has studied the analysis by modern-day physicists of the sub-atomic world of matter must have come to the realization that all this world of various forms is composed simply of Energy, or “fields of force”; and that

every form that exists is merely an “appearance” conjured by this mysterious chimera called “Energy.” That Energy is God’s Power of illusion; i.e., *Maya*. It is *Maya* that creates what we regard as the “objective” universe.

All experience of the world is dependent upon there being both a subject and an object—in other words, a seer and a seen. It should be clear that if you have only the subject, the seer, nothing can be experienced unless you have also the object, the seen. Or, if you have only the object, the seen, but do not have a subject, a seer, still nothing is experienced. We have all heard the conundrum, which asks, “If a tree falls in a forest, and no one hears it fall, was there really a sound?” The question might also be stated as, “If a tree falls in a forest, and no one sees it, did it really fall?” Modern physics has shown quite clearly that the subject, the seer, is an integral ingredient in the existence of an object, that which is seen. For example, the way one observes a quantum particle determines its manner of existence; indeed, without the perceiving subject, the object cannot be said to exist at all. The one exists only so long as the other exists.

This is the view of Vedanta as well. There must be both the subject and the object; otherwise, there is only God, absolute, undivided. God has made Himself into both the subject and the object, the seer and the seen. This is how He has created all this drama within Himself. It is all Himself, of course; but, to make for any kind of experience at all, He had to provide out of Himself both sides; He had to become both the subject and the object. Now, keep in mind, there is really nothing else but God; He is playing both these parts. So, you are That also.

When you examine yourself, you find that, in your makeup, there are also these two sides, these two aspects: there is the subject, the “I”; and there is that which is experienced through the senses as the body, and also as the thoughts, dreams, images that play before the subjective “I”. These things are the objects of your experience. Of course, there is also the world outside of your body and mind; all that too is seen, experienced, as the “object.” So, as you can see, everything has this (apparent) two-sidedness. So long as there is a world, there will be “two”—in other words, an apparent duality. Only when we can merge the objective, thought-producing, mind back into God, are we able to realize directly the truth that there is ultimately only One.

## V. The Self

The Self is Brahman, the universal Consciousness. It is the one “I” that everyone experiences as the Self. In the *Upanishads*, the question is asked, “Who is the Self?” And the reply given is, “The Self is the witness of the mind.” It is that inconspicuous Witness behind all of our various states of mind, which is our true, everlasting Self, and not those various states of mind themselves, with which most of us identify. The Self is the only Reality; but, because we tend to identify with the separative mind and the transient body, we lose sight of our eternal nature as pure Consciousness. Yet It is always there, just behind our minds.

If we reflect, “Who am I? Am I the body? Am I the mind or the intellect?” we quickly realize that we are none of these; we are the pure Consciousness that is witnessing all these. For example, in the waking state, who is looking out from behind your eyes reading this? Who is witnessing all the forms around you? Is it only the senses? Only the mind? No. You cannot be the mind, because you are witnessing the activity of the mind. Is it not so? And, in the dream state, who watches the dreams and remembers them upon awaking? And, in the deep sleep state, if *you* were truly asleep, who was it that experienced that blissful nothingness, and who knows that it was a sound and deep state of peace that was experienced? It is clear to the discriminating mind that, in all three states, there is an unchanging Consciousness which is not involved in the activities of those states, but who witnesses them, and who is the real *you*, the real Self, independent of the mind and body. That is our true Identity.

There is a fourth state, which can be experienced in deep meditation. It occurs when the mind becomes entirely pure and still and merges into that universal Consciousness. Then, one becomes aware, “I am everything; all this universe is only myself? And yet, though all these things and beings are contained in Me, I am forever One and undifferentiated. I am Consciousness and Bliss.” Such a state is not just imaginary; it is not just a theory. Many people have experienced such a state. It is the experience of that which underlies all of the great philosophies and religions of the world and constitutes the wisdom of all the saints. Listen to what the seers of the *Upanishads* said:

When a man has seen the truth of the Spirit, he is one with Him; the aim of his life is fulfilled, and he is ever beyond sorrow.<sup>4</sup>

When a man knows God, he is free; his sorrows have an end, and birth and death are no more. When in inner union he is beyond the world of the body, then the world of the Spirit is found where man possesses all—for he is one with the One.<sup>5</sup>

When a sage sees this great Unity, and realizes his Self has become all beings, what delusion and what sorrow could ever approach him?<sup>6</sup>

... When awake to the vision of one's own Self, when a man in truth can say: "I am He," what desires could lead him to grieve in fever for the body?

... When a man sees the *Atman*, his own Self, the one God, the Lord of what was and of what shall be, he fears no more.<sup>7</sup>

In the Vedantic tradition, such an awareness is said to be "Liberation." Jesus of Nazareth also spoke of this freedom that is attained through knowledge of the Truth: "You shall know the Truth," he said, "and the Truth shall make you free." Why does the knowledge of Truth make you free? Because, when you become aware that you are all pervading, you no longer suffer under the illusion that you are a limited individual being. You will go on playing your role as a father, mother, a wife, a doctor, a lawyer, a beggar, or king; in fact, your enjoyment in playing your role will be increased manifold. But you will also be at rest within, in the joyful awareness of your perfect Self, infinite and eternal—like an actor, who earnestly plays his role on stage, but who remains conscious throughout the drama that he is not the character whom he is playing. He does not identify with the fortunes or misfortunes of his *dramatis personae*, but remains free within, happy and secure in the knowledge of his true identity.

It is this truth that we must come to know and understand: Just as waves on the ocean are only water, just as golden ornaments are only gold, so all the various forms in the universe are only your Self. When you know this and make it a part of your understanding, you will begin to revel in that joy that had been missing in your life before. You will begin to drink the nectar of the love for which you had been thirsting before. And you will begin to take delight in simply being and living and acting in the world in a much more fulfilling way than you had been able to before. Indeed, the knowledge of

the Self is the only means to real fulfillment, and enduring happiness. To know the Self is the aim and destiny of all human life.

The question then arises, “How can I attain it?” And the answer is: “The Self is already attained!” The Self has never left you; in fact, the Self can never go away. You are that eternal Self! The body will go; the mind will go. But *you* will always be. This is the truth. This is the liberating knowledge of all the wise seers and sages of every land of every time. It is found in the sacred scriptures of the Hindus, the Buddhists, the Jews, the Muslims, and in the teachings of Jesus. All say the same: You are the eternal Self, the Source and Witness of your thoughts. That is who you really are. But because you are not aware of it, you identify with the mental activity and the transient worldly forms, and, forgetting your real Identity, you become swept away in the agitated currents of the mind. It is just this false identification, which is the source of all your woes and troubles. And if you could become aware of your true, eternal, Self, the various thought-forms that arise would be powerless to affect you one way or the other.

Another question that may arise is that of the relationship of the individualized, transmigrating soul to the ultimate Self, the Divine Unity. This question is also resolved in the teachings of Vedanta. All the seers of the Self have acknowledged the existence of an individualized soul; but, they say, it has no permanent existence. The individualized soul is really nothing more than a congregation of mental tendencies, which, while continuing throughout many lifetimes, must eventually come to an end when its real essence is realized. Listen to what Shankaracharya had to say about it:

The Self is the Witness, beyond all attributes, beyond action. It can be directly realized as pure Consciousness and infinite bliss. Its *appearance* as an individual soul is caused by the delusion of our understanding and has no reality. By its very nature, this appearance is unreal. When our delusion has been removed, it ceases to exist.<sup>8</sup>

This is why enlightenment is regarded as “liberation from the round of birth and death.” As Shankaracharya says:

The transmigrating soul is not different from the Lord.<sup>9</sup>  
... Just as the light of the Sun and the Sun itself are not

different, so also the soul and the supreme Self are not different.<sup>10</sup>

Because all souls are essentially not different, and their apparent difference is due only to ignorance of the Self, the individual soul, after having dispelled that ignorance by true knowledge of the Self, becomes one with the Self.<sup>11</sup>

This, indeed, is the teaching of all who have truly known the Self. When the Self is experienced, they say, there is no soul. All duality is swallowed up. The seeker and the sought, the seer and the seen, the “I” and the “Thou,” are no longer two in the experience of Unity. Only the Self experiences the Self.

It is this experience, this realization, of the eternal Self, which, according to Vedanta, constitutes salvation, or liberation. We find this stated in every piece of Vedantic literature, including all the Upanishads. It is not a very difficult concept to grasp: The Self is the truth of the universe; It's the truth of ourselves. It's who we really are. There's truly no one here but you! And to know, to really know, this Truth is the attainment of the final knowledge and the ultimate freedom.

What, then, is the means to attain this knowledge, according to Vedanta? Those who have known the Self say that there are basically two different paths to the attainment of Self-knowledge: (1) The path of identifying with the soul (also called the path of *bhakti* or Devotion); and (2) The path of identifying with the Self (also called the path of *jnan* or Knowledge).

There are times when, as an individual soul, you feel the necessity of approaching God as His child, His devotee, His servant. The love in your heart bubbles up and expresses itself as devotion to the Lord of the universe. This is the noblest and highest path for the soul, to focus on God within itself with true humility and love in simple prayer and worship. You will joy in the singing of His name, and in serving Him in all His creatures, and in remembering His presence at every moment in every place.

And there are other times, when you become quiet, and your breathing becomes shallow and soft, and you taste something of the certainty of your eternal and limitless Selfhood. Then you rest in that quietude, that solitary joyfulness—without thought, without movement, aware only of your own

infinite presence. This is meditation, a glorious practice. It enables one to become centered in the Self, to rise above all the vicissitudes of temporal life, and to remain established in peace and goodwill, attuned to the inner joy, and seeing the one Divinity in all creation.

Both of these practices, the devotional and the meditative, are perfectly valid; they are both firmly based in Truth. For remember, we are both distinguishable from, and at the same time, identical with, the one Consciousness. Just as a ray of sunlight is both distinguishable from and identical with the sun, a thought-image is both distinguishable from and yet identical with the mind, a wave is at once distinguishable from and yet identical with the ocean, so we, too, possess this complementarity in our identity.

Whether we turn, as a soul, to our Lord and God, or turn, as the Self, within to our own Identity; in both instances, we are looking toward the one Light. We should come to understand ourselves so well that we can worship God with heart-felt love at one moment and know Him as not different from our inner Self at another moment, and not feel the slightest contradiction in so doing. This whole world of creation is God, and it is also God's. If God in the form of His creature lovingly worships God, the Creator, who is going to object? Remember, He, the One, is both the subject and the object; He is both the worshipper and That which is worshipped; He is the lover and the Beloved; and he is the love as well.

It is only the One who has become many; and there is nothing else but the One in the many. Beneath the differences lies the Undifferentiated. It is that one Self who is spread out everywhere in all these variegated forms—in the drifting cotton-puffs of clouds, and in the moist soil beneath our feet. It is our own Self who is the life-pulse in every form of life—in trees, crustaceans, amphibians, in every weasel and woodchuck in its burrow. Every yearning human soul you see is you. Every loving heart eager for God is your own. The crystal-clear eyes of every illumined soul are bright with your love. You have cast yourself into the magical forms of man and woman for the sake of delight, for the sake of joy. If we are to live in the Truth, we must learn to expand our vision and our love to embrace all that exists. This is the teaching of Vedanta. Listen, now, to the words of the *Svetasvatara Upanishad*:

These three: the soul, the world, and the Lord of all,

Are nothing else but the one Brahman.  
 It's Brahman alone who exists as everyone and  
 everything; beyond Brahman, the Self, there is nothing  
 further to know.<sup>12</sup>

That one conscious Self, the smallest of the small, the greatest  
 of the great,  
 Conceals Himself in everyone's heart.  
 The wise, by the grace of God, become free  
 When they see that majestic and desireless Self within. <sup>13</sup>

When the Lord is known, then a man's soul is freed;  
 He'll never know sorrow or birth again.  
 Through devotion, he'll rise to the highest state,  
 And rest forever in the bliss of God. <sup>14</sup>

To that effulgent Lord who's in fire and in seas,  
 Who lives as this world, who's in plants and in trees,  
 To that Lord let us sing! Give all glory to Him!  
 To that Lord let us sing! Give all glory to Him! <sup>15</sup>

## NOTES:

1. Shankara, *Vivekachudamani*; Prabhavananda, Swami & Isherwood, Christopher, 1978, pp. 112-113.
2. *Kena Upanishad*, I:4-6.
3. *Kaushitaki Upanishad*, III:8.
4. *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, II:14.
5. *Ibid.*, I:11
6. *Isha Upanishad*, I:7
7. *Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad*,
8. Shankara, *Vivekachudamani*; Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 1978, p. 64.
9. Badarayana, *The Vedanta Sutras*, I:1:5, Thibaut (trans.), 1962, Vol. I, p. 51.
10. *Ibid.*, III:2:37, Thibaut, 1962, Vol. II, p. 174.
11. *Ibid.*, III:2:36, Thibaut, 1962, Vol. II, p. 173.
12. *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, I:12
13. *Ibid.*, III:19

14. *Ibid.*, I:11
15. *Ibid.*, II:17 Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 1978, pp. 112-113.

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## 5. The Mystical Tradition of Buddhism (Part One)

### I. The Origin of Buddhism

In the 6th century B.C.E. the main center of Indian civilization was in the Ganges plain, or the ‘middle country,’ from what is now Delhi eastward to Bhagalpur. From June to September, during the monsoon season, a river that is only a couple hundred feet wide in the preceding hot season becomes two miles wide. The Ganges, having its source in the melting snows and glaciers of the Himalayas, never dwindle away; for that reason, the surrounding plain is always fertile. And during the cooler winter months, from October to January, the Spring-harvested crops of wheat, barley, and linseed and mustard, for their oil, are grown in abundance.

During that time long ago, the land was far more fertile and the forests far more extensive than today. Surrounding the villages were the cultivated fields; further outward were the pastures, and beyond them were the forests, deep and lush. Accounts of the time speak of the forests as places of easy retreat, where mango, banana, date, jackfruit, and coconut trees were in bloom, and the banyan, palmyra, acacia and ebony trees housed the wild and colorful birds and monkeys.

The town of Kapilavastu (named for Kapila), in the kingdom of Koshala, lay just due north of Benares, and just west of the great capital city of Shravasti, containing 57,000 families. It was positioned along a major trade route from Shravasti to Rajagriha, the capital city of the neighboring Magadhan kingdom. It was therefore a center of business and trade, and also a place of much activity, culture, and entertainment. Then, as now, cities were distinguished from the country villages by their sophistication and diversity of lifestyles. It was here, in Kapilavastu, that Siddhartha of the Gautama clan, who was to become known as “the Buddha,” was born to Suddhodana and his wife, Maya, around 586 B.C.E.

Suddhodana was the elected ruling citizen of the small republic of Shakya of which Kapilavastu was the capital. He was a wealthy aristocrat, and lived in a sumptuous and elegant home, where he raised his son, Siddhartha, amid the splendor and wealth, which his position provided. When Siddhartha was but sixteen, he was married to the princess, Yashodara; and by her he had a son, named Rahula. But this life of comfort, wealth and pleasure was not to last. At the age of twenty-nine, Siddhartha, who was of a philosophic turn of

mind, having studied many doctrines and having reflected on the perplexities of life and death, resolved to quit the home of his father and the company of his wife and child, to enter into a life of solitude in the forests, where he might resolve his questions in the supreme inner knowledge of which the sages of old had spoken.

From that time, he became a homeless wanderer, one among many of the monks, ascetics and solitary hermits who frequented the forests and riversides. He met, during his wandering, many brother monks, *sannyasins*, and would-be teachers; and he experimented with many different practices, including austere penances and discursive reasonings; but he felt as empty, as unfulfilled, as before.

After six years of study and wandering, Siddhartha had become intensely focused on the attainment of his goal of knowing the ultimate Truth. And so, one day, he took his seat beneath a peepul (Bo) tree on the banks of the Nairanjana river, near Uruvela, the present city of Bodh-Gaya, and resolved to meditate there, and not to leave his place until he had attained what he had come to the forest to attain.

Then, one morning, just before dawn, like a flash, enlightenment came. According to the *Dhammapada*, which was written much later, Siddhartha exclaimed at that time:

Looking for the Maker of this temple (referring to his body), I have run through a course of many births, not finding Him; and painful is birth again and again. But now, Maker of this temple, Thou hast been seen; Thou shalt not construct this temple again. All Thy rafters are broken, Thy ridgepole is sundered; the mind, approaching the Eternal, has attained *nirvana* [the extinction of the ego illusion].<sup>1</sup>

In that transcendent experience of Unity, which the Buddha refers to as *nirvana*, he knew himself to be the one Consciousness who is manifesting as the entire universe. All forms, though transient, he knew as his own, with no division anywhere. Yet, when his mind returned to its normal state, once again he was associated with a particular form within the transformative world, called *samsara*, “the ocean of phenomenal appearance.” As he sat beneath the Bo tree, Siddhartha reflected on what he had seen in that

revelation, and perhaps mused within himself thusly:

‘From this state of limited consciousness, I appear once again to be a separate form within *samsara*; but from the state of expanded awareness, all of *samsara* is a manifestation of myself. I am a single, undifferentiated Mind, yet I shine forth, like the radiant beams of the Sun, as a universe of countless living beings, all made of my light. All beings are united in me, for I am their consciousness, their form, their very being. Never are there any separate selves; that is only an illusion produced by the limiting of consciousness. All are but players in the outflowing radiance of the one Being. These transient forms live but for a moment, but I, the One, live forever. Though I appear as many, I am forever One, forever serene.’

‘Yet, who would believe such a story?’ he wondered. ‘It is so implausible, so utterly fantastic and radical a revelation, so completely opposite to what men believe, that no one, unless they too had seen it, would be able to give any credence to it at all.’ Siddhartha realized that this transcendent knowledge could never be adequately communicated by words but was attainable only through such diligent effort as he himself had put forth. According to a later Buddhist text, called the *Agama Sutras*, he deliberated within himself at this time, questioning the wisdom of attempting to teach such knowledge:

My original vows are fulfilled; the Truth I have attained is too deep for the understanding [of men]. A Buddha alone is able to understand what is in the mind of another Buddha. In this age of the five-fold ignorance, all beings are enveloped in greed, anger, folly, falsehood, arrogance, and flattery; they have few virtues and have not the understanding to comprehend the Truth I have attained. Even if I revolve the wheel of Truth [by teaching it], they would surely be confused and incapable of accepting it. They might, on the contrary, misinterpret it, and thereby fall into evil paths, and suffer therefore much pain. It is best for me to remain quiet and enter [once again] into nirvana.<sup>2</sup>

In the same vein, another Buddhist text has Siddhartha reflecting at this

time:

Why should I attempt to make known to those who are consumed with lust and hate This which I've won through so much effort! This Truth is not a truth that can be grasped; it goes against the grain of what people think; it is deep, subtle, difficult, delicate. It will be cloaked in the murky ignorance of those slaves of passion who have not seen It.<sup>3</sup>

All those who have experienced this amazing revelation of the true nature of Reality have recognized the impossibility of expressing to others what they had come to know and have held serious doubts as to the wisdom of speaking of it at all. Chuang Tze, the Chinese sage of the 3rd century B.C.E., for example, debated with himself on this same quandary, and wrote:

Great truths do not take hold of the hearts of the masses. And now, as all the world is in error, how shall I, though I know the true path, how shall I guide? If I, while knowing I cannot succeed, still attempt to force success, this would be but another source of error. Better, then, to desist and strive no more. *Yet, if I do not strive, who will?*<sup>4</sup>

Siddhartha, pondering on these questions in his forest retreat, apparently reached the same conclusion, and, armed with a firm decision to serve as a guide to suffering mankind, set out on his illustrious teaching career. To many hundreds of generations thereafter he would be known as *the Buddha*, “the enlightened”; the *Tathagata*, “the attainer of Truth”; the *Shakyamuni*, “sage of the Shakyas.”

The Buddha, having grown up in an environment where the Vedantic mystical tradition had been subverted by the priestly class, saw around him only a ritualistic religion presided over by an unenlightened Brahmin priesthood. He had seen how the talk of “God” by the unenlightened led men to a false understanding of the Divine Reality and fostered a philosophical Dualism between man and God; and he determined, therefore, to explain the knowledge of Unity in a way radically different from his Vedic predecessors. He would eschew the old traditional terms for the One, such as “Brahman,” “Shiva,” “Purusha,” etc.; for when one spoke of “the knowledge of God,” a duality was implied between the knower and the

object of knowledge, which was not in fact the case. The very nature of language is such that it relies for meaning upon the normal subject/object relationships. But, in the experience of Unity, there is no such separation. Thus, simply by naming It, that Unity is misrepresented.

In the eyes of the Buddha, it was just such graphic objectifications of the Reality in terms such as “Shiva,” “Vishnu,” etc., which fostered a mistaken notion of the Truth, and perpetuated the present degenerative state of religion. For this reason, he refused to apply any name at all to the transcendent Reality; he preferred to refer to the *experience* of the eternal Unity, rather than apply to It an objective noun. The experience of Unity he named *nirvana*, a word which signifies “extinction,” or “non-being.” What was extinguished in this experience was the false sense of a separative ego, and hence the subject/object relationship. Though misinterpretation was unavoidable in any case, the Buddha felt that the term, *nirvana*, was less likely to misrepresent his meaning than those many objectified nouns, which had been for so long used to signify the one Reality.

He was keenly aware of the inability of language either to express the Truth or to bring about Its realization. He had seen how little true knowledge was obtained by those proud Brahmin scholars who continually discussed and debated every fine point of metaphysical doctrine. As for himself, the Buddha would refuse to engage in any metaphysical discussions at all, insisting that all such harangues were worthless to effect enlightenment, and that if one sincerely wished to know and understand the nature of Reality, it was necessary to engage oneself seriously in the practice of meditation and inner reflection.

When asked by the idly curious such questions as, “Is the universe eternal or non-eternal? Is it finite or infinite? Is the soul real or unreal?” the Buddha would reply:

Such questions are not calculated to profit and are not concerned with the attainment of Truth; they do not lead to the practice of right conduct, nor to detachment, nor to purification from lusts, nor to quietude, nor to tranquilization of the heart, nor to real knowledge, nor to insight into the higher stages of the path, nor to nirvana.<sup>5</sup>  
This is why I express no opinion on them.<sup>5</sup>

It is, perhaps, this reluctance on the part of the Buddha to describe the Reality in objective terms, or to engage in metaphysical discussions, which has led many to view the Buddhist and Vedantic perspectives as irreconcilably antagonistic, when, in fact, they are identical. We are accustomed by unenlightened scholars and partisan religionists to think of Vedanta, Taoism, Buddhism, and the other “isms,” as separate and distinct religious philosophies; but they are, in fact, but different names for the one perennial philosophy of the mystics. Having originated independently in different lands and different times by different seers, each of these “isms” possesses its own idiosyncratic language, its own literary heritage; yet the message of the mystics remains undeviatingly the same. All true mystics have accentuated the need for that personal enlightenment or realization by which the true nature of Reality becomes self-evident. And all have stressed that this enlightenment is attainable, not through much learning, alms giving, or through following the precepts of ritualized religion, but only through devotion to and contemplation of one’s own essential Being.

Shortly after his enlightenment, and his subsequent decision to share his wisdom with other sincere seekers of Truth, the Buddha journeyed to a large deer park near Benares, where many of his fellow monks congregated. And there he addressed his brothers, explaining to them that excessive asceticism, scriptural recitations, sacramental offerings, and other such practices were as futile to the attainment of freedom from suffering as were the opposite extremes of revelry, and the wanton gratification of the senses. He spoke to them of a ‘Middle Path’ by which one could approach true knowledge and a harmonious life. Like Kapila before him, he offered no religious platitudes, no fanciful gods, but spoke to his hearers of “what pain is, and the method by which one may reach the cessation of pain.”

And when he spoke to them, the gathered monks recognized his attainment of enlightenment, and herded around him to listen to his teaching, his Sermon. The Buddha’s Sermon at Benares was the first of many to follow; and it contains for his followers the same profound meaning that the Sermon on the Mount holds for followers of Jesus. It contains in brief form the entirety of the Buddha’s message, the authentic version of which we may only assume has been passed down to us, as the Buddha wrote nothing himself. What we possess of his teachings were handed down orally until they were committed to writing in the 2nd century B.C.E., nearly 300 years after his death.

Sitting before the gathering of monks, the Buddha began his Sermon by saying:

Whatever is originated will be dissolved again. All worry about the self is vain; the ego is like a mirage, and all the tribulations that touch it will pass away. They will vanish as a nightmare vanishes when a sleeper awakes.<sup>6</sup>

This first statement of the Buddha's that "whatever is originated will be dissolved again," is particularly obvious to anyone in the 20th or 21st century who is familiar with the findings of modern physics regarding the nature of matter. All matter, we know, is constituted of one undifferentiated Energy, which 'condenses' or integrates into different congregate forms which then disintegrate once again, only to take on new forms. This statement of the Buddha's is true on all levels of reality, from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic, but here it is intended to refer to the ephemeral nature of the individual body and personality.

Bodies are originated, and must one day be dissolved; therefore, "all worry about the self is vain," says the Buddha. He had seen the Truth, and knew that the sense of an individual self, or ego, was an illusion, a mirage, and that all the troubles and worries that afflict one during the course of a life vanish when that false sense of ego vanishes.

One whose mind awakes to the realization that it is the one Mind and is not in any way affected by the manifestation or de-manifestation of forms within this world of *samsara*, sees this world as a kind of dream. And just as one no longer fears the evil monsters of a dream once he awakes and realizes that he is the dreamer, the awakened Buddha can never again be drawn to identify himself with the body or mental images that exist only in the world of *samsara*.

He who has awakened is freed from fear; he has become a Buddha; he knows the vanity of all his cares, of his ambitions, and also of his pains.<sup>7</sup>

From the time we are infants and discover this body and mind that manipulates us and in turn is manipulated by us, we feel certain that this body and mind is our self, is who we are. That identification becomes so strongly rooted in us, that never once do we doubt that we are this particular

mind and body limited in space and time, and any suggestion to the contrary strikes us as bizarre and absurd. But, say the seers, the Buddhas, it is merely a case of mistaken identity; that which is born, thrives for a while, and then decays, is not who you are. You are the one Mind of the universe, which is the cause and the witness of all this world of changing forms but is never affected by it. You are the Eternal, but you see this transient world of forms and think, "This form is me!" It is like a man who, dreaming that he is being roasted alive, suffers the pain from the heat of the imagined flames; or like a man who is frightened by a snake which, on closer inspection, turns out only to have been a piece of rope.

It sometimes happens that a man, when bathing in the river, steps upon a wet rope and imagines that it is a snake. Terror will overcome him, and he will shake with fear, anticipating in his mind all the agonies caused by the serpent's venomous bite.

What a relief does this man experience when he sees that the rope is no snake. The cause of his fear lies in his error, his ignorance, his illusion. If the true nature of the rope is recognized, his tranquility of mind will come back to him; he will feel relieved; he will be joyful and happy. This is the state of mind of one who has recognized that there is no selfhood (ego), and that the cause of all his troubles, cares, and vanities is a mirage, a shadow, a dream.<sup>8</sup>

Here, in his first Sermon, the Buddha gives the essence of his teaching, and the teaching of all the seers. It should be apparent, of course, that the "selfhood" to which the Buddha here refers is not the Self (*Atman*) of the Upanishads, which is synonymous with the Eternal, but is the false sense of self, the ego. When the Truth is realized, the false idea of an individual self is dissolved, like the idea of the snake which is really a rope. Then it is seen that no separate self exists or ever existed; it is a mirage, a mistaken interpretation of one's own awareness, which is really the immortal and eternal Self, the Absolute. Only that One is real; It is the Self of the universe, the universal Being which manifests as all beings, all things. It is the knowledge of this Self, which is the source of the joy and happiness of the enlightened.

