

A Journal of Universal Religious and Philosophical Teachings

#40

NECTAR

Advaita-satya-amritam
of Nondual Truth

Krishna The Charioteer
Swami Brahmeshananda

Letters from A Holy Rascal
Rabbi Rami Shapiro

Path of Nonduality
Via The Personal God
Annapurna Sarada

Inexplicably Hiding
Babaji Bob Kindler

Chinese Buddhism
& Ultimate Reality
Yogi Lam FuHo

An Ancient
Sufi Hymn

Secret of Mindfulness
Swami Sunirmalananda

Overlapping Philosophical Views
Prof. Larry Herzberg

Roots & Shoots of Mindfulness
Michelle & Joel Levey

Dharma Is The Only Refuge
Anam Thubten Rinpoche

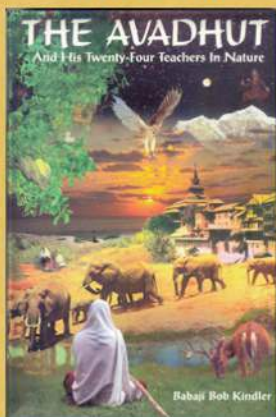
Colonial Contact
& Buddhist Meditation
Rev. Kosho Finch

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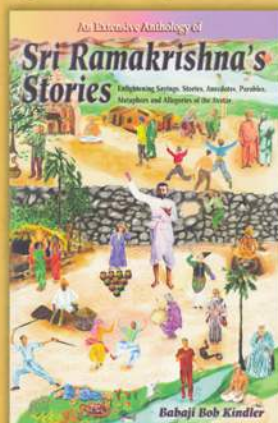
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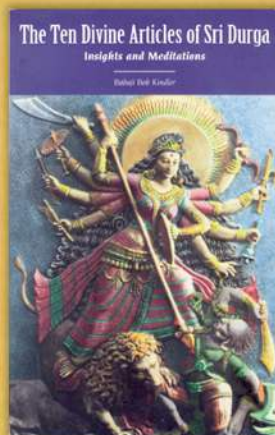


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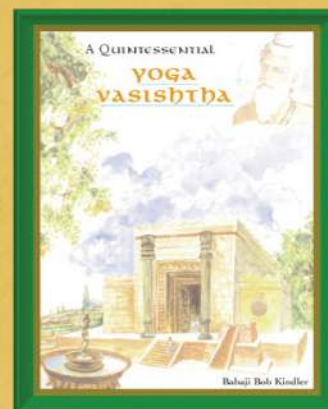
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Advaita-satyam-amritam

Nectar of Nondual Truth

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Publisher's Page

Sarada Ramakrishna Vivekananda – SRV Associations
“Setting the feet of humanity on the path of Universal Truth.”

Notes on an Advaitic Journal

At the basis of Advaita as the philosophy of Shankara and his gurus, there is Advaita as experience. Advaita as experience represents that supreme place where all diversity merges in its Essence. It is not combatant or immiscible with qualified or dualistic approaches, but rather provides them their place of consummate arrival. Where actual practice rather than mere book learning is emphasized, where religion, philosophy and spirituality are not separate from one another, where knowledge and love, reason and devotion, are never divorced from each other, there does the truth of authentic nonduality effloresce.

Historically speaking, experiential Advaita originated with the ancient Rishis. Therefore, the Upanisads contain the non-dual truths of the Vedas which declare: *idam mahabhutam anantam aparam vijnanaghana eva*, "This great Being is endless and without limit. It is a mass of indivisible Consciousness only."

SRV Associations & Universality

The SRV Associations are part of a worldwide movement of spiritual aspirants devoted to the study and practice of Vedanta and Divine Mother Wisdom. The ideals of this ancient pathway to God, exemplified in the lives of Sri Sarada Devi, Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, are the original and eternal perfection of the Soul and its inherent oneness with Reality, the manifesting of divinity in our lives, selfless service of all beings as God, and reverence for the ultimate unity of all sacred traditions. To this end our purpose is to study, worship, and contemplate Truth so that spirituality may flourish. This is the Advaitic way – “None else but Self, none other than Mother.”

Nectar's Mission – Advaita-Satya-Amritam

In Sanskrit, amrita, nectar also means Immortality – and this is, indeed, what we are offering: opportunities to become aware of this Amrita that is our very Essence via the rarefied teachings from Vedanta and the World Religions and Philosophies that appear in each issue of Nectar.

Nectar of Non-Dual Truth is SRV Associations' heartfelt offering of highest Wisdom to the human community. It is the sincerest form of love and service we know to disseminate non-dual Truth and teachings which transmit pure knowledge, pure love, and true universality. Through Nectar we are working out SRV's mission of spiritual upliftment and education. Please join us; this is a universal movement.

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With reverent gratitude, we heartily thank the contributing writers of this issue of Nectar of Nondual Truth, who have so graciously and selflessly shared the wisdom of their respective traditions and practices.

Staff of Nectar of Nondual Truth

Publisher

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EDITORIAL

Nectar of Nondual Truth is an open door to the Eternal Principle which, over the passing of millennia, returns to endear itself to the human heart and mind as they battle with the painful fact of the constant changefulness that effects life in relativity. When this long-standing adversary – cited as pain, war, samsara, maya, doubt, absence of God, lack of awareness, the presence of separation, self-arrogating thought, and the lack of mindfulness, in the articles included in this issue of Nectar – insinuates itself over life and mind, it is then that the ameliorating methods, mechanisms, and mouthpieces of religion and spiritual life must be resorted to so that seekers of all pathways can become steady and duly reach the Goal of human existence.

And though the world knows it not (or seldomly), this principle, called Universality in the present day and time, will broaden the mind's perspectives concerning nonduality and open the heart's wellsprings of unconditional love. Then, the saying of Swami Vivekananda wherein he stated, "Oh Lord: when will man be friend to man?" may become, "Oh Lord, I have realized that all beings are my very own Self," As Jafar, the mystic poet, sings, "All that exists art Thou."

Nectar of Nondual Truth journal is, or aspires to be, then, a thermometer for taking the temperature of the world-weary mind, a compass for revealing the best direction for the embodied soul to take, a barometer for measuring the oft-threatening psychological weather conditions of life in relativity, and a lighthouse for helping the embodied soul to steer clear of the sunken rocks and hidden reefs of individual and collective karma. It stores and reflects the subtlest secrets of the polestar of true guidance shining in the firmament of the sky of natural Awareness, which navigators who are striving to get free from the onerous pull of the tides of samsara need to know about if they are to arrive safely at their highly desired, divine destination.

In this issue, #40, revered religions and noble traditions the likes of Vedanta and Buddhism (basically nondifferent) Sufism, Judaism, Tibetan Buddhism, Zen (all essentially nondifferent), and others, come together to display both their vast sweep of wisdom and their overall similarities with one another. They cannot be called "the same," but their essence can be termed such. Even methods and practices often resemble one another, as if Yoga — union with Reality — is and always has been a multilaterally agreed upon axiom among them. Just think of the mutually beneficial ramifications amongst the various peoples of the world if consciousness of the sisterhood of all religions was adopted!

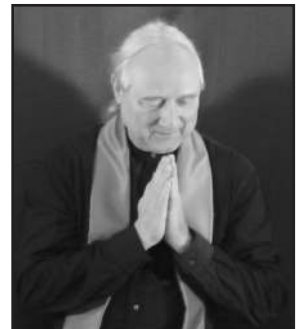
Further, both proof and permission for Universality to be celebrated in this welcome way has been granted in the form of Sri Ramakrishna in these modern times. His advent, in part, is the reason for advocating the open-minded acceptance of all religious faiths among the unanimously agreed upon sacred Truth principles of Godhood. Though a few other seers had mentioned this rare ideal over centuries gone by, he both championed and consummated it via his own religious practices and spiritual experiences. Moreover, he made this high-minded claim available to all, not just to a few. That is why the Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi, said of him: "This time the Master has come to save all — the rich and the poor, the wise, and the foolish. Now there is a special Malaya breeze blowing that will turn all trees to sandalwood. Just set your sail a little, take refuge in Him, and you will be blessed."

So please feel welcome to pour over these pages, feast on the special features, appreciate the precious philosophy, and savor the spirituality contained in the Wisdom-words of this unique offering of Nectar. Then, not only will the thirsty soul become satisfied and well-informed, but the writers and practitioners featured herein will have thankfully and gratefully helped fulfill their respective destinies of sharing the teachings of highest merit and deepest profundity with the world of sincere and interested living beings.

And along those very lines, the Nectar staff bows and proffers heartfelt gratitude to all of those who have selflessly contributed valuable time and concentrated effort towards sharing the teachings of their own wisdom traditions. We may hold Vedanta as our own cherished pathway to God, but it has taught us to recognize Truth in whatever authentic form it happens to come to us, i.e., as transmission from all the honorable spiritual traditions of this world, and beyond.

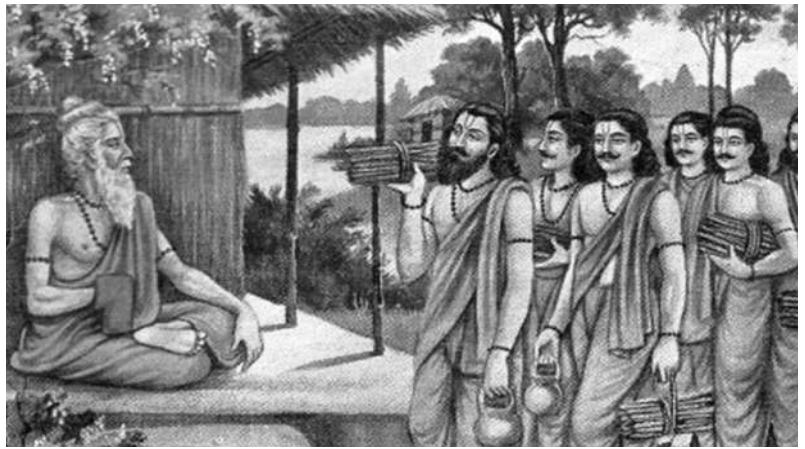
Om Peace, Peace, Peace

Babaji Bob Kindler



NECTAR OF ADVAITIC INSTRUCTION

Questions from Our Readers



As the overall awakening of humanity commences, world-wide, in this darksome age, and as the sea of samsara rises to drown souls in its miasma of misery, another vast ocean also makes its appearance – the ocean of indepth inquiry into Reality, called Atma Vichara. Below are more examples of the impediments that seekers face in this day and age.

“I pray that everything is prepared well for SRV’s forthcoming retreat in Rishikesh, India. Here at home, in Hungary, my meditations have been becoming more focused, and I have been contemplating the Vedantic axioms during my sessions, as well as making progress in the 3rd chapter of the Gita. I have a question regarding a section of a godblog titled ‘Can we know Brahman?’ My question is: I hear you talking about Advaita being something that we can’t achieve, because we already are perfected, and there is nothing to attain, yet, in this godblog you talk about not engaging in premature celebrations regarding success, nor mistaking smaller attainments for the ultimate attainment. How should we correctly understand inherent perfection?”

It is very true that aspirants, especially in this day and age, are too prone to claim swift success for themselves, and are thereby often found celebrating prematurely; they will almost invariably mistake penultimate goals – even superficial goals – for the Ultimate Goal Itself. As the Great Master has explained: *“When one has a guru, and faith in his words, then the mind can be set more easily on the important task of spiritual practice and disciplines. Most practitioners prove lazy, however. They want someone to extract the butter from milk and hold it up to their mouths. Again, they won’t take the trouble to throw spiced bait into the water [attract God to them with spiritual practices]; they will not even agree to hold the fishing rod! Someone else must catch the fish and place it into their hands. What a bother!”*

The essential point is, that though the Soul, Atman, is inherently perfect, the practitioner must exert, spiritually speaking, in order to remove the coverings that accumulate over the mind and in the body over the course of embodied existence. Then this innate perfection will stand forth of its own accord, naturally. But body, senses, and life-force (prana) must all be purified before such internal effort (like meditation) is entered into – *“in order to enter into the Kingdom of the Most-High.”* Our Advaita is that Most-High. That incomparable atmosphere of Nonduality will not permit imperfections into its Sanctum. Can one walk into the finest restaurant wearing a grimy tee-shirt? You will not be admitted!

After having heard of the Truth (shravana), one must purify and go seeking, in that order. With Truth comprehended, all obstacles will fall away...except one. That one is the short-sightedness of the spiritual ego that prematurely proclaims it has become one with Brahman. Seekers get glimpses, but then fall back in doubt. With the help of the guide combined with sincere self-effort, the soul will realize the Soul without even “knowing” it.

I wanted to share with you that my inner practice continues. However, lately my heart feels like I have a fist clenched around it. It feels like I am holding on to things I would like to release but I am unsure of what those are exactly. I have been a little scared to reach out about this. In order to remedy this, do you have any recommendations on how I should orient my meditations? Or other teachings that I may reflect on leading into meditation?”

May all blessings be unto you in your spiritual endeavors, and duly come your way. Since your description of what grips you here is mostly devoid of any detail, and cannot be traced to a source yet, we are to assume that it is an unseen karma that is getting worked out. In that case, you write here, ‘The practice continues.’ That is key. Focusing in on Holy Mother and using the mantra will both lessen the effects of hidden karmas, and help one pass through them more swiftly. Such things are time sensitive. They are rather like illnesses; they come out of nowhere and pass on in due time. Soon, one can hardly remember them. So be strong and hold up your practice in the face of them.

Further, if the cause is something else, like coming from some person or present situation, then remain aware and use your mantra and practice as guards. Another thing: do not wait to contact me when such things transpire. I can help from a distance if I know about them. Even your recounting of such occurrences will help you psychologically, and more readily.

“I am sorry that I have missed so much satsang lately. We’ve had some life dramas recently. I always want to ask you questions; I know that I have so much to learn and try to prepare for. But, I cannot always find the words. The past year has been a lot. There was suddenly so much emotional turmoil rising up in me, just bubbling under the surface. It’s still there somewhat, but less so today. What helped were two things: one was remembrance of Tara Maa Mantra, and also the learning of two diagnoses that I think apply to me. The latter was revelatory and explained some of my physical symptoms that I would experience, which felt both like and very unlike panic attacks. I felt out of control, I guess, and now knowing the name of this thing is helping get it under control. Also it was edifying to see that traditional psychological therapy doesn’t seem to work for folks with these diagnoses. I have tried therapy in the past and always felt like it didn’t work for what I needed help with. Then the recommen-

dition that comes from Western science is to take medicines for a short period of time and sort of retrain the brain. I, of course, do not want to take those drugs, and believe that I can still do that retraining. I'm hoping you can help me with this, to undo habits or ways of thinking that were created by traumas at young ages. The Tara Maa Mantra sort of came back to me, rose up out of my memory, and I started using it the last month or so which is helping a lot. It was interesting to me that this came back from so long ago, maybe two decades in my past. Since you initiated me with Sarada Maa's mantra, that is the only mantra that I had been using. Perhaps I should do none of this though. What do you advise for me? How do I get re-started?"

Yes, what you write, and suspect, is quite true. A sincere aspirant can settle all emotional matters with a well-guided sadhana, and need not stoop so low as to resort to western psycho-therapy and medicines. Yoga psychology is far superior to these. Mental purification takes place with special practices that not only dissolve karmas from such arisings, but also remove completely, in due time, the causes for such problems in life. Inferior methods treat the symptoms only.

So, let us proceed onwards to use mantra and meditation, along with ongoing studies, to set the stage correctly and balance life and mind. Please use the Sarada mantra as I gave it to you, daily. If Tara mantra is working now, suddenly, know that it is because the Sarada mantra I initiated you into is empowering the Tara mantra anew. So continue to use what I gave you, and have full faith in it.

"Recently, I have realized how much I had been in survival mode and how selfish I was becoming. All of my experiences have underscored or re-demonstrated to me how life is not satisfying. I have had such high hopes for my relationships but none of that seems realistic at all now. Those hopes feel foolish today. It's an example of something I struggle with that I wanted to talk to you about, i.e., life makes me feel immensely alone; it did as a 'care-free' child, and adult-life is no different. Husband and friends are supportive, but still so much of living feels isolating. Seva and the relationships I make in the process help. Still, my longing for connectedness goes on. I guess that's just life. It won't deliver what I'm looking for. Only sadhana and faith in Maa's Grace will. Anyway, I've been meaning to email you about all of the above but have really struggled to find the words. I also wanted to ask you about how to know if you are hearing Tandava versus experiencing tinnitus. I have had a few powerful moments where I have been certain I heard Om. But, I had only heard the sound described in a few ways before. Recently, in a satsang call, you listed many descriptions of it, and it made me question the many more times I have had mundane experiences but heard a ringing whistle in my ears and dismissed it as a side effect of my love for headphones and concerts. I use a mudra to clear the sound then. But, if I am hearing Om, shouldn't I dwell with the sound and even meditate, rather than force the moment to pass more speedily? Thank you for your time and advice."

It is good to see something come in from you, and to learn about the events of your life. It seems that you are getting the lessons that sensitive seekers of Truth and Freedom receive over time

spent here in this world. Once one sees the nature of it, then such terms as 'world-weariness,' 'divine discontent,' and others that are found in the scriptures, become understood and applicable.

Sincere beings here on earth look to find the deepest experiences, and then extract the essence from all of life on their return journey to the Source. That was one of the titles of a recent SRV seminar, "Extracting the Essence from everyday life." Last weekend we looked at 'The Primal Seeds in the Deep Sleep State.' Such deep dives into the subtle realms of Atmajnana will do wonders for the flagging soul.

All of this is just to say that your concern with survival and selfishness will disappear in holy company; but you have to be exposed to that several times, over time, and keep it up, otherwise the world's maya will just come dancing back in cycles. Learn to keep it at bay for good, live in constant sattva like the luminaries of our tradition, and then work on lasting serenity and equanimity of mind. No one, and no thing, will be able to touch you with negativity after that.

Yes, and remember that magic word, sadhana. Come and learn it from me, then do it. And about hearing AUM, did you mean 'pranava' when you wrote "tandava." Whatever the case, you can be trained to be sensitive to the actual sound of AUM if you take advantage of the boon of holy company - guru, dharma, sat-sanga.

So let this, my response, trigger further communications between us, so that such long gaps do not interfere with our deepening spiritual relationship.

"As perhaps you ascertain I like to keep my sadhana simple and concise. I am reading the Vakyavritti and have always found 'Thou Art That' intriguing and useful. The description of Thou is clear, the Self, 'distinct from the body, the senses, the mind, the vital force, and the ego.' But why use 'Not this not this' for the meaning of 'That.' I can understand the use of 'Not this, not this' to clarify and create discrimination. I would think that in the context of the 'Thou art That' it would be more beneficial to not concentrate on what is not Brahman but Brahman itself. I suppose it's because Brahman is beyond words, yet the effort still directs us past what is unreal to what is real, however limiting. Any comments would be appreciated."

I am not sure that you read Shankara's slokas in Vakyavritti completely accurately, but whatever the case, the neti neti discipline is in tandem with right discrimination. Because of people's attachments to objects and projections, affirming "not this, not this," is a direct way to loosen the hold that the callow mind has on things changing and ephemeral. You probably comprehend this, but in the case of some beings, they cannot just say, "Thou art That" and expect to realize the depth of what it means. They can walk away thinking they understand, but still fall short of any real experience - other than mental. A goodly amount of time is advised in the "not this, not this" discipline before proceeding onwards and inwards towards spiritual maturation. Thus, "not this not this" is enjoined by the acharyas and gurus. There is also "iti iti," however, which means "all this, all this." That nondual, or beyond nondual proclamation is even beyond knowing the formless Brahman at the early stages.

“I found ‘Let One Put Garlands On’ poignant. I have been considering the difference between nonattachment and indifference and the dance between the two. I find it easy to slip into indifference (which is extremely insidious) as a false mechanism to separate from being attached. What makes nonattachment so powerful and difficult is that one must be fully invested yet standing separate from it. I have found that making God the doer gets me closer. If one’s effort is a vehicle for God, for the love of God, then the ego has a harder time to claim ownership. Do you have guidance on this?”

And this point gets to the root of what I was explaining earlier, in that people making only a general distinction between what is not Brahman and what is, run the risk of falling into indifference and bypassing real discernment. I think you understand this, too. So, discriminate to the fullest extent of the spiritual law! What have you got to lose except those things which are not Brahman....

“The last comment comes from the class last night. You mentioned there is a benefit to glimpsing past lives. Not sure how this is helpful, but rather a distraction and more an effort in wishful thinking. Any comments here?”

In the West, today, coming to know of past lives even as a relative law is important. The saying goes that “We are what we were.” This goes deeper into discovering why people act the way they do, how they got into the body, what their karmas consist of, and how to get free. Later, for an advanced soul, perceiving past lifetimes gives clues into how to refine awareness further, brooking on ultimate freedom. Then, for the free soul, and the one who is helping others get free, a reading of past lifetimes of those who are being helped becomes very helpful in the process of awakening. I believe that watching the forthcoming classes on Sundays will help explain this further.

“Namaste Babaji. In chapter 7 of your Raja Yoga lessons, towards the end, Patanjali begins a sutra with, ‘When, by the previous preparations...’ I find his description of meditation rather confusing there, almost a step backward. Rather than leave behind thoughts and sense objects, he encourages one to examine them. He advises to identify the cause of the thoughts and distractions and then to begin dissolving their appearance and involvement in meditation. I feel that at this stage in the Eight Limbs one would have already reached that level of competency. This sounds like it should be in the Pratyahara limb. What am I missing?”

As they say in the 8-Limbed Yoga practice, what the practitioner is finding out at each of the branches is due to and based upon the roots of the tree. In other words, one is never through with the basics. One does not leave limbs behind in search of the higher limbs; one incorporates the roots and lower limbs as one goes inwards and upwards.

We have to meditate on the objects and the elements in order to know them, and further, to remove old impressions we had about them earlier in life, i.e., as possessions, as comforts, as alien and unconnected entities. Yoga is union, but we have been out of union for so long.

So see these appearances in the mind, then dissolve them

there. And be able to come back to them, like emerging out of deep sleep into the waking state. Back and forth, memorizing the evolution and involution of things; of tattvas. Prior to such a deep study as Raja Yoga, it has all and only been about evolution, as we were taught for lifetimes. Now we have to relearn it all based upon the higher relative truth of involution. And thus, attached herein is lesson 8 of the Raja Yoga study classes for your consideration and application.

“Recently, on your live-streaming satsangs and godblogs, you truly clarified for me the innate oneness of Sri Ramakrishna and Christ, and what is truly the meaning of ‘I am the way, the Truth, and the life.’ Also, I didn’t know that Lord Buddha’s teachings identify two selves. That was clarified, even if many Buddhists don’t seem to get it.”

There are a small host of important realizations that can now be added back into our store of higher wisdom in this age, religious, philosophical, and spiritual facts and axioms which were forgotten along the way of generations, or had become overlooked prior to the arrival of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda on the present world scene. The return of the Age of Truth is now upon us, which always occurs and recurs at the end of an age of darkness like the one we are seeing. As Vivekananda himself has stated, recently: *“In the Ramakrishna Incarnation there is Knowledge, Devotion, and Love – infinite Knowledge, infinite Love, infinite Work, infinite Compassion for all beings. You have not yet been able to fully understand Him yet. People will come to know Him by degrees....”*

“Namaste Babaji: I’m settling into a better understanding of ‘Thou art That.’ It’s taken more reading and meditation on it, but the negation technique makes sense now. Brahman, being formless, is beyond thought, beyond intellect. Using Neti Neti, incrementally, gets us in proximity to eventually make the ‘leap.’ Your teaching of the Bhumikas is interesting, too, but I’m trying to understand how to use them. In what way can I apply the understanding? I can understand that they help ripen the mind, knowing that one arrives at the stages and moves up. So, they help the intellect?”