Happy is he who has overcome his ego; happy is he who

has attained peace; happy is he who has found the Truth.<sup>9</sup>

Some, when they hear of the Truth from one who has seen It, immediately recognize it as the truth, and are overjoyed to learn of It. But some others who hear of It, say, “How unconvincing, how unappetizing!” To them, the Buddha says:

Have confidence in the [eternal] Truth, although you may not be able to comprehend It, although you may suppose Its sweetness to be bitter, although you may shrink from It at first. Trust in the Truth. ...Have faith in the Truth and live [in accordance with] It. <sup>10</sup>

Sooner or later, we must acknowledge that what keeps us from the enjoyment of peace, of happiness, of freedom, is the sense of selfhood, the false ego, by which all pain, all suffering, comes to us. It is the mistaken identification with the transient that must eventually cause us much sorrow.

[The illusion of] self is a fever; self is a transient illusion, a dream; but Truth is sublime, Truth is everlasting. There is no immortality except in [the eternal] Truth. For Truth alone abides forever. <sup>11</sup>

The Buddha explained his message as the way to the cessation of suffering. He did not promise heavenly rewards, or a place at the right hand of the Lord, nor did he claim that he was sent from God; he claimed only that his was the way to the cessation of suffering:

He who recognizes the existence of suffering, its cause, its remedy, and its cessation, has fathomed the four noble truths. He will walk in the right path. <sup>12</sup>

Here, the Buddha introduces his formula of the “four noble truths”:

1. There is suffering, i.e., humans suffer.
2. There is a cause of suffering; namely ignorance.
3. There is a remedy to suffering; namely enlightenment.
4. The cessation of suffering results from the destruction of ignorance.

If we pay close attention to the words of the Buddha's Sermon in the above passage, his message is clear and unequivocal: the cause of all suffering is the ignorance by which we believe we are an individual self, limited to a particular body and mind. This ignorance is inherent in existence and has no cause or beginning. Yet it can be dispelled, and thus ended, by the realization of Truth. In this sense, it is both real and unreal; while it exists, it is experienced as real, and when it is dispelled, it is recognized to be unreal, non-existent—like the snake in the rope. Release from suffering, then, is attained by the direct realization of our eternal Being. To understand this is to possess the right understanding:

Right understanding will be the torch to light the way of one who seeks to realize the Truth. Right aims will be his guide. Right speech will be his dwelling-place on the road. His path will be straight, for it is right behavior. His refreshments will be the right way of earning his livelihood. Right efforts will be his steps; right thinking his breath; and peace will follow in his footsteps.<sup>13</sup>

In this metaphor of the Buddha's, in which he likens the moving of a man's awareness toward enlightenment to a man walking toward his destination, he outlines the right means by which a man reaches to the realization of Truth. "Right" simply means that which is conducive to success. This "eight-fold path" of the Buddha reiterates, in its own way, the *yogas* of the *Bhagavad Gita*: jnan, bhakti, karma, and raja. As a man is a thinking, speaking, acting and contemplating being, all facets of his nature must be coordinated toward the attainment of his goal.

Following naturally from right knowledge, is the second means, right aims, which is to say, the aspiration to know the Truth, to renounce all other pursuits, which might detract from the single-minded pursuit of one's goal. Without such unflagging determination, and utter disregard for all the trouble, opposition, and deprivation encountered, a man cannot hope to attain to it. The Buddha's "right aspiration" is really not different from the *Gita*'s "devotion to Truth." Devotion to the Truth, or God, is devotion to the Eternal in oneself; aspiration toward the attainment of *nirvana* is also devotion to the Eternal in oneself. The mental restraint, renunciation of self (ego), and inward attentiveness required by the one is the same as that required by the other. They are, in aspiration, practice, and result, identical. Only the words are different.

The third means, right speech, is merely an extension of right thinking; it is that speech, which is truthful, sincere, and cognizant of the oneness of all beings. Untruthful speech betrays an untruthful mind and is entirely incompatible with the mind's attainment of the ultimate Truth. Never, in a million years, will untruthfulness lead to the Truth. "Truth," says the Mundaka Upanishad, "is the way that leads to the region of Truth. Sages travel therein free from desires and reach the supreme abode of Truth."

The fourth means, right action, is also simply an extension of right thought. That action which is inspired by and leads to the awareness of Truth, is the right action. It is action that stems from peace of mind, and whose result is peace of mind. Whatever defiles and disturbs the quiet awareness of Truth cannot be right action. This "right action" of the Buddha may be compared to the karma yoga of the *Gita*. It is action, whose sole aim is the awareness and promotion of Truth. It is action that stems not from egoistic desire, but from the awareness that all this world of *samsara* and all beings in it are identical in the one Mind. Such actions flow forth naturally as expressions of service to the One in all.

The fifth means, right livelihood, may be viewed in the same way that Krishna, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, viewed the necessity of following one's own *svadharma*, or personal duty. Men of differing stations in life are obliged by their differing aspirations to differing livelihoods. The livelihood of the householder is in accordance with his aspirations; the livelihood of the student is in accordance with his aspirations, and the livelihood of the realized sage is in accordance with his aspiration. For one, the "right" is not the same as the "right" for another. What conduces harmoniously to one's aspirations is the right livelihood. For the spiritual seeker, that work, which is conducive to the meditative life, is the "right" livelihood; and for the sage who has no aspiration but to share his knowledge to relieve the suffering of the world, the need for livelihood is not so great; he accepts what comes to him in the course of his mission.

Right effort is the sixth means, and it follows from right aspiration. If right aspiration is determination to attain enlightenment, right effort is the application of that determination. The conquest of the sense of selfhood requires great effort. It is the most difficult of all battles. According to the *Dhammapada*, "If one man conquers in battle a thousand men, and if another conquers himself, the second is the greatest of conquerors."<sup>14</sup>

Lao Tze, the great Chinese sage, said this as well: “He who conquers others may be strong, but he who conquers himself is stronger.”<sup>15</sup> To conquer oneself is, in effect, to reduce oneself to nothing. For, as the Buddha tells us, that self is not only an illusion, but an obstacle to the realization of Truth. Only when it is reduced to nothing, shall we find that greater Self which is the one all-pervading Reality, the Buddha-Mind, the Truth.

The seventh means—right mindfulness, or recollection—is the mental aspect of right effort. It means the continual watchfulness of the mind over itself. The pure mind is itself *nirvana*; the illusions that continually becloud its surface serve only to obscure the Truth. Right mindfulness is therefore the retention of the pure mind. It might just as well be spoken of as surrender of the separative will, for it is just that will which obscures the awareness of Unity. Jesus of Nazareth taught the surrender of the will to God; the Buddha taught the surrender of the will to Truth. Who can find any difference between them? That to which the will is surrendered is the one pure Mind. Right mindfulness is simply the retention of the pure Mind.

Right concentration is the eighth and final means; it is an extension or intensification of right mindfulness, which can only be achieved during times of silent meditation. It is the final step toward the threshold of *nirvana*. What is the object of the mind’s concentration? Itself. Let it become still and concentrated, and it reverts to its original, pure Mind, state. In this state is all knowledge, all peace, all satisfaction. It is this utter one-pointedness of mind which lifts it to its ultimate state, that state in which it knows itself as the one Mind of the universe.

The Buddha’s message is so clear and straightforward that, to the wise, it needs no further clarification or elucidation. But there has been, over the years, no dearth of clarification; for it is the delight of all who have attained the knowledge of Truth to speak of It. Many brilliant followers of the Buddha, who lived much later, have offered their own insights into the Truth and Its attainment. Among these, was an enlightened sage of the 2nd century of the Current Era, called Ashvagosha, whose poetic work, *Buddha-Karita*, tells, in a picturesque fashion, the life of the Buddha. Ashvagosha also wrote a Mahayana treatise called, “The Awakening of Faith,” in which he offered his insights into the nature of Reality. Like Kapila, the author of the *Bhagavad Gita*, and so many others, Ashvagosha attempted to explain the two, absolute and relative, aspects of the one universal Soul, or Self:

In the one Soul we may distinguish two aspects. The one [aspect] is the Soul-as-Absolute (*Tathata*); the other is the Soul-as-relative-world (*samsara*). Each in itself constitutes all things, and both are so closely related that one cannot be separated from the other.

What is meant by “the Soul-as-Absolute” is the oneness of the totality of things, the great all-inclusive Whole.... This essential nature of the Soul is uncreate and eternal.

Therefore, all things in their fundamental nature are not nameable or explicable. They cannot be adequately explained in any form of language. ...They possess absolute sameness. They are subject neither to transformation nor to destruction. They are nothing but the one Soul, for which “Absolute” is simply another designation.

The Soul-as-the-relative-world comes forth from the Womb of the Absolute; but the immortal Absolute and the mortal relative world coincide with one another. Though they are not identical, they are not two. <sup>16</sup>

It should be evident that, in this explanation by Ashvagosha, these two, *Tathata* and *samsara*, are precisely those same two aspects of Reality described in earlier chapters as Brahman & Maya, Purusha & Prakrti, Shiva & Shakti, Tao & Teh, etc. They “coincide,” as Ashvagosha says, in the experience of *nirvana*.

Another great sage of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition was Nagarjuna, who lived in the late 2nd century C.E. He too placed great emphasis on the understanding of these two aspects of Reality, insisting, in his “Discourse On The Middle Way,” that:

The Buddha’s teaching rests on the discrimination between two aspects of Reality: The Absolute and the relative. Those who do not have any adequate knowledge of them are unable to grasp the subtle and profound meaning of Buddhism. <sup>17</sup>

Yet, in the same Discourse, he acknowledged the fact that *samsara* is an

activity of *nirvana* (in this sense, the Absolute) itself; not the slightest distinction exists between them.”

It is only from the viewpoint of the enlightened that *samsara* and *nirvana* (or *Tathata*) no longer appear as two. One who has seen the Truth sees only oneness everywhere. He knows himself to be that One who exists eternally, beyond all manifestation of *samsara*; yet he knows also that *samsara* is his own appearance, a play of changing forms on the one ocean of Existence. When a man awakes to *nirvana*, behold! Suddenly he knows himself as the Absolute, the one eternally pure, unblemished Consciousness. And there, also, shining forth from him is the world of *samsara*, with all its creatures and objects. Like a movie shown on a screen, or like a fantasy-image on one’s own mind, the two exist at once. It is ONE, but It has these two aspects.

Those who have seen It realize better than anyone the impossibility of explaining this duality-in-unity to those who have not experienced It, yet they realize, too, that nothing can be said about enlightenment without referring to It. Here, on this same subject, is the master, Padma-Shambhava, who took his Buddhism to Tibet in 747 C.E., and wrote a book entitled, “The Yoga of Knowing the Mind, And Seeing the Reality, Which Is Called Self-Realization.” In it, he wrote:

Although the wisdom of *nirvana* and the ignorance of *samsara* illusorily appear to be two things, they cannot truly be differentiated. It is an error to conceive them as other than one.<sup>18</sup>

Those, like the Buddha, who have realized the Truth, tell of It to others and outline a path to that realization as a way of explaining what happened to themselves and describing the pattern of their progress to it. They are practical scientists who say, in effect, ‘This is what happened to me, and these are the mental refinements that lead to it. You too, by doing likewise, will reach the same inner realization.’ When we examine the testimonies of those many who have described their experience of Unity and their progress to it, we have to be struck by the remarkable agreement evidenced in all their testimonies. Their lives, their methods, their enlightenment, reveal so undeviating a sameness, so compelling an unanimity, that we must be convinced of the universality of their experience, and the universality of the path to it. We must come to the conclusion that the Truth is one, that the

way is clear, and that the choice is our own.

The Buddha continued to live and teach his disciples for forty-five years, moving about from place to place, proclaiming his wisdom to the people around Benares, Oudh, and Bihar. He established a monastic Order and accepted as gifts from his householder devotees many groves and monasteries where his liberating knowledge could be taught. He died at the age of eighty in 486 B.C.E. at Kusinagara, the present city of Kasia, in northern Gorakhpur. His last words to the disciples who gathered around him were: "All constituted forms pass away. Diligently work out your own salvation."

### NOTES:

1. *Dhammapada*, Ch. 11, Babbitt, Irving (tr.), *The Dhammapada*, N.Y., New Directions, 1965; I.
2. *Sutra On Cause And Effect In The Past And Present*, Suzuki, D.T., *Essays In Zen Buddhism, 1st Series*, N.Y., Grove Press, 1961; p. 49f.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 121
4. Chuang Tze,
5. Suzuki, D.T., *op. cit.*
6. *Buddha's Sermon at Benares*, Stryck, Lucien (ed.), *The World Of The Buddha*, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1968; pp. 52-53
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Dhammapada*, *op. cit.*
15. *Tao Teh Ching*, 33
16. Ashvagosha, Stryck, *op. cit.*, p. 285
18. Padma-Shambhava; Stryck, *op. cit.*, p. 315

## 6. The Mystical Tradition of Buddhism (Part Two)

### I. The Ch'an And Zen Buddhists

Buddhism flourished in India until the end of the twelfth century, when the fierce Muslim invaders ravaged northern India, killing many Buddhists and forcing the remaining Buddhists to flee to Tibet. However, Buddhism had already entered China in the first few centuries of the Current Era, and, for a number of centuries thereafter, vied with Taoism for popular acceptance. Buddhism eventually prevailed, due perhaps to the already decadent condition of Taoism, and the massive proselytizing efforts of the Buddhists.

There was really little to choose between the two, however; for, while the Taoist and Buddhist terminologies were different, the realization of Truth which each taught was, of course, the same. In every mystical tradition, the ultimate goal is the attainment of enlightenment, the direct perception of the one Reality. In ancient India, this realization was called *nirvana*, or *samadhi*; when Buddhism was transplanted in China, this supramental experience was called, in Chinese, *chien-hsing*, and as Buddhism became established in Japan in later centuries, this experience was called *kensho* or *satori*. The words and the languages are different, but the experience is the same.

This experience of enlightenment, of the absolute, quiescent, Source of all existence, is described by one Chinese Buddhist in this way:

In learning to be a Buddha, and in seeking the essence of the teaching of our school, man should purify his mind and allow his spirit to penetrate the depths. Thus, he will be able to wander silently within himself during contemplation, and he will see the Origin of all things, obscured by nothing.

...His mind becomes boundless and formless, ... all-illuminating and bright, like moonlight pervading the darkness. During that absolute moment, the mind experiences illumination without darkness, clarity without stain. It becomes what it really is, absolutely tranquil, absolutely illuminating. Though this all-pervading Mind is tranquil, the world of cause and effect

does not cease; though It illumines the world, the world is but Its reflection. It is pure Light and perfect Quiescence, which continues through endless time. It is motionless, and free from all activity; It is silent, and self-aware. ...That brilliant Light permeates every corner of the world. It is This we should become aware of and know.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the early Buddhist philosophers of India called this absolute, all-pervading Reality, *Dharmakaya*, “the Body of Truth.” Ashvagosha (2nd century C.E.) called it *Sarvasattvachitta*, “the one pure Consciousness in all.” In China, It was called *Hsin*, “Consciousness”; and in Japan, It was *Kokoro*. According to Ashvagosha, there arises, in this one pure Consciousness, a spontaneous movement, from which all the phenomenal world is produced; this aspect of Reality, he calls *ekachittakshan*, “the movement of the one Consciousness.” In Chinese, it is *nien*; in Japanese, it is *nen*. Just see how many words there are for our old friends, Brahman and Maya, Purusha and Prakrti, Shiva and Shakti!

Similarly, in every mystical tradition, the means to the realization of Reality is the same; it is an inturning of the mind in search of its root, its source; we call this process “meditation.” In India, the Sanskrit word for meditation is *dhyan*; in China, it is *ch'an*, and in Japan, it is *zen*. Ch'an, or Zen, then, is nothing but the practice of meditation toward the attainment of enlightenment. Enlightenment is the only goal of Zen; and it is meditation, or contemplation, alone which leads to it. For this reason, all the Ch'an and Zen masters incessantly point all sincere seekers of enlightenment to the meditative life. Here is an example of such pointing, from a Sermon by the Ch'an master, Szu-hsin Wu-hsin (1044-1115):

O brothers, to be born as a human being is a rare event, and so is the opportunity to hear discourses on the Truth. If you fail to achieve liberation in this life, when do you expect to achieve it? While still alive, be therefore assiduous in practicing meditation. ...As your self-reflection grows deeper and deeper, the moment will surely come upon you when the spiritual flower will suddenly burst into bloom, illuminating the entire universe.

...This is the moment when you can transform this vast earth into solid gold, and the great rivers into an ocean of milk. What a satisfaction this is then to your daily life! Since this is so, do not waste your time with words or phrases, or by searching for Truth in books; for the Truth is not to be found there. ...They consist of mere words, which will be of no use to you at the moment of your death.<sup>2</sup>

This, throughout the centuries, has been the perennial call of the Ch'an and Zen masters. Their message is not different from that of all enlightened seers of the One. The early Ch'an masters of China, having realized the unchanging Absolute, acknowledged the unity of the One and the many, and grappled for some time with the expression of this paradox. Reiterating the old truth of the identity of *nirvana* and *samsara*, they spoke of the Real, the unreal, and the unitive way, which embraces them both in an undivided awareness. But the Chinese had their own way of expressing this duality-in-unity, this unity-in-duality. Here, for example, is a conversation of the Ch'an master, Ts'ao-shan Pen-chi (840-901) and one of his disciples:

Monk: "Where is the Reality in appearance?"  
 Master: "Wherever there is appearance, there is Reality."  
 Monk: "How does It manifest Itself?"  
 Master: (The master silently lifted his saucer.)  
 Monk: "But where is the Reality in illusion?"  
 Master: "The origin of illusion is the Real."  
 Monk: "But how can Reality manifest Itself in illusion?"  
 Master: "Wherever there is illusion, there is the manifestation of Reality."  
 Monk: "Do you say, then, Reality can never be separated from illusion?"  
 Master: "Where can you possibly find the appearance of illusion?"<sup>3</sup>

At another time, this same Ts'ao-shan Pen-chi was asked by a wandering monk,

"What is your name?"  
 "My name is Pen-chi," he answered.  
 "Say something about ultimate Reality," demanded

the monk.

“I will not say anything,” [replied Pen-chi].

But the monk insisted; and Pen-chi said simply,

“It is not called Pen-chi.”<sup>4</sup>

The difficulty of expressing the paradoxical nature of the absolute Reality, which is other than, but not other than, the projected world-appearance is oftentimes illustrated in the utterances of the early Ch'an masters.

Tung-shan Liang-chieh (807-896) said:

I meet Him wherever I go.  
 He is the same as me,  
 Yet I am not He.  
 Only if you understand this,  
 Will you identify with the *Tathata* (the Truth, the Real).<sup>5</sup>

Ch'an and Zen Buddhism is replete with the recognition of this paradoxicality, and brings this recognition into the most ordinary experiences of life, and the most ordinary of conversations, relying often, not on words, but on wordless symbols to get across their point:

The Master asked Pai-chang, his disciple, “What will you teach others?”  
 Pai-chang raised his staff aloft.  
 The Master remarked, “Is that all? Nothing else?”  
 Pai-chang threw his staff on the ground.<sup>6</sup>

Ummon (d. 996), holding up his staff before his disciples, asked, “What is this? If you say it is a staff, you go right to hell; but if it is not a staff, what is it?” And Tokusan (799-865), who was fond of giving blows with a stick to awaken his disciples, also used to ask a similar question of his disciples, and then say, “If you say ‘yes,’ thirty blows; if you say ‘no,’ thirty blows.”

It is easy to see from these examples that, while the goal of enlightenment is the same in all mystical traditions, and the Truth experienced is always the same, the expression of that Truth is infinitely variable. What distinguishes the Ch'an and Zen Buddhist traditions from their Indian counterparts is their unique methods of teaching. They trace this “non-verbal” method of the

transmission of knowledge to the Buddha himself, who, according to legend, gave his message to the gathered assemblage on the Mount of the Holy Vulture by simply raising aloft a single kumbhala flower which had been given to him by the god, Brahma. Only one disciple in the throng gave evidence of understanding the import of the Buddha's gesture: an old man named Mahakasyapa, who simply smiled in appreciation. With this, the Buddha is said to have immediately turned over the succession of Mastership to Mahakasyapa. From this legendary non-verbal transmission, the Ch'an and Zen Buddhists find a precedent for their own tradition.

The perpetuation of this special tradition is said to have been initiated in China by Bodhidharma, who came from India to China in 520 C.E. His influence is described in a 9th century work called "The Complete Explanation of The Source of Ch'an" by Kuei-feng Tsung-mi (780-841):

When Bodhidharma came to China, he saw that most Chinese students did not grasp the truth of Buddhism. They merely sought it through interpretation of textual terminology and thought of the changing phenomena all around them as real activity. Bodhidharma wished to make these eager students see that the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon itself. The real Truth is nothing but one's own mind. Thus, he maintained that the real teaching must be transmitted directly from one mind to another, without the use of words.<sup>7</sup>

Bodhidharma and his followers rejected the necessity of the long-winded metaphysical formulations of the Indians as a means to enlightenment. They advocated instead a method of evoking an immediate perception of Truth, a sudden recognition of the nature of one's own mind, unfettered by mental formulations or expectations, "a special transmission outside the scriptures; no dependence upon words and letters, a direct pointing to the Soul of man; the seeing into one's own nature and thus the attainment of Buddhahood."

Whenever words are used, whether as tools of analysis, or to construct metaphors and analogies, they must invariably fall short of an adequate representation of the unitive Reality. To many enlightened men, the endless parade of word-pictures and attempted descriptions by the countless millions of seers over the ages appears a futile and self-defeating game. Such a recognition led the early Chinese and Japanese Buddhists to pursue a method

of knowledge-awakening which transcended the impossible demands of language, which directly evoked the immediate Reality, and awakened the mind to its true nature. And over the centuries, this method has gradually become the special hallmark of the Ch'an and Zen Buddhist traditions.

Taking the rejection of metaphysical formulations as their starting point, they began to devise methods whereby they might turn, or startle, a disciple toward the direct perception of his own Self, his own Being. "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" questioned the Master; and the disciple, deprived of a verbalized answer, had necessarily to peer into the silence of his own being for the comprehension of Nonduality. Thus, instead of hoping to awaken a disciple to enlightenment through such explanations as Shankara and the Vedantists offer, and thereby leading him to delve into his own mind to experience the Truth, the enlightened seers of China and Japan practiced a non-analytical method of awakening the disciple; a method which causes the disciple to grab directly and immediately, by wordless insight, at the living truth of his own existence.

When Ummon is asked, "What is Zen?" he stares the disciple fiercely in the face, and exclaims, "That's it! That's it!" This method of the famous Ch'an and Zen masters is a method of shock, a startling of the mind in order to suddenly knock away the clouds of verbalized concepts in the mind of the seeker and awaken him to the immediate reality of consciousness in the here and now. But who can say whether this method is more effective than another? Who can say whether more men and women have been induced to know the Truth for themselves by Shankara's reasonings, or by Jesus' exhortations, or by the words of the *Bhagavad Gita*, or by Ummon's "That's it!" We can only observe that, in China and Japan, the intellectual method was rejected, and the "direct pointing to the Soul of man" was embraced as a method of instruction.

Teaching methods may vary; but the Truth remains one. And no one has ever realized It without an intense and arduous searching for It within themselves. In the last analysis, it is the determination and fitness of the disciple, which determines whether he will attain to the clear vision of Truth, and that, after all, is in the hands of God. Perhaps the most a teacher may do is to exhort and encourage a student to apply himself with all his might to the search for Truth within himself. With this purpose in mind, the famous Zen master, Hakuin (1683-1768), sang:

Not knowing how near the Truth is,  
 People seek It far away—what a pity!  
 They are like one who, in the midst of water,  
 Cries imploringly for a drink of water,  
 Or like the son of a rich man  
 Who wanders away among the poor.  
 ...Those who testify to the truth of the nature of the Self,  
 Have found it by reflecting within themselves,  
 And have gone beyond the realm of mere ideas.  
 For them opens the gate of the oneness of cause and effect;  
 And straight runs the path of Nonduality ...  
 Abiding with the Undivided amidst the divided,  
 Whether going or returning, they remain forever unmoved.  
 Holding fast to, and remembering, *That* which is beyond  
 thought,  
 In their every act, they hear the voice of the Truth.  
 How limitless the sky of unbounded freedom!  
 How pure the perfect moonlight of Wisdom!  
 At that moment, what do they lack?  
 As the eternally quiescent Truth reveals Itself to them,  
 This very earth is the lotus-land of Purity,  
 And this body is the body of the Buddha. <sup>8</sup>

The experience of *samadhi*, or *satori*, is self-revealing, self-illuminating; it effortlessly reveals the unitive Truth, and dispels all doubts. There is no difficulty of understanding involved in it whatsoever. What is difficult, however, is the subsequent adjustment to living the rest of one's life with the knowledge thus acquired. It takes a good deal of reflection and accustoming oneself to recognize only the One in all phenomenal manifestations as well. Such an acquired habitual perspective no longer distinguishes between the Absolute and the relative but focuses singly on the awareness of Unity. Such a mind takes no interest in pursuing gratification in appearances but remains unswayed from Unity-awareness by either pleasant or unpleasant circumstances.

It is this adjustment, or resolution, to life on the relative plane which, therefore, claims much of the attention of the enlightened, and which constitutes much of the written material by the Self-realized sages of every mystical tradition. The writings of the early Ch'an Buddhists are particularly replete with declarations concerning this resolution, this final

state of Unity-awareness. Though the language and teaching methods of the Ch'an and Zen Buddhists are unique to themselves, the goal of enlightenment and the attainment of a perfect and lasting Unity-awareness is the same for all. In many of the poems and utterances of the memorable saints of the Chinese and Japanese Buddhist tradition, we can hear something of that pure and simple state; we can hear the voice of the unfettered Self, released from all doubt and conflict.

In one of the earliest Buddhist treatises to come out of China, called *Hsin-hsin ming*, “Inscription on The Self of The Self,” written by an obscure monk named Seng-ts'an (d. 606), we find an especially illuminating expression of this ultimate awareness. While it represents a movement toward the early Chinaizing, or simplifying, of Buddhist ideology, it is scarcely distinguishable from the Taoism which preceded it. Its author was, undoubtedly, an enlightened man, and a Buddhist; but he was also a Chinaman with a long heritage of Taoist phraseology. In this perfect gem of wisdom, we can actually see the transformation of Indian Buddhism into something distinctly Chinese, as Buddhism blends into Taoism, and the one perennial philosophy of Unity resurfaces once more, this time, under the name of Ch'an:

The perfect Tao knows no difficulties.  
It only refuses to make preferences.  
When freed from hate and love,  
It reveals Itself fully and without disguise.

A tenth of an inch's difference,  
And heaven and earth are set apart.  
If you want to see It manifest,  
Take no thought either for or against It.

To set up what you like against what you dislike:  
This is the disease of the mind.  
When the profound Truth is not understood,  
Peace of mind is disturbed, and nothing is gained.

[The Truth is] perfect like the vastness of space,  
With nothing wanting, nothing superfluous.  
It is indeed due to making choices  
That the One Reality is lost sight of.

Pursue not the outer entanglements.  
 Dwell not in the inner Void.  
 When the mind rests serene in the oneness of things,  
 Dualism vanishes by itself.

When oneness is not thoroughly understood,  
 In two ways loss may be sustained:  
 The denial of the world may lead to its absolute negation,  
 While the denying of the Void may result in the denying  
 of your [true] Self.

Wordiness and intellection—The more with them the  
 further astray we go.  
 Away, therefore, with wordiness and intellection,  
 And there is no place where we cannot pass freely.