Glad to hear that your ruminations over these subtle truths are bearing fruit. It all should work accordingly as you entertain the precepts of the bhumikas over time. One only needs to get used to this different way of thinking, and the “newer” forms of wisdom that come to us from Mother India. Gradually, the knowledge that all these levels of wisdom exist within oneself dawns, and that is called insight leading to enlightenment. Such insights ripen the ego and refine the intellect, both.

It helps to know that everything consists of wisdom. I used to say, as I observed over time and practice, that all seems made of maya when one is (spiritually) unawakened, but once one awakens it all shows itself up as knowledge/wisdom. Later, when fully awake, it all gets transformed into Consciousness – which it always was. In correlation with the maturing individual, then, at first the soul sees false happiness, then notices the inescapability of suffering, which is followed by perceiving that all consists of thought – lower to higher. When higher thought dawns, all is seen as Brahman. This is the famous “seeing God in everything.”

“I’ve been reading and rereading chapter 7 and your commentary and class notes. So much is there, that it has been difficult to absorb and digest. I was finally influenced by you writing that Swamiji points out the existence of the superconscious plane that is above ego sense but is still imbued with intelligence. Lord Vasishtha describes this very nicely in the story of Ikshvaku in the Yoga Vasishtha scripture as ‘...a mind that has dissolved but which simultaneously retains its spiritual element.’ I decided per your recommendation to meditate on this even if I didn’t understand it. Although no known insight happened during my meditations, I reread Chapter 7 and a lot became more interesting and clearer for me. Especially where Swami wrote: ‘There is a little circle within which human reason must move. It cannot go beyond. ...yet it is beyond this circle of reason that there lies all that humanity holds most dear. All these questions, whether there is an immortal soul, whether there is a God, whether there is any supreme intelligence or not, are beyond the field of reason... All our ethical theories, all our moral attitudes, all that is good and great in human nature, have been moulded upon answers that have come from beyond the circle.’ Voila, and this is why learning about and experiencing super-consciousness is important, and not just about the Avatar. Suffice to say this chapter influenced and inspired me in the study of Raja Yoga. There’s a lot of ‘reason’ to continue on with it. Thanks again for your guidance and input,”

We are very fortunate that Swami Vivekananda, though focusing in on bringing America the liberating message of Vedanta from India, also took the time to give a commentary on the noble Raja Yoga tradition. He made it relatively simple to understand as well, leaving the scholarly commentaries to others. It is certain that he knew that Westerners, in general, would become captivated by hatha yoga, distracting them away from authentic Yoga. Thus, his four yoga books – Bhakti, Raja, Karma, and Jnana – to help guide us around and through such folly. Thank God for realized souls like him!

“I have finished reading *The Avadhut and His 24 Teachers*, and it was quite the read! It was packed with so many teachings, plus it had a nice look into how the Avadhut moves about in the world. One of my favorite paragraphs was in the chapter on meditation (p.459): “Come to know yourself as Consciousness and then realize that Consciousness as Mine alone, ever-one with Me. Thus, you are eternal Awareness Itself. Know that all forms are soluble into Me, that I am the primordial solution into which beings and objects, nay, entire universes, gross and subtle, get dissolved. Thus will you know your Source.’ I have started reading “*Seeing God Everywhere*” by Swami Shraddhananda, and am about a quarter of the way into it. I love the way the Swami speaks to the reader. He has a way of laying things out so clean and clear that it brings out the reader’s innate intelligence, and elevates him/her to his thought level.”

This kind of reading, along with study and rumination (manana), comprises a major amount of what the aspirant needs to accomplish day to day in spiritual life and practice. I would therefore encourage that you move onwards and inwards through this profuse collection of divine literature readily. Your own life will thereby become a sacred book to be read by others in the future.

“I have a couple of questions regarding meditation practice, stemming from my recent reading of Swamiji’s Raja Yoga lecture. The first has to do with Swami Vivekananda’s instructions for the placement of the eyes during meditation. He mentioned having the eyes open, looking down past the tip of the nose. My eyes generally rest lightly closed during both japa and formless meditation. Should I work on having my eyes gently open, looking down past the tip of the nose? If, so, is it more described for the japa practice, formless meditation, or both?”

I would interpret looking down the tip of the nose as gazing into the heart. Care must be taken to avoid the sensationalism of the hatha yoga orientation, along with its skewed permutations as it came West. For therein one finds the occult power version of things, i.e., the asana assumed for body alone as a longevity tactic, instead of the self-surrender of allowing Shakti/Divine Mother to take over the body for purification of all aspects of existence; also, the breathing for enjoying the flow of prana in the senses’ contact with their objects instead of balancing the breath, mastering it, then connecting it inwards to the psychic prana to purify mind and thoughts so as to gain Enlightenment.

These lower practices and their proponents would have one focusing attention actually on the nose so that one could enjoy aromas and enhance sensual experience. Such tricks of prana are spoken of in popular books of the day, along with descriptions of people levitating, etc. Looking past the nose, or down the bridge of the nose, with eyes half-closed, infers that the eyes are not looking outward at all; why would a meditator want to do that? Is the nose an illumined soul? When meditation is purposefully done on the senses as alambanas, in that exercise, that is for transcending said senses after noting their place and purpose (to know the cosmic order of things/tattvas, out and in). Only bhogi-yogis writing odd-biographies dwell out there so as to enjoy and smell all manner of aromas here and there. Pseudo-yogis who write autobiographies on themselves get fascinated with that type of thing. The serious seeker after Freedom focuses attention in the heart; that is what is meant by “gazing down the tip of the nose.”

If one studies the famous meditation pose of Vivekananda one can see he is fully concentrated within, even with the eyes slightly open. In the case of hatha yogis one sees them actually looking at the tip of the nose, with the eyes crossed; an inane and silly expression indeed!

At the other end of the spectrum, pertinent to these skewed views, is the fellow who rolls the eyes up in to the head, with said focus on the third eye, or something. It is rather an all whites and no yolk affair, kind of scary, like an alien has come amongst us. These types leave the eyes open to show others how high and transcendental they have become, like a “watch me now as I go into nirvikalpa in an instant” type of blowhard’s demonstration.

The Upanisads instruct to keep the concentration (inner gaze) focused in the heart center, anahata chakra, while the authentic Kundalini system advises that one is to let it rise to other centers in good time at the behest of Kundalini Shakti when She is ready to bestow such inner movement. By the time She reaches the Vishuddha chakra, eyes are closed permanently...no egg whites, no view of the outer throat, nor, of course, the eyes, ears, and nose, etc. Not only the outer senses, but also the inner senses are dissolving. If the lids happen to open, the eyes are pools of bliss – as

seen in the samadhi picture of Sri Ramakrishna, which, as Holy Mother's direct disciple, Swami Nityaswarupananda, once told me, was the first time in history that God had ever been photographed.

So as you can tell by the range of my response on the eyes, it is more that the meditator's attention falls away from them rather than upon them — unless you are taking one up as a specific alambana in order to find out its connection to the others, especially for purposes of involution (leading to dissolution).

As for the breathing processes themselves, Swamiji gives a few simple ones in the Raja Yoga book. He does not intend for the student to do them without instructions from and observation by an adept teacher. Again, there are breathing practices in hatha yoga, there are the same concerning the more comprehensive Vedic breathing, and also rightly-oriented Tantric breathing exercises. The latter two are infinitely superior, while the first one risks disorientation and attachment to the body. When next we meet, we can deepen your practice and increase the power in them by increments, making sure not to overdo them or spend an inordinate amount of time on them, as there is much more to Yoga and its practice than body and breath.

“I have a question that has to do Pranayama. Swamiji describes a practice of Pranayama involving the Ida and Pingala, connected with breathing-in through alternate nostrils, and with certain patterns. I am also aware that this can be a dangerous/injurious practice if not done properly, with a teacher, and at the correct time for the aspirant. With my practice, I continue to balance the four parts of the breath-in, held, out, held (aligning them with ‘I am Brahman, I will always be Brahman, I am not the world.’) Currently, I would say that I hold those breaths for roughly four to six seconds. I only do this practice briefly, after opening the shrine with the traditional SRV Arati. I have found that this breathing practice helps calm wayward thoughts, and allows me to concentrate more deeply and powerfully during japa and formless meditation. I will also do a dissolving of the mindstream practice, before starting japa, during some meditations (this is easier for me when I have had vivid dreams the night before, as I use the dream senses and dream elements to help in the dissolution process). Should I look to incorporate a more detailed and defined Pranayama? Or would you say that the practice of balancing the four parts of the breath is enough of a breathing exercise for my current practice?”

Along with what was written earlier on the breathing practice, what you are doing to complement it is both safe and expansive of mind. Again, I can help you expand the lungs a bit more so as to benefit from all of this more directly. What is not being brought forward here is the import of connecting the rounds of breathing more philosophically, like with one's states of consciousness, and The Word. Attending satsangs will help with that, including viewing the classes that take up such special teachings on subtle Vedic breathing that are not found in today's yoga circles.

“We have read the chapter on psychic prana, can you send lesson 4 for us to review and prepare comments? On other points: It seems that Advaita and Tantra are very different approaches and would be exclusive from each other. Isn't Tantra a dualistic

approach or am I not understanding it? Not sure how they can be assimilated or is that not your intention but rather to offer a broad view of darshanas for each person to find their use. To be honest your classes are a challenge. Their depth can be a little overwhelming but I must say I feel fortunate to be able to participate. I wonder, are these classes something that would be taught to novice monks in a monastery/ashram? Is that what we are experiencing? If so I feel very fortunate.”

At the core, Advaita and Tantra are seeking the same goal, as is the case with all the systems of Mother India's philosophies. At the level of practice, it can be said that Advaita is the Truth more than a practice, and Tantra seeks to get to that Truth by deep inspection of all principles and acceptance of them as expressions of Divine Reality. Thus, Tantra uses deification more than discrimination in its methods, though the latter is definitely important to it. I first offer the broad view, then ask for specialization utilizing practice. After that, a total assimilation is wanted. It is much like your focus on Yoga, which along that pathway you will encounter, naturally, teachings and principles from Tantra and Vedanta. The Advaita is something for later maturation, but which we attempt to imbibe as we move forward in spiritual life and growth. I hope that monasteries are keeping up such deep focus on scripture these days. I know the Ramakrishna Order monks are. Whatever the case, monk or householder, what is most important, i.e., practice, is the main issue, because all sensitive and introspective people will want to save themselves from cycles of suffering in ignorance.

“While reading chapter 3 and the elucidation and class notes, I have had to reread them quite often. Some of the hurdle has been the Sanskrit, but the understanding of the flow of energy from the Muladhara through the Sushumna ending with Sahasrara is new to me. I have had brief experiences of energy moving upward, from lower to mid chakra areas as I meditate. One of the reasons I regularly meditate is that my perceptions are clearer and less ordinary and more mental afterwards. As the lessons have stated, ‘Everything we see or imagine, or dream, we have to perceive in space.’ The difference between elemental space Mahakasha and mental space Chittakasha, what to speak of objectiveless perception in which the ‘soul shines in its own nature’ has been a lot to ponder. I can start to ask myself where is this perception coming from? (A very good ego check!) The paragraphs about coiled up Kundalini were of astute interest. ‘Thus the rousing of the Kundalini is the one and only way of attaining Divine Wisdom, superconscious perception, realization of the spirit.’ This affirmation inspires me.”

Yes, space and energy are very key to the path of enlightenment, or spiritual awakening. But beyond our Western science, we must take them both to the inner planes for higher understanding. Space, or ether, stretches into the heavens within, as Jesus told, and even deeper towards a causal space where all is stored in seed form. For energy, the prana has to be felt, beyond physical energy alone, then the energy of our thoughts must be accessed and controlled. It is about that time that Kundalini Shakti becomes more evident. She is that which we have been seeking all along, the awareness of whom lifts us up from the physical alone and into

what is distinctly spiritual in nature. This happens in stages for most beings today.

So keep contemplating in this fashion, and take the Raja Yoga lessons well, since Patanjali was obviously well aware of this special Mother energy.

“I have been thinking about the tension between Advaita non-dual samadhi and the relationship one has with his/her Bhagavan. The devotion to one’s Bhagavan, it seems to me, creates a thread to Brahman, offering glimpses and moments of renunciation and offers wind to our backs. I gained a sense of that from my attempts to understand Ramakrishna’s frequent moments of samadhi. Once it became clear that it wasn’t his effort/will that pulled him to it but rather his pure Atman/Brahman that was using his embodiment as an opportunity to inspire, teach and love those present. He had long ago discarded his form. Your earlier Godblog clarified this and created the realization for me. This week’s Godblog on Sri Radha reinforced that awareness describing the immense love from Brahman presenting attraction, absorption, and immersion through the Bhagavan. It really is God’s grace. Now I wonder, as one moves into Advaita non-dual samadhi one will need to leave behind their Bhagavan, I assume this could be an impediment for some aspirants? If I recall correctly you briefly addressed this at the close of class 2 on Sunday and I will go back and listen to that again.”

Yes, nondual samadhi, or experiences of formlessness (like deep sleep), will require that one leaves everything behind that has form. That is why it is called formless. But that does not mean that one cannot, does not, gain it back when samadhi with form returns. So there is no fear in this, nor should there be any tension, nor competition between schools of philosophy on the matter. This just epitomizes the two main modes of Consciousness, that is all.

“For scriptural texts you mentioned the Gita and the Upanishads. I am using Eknath Easwaran’s translations and commentaries. Would you recommend other volumes? I also find Edwin Bryant’s volume on Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras very helpful. I appreciate that he is not only a scholar, but a practicing Bhakta yogi (Vaishnava).”

Everyone uses the version that comes to them, but few students inquire of their guru as to what to use. Since we are not formally guru and disciple, you are welcome to proceed at your own choosing. But since you asked, I heartily recommend Swami Chidbhavananda’s Gita from the Ramakrishna Tapovan, and the two volumes of Patanjala Yoga by Swami Veda Bharati. These are for serious students, and will require a guide, like myself, to understand them in their own light.

“My current meditation practice is to sit in my asana, tense the body and then let it relax, several times. The effort is to release awareness of the body, let it drift away so it has the least contact with my mind. I begin pranayama with a lifted gaze behind closed eyes to the spiritual eye. My concentration is centered on watching the breath and the point between the eyes. I then end

the pranayama and begin watching my breath with my mantra. I am currently using Hong Sau. Hong on the inhale and Sau on the exhalation. My understand is it translates as ‘I am,’ ‘Peace.’ After a time I leave the mantram and sit in stillness pushing away thoughts as they emerge and bringing my concentration back to the breath. What suggestions or modifications would you give to my practice. You described ‘I am Atman,’ ‘I have always been Atman,’ ‘I am not of this world.’ For my Japa I am using two legacy chants from India. I find without the Japa I would lose a lot of power and control over the samskaras and vrittis. In addition my practice brings me to still the chitta vrittis; the asanas are inward focused and moving past the body and into a stillness.”

It sounds like you have outlined a practice for yourself that is sound. Again, since we are not formally guru and disciple, I can only hear about your daily practice, and leave you to decide whether it is working to your satisfaction, or not. If I were to outline your practice, the mantra and the Ishtam (your "Bhagavan") would be changed, and other aspects of the practice emphasized – all based upon Sri Ramakrishna and Vedanta practice in Vivekananda. As it is now, you can let me know your experiences with your present form of sadhana and I can respond accordingly.

“This comment in your notes is a little confusing can you help me with this? Sri Krishna states that ‘one should place the attention in the heart center while fixing the energy in the brain.’ Now, to me, I don’t see the distinction between attention and energy. Is he asking to separate concentration from prana? If so, I’m not sure how to get there. Can you offer advice?”

Attention is consciousness, and energy is prana. Generally, people just fix their focus on one place. Many make the mistake of focusing on the third eye. That is for much later, at higher levels of attainment. The heart is the place advised by the scriptures and the seers upon which to lay emphasis. So put your awareness on the heart center, then simultaneously become conscious of the life-force with the mind's eye. This is the specific meaning of Sri Krishna’s instruction in the Bhagavad Gita, cited here by you. The two are one, essentially, but finer expansion can be attained by defining these inner areas of consciousness. This is also what the Advaya Taraka Upanisad states when it speaks of the “Dharakasha” and the “Sambhavi mudra.” All the worlds culminate in the heart chakra, but it is the focused awareness that looks on from the “space between the eyebrows” that must come to witness it.

“I find myself pulled towards Ramakrishna; it’s a vibration, or even a magnetism. I would like your advice on how to develop the relationship further with him.”

I do not know who your Ishtam is, i.e., what god or holy personage, but if Sri Ramakrishna attracts you that is a very good sign. You can simply read the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna and think upon him daily, and see where this leads. We would need to find out if He calls you to Him; and so we can proceed consciously and gradually towards that end. Peace x 3....

Questions regarding problems and insights in spiritual life may be directed to Nectar’s editorial staff at: srvinfo@srv.org



One of the boyhood dreams of Swami Vivekananda was to become a charioteer, a coach-man. He was very much fascinated by the concept of Parthasarathi, the Divine Charioteer of Arjuna in the battlefield of Kurukshetra. And it is noteworthy that Swamiji replied to the welcome address by the public of Madras in the 'Gita fashion' from the box-seat of a horse carriage. In this short literary offering, Swami Brahmeshananda brings out the rich symbolism involved in the figure of the charioteer who is adroitly controlling the restive horses of the five senses.

Subtle spiritual truths are often explained with the help of tales and parables, allegories and illustrations. One such allegory which has found favor with the authors of religious literature is that of a chariot. In the Kathopanishad an embodied soul is described thus: "Know the Atman to be the master of the chariot; the body the chariot; the Buddhi, the charioteer; and the mind, the reins. The senses, they say, are the horses; the objects, the roads. The wise call the Atman united with the body, the senses, the mind – the enjoyer."

Triple Chariots of Consciousness

In Rama Charit Manas, Tulsidas has described a chariot which has since become famous as 'Dharma Ratha', the chariot of righteousness. When Vibhishana saw Ravana with a chariot and Rama without one, he became anxious and asked Rama, "My Lord, you have neither a chariot nor shoes, how would you conquer so powerful a warrior?" "Listen, O friend," said the Lord, "the chariot by which victory is achieved is of a different type. Patience and valor are its wheels; truthfulness and modesty are its strong flags and banners. Strength, discrimination, self-control and benevolence are the horses, which are tied by the reins of forgiveness, mercy, and same-sightedness. Prayer to the Lord is the wise charioteer." "He who has such a chariot of righteousness, for him there is no enemy whatsoever to be conquered."

Then there is the chariot of Lord Jagannath of Puri which is considered so sacred by the *Vaishnavas* that to see the image of the Lord seated in it is supposed to end the transmigratory cycle (*rathe ca vidmanam drstvad punarjanma na vidyate*). Some people consider the vision of the Lord in the chariot allegorical rather than literal, to mean realizing the divinity of the soul within the human body.

The Hindus are familiar with one more chariot – that of Arjuna, driven by Lord Sri Krishna. So popular are the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita that it is hardly ever realized that the chariot on which it was delivered by Sri Krishna could have a profounder significance than being a mere vehicle. Innumerable pictures have been painted of Sri Krishna delivering the immortal message of the Gita, but it is only Swami Vivekananda who has pointed out its spiritual significance. According to Swamiji: "Sri Krishna ought to be painted as he really was, the Gita personified, and the central idea of the Gita should radiate from His whole form Intense action in the

whole body, and withal a face expressing the profound calmness and serenity of the blue sky! This is the central idea of the Gita—to be calm and steadfast in all circumstances with one's body, mind and soul centered at His hallowed feet!" In fact, this picture of the chariot is an excellent object for meditation, a *Dhyana-Citra*. It combines in itself the philosophical teachings of the chariot described in the Kathopanishad with the moral lessons of the one in Rama Charit Manas, and has something more, besides, to convey.

Swami Vivekananda was of the opinion that Sri Krishna should be portrayed holding the bridle of the horses "...so tight that they are brought to their haunches, with their forelegs fighting the air and their mouths gaping." The strong turbulent horses, ready to leap ahead if allowed to, represent the five sharp and active sense-organs. They are kept under control by an alert mind represented by the tight bridle.

Sense Control First, Then Spiritual Practices

The sense organs, by their very nature, are extrovert. This outgoing tendency of the senses is the first great obstacle of a spiritual aspirant who aims at turning them within to see the Inner Self, the Atman. The Bhagavad Gita advocates that one should draw the senses within, just as a tortoise withdraws its limbs inside its body. But human sense-organs are not exactly like the limbs of a tortoise. They cannot be withdrawn bodily. Eyes and mouth can be shut; at the most, ears can be artificially plugged; but neither the nostrils can be prevented from smelling nor the skin from feeling, if their respective sensations reach them.

Many spiritual aspirants try to run away to secluded places in an attempt to avoid sensory stimuli. Others, unsuccessfully and thoughtlessly, try to weaken them by self-mortification. But this is not the right method of sense-control. This is like starving and thrashing the horses till they are half dead. The fact is that the external senses are only the outer receptors of the actual sense-organs situated in the brain centers and connected to them by the nerve fibers. The control of senses therefore actually means control of the inner organs situated within the brain. This indeed is the case with all spiritual giants whose examples can help us to understand this truth. Sri Chaitanya did not feel the taste of sugar even when it was placed on his tongue. The popular portrait of Sri Ramakrishna depicts his eyes open, but the picture was actually

taken when he was in a high state of Samadhi, totally oblivious of the external world.

The senses, therefore, must be controlled by the mind. "When a man purges his mind of all desires, then he can attain to steady wisdom." Innumerable thoughts constantly arise in the mind, but when attachment for sense-objects grows, only then are desires produced. A person without attachment and aversion can move amidst sense objects without being swayed by them. Thus the unending stream of thoughts in itself is not harmful, but the will to possess the objects or to enjoy the fruits of actions – which is called desire – is the cause of bondage. In the Gita, this 'willing' is called *Sankalpa* and man is repeatedly urged to give up desires born of 'willing'

fused and depressed Arjuna. According to Rama Charita Manas, anyone who has devotion to the Lord need not have any fear. What to speak then of the good fortune of one who has the Lord Himself as the charioteer?

Spiritual World-Famous Stithi-Prajnasya

Having the Lord as charioteer has another significance. Sri Krishna is not just a man of steady wisdom who will reach the *Visnu-pada*, the Supreme Abode of the Lord. He is Lord Vishnu Himself. So the allegory of the chariot represents a concept higher than the *stitha-prajanad* idea. Attaining *Brahman*, a sage should guide other souls who are still in bondage towards that goal. This

“...the senses must be sharp and alert, yet controlled; the mind must be free from desires, aversion and attachment, and willing; intellect must be free from egoism and must rest in the Lord. He who has these reaches *tad visnoh paramam padam*, the "Supreme Abode of the Lord.”

{*sankalpa-prabhavadan-kamadri*). An ideal *Bhakta* or a sage who has transcended the three *Gunas* does not allow the stream of thoughts arising in his mind to get converted into desires. He discards all endeavors and self-willed actions.

The reins in turn are held by the charioteer which stands for the intellect. The intellect must rest in the Lord. It should be “one-pointed.” Intellect actually signifies man's mental attitude towards himself and towards the objective world, and it is in this sense that the word *Buddhi* is used in the second chapter of the Gita. Most people have an egocentric attitude towards themselves and the world; “I am a body, and this objective world belongs to me.” This attitude of “me and mine” is the cause of bondage. It is responsible for allowing the mind to let loose the senses towards their objects. But when one gains the wisdom, “I am not a perishable physical body, but the eternal immutable Self, and the objective world is unreal and impermanent,” then the mind does not seek objects and the senses naturally turn inwards.

Thus the senses must be sharp and alert, yet controlled; the mind must be free from desires, aversion and attachment, and willing; intellect must be free from egoism and must rest in the Lord. He who has these reaches *tad visnoh paramam padam*, the "Supreme Abode of the Lord." Says the Gita: "That person, who, giving up all sense-objects, moves about unattached, devoid of the idea of ownership and free from egoism, attains peace." This is called “the Brahman state,” and the sage who has attained to it is a man of steady wisdom – *Stitha-prajna*. Thus, the picture of the chariot beautifully symbolizes “the philosophy of the man of steady wisdom,” the *stitha-prajanad darinana*, which is the central theme of the Gita.

Thus far we have studied the significance of the chariot with the help of the teaching of the Gita and the allegory used in the Kathopnishad. However, the presence of Lord Sri Krishna on the charioteer's seat, towards which Swami Vivekananda has specially drawn our attention, adds special significance to the whole picture. He is guiding the soul in bondage, represented by the con-

is exactly what Sri Ramakrishna exhorted Swami Vivekananda to do when the latter expressed the desire to remain merged in the bliss of *Nirvikalpa Samadhi*. He told Swamiji to accept a higher ideal – to be like a banyan tree which would provide peace and shelter to thousands of weary souls, rather than care only for his own salvation. This has been summarized in the following verse:

"May the wicked become virtuous.
May the virtuous attain tranquility.
May the tranquil be free from bonds.
May the liberated make others free."



Arjuna in the portrait represents the virtuous, and Sri Krishna the free who is leading him to freedom.

“A man of wisdom is different. He is more like a sea with high waves on the surface but profound calmness within. The greater the depth of the sea, the higher the waves which arise on the surface. Thus a man of steady wisdom may show intense outward activity but be perfectly calm within. This, according to Swami Vivekananda, is the central theme of the Gita.”

Describing Sri Krishna, Swami Vivekananda says, *"Sri Krishna, whip in one hand and tightening the reins with the other, has turned himself toward Arjuna, with his childlike face beaming with unworldly love and sympathy and a calm and serene look."*

Profound Significance of Sri Krishna's Countenance

The first feature of Sri Krishna's face is its innocence and childlike simplicity. Normally, as one grows into adolescence and youth, this innocence of the childhood is lost and is replaced by wisdom and maturity. The co-existence of innocence and maturity in later life is rare and is found only in spiritually advanced souls. *Jnanis* and *Paramahansas* are described as having a childlike nature. This was the case with Sri Krishna as well. Even while playing the roles of a warrior, a statesman, and a prince, he ever remained the playful cowherd boy of Vrindaban, and this dominant trait of his character often found expression on his face, in his eyes and actions, in courts and battle-fields, even in the midst of most serious situations and moments of crisis.

The second characteristic of Sri Krishna's face is that it is *"beaming with unworldly love and sympathy."* Indeed, an unsophisticated child with a mind unpolluted by the perverting influence of worldly wisdom, which teaches one to have one thought within and another without, really has true love and sympathy. A child is extremely sensitive to the joys and sorrows of others. If he sees another child weeping he catches that feeling, as it were, and himself starts weeping. On the contrary, a weeping child quickly regains cheerfulness in the company of cheerful companions.

In this context one is reminded of an incident in the life of the Holy Mother. An old laborer-woman used to visit the Holy Mother now and then. Once she came to her after a long lapse of time. When asked why she was not seen for so long, she started weeping and told the Mother that she had lost her grown-up son. No sooner had she heard this, than the Holy Mother burst into loud wailing and both, the bereaved mother and the Holy Mother, wept together for a long time. One can well imagine how consoled the old lady must have felt by the genuine and spontaneous sympathy of the Holy Mother, who could actually experience and share the sorrows of others, instead of merely uttering a few stereotypical words of sympathy. Sri Ramakrishna, too, had a remarkable capacity to sooth bereaved souls by an other-worldly sympathy.

The third feature of Sri Krishna's face is its serene and calm look. A childlike face with serenity seems a contradiction, for, children are naturally restless and, even when they seem to sit quiet, they are restless within like monkeys who may appear to be meditating but are actually planning to attack some nearby fruit garden! Indeed, the greatest punishment for a child is to make him sit quiet in a corner facing the wall. But a man of wisdom is different.

He is more like a sea with high waves on the surface but profound calmness within. The greater the depth of the sea, the higher the waves which arise on the surface. Thus a man of steady wisdom may show intense outward activity but be perfectly calm within. This, according to Swami Vivekananda, is the central theme of the Gita: *"He, who even while doing action, can keep his mind calm, and in whom, even when not doing any outward action, flows the current of activity in the form of the contemplation of Brahman, is the intelligent one among men. He indeed is the Yogi; he indeed is the perfect worker."*

But while an ocean does not overflow its banks even though rivers continually pour into it, here is Sri Krishna who is overflowing with love and compassion towards all suffering souls. One feels as if there is an ocean of Bliss filled to overflowing within the heart of Sri Krishna. The secret is, that while desires and sensory impulses flow into Him like rivers, not making the least disturbance, His heart always flows outwards in a torrent of love and compassion towards all of suffering humanity.

Thus we see that no simile — be it of a charioteer, a child or an ocean — can fully express the inexpressible character of a man of steady wisdom, much less that of the Lord. He is simple like a child, yet calm as the sea; he is deep as the ocean, and yet overflows its shores. And He ever remains inscrutable.



Swamiji's Chariot, "Vivekananda Rath," on processional through the streets of Bangalore.

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INEXPLICABLY HIDING, UNACCOUNTABLY MISSING



Whenever the devotees of the Lord and Mother of the Universe arrive on earth to enact their temporary sojourn in the realm of matter, they immediately come face to face with the painful fact that all things spiritual in nature, i.e., permanent, have vanished here. Eternal Life had been their steady, blissful abode while disembodied, but incarnating on earth in a physical body now forces them to trade in their subtle senses for gross ones, and they now see only the bewitching beauty of manifested Nature dancing in front of them. As Sri Ramakrishna had pointed out when he last descended to earth, there is only the garden in view, but no Gardener. Therefore, for the lovers of Divine Reality, *Brahman* and *Shakti*, so dear to them beyond time, have become unaccountably missing within time, and have evidently and inexplicably gone into hiding.

This stark look at the nature of life in the world does not deter these divine lovers, however, and in fact only serves to drive them deeper into an all-out search for whatever essence of existence can be found and extracted here on the physical plane. For, as the Upanisads have related to them over centuries and millennia, one is to look for *Brahman* here in the *Bhur Loka* like a merchant might search for oil in sesame seeds, or a miner for flecks of gold in rushing rivers. Therefore, as any good detective would say, “The game is afoot” – which is an appropriate statement given that the Feet of The Lord are the ultimate prize in this particular endeavor.

But detection of Divinity in the sweep of *Maya* on the wheel of *Samsara* is no simple matter. In relativity there are many shades of mental conditioning to unravel, and many levels of covering that living beings bury themselves in and hide behind. And many of these conditionings are projected by other souls caught in the net of *Maya* as well, while yet another host of coverings and overlays belong to the appearance of Nature and its convincing show. These “other souls” are fond of both. They seldom seek to pierce through *Maya*, transcend Nature, and discover the Light of *Brahman* within them.

At that mesmerizing moment when billions of tiny minds emitted like sparks from the Cosmic Mind of God; when time and space got projected thereafter, when the radiant sheen of boundless, primal awareness got dimmed down to a single physical sun in the sky; when the all-pervasive power of *Shakti* became restricted to a diminished flow of life-force through gross nerves in human bodies; and these bodies became dependent upon the food that rooted itself in and sprang out of solid matter – at that defining moment these fragmented bits of awareness decided collectively that this creation was real. Next, they fully engaged in it, casting away all memory of the Light of Consciousness that is their Essence, leaving behind the Home of Truth that is their only real and lasting abode. To seek this Essence and return Home, then, is the only recourse and the prime intention for the spiritually awakened soul reincarnated on earth.

To Explain the Inexplicable

For the naïve and simple soul who gazes out with physical eyes upon the vision of nature, it never occurs that: 1. it is actually a mass of swirling particles; 2. that it is a projection of the mind rather than a creation by an external force; 3. that it contains the diverting power to lure the soul away from deeper and hidden truths; 4. that it hides the potentially dangerous secret of immense physical force within it; and 5. that it is “unoriginated.” Like the thought vibrations (*chitta*) that brought it into being, its appearance is constantly rising and falling before the minds and senses of billions of souls under the hypnotism of assuming themselves to be separate individuals. With all of this considered, a sixth point, or an apt conclusion, could be readily forthcoming, which is, that the entire expanse and show of Nature is unreal, or nonactual. To account for this, even as a possibility, would require an open-minded scrutiny of the phenomena of birth, life, death, and rebirth, in addition to an overall inspection of one’s own states of shifting awareness – particularly the deep sleep state. And this final facet up for examination would, in turn, benefit by the practice of both contemplation and meditation, i.e., *dharana* and *dhyana*.

The ancient seers of India (as well as a few contemporary ones of note), engaged in these profound methods of examination, and did so after ensuring that they had the proper orientation. For them, there was no need to explain existence; that was not the problem (as it is in so many other religions and parts of the world). Their very own existence was seen as Existence, so no further proof was necessary. It only remained to explain how this stunted condition of Existence called the body/mind mechanism had succeeded in dwarfing the vast expanse of pure Intelligence and Consciousness that they began to perceive within them when they shut down all outer mechanisms (*tattvas*) “in their deepest contemplations.”

For others, not so conscious or inwardly enterprising, the matter of the existence of energy, thought, intelligence, and awareness itself, never came into the picture. They were purblind from the outset, that is, since before their present incarnation in the human body. And this fact, seen from a detached witness perspective by the luminaries, began to assist them in explaining why pure Consciousness had gone into hiding. As the Upanisads had related many millennia earlier, “*She, the Devatmashakti, remained veiled due to the limitations of their own intellects.*” Therefore, another reason for why Reality had inexplicably gone into hiding here on earth, came to light. It was attributed to the covering power, *avarana*shakti, which operated not only in nature due to the projection of name and form, but also in the individual mind which, unbeknownst to itself, did the projecting.

Unlike the rest of the world, Indian thinkers never accepted Nature and its show, called “the Creation,” simply because it appeared to the five senses. Where had it been prior to embodiment? Where does it disappear to at the time of death? What hap-

pens to it at night in deep sleep, etc., were pertinent, if not indispensable questions to be answered, forthrightly. While answering such deep questions, the relative truth of reincarnation appeared in their mind's deep memory. Due to willing participation in sense life devoid of the knowledge of Reality, over lifetimes, the soul got itself densely covered in the mire of *maya*. Looking for ways out of this unwanted cosmic weight, they found that inferior methods, also physically oriented, were not enough to undo the predicament. They had to immediately cease from careless thinking and the actions that came about from them, while simultaneously entering into a phase of self-disciplines designed by the ancient luminaries to destroy the effects of past actions/*karmas*. Thus, the return journey to liberation became known as a "razor's-edged path" due to the difficulties involved.

Besides their inability to shut down the senses and draw back from manifested Nature, then, the poor beings who fell under its influence, devoid of discrimination, also had *prarabdha* (*karma* from past lives/actions) to deal with at some point. These two

heaven aspiring senses" would require proper training — all for the sake of learning the art of transcendence.

To Account For What is Missing

This rare art of transcendence, then, demanded by the requisites for attaining authentic spiritual life, goes deeper than just an inspection to uncover what is in hiding. For ultimately, *Brahman*, Divine Reality, is present in and through everything in all worlds, at all levels of existence, but the painful truth about the physical realm is that the essence of Consciousness, as in *ananda*, *nirvana*, *samadhi*, etc., is not gained in and through the physical; It is only experienced at the highest condition of Awareness. As Swami Asehanandaji once stated, "One cannot get to the infinite through the finite."

By way of an apt analogy, we could use the sun. The sun is not here on earth; if it were, even if it were a bit closer to us in terms of space, the earth would be a charred mass. In this same way, *Brahman* can never come to earth. Its rays come here, however,

"At that mesmerizing moment when billions of tiny minds emitted like sparks from the Cosmic Mind of God, when time and space got projected thereafter, when the radiant sheen of boundless, primal awareness got dimmed down to a single physical sun in the sky, when the all-pervasive power of Shakti became restricted to a diminished flow of life-force through gross nerves in human bodies, and these bodies became dependent upon the food that rooted itself in and sprang out of solid matter — at that defining moment these fragmented bits of awareness decided collectively that this creation was real."

facts, also hidden from view, began to form the basis for a superior philosophy (*Vedanta*) that could clearly reveal why Divine Reality was covered up, or hiding. In a sense It was, as they say, "hiding in plain sight," for the luminaries found out that It was changeless (*aparinama*), birthless (*ajati*), and eternal (*ananta*), insights which further unveiled the truth that the ignorance of the embodied being him/herself was the one obscuring It. Like beings living under the sun on a cloudy day, the vision of that golden orb in the sky above them was verily forgotten, as in the "out of sight, out of mind," saying.

The appearance of Nature, hidden *karmas* from past actions, worldliness, mundane human convention, religious convention, influence of ignorant ancestors, lack of religious and spiritual training, these are a few of the more major reasons why the ever-present Reality gets obscured from the view of collective humanity on the physical plane (see chart on facing page). Ironically, in what most religions call "heaven," this Divine Awareness gets obscured as well, for the ancients found that beings embodied repeatedly in a cycle of transmigration from heaven, to earth, to hell. Enough of this type of rough treatment from a callous and uncaring process only strips the sensitivity off of a tender soul, subjecting it to continual whips of pleasure and pain, in turns, for interminable rounds of time (*yugas*). Therefore, not only the physical senses would require purification, but also what the rishis called the "the

and light up the world of senses and objects. And the brightest ray to travel here is the Divine Incarnation. Rama, Krishna, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Chaitanya, Mohammed, and most recently, Sri Ramakrishna, all saw the earth as a "charred mass" of insentient matter, that is, when they wanted to see *Brahman*, to perceive that Ultimate Reality that they found missing on earth, they had to go into heightened states of Awareness which transported them beyond physical matter and into the realmless Realm of unconditioned Awareness.

Put in another way, *Brahman* can never be a material object, an energy, a thought, or a conception by the intellect. It is the causeless Cause of all of them, but is always independent of them. As a result, and as an apt conclusion, what is unaccountably missing here will always be missing. What is in hiding, then, is the knowledge that this is so, i.e., that, although *Brahman's* Light reflects everywhere else by degrees, one discovers actual Consciousness, unconditioned and unadulterated, only at its pristine Source and nowhere else. This can be done by the seeker of truth from the embodied condition (*jivanmukta*), but only after purification and self-discipline has been thoroughly undergone so as to remove all notions otherwise. As Sri Ramakrishna *Paramahamsadev* once said about the beautiful Indian village they were born in, "If I had known that *Kamarpukur* was real I would have covered it in gold, but since I found out it was not, I renounced it." This



Crystal Clarity & Cosmic Subterfuge



Penetrating Phenomena & Their Mystic Appearances



"When form is incepted in space by the Cosmic Mind at the outset of a vast cycle of time, the original, transcendental vision of Ultimate Reality gets compromised. Behind the multi-faceted weave of layers of powerful and convincing mental projection, the Formless Reality retreats, showing Itself only on those rare occasions when a unique mind possessing crystal clarity penetrates this amazing veil of cosmic subterfuge." Babaji Bob Kindler

Vision of Crystal Clarity

"Who but God can say what is going on in the remote planes of existence? It is only God and His Incarnations who can be omniscient in the realm of maya. Just know that all conditions can turn favorable by the will of the Master. He used to say that avidya maya is more powerful than vidya; that is why avidya maya has kept the world enchanted." Sri Sarada Devi

*"As space is always freshly appearing and never completely filled, just so, pure mind is without limits and ever-aware. If you gaze with sheer awareness into sheer awareness, all habitual, abstract structures will melt away entirely and begin to flow unceasingly, appearing as the fruitful springtime of mature Buddhahood."
Tilopa*

Vision of Crystal Clarity

"By keeping the mirror of the mind wiped clean daily with spiritual practices and beneficial austerities, one's inner vision will always offer forth a clear & immaculate view of Brahman." Shankara

*"A yogi always restrains the pain-bearing and wayward vibrations of the mind. Otherwise, factors such as false thinking, deluded perceptions, dull sleep, and sentimental memory will swiftly rise up and cloud it. By combining spiritual practices with mature detachment steadiness leading to proper exertion ensues. Always remember, that the honed discernment that proceeds from the sentient Self that has detached from all modes of nature and is free of desires, is the real discernment."
Patanjali*

The All-Blissful Presence

Mesmerized Human Being

Layers of Cosmic Subterfuge

**External Layer: physical space, matter, the 5 elements, 5 senses, the body, objects of nature, brain & its fear and pleasure-based thoughts*

**Vital Layer: etheric space, movement, sensation, appearance/disappearance of empty phenomena, temptation towards occult powers, preoccupation with personal agency, fascination with celestial beings*

**Cognitive Layer: sporadic mentation, undisciplined power, of projection, ignorance of maya's veiling power, absence of discernment, tendency towards excitement, attraction towards imagination*

**Cosmic Layer: Dependence upon higher deities, persistence of the individual will, avoidance of self-surrender, attachment to higher wisdom, failure to unite with Consciousness, unwillingness to see all as equal*

"Oh bound soul! Surrender to the Mother of the Universe. Then alone will She shower compassion on you and open your pathway to Freedom."

The plenum of nature and the void of outer space capture the embodied soul's attention, convincing it of the presumed reality of both. But nature and the universe are only the external manifestations of the limitless mind, which contains subtler and subtler expressions of both nearer to its Source. Unseen primordial energy, unplumbed thought, untapped intelligence, and unimaginable, ultrapersonable love permeate the unbounded expanse of this Source, infusing It with awe-inspiring beauty, a peace that passes all understanding, and an intense bliss that beggars any and all description."

Babaji Bob Kindler

follows the saying of illumined souls like Lord Jesus who stated: "Birds have nests, and foxes have holes, but the son of man hath no place to lay his head here."

The Priceless Boon of Mature Renunciation

And this is why seers and luminaries renounce the world. This could also be interpreted to convey the truth that they renounce the idea that a world separate from Brahman is real, and thus undesirable for permanent habitation. Then they can see the Essence, called pure, conscious Awareness, lying behind the appearance of nature and the world. But being is beyond seeing. To be one with Brahman will transport the mind beyond phenomena, even of that which is religious and philosophical in nature.

True spirituality is based in accountability, then. Sharp Wisdom, of the rare nondual kind, is required in order to do away with the world-bewitching *maya* and the pleasure-seeking mind and senses, but also in order to allow the transmigrating soul to face up to the brutally honest fact that due to the absence of God's Essence on the physical plane, there is nothing here on earth that can ever truly satisfy.

Nevertheless, and in the context of the soul's sojourn on earth and its journey through the life-heavens, both, the fine process of coming to perceive the very fact that something as crucial as one's own Consciousness has been hidden from view, and that Consciousness Itself, in its original state, is not only missing here, but was never here to begin with, is the very stuff of primal revelation. The soul should take this perspective as soon as it is embodied, being taught the Truth by beings who, themselves, have realized It — as the *rishis* of ancient India did for themselves, and for their families and country.

The world, all worlds, can never be the Goal. They can, however, become a part of the path. Both secularly and traditionally, paths are known to be strewn with obstacles. The prompting to embark upon an inner voyage to find the reasons why our Beloved Companion has seemingly abandoned us in earthly life renders the world a crucial part of the pathway leading back to the Source. However, trying to hold on to the worlds while attempting to attain That which forever lies beyond them is futile and painful. As Sri Ramakrishna told us after returning from that highest *Samadhi* (*nirvikalpa*) that revealed *Brahman* to Him, "The further one goes towards *Brahman*, the further the worlds of name and form in time and space recede from view."

Babaji Bob Kindler, initiated disciple of Swami Areshanandaji Maharaj, is the Spiritual Director of the SRV Associations with its main center in the Hawaiian Islands. Offering religion and spirituality, he is a prolific author with many books, including, *The Avadhut*, *Twenty-Four Aspects of Mother Kali*, *Ten Divine Articles of Sri Durga*, *An Extensive Anthology of Sri Ramakrishna's Stories*, *A Quintessential Yoga Vasishtha*, and most recently, *Footfalls Of The Indian Rishis*. Founder and Artistic Director of *Jai Ma Music*, he is also an accomplished musician, recording artist, and composer, who has produced over 25 albums of instrumental and devotional music.



Shed Tears of Gratitude

*In an unending series of empty worlds,
you are the only real Substance.
Is there anything other than your Self in existence?
Then why waste time grieving?
You are Pure Existence, Wisdom, and Bliss,
as boundless as the sky, infinite like space.*

*Do not weep in dejection; weep tears of joy! For you
there exists neither old age or death. For you there is
neither birth nor its sufferings. In you there can be
no real disease. You are Pure Existence, Wisdom,
and Bliss, as boundless as the sky, infinite like space.*

*Do not weep with grief; shed tears of gratitude!
Your form, perfect or defective, is inconsequential.
Ageing will not attend you, nor will real death.
You are Pure Existence, Wisdom, and Bliss,
as boundless as the sky, infinite like space.*

*Why drop tears of sadness on your own divine feet?
Your gross senses are unreal; your subtle senses are
pure! Your body is five eternal elements; your mind
is a replicate of the Mahat! You are Pure Existence,
Wisdom, and Bliss, as boundless as the sky,
infinite like space.*

*Lust, greed, and other phenomena: what can they do
to you; how can they harm you! You cry tears for
things that have no real existence! You are Pure
Existence, Wisdom, and Bliss,
as boundless as the sky, infinite like space.*

*Does wealth or its lack make you weep? How is that
sensible when you possess everything within you?
When even the sense of ownership will be transcended,
what will you be left with that is so valuable?
You are Pure Existence, Wisdom, and Bliss,
as boundless as the sky, infinite like space.*

*Without a doubt there is not one iota of binding
attachment within you. There is not even a hint of
actual desire, either. Nondual Reality is your true
nature. You are Pure Existence, Wisdom, and Bliss,
as boundless as the sky, infinite like space.*

*The Avadhut declares: you, yourself,
are the quintessence of Supreme Reality.
Ultimate Reality is simple and spontaneous.
We are Pure Existence, Equanimity, and Ecstasy,
as boundless as the sky, infinite like space.*

AUM Peace, Peace, Peace!

**Verses of The Avadhut's Song
From The Avadhuta Gita**

DHARMA IS THE ONLY REFUGE

The Diamond Jewel of Wisdom Essence



Chintamani is a precious, mythological, Indian gem that can grant all one wishes if one worships it and takes the mind out regularly and wipes the dust off of it. But that maintainance demands a price in order for the Chintamani to grant all wishes. Even when we find this very precious gem, we cannot actually measure its value. The price of *dharma* is inconceivable. It's past the best opportunity and the best career and the best vocation that we have, after all. It's the only source of refuge, it's the only thing we can rely on. When we go through these different conditions of awareness called waking state, sleeping state, dreaming state, dying state, you see, we go through different kinds of states. We're always in a different state, and *dharma* is the only source of refuge for them.