When we return to the root, we gain the meaning.  
 When we pursue the external objects, we lose the purpose.  
 The moment we are enlightened within,  
 We go beyond the voidness of a world confronting us.

Transformations going on in an empty world which  
 confronts us  
 Appear real all because of ignorance.  
 Try not to seek after the Real.  
 Only cease to cherish opinions.

Tarry not with dualism,  
 Carefully avoid pursuing it.  
 As soon as you have right and wrong,  
 Confusion ensues, and the mind is lost.

The two exist because of the One,  
 But hold not even to this One.  
 When the one Consciousness is not disturbed,  
 The ten thousand things offer no offence.

When no offence is offered by them, they are as if  
 non-existent.

When the mind is not disturbed, it is as if there is no mind.

The subject is quieted as the object ceases.  
The object ceases as the subject is quieted.

The object is an object for the subject.  
The subject is a subject for an object.  
Know that the relativity of the two  
Rests ultimately on the oneness of the Void.

In the oneness of the Void, the two are one,  
And each of the two contains in itself all the ten thousand things.

When no discrimination is made between this and that,  
How can a one-sided and prejudiced view arise?

... In the higher realm of true Being,  
There is neither “other” nor “self.”  
When a direct identification is required,  
We can only say, “not two.”

In being not two, all is the same.  
All that *is* is comprehended in it.  
The wise in all the ten quarters  
Enter into this same absolute Awareness.

This absolute Awareness is beyond movement and rest.  
One instant is ten thousand years.  
No matter how things are regarded, as being or non-being,  
It is manifest everywhere before you.

...One in all,  
All in One—  
If only this is realized,  
No more worry about not being perfect! <sup>9</sup>

About one hundred years later, another Ch'an master, by the name of Yung-chia Ta-shih (d. 713), wrote his *Cheng-tao Ke*, “Song Of Enlightenment,” which reiterates, in equally inspiring tones, this same knowledge, this same enlightened state of awareness:

Do you know that leisurely sage who has gone beyond learning, and who does not exert himself in anything? He neither endeavors to avoid idle thoughts nor seeks after the Truth.

[For he knows that] ignorance is also the Reality, [And that] this empty, illusory, body is nothing but the absolute Reality (*Dharmakaya*).

When one knows the Absolute, there are no longer any [independent] objects.

The Source of all things is the absolute Self of all the enlightened.

The five elements are like a cloud floating aimlessly here and there,

And the three passions are like the foam which appears and disappears on the surface of the ocean.

When the absolute Reality is known, it is seen to be without any individual selves, and devoid of any objective forms.

All past [mental and physical] actions which lead to hell are instantly wiped away.

... After the Awakening, there is only vast Emptiness; this vast universe of forms ceases to exist [outside of the Self].

Here, one sees neither sin nor bliss, neither loss nor gain. In the midst of the eternal Serenity, no questions arise. The dust of ignorance which has accumulated on the unpolished mirror for ages, Is now, and forever, cleared away in the vision of Truth.

...The people do not know where to find this precious jewel Which lies deep within the creative Power (*Tathagata-garba*); The activity miraculously performed by the creative Power is an illusion and yet it is not an illusion, [Just as] the rays of light emanating from the one perfect Sun belong to it and yet do not belong to it.

Let us be thoroughgoing, not only in inner experience, but in its

interpretation,  
 And our lives will be perfect in meditation and in wisdom as well—not adhering one-sidedly to Emptiness (*Sunyata*) alone. It is not we alone who have come to this conclusion; All the enlightened, numerous as the sands of India, are of the same mind.

I crossed seas and rivers, climbed mountains, and forded streams,  
 In order to interview the Masters, to enquire after Truth, to delve into the secrets of Ch'an,  
 But since I learned the true path from my Master [Hui-neng: 638-713],  
 I know that birth-and-death is not what I need to be concerned with.

For walking is Ch'an, sitting is Ch'an.  
 Whether talking or remaining silent, whether moving or standing still, the Essence Itself is always at rest.  
 Even when confronted by swords and spears, It never loses Its way of stillness.  
 Not even poisonous drugs can perturb Its serenity.

Ever since the realization—which came to me suddenly—that I have never been born,  
 All vicissitudes of fate, good and bad, have lost their power over me.  
 Far off, in the mountains, I live in a modest hut.  
 The mountains are high, the shade-trees are broad, and under an old pine tree  
 I sit quietly and contentedly in my monkish home.  
 Here, perfect tranquility and rustic simplicity reign.

[The sage] neither seeks the Truth, nor avoids the defilements; He clearly perceives that all dualities are empty and have no reality.  
 And, since they have no reality, he is not one-sided, neither empty, nor not empty.  
 This is the genuine state of enlightenment.

The one Mind, like a mirror, reflects everything brightly,  
and knows no limitations.  
It pervades the entire universe in even its minutest crevices.  
This world and all its contents, multitudinous in form, are  
reflected in the one Mind,  
Which, shining like a perfect gem, has no “outer” or “inner.”

If we hold exclusively to Emptiness, we deny the entire causal  
World,  
All is then attributed to chance, with no ruling principle,  
inviting evil to prevail.  
The same error occurs when one holds exclusively to the  
manifested, denying the Emptiness.  
That would be like throwing oneself into the flames in order  
to avoid being drowned in the water.

...The Real need not be adhered to.  
As for the non-real, there has never been any such thing.  
When both Real and non-Real are put aside, “non-real”  
becomes meaningless.  
[Even] when the various means to [the attainment of]  
Emptiness are abandoned,  
The eternal Oneness of the sage remains as It has always  
been.<sup>10</sup>

In the ongoing tradition of Ch'an and Zen Buddhism, many such declarations have been uttered; oftentimes they are but brief and simple declarations of isolation and profound contentment. And oftentimes, when we read the poems of the early Ch'an and Zen masters, such as this, by P'ang-yun (d. 811):

How wondrously supernatural,  
And how miraculous this!  
I carry water, and I carry fuel.<sup>11</sup>

Or this, by Pao-tzu Wen-ch'i (10th century):

Drinking tea, eating rice,  
I pass my time as it comes,  
Looking down at the stream,

Looking up at the mountain,  
How serene and relaxed I feel indeed! <sup>12</sup>

Or this, by Hsue-tou (950-1052):

What life can compare to this?  
Sitting quietly by the window,  
I watch the leaves fall and the flowers bloom,  
As the seasons come and go. <sup>13</sup>

...we may fail to recognize the connection of these Oriental Buddhists to their parent tradition, and lose sight of the long, arduous progression of understanding which led to the apparent simplicity of the enlightened Ch'an and Zen masters. Their simple poems may seem far removed from the reasonings of the early Buddhist Fathers on the complementarity of *nirvana* and *samsara*, but they represent the ultimate synthesis of centuries of metaphysics, and the final freedom of those who have realized that synthesis in their ordinary lives. How simple seem these Buddhist sages, yet their very simplicity is the simplicity of the blessed; it stands on the heads of the Buddhas of the past and reveals a consummation of the struggles of a thousand lifetimes.

## NOTES:

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10. Suzuki, *ibid.*, 1960; pp. 89-103
11. Suzuki, D.T., *Essays In Zen Buddhism, First Series*, N.Y., Grove Press, 1961; p. 319
12. Chung-yuan, *op. cit*; p. 141
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## 7. The Mystical Tradition of Platonism (Part One)

### I. Early Contact Between the East and the West.

The mystical experience of one's eternal and all-pervasive identity undoubtedly occurs to people of both East and West; and, while the question of whether it was the East or the West, India or Greece, that served as the birthplace of a mystically based metaphysics is an intriguing one, it is a question which will probably never be resolved. It is my belief that the similarities between the metaphysics of Eastern mystics and Western mystics is due to the commonalities of the mystical experience itself rather than any philosophical interchange between East and West; but there was no doubt some opportunity for such interchange to occur in the remote past, and this contact should be acknowledged.

There are records of commercial trade between India and Mesopotamia from around the 15<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., and between India and Greece going back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. The teachings of the early Upanishads presumably reached Greece around the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., during the time when both countries were part of the Persian empire and enjoyed increased commerce with each other. There were no manuscript translations of Sanskrit works at that time that we know of; and so, any religious or philosophical ideas would have to have been shared verbally between traveling religious scholars, probably with the mediation of an interpreter. That would certainly lessen the possibility of a detailed transmission of metaphysical ideas; nonetheless, the possibility exists of an Indian influence upon the earliest Greek philosophers such as Thales (624-545 B.C.E.), Pythagorus (572-512 B.C.E.), Xenophanes (570-470 B.C.E.), Parmenides (540-480 B.C.E.), etc., who in turn had great influence upon later Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Plato.

### II. Historical Roots of Western Mysticism

To fully understand the development of Platonism, it is necessary to go back in time in order to trace some of the influences that preceded and gave rise to Platonism. Since the beginning, men have been gathering knowledge about the world in which they live in the effort to answer such questions as: 'Where did this world come from?' 'Who made it?' and 'What is it made of?' The earliest efforts to formulate a cosmogony came in the form of

simple stories, myths, which were necessarily vague. Hesiod's *Theogony* (7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.), for example, posited the originating agent as "Chaos", a primordial abysmal condition from which all else mysteriously arose. But, by the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., enquiring minds had become a bit more sophisticated; and as the ancient philosopher, Xenophanes (580-480 B.C.E.) observed, "Not at first did the gods reveal all things to mortals, but in time, by inquiring, they make better discoveries." And this gathering of knowledge through 'better discoveries' tended to be cumulative over the ages, though inquiry led only very slowly and laboriously toward a true understanding.

It had been clear, even to men of more primitive societies, that mind and matter, soul and body, were two very different categories of being. Then, as now, men struggled to understand the nature of the material world and the nature of their minds or souls as well. In answer to the question, 'What is the world made of?' ancient Greek thinkers, like Thales or Anaximenes, became convinced that everything in the sensible world was made from water or from air, respectively. But these theories were unsatisfying, and the search for the ultimate irreducible 'stuff' composing all matter continued in earnest during those early centuries with little success. For some thinkers, it had become increasingly evident that *in addition* to the physical world, the world of 'nature', there had to be an intelligent cause *behind* the manifestation and development of this complex and manifold universe. Matter itself was devoid of life and awareness; there had to be an intelligent Cause of this universe, pervading, guiding and developing the intricacies of its design, and accounting for the inherent life and consciousness of mankind and of all living creatures.

At first, the early poets and mythologizers, such as Hesiod and Homer, dreamed up gods who were styled after mankind, possessing both the noble and the ignoble characteristics of mortal men and women. But there were some who contemplated a God who was incorporeal and all-pervading, an eternal, noumenal Reality whose consciousness filled the entire Cosmos.

**Xenophanes** (580-480 B.C.E.) was one of those who, whether he had experienced it in vision or simply inferred it through his faculty of reason, thought that there *was* a non-material, i.e., supernatural, cause behind this world of sense experience, who exists within the world as the Intelligent

creator, guide and controller. He said:

“There is one God, among gods and men the greatest, not at all like mortals in body or in mind. He sees as a whole and hears as a whole. And without toil He sets everything in motion, by the thought of His mind. And He always remains in the same place, not moving at all, nor is it necessary for Him to change His place at different times.”<sup>1</sup>

A contemporary of Xenophanes who knew something of the Divine Thought pervading the universe was **Heraclitus** (540-480 B.C.E.), who, utilizing the Greek word, “logos”, to represent that all-pervading Intelligence, gave eloquent expression to his philosophical vision. Indeed, Heraclitus seems to have experienced a personal mystical vision, revealing to him the one Mind whose presence (as *Logos*) fills the entire universe, and who comprises the underlying identity of all men. However, due to the ignorance of unenlightened commentators, of whom there are always plenty, Heraclitus was much misunderstood and maligned, both in his own time and ever since. But judge his vision for yourself; here is a reconstruction of Heraclitus’ thought, based on existing fragments from his book, *On Nature*:

“I have explained the Logos, but men are always incapable of understanding it, both before they have heard it, and after. For, though all things come into being in accordance with the Logos, when men hear it explained—how all things are made of it, and how each thing is separated from another according to its nature—they seem unable to comprehend it. The majority of men are as unaware of what they are doing after they wake from sleep as they are when asleep<sup>2</sup> ...Everyone is ruled by the Logos, which is common to all; yet, though the Logos is universal, the majority of men live as if they had an identity peculiar to themselves.<sup>3</sup> ...Even when they hear of the Logos, they do not understand it, and even after they have learnt something of it, they cannot comprehend; yet they regard themselves as wise.<sup>4</sup>

“Those who believe themselves wise regard as real only the appearance of things, but these fashioners of falsehood will have their reward.<sup>5</sup> Though men are inseparable from the

Logos, yet they are separated in it; and though they encounter it daily, they are alienated from it.<sup>6</sup> What intelligence or understanding do they have? They believe the popular orators and are guided by the opinions of the populace; they do not understand that the majority of men are fools, and the wise few.<sup>7</sup>

“Of all the wise philosophers whose discourses I have heard, I have not found any who have realized the one Intelligence, which is distinct from all things,<sup>8</sup> and yet pervades all things.<sup>9</sup> That Intelligence is One; to know It is to know the Purpose, which guides all things and is in all things.<sup>10</sup> Nature has no inherent power of intelligence; Intelligence is the Divine.<sup>11</sup> Without It, the fairest universe is but a randomly scattered dust-heap.<sup>12</sup> If we are to speak with intelligence, we must base our being on THAT which is common to all. ...For that Logos, which governs man, is born of the One, which is Divine. It [the Divine] governs the universe by Its will and is more than sufficient to everyone.<sup>13</sup>

“One should not conjecture at random about the Supreme [Truth].<sup>14</sup> The eyes are better witnesses to the truth than the ears;<sup>15</sup> but the eyes and ears are bad witnesses for men if their souls cannot understand.<sup>16</sup> You could not in your travels find the source or destination of the soul, so deeply hidden is the Logos.<sup>17</sup> [But] I searched for It [and found It] within myself.<sup>18</sup> That hidden Unity is beyond what is visible.<sup>19</sup> All men have this capacity of knowing themselves,<sup>20</sup> [for] the soul has the Logos within it, which can be known when the soul is evolved.<sup>21</sup> What is within us remains the same eternally; It is the same in life and death, waking and sleeping, youth and old age; for, It has become this world, and the world must return to It.<sup>22</sup>

“The best of men chooses to know the ONE above all else; It is the famous “Eternal” within mortal men. But the majority of men are complacent, like well-fed cattle.<sup>23</sup> They revel in mud;<sup>24</sup> like donkeys, they prefer chaff to gold.<sup>25</sup> [The Eternal is attained only by those who seek It with all their desire;] for if

one does not desire It, one will not find the Desireless, since there is no trail leading to It and no path.<sup>26</sup> Such a man is satiated with things seen and kindles his inner light during the night. While living, he is like a dead man; while awake, he is like a man asleep.<sup>27</sup> But such men, the best of men, are one in ten thousand.<sup>28</sup>

“You needn’t listen to me; listen to the Logos [within]. When you do, you will agree that all things are One.<sup>29</sup> This ordered universe, which is the same for all, was not created by any one of the gods or by man, but always was, is, and shall be, [similar to] an ever-living Flame that is first kindled and then quenched in turn.<sup>30</sup> [The universe bursts forth and then is reabsorbed, yet its Source is ever-living, like a Sun that never sets;] and who can hide from that which never sets?<sup>31</sup> [That eternal Intelligence in man] is forever beyond change;<sup>32</sup> [It is God.] To God all things are beautiful, good and just, but men see some things to be just, and others unjust.<sup>33</sup>

“One should understand that the world appears by the opposition of forces; order exists in the world by this play of contraries.<sup>34</sup> We would never have heard of “right” if we did not know of “wrong;”<sup>35</sup> whole and not-whole, united-separate, consonant-dissonant—all these are interdependent.<sup>36</sup> [But] in the One, above and below are the same,<sup>37</sup> [just as] beginning and end are one in the circumference of a circle.<sup>38</sup> That, which is in conflict is also in concert; while things differ from one another, they are all contained in the most beautiful Unity.<sup>39</sup> [Yet the philosophers cannot understand this;] they do not understand how that which contains differences within it is also in harmony, how Unity consists of opposing forces within Itself, just as the strings of a bow or a lyre [produce harmony while being pulled by opposing forces.]<sup>40</sup>

“[When one’s mind becomes stilled, the soul separates from the world-appearance;] just as a mixture of wine and barley meal separates when it is not stirred.<sup>41</sup> [The impulses of the mind must be stilled;] though it is difficult to fight against impulse. [The impulses of desire arise, but] whatever the mind wishes, it

purchases at the expense of the soul.<sup>42</sup> [Such desires feed on pride and arrogance, and] it is a greater task to quench one's own arrogance than it is to quench a raging fire.<sup>43</sup> Pride is the greatest hindrance to the progress of the soul.<sup>44</sup> Moderation is the greatest virtue, and wisdom is to speak the truth and to act in accordance with nature, while continuously attending to one's own Self.<sup>45</sup> [A man should see to his own character,] for a man's character is his destiny."<sup>46</sup>

Not long thereafter, **Anaxagorus** (500-428 B.C.E.) came to a similar conclusion. The universe, he said, began as a primordial, undifferentiated and chaotic mass—he doesn't even attempt to guess at its origin; but he states that this chaotic mass was then arranged and organized by "Thought". He doesn't say "Divine Thought" or "the Thought of God", but that is clearly what he intended. He speaks of a "limitless and independent Thought" that is:

"The finest of all things and the purest, and it possesses all knowledge about everything, and it has the greatest strength. And Thought has power over all those things, both great and small, which possess soul. ...And Thought knows everything ...what was to be and what was and what now is and what will be. ...Thought has power over whatever exists and now is where the other things also are [i.e., it permeates all things]."<sup>47</sup>

**Socrates** (469-399 B.C.E.) who was a contemporary of Anaxagorus, was the student and beneficiary of all previous philosophical enquiry. It appears that he had also been the beneficiary of a personal mystical vision in which the Divine had made itself known to him. However, since he wrote nothing, but preferred to teach men face to face, we must rely upon his student, **Plato** (d. 347 B.C.E.), for our knowledge of his thought. Plato's various *Dialogues* purport to be conversations between Socrates and his many admirers; but it is impossible to separate out the thought of Socrates from the thought of Plato; and so, we must treat them as one.

By the time of Plato, belief in the *Psyche*, or "Soul" as the eternal and incorporeal essence of one's being was implicit, as was the belief in the soul's ability to reincarnate. Plato saw the soul as tripartite, being made up of

*logos*, the mind or reason; *thymos*, emotion; and *eros*, or desire. For both Socrates and Plato, Soul was seen as the entire inner consciousness of man, synonymous with the very fact of life. It was soul that gave life to the body, and without which the body was merely a corpse. It was Plato who introduced Socrates' idea that, through introspection, a man's soul was able to ascend in spirit and directly perceive and know the Divinity within himself; and it was for that reason that Socrates had so emphasized the need to care primarily for "the greatest improvement of the soul."

Here are a few illustrative excerpts from the Dialogues of Plato that purport to be the words of Socrates:

"As for the sovereign part of the human soul, we should consider that God gave it to be the Divinity in each one, it being that which, inasmuch as we are a plant not of an earthly but a heavenly growth, raises us from earth to our brethren in heaven.

"When one is always occupied with the cravings of desire and ambition which he is eagerly striving to satisfy, all his thoughts must be mortal, and, as far as it is possible to become such, he must be mortal every whit, because he has made great his mortal part. But he who has been earnest in the love of knowledge and true wisdom and has exercised his intellect more than any other part, must have thoughts immortal and divine. If he attains Truth, in so far as human nature is capable of sharing in immortality, he must altogether be immortal. And since he is ever cherishing the divine power, and has duly honored the Divinity within, he will be supremely happy.<sup>48</sup>

"The true lover of knowledge is always striving after Being—that is his nature; he will not rest at those multitudinous particular phenomena whose existence is in appearance only but will go on—the keen edge will not be blunted, nor the force of his passion abate until he has attained the knowledge of the true nature of all essence by a sympathetic and kindred power in the soul. And by that power, drawing near and becoming one with very Being, ...he will know and truly live and increase. Then, and only then, will he cease from his travail.<sup>49</sup>

"The immortality of the soul is demonstrated by many proofs; but to see it as it really is—not as we now behold it, marred by communion with the body and other miseries—you must

contemplate it with the eye of reason in its original purity; and then its beauty will be revealed.<sup>50</sup> ...When a person starts on the discovery of the Absolute by the light of the reason only, without the assistance of the senses, and never desists until by pure intelligence he arrives at the perception of the absolute Good, he at last finds himself at the end of the intellectual world...<sup>51</sup>

“Of that Heaven which is above the heavens what earthly poet ever did or ever will sing worthily? It is such as I will describe; for I must dare to speak the truth, when Truth is my theme. There abides the very Being with which true knowledge is concerned; the colorless, formless, intangible Essence visible only to mind, the pilot of the soul. ... Every soul capable of receiving the food proper to it rejoices at beholding Reality. ...She beholds Knowledge absolute, not in the form of generation or of relation, which men call existence, but Knowledge absolute in Existence absolute.<sup>52</sup>

“To find the Father and Maker of this universe is most difficult, and, to declare Him, after having found Him, is impossible.<sup>53</sup>

“A man must have knowledge of the Universal, formed by collecting into a unity by means of reason the many particulars of sense; this is the recollection of those things which our soul once saw while following God—when, regardless of that which we now call being, it raised its head up towards true Being. And therefore, the mind of the philosopher alone has wings; and this is just, for he is always, as far as he is able, clinging in recollection to those things in which God abides, and in beholding which, he is what He [God] is. And he who employs aright these memories is ever being initiated into perfect mysteries and he alone becomes truly perfect. But since he stands apart from human interests and is rapt in the Divine, the vulgar deem him mad and do not know he is inspired.<sup>54</sup>

“He who would be dear to God must, as far as is possible, become like Him. Wherefore the temperate man and the just is the friend of God, for he is like Him. And this is the conclusion—that for the good man to ... continually hold converse with God by means of prayers and every kind of

service, is the noblest and the best of things, and the most conducive to a happy life.<sup>55</sup>

“This is that life above all others which man should live, ...holding converse with the true Beauty, simple and divine. In that communion only beholding Beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but Reality [Itself]; ...and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue, to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may. Would that be an ignoble life?”<sup>56</sup>

For all his high-mindedness, and his great effect on all subsequent philosophy, Plato gives no indication in his writings that he himself had experienced the unitive knowledge of God. In fact, he departed from the simple ideas of Xenophanes, Heraclitus and Anaxagorus regarding the guidance and direction of the universe by means of Divine Thought, emphasizing instead the theory of the dependence of all objects in the material world upon the intelligible *Forms*, or *Ideas (ideai)*, that he saw as constituting their archetypal essence and reality. This theory was born, however, not of mystical vision, but of Plato’s speculative imagination.

**Democritus** (468 B.C.E.-?), though not a mystic, nonetheless plays a minor role in our story. He was a contemporary of Socrates, though not of his circle. He wrote many books, on many subjects, none of which has survived; but he is best known for anticipating our current atomic theory. He, and perhaps his teacher, Leucippus as well, held that all things are made of tiny entities of many geometric shapes, imperceptible to the senses, which he called “atoms”—meaning ‘irreducible elements’. Though he had no means of discovering or proving this through empirical means, he nonetheless hit upon a conception that seemed reasonable at the time, and which, only twenty-five hundred years later would be shown to be, if not wholly accurate, an amazingly prescient theory of the atomic nature of matter, the intricacies of which were ferreted out in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of our current era. Of course, Democritus could not have dreamed that these tiny ‘irreducible elements’ were really electrically charged wave-particles formed of the intense energy of the Light that created the universe.

**Philo Judaeus** (20 B.C.E. to 40 C.E.), an Alexandrian Jew of the first

century, was a follower of Plato; but he didn't subscribe to Plato's concept of the individual *Forms* or *Ideas* underlying each physical object. Rather, he saw the *Idea* of the universe as inhering entire in the Divine Mind, and which, borrowing from Heraclitus and the Stoics, he called the *Logos*. Philo explains, in the Platonist manner, that God has two aspects: the transcendent, of which nothing at all can be said; and the immanent aspect, the *Logos*, by which He is the governing Thought or Idea filling all the material universe:

“God is high above place and time ...He is contained by nothing but transcends all. *But though transcending what He has made, nonetheless, He filled the universe with Himself.* [My italics.] ...When, therefore, the God-loving soul searches into the nature of the Existent, he enters on a quest of That which is beyond matter and beyond sight. And out of this quest there accrues to him a great boon—to comprehend the incomprehensible God.”<sup>57</sup>

The *Logos*, as Philo describes it, is the Idea in the mind of God which is the archetypal pattern from which the design of all the physically manifested universe is produced. It is, in effect, the directive and organizational Intelligence of God that permeates all matter, bringing all into conformity with Its will and design. For Philo, God *thinks* the universe; He is continually *thinking* the universe. It is this underlying Thought which is the *Logos* of God, the subtle guide and governor of the material universe of our experience.

“The supremely generic is God, the next is the *Logos* of God;<sup>58</sup> ...That which comes after God, even if it were the most venerable of all other things, holds second place, and was called feminine in contrast to the Creator of the universe, who is masculine.<sup>59</sup>

“That aspect of Him which transcends His powers cannot be conceived of at all in terms of place, but only as pure Being; but that power of His (the *Logos*) by which He made and ordered all things ...pervades the whole and passes through all the parts of the universe.”<sup>60</sup>

Philo had experienced the unitive vision, and understood the spiritual foundation of our world; and he knew that that vision was not of his own making, but was a gift of God's grace:

“Without Divine grace it is impossible to leave the ranks of mortality; [but] when grace fills the soul, it is possessed and inspired, ...and hastens to that most glorious and loveliest of visions, the vision of the Uncreated.<sup>61</sup> The soul, stirred to its depths and maddened by heavenward yearning, [is] drawn by the truly Existent Being and pulled upward by Him. <sup>62</sup>

“It is the characteristic of him who would see God not to leave the holy warfare without his crown, but to persevere till he reaps the prize of victory. And what victory garland more fitting or woven of rarer flowers than the clear and unalloyed vision of Him who IS. It is a worthy conflict that lies before the striving soul: to win eyes for the clear vision of Him Whom alone it is worth man’s while to see.<sup>63</sup>

...Go up, then, O soul, to the vision of Him who IS—go up quietly, mindfully, willingly, fearlessly, lovingly <sup>64</sup> ...[for] to know God is the highest happiness, and immortal life. <sup>65</sup> ...It is worth more than all wealth, private or public. For if the sight of elders or holy teachers, rulers or parents, moves one to reverence and modesty and zeal for a pure life, how great a support for virtue in our soul shall we find, who have learnt to pass beyond all things created, and to see That which is uncreated and divine, the highest good, the greatest Joy; nay, to speak the truth, That which is greater than the greatest, more beautiful than the greatest beauty, more blessed than the most blessed, more joyful than the joyfulest; aye, more perfect than any words such as these [can tell].” <sup>66</sup>

***The Wisdom of Solomon***, an apocryphal book of the Bible,<sup>67</sup> written around the same time and place in which Philo flourished, speaks of the governing Spirit of God as *Sophia*, or “Wisdom.” Wisdom, according to the anonymous author of this book, is “the artificer of all; ...[she] pervades and permeates all things...”

“She is an exhalation from the [creative] power of God, a pure effluence from the glory of the Almighty; therefore, nothing tainted insinuates itself into her. She is an effulgence of everlasting light, an unblemished mirror of the active power of God, and an image of His goodness. Though but one, she can

do everything, and abiding in herself she renews all things; ...She is brighter than the sun and surpasses every constellation; compared to the light of day she is found more radiant; ...She stretches in might from pole to pole and effectively orders all things.”<sup>68</sup>

According to this unknown author, *Wisdom* is the breath of God by which the universe comes into being. It is a breath of “everlasting light”, more radiant than the sun and all the constellations, that forms and effectively orders all things. Philo and the author of *The Wisdom of Solomon* are in full agreement that the Divine Mind (as *Logos/Sophia*) directs, orders and controls every facet of the material universe. It is also she who graces the pure-hearted, bringing them to enlightenment through union with herself.