How can we really verify this statement, that *dharma* is the sole refuge? Because *dharma* sets you free, *dharma* takes away all your internal obscurations by revealing the nature of reality, the ultimate Truth. Because once again, suffering itself is delusion, delusion is illusion. When we recite the Heart Sutra there's a whole line saying that everything is non-existent, everything is illusion, even suffering is illusion. You see? And that means that we don't have to necessarily experience suffering at all. We have always this option not to experience suffering and to completely transcend suffering.

"Suffering Is," Explained

In Buddhism they often distinguish between pain and suffering. Pain is inevitable, whereas suffering is evitable. The demarcation between pain and suffering is that suffering is this conceptual, psychological defensiveness, resistance to the pain, resisting the existential pain. Simply put, we don't want to face reality; we don't want to face what is. We don't want to face conditions and circumstances, and that threatens our ideas about what life should be, and our life in general as well as the very essential relationship that we're attached to.

Of course, pain is inevitable in that case. If I walk on the fire, there's pain. It's inevitable. If I deny that I don't have that pain, I'm simply deceiving myself or deceiving the people around me. In the same way, if I don't get food for quite a while, I will be feeling hungry; I will be feeling thirsty. So there's no need to deny the fact that we have this human incarnation and that we get hungry, we get lonely, we sometimes get thirsty, and so forth. And we get sick too. But suffering is another factor. It has nothing to do with this kind of existential inevitable reality; rather, it is a manufactured, mental conceptual defensiveness that we create to ward off the pain, ward off the obvious reality that we don't like, basically. Reality is not always very pleasant. That's why we got an itch to get rid. You see? Reality is our strongest foe, sometimes, the enemy.

It is not that Reality is harsh. Reality is actually amazing. It's divine. And that's why even Buddha himself has awakened to the

reality. Even Buddha himself surrendered to the reality, worshiped the reality rather than resisting reality. That's why Buddha became the completely perfectly awakened one.

So, the reason that we always feel that reality is painful is because we're the ones who are always fighting against It and demonizing It, and trying to steer clear of It utilizing all the resources at our command. And this is what is really happening every day in our life. Sometimes, when you go through an emotional upheaval, or somebody has just had a compulsive thought, a thought about not liking what is happening, a thought about having suffering or confusion, the best thing one can do is immediately look into your consciousness and see what is the root of that suffering. You will then realize that the root of that concept is coming from the place that you are against, continuing to fight the reality of whatever is happening.

Truth is Reality

We often talk about how reality is not really a mystery. It is whatever is happening right now. Whatever is unfolding, that is reality. So sometimes when we practice Buddhism, and especially *Vajrayana*, we get into this way of worshiping the truth, *dharmata* or *Dharmakaya*, with a mind set that is some kind of a non-human transcendent dimension, and that it is somewhere above all of us. So, in other words, there is a way that we can actually mystify and put false clothes on reality or mask reality in a way that we don't have to face the reality. So then we can sing and chant all these HUNGS, worshiping reality. We can dance, we can throw our body on the ground, and be humbled by reality and thereby presenting that we are lovers of reality or worshiper of the truth as a mystical item.

But then at the same time, and there is a double standard, we really hate what is happening right now. [laughter] While we are throwing ourselves on the floor for the truth, and worshiping the truth, and chanting all these beautiful melodious and poetic hymns to the truth, we somehow manage to really hate what is happening. In that case there is a double standard, some kind of subtle hypocrisy in a way that we are really fighting against truth while we are convincing ourselves that we are the lover of the truth or we are the worshiper of the truth.

So truth is whatever is happening. And it is very easy to say I love the truth when everything is going well. As Patrul Rinpoche said, when your belly is full and the sun shines on your head, it's very easy to act and believe that you are an extraordinary *dharma* practitioner. But when things get rough, it's very difficult to maintain that perspective. That is true; it's very easy to convince ourselves that we have a tremendous love and reverence for *dharma*, trust in the *dharma*, and trust in the truth, but when we are forced to face the more challenging things, our ego gets easily irritated. That is why, when we are forced to face more challenging or more wrathful aspects of the reality or the truth, then it's very easy to

lose trust, faith, and devotion towards *dharma*, or towards our true essence, or towards truth. So that's the *patala*, this place where we meet the ultimate demon – the demon of doubt, of fear, and the demon of mistaken beliefs about who we are and what reality truly is.

So here, now, since we know that suffering, or *samsara*, is illusion, we can always court the possibility of ending it completely. And how can we do that? That's our business right now, and that is why we are here today, to practice, to meditate, and to pray. We have only a single goal. It is to completely bring about cessation of *samsara*, cessation of confusion, and before we die, before we completely die. I'm speaking now of physical death. And there is the possibility for all of us to actualize the highest realization, the ultimate awakening, in this lifetime. As a matter of fact, in this very moment, too.

Enlightenment, Its Arrival, and Its Aftermath

Sometimes enlightenment is momentary. It's like you are glimpsing that brilliance of the sun, and it shines through the gap between clouds, thick clouds obscuring the whole sky. And that's all you need to do, just somehow find the place to have that glimpse of that brilliant sun. Even a brief moment, even just in one single moment, you have to realize that possibility, some way or another. And how can we do that? Without having that experience of glimpsing awakening or enlightenment or *Dharmakaya*, even for a brief moment, our understanding of the *dharma* simply remains intellectual understanding; no matter how much knowledge we may have regarding *dharma*, and no matter how much practice we may have been doing, our *dharma* practice simply remains intellectual, very dry. And so *dharma* is not really functioning at all in terms of transcending the root of our conflicts. But the moment we have that experience of glimpsing, even in a very singular moment, just briefly, it is brilliant, the majestic face of the Truth, and from that moment on your heart is taken by the *dharma*. *Dharma* charms you completely; the truth charms you completely. The truth charmed you completely and got into your system, and from that moment on there's going to be this ardent devotion and ardent longing to be awakened, above everything, above all your desires, above all your goals, above all your conventional purposes and agenda. There remains, then, only this unshakable, ardent desire to become awakened and to be fully enlightened.

And I'm sure that this experience has already occurred to many of you. But if this experience hasn't occurred to you, then you definitely have to realize that you have a task waiting in front of you. And this can be very exciting, because now you're going to experience truth that you haven't faced before, that you haven't tasted before. It is like you went through the whole list of drinks in the universe, but suddenly somebody told you, that's not true, you haven't yet tasted the ultimate drink called ambrosia; it's waiting for you! And you'll be quite excited, because you're very despondent about the fact that you have imbibed everything and there's no longer any mystery. Now there is mystery! And that mystery is actually the great charm of the *dharma*, you see? I think that's really why we are here – to drink in the wisdom that leads to Truth.

Commitment to and Actualization of the Dharma

And now, how can we conclude and break down that whatever is binding us from having the possibility of experiencing the Truth, even for one brief moment, is the perfect means for engaging in the practice of *dharma*. *Dharma* is like that *Chintamani*, the wish-fulfilling jewel. It has to be cultivated, it has to be maintained. And that means each of us have the full responsibility to not just learn *dharma*, not just to know *dharma*, not just to identify ourselves as a *dharma* student or *dharma* practitioner, but to basically immerse the mind into the work of realizing the *dharma* as the main priority in our life.

The practice of *dharma* comes in different forms. Sometimes *dharma* practice is to be done more formally, and that involves having a daily schedule and making a commitment to a specific assignment with *dharma* and with the representative of the lineage. It is an assignment that may involve us in long-time commitment, like years' of practice, or concentration on a particular discipline, and so forth – and that is necessary. And sometimes *dharma* practice comes more informally by way of integrating the teachings of *buddha-dharma*, teachings of loving-kindness, teachings of awareness, into our daily activities. For, when we are attending to our business, when we are relating to another human being, we always have to maintain the luminous awareness. The idea is, we should not have even one moment in which we lose the luminous awareness, once we realize what *dharma* is, once we realize what we're up to.

Right now, most of us know what we are up to, obviously. We all know that we are awakening, we're entertaining the *buddha-dharma*; also, we know in our hearts that basically there's nothing more meaningful, there's nothing better than realizing the nature of reality, realizing truth...because that ends *samsara*, that ends our conflicts. Everything else we try, like meditation, analysis, even all our efforts at trying to bring about the cessation of suffering, doesn't really work as long as our focus is not about realizing truth and surrendering our egos, surrendering your self. And once we know *dharma* from our heart, what *dharma* really means, the idea comes that we should not allow a single in which we lose our awareness. You see? We have to be quite shocked and surprised whenever we catch ourselves losing awareness and engaging in ordinary thought, compulsive thought, and allowing jealousy, hatred, confusion, and anguish to enter the mind. So *dharma* has to be maintained in that special sense.

Sacred Transmission

Now, I'm going to present an offering to the *sangha*, which is the *lung* transmission of *Miphram's ngondro*. In Vajrayana Buddhism, practicing *ngondro* is actually symbolic, as well as a serious commitment to the path. So once you realize that *dharma* is the path you want to follow, once you realize that your purpose of life is to be awakened, then you make the commitment. And the way of making the commitment is basically to start practicing the *buddha-dharma*. In Vajrayana tradition, we all are encouraged to embark on this journey by starting the *ngondro* practice.

There are many forms of *ngondros*, such as *Longchen Nyinthig ngondro* and the *Miphram ngondro*. Today I'm going to give you the transmission of the *Miphram ngondro*, which is permission to do this practice. The *Miphram ngondro* is one of the main *ngondros* that

we practice in the modern age. As a matter of fact, His Holiness, Jigme Pongdro, always encourages his disciples to practice two *ngondros*, *Longchen Nyinthig ngondro*, then *Miphram ngondro*. Fortunately we have a very beautiful translation of the *Miphram ngondro* which is inserted in the new version of our daily practice.

Many of you have already been practicing the Longchen *Nyinthig ngondro*. So you can now try the *Miphram ngondro*. And also, many people are practicing different *sadhanas*, who are into the deity, practicing *sadhanas* like *Vajrayogini sadhana*. In that case, I would not encourage you to do the *Miphram ngondro*. But if you haven't started the *buddha-dharma Vajrayana* practice officially, this would perhaps be a very good time to receive the transmission, and to at least try *ngondro* practice. And if you start, and just keep practicing, that's all you need to do. And one day there's going to be a moment that you realize what I'm speaking about - the glimpsing of the truth in the very moment.

“...we're not able to experience that level of ardent longing for inner awakening because our consciousness is bound into a sort of mental straight-jacket, i.e., bound by all these karmic blocks of fear, confusion; and especially attachment to self, attachment to false reality, attachment to life, attachment to birth and death, attachment to all this very convincing false reality such as to the idea of gain, to the idea of loss, and believing all these illusions are real. And that's why we're not able to experience that level of complete devotion and love towards the *dharma*.”

And then the gap between the clouds is going to get wider and wider. It's going to get bigger and bigger. The more it expands, the more confidence and love towards the Truth you are going to experience, and to the extent that nothing, no condition, can really convince you or really detain you from your journey. There's nothing, not even death, not even this ultimate fear, that can convince you to give up the journey once that gap gets bigger and bigger. It is the primal gap between clouds of obscurity through which that Truth can shine. And eventually there will come a moment when all the clouds will go away, will be gone forever. Not even a thumb-sized cloud will remain. The only thing that will remain is this vast space, fully illuminated by that brilliant sun of Truth, and in the same way, your consciousness will be like that - a brilliant sun completely all-illuminated without any obscurity. And that can happen. It's true, actually. That can happen in this lifetime.

When that happens, you can go beyond everything. You can go beyond doing *ngondro*, you can go beyond meditation, you can go beyond everything. There's nothing to do. But until that, we have to work hard, we have to do everything. Sometimes we have to do the *dharma* practice without really knowing what we're actually doing it, you see? Because, at this point there isn't any choice except to do everything, right? When you read the biographies of great masters, they did everything in order to realize the Truth. They might even bang their head against a wall sometimes. And they might jump into cold water and take sacred baths. They do everything. You have to be desperate to realize the Truth.

Fortunately, now you don't have to run and bang your head against the wall like they did, because at least there is knowledge of the *dharma*. This knowledge is now being presented to you as *ngondro*. *Ngondro* is the practice that we must do daily, at the outset. But imagine that we didn't have any tradition, or any sacred lineage; then what are we supposed to do? We should still be desperate to realize Truth, and we should do anything and everything in order to realize the Truth. For there is no other real refuge than the *dharma*. You see?

Sometimes when you practice *dharma*, and sit in meditation, there are many moments wherein you get quite disappointed with yourself, because it's not working for you and you go on envisioning high expectations about getting enlightened and realizing the Truth, but when the time for it comes due, and what was due passed you by, unfulfilled, then sometimes we get very desperate.

Dark Night Of The Mind

I remember one time this lady came to Hawaii, maybe 10 years ago when I was on the Big Island, and she came there to do *ngondro* accumulation, some 5,000 - 500,000 accumulations. At that time, when I was living at this *dharma* center, this lady showed up, a very enthusiastic *dharma* student, and she started to do her prostration accumulation. She had the assignment to finish 100,000 prostrations. And she start accumulating the prostrations in the temple. I remember that the ceiling of that temple was metal, and it was very hot, extremely hot, in the daytime. It was one of those hot days on the Big Island. And she started prostrating. Soon, I heard this person shouting, crying, and screaming. Later this lady came to me for an interview. She said, "Who invented this evil prostration!! [laughter]. Somebody malicious? Whoever invented this prostration must be sadomasochistic," and she was very furious and she just threw everything away - *malas*, books, and cushions - and went back to her room. She didn't do any more prostrations that day.

Then evening came, the sun went down, the weather got really cool, and I kind of heard that she went back and started prostrating, and singing these very devotional songs, and she was in a very good mood! You see, it is like that. I guess sometimes you even have to scream out and give it everything in order to realize Truth when nothing is working. [gentle laughter]

Dharma Boot Camp

This practice "goes before" all other procedures. "Ngon" means before, "dro" means goes. It goes before all the procedures.

“There’s a story that one lady became awakened by simply worshipping a dog’s tooth, because she thought that dog’s tooth was actually Buddha’s tooth. She received the dog’s tooth from her son, who lied to her and told her that the dog’s tooth really was Buddha’s own tooth, and she placed that dog’s tooth on the altar and started meditating every day and praying, and just kept praying for awakening – and one day she became awakened.”

This is like building the foundation if you build a house. This is also a very serious procedure in a way, since you cannot take *dharma* superficially; you cannot actually play with the *dharma* as an experiment out of a simply half-hearted curiosity, because this really determines whether or not you have a full-hearted commitment to *dharma* or not. Because, traditionally, *ngondro* is considered the *dharma* boot camp. [laughter] Because it really takes you to the level, the place, that you have to make up your mind; you have to make the ultimate decision whether you want to follow along this journey or not.

It’s not really only about self-atonement bringing about a great awakening, but rather, that the whole idea of going through that spiritual boot camp is really to just determine whether we have that whole-hearted commitment to spiritual awakening or not. If not, then we have to go through again the process of purifying all our obscurations – whatever karmic blockages are preventing us from being fully committed to the path, the path of the *dharma*, the path to the great awakening. And that’s why *ngondro* comes along with the assignment. Personally, I haven’t been pushing everybody to finish the *bhum-lha* or the 500,000 accumulations, and yet *ngondro* practice is the prerequisite to all the Buddhist meditation training and discipline, as well as even *sadhana* too. Therefore, it’s very good for those who are interested in practicing *Vajrayana*, and to start up the *ngondro* practice, especially the *Miphram ngondro*. This is a very beautiful *ngondro*. It’s not too long, it’s not too short, and it is also quite easy to understand, relatively. And therefore I have chosen this *ngondro* as prerequisite to practice for those who are embarking on the path of *Vajrayana*, unless you have been already practicing *ngondro*.

Constancy At The Outset

And then there is an assignment to practice *ngondro* once every day. At first perhaps you will not understand what you’re doing. That’s ok, too; most of the time we don’t know what we are trying to understand. For example, when I was flying from New Delhi to the United States, and we had around 30 people on board, we all sat in the airplane but we didn’t know how an airplane can fly. So there was this doubt that took us over about how an airplane can fly. And one monk thought that the airplane can fly, because maybe one of those wheels can lift the airplane. And somebody else thought the airplane is flying due to a battery. We didn’t know exactly how an airplane is supposed fly, but we also didn’t decide not to fly, or conclude that an airplane cannot fly. We didn’t offer any challenging comment to the pilot that the airplane could not fly until we figured out how it is flying. So we couldn’t figure it out, but we flew, right? We flew all the way, too.

In that same way, when you practice *dharma* you really don’t know exactly what you’re doing. You don’t understand the practice. You don’t understand all of the disciplines, as well as the *dharma* etiquette that revolves around the practice, as a kind of package deal. But it’s all right not to know what we’re doing sometimes. Without knowing exactly what we are doing and what the practice is about, it still works, because practicing *dharma* is simply the best means of purification. It’s like doing exercise; it’s like working on the process of purification. So when you simply start practicing, out of trust, out of faith, faith in the *dharma*, and with completely ardent patience and longing for awakening, then pretty much whatever you do becomes the perfect path to the Great Awakening. Not only in just practicing *ngondro* or a formal *dharma* practice, but even doing any other meditative disciplines can be the perfect means to the *dharma* if you’re coming from the place where you have the highest love towards the *dharma*.

There’s a story that one lady became awakened by simply worshipping a dog’s tooth, because she thought that dog’s tooth was actually Buddha’s tooth. She received the dog’s tooth from her son, who lied to her and told her that the dog’s tooth really was Buddha’s own tooth, and she placed that dog’s tooth on the altar and started meditating every day and praying, and just kept praying for awakening – and one day she became awakened. Of course from one perspective, worshipping a dog’s tooth is very idiotic, but when you have this ardent love for awakening more than anything else, then you can be awakened right now.

I was talking with somebody a few weeks ago. This person was in state of turmoil, because this person was longing to be loved from the outside; that’s what this person told me. “I’m suffering because I’m longing to be loved from the outside. What should I do? Should I renounce this longing because it is very painful, or can you tell me how I can overcome this yearning?” This person was in a state of agony, and real turmoil, because this person was longing to be loved externally, physically. You know what that means. Longing for a boyfriend or a girlfriend, or an ideal earthly relationship. This person was very much troubled and almost to the brink of falling apart.

And my advice was, not to get rid of that longing, but rather embrace that feeling, be with that feeling, and turn that longing in towards the Truth rather than outwards towards an external object. And just use the Truth as the object of that longing instead of trying to get rid of that longing. And I told her, if you’re able to do this successfully, 100%, I grant that you’ll be pretty much awakened in a few seconds, because it sounds like the wave of your longing is really overwhelming; it is difficult even for me just to listen to it! I’m really having goose bumps just by listening to what

you are saying! [laughter]. And it sounds really powerful, you know. Now all I ask is that you just turn that longing towards the Truth; accent the thought that I want the Truth right now. I want to be awakened right now. I want to end my delusion; I want to transcend my attachments – right now.

Role Of Faith And Devotion Along The Diamond Way

With that kind of ardent longing, there's no doubt that realization will come to you right away, right here and now; but you must sincerely adopt that intense level of longing. And it's so hard to have that kind of intense longing. In relation to the truth, most of the time when we're practicing, we meditate, and we're kind of half-hearted, you know, cruising around loosely when we meditate, kind of gazing toward the subject and trying to get somewhere when we meditate. There's a kind of ordinariness in the way that we think that we really can't go beyond that ordinary level of habitual mind. It's like a kind of airplane; a kind of glider. You know, it really can't go further after a certain point, right? It's just circulating. In the same way, our meditation is like that glider. It's just circulating around in the atmosphere of ordinary mind. We must receive this higher credit in the form of acknowledging that we have this kind of unusual state of mind like within us, or a beautiful state of finer sensations, of deeper awareness. But it's really hard for us to acquire this credit of patient and ardent longing to be awakened to the Truth, and to really let go of our attachments. If we can have that level of longing, I don't think there's any doubt that we can be awakened, if not forever, definitely in one moment on one spot.



Again, that brilliant sun gets covered by the clouds, and the reason that we're not able to experience that level of ardent longing for inner awakening is because our consciousness is completely bound into a sort of mental straight-jacket, i.e., bound by all these *karmic* blocks of fear, confusion; and especially attachment to self, attachment to false reality, attachment to life, attachment to birth and death, attachment to all this very convincing false reality such as to the idea of gain, to the idea of loss, and believing all these illusions are real. And that's why we're not able to experience that level of complete devotion and love towards the *dharma*.

So *ngondro* is actually a procedure, a powerful practice, as well as a mental and a physical discipline, and that helps us to process and overcome all these internal *karmic* blocks that are basically binding our consciousness, binding our heart from completely blooming towards the path of the *buddha-dharma* and towards the brilliance of the Truth without going through too much of that boot-camp training. And sometimes I think it's just like flying in an airplane without knowing how an airplane flies. There are going to be many moments when we don't know why we are practicing, when we don't know exactly, we don't know. But once again we must convince ourselves to continue the practice and by

simply having sheer faith that it's going to work out, sooner or later.

And having that kind of abiding faith itself is actually an extraordinary achievement, too. And when you have that level of faith, just trusting in the *buddha-dharma*, then that faith is going to be responsible of the complete destruction of your ego, eventually. Faith is more important than knowledge, more important than actually knowing all the *sadhanas*, knowing all this *dharma* stuff. Faith is so important, and sometimes there are going to be moments in your life that you realize that you have this treasure in abundance, an abundance of knowledge regarding how to do *dharma* practice, and all these precise ways of doing the *sadhanas* and meditation techniques. But without having faith, the quality of your *dharma* practice seems very dry. So faith plays a very important role in Buddhist practice. It's encouraged by even Buddha for us to cultivate faith as the foundation, the backbone, of the *dharma* practice.

So now we are presented with this assignment as always. I guess we're always presented with an assignment. We are speaking about undertaking a path, seriously. Now we are asked to go through that boot camp. And the hindrance that may occur regarding this assignment is, "Oh, how can I make such commitment to this path." It's like you go to a store and you want to buy an item, but the person who helps you tells you that this item is really expensive. It's supposed to be very exotic, et cetera, right? But then, this person may tell you this item is so expensive that you may have to completely empty your bank account. So, sometimes the practice in *dharma* can be like that, too, especially without experiencing any awakening first. Suddenly you have this assignment in front of you, and you're asked to trust this person, you're asked to do this practice, you're asked to spend a great amount of time every day to do this practice, you see?

Spiritual Practice And The Purse-Strings of Life

I think we all have a very strong attachment to time. We have an expression "time is money," right? People are really attached to time. And now we're asked to dedicate a huge amount of time into practicing all these assignments. And sometimes we're asked to even dedicate a whole day, a whole week, and do nothing but practice those assignments. And if we're used to a more scientific, materialistic, pragmatic mentality, we begin to think about doing a whole week, and that consumes a lot of hours, right? Imagine that you're a very successful person, a well-to-do person, who makes twenty dollars an hour. So, one week represents quite a lot of money, actually. You're making hundreds of dollars, and now here is the *dharma* teacher telling you that you have to give up all these hours and dollars and practice *sadhana* [laughter].