“She is an inexhaustible treasure for mankind, and those who acquire it attain friendship with God, commended by the gift derived from her instruction. ...I learned both what is hidden and what is manifest, for *Wisdom*, the artificer of all, taught me.<sup>69</sup> ...Generation by generation she enters into holy souls and renders them friends of God and prophets ...”<sup>70</sup>

Like Philo, the author of *The Wisdom of Solomon* appears to have been graced with the vision of God, and he had seen that God breathes the universe into being with a tremendous effluence of light that becomes the vast universe. And that God’s very breath has inherent within it the power and wisdom to fashion matter and to bring the cosmos into order, to initiate life and bring intelligence to mankind. According to him, the material universe, formed of God’s light is governed by His inherent *Wisdom*, by which He organized and arranged the universe, and fashioned all life and mankind to His will. In our modern conception as well, informed as it is by empirical science, we may come to understand that God manifested matter through His emanation of light, and permeated that universe of matter by virtue of His omnipresence, effectively informing all matter, directing its evolution, and fashioning all things according to the coordinated beauty of His design.

### III. Socrates And Plato

Babylon fell in 538 B.C.E., and Cyrus founded the Persian Empire. In 510 B.C.E., his successor, Darius, made the Indus Valley a part of his empire; and in 480 B.C.E., Darius' son, Xerxes, invaded Greece. In that great Persian war, chronicled by Herodotus, the Greeks successfully repelled the Persians; and thereafter, Athens came to prominence as a great power. The fifty years between 480 and 430 B.C.E. constituted the "golden age" of Greece; and it was during this time that the martyred sage, Socrates, lived.

Socrates (469-399 B.C.E.) was born to Sophroniscus, a sculptor, and Phaenarete, a midwife, in the deme, or suburb, of Athens called Alopece. In all probability, he was a journeyman stonemason to his father in his youth, but we know nothing of it. As a young man, Socrates became an armed infantryman in the Athenian army, and served for at least ten years in the field during the Peloponnesian war. In Plato's *Symposium*, Alcibiades, who served in the war with Socrates, praises him, and tells of his extraordinary powers of endurance during a bitter cold winter at Potidaea, and of his gallant demeanor in battle at Delium, where he stood his post from dawn to the following dawn without moving from his spot—apparently deeply absorbed in contemplation. Later, Socrates married Xanthippe, who turned out to be a shrew who constantly badgered Socrates about his improvident ways; and by her, or perhaps, as some say, by a second wife, he had three children, two of whom were fathered rather late in his life.

Socrates was not an unlearned man; he was familiar with philosophers both ancient and contemporary. He knew the writings of Heraclitus, Pythagoras, and his contemporary, Anaxagorus, who was prosecuted around 450 B.C.E. And it seems probable that he had at least some knowledge of the philosophy professed by the men of India and Persia who lived in the city. Indian soldiers had taken part in the Persian invasion of Greece, and Greek soldiers and officials were also serving in India by that time. There was, in fact, a good deal of intercourse between India and Greece during the lifetime of Socrates; and in Athens there were a number of Brahmin philosophers with whom Socrates is said by Aristoxenus (ca. 330 B.C.E.) to have had frequent meetings. Thus, the mystical philosophy of Unity propounded by the Upanishads was spoken of in the intellectual circles of his time, and no doubt contributed somewhat to his own thought.

It would be a mistake, however, to regard Socrates as a mere product of his

philosophical learning, or as a representative of a particular school of thought. Socrates, through his long habit of virtue and self-examination, and his extreme detachment from bodily externals, had learned to contemplate the eternal Truth for long periods of time. In this way, he came to realize the one Mind, the one "Good," by which he became an enlightened and holy man. It was from this pure knowledge that all his teachings sprang, not from learning. And, although Socrates lived in a time when to speak of unpopular ideals was to court disaster, he believed he was led by God to teach what he had known in the streets and marketplaces to all who would listen to him. And so, he became a gadfly philosopher, stinging his fellow Athenians with his eloquent reasonings, ever guiding them toward virtue and truth.

In the mornings, Socrates would be found strolling on the promenades, and later in the day at the agora of Athens, which was the commercial center of the city as well as the location of the offices of government. Because so many sophists and self-styled teachers were to be found there, it also became an open market of philosophical discussion. But Socrates was no ordinary teacher; he did not offer to explain to men the nature of the universe, or the way that the world was created; his one intent was to teach men the proper conduct of man whereby they might be led to know for themselves the highest Good, the unchanging Truth. Xenophon, an admirer of Socrates, said that he offered men the hope that, "if only they disciplined themselves, they would become truly noble men. Yet he never promised or taught this; rather, because he clearly was truly noble, he made his companions hope to become like him by imitating him."<sup>71</sup>

Socrates was a sage before anyone had any set notions of what a sage should be like, or even what constitutes sagacity. He was short, stocky, balding, with a pudgy nose, and was extremely jovial, eager to converse with whomever showed interest in following along. His conversations inevitably led to a consideration of what is the highest Good, and how a man might live so as to attain to it. Socrates had found in himself that highest Good, and he knew that it was That alone which was the purpose and foundation of all man's actions; and that otherwise there was no stable or reliable foundation for morality, or for judging the rightness or wrongness of any action or motive.

But he was no preacher, nor was he one to reveal everything he knew just like that. He led each of his listeners by just so much of a string of reason as each could comfortably follow, until they were led at last to agree to

conclusions to which, theretofore, they would never have agreed. He was so gentle, so extremely kind, that even the meanest sycophant was brought by him to new levels of understanding simply by following the Ariadne-thread of logic by which he was led out of the dark labyrinth of confusion and into the clear light of truth. For Socrates, a “philosopher” was just what the word implies, “a lover of wisdom”; and wisdom meant the following of truth. To everyone who met him and spoke with him, it was evident that Socrates had obtained something very like wisdom, that he knew something that elevated him far beyond the level of ordinary men and made him holy.

Had Socrates lived in India, he would have been regarded as a “Guru”; or had he lived in Persia some centuries later, he would have been known as a “Pir.” Whatever we may call him, he was one of that small band of perfected men who are intimate with God, and who remain on earth to teach others of the path to blessedness. Like others in a similar position, Socrates was greatly misunderstood in his own time—and very often he himself was the cause; for he liked to obscure his own merits and his own knowledge of God, or “the Good,” as he liked to say. He had rather question others, and by his skilled questioning, lead the young men who gathered ‘round him to give birth within themselves to a new insight, a clearer understanding, of the truth. In this, he regarded himself as a sort of midwife, aiding in the birth of wisdom in the souls of his charges.

If pressed, Socrates pretended ignorance of divine knowledge; he was cautious, not only on account of the danger of incurring the wrath of powerful people who were always eyeing him suspiciously, but as a means of encouraging his listeners, as fellow voyagers, to set sail with him on the search for truth. He was so humble, so genial, so lovable, that no one but the very proud and vengeful could find the least fault in him. Yet, with all that, he was a man of uncompromising honesty and virtue, guided incessantly from within by his “guiding spirit.” Little wonder that his devoted followers saw in him the model of human perfection.

He seemed, like all true spiritual teachers, to speak in one way to his casual listeners, and quite another way with his intimate disciples. Out on the promenades, he would never pretend to any knowledge of the one Source of the universe; he was fond of letting all the public know that his only wisdom lay in knowing his own ignorance. But when he was alone with the young men who were his closest and most discerning students, he explained the highest vision to them, and by figures and allusions he sought to explain to

them what it was like. One of his most famous such allegorical references to the vision of “the Good” appears in Book VII of Plato’s *Republic*. There, Plato depicts Socrates in a conversation with Glaucon and Adimantus explaining his famous ‘Analogy of the Cave,’ in which he portrays allegorically the difference in perception between one who has seen the Source of all manifestation and those who see only the appearances of appearances.

Socrates asks his listeners to imagine a dark underground cave where men are sitting chained, with their backs to a fire, before which are paraded all sorts of figures, so that the shadow-projections of these figures are shown on a wall before the eyes of the chained men. The men chained do not see the actual figures moving behind them, but only the shadows playing on the wall before them; and this they regard as the true reality. Next, Socrates asks his listeners to imagine the state of one who, breaking free from his bonds, was to look ‘round and discover the fire and the figures and realize that his previous estimate of reality had been very superficial and inadequate. Then, says Socrates, suppose that this newly freed man was to wander upward, out of the cave altogether, and reach the light of day, and discover the very Sun which is the source of that light; imagine his delight and freedom compared to his previous state! “But then imagine once more,” says Socrates, “such a man suddenly coming out of the Sunlight to be replaced in his old situation, would he not be certain to have his eyes full of darkness?”

“To be sure,” answered Glaucon.

“And if there were a contest, and he had to compete in measuring the shadows with the prisoners who had never moved out of the cave, while his sight was still weak and before his eyes had become steady, ...would he not be ridiculous? Men would say that up he went and down he came without his eyes, and that it was better not even to think of ascending; and if anyone tried to free another and lead him up to the light, let them only catch the offender, and they would put him to death.”

“No question,” he said.

“This entire image you may now apply, Glaucon, to the previous argument. The prison house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the Sun, and you will not misapprehend me if

you interpret the journey upward to be the ascent of the soul into the intelligible world [of the Spirit], according to my poor belief, which at your desire I have expressed—whether rightly or wrongly God knows. But whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge, the realm of “the Good” appears last of all and is seen only with an effort. And, when seen, It is also understood to be the universal Cause of all things beautiful and right, Father of light and Lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate Source of reason and truth in the intelligible world; and to be the Power on which he who would act rationally either in public or private life must have his eye fixed.”

“I agree,” said Glaucon, “as far as I can understand you.”

“Moreover,” [said Socrates,] “you must not wonder that those who attain this height are unwilling to descend to human affairs; for their souls are always hastening into the upper world where they desire to dwell...”<sup>72</sup>

Thus, did Socrates describe, in veiled terms, the state of his own consciousness; and thus, did he prophesy the fate his contemporaries held in store for him.

In 405 B.C.E., after the Peloponnesian war and the Athenian defeat by Sparta, Athens was racked by internal civil war, and only in 403 B.C.E. settled back into her previous democratic government. A few of the perpetrators of this seditious war, who were among the famous “thirty” who had attempted to seize the government, had previously been frequent visitors to Socrates; and though he had no connection whatsoever with the political activities of these men, in the minds of some, Socrates was, as their previous mentor, the inspirer of their deeds. It was under such volatile circumstances that Socrates was brought to trial in 399 B.C.E. on charges of “disrespect for the gods whom the state recognizes, of introducing new divinities, and of corrupting the young.” The penalty demanded was “death.”

It was a private citizen, a self-righteous poet by the name of Meletus, who brought charges against Socrates, and who was supported in his suit by Antes, a wealthy statesman, and another by the name of Lycon. In the courts of Athens at that time, any man could bring charges against another, and take

him to court, which suit would be heard by a large jury made up of citizens drafted to serve in that capacity. It is this trial and the subsequent condemnation and execution of Socrates which is the subject of some of the most exquisite and ennobling literature possessed of man. Socrates, himself, wrote nothing, but his student, Plato, became his voice; creating some of the greatest works of Western philosophy ever made, Plato told the story of his beloved Socrates, immortalizing his life and his words in his recorded dialogues.

Socrates gave a beautiful speech in his own defense which is immortalized in Plato's *Apology*; in it, he points out that it is not Meletus, nor Anytus, who are his persecutors, but the jealousy and fear of the entire populace. "They have been fatal," says Socrates, "to a great many other innocent men, and I suppose will continue to be so; there is no likelihood that they will stop at me."<sup>73</sup>

Here is a portion of that speech of Socrates to his judges:

Suppose, then, that you acquit me, and pay no attention to Anytus, who has said that either I should not have appeared before this court at all, or, since I have appeared here, I must be put to death, because if I once escaped, your sons would all immediately become utterly demoralized by putting the teaching of Socrates into practice. Suppose that, in view of this, you said to me, 'Socrates, on this occasion we shall disregard Anytus and acquit you, but only on one condition, that you give up spending your time on this quest and stop philosophizing. If we catch you going on in the same way, you shall be put to death.' Well, supposing, as I said, that you should offer to acquit me on these terms, I should reply: 'Gentlemen, I am your very grateful and devoted servant, but I owe a greater obedience to God than to you; and so long as I draw breath and have my faculties, I shall never stop practicing philosophy and exhorting you and elucidating the truth for everyone that I meet. I shall go on saying, in my usual way, "My very good friend, you are an Athenian and belong to a city which is the greatest and most famous in the world for its wisdom and strength. Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honor, and give no attention or thought to Truth and understanding, and the

perfection of your soul?" And if any of you disputes this and professes to care about these things, I shall not at once let him go or leave him; no, I shall question him and examine him and test him; and if it appears that, in spite of his profession, he has made no real progress towards goodness, I shall reprove him for neglecting what is of supreme importance and giving his attention to trivialities. I shall do this to everyone that I meet, young or old, foreigner or fellow-citizen; but especially to you, my fellow-citizens, inasmuch as you are closer to me in kinship.

This I do assure you, is what my God commands; and it is my belief that no greater good has ever befallen you in this city than my service to my God; for I spend all my time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to make your first and chief concern not for your bodies nor for your possessions, but for the highest welfare of your souls, proclaiming as I go, "Wealth does not bring goodness, but goodness brings wealth and every other blessing, both to the individual and to the state." Now, if I corrupt the young by this message, the message would seem to be harmful; but if anyone says that my message is different from this, he is talking nonsense.

And so, gentlemen, I would say, 'You can please yourselves whether you listen to Anytus or not; and whether you acquit me or not, you know that I am not going to alter my conduct, not even if I have to die a hundred deaths.' <sup>74</sup>

The jury, made up of Athenian citizens, nonetheless found Socrates guilty as charged; and, perhaps offended by his offer to pay a mere one hundred drachmas as a fine, handed down the death penalty to him. Socrates, before they led him away, had this to say:

You too, gentlemen of the jury, must look forward to death with confidence, and fix your minds on this one belief, which is certain: that nothing can harm a good man either in life or after death, and his fortunes are not a matter of indifference to the gods. This present experience of mine has not come about accidentally; I am quite clear that the

time had come when it was better for me to die and be released from my distractions. That is why my sign [his guiding spirit] never turned me back.

For my own part, I bear no grudge at all against those who condemned me and accused me, although it was not with this kind intention that they did so, but because they thought that they were hurting me; and that is culpable of them. However, I ask them to grant me one favor. When my sons grow up, gentlemen, if you think that they are putting money or anything else before goodness, take your revenge by plaguing them as I plagued you; and if they fancy themselves for no reason, you must scold them just as I scolded you, for neglecting the important things and thinking that they are good for something when they are good for nothing. If you do this, I shall have had justice at your hands, both I myself and my children.

Now it is time that we were going, I to die, and you to live; but which of us has the happier prospect is unknown to anyone but God. <sup>75</sup>

It was necessary, however, for Socrates to wait nearly a month in jail before his execution, due to the occurrence of a holiday commemorating the ancient tribute of young men paid to king Minos, and during which no executions were allowed. So, while he awaited the return of the ships from Delos marking the end of the holiday, Socrates spent his time with his friends and disciples who were allowed to visit with him in his cell. At last, the day of execution arrived; a cup of hemlock was brought to him by a guard, and Socrates unhesitatingly took and drained the cup. Phaedo, who narrates the story of Socrates' last hours in Plato's *Phaedo*, tells what happened after that:

Up till this time most of us had been fairly successful in keeping back our tears; but when we saw that he was drinking, that he had actually drunk it, we could do so no longer; in spite of myself the tears came pouring out, so that I covered my face and wept broken-heartedly—not for him, but for my own calamity in losing such a friend. Crito had given up even before me and had gone out when

he could not restrain his tears. But Apollodorus, who had never stopped crying even before, now broke out into such a storm of passionate weeping that he made everyone in the room break down, except Socrates himself, who said: “Really, my friends, what a way to behave! Why, that was my main reason for sending away the women, to prevent this sort of disturbance; because I am told that one should make one’s end in a tranquil frame of mind. Calm yourselves and try to be brave.”

This made us feel ashamed, and we controlled our tears. Socrates walked about, and presently, saying that his legs were heavy, lay down on his back—that was what the man [the guard] recommended. The man kept his hand on Socrates, and after a little while examined his feet and legs; then pinched his foot hard and asked if he felt it. Socrates said no. Then he did the same to his legs; and moving gradually upwards in this way let us see that he was getting cold and numb. Presently he felt him again and said that when it reached the heart, Socrates would be gone.

The coldness was spreading about as far as his waist when Socrates uncovered his face—for he had covered it up—and said (they were his last words): “Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius. See to it, and don’t forget.”

“No, it shall be done,” said Crito. “Are you sure that there is nothing else?”

Socrates made no reply to this question, but after a little while he stirred; and when the man uncovered him, his eyes were fixed. When Crito saw this, he closed his mouth and eyes.

Such, Echecrates, was the end of our comrade, who was, we may fairly say, of all those whom we knew in our time, the bravest and also the wisest and most upright man.<sup>76</sup>

Here is what his contemporary admirer, Xenophon, had to say of Socrates

after his death:

Of all who knew Socrates and what he was like, all those who seek virtue even now continue to long for him, for he was the most helpful in aiding them in their quest for virtue. To me, as I describe what Socrates was like, he was so reverent that he could do nothing without counsel from the gods; so just that he never hurt anyone at all, but aided all who dealt with him; so self-controlled that he never chose pleasures in place of something better; so prudent that he never erred in distinguishing what was better from what was worse, and he never needed another's counsel, but was independent in his decisions about good and evil, and skilled in testing others, showing them their mistakes, and urging them toward virtue and true nobility. He seemed to be what the noblest and happiest man would be. And if anyone is not satisfied with this, let him compare the character of other men with what I have described, and then let him judge. <sup>77</sup>

Socrates was a true and devoted "son" of God; he had known the eternal Truth of the universe, but like the hypothetical 'liberated man' in his parable of the Cave, he was constrained to show men the way out of darkness in very cautious and considered ways. To many, the figure of Socrates remains a mystery, but to the knowers of God, his teaching and the manner of his life are clear as crystal, and he is dearly beloved; for only those who have trod the same path and realized the same Truth can know how pure was his soul and how wonderful his task in life and in death.

Here are a few selected quotes from Socrates as preserved by his disciple, Plato:

The Ruler of the universe has ordered all things with a view to the excellence and preservation of the whole; and each part, as far as may be, does and suffers what is proper to it. And one of these portions of the universe is thine own, unhappy man, which, infinitesimal though it be, is ever striving towards the whole; and you do not seem to be aware that this and every other creation is in order so that the life of the whole may be blessed; and that you are

created for the sake of the whole, and not the whole for the sake of you.<sup>78</sup>

As for the sovereign part of the human soul, we should consider that God gave it to be the Divinity in each one, it being that which, inasmuch as we are a plant not of an earthly but a heavenly growth, raises us from earth to our brethren in heaven.

When one is always occupied with the cravings of desire and ambition which he is eagerly striving to satisfy, all his thoughts must be mortal, and, as far as it is possible to become such, he must be mortal every whit, because he has made great his mortal part. But he who has been earnest in the love of knowledge and true wisdom and has exercised his intellect more than any other part, must have thoughts immortal and divine. If he attains Truth, in so far as human nature is capable of sharing in immortality, he must altogether be immortal. And since he is ever cherishing the divine power, and has duly honored the Divinity within, he will be supremely happy.<sup>79</sup>

The true lover of knowledge is always striving after Being—that is his nature; he will not rest at those multitudinous particular phenomena whose existence is in appearance only but will go on—the keen edge will not be blunted, nor the force of his passion abate until he have attained the knowledge of the true nature of all essence by a sympathetic and kindred power in the soul. And by that power, drawing near and becoming one with very Being, ... he will know and truly live and increase. Then, and only then, will he cease from his travail.<sup>80</sup>

The immortality of the soul is demonstrated by many proofs; but to see it as it really is—not as we now behold it, marred by communion with the body and other miseries—you must contemplate it with the eye of reason in its original purity; and then its beauty will be revealed.<sup>81</sup> ...When a person starts on the discovery of

the Absolute by the light of the reason only, without the assistance of the senses, and never desists until by pure intelligence he arrives at the perception of the absolute Good, he at last finds himself at the end of the intellectual world...<sup>82</sup>

Of that Heaven which is above the heavens what earthly poet ever did or ever will sing worthily? It is such as I will describe; for I must dare to speak the truth, when Truth is my theme. There abides the very Being with which true knowledge is concerned; the colorless, formless, intangible Essence visible only to mind, the pilot of the soul. ... Every soul which is capable of receiving the food proper to it rejoices at beholding Reality. ... She beholds Knowledge absolute, not in the form of generation or of relation, which men call existence, but Knowledge absolute in Existence absolute.<sup>83</sup>

To find the Father and Maker of this universe is most difficult, and, to declare Him, after having found Him, is impossible.<sup>84</sup>

A man must have knowledge of the Universal, formed by collecting into a unity by means of reason the many particulars of sense; this is the recollection of those things which our soul once saw while following God—when, regardless of that which we now call being, it raised its head up towards true Being. And therefore, the mind of the philosopher alone has wings; and this is just, for he is always, as far as he is able, clinging in recollection to those things in which God abides, and in beholding which, he is what He [God] is. And he who employs aright these memories is ever being initiated into perfect mysteries and he alone becomes truly perfect. But since he stands apart from human interests and is rapt in the Divine, the vulgar deem him mad and do not know he is inspired.<sup>85</sup>

He who would be dear to God must, as far as is possible, become like Him. Wherefore the temperate man and the

just is the friend of God, for he is like Him.

And this is the conclusion—that for the good man to ...continually hold converse with God by means of prayers and every kind of service, is the noblest and the best of things, and the most conducive to a happy life.<sup>86</sup>

This is that life above all others which man should live, ...holding converse with the true Beauty, simple and divine. In that communion only beholding Beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but Reality [Itself]; ...and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue, to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may. Would that be an ignoble life?<sup>87</sup>

#### IV. Plato And His Successors

Since Socrates wrote nothing, we must rely primarily on the *Dialogues* of his student, Plato (d. 347 B.C.E.) for a formulation of his teachings. But Plato was not a mystic like his master; he was a thinker. And as so often happens when one who has not “seen” attempts to convey the teachings of a seer, a great deal is lost, and a great deal of speculation and outright misinterpretation becomes added to the original teachings. We see this same phenomenon occurring much later with the remolding of the teachings of Jesus by Paul and others of his unillumined disciples.

Plato elaborated from the mystical teachings of Socrates a full-fledged metaphysical philosophy. How much of it he invented on his own is impossible to say; but it is *his* name which is rightly attached to the metaphysical system he taught at his Academy. Plato sought to describe in detail the manner and means whereby the Divinity manifests the phenomenal world through Its Ideas. According to him, these Ideas have their own subtle forms independent of what we know as material forms, yet which produce and support the forms of the material world. He held that all particular forms, thoughts, and acts approach perfection only insofar as they approach fidelity with those original Ideal forms. It was a notion born, not of vision, but of imaginative speculation; yet it was a notion which seemed to answer some important questions, and which fired the imagination of later

philosophers as well. It offered an explanation of God's methodology, which could be comprehended by the mind of man; yet, in that very attempt to fit the magical manifestory Power of God into words comprehensible to man, all but the slightest resemblance to Reality was lost.

Plato was succeeded, indirectly, by Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.), who revolted against many of Plato's concepts, and founded his own school, the Lyceum, where he taught doctrines at yet a further remove from the mystical vision of Socrates. It is not our aim here to go into the details of the philosophies of these two men; suffice it to say that, while both upheld the idea that it was possible to attain union with and supramental knowledge of Divinity, neither had actually done so. Both, constitutionally, were thinkers, philosophers, systematists; and the names of both remain to this day synonymous with 'the epitome of intellectual attainment.'

The works of both Plato and Aristotle are magnificent monuments to the power and achievement possible to the human intellect. They analyzed and argued and deduced with a fine-tuned logic and perspicacity that has awed and inspired generations of thinkers down through the years; but while they thought much, they never came to *know*. Their lifelong efforts never brought them to the ultimate vision of Truth. It has often been said that the narrow mountain path of the mystic's ascent begins where the philosopher's broad highway leaves off. And this is true, for once that road of intellectual discrimination has led one to infer the divine nature of one's own being, one has reached its furthest access and arrived at the point of departure.

From there, the leap (facilitated by grace) must be made to a steeper and less-traveled path of inner devotion if one is to reach the summit of knowledge. The brave sojourner on this path walks quite alone, yet he is moved by an inward grace which lures him on by whisperings and caresses of love, inspiring in him a burning desire for the meeting with his Beloved at his journey's end. That summit, which is God, is hidden from the philosophers and known to the pure in heart. If one is to become a truly wise man, one must come (by His grace) to know God. For in that knowledge is true certainty and wisdom which sheds its light on all mankind, while those who presume to teach philosophy without that God-revealed knowledge, however well-meaning their endeavor, succeed, for the most part, in engendering only doubt and confusion in the world.

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- 58. Philo, *Legum Allegoriorum*, 2:86; *Ibid.*, p. 93
- 59. Philo, *De uga et inventione*, 50-52, *Ibid.*, p. 93
- 60. Philo, *De confusione linguarum*, 136-137; *Ibid.*; p. 90
- 61. Philo, *On Drunkenness*, 145f., 152
- 62. Philo, *Who Is the Heir?* 69f.
- 63. Philo, *De mutatione nominum*, 12.82
- 64. Philo, *De migratione Abrahae*, 31.169
- 65. Philo, *De specialibus legibus*, I.16
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- 67. *The Wisdom of Solomon* became a canon of the Catholic Bible but is considered apocryphal in the Protestant tradition. It purports to have been written by the Israelite ruler, Solomon [8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.], but it was actually written in the early half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. by an anonymous Hellenized Jew in Alexandria contemporary with Philo Judaeus.

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## 8. The Mystical Tradition of Platonism (Part Two)

### I. Neoplatonism

The twentieth century philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, said that “all philosophy is but so many footnotes to Plato”—and it’s certainly true that Plato furnished many of the core ideas upon which all subsequent Western philosophy draws. Plato’s main teacher and predecessor, Socrates (469-399 B.C.E.), himself drawing on the Orphic and Pythagorean teachings, had apparently been disinclined to set his thoughts in writing; rather, it was his student, Plato (427-347 B.C.E.), who, by putting his master’s teachings into the form of written conversations, or dialogues, gave voice to the Spiritual philosophy that has come to be known as Platonism.

Plato established the notion of the immortality of the Spirit, or soul, and its distinction from the body, in his Dialogue, *Phaedo*, where Socrates, while awaiting execution, assures his companions that his impending departure, as a soul, from the body was not a matter for sadness or regret:

Socrates: "In this present life, I reckon that we make the nearest approach to knowledge when we have the least possible intercourse or communion with the body, and are not surfeited with the bodily nature, but keep ourselves pure until the hour when God himself is pleased to release us. And thus, having got rid of the foolishness of the body we shall be pure and hold converse with the pure, and know of ourselves the clear light everywhere, which is no other than 'the light of truth.'

"...But O my friend, if this be true, there is great reason to hope that, going whither I go, when I have come to the end of my journey, I shall attain that which has been the pursuit of my life. And therefore, I go on my way rejoicing, and not I only, but every other man who believes that his mind has been made ready and that he is in a manner purified."

"Certainly," replied Simmias.

"And what is purification but the separation of the soul from the body, as I was saying before; the habit of the

soul gathering and collecting herself into herself from all sides out of the body; the dwelling in her own place alone, as in another life, so also in this, as far as she can; —the release of the soul from the chains of the body?"

"Very true," he said.

"...And the true philosophers, and they only, are ever seeking to release the soul. Is not the separation and release of the soul from the body their especial study?"

"That is true."

"And, as I was saying at first, there would be a ridiculous contradiction in men studying to live as nearly as they can in a state of death, and yet repining when it comes upon them." <sup>1</sup>

While here and there throughout the meandering Dialogues of Plato we may find sparkling jewels of mystical insight, we find nothing like a systematic metaphysics, or even a clear outline of a consistent metaphysical vision. But more than five hundred and fifty years after the death of Plato, the great mystic-philosopher, **Plotinus** (205-270 C.E.), born in Lycopolis, Egypt, and transplanted to Rome, would formulate a more comprehensive metaphysics, a spiritual perspective, based, not only upon the teachings of Socrates cum Plato, but upon his own visionary experience as well. It is this mystical perspective which would ultimately be labeled by scholars as *Neoplatonism* ("the new Platonism").

In the centuries prior to Plotinus, the subject of the human experience of the Divine had always been shrouded in secrecy. In ancient Greek and Roman societies, the rare and subtle experience referred to as 'mystical experience' was regarded as belonging exclusively to the secret 'mystery' schools such as the Eleusinian, Mithraic, and Orphic mystery schools. Teachings about mysticism or mystical experience could be found only among the Adepts and initiates of those secret schools. Plotinus, living in Rome in the third century of the Current Era, repeated the ancient warning that matters relating to mystical experience were "Not to be told, not to be written." The obvious reason for this is that, in the hands of the unlearned, the uninitiated, mystical

knowledge is very likely to be misinterpreted and misrepresented, and those who spoke of it ran the risk of being not only misunderstood, but persecuted, by the ignorant. No doubt, in those times, the example of Jesus was a strong deterrent to any mystics who might have thought of going public.

Though his own interior experience was certainly comparable to that of Jesus, Plotinus (living only a couple of centuries after him) knew that he could not openly announce his mystical experience to the commoners of Rome; rather, Plotinus spoke of his own mystical experience with only a few close students of philosophy, and his circle was very exclusive and very secret. Even to this day, only the few, the elite among spiritual seekers, are able to access, appreciate, and find joy in the great spiritual wisdom of Plotinus. And yet, it seems to me, there is so much benefit to be had by the entire society through an open sharing of spiritual knowledge by those to whom it is revealed, and so much loss accrued to the whole society without it, that I believe the benefit of sharing this knowledge greatly outweighs the risk of its corruption by the foolish. Great, liberating, knowledge is not to be hidden and relegated to whispers behind doors. The more it is shared, the more accepted it will become, and understanding will increase in even greater circles, expanding to benefit more of those who would, otherwise, suffer in the dark and lonely blindness of ignorance. It seems to me that the world has already done that for long enough!

Both Jesus and Plotinus had experienced the union of the soul with God. Jesus attempted to explain his experience in the language and context of his Judaic heritage; Plotinus attempted to explain it in the language and context of Platonist philosophy. Plotinus had experienced ‘the vision of God’, and, in his attempt to explain it, he formulated a metaphysics relying heavily upon the terminology of Plato that was still current at the time. However, it is not a metaphysics based *solely* on a prior metaphysics or on rational speculation, like some others, but one that is based primarily on his own unitary vision in the contemplative state, which vision he is said to have experienced on at least four occasions.

Following Plato’s metaphysical lead, Plotinus describes the one Spirit as emanating or radiating itself in every direction to inhabit the subtle and manifest universe. He describes the successive realms of Spirit as three: The One, The Divine Mind (*Nous*), and Soul, in a manner analogous to the successive stages of radiation expanding from the Sun. Here are his own

words:

"There exists a Principle which transcends Being; this is The One, ...Upon the One follows immediately the Principle which is at once Being and the Divine Mind. Third comes the Principle, Soul. ... Thus, our soul, too, is a divine thing, belonging to another order than sense;<sup>2</sup>

"There is, we may say, something that is the Center; about It, a circle of light shed from It; then, around Center and first circle alike, another circle, light from light ..." <sup>3</sup>

It must be noted that, in this representation by Plotinus, these three "principles" are not to be thought of as separate, independent entities; it is a *causal* progression only. It is the One whose creative Power is called 'the Divine Mind'; and it is the creative Power of the One whose radiance spreads as Soul. Despite the names given to these "layers", there is never anything but the One, and only the One, filling all.

'The One' represents for Plotinus the transcendent Absolute, the Unmanifest Ground. It is prior to the creative activity of the Divine Mind; and so, in the One, the universe of time and space does not even exist. The One is the absolute Void, the indescribable Godhead. It is the ultimate Identity of all. In the Vedic tradition, It is called "Brahman," in the Taoist tradition, the "Tao," and in the Christian writings of Meister Eckhart, "*Gottheit*." The *active* principle, the creative Power of the One, Plotinus calls 'The Divine Mind' (*Nous*). And 'Soul' (*psyche*) is the radiation of the Divine Mind into the intelligible as well as the phenomenal universe.

Plotinus pointed out in his *Enneads* that the Absolute, who is the ultimate Source and foundation of all, cannot be described or even named accurately, since He/It is prior to all qualities, prior even to the designation of 'Being'. Nonetheless, he names It "the One", or he uses Plato's previous designation, "the Good." But he is always quick to stipulate that any descriptive name limits and qualifies the Absolute, and thereby misrepresents It:

"The All-Transcendent, utterly void of multiplicity, is Unity's Self, independent of all else... It is the great Beginning, wholly and truly One. All life belongs to It. <sup>4</sup> ...The One is, in truth,

beyond all statement; whatever you say would limit It; the All Transcendent has no name.<sup>5</sup> ... [It] is That which is the truly Existent. ... It is the Source from which all that appears to exist derives that appearance.<sup>6</sup>

"... Everywhere one and whole, It is at rest throughout. But... in Its very non-action It magnificently operates and in Its very self-being It produces everything by Its Power.<sup>7</sup>

"... This Absolute is none of the things of which It is the Source; Its nature is that nothing can be affirmed of It—not existence, not essence, not life—It transcends all these. But possess yourself of It by the very elimination of [individual] being, and you hold a marvel! Thrusting forward to This, attaining, and resting in Its content, seek to grasp It more and more, understanding It by that intuitive thrust alone, but knowing Its greatness by the beings that follow upon It and exist by Its power."<sup>8</sup>

Today, we use the word “Godhead”, after Meister Eckhart’s *Gottheit*, to represent the Absolute, ineffable One, with the understanding that this too is merely a shorthand pointer to That which can never be conceived or expressed by the human mind. God may be directly *experienced*, but never adequately captured in thought or language. For this reason, a clear and rational comprehension or description of the One is concealed from our understanding. An ancient saying, quoted by both Plato and Saint Paul, reminds us that “We see now but vaguely, as through a darkened glass; but then [“then,” meaning when we have direct *vision* of God,] we shall see as though face to face.”

While the One cannot be described or clearly comprehended by the intellect, nonetheless, we can get a sense of It by analogy with our own nature, since we are made in Its image. Like the eternal Consciousness, our own individual consciousness is one and unchanging, while the energetic outpouring of thought is multiple and subject to flux. Our thoughts are contained as potentiality in our own consciousness, which is their substratum and source, and yet these thoughts, even when given expression, do not in any way affect that consciousness, any more than clouds passing through the sky alters or affects the sky. This, I believe, is analogous to the unity of the One and Its Creative Power; for while the One remains transcendent, unaltered, and unaffected, Its energetic outpouring of creativity continues

apace.

And so, we are able to recognize these two aspects of our own minds as in some way comparable to the two aspects of God: The One (the pure Absolute), and His Creative Power. They are not two separate entities, of course, any more than those two aspects of our own minds are separated. They are one, yet they have a semblance of duality, since one is causally primary to the other, just as, while the Sun and the light it radiates are one, the Sun is primary to its radiance.

"The Divine Mind is the first Act of The One and the first Existence; The One remains stationary within Itself, but the Divine Mind acts in relation to It and, as it were, lives about It. And the Soul, outside, circles around the Divine Mind, and by gazing upon it, seeing into the depths of it, sees God <sup>9</sup> through it.

According to Plotinus, we may think of Soul as a spreading Field radiating from the Divine Mind. It is the outspreading light of Divine Intelligence, the invisible radiation of the Divine Consciousness, that manifests as the intelligible (spiritual) world. Soul is one undivided radiance, and though it contains souls, they are as yet unmanifest, undifferentiated. We must remember that, for Plotinus, Soul does not consist of an ethereal substance; it is a projection of the conscious intelligence of the Divine Mind.

Unlike the conception of Moses, in which God's Spirit, or Soul, had been imparted to man alone via His breath, Plotinus regarded Soul as a radiation of God's Spirit imparted to the entire universe, permeating and residing in every existent form. Here is Plotinus' vision of this Divine Soul emanation in his own words:

"Let every soul recall, then, at the outset the truth that soul is the author of all living things, that it has breathed the life into them all, whatever is nourished by earth and sea, all the creatures of the air, the divine stars in the sky; it is the maker of the sun; itself formed and ordered this vast heaven and conducts all that rhythmic motion; and it is a principle distinct from all these to which it gives law and movement and life, and it must of necessity be more

honorable than they, for they gather or dissolve as soul brings them life or abandons them, but soul, since it never can abandon itself, is of eternal being.

"How life was purveyed to the universe of things and to the separate beings in it may be thus conceived:

"...Let not merely the enveloping body be at peace, body's turmoil stilled, but all that lies around, earth at peace, and sea at peace, and air and the very heavens. Into that heaven, all at rest, let the great Soul be conceived to roll inward at every point, penetrating, permeating, from all sides pouring in its light. As the rays of the sun throwing their brilliance upon a lowering cloud make it gleam all gold, so the Soul entering the material expanse of the heavens has given life, has given immortality. What was abject it has lifted up; and the heavenly system, moved now in endless motion by the Soul that leads it in wisdom, has become a living and a blessed thing. The Soul domiciled within, it takes worth where, before the Soul, it was stark body—clay and water—or, rather, the blankness of Matter, the absence of Being...

"The Soul's nature and power will be brought out more clearly, more brilliantly, if we consider how it envelops the heavenly system and guides all to its purposes: for it has bestowed itself upon all that huge expanse so that every interval, small and great alike, all has been ensouled.

"...By the power of the Soul the manifold and diverse heavenly system is a unit; through Soul this universe is a god. And the sun is a god because it is ensouled; so too the stars; and whatsoever we ourselves may be, it is all in virtue of Soul...

"This, by which the gods are divine, must be the oldest God of them all: and our own soul is of that same Ideal

nature, so that to consider it, purified, freed from all accruement, is to recognize in ourselves that same value which we have found Soul to be, honorable above all that is bodily." <sup>10</sup>

For us, the most obvious manifestation of God's Spirit, or Soul, is our very life and consciousness; but if Plotinus is correct—that Soul is the guiding Intelligence in all of creation—then Spirit, or Soul, must be regarded as a presence informing the very evolution of matter and the cosmos from the Beginning. For Plotinus, Soul is the intelligent organizing principle that impresses its order upon all the matter in the universe. In the language of contemporary knowledge, we would say that Soul is the all-pervading Intelligence that coalesces wave-particles into structures such as atoms, molecules, cells; and organizes them into microbiological structures such as amoeba and bacteria, into photosynthesizing vegetation and aquatic creatures, becoming the very life-pulse of all that lives and moves. Matter alone has no abilities such as these; it is Soul that permeates the expanding heavens and earth, bringing living organization into matter and enabling replication and evolutionary change. Soul is the guiding intelligence, the evolutionary force, and the breath of Life permeating all the universe.

The organizing influence of Soul in the structuring of the material universe, on either the microcosmic or macrocosmic level, is not empirically evident; but cumulatively, the various "fine-tuned" developments in the ordering of the simplest atoms to the grandest galaxies leads us to discern a purposeful intelligence at work that has been recognized even by hardened empiricists, who have dubbed it "the anthropic principle". This principle derives from the increasing recognition on the part of scientific observers that nature appears from the beginning, at every step, and in countless ways, to be teleologically structured with an innate intention toward the emergence of human life-forms. May we not accept this principle as evidence of the presence of an invisible guiding intelligence such as that Plotinus labeled "Soul"?

We may also wonder if Soul, the all-pervading Intelligence of God, is, indeed, the "unified force" responsible for the manifestation of the weak, strong, electromagnetic, and gravitational forces, binding the elements of this universe together. Could it also explain the phenomenon of quantum

interconnectedness known as ‘quantum entanglement’, which requires a medium of transmission allowing for the instantaneous relaying of information? Mightn’t this currently unexplained phenomenon also be attributable to an all-pervading consciousness extending throughout the universe, such as that Plotinus refers to as ‘Soul’?

An all-pervading consciousness permeating all the universe may be difficult to recognize in what we regard as *inert* matter, but what of living forms? A mother’s ovum becomes impregnated by the father’s sperm, and a single cell is formed in her uterus. The cell divides and divides again and again. Some of the cells become eyes; others become fingers; others become brain cells, others blood or ears. Who tells each cell what it is to become? How does it know where to go, and what form it is to take? Biologists haven’t a clue. Perhaps it is an invisible intelligence that operates within each cell of the nascent embryo to direct and guide its formation—something akin to what we’ve described as an all-pervasive Soul.

And if that conscious Soul lives throughout the universe, in the billions of galaxies, and in the countless stars and planets, then our own soul is connected to and part of that universal Soul. No doubt, it will one day be universally understood that the archetypal energies and angular relationships of the proximate heavenly bodies do indeed correspond meaningfully to the physical and psychical activities of humanity on earth through the medium of an all-pervasive Soul. Such correspondences do not operate by any law of physics, but by a universal sympathy too subtle for physical measurement. There have always been a few who have been aware of and understood these meaningful correspondences, but the universal comprehension of their full significance we must leave to future generations.

What is currently apparent to most of us, however, is that Soul is the life-force that transforms inert matter into living, breathing entities; and that Soul is the conscious intelligence that stirs the minds of men, acting as an evolutionary force to lead them to the knowledge of their true source and being, their own all-pervading Divine Self. This pervasion of the material universe by Soul is at the foundation of Plotinus’ metaphysical vision. In his vision, Soul, emanated from the Divine Mind, has no physical parameters; It does not consist of mass or energy; It is not a substance that extends as a radiation into space. It is entirely beyond comparison with physical spatio-

temporal phenomena. And yet, because our language is grounded in phenomenal temporality, and we have only these language tools in use when attempting to convey the concept of a noumenal Soul, we are often at a loss to even formulate a clear conception of Soul.

One might reasonably ask, “Is it even necessary for God to extend throughout space as Soul in order to manifest in bodies? Isn’t He already all-pervasive, and inherent in everything that exists?” And the answer is “Yes, He is all-pervasive throughout the universe—and it is just this all-pervasiveness of God that we call ‘Soul’”.

Unfortunately, however, “Soul” is a word that carries with it some negative overtones for many of us. To many, it suggests a distinct personal entity; or we may be reminded of the misty imaginings conjured up during the religious instructions of our childhood. It is a word that has dwindled from our modern vocabulary due to such associations, and due also to its seeming vagueness. But let us understand “Soul”, as Plotinus did, as a term intended to represent the ineffable Intelligence that wafts from the Divine Mind, pervading everything, invisibly present in every place, enlivening every life-form, imbuing us with vitality, consciousness and intelligence; and constituting the medium connecting us to God. Soul is invisible and immaterial; it cannot even be conceived of or imagined, and yet it is impossible to deny that such a Divine principle exists, and operates, and rules over all. It is in fact the one Consciousness in which the universe and all its contents resides. And so, if we must represent this Divine universal presence with a word, let us agree to call it “Soul.”

Soul pervades, and it is the universe of time, space and form that is pervaded; and that too is His production. But, unlike Soul, which is the eternal radiance of God’s very Consciousness and Being, the material universe is made of a transient form-producing burst of Divine Energy.

So, we must see that, in Plotinus’ vision, as well as in the vision of the Judaic scriptures, it is not the material form that constitutes our true and eternal identity, but it is, rather, our Divine soul that is our eternal source of life and joy, and is indeed a ray of the one eternal Consciousness, and the link by which we are connected to the one eternal Self, by which we may,

with His grace, ascend to the knowledge of our identity with that highest Divinity.

Here is **Plotinus** on the "Return" of the Soul to Its Source in the mystical vision:

"That which the soul must seek, that which sheds Its light upon the Divine Mind, leaving Its mark wherever It falls, surely we need not wonder if It has the power to draw [all back] to Itself, calling [the soul] back from every wandering to rest before It. From It came all and so there is nothing mightier; all is feeble before It." <sup>11</sup>

"This Light [from the Highest] shining within the soul enlightens it; that is, it makes the soul intellective, working it into likeness with itself, the Light above. Think of the traces of this Light upon the soul, then say to yourself that such, and more beautiful and broader and more radiant, is the Light itself. Thus, you will approach to the nature of the Divine Mind and the Spirit-realm, for it is this Light, Itself, lit from above, which gives the soul its brighter life." <sup>12</sup>

"We may know we have had the vision when the soul has suddenly taken Light. This Light is from the Supreme and is the Supreme. ...The soul remains unlit without that vision; lit, it possesses what it sought. And this is the true end set before the soul, to take that Light, to see the Supreme by the Supreme and not by the light of any other principle: to see the Supreme which is also the means to the vision; for that which illumines the soul is That which it is to see, just as it is by the Sun's own light that we see the Sun.

But how is this to be accomplished?

Let all else go." <sup>13</sup>

"Suppose the soul to have attained: The Highest has come to her, or rather has revealed Its presence; she has turned away from all about her and made herself apt, beautiful to

the utmost, brought into likeness with the Divine by those preparings and adornings which come unbidden to those growing ready for the vision. She has seen that presence suddenly manifesting within her, for there is nothing between. Here is no longer a duality but a two-in-one; for, so long as the presence holds, all distinction fades. It is as lover and beloved here [on earth], in a copy of that union, long to blend. The soul has now no further awareness of being in body and will give herself no foreign name, not man, not living being, not Being, not All. Any observation of such things falls away; the soul has neither time nor taste for them. This she sought and This she has found and on This she looks and not upon herself; and who she is that looks she has not leisure to know.

“Once There she will barter for This nothing the universe holds; not though one would make over the heavens entire to her. There is nothing higher than this, nothing of more good. Above This there is no passing; all the rest, however lofty, lies on the downward path. She is of perfect judgment and knows that This was her quest, that nothing is higher. Here can be no deceit; where could she come upon [something that is] truer than the Truth? And the Truth that she affirms, she is herself; but all the affirmation is later and is silent. In this happiness she knows beyond delusion that she is happy; for this is no affirmation of an excited body but of a soul become again what she was in the time of her early joy. All that she had welcomed of old—office, power, wealth, beauty, knowledge—of all she tells her scorn as she never could, had she not found their better. Linked to This she can fear no disaster, not even if she has had the vision but once. Let everything about her fall to pieces, she wouldn’t mind if only she might be wholly with This, so huge [is] the happiness she has won to.”<sup>14</sup>

It was these early figures, then, and most especially the great mystic-philosopher, Plotinus, who helped to establish the foundations of Western

mystical theology that would be reiterated and expanded upon by the Christian and Islamic mystics of later centuries.

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## 9. The Mystical Tradition of Christianity (Part One)

### I. The Story of Jesus

The story of Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament of the Bible is a true story—well, most of it is anyway. The virgin birth and the resurrection were added by well-meaning zealots, but the rest is factual.

Little is known or has been related about the life of Jesus prior to his great experience at a baptism in the river Jordan. When Jesus was baptized in his late twenties by the baptizing sage, John, he received the gift of God's grace, and his spiritual vision was opened. That vision revealed to him the spiritual nature of this world and all that's in it. He, himself, he realized, was made of God and was nothing else but God. He was suddenly aware that he was all-embracing Spirit, no longer confined solely to this Jesus body, but existing everywhere, in the clouds, in the soil, in the stars, and in the creatures of the wood. It was a startling revelation, awakening in him a new awareness that he and all beings were contained in and consist of the all-pervasive Divine being.

But for that *experience* at the river Jordan, no one would have ever heard the name of Jesus and there would not have been a Christianity. But that mystical experience *did* occur in that young man—a purely subjective experience—that he later told many people of; and it was because of that unmistakably Divine experience that Jesus was to initiate his mission of announcing to everyone the amazing truth that had been revealed to him. The current cultural expectations of a coming Savior were already rampant, and Jesus was later to be seen by many as the fulfilment of those cultural expectations, but in fact, he was simply a young Palestinian who experienced a Divine revelation.

In the days to come, he would say to his comrades, "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me,"<sup>1</sup> and "I and my Father are one."<sup>2</sup> He said this as one who had observed a new empirical fact and was declaring his astounding discovery. But it was difficult for anyone who had not experienced that divine revelation to grasp the truth of what he was saying.

Jesus' words were a true reflection of the Divine revelation that occurred within him, and yet it is easy to see that his words could be offensive to those with strongly held traditional religious beliefs. But Jesus was totally

convinced that it was his God-given mission to relate to the people the knowledge that had been revealed in him. However, a group of religious 'authorities' made it their mission to put an end to his public pronouncements, and they incited the prelate of the occupying Roman forces to arrest Jesus for sedition against the state, a crime punishable by death by crucifixion.

After Jesus was cruelly killed at the insistence of the ignorant mob, his followers, having remembered his words but unable to fully comprehend their meaning, became convinced that he had not been a mere mortal, but was undoubtedly the very incarnation of God. A few of these followers hastily hatched a plot: it was a simple matter to move Jesus' body under cover of dark to an undisclosed grave, and the imaginations of the superstitious villagers would do the rest. Another of the group served as a biographer who fashioned a lovely story of how God visited Jesus' mother, while she was still a virgin, and caused her to conceive him supernaturally (even though she had already had numerous children by the time of Jesus' birth).

It was not long before Jesus was officially declared by his followers to be the *bona fide* Son of God, and a suitable theology was constructed to reflect his divinity. However, by their counterfeit theology, the followers unwittingly put an end to the significance of Jesus' observation of his spiritual nature, for obviously that observation applied only to God-men like him, and not to ordinary meat-bodied people like the rest of us.

Then, after a couple of centuries, along came others who experienced the same revelation that all this is God's appearance in form, and they too would say: "I am in God, and God is in me. I and the Father are one." But this time, no one claimed that they are Messiahs—not even them. So, this cast a different light on what was believed about Jesus. Now, there are a number of guys saying the same thing, though none of them claimed to be a special incarnation of God, but just ordinary men. Clearly, it was not necessary to be a God or a relative of God in order to be visited by this revelation. But can the vision of these men be true? Can it possibly be true that all of us are made of God-stuff? Can it be that we really are living in 'the Kingdom of God'? That we are in Him, and that He is in fact our very self?

I suggest that we look carefully at what young Jesus said. Look at what he actually said! He was telling us way back then of our true spiritual nature.

But no one who had not experienced that revelation for themselves could understand what he was saying. Now, two thousand years later, there have been many all over the world who have had the same revelatory experience and have declared the same truth that Jesus expressed. How many more will need to experience this revelation and make the same declaration before we begin to understand? Only time will tell.

## II. The Mystical Experience of Jesus

Judaism, while proudly monotheistic, never advanced to a Nondual perspective. The patriarchal figures, Abraham and Moses, were said to have spoken with God, but neither is said to have experienced *oneness with God*; that is, they never experienced their own identity as Divine. And since orthodox Judaism refuses to abrogate the authority of the patriarchs, a strict doctrinal separation between God and His creation is maintained, and the possibility of the “union” of man and God is disavowed; though, in recent times, scattered mystics of the esoteric Hasidic and Kabbalistic schools within the Judaic tradition have taught the possibility of ‘the mystical union’ with God.

When Christianity came into existence, Judaism was rightly viewed as its foundational background, since Jesus, the founder and object of Christian worship, was born and raised in the Jewish religious tradition. We have every reason to assume, therefore, that Jesus assented to the Biblical account of Creation in the book of Genesis. However, when Jesus experienced God directly, leading him to proclaim his essential unity with God, he presented a threat to the Judaic theological doctrine of the separation of man from God, and thereby aroused the ire of the Jewish orthodoxy. It wasn’t long before these religious legalists hounded and arrested Jesus and put him to death in a public manner usually reserved for enemies of the state under Roman law. Jesus had been merely an obscure Jewish mystic, but the story of his brief life and tragic death spread far and wide, and eventually inspired and raised the spiritual aspirations of generations of people all over the world.

All great religious teachers have taught according to their own intimate experience of God, their “mystical vision”—whether it is called “*samadhi*,” “*nirvana*,” “*fana*,” or “union with God.” Since there is but one ultimate Reality, which all share, each one who has experienced the Truth within has experienced that same ultimate Reality. Naturally, therefore, their teachings about it are bound to be identical<sup>3</sup> However, the languages and cultures of

the various teachers who have lived throughout history are, no doubt, different from one another. Their personalities and life-styles are different. But their vision is one, and the path they teach to it is universal. In the mystical experience, which transcends all religious traditions and cultures and languages, the Christian, the Buddhist, the Muslim, and the Vedantist alike come to the same realization: They realize the oneness of their own soul and God, the Soul of the universe. It is this very experience, which prompted Jesus, the originator of Christianity, to explain at various times to his disciples that he had known the great Unity in which he and the Father of the universe are one:

“If you knew who I am,” he said, “you would also know the Father. Knowing me, you know Him; seeing me, you see Him. Do you not understand that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? It is the Father who dwells in me doing His own work. Understand me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me.”<sup>4</sup>

This was not a personal vanity on the part of Jesus; this was a universally realizable and applicable theological perspective. This is the truth that Vedanta speaks of as “Nondualism.” The term, “Unity,” is, of course, the same in meaning; but it seems that the declaration, “not-two” is more powerfully emphatic than a mere assertion of oneness. Indeed, the word, “Unity” is often used by religionists who apply it to God, but who have not even considered the thought that they themselves are logically included in an *absolute* Unity. Nondualism, the philosophy of absolute Unity, is the central teaching, not only of Vedanta, but of all genuine seers of Truth. This position is embodied in the Vedantic assertion, *tat twam asi*, “That thou art.”

Once we begin to look at the teachings of Jesus in the light of his “mystical” experience of Unity, we begin to have a much clearer perspective on all the aspects of his teachings. His teachings, like those of the various Vedantic sages who’ve taught throughout the ages, is that the soul of man is none other than the one Divinity, none other than God; and that this Divine Identity can be experienced and known through the revelation that occurs inwardly, by the grace of God, to those who prepare and purify their minds and hearts to receive it. The words of Jesus are so well known to us from our childhood that, perhaps, they have lost their meaning through our over familiarity with them. He attempted to explain to us, with the words, “I and the Father are one,” that the “I,” our own inner awareness of self, is none other than the one Self, the one Awareness, the Lord and Father of us all.

Why, then, are we so unable to see it? Why should it be so hard for us to attain to that purity of heart, which Jesus declared so essential to Its vision? Probably because we have not really tried—not the way Jesus did, going off into the wilderness, jeopardizing everything else in his life for this one aim, focusing completely and entirely on attaining the vision of God. Not the way the Buddha did. Not the way all those who have experienced God, the eternal Self, have done. Perhaps we're not ready for such a concentrated effort just yet. Perhaps we have other desires yet to dispense with before we will be free enough to seek so high a goal. For us, perhaps, there is yet much to be done to soften the heart, so that we are pure enough to hear the call of Divine Grace. It is to such as us, for whom much yet needs to be accomplished toward the attainment of a “pure heart,” that Jesus spoke.