So how do we do that? My answer is that it seems that we have been doing everything in our life trying to end our suffering; we're trying to be happy, we're trying to be content. And possibly, we've tried everything, right? There isn't anything that we haven't tried. We've tried money, because we believe that is going to bring our happiness. We've tried to experience all kinds of sensual pleasures, and that didn't bring about lasting happiness. And we've tried to be the winner, we've tried to defeat our enemies, we tried to have a higher and better social status. We tried everything!

There isn't anything that we haven't tried, but obviously none of them are really working, right? None of them give you ultimate satisfaction. None of them give you fulfillment. And that's not a lie. That's the fact. Look into your life right now. It's obvious that nothing really works, completely. Nothing can give you that independent, unconditional freedom that spiritual awakening can.

Nothing to Win or Lose; It's Already Yours

And that means we really don't have so much to lose after all. We really don't have anything to lose after all. And that's why it's always worthwhile to give our heart to the *dharmā*; just to give your heart to the *dharmā*. Actually, the moment you give your heart to the *dharmā*, everything will begin to work for you, because *dharmā* is not a belief system or doctrine like worldly ways and means. *Dharma* is the perfect way to the great awakening. *Dharma* actually reveals the truth at the very beginning. *Dharma* is the only knowledge, the only path, that reveals the Truth at the very beginning. At your first initial encounter with the *dharmā*, it reveals Truth. Whether we can really hear that or not, whether you can really understand that or not, *dharmā* reveals the Truth right there at the moment you encounter the *dharmā*.

The Apt And Final Conclusion

And giving the heart, your own heart, to the *dharmā* itself, is oft-times very rewarding. It takes you to higher levels of awakening – whether you go the distance, or not. I think the moment that you give your heart to the *dharmā*, there comes a tremendous sense of freedom and fulfillment that you can experience. And that fulfillment is so extraordinary; not even the entire wealth of the universe can give you that level of joy and fulfillment that comes when you give your heart away to the *dharmā*. Because giving away your heart to the *dharmā* means surrendering to the *dharmā*, surrendering to the path, surrendering to the Truth. And surrendering to the *dharmā* is actually surrendering to the self. It means transcending your habitual self. And when self is transcended, there isn't anything left to do. Enlightenment is already there.

Thank you, everybody.



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No Birth, No Base, Union

Song by Milarepa

The true nature of appearances
is that they've never been born.

If birth seems to happen
it's just clinging, nothing more.
The spinning wheel of existence
has neither a base nor a root.

If things seem to be stable,
that's only a thought.

The true nature of the mind is union,
inseparability.

If you separate its aspects,
you're hooked on some view.

The sign of the true lamas
is that they hold a lineage.

The ones who make stuff up
are just being ignorant.

The mind's basic reality
is like the clear and open sky,
but the dark clouds of thoughts
just cover it all up

So let the lama's pith advice
be the wind that blows those clouds away.

Even confused thoughts themselves
are clear light that shines brilliantly;
experiences so bright like sun and moonlight.

Without any direction,
clarity shines timelessly.

You cannot hold it,
you can't say what it is.

So many kinds of certainty shine
like the stars in the sky

Whatever arises is the greatest bliss.

Its nature is simplicity,
the dharmakaya expanse.

The six dependent appearances
are empty naturally.

This natural flow is effortless;
there's not a klesha in sight.

Within this basic state, completely relaxed,
wisdom free of fixation abides continuously-
the three kayas inseparable,
the greatest miracle.



VEDANTA 101



The Four Ways of Perceiving God in Vedanta

The ancient seers of India realized that *Brahman*, Ultimate Reality, is all that exists. *Sarvam khalvidam Brahman* – “All this indeed is Brahman.” The teaching of the Four Ways of Perceiving God/Reality in Vedanta is a way of explaining that “all this” truly means everything perceptible to the senses and mind, and beyond both, as Swami Vivekananda states in the top quote of the chart on the next page.

Looking first at their direct experience that *Brahman* is Reality, how shall we understand “Reality?” People today talk about “my reality” and “your reality,” referring, it seems, to mental, emotional, political, religious, or other perspectives. In contrast, the seers are speaking of Reality in foundational terms as that which is the Existence of our existence. Even to call It all-pervasive puts the emphasis on what is pervaded, as if physical, mental, or more subtle structures/conceptions could somehow be separate from the all-pervading Reality.

The rishis who gave us the *Upanisads* also used clay and gold as metaphors for Reality. The reality or existence of a clay image is only clay. The reality of a gold necklace is gold only. Our minds, immediately imagine a mound of clay and the clay image as separated by space and time. Same with the gold necklace and the molten gold it was crafted from. But the meaning of *Brahman* as Ultimate Reality has no such separations. It is the reality of space and time too. The magnitude of this realization is staggering – there is nothing apart from *Brahman* because if you could remove It, everything would disappear as well.

Along the path of Vedanta, teachers are quick to say that *Brahman* is the reality of everything, but it cannot be a thing. This is to make certain that the student does not mistake any perceived phenomena (including mental) to have an independent reality. This is an absolutely necessary step and, as it is mastered, the sense of the *rishis’* statement, “All this indeed is Brahman,” comes into a fuller focus. Sri Ramakrishna hinted at this: “...I had a similar vision once before, when I saw houses, gardens, roads, men, cattle – all made of One Substance; it was as if they were all made of wax.”

Let’s take a look at Vedanta’s 4-part perspective on the chart (page 24), starting with *Brahman*, defined as Ultimate Reality on that chart. Technically speaking, one cannot perceive Ultimate Reality, one can only be It. In the same way that the eye cannot see itself except by way of reflection, so too, *Brahman*, being one without a second (*brahm’advitiye*), cannot be perceived as an object without a reflector. Via the reflector of Cosmic and individual Mind, *Brahman* appears to us as *Ishvara*, *Antaryami*, and as *Archa*.

Ishvara, the Supreme Godhead, is *Brahman* appearing as the Lord or Mother of the Universe. This beneficent Divine Being, full of all divine qualities, is called by other names as well: *Saguna Brahman*, *Mahashakti*, *Mahamaya*, *Mahat*, and others. It corre-

sponds to the beloved God who creates, sustains, and withdraws the universe, who loves His/Her creation and created beings and guides them. It can be with form or without form but full of divine qualities. *Ishvara* also appears as the *Ishtam*, one’s Chosen Ideal of God within the devoted heart and mind.

Antaryami, the “Inner Self Immortal seated in the heart,” is *Brahman* manifesting as that formless Divine Presence that guides us from within. Veiled by personal desires, mundane habits, and root ignorance, It nonetheless inspires one during cycles of *sattva* (balance) and leads us eventually toward spiritual practices, and to the Triple Gem of *Guru*, *Dharma*, and *Sangha*, the teacher, teachings, and the sacred community of fellow travelers on one’s chosen path. When the mind and heart are sufficiently purified, the *Antaryami* manifests as the inner *Guru*.

Archa, the Universal Symbol, refers to both established sacred symbols, as well as to all phenomena that we perceive. Examples of sacred symbols include, *Om*, the sun, moon, the sacred symbols of other religions, objects used in ceremonial worship, as well as forms appearing in nature considered sacred to various religions. The latter, all phenomena that we perceive, means simply that since *Brahman* is all that is, then all manifestation is a symbol for Brahman. We are to cultivate the ability to associate everything the mind and senses perceive with God. Sri Ramakrishna exemplified this to such a degree, that everything he saw reminded him of God. One famous example is the time he was watching a man sweep and went into *samadhi*. When asked why that happened, he explained that when he saw the broom, it made him think of the straw that it was made with, which was grown in the region where Sri Chaitanya was born. As soon as he thought of Chaitanya, a Divine Incarnation, he went into *samadhi*.

By way of further analysis, we can suggest there are two ways of looking at this set of four ways of perceiving God/Reality. One is from the standpoint of spiritual practice as the different Ideals aspirants select: one sees God according to what one can understand, or as the Divine aspect that one’s teacher or religion instructs one to concentrate upon. The other is from the standpoint of attainment, like the way that those rare souls who have attained nondual realization experience the outer world, the inner worlds, and what is beyond them. A young future monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna said once that his spiritual ideal was to see God in all beings. Sri Ramakrishna replied, “It is the last word, my child, the culmination of *sadhana* [spiritual practice]. At the ultimate development of love for God, this nondual experience manifests spontaneously in the life of all aspirants. Know it to be the goal of all faiths; and as many faiths, so many paths.”

– [Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play, Ch. 16.]

The accompanying charts on pages 25/26 reveal how practicing *sadhana* possessed of all four of these perspectives along two distinct but connecting pathways destroys our ignorance forever.

The Four Ways of Perceiving God

In Indian Darshanas

“Brahman is beyond both Ishvara and the world, and is not a state. It is the only unit not composed of many units. It is the principle which runs through all, from a cell to God, and without which nothing can exist.” Swami Vivekananda

Vedanta	Bhagavad Gita	Tantra	Yoga Sadhana
As Brahman, Ultimate Reality	Adhyatma, The Imperishable	Brahmabhava, Perception of Reality	Atikranta-bhavaniya Perfection
As Ishvara, Supreme Godhead	Adhiyajna, God Assuming Form	Dhyanabhava, Focus on the Deity	Prajna-jyoti, Masterful
As Antaryami, Inner Self Immortal	Adhidaiva, The Purusha, or Self	Japabhava, Mantra & Hymns	Rtambhara-prajna, Intuitive Wisdom
As Archa, Universal Symbol	Adhibhuta, Perishable Nature	Buhyabhava, Practice of Rituals	Prathama-kalpika, Beginning Aspirants

The Five Stages of God Realization And Their Correlative Samadhis

Grades of Existence	Stages of Realization	Vedantic Samadhis	Yogic Samadhis
Vyavaharika (Phenomenal)	1) Mental Plane, Earthly Phenomenon		
Pratibhasika (Ephemeral, Intellectual)	2) Ethical Plane, Dharmic Law	Savikalpa	Savitarka Savichara
Adhyatmika (Spiritual)	3) Cosmic Plane, Kinetic Ishvara	(Bhava Samadhi)	Sananda
↓	4) Transcendental Plane, Static Ishvara	(Chaitanya Samadhi)	Sasmita
	5) Absolute Plane, Formless Reality	Nirvikalpa	Asamprajnata

“There are three types of joy, ananda: the joy of the world; the joy of worship; and the Joy of Brahman. In the first, one should dance and sing the names of the Lord; in the second, one loses partial consciousness of the world; and in the third, one experiences God-vision.” Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa



The Disappearance of Ignorance



"One day I awoke and my ignorance was gone, gone, utterly gone! Who can conceal the Truth? Who can keep a blazing fire tied in a cotton cloth?" Ramprasad Sen

"If a man but tastes the bliss of God, he runs after it thereafter. It matters little to him then whether the world remains or disappears." Sri Ramakrishna



"We believe that every being is divine, is God. Every soul is a sun covered over with clouds of ignorance; the difference between soul and soul is only due to the difference in density of these layers of clouds." Vivekananda



Excitement
Happiness *Sukha*
Joy *Mudita*
Wisdom *Jnana*
Contentment *Tripti*
Peace *Shanti*
Equanimity *Samatva*

Fulfillment Discipline

Bliss *Ananda*
Transcendence *Para*

Attainment *Sampadyate*



Self-Effort *Sadhana*

Austerity *Tapas*

Contemplation

Manana

Scriptural Study

Svadhya

Holy Company

Satsangha

Dharma

"At the time of creation, people had wisdom from their very birth. Consequently, they at once realized the unreal nature of the world. They renounced it and practiced austerity. They were liberated in no time." Sri Sarada Devi

"The secret of religion lies not in theories but in practice. This is all I have to preach. Doctrines have been expounded enough. There are books by the millions. Oh, for an ounce of practice!" Vivekananda

"Perhaps one practices japa and austerity in this life. In the next life one intensifies the spiritual mood and in the following advances it further, and thus spiritual evolution goes on." Sri Sarada Devi

"The nondual scriptures point the way to Moksha, that most elevated condition that is the very atmosphere of Divine Reality." Lord Vasishtha

"Whenever I contemplate the teachings of the dharma, I cannot help but share them with others." Milarepa

"The happiness of the worldly man slowly declines as his spiritual joy becomes deeper." Sri Ramakrishna

"The happiness of the world is transitory. The less you become attached to the world, the more you enjoy peace of mind." Sri Sarada Devi

Ignorance / Avidya

"From peace, a fuller, richer, nobler knowledge will dawn, to be tempered further still by the apt instructions proceeding from an illumined preceptor in conjunction with the revealed scriptures. Then, through sententious striving you shall come upon, in a state of spiritual exaltation, that Truth which you are seeking, and which puts to death even the most delicate and diaphanous tendrils of ignorance." Lord Vasishtha

Wisdom Facets From the Gem of Truth



Sri Ramakrishna

Quickly: Count to Three!

“There are three classes of devotees. The lowest one says, ‘God is up there,’ and points towards the heavens. The mediocre devotee says that God dwells in the heart as the Inner Controller. But the highest devotee says, ‘God alone has become everything.’”
(Ramakrishna’s Life & Message)

Clean and Tidy Detachment

“Be careful to not let your mind become like the storeroom of a washerman. He fills his storeroom with the unclean clothes of others, but when those clothes are clean and ready for use, they go back to their respective owners, and he has nothing to call his own.”
(The Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna)

Time For Union

“What is the nature of the jivatman and the Paramatman? It is like the union of the hour and the minute hands at twelve o’clock.”
(The Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna)

...Which Proves the Ultimate Truth of Nonduality

“‘He it is,’ sings Ramprasad Sen, ‘that I approach as Mother; ‘but must I give away the secret here in the marketplace?’ That is, He who is Brahman is also Shakti. When thought of as inactive He is called Brahman, and when thought of as Creator, Preserver, and Destroyer, He is called the Primordial Power, Kali.”
(The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna)

Simply Arrive and Remain

“Whatever a person experiences in a particular state is real for him in that state. Suppose you are dreaming that you have gone to a garden. As long as the dream lasts, the garden is real for you. But you think of it as unreal when your mind undergoes a change, as, for instance, when you awaken. Thus, when your mind attains that state in which you see God, you will know God to be Real. Then, simply remain in that state.”
(The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna)



Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi

Brahmani’s Maya

“What is all of this around me? It is maya; what else? Why should I be in such a state if not because of maya? I should have been sitting by Narayan as His Lakshmi in Vaikuntha, but because He likes to disport as a man, I am here.”
(Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi)

Mother Instinct

“Whenever the thought of a disciple comes to my mind, then he either comes here or writes a letter to me. All come to me prompted by an intimate inner feeling. Perhaps they have in their minds the thought of the Divine Mother of the Universe.”
Sri Sarada Devi, The Holy Mother)

The Tree of Sweet Poison

“Is there happiness in this world? There is, and again, there isn’t. The world is like a tree with sweet and poisonous fruits. The poison permeates all of life, even its sweet moments. Those who have plunged into worldly life, what else can they do? Even if they come to understand the implications of such a life, they can’t act otherwise. And so I bless them.”
(The Gospel of Holy Mother)

Flashes of Truth in the Midst of Illusion

“My true nature does flash upon me at times, and I think, ‘What’s this I am doing? What is this I am engaged in? Again, all of these things – houses, children, etc., come to my mind and I forget my essential nature. It is only by accepting this illusion that I am so, and all that you see me doing is nothing but continuing on in the midst of an illusion.”
(Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi)

Salvation Is Easy; Liberation is Rare

“If I freed everyone immediately my spiritual strength would be sapped. Then my body would not be able to help many others. It would fall off after those few got liberation”
(Holy Mother)

Wisdom Facets From the Gem of Truth



Swami Vivekananda

How Clear Must I Make This?

“Where will you go to seek Brahman? He is immanent in all beings. Here, here is the visible Brahman! Shame on those who, neglecting the visible Brahman, set their minds on other things! Here is the visible Brahman before you as tangible as a fruit in one’s hand! Can’t you see? Here — here — here is Brahman!”
(God Lived with Them, Swami Chetananda)

The Worship That Defeats Death

“Whenever death approaches me, all weakness vanishes. I have neither fear, nor doubt, nor thought of the external. I simply busy myself making ready to die. I am as hard as that — and the stones struck one another in his hand — “for I have touched the feet of God!”
(God Lived with Them)

Please Take Out The Trash, Dear

“Let no political significance ever be attached falsely to my writings or sayings I will have nothing to do with political nonsense. I do not believe in politics. God and Truth are the only policy in the world. All else is trash.”
(Vivekananda Vijnanagita)

It Is Time To Realize Universal Religion

“First make character — that is the highest duty you can perform. Know Truth for yourself, and there will be many to whom you can teach it afterwards; they will all come. This was the attitude of my Master. He criticized no one. For years I lived with that man, but never did I hear those lips utter one word of condemnation for any sect. I learned from my Master that the religions of the world are not contradictory or antagonistic. They are but various phases of one eternal religion.”
(God Lived with Them)

Body or None, My Task is Clear

“It may be that I shall find it good to get outside of my body — to cast it off like a disused garment. But I shall not cease to work! I shall inspire men everywhere, until the world shall know that it is one with God.”
(Vivekananda Vijnanagita)

Disciples & Devotees of Sri Ramakrishna

Don't Plan or Scheme; Trust Her

“Why do you plan? Why are you scheming? Why do you look so far ahead? Let Mother plan. Her plan comes true. Human planning is all in vain if She does not consent. She knows what will happen. The future is an open book to Her. Live in the present; make the best of your time and opportunities. Don't think of the future. Know for certain that Mother's will shall come to pass. Trust in Her. Only try to love Her sincerely. Give yourself to Her. Let Her do with you as She wishes.”
(Swami Turiyananda)

The Divine Is In The Details, Too

“One day you will all have to do very responsible things. If you don't learn the habit of responsibility in small things, you will not learn the habit of responsibility in big things. You will only cheat yourselves and others.”
(Swami Premananda)

The Feet Are Great, But I Touched The Head!

“You see, it is nothing spectacular to see light during meditation; it only strengthens faith. When body consciousness goes away and the mind becomes pure, one realizes a realm behind the light, which neither can be known through the intellect nor can it be expressed by words. One day at Cossipore I was rubbing the Master's head, then that transcendental realm opened to me. My senses failed to grasp that Infinite, but I realized It through and through.”
(Swami Adbhutananda)

The Disease, Desire; The Remedy, Dispassion

“Disbelief is a great obstacle in spiritual life. It is not only an obstacle but a disease. One will have to clear up the past life tendencies ingrained in the mind by practicing spiritual exercises and good deeds. He on whom faith descends is very fortunate. He needs nothing else. Faith in God is a precious treasure. Our disease is desire, and the remedy is spiritual discrimination. God has given us the power to discriminate between the eternal and the evanescent. If we forget Him, we shall be nowhere.”
(Swami Ramakrishnananda)

(All direct disciple quotes taken from “God Lived With Them”)



"When dealing with desires, cut down the whole forest, not just a single tree. For, from this forest arises great fear. Cut down this entire forest and use its brushwood to purify your entire being, and then quickly get yourself emancipated."

"As the one substance, water, is called by different names by different peoples – eau, aqua, wasser, pani – so the one Satchitanandam is evoked by some as God, by others as Allah, by still others as Jehovah, or as Divine Mother or Brahman. Different creeds are but different paths by which to reach the Divine. Many are the roads leading to the Temple. Every religion is a path leading to the one Reality."



"God gave us a spirit not of fear, but of power, love, and self-control.

Thus do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, as a worker who has no need for shame, rightly handling the word of truth. Thus fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."



SCRIPTURAL
SAYINGS
*of the World's
Religious Traditions*

"I have learned all that was hidden, and all that was undiscovered because I was taught by Wisdom Herself. For there is within Her the spirit of intelligence which is holy, unique, multiple in Her effects, fine, copious, agile, spotless, dear, soft, friendly to good, penetrant, which nothing can prevent from acting, benevolent, friendly to men, kind, stable, infallible, calm, that achieves all, and that can comprehend all minds."



"The flowering tree near the Garden of Essence that marks the mystic frontier beyond which no limited being may pass was suddenly engulfed by Divine Radiance. The sublime gaze of the Prophet did not waver or turn even slightly away, and he merged into the direct presence of his Lord."

"The faculties of the Great Being are so ample, so vast, so profound, that It is as if an immense source from which everything emerges in its own time. And all of these are as abundant and extended as the star-studded vault of heaven, the hidden source from which they all issue is as deep and fathomless as the infinite abyss."





THE OVERLAPPING RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHIES OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA & WILLIAM JAMES



An Eastern seer and a Western philosopher met at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1886. Their ideals and insights were based in different views of the world and of religion, but were generally compatible nevertheless.

Prior to my retirement from university teaching in 2024, I regularly taught a philosophy of religion course focusing exclusively on Western philosophers and theologians ranging from Anselm of Canterbury (1034-1109) to Alvin Plantinga (1934-) and other contemporary writers. Almost without exception, the arguments for the existence of God these philosophers employed were either deductive (based on axioms that they found to be self-evident), inductive (based on evidence provided by ordinary sense perceptions), or “abductive” (based on “inference to the best explanation”). The only exception to those well-worn patterns of reasoning was found in William James’ book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), in which he argued that mystical experiences – those produced not by ordinary sense perception but rather by some other faculty of consciousness – are sufficient grounds for religious beliefs for those who have had them. But he also argued that those who do not have such experiences are under no rational obligation to adopt a mystic’s religious conclusions. These views stemmed from his general philosophy of truth and knowledge, which he and a few other proponents at that time termed “Pragmatism.”

Now, in the 1970s (not coincidentally, shortly after I first met Babaji, the founder and editor of this journal), I read Swami Vivekananda’s books *Raja Yoga* and *Karma Yoga* (1896) in an effort to understand the fundamentals of Vedanta. My resonance with Vivekananda’s approach may have stemmed from the fact that he had been well-educated in Western philosophy, and so was able to draw illuminating East-West comparisons. I also admired the clarity with which he wrote and his respect for other religious traditions – even for agnostics (such as myself) who may have never had mystical experiences, but were open-minded about their possibility. However, I judged that the techniques of Raja Yoga that Vivekananda described were simply too daunting for me. If I were to make spiritual progress in this life, it would be by living a (hopefully) karmically decent life, first as a musician, and later as a writer and teacher. Given his broadmindedness, I felt that Vivekananda might have endorsed my intention.

Two decades passed, and I found myself writing and teaching philosophy at a university. When the opportunity arose to teach the philosophy of religion, I approached the subject from the only perspective I felt qualified to adopt: that of an academic philosopher who specialized in epistemology (the “theory of knowledge”) and the philosophy of mind. Although I considered using excerpts from Vivekananda’s writings, I doubted my competence to teach them well, and, in any case, I knew that any adequate introductory course on *Vedanta* would require at least an entire semester of its own. However, whenever I taught James’ views on mystical experience from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, I primarily thought

of Vivekananda, even though in that book James focused almost entirely on Christian mystics like Saint Theresa. In fact, although he had attended Vivekananda’s lectures at Harvard in the late 1890’s (later praising his oratory), and the two men had apparently met socially (Vivekananda once describing James as “a very kind man”), Vivekananda’s name appears only once in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in a footnote to a passage describing the experience of *Samādhi*. The passage from Vivekananda’s *Raja Yoga* reads, in part:

“There is no feeling of I, and yet the mind works, desireless, free from restlessness, objectless, bodiless. Then the Truth shines in its full effulgence, and we know ourselves – for *Samadhi* lies potential in us all – for what we truly are, free, immortal, omnipotent, loosed from the finite, and its contrasts of good and evil altogether, and identical with the *Atman* or *Universal Soul*.”

Monism and Pragmatism

The realization of this identity holding between the *Samādhi*-experiencer and the *Atman* (the Absolute or Universal Soul) is the primary goal of a kind of “monism,” the view that all that really exists is the one, eternally perfect Absolute, and that all impermanent individual things (including our own bodies and psychological egos) are mere illusions. While it is not clear in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that James does not wish to adopt such monism for himself, he makes this explicit five years later in his book *Pragmatism* (1907), where Vivekananda plays a more prominent role as a main proponent of religious monism. While some commentators have suggested that James’ refusal to adopt monism for himself is evidence that his Pragmatism is incompatible with *Advaita Vedanta*, I do not believe this is correct. Rather, a close reading of their works reveals that the two views are quite compatible, thanks to their sharing some very broad principles and pre-suppositions.

One such principle is the view that all knowledge, scientific or religious, ultimately rests on experiences, including mystical ones. James’ inclusion of mystical experience as a genuine source of knowledge marks a major difference between his Pragmatism and the narrower sort of sense-perceptual empiricism that was so popular in the English-speaking world at the start of the 20th century. For his part, Vivekananda makes clear in *Raja Yoga* that he shares this view by insisting, “If there is a God we must see Him, if there is a soul we must perceive it; otherwise it is better not to believe,” later making it clear that the perceptions to which he is referring are mystical ones. A second shared principle concerns which beliefs or “hypotheses” count as meaningful and therefore as at least possibly true. For James, any useful hypothesis counts. In the case of science, a hypothesis is at least provisionally confirmed if one can use it to make accurate predictions about particular events. The same

is true in the religious context, but the use is not predictive. Rather, the use of a religious hypothesis is to generate positive practical and psychological effects in the believer, who can then act as a moral exemplar for others in their community. James writes: “On pragmatic principles we cannot reject any hypothesis if consequences useful to life flow from it,” and he identifies Vivekananda’s monism as just such a hypothesis, writing, “The use of the Absolute is proved by the whole course of men’s religious history...Remember Vivekananda’s use of the Atman...” James is here referring to a passage from the book, *Jnana Yoga* by Vivekananda, that he had quoted earlier in *Pragmatism* as a prime example of monism:

“And what is a soul? For Descartes, the mind is the soul. But for others, souls are distinct from minds; they are what have both minds and (at least sometimes) bodies. One way of describing individual souls is to say that they are the subjects of conscious experience: the witnesses (from particular perspectives) of what occurs physically or mentally.”

“Where is any more misery for him who sees this Oneness in the Universe...this Oneness of life, Oneness of everything? ...This separation between man and man, man and woman, man and child, nation from nation, earth from moon, moon from sun, this separation between atom and atom is the cause really of all the misery, and the Vedanta says this separation does not exist, it is not real. It is merely apparent, on the surface. In the heart of things there is Unity still. ... that is Eternal Bliss, Eternal Knowledge, Eternal Existence. Neither death nor disease, nor sorrow nor misery, nor discontent is there ... in the centre, the reality, there is no one to be mourned for, no one to be sorry for. He has penetrated everything, the Pure One, the Formless, the Bodiless, the Stainless, He the Knower, He the Great Poet, the Self-Existent, He who is giving to everyone what he deserves.”

By quoting the swami here, James is pointing out that Vivekananda’s “religious hypothesis” of the individual’s identity with the Atman is very meaningful insofar as it has a very important pragmatic use, writing, “surely we have here a religion which, emotionally considered, has a high pragmatic value; it imparts a perfect sumptuousness of security.” Vivekananda agrees with the idea that true knowledge is marked by usefulness, writing that “knowledge itself is the highest reward of knowledge, and secondly, there is also utility in it. It will take away all our misery.” So, given the immense benefits such monism can impart, why doesn’t James adopt it as his own view?

Conflict and Clarity in Philosophy

Now, before we go any further, and to avoid confusion, I need to point out that there is no single debate over monism in philosophy and theology. In the West, monism has usually been contrasted with dualism, where the focus is on the mind’s relation to the body. Descartes, for instance, promoted “substance dualism,” the view there are two independent kinds of stuff in the universe, the physical (matter/energy) versus the mental (ideas, feelings, and so on). Understood in these terms, a central issue is how the two kinds of stuff can interact with each other (as when your mental intention to move causes your physical body to move). Partly to

avoid this interaction problem, “substance monists” deny substance dualism, arguing that the universe is constituted by only one kind of stuff. There are two contrary types of such monists: physicalists holding that there is only physical stuff, and Idealists arguing that there is only mental stuff. However, there is a second monist/dualist debate that is more relevant here, one concerning not the relationship between mind and matter, but rather between constantly changing and temporary individual things and whatever may eternally provide the unchanging ground of their existence, namely, “the Absolute.” In this second debate, monists hold that only the Absolute really exists, while dualists champion the real

existence of individual things (without necessarily denying the existence of an Absolute basis for them). In some contexts, such as 19th-century European philosophy, the Absolute is argued for by rationalists and argued against by non-mystical empiricists. In more religious contexts, where the existence of non-physical souls is taken for granted (or taken to have been proved by mystical experience) and the Absolute is interpreted as God, the monism/dualism debate extends to the relationship between individual souls and the one eternal Absolute soul. And what is a soul? For Descartes, the mind is the soul. But for others, souls are distinct from minds; they are what have both minds and (at least sometimes) bodies. One way of describing individual souls is to say that they are the subjects of conscious experience: the witnesses (from particular perspectives) of what occurs physically or mentally.

It is in this context that Vivekananda contrasts monism with two other views: dualism and “qualified monism.” Here’s how he draws the distinction in his talk, *Practical Vedanta and Other Lectures*:

“What is the soul of man? There was one party who held that there is a Being, God, and an infinite number of souls besides, who are eternally separate from God in essence, and form, and everything. This is dualism. This is the old, old crude idea. The answer given by another party was that the soul was a part of the infinite Divine Existence. Just as this body is a little world by itself, and behind it is the mind or thought, and behind that is the individual soul, similarly, the whole world is a body, and behind that is the universal mind, and behind that is the universal Soul. Just as this body is a portion of the universal body, so this mind is a portion of the universal mind, and the soul of man a portion of the universal Soul. This is what is called the Vishishtādvaita, qualified monism.”

By calling dualism “crude,” Vivekananda is not denying that for people at a certain stage of spiritual development it can be useful. He has a similar attitude toward qualified monism, which he views as being a step forward in religious belief. But Vivekananda immediately argues against qualified monism on the assumption that an actual infinity cannot be divided into (finite) parts. Be that

as it may, for our purposes here we need only note that while Vivekananda views qualified monism as being “truer” than dualism (in which God and his creations are entirely separate), his own view is of course that of monism or “non-dualism” (in the sense of *Advaita Vedanta*). Here is a beautiful way in which the swami describes how monism views individual things, including things as immense as the natural universe:

“The universe does not exist at all; it is all illusion. ...There is no Jiva [individual soul] at all. How can there be many? It is the one Infinity. As the one sun, reflected on various pieces of water, appears to be many, and millions of globules of water reflect so many millions of suns, and in each globule will be a perfect image of the sun, yet there is only one sun, so are all these Jivas but reflections in different minds. ...Thus says the Advaitist. So all these births and rebirths, coming and going are figments of Maya. You are infinite.”

The main goal or ideal of this philosophy, Vivekananda says, is “*That those who receive this knowledge are one with the universe.*” We

specific redemptive effects even of your failures, upon yourself or others. ...Forget the low in yourself, then, think only of the high. Identify your life therewith....” By using the low/high distinction here, James seems to be expressing a moral form of “crude” dualism, as Vivekananda called it. And while Vivekananda would not deny the usefulness of such dualism for some people, he would surely claim that less peace or equanimity is likely to be found on that path. James, however, is willing to accept that risk. He writes, “*the pluralistic way agrees with the pragmatic temper best, for it immediately reveals an infinitely larger number of the details of future experience to our mind. It sets definite activities in us at work [in contrast to the supposed “quietism” or “indifferentism” of monism].*”

In other words, James thinks that once the rigorous discipline required to identify with the Absolute has been completed, the ideal of monism is to “lay back” and, well, just bliss out. This is the end of striving, of all desire, and of all possible conflict. The ideal of pluralism, by contrast, is to “look forward” towards more

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are the Absolute. We just have to realize it, and that realization is just what we should strive for, what we should dedicate our lives to, insofar as we are able. Once we are able to achieve this realization, we will have perfect peace. As we have seen, James agrees with Vivekananda that the value of this path has been proven pragmatically, by the exemplary lives of the most successful (fully realized) mystics.

So, once again, why does James reject such monism for himself? He thinks that treating oneself and others as real individuals, rather than as illusions, is pragmatically better for people such as himself. He recognizes, of course, that if each of us is identical with the Absolute, each of us is thereby as real as can be: exactly as real as the Absolute itself. But that sort of ultimate reality, in which all distinctions are erased, is not the ideal he wishes to pursue. To understand why, we have to examine the “pluralistic” view he proposes in the last chapter of *Pragmatism*, entitled “Pragmatism and Religion.” There he writes of those who accept monism, “*The glories and grandeurs, they are yours absolutely, even in the midst of your defacements. Whatever may happen to you, whatever you may appear to be, inwardly you are safe. Look back, LIE back, on your true principle of being!*” Such is the great pragmatic value of identifying with the Absolute. Pragmatism, he says, “*must respect this way, for it has massive historic vindication.*” But on the other hand, the pluralistic path, which focuses on the dynamic process of becoming rather than simply on being, can involve a different sort of optimism about one’s individual possibilities in the ordinary world. “*You,*” he writes, “*...may mean your better possibilities phenomenally taken, or the*

possibilities for activity in this world, and to accept the possibility of real failure. At the end of *Pragmatism*, he invites his readers to consider the following scenario:

Suppose that the world’s author put the case to you before creation, saying: “*I am going to make a world not certain to be saved, a world the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition being that each several agent does its own ‘level best.’ I offer you the chance of taking part in such a world. Its safety, you see, is unwarranted. It is a real adventure, with real danger, yet it may win through. It is a social scheme of co-operative work genuinely to be done. Will you join the procession? Will you trust yourself and trust the other agents enough to face the risk?*”

Should you in all seriousness, if participation in such a world were proposed to you, feel bound to reject it as not safe enough?

The sort of “adventure” James is representing here is well-constructed to appeal to his Western audience, of course. It may appeal to their imaginations (as a myth, in Joseph Campbell’s sense, of the hero’s suspenseful struggle against apparently insurmountable odds), and it fits nicely into their long traditions of dualism and theism. But James goes at least one step too far in his argument for pluralism, in my opinion. In *Pragmatism* he makes an unjustified claim against monism that in *The Will to Believe* (1897) he made against scientifically-minded skepticism and agnosticism, namely that his sort of pluralistic religious belief is motivated by the hope that the world can become a better place as a result of our effortful struggles, while both skeptical agnosticism and monism are motivated by fear (fear of believing a falsehood in the case of

scientifically-minded skeptics, or fear of uncertainty, insecurity, and cosmic irrationality in the case of monists). Rhetorically this might help to convince his audience, insofar as they approve of hope and disapprove of fear. However, he does not provide any evidence for the claim, and it certainly does not follow from the nature of the attitudes themselves. Atheism aside, there is no reason why monism cannot be motivated by hope (namely, for infinite peace and freedom from one's bondage to human nature), nor why pluralism cannot be motivated by fear (perhaps of losing one's ego or individual identity). Emotions are flexible enough to accommodate all of the idiosyncrasies of human psychology.

Broadmindedness With Differences

We should note that James' own "religious hypothesis," which he discusses in *The Will to Believe*, is abstract enough to be compatible with either dualism or monism. It consists of two "affirmations," the first metaphysical and the second pragmatic: perfection [God, the Absolute] is eternal, and secondly, we are much better off if we believe that perfection is eternal. But it does not include Vivekananda's further ideal of identification with eternal perfection. James prefers to worship eternal perfection dualistically (in accord with his Christian culture), perhaps while praying for its assistance in the struggles he expects to come. In *Pragmatism* he further defines his own religion by calling it "pragmatic theism" and describing it as a moderate view standing between "crude naturalism on the one hand and transcendental absolutism [monism] on the other."

But in terms of *Vedanta*, it seems to me that James' preference for activities in this world indicates that his path is actually one of *Karma Yoga* - a path that Vivekananda would of course endorse for anyone with a fitting temperament. As Vivekananda makes clear in Lectures and Discourses, "The different forms of Yoga that we teach, are adapted to the different natures and temperaments of men." James certainly generally agrees that "Temperament is a factor in all philosophizing," and acknowledges that his religious preferences stem from his temperament.

Ultimately, despite their different temperaments, both philosophers also agree that religious beliefs should be "tested" and "verified" in terms of their practical utility. Vivekananda simply believes that monism has been conclusively tested and verified by the great seers (including, of course, Sri Ramakrishna), while for James the jury is still out. But thanks to both men's broad-mindedness, I think that they have much more in common than may at first be appreciated.



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Two Poems
of Swami Vivekananda

The Living God

He who is in you and outside you,
Who works through all hands,
Who walks on all feet,
Whose body are all ye,
Him worship, and break all other idols!

He who is at once the high and low,
The sinner and the saint,
Both God and worm,
Him worship - visible, knowable, real, omnipresent,
Break all other idols.

In whom is neither past life
Nor future birth nor death,
In whom we always have been
And always shall be one,
Him worship. Break all other idols!

Ye fools! who neglect the living God,
And his infinite reflections
With which the world is full,
While ye run after imaginary shadows,
That lead alone to fights and quarrels,
Him worship, the only visible!
Break all other idols!

Many Happy Returns

The mother's heart, the hero's will,
The softest flower's sweetest feel,
The charm and force that ever sway
The altar fire's flaming play,
The strength that leads, in love obeys,
Far-reaching dreams, and patience ways,
Eternal faith in Self, in all
The light Divine in great, in small,
All these, and more that I could see
Today may 'Mother' grant to thee.



COLONIAL CONTACT & BUDDHIST MISCONCEPTIONS



When someone hears of Buddhism they generally think of meditation. The image that comes to mind is often a monk in serene meditation, or a hall with figures sitting in contemplation. This image is so deeply embedded in the Western consciousness that it builds the expectation that Buddhist practice is limited to meditation. In this article I will discuss, in part, how we developed this perspective, and what practices actually predominate within the very diverse spectrum of Buddhist practice and tradition.

First, there is not a single practice within Buddhism. The various schools of Buddhism that developed across South Asia and East Asia present a variety of approaches to the same core Buddhist principles. These practices generally center around recitation and chanting of texts core to the perspective of each school. The earliest such practices were the recitation of guides for monastic conduct, or vows, the *Vinaya*, going back to the time of the Buddha. Monks and nuns, and their communities were organized around the rules for conduct in the community. In a time before teachings were written, they were recited together in community to retain that knowledge. As different philosophical perspective and practice preferences congealed into distinct schools, the tradition of reciting core texts as a means of memorization continued. This recitation practice extends to the use of various linguistic formulae. *Dharani*, are usually shortened linguistic formulae encapsulating the meaning of a larger text. The syllabic organization of a *dharani*, however, may not directly communicate a logical statement, and can be used in a mystical or meditative manner. *Mantra*, can be as short as a single word or syllable, or as long as a short verse. *Mantra* similarly may not communicate a logical meaning, but may instead represent components of larger texts, ideas, deities, or concepts within a particular Buddhist school. *Sutra*, the collected teachings of the historical Buddha, and other cosmic Buddhas and deities, generally present a teaching, often in the form of a dialogue. Across East Asia for example, it is common to encounter the Heart Sutra, (the shortest of all the *Mahayana Buddhist Sutras*) recited for a variety of purposes.

Visitors to Buddhist temples in most parts of Asia, are most likely to encounter people involved in the recitation of *sutras*, *mantras*, and a host of ritual practices reflecting local cultural expression. However, most all Buddhist centers outside of the Asian diaspora, feature the practice of sitting meditation. The preference for, and near complete focus on, sitting meditation stems from the encounter between the Buddhist teaching and colonial influences in Asia, and specific interests of early Western translators and spiritual seekers. I will highlight two examples that have likely had the deepest impact; the encounter of Theosophy with Buddhism in India, and the colonial experience of Sri Lanka and Burma.

An Unfortunate Definition of Spirituality

The founders of Theosophy, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, and Madame Helena Blavatsky, extended the then growing interest in the Spiritualist movement of the nineteenth century, into an organized religious system. Spiritualists focused on the belief of the existence of the soul after death, and employed such practices as seances, and contact with spirits of the dead through various means. Theosophical ideas and beliefs often centered around various psychic phenomena, their writings claiming origins in Buddhist, Brahmanic, and Pythagorean concepts. Theosophical writings increasingly included, and recast, Buddhist ideas in line with Spiritualist ones. Theosophy presented an individual spiritual path of teachings generally pointing toward supernatural abilities, explained with the assistance of Asian philosophical terms, often labeling this effort “Buddhism.” In the process, however, Theosophy discarded the traditional Buddhist teaching on the individual, substituting its own ideas of the individual’s spiritual search.

Theosophy left an indelible mark on the Western conception of Buddhism. While the Theosophical Society was initially conceived as an organization to investigate supernatural phenomena, it went on to announce sweeping spiritual revelations. Blavatsky’s later works expand on her initial theories, bolstered by claiming authority from hidden masters in the Himalayas. Theosophy liberally mixed Hindu, Buddhist, and other Eastern philosophical concepts to present a “Buddhism” largely of Theosophy’s own making. In the process, Theosophy presents to the Western reader a “Theosophical Buddhism” focused on the individual’s search for truth and acquisition of supernatural abilities. This “Theosophical Buddhism” was one response to the Victorian age’s crisis of faith, and the perceived threat of science. “Theosophical Buddhism” stands in dramatic contrast to any extant school of Buddhism, eschewing the traditional Buddhist focus on supplanting the individual self with an interdependent existence.

To bolster their connection with Buddhism, Theosophy’s founders would eventually take formal lay Buddhist vows during a trip to India in 1879. Thereafter, Theosophy began a formal patronage of Buddhist institutions and thinkers. Pivotal early Theosophical members would go on to publish works explaining Buddhist teaching, such as *The Buddhist Catechism* and *Esoteric Buddhism*, in 1883. In the introduction to *Esoteric Buddhism*, the author, Alfred P. Sinnet, perhaps inadvertently acknowledges that its contents will reveal something other than Buddhism as it is known to adherents in India and East Asia. Theosophical writers conceptualize this “esoteric Buddhism” as the means of bridging the spiritual and the material.

Theosophy was much influenced by the Oxford researcher Friedrich Max Muller, who published the 1879 fifty-volume series, *Sacred Books of the East*. Muller’s translations were the largest set of Hindu and Buddhist religious literature available in a Western lan-

“Theosophical Buddhism” carelessly presented an amalgamation of Buddhist, Hindu, and occult conceptions divorced from any extant tradition. Stated another way, Buddhism was unable to introduce itself to the West before the West determined how it would and should be introduced.”

guage. In alignment with Muller, Theosophy made the decision to characterize “early” Buddhist teachings as the true Buddhist path. As such, Theosophy determined that the Pali Cannon was the appropriate focus of Buddhist studies, and discarded the whole of Mahayana Buddhism, except for Zen, which the later Theosophist, Christmas Humphreys, determined matched Theosophy’s search for the source. While Sinnet announces a break with Blavatsky’s conception of Buddhism, he endorsed the early “primitive” Buddhism of the Pali Cannon and continued to locate living teachers of this tradition in the Himalayas, an area untouched by modern European influence. Sinnet cites “Theosophical Buddhism” in the Himalayas despite this being the exact location of the Mahayana Buddhist schools Theosophy denounces. Theosophy’s view of Buddhism positions Buddhism as a Theosophical exposition of humanity’s search for truth, lacking dogma and in accord with science and Western thought. Theosophy appeared to find in Buddhism a path towards truth without gods, worship, or hierarchy. Theosophy’s focus on a self-guided means of spiritual awakening presents Buddhism as the penultimate personalized path, simultaneously revealing the Theosophical bias against structure and clergy.

Theosophy excelled at gathering latent occult interests in an age of general spiritual discontent. The perceived failure of the religious establishment to effectively respond to scientific development provided an opening for alternative spiritual ideas. The same alternative leanings sought harmony with growing scientific discoveries, often interpreted as devaluing humanity. It was in this search for a harmonious marriage between science and religion, that the West discovered Buddhism. The Western encounter with Buddhism was often facilitated through Theosophical lodges which introduced Buddhism, and simultaneously a Theosophical view of Buddhist ideas. Blavatsky’s claims of authority from a succession of realized Eastern masters, without locating them within the existing Buddhist philosophical traditions, began a tradition of “new age” leaning Buddhism and its popular writings. Buddhism in the West now largely divides into two camps: those with a connection to an established Asian school or tradition; and those who have charted a path loosely termed “Buddhist” that is much influenced by the most famous Theosophist of all, Allan Watts, and reliant on Max Muller’s historical revisionism.

This is evident early on when Theosophists declared their conception of Buddhism as practiced in the United States as the only real Buddhism; the faith having effectively died in Asia. These self-empowered seekers removed elements they declare cultural baggage in search of “early” Buddhism, or a vague notion of the “wisdom of the East.” Unmoored from traditions that were never self-guided and lacking a grounding in the Buddhist cannon, highlights the pitfalls of such ego-reifying tendencies. This “Theosophical Buddhism” presented a purported philosophy of ancient wisdom without practice, traditional ethics, or teachers.

Philosophy in Parlors, Spirituality in Salons

Theosophy’s origins in the parlors and salons of arts communities with an overriding interest in occult knowledge, led to a focus on psychic power, lined with a thin veneer of ethical conduct. Alone in one’s exotically decorated parlor, Theosophical Buddhism provided an approachable ethical philosophy free of robes or ritual. The focus on psychic and supernatural powers remained the focus of “Theosophical Buddhism,” despite its denouncement by Asian Buddhists of the day. The silence of one’s own meditation provided the perfect locus for Theosophy’s goal of pointing beyond cultural baggage, theology, dogma, structure, and the individual tormented by the modern age. This focus ignored Buddhism’s complex metaphors, coded language, and practices directed at transcending the notion of the individual. “Theosophical Buddhism” carelessly presented an amalgamation of Buddhist, Hindu, and occult conceptions divorced from any extant tradition. Stated another way, Buddhism was unable to introduce itself to the West before the West determined how it would and should be introduced.

The Culturally Molded Shape of Insight Meditation

The second example is that of Insight Meditation, born out of the Burmese Buddhist tradition. Where Insight Meditation is often synonymous with Burma, widespread meditation practice among monks and laypeople only began in the early twentieth century. The popularization of meditation in Burma arose from an effort to spread the Buddhist teaching and protect the Buddhist religion in the face of colonial powers that were recklessly spreading Christianity. British conquest of Burma required monks interested in protecting Buddhist teachings from colonial religious proselytization, to disperse the learning and practice away from centralized monasteries directly to the people.

Traditionally, meditation is understood as deriving from the Sanskrit term, *bhavana*. *Bhavana*, in this context, is better understood as “cultivation,” and includes a variety of practices. Among these are the development of mind, body, understanding, benevolence, concentration, tranquility, and insight. *Bhavana* suggests study, moral development, chanting, memorization, and relic veneration. Prioritizing study became a key means of resistance to British colonial rule. Colonial rule came after a period of tumult in Burmese society through the early 1800’s. In response, sitting meditation began to be stressed as a means of government enforcement of monastic discipline.