All of what Jesus taught to his disciples was by way of explaining to them that his real nature, and that of all men, is Divine; and that the reality of this could be realized directly. Let us look to his own words to corroborate this: In the Gospel book of John, he laments to God, “O righteous Father, the world has not known Thee. But I have known Thee.”<sup>5</sup> And, as he sat among the orthodox religionists in the Jewish temple, he said, “You say that He is your God, yet you have not known Him. But I have known Him.”<sup>6</sup> Jesus had “known” God directly at the time of his initiation by John the Baptist, and probably more deeply during his time in the wilderness; and that experience had separated him and effectively isolated him from his brothers, because he alone among his contemporaries seemed to possess this rare certain knowledge of the truth of all existence.

This is the difficult plight of all those who have been graced with “the vision of God.” It is the greatest of gifts, it is the greatest of all possible visions; and yet, because the knowledge so received is completely contrary to what all men believe regarding God and the soul, it is a terribly alienating knowledge, which brings upon its possessor the scorn and derision of all mankind. History is replete with examples of others who, having attained this saving knowledge, found the world unwilling to accept it, and ready to defend its ignorance aggressively. This circumstance is little changed today.

Because the “vision” of God was so difficult to convey to those who had not experienced it, Jesus spoke often by way of analogy or metaphor in order to make his meaning clear. He spoke of the experience of “seeing” God as entering into a realm beyond this world, a realm where only God is. In his own Aramaic language, he called this realm *malkutha*. In the Greek translation, it is *basileia*. In English, it is usually rendered as “the kingdom

of God.”

“His disciples asked him, “When will the kingdom come?” Jesus said, “It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying ‘Here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ Rather, the kingdom of the Father is [already] spread out upon the earth, and [yet] men do not see it.”<sup>7</sup>

“... Indeed, what you look forward to has already come, but you do not recognize it.”<sup>8</sup>

“The Pharisees asked him, ‘When will the kingdom of God come?’ He said, ‘You cannot tell by signs [i.e., by observations] when the kingdom of God will come. There will be no saying, “Look, here it is!” or “There it is!” For, in fact, the kingdom of God is [experienced] within you.’”<sup>9</sup>

“Jesus said, “If those who lead you say to you, “See, the kingdom is in the sky,” then the birds of the sky will have preceded you. If they say to you, “It is in the sea,” then the fish will precede you. Rather the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you [as well]. When you come to know your Self, then you [i.e., your true nature] will be known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living Father. But if you will not know your Self, you live in poverty [i.e., you live in the illusion that you are a pitiful creature far from God].”<sup>10</sup>

Another of Jesus’ metaphors utilized the terms, “Light” and “darkness” to represent the Divinity and the inherent delusion of man, respectively:

“Jesus said, ‘The world’s images are manifest to man, but the Light in them remains concealed; within the image is the Light of the Father. He becomes manifest as the images, but, as the Light, He is concealed’.”<sup>11</sup>

“He said to them, ‘There is a Light within a man of Light, and It lights up the whole world. If it does not shine [within that man], he is in darkness.’”<sup>12</sup>

*Light* and *darkness* are terms which have been used since time immemorial to represent the Divine Consciousness in man and the hazy ignorance, which obscures It. In the very first paragraph of the Gospel of John, we find an excellent explanation of these two principles, and their Greek synonyms,

*Theos and Logos.*

“In the beginning was the Logos [the creative Power of God], and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God. He [or It] was with God in the beginning. All things were made by Him; without Him nothing was made. Within Him was Life, and the Life was the Light of man. And the Light shone in the darkness, but the darkness comprehended It not.”<sup>13</sup>

A word of explanation is necessary: These two terms, “Light and “darkness,” are also indicative of the cosmic aspects of Reality; in other words, they are not only the Divine Consciousness in man and the darkness of unknowing, but they are, at a higher level, the very Godhead and Its Power of manifestation. They are those same two principles we have so often run into, called “Brahman and Maya,” “Purusha and Prakrti,” “Shiva and Shakti.” It is the Godhead in us, which provides the Light in us; it is the manifestory principle, which, in the process of creating an individual soul-mind-body, provides us with all the obscuration necessary to keep us in the dark as to our infinite and eternal Identity.

“Jesus said, ‘If they ask you, “Where did you come from?” say to them, ‘We came from the Light, the place where the Light came into being of Its own accord and established Itself and became manifest through our image.’”

“If they ask you, ‘Are you It?’ say, ‘We are Its children, and we are the elect of the living Father.’ If they ask you, ‘What is the sign of your Father in you?’ say to them, ‘It is movement and repose.’”<sup>14</sup>

“Jesus said, ‘I am the Light; I am above all that is manifest. Everything came forth from me, and everything returns to me. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift a stone, and you will find me there.’”<sup>15</sup>

Here, Jesus identifies with the Eternal Light; but it is clear that he never intended to imply that he was uniquely and exclusively identical with It; his intention was always to convey the truth that *all* men are, in essence, the transcendent Consciousness, the very Light of God, manifest in form:

“Ye *are* the Light of the world. Let your Light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and

glorify your Father which is in heaven.”<sup>16</sup>

Frequently he declared to his followers that they too would come to the same realization that he had experienced:

“I tell you this,” he said to them; “there are some of those standing here who will not taste death before they have seen the kingdom of God already come in full power.”<sup>17</sup>

“The heavens and the earth will be rolled up in your presence. And the one who lives from the living ONE will not see death. Have I not said: ‘whoever finds his Self is superior to the world?’”<sup>18</sup>

“Take heed of the living ONE while you are alive, lest you die and seek to see Him and be unable to do so.”<sup>19</sup>

“That which you have will save you if you bring It forth from yourselves. That which you do not have within you will destroy you.”<sup>20</sup>

“That which you have” is, of course, the Truth, the Light, the Divinity who manifests as you. “That which you do not have” refers to the ego, the false identity of separate individuality, which is simply a lie. It is the wrong understanding of who you are that limits you, and which prevents you from experiencing your eternal Self.

The teaching, common to all true “mystics” who have realized the Highest, is “You *are* the Light of the world! You *are* That! Identify with the Light, the Truth, for That is who you really are!” And yet Jesus did not wish that this should remain a mere matter of faith with his disciples; he wished them to realize this truth for themselves. And he taught them the method by which he had come to know God. Like all great seers, he knew both the means and the end, he knew both the One and the many. Thus, we hear in the message of Jesus an apparent ambiguity, which is necessitated by the paradoxical nature of the Reality.

In the One, the two—soul and God—play their love-game of devotion. At one moment, the soul speaks of God, its “Father”; at another moment, it is identified with God, and speaks of “I.” Likewise, in the words of Jesus to his disciples, we see this same complementarity: At one moment, he speaks of dualistic devotion in the form of prayer (“Our Father, who art in heaven”); and at another moment he asserts his oneness, his identity, with God (“Lift

the stone and I am there ...”). But he cautioned his disciples against offending others with this attitude (“If they ask you, ‘Are you It?’ say, ‘We are Its children ...’”).

At times, identifying with the One, he asserts that he has the power to grant the experience of Unity (“I shall give you what no eye has seen and what no ear has heard and what no hand has touched and what has never occurred to the human mind”).<sup>21</sup> And at other times, identifying with the human soul, he gives all credit to God, the Father (“Why do you call me good? There is no one good but the ONE, that is God.”).<sup>22</sup>

There is an interesting story that appears in both Matthew and Luke which illustrates the knowledge, from the standpoint of the individual soul, that the realization of God comes, not by any deed of one’s own, but solely by the grace of God: Jesus had just commented upon how difficult it would be for a young man, otherwise spiritually inclined, who was attached to his worldly wealth and occupations, to realize God (“It would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle”); and his disciples, who were gathered around, were somewhat disturbed by this, and asked, “Then, who *can* attain salvation?” And Jesus answered, “For man it is impossible; but for God it is possible.”

And Peter, understanding that Jesus is denying that any man, by his own efforts, can bring about that experience, but only God, by His grace, gives this enlightenment, objected: “But we here have left our belongings to become your followers!” And Jesus, wishing to assure them that any effort toward God-realization will bear its fruits in this life and in lives to come, said to them: “I tell you this; there is no one who has given up home, or wife, brothers, parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not be repaid many times over in this time, and in the time to come [will] know eternal Life.”<sup>23</sup> He could guarantee to no one that knowledge of God; that was in the hands of God. But Jesus knew that whatever efforts one makes toward God must bear their fruits in this life, and in the lives to come.

And so, throughout the teachings of Jesus, one finds these two, apparently contradictory, attitudes intermingled: the attitude of the knower, or *jnani*: (“I am the Light; I am above all that is manifest”); and the attitude of the devoted soul, or *bhakta*: (“Father, father, why hast Thou forsaken me?”). They are the two voices of the illumined man, for he is both, the transcendent Unity and the imaged soul; he has “seen” this unity in the

“mystical experience” of oneness.

Jesus had experienced the ultimate Truth; he had clearly seen and known It beyond any doubt; and he knew that the consciousness that lived as him was the one Consciousness of all. He knew that he was the living Awareness from which this entire universe is born. This was the certain, indubitable, truth; and yet Jesus found but few who could even comprehend it. For the most part, those to whom he spoke were well-meaning religionists who were incapable of accepting the profound meaning of his words. The religious orthodoxy of his time, like all such orthodoxies, fostered a self-serving lip-service to spiritual ideals, and observed all sorts of symbolic rituals, but was entirely ignorant of the fact that the ultimate reality could be directly known by a pure and devout soul, and that this was the real purpose of all religious practice.

Jesus realized, of course, that despite the overwhelming influence of the orthodox religionists, still, in his own Judaic tradition, there had been other seers of God, who had known and taught this truth. “I come,” said Jesus, “not to destroy the law [of the Prophets], but to fulfill it.”<sup>24</sup> He knew also that any person who announced that he had seen and known God would be persecuted and belittled and regarded as an infidel and a liar. In the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus is reported to have said, “He who knows the Father (the transcendent Absolute) and the Mother (the creative Principle) will be called a son-of-a-bitch!”<sup>25</sup> It seems he was making a pun on the fact that one who does *not* know his father and mother is usually referred to in this fashion; but, in his case, he had known the Father of the universe, and knew the Power (of Mother Nature) behind the entire creation, and still he was called this derisive name.

It is the common experience of all the great seers, from Lao Tze to Socrates and Heraclitus, from Plotinus and al-Hallaj to Meister Eckhart and St. John of the Cross. All were cruelly tortured and persecuted for their goodness and wisdom stemming from the ‘vision’ graciously granted by God. Jesus too found the world of men wanting in understanding; he said:

“I took my place in the midst of the world, and I went among the people. I found all of them intoxicated [with pride and ignorance]; I found none of them thirsty [for Truth]. And my soul became sorrowful for the sons of men, because they are blind in their hearts and do not have vision. Empty they came into the world, and empty

they wish to leave the world. But, for the moment, they are intoxicated; when they shake off their wine, then they will repent.”<sup>26</sup>

## NOTES AND REFERENCES:

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4. John, Gospel of, 13:40
5. *Ibid.*, 17:25.
6. *Ibid.*, 8:54.
7. *Thomas, Gospel Of*, 114; Robinson (trans. By Thomas O. Lambdin), 1977, p.138.
8. *Ibid.*, 51, p. 132.
9. Luke, Gospel Of, 17:20.
10. *Thomas, Gospel Of*, 3; Robinson, 1977, p. 126.
11. *Ibid.*, 83, p. 135.
12. *Ibid.*, 24, p. 129.
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17. Mark, Gospel Of, 9:1.
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19. *Ibid.*, 59, p. 132.
20. *Ibid.*, 70, p. 134.
21. *Ibid.*, 17, p. 128.
22. Luke, Gospel Of, 18:18.
23. *Ibid.*, 18:18-30; Matthew, Gospel Of, 19:16.

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## 10. The Mystical Tradition of Christianity (Part Two)

### I. Jesus' Legacy

Jesus had taught the mystical path to his disciples; but few of his followers, either during his lifetime or after, could follow him into those rare heights. After he was persecuted and executed for expounding his unitive vision, his followers began to gather together for inspiration, and the small gatherings soon developed into a sizable church organization. And, when the few became many, diverse interests inevitably came into play: some were attracted to contemplation; some to charitable or teaching activities; and some preferred to deify their master, Jesus, as an object of ritual worship.

Jesus never formulated a detailed metaphysics to guide his followers. A metaphysics developed around him nonetheless, fueled not only by his Judaic background, but by the pervasive Greek influence of the times. In particular, the Greek philosophical concept of the *Logos* played an important part in the metaphysics of the early Christian theologians.

The common Greek word, *logos*, was originally understood in several different ways; one of which was as “intention, hypothesis, or thought”. **Heraclitus**, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., the first to use the word in a metaphysical sense, intended by it the Divine Intelligence by which all the world is pervaded. Much later, a contemporary of Jesus, **Philo Judaeus**, who was an influential Alexandrian Jew with strong ties to the Greek, and specifically to the Platonic philosophical tradition, used the word to denote the Thought in the Mind of God, from whence the Idea of the world took form. Here is how he expressed it:

“God who, having determined to found a mighty state, first of all conceived its form in his mind, according to which form he made a world perceptible only by the intellect, and then completed one visible to the external senses, using the first one as a model. ...It is manifest also, that the archetypal seal, which we call that world, which is perceptible only to the intellect, must itself be the archetypal model, the idea of ideas, the *Logos* of God.”<sup>1</sup>

“...The incorporeal [spiritual] world then was already completed, having its seat in the Divine *Logos*; and the world, perceptible by the external senses, was made on the

model of it.”<sup>2</sup>

For Philo, the *Logos* was not only the Idea in the mind of God but was that very Ideational Power of God that Plotinus would later call *Nous*, or “The Divine Mind”. Philo, acknowledging that the *Logos* was the Creative Power of the One, referred to it as “the first-born of God,” because ‘It was conceived in God’s mind before all things, and is that which manifests as all things.’<sup>3</sup>

One of the four Gospel authors, living in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E., and known to us only as ‘**John**’, was apparently familiar with the writings of Philo, and taking his theological cue from him, began his Gospel with these words:

“In the beginning was the Logos, the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God. ...All things were made by the Logos; without him, nothing was made. It was by him that all things came into existence.”<sup>4</sup>

This was, of course, quite in keeping with the Philonian concept; but then John added these words:

“And the Logos became flesh and lived among us...as the only-begotten son of his father.”<sup>5</sup>

In the words that followed, John made clear he was referring to Jesus of Nazareth whom John the Baptist had declared was the Messiah at the time he baptized Jesus in the river Jordan.

Some of the most influential Christian theologians and apologists, such as **Justin Martyr** (100-165 C.E.), **Ireneus** (130-200 C.E.), **Tertullian** (150-225 C.E.), and others, jumped on this bandwagon, campaigning strongly for the recognition of Jesus as synonymous with the *Logos*, or creative Power, of God; though there were others, called *alogi*, who were against this idea. And so, there was much argument and discussion among these early Christians. It was a time when theological and metaphysical ideas were very much ‘in the air’; and it is clear that many of the learned Christian theologians and Apologists of the time were influenced not only by the Judaic tradition, but by the Platonist vision, as well as by the writings of Philo Judaeus, the Gnostics, Hermetics and Stoics as well. Borrowing the terminology of Philo, as echoed by the Gospel writer, John, they regarded the *Logos* much the way Plotinus regarded *Nous*, the Divine Mind: as the active creative power of the transcendent Godhead, or “the One”. For the

Christians, the Godhead was referred to as “the Spirit” or “the Father”, and His Creative Power was referred to as “the Logos” or “the Son”. According to Tertullian (150-225):

“The Spirit is the substance of the Logos, and the Logos is the activity of the Spirit; the two are a unity (*unum*).”<sup>6</sup>

The Christian Apologist, **Athenagoras** (133-190) wrote:

“If you ask what is meant by the Son, I will state briefly that he is the first product of the Father, not as having been brought into existence (for from the beginning, God, who is the eternal Mind has the Logos in Himself, being from eternity instinct with Logos); but inasmuch as the Logos came forth to be the Idea and energizing power of all material things.”<sup>7</sup>

Later, **Athenasius**, Patriarch of Alexandria (293-372), using the very analogy of the Sun’s radiation often used later by Plotinus, says:

“Was God, who IS, ever without the Logos? Was He, who is light, ever without radiance? ...God is, eternally; then, since the Father always is, His radiance also exists eternally; and that is His Logos.<sup>8</sup> ...The Logos of God is creator and maker; he *is* the Father’s will.”<sup>9</sup>

From these many theological interchanges a consensus arose; and the historical Jesus became permanently associated with the *Logos* and was thereafter regarded by Christians as an incarnation of God; or, in popular circles, ‘the Son of God’. Then, to the duality of the Father and Son was added the “Spirit” or “Holy Ghost”—thus constituting a holy Trinity, comparable to Plotinus’ trinity of The One, the Divine Mind, and Soul. This doctrine of the ‘Holy Trinity’ became firmly established as a metaphysical tenet of the Church with the formulation of the Nicene Creed following the first ecumenical council assembled by emperor Constantine in 325 C.E., and the Athenasian Creed, penned around the same time—though in later years Christendom would become bitterly divided in its acceptance of this tenet.

All the great teachers of Spirituality have offered a description of and commentary on the nature of Reality as directly experienced in “the mystical vision.” Only those who have actually experienced the Truth directly are able to speak authoritatively about it. And, the fact is, there have been many wise and pure-hearted men and women of every nationality and every

religious affiliation who have experienced the Truth. There are Christians who have experienced It, and Jews, and Muslims, and Hindus, and Buddhists, and so on. And so, we must include as part of our Spiritual heritage the teachings and writings of all those of various traditions who have directly realized the Truth and spoken of It.

Let us consider, for example, some of those Christians who taught Spiritual Truth under the name of Christianity. They are the seers, the mystics of the Church, who taught the path to God-realization, and who proclaimed the identity of the soul and God, and the indivisibility of the one absolute Reality. First among these, of course, is Jesus of Nazareth, called “the anointed one,” or *Christos*, in the language of the Greeks. It is of his own mystical experience that Jesus spoke, a mystical experience that transcends all doctrines and all traditions, and that is identical for Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Vedantists alike. It is an experience of absolute Unity—a Unity in which the individual consciousness of the soul merges into its Divine Source, and knows, “I and the Father are one.”

Ironically, however, this knowledge is unacceptable in all conventional religious traditions; and so, those, like Jesus, al Hallaj, Meister Eckhart, Spinoza, and many others who have experienced the Truth, are inevitably rejected by the religious traditions to which they belong. The Christian religious tradition, which arose around the teachings of Jesus, commonly rejects and persecutes its mystics as well. Nonetheless, down through the centuries, a few of the followers of Jesus also experienced the spiritual unity, by the grace of God, and spoke of It for posterity. Here, for example, is what the famous Christian mystic of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, **Meister Eckhart**, had to say about his own experience:

As the soul becomes more pure and bare and poor, and possesses less of created things, and is emptied of all things that are not God, it receives God more purely, and is more completely in Him; and it truly becomes one with God, and it looks into God and God into it, face to face as it were; two images transformed into one.<sup>10</sup>

...Some simple people think that they will see God as if He were standing there and they [standing] here. It is not so. God and I, we are one.<sup>11</sup>

...I am converted into Him in such a way that He makes me one

Being with Himself—not a *similar* being. By the living God, it is true that there is no distinction! <sup>12</sup>...The eye by which I see God is the same as the eye by which God sees me. My eye and God's eye are one and the same—one in seeing, one in knowing, and one in loving. <sup>13</sup>

In one of his Sunday Sermons to the simple peasants of his congregation, Meister Eckhart took up the elucidation of those two aspects of the one Being which enlightened sages in other lands had long spoken of as Brahman and Maya, Purusha and Prakrti, or Shiva and Shakti. Eckhart, like all others who have “seen” the Truth, recognized that the divine Consciousness at once transcends and pervades the universe. It is both the absolute, transcendent Godhead *and* the projecting Power, the Creator. Yet there is no *actual* division between these two aspects; for it is that same one Consciousness that appears as all existence.

Meister Eckhart, in his Sermon, made the distinction between these two aspects of the One by using the two terms, “Godhead” (*Gottheit*), and “God” (*Gott*), to represent these two aspects respectively. By “Godhead,” he meant, of course, that transcendent, absolute, Silence which is forever unchanging, unmoving; and by “God” he meant the Creator, that aspect of the Divine which, like an effusive mind, continually projects the phenomenal universe. Says Eckhart:

God and the Godhead are as different from each other as heaven and earth... Creatures speak of God — but why do they not mention the Godhead? Because there is only unity in the Godhead and there is nothing to talk about. God acts. The Godhead does not. ...The difference between God and the Godhead is the difference between action and non-action. <sup>14</sup>

The eternal “Godhead” is man’s true Being, the conscious Self from which the creative aspect, “God,” shines forth. “My real being,” says Eckhart, “is above God, if we take ‘God’ to be the beginning of all created things. ... I [the eternal Godhead] am unborn, and in my unborn aspect I can never die. In my unborn aspect, I have been eternally, and am now, and shall eternally remain.”<sup>15</sup> That unborn aspect, the Godhead, is experienced when, in contemplation, one enters into that Silence which exists as the Source and Ground of the mind’s creative effusion.

Eckhart, having broken through into that Silence, spoke of his own experience of the unborn Self:

In that breaking-through, when I come to be free of my own will and of God's will and of all His works and of God Himself, then I am above all created things, and I am neither God nor creature, but I am what I was and what I shall remain, now and eternally.<sup>16</sup>

...When I stood in my first cause, I then had no 'God,' and then I was my own cause. I wanted nothing, I longed for nothing, for I was empty Being and the only truth in which I rejoiced was in the knowledge of my Self. Then it was my Self I wanted and nothing else. What I wanted I was, and what I was I wanted, and so, I stood empty of God and everything.<sup>17</sup>

Here is another declaration of mystical experience by the 15<sup>th</sup> century Christian Bishop, **Nicholas of Cusa**:

"Thou dost ravish me above myself that I may foresee the glorious place whereunto Thou callest me. Thou grantest me to behold the treasure of riches, of life, of joy, of beauty. Thou keepest nothing secret.<sup>18</sup>

"I behold Thee, O Lord my God, in a kind of mental trance,<sup>19</sup> ... and when I behold Thee, nothing is seen other than Thyself; for Thou art Thyself the object of Thyself, for Thou seest, and art That which is seen, and art the sight as well.<sup>20</sup>

"Hence, in Thee, who are love, the lover is not one thing and the beloved another, and the bond between them a third, but they are one and the same: Thou, Thyself, my God. For there is nothing in Thee that is not Thy very essence.<sup>21</sup> Nothing exists outside Thee, and all things in Thee are not other than Thee."<sup>22</sup>

Or listen to this, by the 16<sup>th</sup> century Christian monk, **St. John of the Cross**:

“What God communicates to the soul in this intimate union is totally beyond words. In this transformation, the two become one.<sup>23</sup>

“... The soul thereby becomes Divine, becomes God, through participation, insofar as is possible in this life.

“... The union wrought between the two natures, and the communication of the Divine to the human in this state is such that even though neither changes their being, both appear to be God.<sup>24</sup>

“... Having been made one with God, the soul is somehow God through participation.”<sup>25</sup>

This is the truth revealed in “the mystical vision,” the truth that Vedanta speaks of as “Nonduality.” While some Christians interpret St. John’s words to indicate that “the mystical experience” of Unity is an aberration, a gracious act of God, unifying the soul with God, rather than a revelation of the *eternal* unity of the soul and God, Vedantists take the position that the soul is always identical with God but is concealed from the awareness of this unity by the (veil of) ignorance inherent in phenomenal manifestation. The central teaching of Vedanta, and of all genuine religious teachers, is that the inner Self (*Atman*) and God (*Brahman*) are one. This is expressed in the Upanishadic dictum: *tat twam asi*, “That thou art.” It is this very knowledge, experienced in a moment of clarity in contemplation or prayer, which prompted **Jesus of Nazareth** to explain to his disciples who he was, and who they were, eternally:

“If you knew who *I* am, you would also know the Father. Knowing me, you know Him; seeing me, you see Him. ...

“Do you not understand that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? ... It is the Father who dwells in me doing His own work. Understand me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me.”<sup>26</sup>

There are many other nondual mystical teachings, which one can find in the utterances of Jesus, and his followers. For example, it follows from the teaching of Nonduality—that is to say, the teaching that all beings are manifestations of the one Divinity—that we should therefore treat all beings as our own Self, as they most truly are. We find this teaching very

prominent among the teachings of Jesus. In his Sermon on The Mount, he says:

“Ye have heard that it has been said, thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy; but I say unto you, love your enemies [also]; bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that you may be the children of your Father which is in heaven; for He maketh His sun to rise on the just and on the unjust. Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”<sup>27</sup>

This is the message of equality-consciousness, of seeing God (one’s eternal Self) in all beings, and of thinking and acting for the benefit of all. It is this kind of reformation of our minds and hearts that is called for if we are to assume our true identity and experience the perfection of our eternal Self. It is, of course, our own minds, which must be transformed so that we are capable of ridding ourselves of the false notion of a separate and distinct identity apart from the one eternal Identity. It is the mind, which must be made single, one-pointed, and eventually identified with the eternal Self.

To this end, Jesus spoke to his disciples of the necessity of releasing their minds from concerns for the welfare of their separate personalities and worldly holdings in order to lift them up to God through meditation and prayer. “How,” he asked them, “can you have your mind on God and at the same time have it occupied with the things of this world?” He pointed out to them that their hearts would be with that which they valued most. One’s attention could not be focused on God and on one’s worldly concerns at the same time, for, as he said, a city divided against itself must fall. He advised them frequently to let God be the sole focus of their attention, and to let God be the sole master whom they served. “No man can serve two masters,” he said,

“For either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve both God and Mammon [the flesh]. Therefore, I say unto you: take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. For your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of

God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”<sup>28</sup>

Naturally, this is a hard saying to those who harbor many hopes and dreams of individual worldly wealth and attainments. You’ll recall what Jesus said to the sincerely spiritual man who, nonetheless, was yet attached to his worldly wealth; “It would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle,” he said, “than for such a man to experience the kingdom of God.” The necessity for renouncing the preoccupation of the mind with worldly things if one is to occupy the mind with thoughts of God, is a teaching that is found, not only in Vedanta and Christianity, but in all true religion. It is certainly a consistently recognized fact within the long tradition of Christian mysticism. Listen, in this regard, to the words of the 5<sup>th</sup> century Christian mystic who wrote under the name of **Dionysius the Areopagite**:

“While God possesses all the positive attributes of the universe, yet, in a more strict sense, he does not possess them, since He transcends them all.<sup>29</sup> ... The all-perfect and unique Cause of all things transcends all, (and) is free from every limitation and beyond them all.<sup>30</sup>

“Therefore, do thou, in the diligent exercise of mystical contemplation, leave behind the senses and the operations of the intellect, and all things sensible and intellectual, and all things in the world of being and non-being, that thou mayest arise by unknowing towards the union, as far as is attainable, with Him who transcends all being and all knowledge. For by the unceasing and absolute renunciation of thyself and of all things, thou mayest be born on high, through pure and entire self-abnegation, into the superessential radiance of the Divine.”<sup>31</sup>

We are accustomed, perhaps, to associating the word, “renunciation” with the Vedantic tradition of India, and most especially as it is used in the *Bhagavad Gita*; but renunciation of the false individual self is a prerequisite to God-consciousness, regardless of one’s nationality or religious affiliation. It is a word, which occurs frequently among the writings of the great Christian mystics of the past. Listen, for example, to the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish monk, **St. John of the Cross**:

“The road and ascent to God necessarily demands a habitual effort to renounce and mortify the appetites; and the sooner this mortification is achieved, the sooner the soul reaches the summit. But until the appetites are eliminated, a person will not arrive, no matter how much virtue he practices. For he will fail to acquire perfect virtue, which lies in keeping the soul empty, naked, and purified of every appetite.”<sup>32</sup>

“Until slumber comes to the appetites through the mortification of sensuality, and until this very sensuality is stilled in such a way that the appetites do not war against the Spirit, the soul will not walk out to genuine freedom, to the enjoyment of union with its Beloved.”<sup>33</sup>

Now, I would like for you to hear one more Christian seer on this same theme: **Thomas á Kempis** was a German monk of the 15<sup>th</sup> century who, above all other mystics, Christian or Vedantic, had a great influence upon me and many others for the beauty of his expression and the pure sincerity of his longing for God. Here is just a little of what he had to say:

“You may in no manner be satisfied with temporal goods, for you are not created to rest yourself in them. For if you alone might have all the goods that ever were created and made, you might not therefore be happy and blessed; but your blessedness and your full felicity stands only in God who has made all things. And that is not such felicity as is commended by the foolish lovers of the world, but such as good men and women hope to have in the bliss of God, and as some spiritual persons, clean and pure in heart, sometimes do taste here in this present life, whose conversation is in heaven. All worldly solace and all man’s comfort is vain and short, but that comfort is blessed and reliable that is perceived by the soul inwardly in the heart.