Texts began to appear in Burma addressing modern scientific notions of the body, through Buddhist teachings. In an age of Western colonialism asserting its superiority over indigenous populations in part through comparisons of traditional practices with scientific knowledge, Buddhism had to explain itself using scientific language. Most notably, Buddhist monks in Burma, writing to the public in response to the British overthrow of the Burmese monarch in 1885, used overt Buddhist language to exhort the peo-

ple toward moral behavior. Monks wrote public letters addressing the difficulties of the time and directing people to reflect on the communal dynamic of *karma*. They similarly urged a reliance on communal ethical practices to address the calamity of colonialism. Through the end of the nineteenth century, monks began crafting meditation practices suitable for lay people to strengthen the study of ethical and philosophical teachings they recommended. Many of these were popularized to combat Christian missionaries who brought a new style and often provided money to people who converted. During these colonial times Christian missionaries claimed superiority and had the backing of the colonial state to support those claims. The popularization of meditation among lay people especially, was the Burmese response to these rapid social changes, colonialization, and modernization.

These lay Buddhist movements evolved and eventually popularized the Insight Meditation that is well known today. Its development and separation from traditional monastic practice was a response to colonialism. Like the example of Theosophical Buddhism, over time, Insight Meditation became largely separated from the spectrum of Buddhist practices historically associated with the term, *bhavana*, restraining the idea of cultivation only to meditation. These assumptions about Buddhist practice are now deeply embedded in Western thinking, and leave the Western student bewildered in the face of traditional practice and study.

Western students of Asian religious and philosophical systems may experience an unexamined absence in their studies and practice. We often carry biases toward traditional practices or consider our expressions purer than some others. Texts in Western languages have often presented a Buddhism absent of superstition, local cultural expressions, or patriarchal structures. Whether these assertions are accurate or not, they generally fail to consider the overlay of Western cultural expressions, philosophical positions, and class structures that gave rise to them. For instance, how many of us have considered why we may react to certain religious practices the way we do? Few consider our often-shared Protestant Christian cultural backgrounds that may eschew the cultural and religious fabric from which our practice threads are drawn. Have we considered whether a dispassionate sociological treatment of a treasured wisdom tradition has robbed it of the vibrancy and life that sustained it over the course of millennia? Are we truly laying aside our rigorous Western logical minds to find truth as our traditions encourage, or have we secreted away that exact obstacle these traditions warn of, unaware of how our traditions were repackaged in modern times? The phrase, “*study and practice are two wheels of the cart,*” often recited in Buddhist traditions, is an apt guide here. Both our studies and our practices should be equally deep, and I encourage the reader to consider how their traditions are expressed and presented, in order to explore the path to its fullest extent.

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Two Poems of Kukai (Dobo Daishi)

Singing Image of Heat Waves

Sunlight streams on the spring landscape.
Heat waves shimmer in the meadow.
Their essence is entirely empty and not existing.
In it the astray are distressed, forgetting their home.
Heat waves far off look real, but close up are nothing.
They are like running horses or a stream, but are nothing.
Fantasies arise from wrong thinking.
Beautiful men and women fill a fortress;
But it is wrong to think that men and women
have essential being.
Sages and wise men are only assumed to be so.
The all-voidness of the five functions of body and mind
is the real truth.
The Four Devils and Buddha are also inconceivable.
Yoga-mind is uniquely enlightened.
A flame of the World of Truth is self-illuminating.
Do not be conceited or self-satisfied.
Even yoga-mind is temporary.
Bliss of the Great Void Only is my true Empress.

Singing Image of Foam

A fine rain falls from heaven.
Many kinds of foam spreading on water
Are born then perish as water changes.
They are not born from self or other,
but from the chain of causation.
Things arising in visions are mystifying.
Buddhas in the mind make them.
Never suspect or doubt them.
Fundamentally, Truth and Mind are one.
Not to know this is extremely pitiful.



MUNAJAT

An Ancient Dervish Hymn



This sacred hymn was composed by Abdullah Ansari almost one-thousand years ago in the geographical area we now call Afghanistan. It clearly expresses the most radical insights of Sufism. These startling Sufi attitudes are fully consistent with the basic fabric of Islam, and are most cherished by the Jerrahi Dervish Order of Istanbul.

IN YOUR PAINFUL MYSTERY OF LOVE,
LOVERS FIND THE CURE FOR PAIN,
WANDERING THROUGH THE DESERT OF LONGING
CRYING ALOUD, ALLAH, ALLAH

DRUNK WITH DELIGHT, CENSORED BY MEN,
EYES AFLAME WITH DESPERATE LOVE,
YOUR FRIENDS CRY OUT LIKE MOSES ON THE MOUNTAIN,
"LORD, REVEAL YOURSELF TO ME."

WHEN YOU CONSUME A HEART WITH YOUR LOVE,
YOU SCATTER ITS ASHES ON THE WIND.
WHAT NEED HAVE WE FOR SEPARATE IDENTITY
WHEN WE KNOW YOU AS THE ONLY TRUTH?

EVER PRESENT, HOW CAN I SEARCH?
ALWAYS AWARE, WHAT CAN I PRAY?
WHEN YOU GLANCE WITH INFINITE MERCY,
HOW CAN ANY SEPARATION BE?

WE SPEAK ONLY TO PRAISE YOUR NAME;
WE SEEK ONLY TO EXPRESS YOUR DELIGHT.
RUINED ARE WE; ANNIHILATED ARE WE;
SLAIN BY YOU, WE ARE HAPPY TO BE SLAIN.

PARADISE, BRILLIANT AND PURE,
WITHOUT YOUR FACE IS WORSE THAN HELL.
A SINGLE GLIMPSE OF YOUR TRUE ESSENCE
BRINGS TO NAUGHT EVERY HEAVENLY DELIGHT.

WHEN THERE DAWNS A GLIMPSE OF YOUR LOVE,
LOVE OF FINITUDE FADES AWAY.
WHAT DRUNKEN HEARTS YOU GIVE TO YOUR FRIENDS;
LOOKING AT THEMSELVES THEY SEE ONLY YOU.

FREE US FROM FACES, REVEALING YOUR FACE;
FREE US FROM DOORS, OPENING YOUR DOOR.
IF YOU BUT ONCE CALL ME LOVE'S SLAVE,
MY BLISS WILL SURPASS THE BLISS OF YOUR THRONE.

YOUR PERFECT MERCY CANCELS OUR FAULTS;
RINGS OF SLAVE-HOOD ADORN OUR EARS.
YOU RAISED US UP BEFORE TIME BEGAN;
WE ARE YOUR GUESTS; TREAT US AS YOU WILL.

WHAT DO I CARE FOR THE PLAY OF PARADISE?
YOU MAKE MY EVERY GLANCE PARADISE.
WHEN YOU GAZE INTO MY EYES,
NO DUALITY CAN ARISE.

WHAT THIS POOR ONE DESIRES OF YOU
IS MORE THAN THE WEALTH OF A THOUSAND KINGS.
EVERY LIFE SEEKS BLESSINGS FROM YOU;
I AM ASKING FOR YOU ALONE.

THIS FAQIR HAS NO NAME AND NO SHAME.
THIS POOR ONE KNOWS NEITHER PEACE NOR WAR.
TRUE RANK IS NEVER TURBAN AND SILKEN ROBE:
ROYALTY SPRINGS FROM THE HEART OF LIGHT.

CREATURES ARE DRUNK WITH YOUR WINE;
I AM DRUNK WITH THE WINE-BEARER.
THEIR DRUNKENESS IS THE LIFE OF PRAISE;
I AM LOST IN YOUR SILENCE ALONE.

YOU ARE WHAT THEY PRAISE AT THE HOLY KABAA;
YOU ARE WHAT THEY SEEK AT TEMPLES AND SHRINES.
I AM FREE FROM EVERY RELIGION,
CRYING ALOUD, ALLAH, ALLAH.

YOU PLACE A PEARL ON ADAM'S BROW
DUST OF REBELLION ON SATAN'S HEAD.
SATAN SEEKS YOU AND FINDS BUT HIMSELF;
ADAM SEEKS HIMSELF AND FINDS ONLY YOU.

CREATION IS HIDDEN WITHIN YOUR HEART,
YET IT REMAINS UNAWARE.
YOU ARE CONCEALED WITHIN OUR HEART,
STILL WE REMAIN UNAWARE.

ALL WILL IS YOURS. WHAT CAN I WILL?
I WANT NO THING. I WANT NO WORLD.
I CANNOT CARE FOR HEAVENLY DELIGHT,
SEEKING ONLY THE DELIGHT OF YOU.

WHAT MUST I DO TO MERGE INTO YOU?
MY HEART'S BLOOD STREAMS THROUGH MY EYES.
I HOLD NO KEY TO UNLOCK YOUR DOOR.,
MADLY CRYING, ALLAH, ALLAH

WHOEVER KNOWS YOU ENCOUNTERS YOUR SAINTS,
COOL WATER FOR THE THIRSTY SOUL.
HEAVENLY STATES FOR THEM ARE LIKE THORNS;
THEY SEEK ONLY THE ROSE OF YOU.

PIOUS ACTS MAKE THE MIND PROUD;
FORGETFULNESS BRINGS REPENTANCE.
I REJOICE IN THE NIGHT OF SEPARATION,
FOR THE DAWN OF MYSTIC UNION IS NEAR.

YOU EXIST. I EXIST NOT.
EVERYTHING IS LOST IN YOU.
YOU ARE CLOSER THAN MY SOUL.
THIS IS ALL THAT NEED BE KNOWN.

THIS POOR ONE IS MAD WITH TRUE JOY.
THIS FAQIR IS KING OF ALL WORLDS.
RECEIVING JUST AN ATOM OF YOUR LOVE,
EVERY KING AND WORLD DISAPPEARS.

ADORING YOU HAS DESTROYED MY EASE;
NOW I REJOICE IN TESTS AND TRIALS.
JUST A MIRROR FOR YOUR REFLECTION,
I AM NEVER SEPARATE FROM ALLAH.

LOVE'S UNION IS CALAMITY;
ITS AGONY IS SHEER DELIGHT.
I NEITHER POSSESS WHAT I USED TO KNOW,
NOR KNOW WHAT IT IS I NOW POSSESS.

YOU ARE THE GOAL; YOUR FRIENDS ARE THE WAY.
EARTHLY FIRES ARE DROPS OF DEW.
WITHOUT SEEING YOU, PARADISE IS PRISON.
PLEASURE IS POISON WITHOUT YOUR FACE.

IF YOU BRING US TO TRIAL, WE HAVE NO DEFENSE.
GRANT OUR LIVES YOUR OWN PURITY.
GIVE OUR HEARTS DESIRE FOR YOU ONLY.
RESURRECT US THROUGH YOUR GRACE.

THERE ARE NO SHORES IN YOUR OCEAN OF LIGHT.
YOUR MYSTERY CAN NEVER BE REVEALED.
LEND US YOUR SPEECH TO THANK AND PRAISE YOU;
WE HAVE NOTHING OF OUR OWEN TO GIVE.

HEARTS BEAT ONLY WITH AFFECTION FOR YOU.
LUNGS BREATHE ONLY WITH LOVE FOR YOU.
FROM ROSES ABOVE MY TOMB
STREAMS THE FRAGRANCE OF FIDELITY.

FOR FREE YOU CREATE. YOU SUSTAIN US FOR FREE.
YOU ARE NOT A MERCHANT OF GEMS.
YOU NEVER SELL THE PRECIOUS RESURRECTION,
FREELY GRANTING UNION TO ALL LIVES.

SUBMISSION IS YOUR LUMINOUS WAY;
OUR ACTIONS ARE YOUR GRACE ALONE.
REMOVE FROM US THE SENSE OF OBLIGATION;
NEVER VEIL US FROM YOUR FACE.

WHEN I REMEMBER YOU, SORROW IS JOY.
THIS IS MY SECRET DOOR TO TRUTH.
WITHOUT THE TASTE OF YOUR IDENTITY,
PRAYING AND LEARNING ARE ILLUSORY.

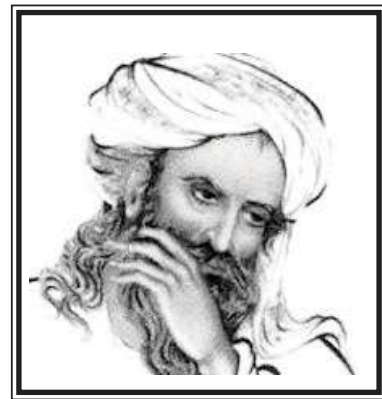
MY DIRECTION OF PRAYER IS YOUR FACE.
MY VICTORY BANNER READS, "ALL IS HE."
PARADISE IS NOT MY CONCERN;
HELL IS NOT MY ANXIETY.

BEGINNERS ON THE WAY SPEAK OF THE TRUTH,
BUT LOVERS POSSESS NEITHER WORD NOR VOICE.
THOSE WHO DESIRE THIS WORLD ARE INSANE;
THOSE WHO LONG FOR HEAVEN ARE INANE.

FASTING, VIGIL, PILGRIMAGE
ARE WAGES OF THE WAGE EARNER.
FALL IN LOVE, THE ROYAL CROWN OF FLAME.
"I AM TRUTH," CRIES MANSUR AL-HALLAJ.

LIVE IN ECSTASY BUT NEVER SPEAK ALOUD.
TO FIND TRUTH, BECOME AFFLICTED BY LOVE.
KNOW WHAT REMAINS BEYOND ANNIHILATION
WHEN THERE EXISTS NEITHER FASTING NOR PRAYER.

MY EYES ARE WEEPING WITH LOVE'S AGONY
AS I DANCE ON THE MYSTIC WAY.



Abu Ismail Abdullah al-Harawi al-Ansari or Abdullah Ansari of Herat (1006–1089) also known as Pir-i Herat, "Sage of Herat," was a Sufi saint who lived in Herat (modern-day Afghanistan). Ansari was a commentator on the Qur'an, scholar of the Hanbali school of thought, traditionalist, polemicist, and spiritual master, known for his oratory and poetic talents in Arabic and Persian.



GODBLOGS

Brahman-Bytes



Hundreds of "Godblogs," also titled "Brahman-bytes," appear on SRV Association's website, ASR (Ashram of the Subtle Realms) most every weekday, and are discussed on line with Babaji every Saturday with the SRV sangha, friends, participants, and visitors as well. Become a member at: community@srvwisdom.org

Several Egos That Are Nonharmful

The Redeeming Qualities of Servant, Child, and Devotee

In all spiritual circles where philosophy is as important as religion, and high wisdom on a par with love, the problem of the unripe human ego inserts itself on human activity, and insinuates itself on life and mind. To "Let go and let God," then, is not possible for most people, since that selfsame "God" is unable to be consulted daily due to the strong sense of individual agency and selfish ownership prevalent in human beings. As Sri Ramakrishna noted: "Man cannot see God on account of his ego. It is like how one cannot see the sun when a cloud rises in the sky. But that does not mean there is no sun; the sun is there just the same. I taught Keshab about the presence and the absence of the ego. He wanted to hear more, but I told him that if I



related more, he wouldn't be able to keep his organization together. That frightened him."

We see from this that the human ego is necessary for the continuation of good works in the world, ones that benefit other beings. It is just that, when it comes to seeking ultimate wisdom, knowing one's true Self, seeing God, and clearly apprehending the Truth, the human ego must take a backseat, as it were, and remove itself from the picture. Even then, at least up until Nondual Realization dawns fully, it can be kept in a more mature form, like as an observer, or a witness. And as Sri Ramakrishna has explained, in a few other forms as well: "But there is no harm in the ego of a child. On the contrary, this ego is helpful. It is like the case of greens; some of them are bad for the stomach, but hincbe greens are good. So, hincbe cannot properly be called greens. Similarly with sugar. Some sweets are injurious to one's health; but not boiled sugar candy. Sugar candy cannot be classed with other sweets. In this way, a few types of ego are not harmful."

A few other subtle and gentle forms of the human ego are also seen among the enlightened ones. To serve selflessly is divine, for instance; also, to give away the sense in individuality into God's hands, and become a pure instrument for His/Her Will. The Paramahamsadev explains about this, as well: "There is no harm in the ego of a child, or the ego of a servant; also, the trace of ego in a devotee of God. When God keeps a little of the trace of ego in His devotee, He uses it for spreading and enjoying bliss. This is like keeping a small distinction between yourself and God – like in the case of a devout servant and his kind Master." As Raj Ramachandra sings in a song of high repute, worthy of repeating:

*"Oh Divine Mother, all happens by Thy own sweet Will.
Certainly you are the Self-willed One, and the Inactive Doer of all Action.
All work belongs to you, others only call it their own.
You trap the powerful elephant in the mire,
yet cause the blind man to scale the highest mountain
On some you bestow the Highest Bliss;
others You cast into the sea of suffering.
Who can fathom Thy Dictates, Oh Mother of the Universe?
I only know that I am the Sword, You are its Wielder.
I am the Chariot, You are the Charioteer.
I am the house, You are the indweller.
I move as You move me; I think as You think through me."*

All Is God's Love

God Gets His Work Done Through Pure-Hearted Souls

When the traditions of Vedanta, Yoga, Tantra, and so forth declare that God is the only doer of action, they mean just that. As one sacred hymn in India puts it, "Oh Divine Mother, all work belongs to Thee; others only call it their own." In the case of Sri Ramakrishna, he is even more explicit: "Therefore I say, he who works in a detached spirit, who is kind and charitable, benefits himself only. Helping others, doing good to others, is the work of God alone, who for men has created the sun, moon, father, mother, fruits, flowers, and vegetables." Whether one knows this salient fact or not, it is nevertheless wisest to conduct all action in the world for the highest good of oneself, and for all others. Selfish works are karma-laden works. As the Father of Yoga, Patanjali, states: "They are pain-bearing."



Placing selfish beings aside for now, it is still a great temptation for good people to feel that they are being kind, generous, and well-intentioned when they bend to helps others. Parents, friends, philanthropists, and altruists assume this fallacy when they engage in the various activities of the world. The wise know differently, however, and keep the imperfect human ego out of the mix when they act. As the Paramahamsa states: "The love that you see in parents is God's love: He has given it to them to preserve His creation. The compassion that you see in the kind-hearted is God's compassion. He has given it to them to protect the helpless. So, whether you are charitable or not, He will get His work done somehow or other. Nothing can stop His work."

So it is true, that "love makes the world go round." Work makes the world go wrong. But if both love and work are selflessly oriented, the Lord is pleased and human beings are benefited. Work as worship, labor as love, and all efforts given in the excellence of Divine Essence – these are the words and the vision of Swami

Vivekananda. Thus, we place the Lord in the heart and go forth to exert in the name of Love and Goodwill.

All Aimless Without Advaita
Laboring Under the Contrasting Pairs of Opposites

Though nonduality is still relatively new to this day and age, most beings (even if they think philosophically) will nonetheless nestle comfortably into the provisional refuge of dualism and scarcely venture out. The example of Lord Vasishtha cited by Sri Ramakrishna gives us pause for thought. "When Lakshmana was amazed to see the sage, Vasishthadev, grief-stricken at the death of his sons, Sri Ram said: 'Dear brother, whoever has knowledge also has ignorance. Whoever is aware of light, is also aware of darkness.'"

Shankara, in his nondual *stotram* on *Nirvana*, states, "I have no death, for never a birth had I." Here, he is looking at the Source, not at Its (*Brahman's Maya*) expressions, manifestations, and superimpositions. He is gazing directly into the fires of eternal *Yoga*, not at the waning embers of disintegrating ages past and gone. He is thinking, nobly, with pure, living intelligence, not with a dual mind conditioned over lifetimes in *samsara*. He is facing off with the illusion of death for all time, bolstered up and supported by the Highest Truth. As my guru, Swami Areshanandaji Maharaj, once declared about this singular principle: "This is the best of India!"

Therefore, let all beings, wherever they may venture in this changing realm of *maya*, all imbued with name, form, time, space, and causality, do what they will and enjoy and suffer as they may under the mighty regime of duality and varieties, but have the innate sense to become still, silent, and reverent in the face of Truth, called *Advaita*, or Nonduality. As my *guru* often affirmed:



"May Peace come unto all,
 May Higher Wisdom dawn upon all,
 May all perceive the Face of Truth,
 And become fortified with the Armor of Love."

Father As Mother
The Son of a Rich Mother

One key relationship in religion that has gone missing in this day and age is that of courting the faithful favor of the Divine Mother of the Universe. She may be extremely subtle, and often hard to reach and realize, but no one likes to be ignored. She awaits the intrepid wayfarer on the road of life to be of special assistance to that singular soul in matters pertinent to both its growth and protection. Sri Ramakrishna often used the analogy of a small tree that needs to be fenced around so as to keep cattle from eating and destroying it. When it has matured, however, one can then even tie a cow to its strong trunk. Such is early spiritual life as well, and getting beyond the young sapling state of early practice.

And so, the Great Master used to say, "If you pray to God addressing Him as Mother, that is very good. People say that the mother's attachment to the child is stronger than the father's. A son, for instance, can force his demands on the mother, but not on the father."

Utilizing the whole mother/son relationship in a symbolic way in order to illustrate a devotee's earnest prayers to God, Sri

Ramakrishna encouraged spiritual seekers to turn to the Divine Shakti power which is so near and dear to all, though often going unnoticed. By calling up that force, individuals can actually fulfill their own prayers rather than waiting on the all-too-slow process of "God's Will." As Swami Vivekananda often put it, "Mother is a thousand times more gracious than Father." And as Sri Ramakrishna explained it, by way of metaphor: "There is a story out of *Itihasa* scripture regarding the estate of Trailokya's mother. Once, cartloads of money were being transferred from her estate to another place. It was well-guarded by many red-turbaned stalwarts armed with big sticks. Trailokya, who had been waiting along the road with his men, pounced upon the money and took it away by force. You see, a son has a strong claim on his mother's wealth. She cannot very well sue him in court, either..." Our ecstatic poet/sage, Ramprasad, sings about the deeper symbology of this matter as well:

"O majestic Kali, O living Mystery!
 You alone can sweep away every difficulty.
 Divinely revealed scriptures confirm Your Power.
 So why do You refuse to intervene on behalf of this
 impoverished poet!
 O sublime Goddess, why do You avoid every display of
 Divine Wealth!
 Why do You prefer dusty cremation grounds to Your
 radiant Jewel Palace!
 You resemble Your Consort, the renunciate Who lives only
 on the crushed hemp leaves of Wisdom's Ecstasy.
 Yet whoever loves You, Holy Mother, begins to shine with
 inward illumination.
 The secret lives of Your intense lovers
 resemble the naked limbs and matted hair of ascetic practice.
 Their shining bodies of Love remain concealed beneath the
 ashes of inner renunciation.
 Through Your inscrutable Will alone, Mother, my soul
 incarnates upon this earth.
 You present me with experience after experience of
 excruciating misery,
 and still I repeat Your august Name, O Kali.
 How courageous I must be!"

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THE PATH OF NONDUALITY

Via The Personal God



There is a poignant question that arises for spiritual aspirants aware of the paths of action, devotion, knowledge, and meditation. Is it better to taste sugar or to be sugar? In other words, do I want to keep a sense of separation from God in order to enjoy bliss, or do I want to realize that the Self and God are identical and transcend the distinction of experience and experiencer? This question was once put before Swami Areshananda of the Portland Vedanta Society. He replied very simply, “Only one who has not yet tasted sugar will not want to be sugar.” The unspoken part is that having once tasted sugar (the bliss of God), one will want to merge with It, like a moth to flame, or a salt doll “tasting the ocean” and naturally dissolving into it, because that is its Essence. Until we taste that sweetness, we will have doubts about this and fear formless Reality.