Await, my soul, await the promise of God, and you shall have abundance of all goodness in Him. If you inordinately covet goods present, you shall lose the Goodness eternal. Have therefore goods present in use and Goodness eternal in desire.”<sup>34</sup>

Here, again, from the same author:

“Many desire to have the gift of contemplation, but they will not use such things as are required for contemplation. And one great hindrance of contemplation is that we stand so long in outward signs and in material things and take no heed of the perfect mortifying of our body to the Spirit. I know not how it is, nor with what spirit we are led, nor what we pretend, we who are called spiritual persons, that we take greater labor and study for transitory things than we do to know the inward state of our own soul. But, alas for sorrow, as soon as we have made a little recollection to God, we run forth to outward things and do not search our own conscience with due examination, as we should, nor heed where our affection rests, nor sorrow that our deeds are so evil and so unclean as they are.<sup>35</sup>

“... You shall much profit in grace if you keep yourself free from all temporal cares, and it shall hinder you greatly if you set value on any temporal thing. Therefore, let nothing be in your sight high, nothing great, nothing pleasing nor acceptable to you, unless it be purely God, or of God. Think all comforts vain that come to you by any creature. He who loves God, and his own soul for God, despises all other love; for he sees well that God alone, who is eternal and incomprehensible, and fulfills all things with His goodness, is the whole solace and comfort of the soul; and that He is the very true gladness of heart, and none other but only He.<sup>36</sup>

“This grace is a light from heaven and a spiritual gift of God. It is the proper mark and token of elect people and a guarantee of the everlasting life. It lifts a man from love of earthly things to the love of heavenly things and makes a carnal man to be a man of God. And the more that nature is oppressed and overcome, the more grace is given, and the soul through new gracious visitations is daily shaped anew and formed more and more to the image of God.”<sup>37</sup>

Thus, as we have seen, the true religion, the true understanding, is always

the same. The teachings of the saints who have known their true nature as Divine have always declared the same path of one-pointed devotion as the means to experience and become united with the Divine Self. And so, we find, in the words of the mystics of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and of the mystics of every true religious tradition, the authentic Spiritual teachings.

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## II. The Truth About Jesus

No one in their right mind would disparage Jesus, the great mystic-martyr of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. I, for one, have often stated that, in my opinion, of all the enlightened men gifted by God's revelation, he is at the forefront as teacher and representative of God's truth. But, in the interest of truth, I must insist on pointing out the harmful fallacies perpetuated by the unilluminated organizers of what came to be called Christianity—harmful fallacies that are perpetuated to this day.

Those early followers of the teachings of Jesus may be excused their zealous intent to form an organization that spread and perpetuated those teachings, but, like many others before them, they mistakenly felt that it was necessary to deify their leader in order to guarantee his place in the eyes of the people as a singular authority, and so he was designated as the sole progeny of God, being both God and man, worthy of being worshiped and adulated as Divinity itself. This strategy did indeed work very well for centuries, and the simple people wholeheartedly accepted this doctrine as Gospel. Having

been passed down from generation to generation, today this imaginative notion has attained the status of an unassailable tradition.

But this tradition also brought along with it a negative consequence as well: mere man was henceforth relegated to a world where he could only aspire to a divine status, but he could never attain it. That status was reserved for Jesus, 'the Son of God'. The Church had essentially declared that there were two kinds of beings: Divine and human. Jesus is Divine, and the rest of us are mere humans. And that doctrine tended to not only dampen but deaden the innate aspirations of man to know his own divine identity.

Nevertheless, throughout history, God continued to reveal to a few mere men the truth of their own divine nature. Like Jesus, so long ago, they experienced in clear vision that they are in God, and that God is in them, that they are truly made of God and one with Him. These men knew that they were not "sons of God" in any literally meaningful sense; they were not different in the manner of their paternity or their conception than any other men, and yet the revelation of their divinity had come to them. Therefore, it was readily apparent to them that Jesus, who had experienced what they had experienced, was not necessarily different in kind from them, but that, in fact, all men are manifestations of the one Divine Father of us all.

Today, we may no longer regard Jesus as the Son of God, or even as a special manifestation of God; but we must not, on this account, regard Jesus any the less, for, make no mistake: Jesus—like all who become illumined and who live to serve God as His spokesman—was chosen and empowered by the Father. The life and mission of Jesus—in fact *everything* that occurs in this world—is conceived, enacted, and accomplished by God. Jesus may no longer be hailed as the sole progeny of God, but he and all of his illumined brothers and sisters throughout the world stand as proof of the ability of every single person to know their own Divinity by the gracious gift of God.

The duality between human and Divine does not exist; and yet there remains a distinction between those who *know* the truth of their Divinity and those who do not. Ultimately, your religion is not about the status of Jesus, nor about having faith in Jesus to save you; it's about you. It's about you becoming what Jesus was: A man illumined by God. And that will happen only by the bountiful Grace of God.

Your only spiritual task is to open your heart to Him. Seek Him in silence. Seek Him in the long dark night. If your heart is open and pure, He will come. He will illumine you as He illumined Jesus. Then you too will be a man illumined by God, and your life will be joyfully fulfilled. The enlightening truth is revealed by God to those whom He chooses, and only they know with utmost certainty the marvelous truth that He is our very substance, that we are all contained in, sustained in, and united in Him.

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## 11. The Mystical Tradition of Islam (Part One)

### I. The Religion of Islam

The religion of Islam was founded in Arabia by Muhammed (570-632 C.E.), whose book, the *Quran* or *Koran*, constitutes the final authority and credo for all who claim Islam as their religion. Though Muhammed claimed that the book was inspired by God, whom he calls *Allah*, it contains much that is derived from ancient Jewish and Christian sources. Muhammed set forth in the *Quran*, by the use of many anecdotes and commentaries, a number of moral precepts and social laws, which did much in the 7th century to transform a diversified group of lawless nomadic tribes into a united God-fearing nation. And while the *Quran* is essentially a book of moral principle and faith, it contains many statements by Muhammed which may be interpreted as mystical in nature.

Following upon the death of Muhammed, a number of devout mystics belonging to the Islamic faith appeared throughout the Middle East, spreading from Arabia to Egypt, Iraq, Persia, Turkey, and Afghanistan. They came to be known as *Sufis*, from the word for “wool”—apparently because of the woolen garments worn by these gnostics to set them apart as “knowers” of God. While the mainstream faithful of Islam were busily engaged in the spread of their religion through territorial conquest during the 8th and 9th centuries, the Sufis were teaching the pure love of God, and living an ascetic life aimed at realizing Him in the depths of their souls.

Among the best known and revered of these early Sufis were Hasan al-Basri (d. 728), Rabi'a Adawiyya, the slave-girl of Basra (d. 801), Dhu'n-Nun, the Egyptian (d. 859), Beyizid Bistami, the Persian (d. 874), and Abu'l-Husayn an-Nuri, the Iraqi (d. 907). All were great lovers of God, and each of them greatly influenced the mystical mood of their time. Their love of God took the form of a one-pointed yearning for union with Him, for the “vision of His Face”; and their writings often resembled the arduous outpourings of a lover to his beloved.

For the Sufis, the path of love is the Way by which the soul makes the involute journey to the awareness of her eternal identity. And the prayerful songs of love sung by the Sufis are the expressions of the soul's yearning to return in awareness to her Divine Source and Ground. She searches inwardly for her pristine state, her Beloved, her Lord; and subdues herself,

dissolving herself, as it were, by reducing her own being to her pristine simplicity and ultimate non-being. She renounces all regard for herself, divests herself of all fascination with manifested phenomena, both inner and outer; and, drawn by a one-pointed love and desire for God, is brought at last to silence. Then the illusory duality of soul and God is no more; the awareness of the One dawns with supreme clarity, knowing who It has always been, knowing Its eternal freedom and joy.

Such a description of the soul's inner "pilgrimage" makes it appear a simple and clear-cut process, but it is the most difficult accomplishment that can be performed, for the ego-soul does not die without a fight. It wages a tireless and bitter warfare against its own attraction to God, and fights with all the fury and panic of a drowning man struggling to sustain his existence; it incessantly asserts its love of the manifested world and life, and restlessly strives to create a diversion from its path toward God. Torn in two directions, the soul suffers, on the one hand, the agonies of annihilation, and on the other, the painful prolonging of its failure to reach its avowed Goal. Only when it comes at last, by the grace of God, to that point where it surrenders all other objectives for God alone does it become capable of reaching its cherished Goal; divinely inspired by the desire for God alone, it makes that leap into the consciousness of universal Being.

In the writings of the early Sufis, and especially in those of Dhu'n-Nun, this path of divine love for God, culminating in vision, or *gnosis*, is charted as a path (*tariq*) marked by several distinct advances, or stations. The entering upon the path originates with a call from God and the assent of the individual will to embark on the journey. This "call" is an awakening of the heart, which is affected solely by God's grace, serving to draw the wandering soul back to its true home and divine source. This awakening might be precipitated by the meeting with a *Shaikh* (spiritual Master), or through a reading of the words of one of the mystics who had traveled the path of divine love and reached its goal.

The actual journey along the spiritual path begins with the station of Repentence (*tauba*). "Repentance," said Jalaluddin Rumi, "is a strange mount; it jumps toward heaven in a single moment from the lowest place." A man may have led an utterly despicable life prior to the awakening of the soul, but once that awakening takes place, he immediately wipes clean the entire slate of the past, and utterly transforms his own mind and will by the intense remorse he feels for all the little acts of wicked selfishness

performed theretofore.<sup>1</sup> He is filled with shame and regret for every instance of hurt given to another, because his heart is now filled with pity and love for all humanity struggling to find the joy and understanding he has now found through God's grace. Such remembrance of one's own stupidity in the previous state of ignorance is also a great humbler of what pride one might otherwise be tempted to feel in the possession of that grace.

The next station is that of Faith or Surrender to God (*tawakkul*). The mental agitation resulting from fear for one's own welfare, which may afflict the novice when he chooses to give all his thought to God, is dispelled by the calm remembrance that it is He who has called the soul to Him, and that He will nourish and provide for the body as well. Surrendering all thoughts of his own bodily welfare, he gives everything into the hands of God, and says, "Lead me wheresoever Thou wilt." This attitude was expressed by Jesus to his disciples when he told them to take no thought for the morrow: "Do not worry and say, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we wear?' Your Father in heaven knows that you need all these things. Seek first His kingdom and all these things shall be given to you." This may lead to Poverty (*faqr*), and often does; but if this poverty is necessary to the freedom to contemplate God, so be it. To those who have been thus led to it, this poverty is the true and greatest wealth.

The next station is that of Patient Endurance (*sabr*), a great necessity for the soul called to the contemplation of God. Calm acceptance of the rigors of such a life is necessary to the stability of the soul, which must pass through many ordeals, and many temptations that arise in the mind. Next, and allied with Patient Endurance, is Joy in Affliction (*rida*). When the soul is free to focus its attention on God, it enjoys an inner bliss, which cannot be dislodged by any outward occurrence, no matter how unpleasant. Its joy is derived from a source entirely untouched by worldly pains or pleasures, and therefore the soul remains unaffected by them, reveling solely in the proximity of the Beloved. The soul, burdened by afflictions, has only to remember God to rise above all earthly pain, and know the healing caress of imperturbable bliss.

However, following that sweet time, comes another, often referred to as "The Dark Night of The Soul"; the Sufis call it *gabd*. This is a state of dryness and emptiness, when the soul, struggling to become completely selfless, egoless, has not yet reached the ultimate degree of extinction, and suffers the heavy sense of death, with no light of superconscious life yet

visible. It is a dry, awful, sense of one's own nothingness, one's own emptiness, which may be likened to the darkness experienced while going through a dark tunnel when the light at the other end cannot yet be seen. The ego-self is withered, dried-up, and all but gone; but the greater Selfhood has not yet revealed Itself. The suffering soul feels great agony in the lack of both worldly and spiritual consolation; and worse, it imagines that it has been damned and relegated forever to its present hell, and thus suffers all the more.

Then comes the revelation of Love and Spiritual Knowledge (*mahabba* and *ma'rifa*). The soul awakens to an incredibly clear awareness that embraces both divine Love and Knowledge. It is an inner realization by the soul that the God it sought is all-inclusive Love, and the soul experiences that Love within itself. It knows that This is the sustaining Power and guide of all its life. And it vows to surrender all else for the sake of being filled throughout life with this perfect Love. With great joy, the soul is refreshed, and sings: "Thou art my God, the sole Father of my being, the sweet breath of Love that lives in my heart; and I shall follow Thee, and live with Thee, and lean on Thee till the end of my days."

This experience of divine Love may be likened to the corona of the Sun; it is fully Light, yet it has a still deeper Source. And this Love, while fully complete, yet yearns for its own source, its own center of radiance; and so, while this Love is the fulfilling Light itself, it is drawn by longing to Itself. Says Rumi: "The hearts of the wise are the nests of love, and the hearts of the lovers are the nests of longing, and the hearts of the longing are the nests of intimacy." The longing of the lover for God is often compared to that of a worldly lover for her beloved. The soul so blessed, or afflicted, with divine Love has no other thought or desire but to reach her Beloved. She weeps sweet tears of love nightly and calls in her heart for death at her Beloved's feet. Like a moth drawn to a flame, she longs to be annihilated in her Beloved's embrace, and so to enjoy the ultimate intimacy of union with her beloved God.

It is this love-longing which leads to the station of Annihilation (*fana*). This is the profoundly transformative experience referred to in other traditions as *nirvana*, *samadhi*, or "the vision of God." For, at the moment the ego is extinguished, the eternal and all-pervasive "I" is realized. It is an experience that overturns all previous conceptions of God and the soul. Previously, there was a relationship: of the soul to God, the lover to the

Beloved; but now, the ego-soul is no more. The false sense of selfhood, which is part of the illusion of phenomenal existence, has been erased, and only the Real, the One, exists. What shall we call It? The *Dharmakaya* of the Buddhists? The *Atman* of the Vedantists? The “One” of Plotinus? The Sufis call It *Haqq*, “the Real.”

Scholars may imagine that a Buddhist experiences one thing, a Vedantist another, and so forth; but one who has experienced It, whether a Sufi, Christian or Hindu, knows that It is the final Truth, the only One. There are not different Unities, one for each sect or denomination; there is only one absolute Source, and It is That which is experienced by Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and Sufis alike. It should be obvious that, if there is such a thing as Unity, and if It can be experienced, then the experience must be the same for all; since Unity, by its very definition, by its very nature, is one. So, what if that One is called by different names in different lands! In every place and in every generation, new terms are ever being invented in the hope of elucidating the knowledge of Unity.

All phenomenal existence comes into being by the power of that One. This makes an apparent two; but it is really only one. The appearance of two is just the result of the “imaginary” juxtaposition of subject and object. But, of course, the subject and the object are the same One. It is this Unity that is realized when the soul reaches the station of *fana*. When the ego-mind is dissolved, having been drawn to its extinction by its own Source, there is no longer a subject-object relationship. There is only the Unnamable, beyond all subject-object predication. It is what has been called by the Sufis, *jam*, or “Unity.”

The Upanishadic seers of this Unity declared, “When one realizes Brahman, he becomes Brahman.” “When I died to myself,” says the Sufi, “I became the Beloved.” “I have ceased to exist, and have passed out of self,” said Rabi’ā; “I am one with Him and entirely His.” It is from the standpoint of this experience of Unity that al-Hallaj declared, *ana’l Haqq*, “I am He”; and Bistami exclaimed, “Glory be to Me! There is nothing under my garment but He.” For, after such a revelation, if one is to speak the truth, he can no longer make a distinction between “me” and “Thee.” He knows full well that there is no other in all the universe but that one “I.” If he makes the slightest separation between “I” and “Thou,” he has forfeited the Truth, and re-established Duality. How strange and baffling, that only moments before, he was a soul on fire with love; and now he is enjoined by the Truth revealed

to him to forget about souls and desire for union.

One might imagine this experience of *fana* to be the final station on the Sufi path, but, in Sufism, as in nearly every mystical tradition, there is recognized to be a further, final, station on the journey to perfection. This ultimate summit of spiritual attainment is called Retention of Identity (*baqa*). This is the state of one living continuously in the enlightened awareness of Unity. It is the state of the *jivanmukta* of Vedanta; the state of Buddhahood of the Buddhists; the Beatitude of the Christians; the Sagehood of the Taoists. *Baqqa*, the final and ultimate station, is nothing less than the continuous retention of the awareness of Unity throughout one's life; in every moment and breath, to live in the awareness of one's true, all pervasive, Identity. This is the perfect life of freedom, contentment, and utter surrender of the soul to the will of God within.

We find this state of perfection described by the Taoist, Lao Tze, by the *Bhagavad Gita*, by the Avadhut, by the Christians, Zen Buddhists, and all the enlightened saints of all time; yet all have declared as well that this state is beyond description. "The Way that can be told is not the true Way," said Lao Tze; it would make no sense at all to those unprepared for it by inner experience, and besides, no words can tell just what the life of such a man is like. It must be lived to know it. Such a man may teach, or he may not teach; he may beg for his food, or he may labor for it; he may be fat, or he may be thin; he may write books, or he may appear a simpleton; but the joy is the same. He may be a Sufi or a Jew; he may be a Buddhist or an Avadhut, a Christian or a Sikh, a farmer or a monk; but the joy is the same.

Naturally, it is very difficult for people at a lower station of knowledge to recognize or appreciate the view of one at the highest station, and it is because of this that the unillumined so often deride and persecute the saints. On the other hand, one who has reached the final state cannot malign the preliminary stations as incorrect; for it was by the ascension of the path, by way of these very stations, that he arrived at his Goal. Once there, he sees that all the people of the world are at the station on the path to which they have individually arrived by God's Grace. How can he fault their ignorance? If anyone at all can understand him or even hear his voice, it is those at the stations most near to him. The great majority of men are far below him and must imagine him to be a madman. As Lao Tze has said, "If it were not the highest Truth, it would not be laughed at by the majority of people."

Within Islam, as within all religious traditions, there are individuals of varying degrees of spiritual experience and understanding, with the mystic standing at the highest degree, opposed at the other end of the scale by those pious and pretentious people whose understanding of spiritual experience is dim. These two contrary elements within any religious tradition tend naturally to conflict mightily with one another; and, in Islam, as elsewhere, this conflict has often resulted in the extreme persecution and martyrdom of the mystics.

## NOTES:

1. *Repentance*: In my own case, I remember that Repentance came into play early in the purification process, as I recollected the predatory attitude I exhibited as a young man toward young women, and my subsequent insensitive and inconsiderate behavior toward those whom I sought to possess. Remembering the events of my earlier life, I felt intense remorse and regret for all my past infractions and wrong-headed intentions; and I shed many tears at the thought of the many unkind attitudes and actions of my past.

## II. Al-Hallaj

One of the most persecuted martyrs of the Islamic faith was a man known as al-Hallaj. Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (858-922) was an Arab, born in the province of Fars, and spent most of his life in the city of Baghdad. He became a disciple of 'Amr al-Makki and also of the famous Sufi teacher, al-Junayd of Persia (d. 910). At some time during his discipleship, al-Hallaj attained the realization of Unity, and realized his identity to be the Identity of the One. But when al-Hallaj spoke of it, he found that both al-Makki and al-Junayd had no inkling of such an experience and refused to acknowledge that what al-Hallaj said was true. It seemed to them quite contrary to the teaching of the Prophet, and therefore a dangerous heresy.

Al-Hallaj, around this time, became married to the daughter of a well-known religious teacher; but the girl's father also became turned against al-Hallaj when he began speaking of the unity of his own soul with God. In al-Hallaj's own home, his father-in-law regarded him as "a miserable infidel." It was then he began writing in poetic verse of what he had realized, in order to make known to his fellow Sufis what he had known to be the Truth. He

wrote of his search for God by the path of loving prayer, and his eventual experience of Unity, declaring, “I am the Truth,” “I am the Reality” (*ana'l Haqq*); but very few of his writings have survived, due to their being regarded as blasphemous and heretical in his own time.

In his writings, al-Hallaj attempted to explain that his saying, “*ana'l Haqq*,” was not heretical, by comparing his own saying to the similar declarations of Satan and the Egyptian Pharaoh in certain mythological stories. He argued that, whereas the “I” of the Pharaoh’s saying, “I am your highest Lord,” and Satan’s “I am the Highest,” referred to the personal “I,” the ego; his own “I” was an “I” devoid of ego, referring not to the personal self, but to the one “I” of all. Said al-Hallaj:

I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I; we are two spirits dwelling in one body. If you see me, you see Him; and if you see Him, you see us both.<sup>1</sup>

These words of his were very similar to those of Jesus, who had experienced the same revelation; and they met with a similar response. Both his old friends and teachers, al-Makki and al-Junayd, went to the *ulama*, the guardians of Islamic faith, and accused al-Hallaj of propagating a false and heretical doctrine.

The antagonism mounted against him by the *ulama* became too oppressive, and al-Hallaj was forced to leave Baghdad. He travelled for five years, meeting with other Sufis in Khurasan, and in Mecca. It is said that when he made pilgrimage to Mecca, four hundred disciples accompanied him. In the year 905, at the age of forty-seven, he took a boat to northern India, where the Muslim empire had already begun to establish itself. He traveled through Gujerat, Sind and the lower Indus Valley, presumably meeting with and teaching the Sufis living there. It is not known how long he stayed in India, nor if he had any intellectual intercourse with the Vedantic teachings, but he seems to have traveled extensively; and to have gone from there north to Khurasan, Turkestan, and Turfan, traveling with trade caravans, and eventually back to Baghdad.

Upon his return to Baghdad, al-Hallaj resumed his teaching and preaching to the people on the life of prayer and intense love of God. He led an ascetic and holy life and was revered by many. But again, opposition rose up from

the orthodox legalists of the city, and al-Hallaj left for two years to remain in Mecca. On his return, the religionists—in particular, one Muhammed ibn Da'ud—brought action against al-Hallaj's "heretical" doctrines. Both the Shiites and the Sunnis rallied against him, and, in the year 912, he was arrested and imprisoned. Nearly ten years were to pass before the high judge of Arabia (now Iraq) could be prevailed upon to sign the order for his execution.

Mansur passed those years in prison in prayer and contemplation, sometimes writing of his ecstatic experiences of divine love, and expressing his knowledge of the oneness of God and the universe. Of his last days, the famous Turkish Sufi, Attar (d. 1220), later wrote:

When al-Hallaj was in prison, he was asked, "What is love?" He answered, "You will see it today and tomorrow and the day after tomorrow." And that day they cut off his hands and feet, and the next day they put him on the gallows, and the third day, they gave his ashes to the wind..."<sup>2</sup>

On the day of his execution, March 26, 922, a great many of the people of Baghdad turned out to see his death; among them many of his old friends, teachers and disciples. It is told that he danced to the gallows, singing praise to God, as though he were going to a wedding festival. Some threw stones at him as he passed, but al-Hallaj had long foreseen and prepared for that day and was like a bridegroom going to meet his beloved. He had written, in his poetry, of the moth that, drawn to the flame, and caring nothing for its light or its heat, desires only to be merged in that flame. "Happiness comes from God," he said, "but suffering is He Himself!" "Slay me, O my trustworthy friends!" he sang; "For in being slain is my life." And, as he approached his executioners, he remarked, "It is now time for the lover to make the One single."

It is reported that his death was long, and deliberately drawn out by his tormentors. First, he was beaten with scourges, and then his hands and feet were cut off; and he was left in that condition to bleed and suffer until the following day when he was hanged. Then, as if to rid themselves of his voice forever, his persecutors severed his head and burned his body, and dumped his ashes in the Tigris. Since that time, however, the name of al-Hallaj has become famous throughout the world, and his perfect love has

been extolled in song over the centuries. One admirer, who had also known the experience of *ana'l Haqq*, wrote:

O my friends, you have wreaked your vengeance on al-Hallaj; but it is you who are the losers. What a gentle, perfect soul he was! “*Ana'l Haqq*,” he said. Perhaps if you had listened, you too would have learned to put an end to that ignorance which prevents you from saying *ana'l Haqq*. Far better had you murdered your own sense of pride and selfhood which stands like a cloud between you and your *ana'l Haqq*. But you will live in sorrow and struggle and bitter pain, while al-Hallaj is spread throughout space in blissful joy, all pervading and sparkling with light. You tried to silence him, but his words are whispered even by the autumn winds. The lips of countless millions of sages praise him still. You cut off his head to wipe the smile from his face, but his bell-like laughter spreads from shore to shore, and his laughing eyes twinkle in the clear blue sky.<sup>3</sup>

Al-Hallaj’s words of truth live still; in a modern-day drama on the life of al-Hallaj by the Egyptian, Abdu’s-Sabur, a chorus sings:

We will go scatter in the plough furrows of the peasants what we have stored from his words. ...We will preserve them among the merchant’s goods, and we will give them to the wind that wanders o’er the waves; We will hide them in the mouths of singing camel-drivers who traverse the desert; we will note them down on papers, to be kept in the folds of the frock; and we will make them into verses and songs. Tell us—what would have become of his words had he not been martyred?<sup>4</sup>

Thus, al-Hallaj lives on, as has Jesus, in the hearts and minds of all true lovers of God; and his name is a banner of victory for all who would declare the saving truth to men.

## NOTES:

1. Nicholson, R.A., *The Mystics Of Islam*, London, Routledge &

Kegan Paul, 1963; p. 151

2. Schimmel, Annemarie, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill, Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1975; pp. 62-64

3. Anonymous

4. Schimmel, *op. cit.*; p. 77

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## 12. The Mystical Tradition of Islam (Part Two)

### I. Ibn Arabi

Sufism, in the 13th century, produced some of its most prized literature from the hands of some of its most revered mystics; among them were: Attar (d. 1220), al-Farid (d. 1235), Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240), Rumi (d. 1273), and Iraqi (d. 1289). It was an equally illustrious period in the Christian and Vedantic traditions; indeed, the 13th century saw one of the most saint-filled and spiritually glorious periods in the history of the world. In the Muslim tradition, with which we are now concerned, it was **Ibn 'Arabi** who, through his philosophical writings based on his vision of Unity, set the tone for his time, and gave new life and understanding to the mysticism of the Sufis.

Muhammed Ali Muhammed Ibn al 'Arabi al-Ta'i al-Hatimi, better known simply as Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), was born into a Muslim family in Murcia, Spain, on August 7, 1165. He was given religious training by his father, and while he was still quite young, his father took him to meet the famed philosopher, Averroes, in Cordoba. It seems the aging Averroes had heard of young Arabi's spiritual proclivities and had asked to meet him. During this youthful period in Spain, Ibn Arabi also came under the spiritual tutelage of two women, both elderly ladies well versed in mystical knowledge, to whom he became quite devoted. It is said that the young man used to spend his free hours in the cemetery, where he practiced his meditation on God.

After his education in Seville, Ibn Arabi became married and obtained a position as secretary to the governor of Seville. He was twenty years of age when he was initiated into the Sufi path. It is not known when he became illumined by God's grace and realized the Unity of which he was later to write; but we know that between the ages of twenty-eight and thirty, he traveled several times to Tunis in North Africa, where he visited a number of Sufi *Shaikhs*, and spent much of his time in studying and writing.

In the year 1200, when he was thirty-five, Ibn Arabi was in Morocco, and had a vision telling him to journey to Fez, and then on to Egypt. He traveled through Alexandria and Cairo and finally made his way to the holy city of Mecca. During the period between 1200 and 1206, much of which was spent at Mecca, he wrote a great deal, including portions of his magnum opus, *Meccan Revelations*. And by the time he went to Cairo in 1206, his reputation as a divine had already preceded him. However, the orthodox

*mullas* of Islam living there were highly offended by his teachings and were openly antagonistic to him.

In 1210, he traveled north, and arrived in the city of Konya in Anatolia. There he was welcomed as a great teacher of Sufism, and his influence spread rapidly. He continued to travel about, visiting with celebrated divines, such as Shaikh Suhrawardi (1145-1234) in Baghdad, and eventually settled in Damascus in 1223, where he stayed for the remainder of his life. Having married twice before, he now married a third time in Damascus, and fathered three children; but the children for which he is best remembered are the products of his pen. He wrote *Bezels Of Wisdom* around 1230; and is said to have once remarked that he had written over two hundred and fifty books during his lifetime.

When reading the books of Ibn Arabi, one cannot help wishing that he had presented his thought in a more simple and direct manner, without the many effusive embellishments of Quranic myth and imagery. As in the case of Philo, whose Jewry gets in the way of his expression and makes it all a muddle, so Ibn Arabi's Islamic heritage gets in the way; and one must tramp through a vast swamp of verbiage to find the occasional gems of clear mystical insight. What he had to say was said in so much more precise a manner by Shankara, in so much more direct a manner by Ashvagosha and S'eng-hsin, so much more poetically by a great number of his own fellow Sufis, and with so much less verbiage by so many who have realized the Truth. But it is because he represents an early attempt within the Islamic tradition to convey a rational formulation of the vision of Unity that he must be accounted one of the most influential thinkers of Sufism in any history of mystical thought.

We have already seen how the various seers of other traditions have described the experience of Unity in complementary terms, naming the Absolute and Its manifestory Power by such terms as "Brahman-Maya," "Purusha-Prakrti," "Nirvana-Samsara," "Theos-Logos," and so on; the Sufis also had long framed their conception of the Reality in such complementary terms. Prior to Ibn Arabi, the martyred saint, Suhrawardi (1153-1191), who died in prison at the age of thirty-eight (not the Suhrawardi whom Ibn Arabi met in Baghdad), had written of the manifestation of the world from God in terms reminiscent of the Christian Fathers' exposition of the Logos:

The Essence of the First, the absolute Light, God, gives

constant illumination, whereby It is manifested and brings all things into existence, giving life to them by Its rays. Everything in the world is derived from the light of His Essence, and all beauty and perfection are the gifts of His bounty. To attain fully to this illumination is salvation.<sup>1</sup>

Ibn Arabi's contribution to mystical philosophy was his clarification of this concept of complementarity, and his employment of two distinct terms to distinguish the unmanifest Absolute from the manifested world of phenomena; (borrowing from al-Hallaj,) he calls them *Haqq* and *Khalq*. When we experience the Absolute in the transcendent state of consciousness, says Ibn Arabi, we are experiencing *Haqq*; when we experience the world of multiple phenomena through our senses, we are experiencing *Khalq*. "But," says Ibn Arabi, "the *Haqq* of whom transcendence is asserted is the same as the *Khalq* of whom immanence is asserted, although the one is distinguishable from the other."<sup>2</sup> Thus, Ibn Arabi's vision and his doctrine, like that of the other great mystics of all religious traditions, was one of the essential unity of God and the universe.

For him, the world (*Khalq*) is simply the appearance of God (*Haqq*). It is simply our limited perspectives as individual perceiving entities that produces the appearance of multiplicity. "Multiplicity," he says,

is simply due to the existence of different points of view, not to an actual division in the one Essence."<sup>3</sup> And unity simply means that, "two or more things are *actually* identical but *conceptually* distinguishable the one from the other; so that, in one sense the one is the other, while in another sense it is not."<sup>4</sup> "If you regard Him through Him, then He sees Himself through Himself; but if you regard Him through yourself, then the unity vanishes."<sup>5</sup> "[Furthermore,] if you assert that only *Haqq* is real, you limit God [to transcendence]. And if you assert that only *Khalq* is real, you deny Him [altogether]. But if you assert that *both* things are real, you follow the right course, and you are a leader and a master in gnosis."<sup>6</sup>

Elsewhere, he says, in much the same vein:

Do not distinguish *Haqq*, lest you regard Him as separate from *Khalq*. Do not distinguish *Khalq*, lest you invest it

with non-Reality. Know Him as both particularized and unparticularized and be established in Truth. Be in a state of unity if you wish or be in a state of separation if you wish; if the Totality reveals Itself to you, you will attain the crown of victory.<sup>7</sup>

In the following passage, Ibn Arabi describes how, when the mystical vision of unity dawns, it is seen that the One alone exists—and that It *is* the many:

When the mystery of the oneness of the soul and the Divine is revealed to you, you will understand that you are no other than God. ... Then you will see all your actions to be His actions and all your attributes to be His attributes and your essence to be His essence.

...Thus, instead of [your own] essence, there is the essence of God and in place of [your own] attributes, there are the attributes of God. He who knows himself sees his whole existence to be the Divine existence but does not experience that any change has taken place in his own nature or qualities. For when you know yourself, your sense of a limited identity vanishes, and you know that you and God are one and the same.<sup>8</sup>

...There is no existence save His existence. ...This means that the existence of the beggar is His existence and the existence of the sick is His existence. Now, when this is admitted, it is acknowledged that all existence is His existence; and that the existence of all created things, both accidents and substances, is His existence; and when the secret of one particle of the atoms is clear, the secret of all created things, both outward and inward, is clear; and you do not see in this world or the next, anything except God.<sup>9</sup>

This vision is universal among the seers. It must be admitted that Ibn Arabi, by the 13th century, had access to the writings of the seers of ancient Greece, the Neoplatonists, the Christian Fathers, perhaps even of the Vedantists and

Buddhists, and certainly those of his Sufi predecessors. However, we mustn't imagine on that account that he was merely recounting a learned philosophical position. He had "seen" It, and spoke from his own direct experience, framing his words in the idiom of his own time and traditional affiliations. "Such knowledge," he said,

can only be had by actual experience, nor can the reason of man define it, or arrive at any cognizance of it by deduction, just as one cannot, without experience, know the taste of honey, the bitterness of patience, the bliss of sexual union, love, passion, or desire.<sup>10</sup>

In his writings, Ibn Arabi strove above all to explain the identity of God and the Self for the benefit of all who sought to comprehend the Truth. Here are a few of his most penetrating remarks on this theme:

Know that whenever something permeates another, it is assumed into the other. That which permeates, the agent, is disguised by that which is permeated, the object. In this case, the object is the manifest [universe], and the agent is the Unmanifest, the Hidden.<sup>11</sup>

On Him alone we depend for everything; our dependence on other things is in reality dependence on Him, for they are nothing but His appearances.<sup>12</sup>

The eye perceives nothing but Him; only He is to be known. We are His; by Him we exist, and by Him we are governed; and we are, at all times and in all states, in His presence.<sup>13</sup>

Nothing but the Real is; there is no separate being, no arriving and no being far away. This is seen in true vision; when I experienced it, I saw nothing but Him.

When my Beloved appears, with what eye do I see Him?  
With His eye, not with mine; for no one sees Him except Himself.<sup>14</sup>

It is none other than He who progresses or journeys as you. There is nothing to be known but He; and since He is Being itself, He is therefore also the journeyer. There is no knower but He; so, who are you? Know your true Reality. ... He is the essential Self of all. But He conceals it by [the appearance of] otherness, which is “you.”<sup>15</sup>

If you hold to multiplicity, you are with the world; and if you hold to the Unity, you are with the Truth. ...Our names are but names for God; at the same time our individual selves are His shadow. He is at once our identity and not our identity... Consider!<sup>16</sup>

In one sense the Reality is creatures; in another sense, It is not. ...Whether you assert that It is undivided or divided, the Self is alone. The manifold [universe] exists and yet it does not exist.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, know your Self, who you are, what is your identity. ...Consider well in what way you are *Haqq*, and in what way *Khalq*, as being separate, other.<sup>18</sup> He who knows himself knows his Lord; ...indeed, He is his very identity and reality.<sup>19</sup>

As for the theorists and thinkers, and the scholastic theologians, with their talk about the soul and its properties, none of them have grasped the Reality; such speculation can never grasp it. He who seeks to know the Reality through theoretical speculation is flogging a dead horse; ... for he who seeks to know It by any means other than the one proper to It, will never grasp It.<sup>20</sup>

If men knew themselves, they would know God; and if they really knew God, they would be satisfied with Him and would think of Him alone.<sup>21</sup>

### NOTES:

1. Schimmel, Annemarie, *Mystical Dimensions Of Islam*, Chapel

2. Hill, Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1975; p. 261
2. Affifi, A.E., *The Mystical Philosophy Of Muhyic Din-ibnul 'Arabi*, Cambridge, AMS Press, 1939; p. 21
3. *Ibid.*; p. 11
4. *Ibid.*; p. 11
5. *Ibid.*; pp. 10-11
6. *Ibid.*; p. 21
7. Austin, R.W.J. (trans.), *Ibn Al-Arabi: The Bezels Of Wisdom*, N.Y., Paulist Press, 19801980; p.125
8. Landau, Rom, *The Philosophy Of Ibn Arabi*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1959; pp. 83-84
9. *Ibid.*; p. 83
10. Ibn Arabi, *Meccan Revelations*, I
11. Austin, *op. cit.*; p. 92
12. *Ibid.*; p. 98
13. *Ibid.*; p. 137
14. *Ibid.*; p. 108
15. *Ibid.*; p. 136
16. *Ibid.*; pp. 126-127
17. *Ibid.*; p. 88
18. *Ibid.*; p. 126
19. *Ibid.*; p. 153
20. *Ibid.*; p. 153
21. Landau, *op. cit.*; p. 79

## II. Iraqi

A younger contemporary of Ibn 'Arabi, the celebrated Sufi poet, Fakhruddin **Iraqi** (1213-1289), was born in the village of Kamajan, in Persia (present day Iran). According to legend, he was famous in his region for his religious devotion by the time he was eight years old; and by the age of seventeen he was giving lectures on the scriptures to his schoolmates. As the story goes, he was drawn to the Sufi path when a group of wandering dervishes passed through the town, and he happened to hear their plaintive songs of divine love. Iraqi immediately left his studies behind, and went off with the Sufi band, wandering throughout Persia and into India.

In the city of Multan, in India, he met the Shaikh, Baha'ud-din, of the Suhrawardiyya Order, and became his disciple. Not long thereafter, he married the Shaikh's daughter, by whom he had a son, Kabiruddin. For twenty-five years Iraqi lived in Multan under the munificent protection and guidance of his master, Baha'uddin. Iraqi was, by nature, a poet; and during his years at Multan, he wrote a number of devotional songs; but his great masterpiece of poetry, the *Lama'at*, or "Glimpses," which has brought him everlasting fame, was written some years later, in Anatolia (Turkey).

In 1268, when Iraqi was fifty-five, his old master, Baha'ud-din, died, and passed the succession of the Order to him. However, there was much discontent and turmoil over this change of leadership, not only within the Order, but among the political factions of the area as well; and Iraqi decided it would be best to leave Multan. So, along with a few loyal friends, he journeyed by sea to Oman, on the coast of Arabia. There, he was received as a celebrity, and was soon made the chief Shaikh of the district. But Iraqi was not content to remain in Oman; instead, he set out for Mecca, and from there to Damascus, and onward north to Anatolia, to the city of Konya.

Konya was the city in which Ibn Arabi had spent some years of his life, and where Sadruddin Qunawi (d. 1274), Ibn Arabi's chief disciple, now lived. It was also the home of the famous Sufi, Jalal-uddin Rumi, about whom we shall hear more later. Iraqi quickly became the intimate friend of both of these revered Sufis, but most especially of Qunawi, who had a great influence on him intellectually. Qunawi, as mentioned, was the principal disciple of Ibn Arabi in this area; and he was also very actively engaged in the dissemination of Ibn Arabi's teachings, attempting to popularize the philosophy of unity taught him by his master. It was this philosophy, which was to become the foundation and rationale of Iraqi's most exquisite poetry, the loom upon which he would weave a tapestry of unparalleled beauty.

Ibn Arabi had been not only the teacher of Qunawi but had also become his stepfather by marrying Qunawi's widowed mother; in addition, Ibn Arabi had bestowed on Qunawi the successorship of his lineage, and Qunawi was now the chief Shaikh of the city of Konya. He gave frequent lectures and wrote books explaining the mystical and metaphysical precepts of Ibn Arabi, and had a number of gifted, and later distinguished, disciples himself. His lectures on Ibn Arabi's *Bezels Of Wisdom* and *Meccan Revelations* were attended by Iraqi, who became thoroughly fascinated and inspired by the

study of these works. Each day, after the lectures of Qunawi, he would, in a state of inspired joy, set down a few verses of his own, illustrating Ibn Arabi's teachings, and at last collected them in a book, which he called *Lama'at*, which may be translated as "Flashes," or "Glimpses" of insight.

When he showed his little book to Qunawi, the great Shaikh, after reading it, pressed it reverently to his eyes, and exclaimed, "Iraqi, you have captured the secret essence of Ibn Arabi's thought; your *Lama'at* is the very heart of his words!" Ibn Arabi, though a true mystic, had been of a metaphysical turn of mind; he labored at great length to thoroughly explain the mystery of things. Iraqi, however, was a poet; he was able to express the thought of Ibn Arabi in exquisitely succinct gems of precision. He used the simple language of love to capture the essential truth of the complementarity of *Haqq* and *Khalq*, which Ibn Arabi had so elaborately articulated; and turned the intellectual abstractions of Ibn Arabi into immediately perceived fruits-in-the-hand. Where Ibn Arabi had hovered like a bee over the blossom of Truth, examining its fragrance, Iraqi settled in the flower's heart, and drank its nectar.

Destiny, it seems, had brought Iraqi to Konya, where he was to catch his "Glimpses" of the one Reality; but he was not to remain there for long. He had found favor with one of the local rulers, the Amir, Parwanah, who built for him a retreat in the town of Tokat, and so Iraqi lived and taught there for some years. But when Parwanah was suspected by the Mongol Emperor, Abaka, of consorting with his enemies, the Amir was executed, and Iraqi fled Tokat in fear for his life.

Arriving in Cairo, Iraqi met with the Sultan there, who became very favorably impressed with him and made him the chief Shaikh of Cairo, conferring on him exceptional honors. And when, after some time, he traveled to Damascus, he was treated in a similarly reverential manner there. But he was now old, and after about a year in Damascus, he became quite ill, and sent for his son, Kabir-uddin, who had remained in Multan. With his son at his side, he died at the age of seventy-eight, in the year 1289.

Here are a few selected verses and passages from his celebrated *Lama'at*:

Beloved, I sought You here and there,  
Asked for news of You from all I met.  
Then I saw You through myself,

And found we were identical.  
Now I blush to think I ever searched  
For signs of You.<sup>1</sup>

By day I praised You, but never knew it;  
By night I slept with You without realizing it,  
Fancying myself to be myself.  
But no, I was You and never knew it.<sup>2</sup>

“O You who are so unbearably beautiful,  
Whose beloved are You?” I asked.  
“My own,” He replied,  
“For I am one and one alone—  
Love, lover, beloved, mirror, beauty, eye!”<sup>3</sup>

I sought solitude with my loved one,  
Yet find there is no one here but myself.  
And if there were a “someone else,”  
then, truly, I should not have attained her.<sup>4</sup>

When I clutched at His skirt,  
I found His hand in my sleeve.<sup>5</sup>

I am the one I love,  
He whom I love is I.  
Two, yet residing in a single body.<sup>6</sup>

If I have become the Beloved,  
Who is the lover?  
Beloved, Love and lover—three in one.  
There is no place for union here,  
So, what is this talk of “separation?”<sup>7</sup>

What He takes,  
He takes with His own hand from Himself.  
What He gives,  
He gives from Himself to Himself.<sup>8</sup>

Hunter, prey, bait, and trap,  
Candle, candlestick, flame, and moth,  
Beloved, lover, soul, and soul’s desire,  
Inebriation, drinker, wine, and cup—

All is He! <sup>9</sup>

Is it You or I—this reality in the eye?  
Beware, beware of the word, “two.” <sup>10</sup>

“I” and “You” have made of man a duality.  
Without these words,  
You are I and I am You. <sup>11</sup>

He speaks.  
He listens.  
“You” and “I” are but a pretense. <sup>12</sup>

When shall You and I divorce ourselves  
So that “You” and “I” are gone,  
And only God remains? <sup>13</sup>

If You are everything,  
Then, who are all these people?  
And if I am nothing,  
What’s all this noise about?  
You are the Totality.  
Everything is You. Agreed!  
Then, all that is “other-than-You”—  
What is it?  
Oh, indeed I know, nothing exists but You!  
But tell me, whence all this confusion? <sup>14</sup>

He Himself speaks of Truth.  
He Himself listens.  
He Himself shows Himself.  
He Himself sees. <sup>15</sup>

The world but seems to be,  
Yet it is only a blending of light and shade.  
Discern the meaning of this dream.  
Discriminate between time and Eternity.  
All is nothing, nothing.  
All is He. All is He. <sup>16</sup>

Listen, riffraff: Do you want to be ALL?  
Then go, go and become nothing. <sup>17</sup>

You are nothing when you wed the One,  
 But, when you truly become nothing,  
 You are everything.<sup>18</sup>

Regard yourself as a cloud drifting before your Sun;  
 Detach yourself from the senses,  
 And behold your intimacy with the Sun.<sup>19</sup>  
 If you lose yourself on this path,  
 Then you will know for sure:  
 He is you, and you are He.<sup>20</sup>

### NOTES:

1. Chittcock, W.C. & Wilson, Peter L. (trans.), *Fakhruddin Iraqi: Divine Flashes*, N.Y., Paulist Press, 1982; p. 120.
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3. *Ibid.*; p. 111
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7. *Ibid.*; p. 76
8. *Ibid.*; p. 96
9. *Ibid.*; p. 110
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12. *Ibid.*; p. 80
13. *Ibid.*; p. 127
14. *Ibid.*; p. 99
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17. *Ibid.*; p. 10
18. *Ibid.*; p. 112
19. *Ibid.*; p. 123
20. *Ibid.*; p. 120

## 13. The Living Mystical Tradition

### I. Mystical Experience

So long as the Lord continues to illumine the minds of men, revealing to them the truth of existence and the illusory nature of their egos, so long will the Mystical Tradition continue to exist. It may masquerade as Hinduism, Platonism, Buddhism, Islam or Christianity, but these are only partisan frameworks by which the knowledge revealed through mystical experience is explained. It is the *experience*, gifted by God to His own human manifestations, that reveals to the minds of men the one eternal Existence in which all beings participate. The frameworks of the various religions are merely incidental. The illumination that occurs by the unfathomable Grace of God constitutes the be-all and end-all of the great Mystical Tradition. And no one has entry into its ranks except those whom He chooses.

The inner revelation of the all-pervading Spirit is the same for all and reveals a common truth; and yet that revelation too often becomes colored by the biased interpretation put forward by the particular religious tradition of the society into which one is born, or to which one is karmically attracted. All religious traditions are born of someone's spiritual experience, and while each tradition contains and preserves some kernel of the truth of that universal experience, the different cultural and historical contexts surrounding each tradition oftentimes serve only to limit our spiritual perspective and understanding. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and all the rest—mere ideational precepts, mere politics—divide us and disconnect us from the true conscious awareness of our own universally divine reality. Indeed, we as a people have succeeded over the centuries only in obfuscating and concealing the simple truth of our universally divine existence by the many dissevered and dissonant perspectives that we mistakenly call by the name of religion.

Isn't it amazing how the majority of the world's populace continues to hold fast to its childish sectarian mythologies while often remaining completely unaware of the very existence of true spiritual realization! It is as though the general tradition-bound public and those pursuing true spiritual realization exist in distinctly separate dimensions with no means of communicating with each other. It is not only diverse languages and regional cultures that divide us, nor merely the multiplication of disparate voices throughout history that has caused a proliferation of allegiances of faith; we seem to be

lost in our own inherently impenetrable and directionless fog, our own innate blindness of ignorance. And we must wonder: ‘Will the world’s scattered flocks ever return to a single common pasture? Or will each separate collection of partisans remain forever isolated from one another, perpetuating dissent and confusion and conflict in full view of the reality of an undivided Unity?’

Let us not bicker about the differences in religious traditions in a misguided attempt to find which of them is true. None of the various religious traditions contains truth in themselves; and yet each of them possesses the ability to lead one to the *experience* of truth. It is the experience of the Divine Self that is the prize to be sought; religious institutions merely provide pathways to that inner experience wherein lies all certainty and satisfaction. The purpose of all religious traditions is to focus the mind on God, who lives within the heart of every soul. When that Divine Spirit draws the soul to the realization of its oneness with Himself, then and only then is the truth found. If your religious tradition is truly worthy of your allegiance, it will lead you from the exterior to the interior, from the outer environment to the inner environment, and from thought construction to the still clarity of vision. Become quiet, and search for your Divine Lord, not within the pages of a book, but within yourself. If He reveals Himself, you will know Him as your own Self as well. Then your religious path will have fulfilled its purpose, and you will have no further need of a religious path. For here is the secret truth:

Though you play the game  
Of searching for God’s presence,  
And though at times it seems that you are  
Lost in this persuasive dream of time,  
The truth is that you are the One  
Who is imagining this broad fantasy.

All this is You: You are the seeker,  
The search, and that which is sought.  
You are truly the divine Self in all.  
You have only temporarily forgotten  
That you reign supreme as the eternal One,  
Forever unbounded by time or place.

## II. The One True Religion

Spiritual experience teaches us the truth; and the very first truth we learn, the very first teaching of all the saints, is the universality of the one Spirit. We are accustomed to half a dozen different religions vying for our allegiance, and yet the first spiritual truth to recognize is that God is one and His truth is one: There are not many religions; there is but one religion! The disparate claims of the differing sects and so-called ‘religions’ can be reconciled and understood; but there has been no reconciliation among the different teachings throughout all our history, but only war between the disparate factions, each representing its own exclusive truth. There is no exclusive truth! There is only an all-inclusive Truth, an all-inclusive Religion. Let me see if I can outline it for you:

“This world and everything in it is made of one Spirit. That Spirit is the world’s governing Power, constituting the Life and Awareness of every creature, and embracing everyone and everything in Its all-embracing Love. That Spirit is your essence; that Loving Spirit is who you really are.” Who teaches this religion—whether it is taught by Moses, Jesus, Krishna, the Buddha, or Muhammed—doesn’t matter; that’s but a triviality of history. Who wrote it—whether it appears in this book or that book—doesn’t matter; that’s but a triviality of history. This is the one true and eternal Religion. Make it your own!

But there are some who will say: “No, your religion and mine are far apart. I worship the one Father and His only begotten Son who is my savior”; or they might say, “I worship Krishna, who is the incarnation of God, and I meditate on Him in my heart”; or they may say, “I am a follower of the Buddha. I do not recognize gods, for ultimately, there is only the all-encompassing Void”; or they may say, “I worship Allah, and I live by the words of His Messenger as set down in the Koran”.

The truth is that religion is about experiencing your oneness with God. That experience *is* religion. Religion is *not* the deification of one exemplary historical person who experienced his oneness with God (as in Christianity); it is *not* about becoming obsessed with a written text of moral directives (as in Islam); it is *not* about the following of long-established customs or rituals (as in Judaism); it is *not* about the worship of multiple figurative representations of divine powers (as in Hinduism). So many religions, so

many paths. How divergent they seem! And each one believes they are on the exclusive path to blessedness! But blessedness only comes when He reveals that you and He are one—or, more precisely, that there is no you, but only Him.

**Comment:** At first glance, it seems tragic that human beings are so divided in their religious and spiritual understandings, that each person on this earth seems to hold a view that is inconsistent with the view of his or her neighbor. Would it not make for a more agreeable life if everyone understood the nature of our reality in a similar manner? The fact is, however, that each of us lives in a particular cultural region and is evolving under circumstances unique to ourselves and at varying degrees of spiritual awareness. This being so, it appears that we shall always incline toward views vastly different from one another regarding the spiritual nature of our universe and ourselves. To make matters worse, the scope of spiritual experience is also vast—so vast that none of us is likely to span the entirety of it—and so there will always be much more to explore, and much of which we must long remain ignorant.

Universal enlightenment is therefore an ever-receding goal, and yet spiritual awareness is, for each of us, a matter of every moment's concern. Also, how we see the universe and our life in it is constantly evolving, refining the focus of our spiritual sight. We live in isolated worlds of our own making, and yet each of us possesses a wider identity in common—for one Life lives us all, encompassing us in Its oneness. To be sure, our understanding will change, will grow; but we are already at our journey's end at home in Him, and so shall we always be.

### III. The Purpose of God's Creation

The summit of divine evolution comes when God, living and experiencing as a divine human soul in a divine human body, awakens to the truth that all this is Himself, that He is and has always been the one all-pervading Existence. God gets to experience the joy of this revelation not just once, but in billions of different forms over an immense span of time and space. That, I believe, is the hidden purpose of His universal manifestation: to slowly evolve as human souls over lifetimes in utter blindness of ignorance, and then, in His own time, to suddenly awaken each and every one of these beings from within themselves to the greatness and beauty and joyfulness of

His own limitless and unfathomable being. The thrill of enlightenment multiplied billions of times, the sudden unveiling of His perfection in billions of souls that turn out to be Himself—this is His evolutionary game. This is the answer to the question, 'Why does He do it? This is the answer to the question, 'What is the purpose of His Creation?' It is for this long prepared and multiply experienced Joy! It is an awesomely involved adventure, a prolonged drama, played out on countless far-flung stages, in countless unsuspecting hearts, each one culminating in Joy—the ever-new and unimaginable Joy of the discovery of one's own unbounded Self. What an exquisitely marvelous and satisfying game He has devised! Praise God!

#### **IV. How The Enlightened Man Lives**

How does the enlightened man live? He lives free of concern for himself, for he lives only to serve. As he views all the world as his own self, he acts always for the good of all. He is relaxed, asking for nothing; he relies on the universal order, trusting entirely in the perfect benevolence of the One. He is friendly to everyone, knowing all are struggling in the face of death. He gives, unconcerned with receiving, for the One he serves fills his heart with joy, and that is all the reward he needs.

He is wise but appears to be a fool. He appears to be poor, but he is the wealthiest of men. He lives and acts in the world like everyone else, finding enjoyment in pleasures, like everyone else. But, to him, it is all a game, quickly put aside. He does not follow the broad pathways of men but keeps to his own quiet ways. His is a life of peace, hidden and calm, though he accomplishes a thousand marvelous deeds. He seeks no glory or honor, and so is ignored by the world. He is a roaring fire, shedding light for generations, warming hearts both living and unborn; yet, in his own heart, he never strays from the sweet tranquility of his eternal home.