This question and the answer given highlights the importance of getting that first (and subsequent) direct experience of the personal God, often called God with form. It is significant as well, that this question arises among those familiar with the four paths mentioned above. These comprise the now famous Four Yogas that Swami Vivekananda brought to the forefront in our era as universal approaches to God, and under the heading of Vedanta. These have always existed, appearing in the Vedic era as well, and later in the *Bhagavad Gita*. In these modern times they have been renewed and presented as an integral system by Swami Vivekananda (and others after him) for maturing spiritual aspirants and leading them to the cusp of God-Realization. Each one is associated with a particular temperament: the active, the devotional/emotional, the studious and rational, and the contemplative. As a complementary set of pathways to be coalesced, we start with the one or two that we naturally lean toward and then add in the others to avoid one-sidedness and narrowness. As Swami Vivekananda has said,

“Would to God that all men were so constituted that in their minds all these elements of philosophy, mysticism, emotion, and of work were equally present in full! That is the ideal, my ideal of a perfect man. Everyone who has only one or two of these elements of character, I consider “one-sided”; and this world is almost full of such “one-sided” men, with knowledge of that one road only in which they move; and anything else is dangerous and horrible to them. To become harmoniously balanced in all these four directions is my ideal of religion.”

- Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. 2, “The Ideal of a Universal Religion”

Because the goal of each of these yogas, pathways, is described differently from the others, it can appear that they are at odds with each other to beginners. There have also been periods of time when it was believed that action and meditation could not coexist, or that the aim of *Bhakti* and *Jnana* were incompatible. The goal

of the path of devotion, called *Bhakti Yoga*, is to have the vision of God, the chosen Ideal, which can be the personal God of whichever religion one has taken up. This path assumes a distinction between the devotee and God. With *Jnana Yoga*, the path of Knowledge via discrimination between the Real and the unreal, the goal is to realize that the embodied Soul (*Atman*) is one with the Supreme Reality (*Brahman*). We can readily see that the path of devotion is the path of tasting sugar and the path of Knowledge seeks to be sugar. The goal of *Karma Yoga*, the path of action, is to realize God through complete renunciation of the fruits of action.

And finally, the goal of *Raja Yoga*, the path of meditation as described in the *Yoga Sutras*, is the attainment of complete self-mastery followed by concentration leading to dissolution of the individual Self (*Atman*) in the *Paramatman*, the Supreme Self. One can also make the case that *Karma Yoga* maintains a sense of distinction, i.e. agent and action, while those who want to be sugar would fall more toward the path of meditation. One thing that is less well known in the West is that there are illumined beings, who, having realized God along these yogic pathways, have merged into nondual Reality, only to return (these are very rare) and enjoy tasting sugar and being sugar in cycles. Sri Ramakrishna epitomizes this in full, and many of his 16 direct disciples, following his teachings, also attained perfection in all four yogas, realization of the Personal God, and nondual absorption.

The Persistence of Doubt

As stated above, until we taste the sweetness of God/Divine Reality, we will have doubts. These simplified renderings of the goal of each *yoga*, should serve to spur us on to attaining direct experience. It has been directly or indirectly pointed out by luminaries such as Sri Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, the great *Advaitin* (nondualist) Shankaracharya (who also re-established temples of worship for the general religious public in India), and all the way to Sri Ramakrishna of our own times, that the path which incorporates the Personal God is the easiest path to follow, and necessary for the vast majority of humanity. Sri Ramakrishna states that the path of devotion is the path of the *Kali Yuga* – the long, dark age we are experiencing at this time, when humanity’s access to its own spiritual consciousness is heavily veiled. He advised it for all but the most spiritually advanced persons following the path of Knowledge.

Most of us who lean predominantly towards the path of Knowledge and meditation are not spiritually equipped to abandon the personal God. Sri Ramakrishna likened meditation on the Chosen Ideal (Personal God) to learning to aim an arrow first at the side of a barn, then a tree trunk, then a bird at rest, and finally a bird in flight. Setting one’s mind and heart with love and sincerity on the Personal God will eventually make one fit for immersion into Divine Reality. It is useful to understand more about the Personal God, known as *Ishvara*.

“Most of us who lean predominantly towards the path of Knowledge and meditation are not spiritually equipped to abandon the personal God.”

Sri Ramakrishna, in the late 1800's, would often ask the question, “Do you believe in God with form or God without form?” Some spiritual aspirants would adamantly reply with one or the other and oppose its opposite. Some, like “M” in the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, would be thrown into a quandary – if God has form, then how can He be formless, and if He is formless, then how can He have form? Sri Ramakrishna would tell those who believed in God with form to follow their path sincerely but never think that their view was the only correct view. And he would say the same to those who believed in God without form. He likened any narrowness of view in one's thinking to the saying, “only my watch tells the correct time.” He himself would say, depending on the capacity of those around him, that “Yes, God has form and He is formless too. Further, He is beyond both form and formlessness. No one can limit Him.” Sri Ramakrishna was uniquely qualified to say this, as he himself experienced all three of these modes repeatedly, and often daily during his life. His words have authority, like revealed scripture.

During the time of Sri Ramakrishna, there was a popular religious movement in Calcutta (Kolkata today) consisting of several branches. One was called the *Brahmo Samaj*. It was a modern synthesis of Indian Wisdom with some elements of Christianity included. They believed God to be formless but with attributes, and went so far as to require members to sign a pledge vowing to never bow before any image. They had great devotion to the Divine Being conceived as the Creator, Sustainer, and Dissolver of the Universe, who was the repository of all beneficent qualities. Prayer and meditation were part of their daily practices, along with devotional singing. Teachers and students of these communities (*Samaj*) would visit Sri Ramakrishna, and he was also invited to their festivals. He saw them as *bhaktas*, devotees, rather than as *jnanis*, those following the path of Knowledge aiming for the ultimate formless Reality (*Nirguna Brahman*). Speaking to one of these members, Sri Ramakrishna stated:

“...it is good to have the feeling, ‘I am a lover of God.’ The *Saguna Brahman* is meant for the *bhaktas* (devotees). In other words, a *bhakta* believes that God has attributes and reveals Himself to men as a Person, assuming forms. It is He who listens to our prayers. The prayers that [the *Brahmos*] utter are directed to Him alone. You are *bhaktas*, not *jnanis* or *Vedantists*. It doesn't matter whether you accept God with form or not. It is enough to feel that God is a Person who listens to our prayers, who creates, preserves, and destroys the universe, and who is endowed with infinite power. It is easier to attain God by following the path of devotion.” *Gospel*, p. 149

The Four-In-One Path Of This Age

Lex Hixon, the author of *Great Swan, Meetings with Ramakrishna*, was once asked what he himself understood to be Sri Ramakrishna's meaning of the teaching that “*Bhakti is the path for this age.*” He replied, insightfully, that it meant that all the Four *Yogas* are to be practiced with love: that selfless action should be practiced with love; that we should have love for Truth (perfect Knowledge); and that our meditation practice is to be undergone with love.

From Sri Ramakrishna's quote above, we can deduce that there are two aspects to the Personal God, and that they are both part of *Saguna Brahman*. “*Saguna*” means with qualities or attributes. It stands in contrast to *Nirguna*, without attributes and qualities. *Brahman* is the Sanskrit word for divine Reality. The Vedic rishis directly realized that *Brahman*, Pure Consciousness, is all that exists, appearing as the changing and the unchanging, in other words, the changing *Brahman* (*saguna*) appears as God, deities, celestials, ancestors, humans, animals, and the worlds. *Nirguna Brahman* is the unchanging (and therefore) all-pervading Consciousness within which the changing manifests.

The highest conception of God/Divine Reality that the human mind can conceive of is the Personal God, called *Ishvara/Ishvari* in Sanskrit. It is the one *Brahman* appearing in the context of the Universe. Thus, the Personal God, depending on the orientation of the seeker, can manifest with a name, form, and attributes, and also with only a name and attributes, free of any human-like or symbolic form. For example, one can conceive of God as infinite Power that creates, sustains, and destroys, or as the Light of infinite Wisdom showering knowledge, consciousness, and love upon all beings. Whether with form or without, as Sri Ramakrishna says above, one relates to the Personal God as a Person. Many are the prayers and devotional songs that call upon God as one's Father, Mother, Friend, Master, Beloved – one's All in All. He further advises spiritual aspirants to assume a definite relationship with God, as child, friend, servant, lover, or as the personification of Peace. Making one's thoughts and actions conform to this divine relationship, moment to moment in all the activities of life, makes the mind one-pointed and pure over time. Spiritual intensity grows and divine experiences of bliss and ecstasy occur.

Let's look again at the question of tasting or being sugar. Tasting sugar refers to realizing the Personal God with Attributes, with or without form. Being sugar refers to merging with *Nirguna Brahman*, the ultimate formless Reality transcendent of all qualities and attributes. *Nirguna Brahman* is described as Existence-Consciousness-Bliss Absolute. These three are not qualities or attributes of *Brahman*; they are the very nature of *Brahman*. The rishis declare, “*Brahman alone exists, and Thou art That.*” The sages explain how this individual “I” can be the all-encompassing “That” of *Brahman*: discriminate away the veils of individual limitations (body, mind, ego) that cover the embodied Soul/*Atman*, and also the Cosmic veils from the Personal God, and what is left is (*Nirguna*) *Brahman*, unconditioned Reality. This is also explained by the wave and ocean analogy. Take away the name and form of the wave, and the name and form of the ocean, and you are left with water, the essence of both.

It is important to avoid or dismiss the idea (fear) that arises, for some, that this ultimate Formless Reality, this merging the self into the great Self (*Brahman*) is like winking out of existence. Swami Vivekananda, speaking from direct experience of oneness, addressed this issue before a Western audience. “*The people in this country are so afraid of losing your in-di-vid-u-al-i-ty! Why, you are not individuals yet. When you realize your whole nature, you will attain your true*

individuality, not before.” (Complete Works, vol. 8 Sayings and Utterances) In his lectures in *Jnana Yoga*, he also explained, “People are frightened when they are told that they are Universal Being, everywhere present. Through everything you work, through every foot you move, through every lip you talk, through every heart you feel. People are frightened when they are told this. They will again and again ask you if they are not going to keep their individuality. What is individuality? I should like to see it. A baby has no moustache; when he grows to be a man, perhaps he has a moustache and beard. His individuality would be lost, if it were in the body.... We are not individuals yet. We are struggling towards individuality, and that is the Infinite, that is the real nature of man.” (*Jnana Yoga*, “The Real Nature of Man”)

“...there has even arisen a form of nondual fundamentalism that sneers at the idea of the Personal God. Further, there is a pervasive assumption that one can realize God without the personal guidance of an authentic teacher. Browsing the internet and sampling teachers without ever becoming an actual student is something to be avoided.”

We have now established the following points: 1) there are two primary spiritual ideals: the Personal God/*Saguna Brahman* (and maintaining a sense of separation); and merging the self into the Great Self (*Nirguna Brahman*); and 2) the Personal God has two aspects, with form and with qualified formlessness. It necessary to draw a distinction between these two kinds of formlessness for several reasons. The first is simply to clarify this so we do not mistake one for the other, i.e., be able to discriminate between conditional formlessness and absolute formlessness and not assume we have reached the latter when we have not. But more importantly, is to encourage those seekers uncomfortable with God with form, to consider the Personal God that is formless and make It one’s portal to ultimate Oneness – if that is their spiritual Ideal.

Jaya Vivekananda!

Swami Vivekananda, Sri Ramakrishna’s foremost disciple, came to the West in 1893 to share the spiritual wealth of India with the aim to get help for the impoverished masses of India. He was the first illumined being to teach Vedanta in the U.S. and Europe. There was not much help forthcoming for the latter aim, but what he soon realized was that the West desperately needed the universal teachings of Vedanta and Sri Ramakrishna to solve its intellectual, religious, and spiritual misconceptions which were causing interreligious fighting, ethnic hatred and domination, and a whole host of other issues. Given that Christianity was strongly embedded here, and, it was never the swami’s intention to create a sect around the personality of Sri Ramakrishna, he focused on the universal principles that could be applied by people in all walks of life, all temperaments, and religious preferences. The Vedanta he brought is encapsulated in his teachings of the Four Yogas.

The U.S. in Vivekananda’s time was in the throes of dogmatic religion that was lacking in direct experience; the burgeoning field of modern science; intellectual skepticism about religious doctrines and the Personal God; and dalliance with the occult through lower metaphysical pursuits, or faith healing. There was

a lot of experimentation going on alongside much misinformation and gullibility. It was a fortuitous time to bring a coherent philosophy that could explain the subtle workings of the relative world we experience with senses and mind, and turn our attention to the purely spiritual, the undivided Existence-Consciousness-Bliss that underlies and permeates phenomena while undergoing no change. He explained for us the philosophy of *Ishvara*, the Personal God and Its relation to the Absolute:

“Are there then two Gods – the “Not this, not this,” the *Sat-chit-ananda*, the Existence-Knowledge-Bliss of the philosopher, and this God of Love of the *Bhakta*? No, it is the same *Sat-chit-ananda* who is also the God of Love, the impersonal and personal in one. It has always to be understood

that the Personal God worshipped by the *Bhakta* is not separate or different from the *Brahman*. All is *Brahman*, the One without a second; only the *Brahman*, as unity or absolute, is too much of an abstraction to be loved and worshipped; so the *Bhakta* chooses the relative aspect of *Brahman*, that is, *Ishvara*, the Supreme Ruler.” - *Bhakti Yoga*

Notice, especially, that there is only one God/Reality expressing as personal and impersonal. In other talks he explains, that so long as we have the experience of “I” and “other,” *Brahman* manifests for us as the Personal God. When the individual soul merges in the Absolute, the Cosmic Soul (*Ishvara*) does likewise. They are co-existent. In this and other ways, Swami Vivekananda taught the oneness of Existence as the ultimate Reality.

Mishappen Views, Mistaken Thoughts

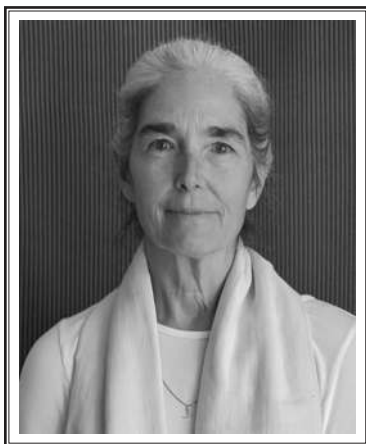
For various reasons in our history, many seekers over the decades since have sought to do away with the Personal God. Some mistook it to be an illusion or a crutch for the weak. Others have been disappointed or traumatized by their religious upbringing concerning a God with form and personality and did not want anything more to do with it. Still others have the idea that the Ultimate Reality is “better,” so one should strive for that directly, never considering their qualification to do so. As some of the nondual statements of Vedanta and other Eastern traditions got filtered through popular culture and teachers who were neither attained nor properly schooled in the philosophy of Advaita, nonduality or Absolute oneness, there has even arisen a form of nondual fundamentalism that sneers at the idea of the Personal God. Further, there is a pervasive assumption that one can realize God without the personal guidance of an authentic teacher. Browsing the internet and sampling teachers without ever becoming an actual student is something to be avoided. Thus, a sector of seekers in the West try to jump to the nondual heights, bypassing the personal God altogether. This has been likened to attempting to throw oneself bodily from the ground onto a rooftop, ignoring the safety and efficiency of stairs or ladders.

We are now led back to Sri Ramakrishna's and Sri Krishna's statement that the path of devotion to the Personal God is the easiest. Speaking to a worshipper of the formless God, Sri Ramakrishna said, "Dive deep; one does not get the precious gems by merely floating on the surface. God is without form, no doubt; but He also has form. By meditating on God with form one speedily acquires devotion; then one can meditate on the formless God. It is like throwing a letter away after learning its contents, and then setting out to follow its instructions." (*Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 353) From this teaching we learn that there is a danger in trying to focus one's mind on the formless Reality before it is charged up with devotion and inspiration leading to concentration. Without these, it is like trying to dive below the surface of water with arms and legs stretched outward. You have to pull them in, then tuck and dive. Worship and contemplation on the form and/or the divine attributes of the Personal God with love and devotion can swiftly bring the mind to a concentrated state conducive of nondual spiritual experience.

Without achieving one-pointed concentration, the untutored spiritual aspirant might only create a kind of dullness or scatteredness in the mind. In *Raja Yoga*, Swami Vivekananda comments on *Yoga Sutra 1:18*: "When persons without training and preparation try to make their minds vacant, they are likely to succeed only in covering themselves with *Tamas*, the material of ignorance, which makes the mind dull and stupid, and leads them to think that they are making a vacuum of the mind. To be able to really do that is to manifest the greatest strength, the highest control." Sincere yearning to have direct experience of the personal God leads to a deep sense of intimacy. This divine intimacy is the secret to higher and higher states of awareness. Real love and devotion concentrate the mind. They facilitate the awakening of Kundalini. As Sri Ramakrishna has informed us:

"The Kundalini is speedily awakened if one follows the path of bhakti. God cannot be seen unless She is awakened. If the devotee but once feels this attachment and ecstatic love for God, this mature devotion and longing, then he sees God in both His aspects – with form and without form." (*Gospel of Ramakrishna*, p. 362)

Annapurna Sarada lives in Waimea, Hawaii, where she continues her studies of Vedanta and Indian Religion and Philosophy with Babaji Bob Kindler, serves as the President and General Manager of SRV Associations, and offers live and on-line classes in the community, and for SRV Sangha.



**A Bengali Hymn to
Sri Ramakrishna**
by Swami Premeshananda

From the formless ocean of
Consciousness arose waves of Divine
Sport, blown by the wind of
tender mercy.

The one without beginning or end
assumed human form by his divine
power called Mahamaya.

What region is that which is beyond
the mind's reach, where even the sun
and the moon have no entrance.

Your smile, that pours forth rays of
love, shines there in that region, in
great splendor.

This body of love, that excels even
the formless Brahman, opens the eye
to such sweet brilliance.

Whoever sees you, even once, wants
to offer body, life, and mind at Your
Feet of Bliss.

Your advent on earth has now
cleared up so many age-old doubts.

Please accept whatever is mine – this
small offering – and let my life be
fully dedicated to your service.



LETTERS FROM A HOLY RASCAL

Jewish Teachings from My Zayde's Rebbe



“The essence of God is that there is no essence of God, for God is all and nothing, here, now and forever.”

– Reb Yerachmiel ben Yisrael

Preface

This is not my book. It belonged to my father's father – my *Zayde* – and before him, to his father, Aaron Hershel Shapiro. It was, I suspect, a prized possession for them both.

I know nothing of my great grandfather and little of my *Zayde*. To me, *Zayde* was always a bit alien, the Eastern European Jew who transplanted the Old World into the midst of the new. His language was Yiddish, mine was English; his world Orthodox, mine liberal. His passions were *shul* and study, mine were music and mysticism.

In my most cogent image of him, I see *Zayde*, dressed as always in black pants, dark suspenders, white shirt with bow tie, and black jacket, seated on the hard wooden bench built into a corner of his whitewashed apartment, reading from a worn and cracked black leather notebook. The pages of the book were yellow and tattered. Pieces of brittle paper often flaked off as he turned pages. *Zayde* would carefully gather these up and stuff them into the book close to the binding. Along with these flakes, a host of other paper scraps stuck out from the book at odd angles.

Zayde kept the book in his jacket pocket. I imagine it never left his side, and while he read it often, he shared it with no one. I always assumed it was an old book of Psalms, a common companion of pious Jews.

When *Zayde* died at the age of 99, I was studying at Hebrew Union college in Jerusalem. I did not fly home to attend the funeral and was not around when my father disposed of his father's things. The black notebook disappeared.

Two decades later, while rummaging through some family photographs stored in my parent's basement, I came across a shoe box filled with some of *Zayde's* things. In it was the black notebook. I recognized it instantly and was flooded with memories of *Zayde* pouring over its tightly inked pages. I took it upstairs, sat in the living room by the bay window, and opened the book. It was not a book of Psalms.

Zayde's book contained letters from his father's rebbe, Yerachmiel ben Yisrael. My great grandfather, Aaron Hershel, had been a *hasid* of Reb Yerachmiel somewhere in Russia. I know very little about my family's history. I know nothing about Reb Yerachmiel, nor can I find him listed in any study of Hasidism. All I know of him is these letters and the many sayings of his my great grandfather had scribbled on bits of paper and stuffed into this book.

The letters are addressed to Aaron Hershel. Reb Yerachmiel appears to have been responding to questions my great grandfather posed to him in writing. The issues raised are perennial: the

nature of God, the purpose of Creation; but the answers!

Reb Yerachmiel was a thinker outside the boundaries of normative Judaism. His Judaism must have been exceedingly radical for its day, yet today it speaks powerfully to those of us seeking a new understanding of Torah for a postmodern age. It is because of this that I have taken the time to translate these letters into English and publish them in book form.

I present reb Yerachmiel's letters without notes or comment and without my great grandfather's initial queries, which were, sadly never preserved. My aim is to reproduce the letters in a manner that allows the reader to encounter them just as my *Zayde* did. While I admit to seeking a contemporary English translation, I believe I have remained faithful to the original. All I have added are “chapter and verse” to Reb Yerachmiel's biblical and Talmudic references.

Zayde was forever reading and rereading these short letters from Reb Yerachmiel. I find myself doing the same. The more I read them, the more I find the gentle wisdom for which I and so many others hunger.

I ask of you that you read these letters at least twice: Once simply to become familiar with Reb Yerachmiel's style and vocabulary, then a second time to begin to allow his wisdom to find a place in your own.

Rami M. Shapiro

Hol haMoed Sukkot 5755

“There is no secret Truth, only truths we refuse to acknowledge. Truth undermines the self to which we so desperately cling. The Truth is not bidden from us. We are hiding from it.”

– Reb Yerachmiel ben Yisrael

12 Kislev 5636

My Dear Aaron Hershel,

Can it really be that you have moved so far away that we are reduced to speaking through paper and ink? It saddens me to think I may not see you again. Yet I am honored that you have chosen to continue your studies with me. It will be a challenge, not simply because of the medium, but because of the message. You ask difficult questions, seeking to open the secrets of the universe.

My teaching is not complex. Its difficulty lies only in its simplicity. There is nothing in what I will tell you that cannot be verified through your own experience. I will not ask for faith in my teaching nor trust in my person. On the contrary: I have faith in you that you will see what is so, and I trust you to judge my words against your experience.

Write when you can and ask of me what you will. I will respond as clearly as I know how. I look forward to this venture. It is my charge to “raise up many students” (Pirke Avot 1:1). There is

nothing a teacher desires more than a student hungry to learn. Let us “*taste and see that God is good*” (Psalms 34:8). Let us feast on wisdom and take care not to grow fat on illusion.

B'Shalom

19 Tevet 5636

My Dear Aaron Hershel,

You ask me of God: to define the Nameless, to place in your palm the ultimate secret. Do not imagine that this is hidden somewhere far from you. The ultimate secret is the most open one. Here it is: God is All.

I am tempted to stop with this – to close this letter, sign my name and leave you with this simple truth. Yet I fear you will not understand. Know from the first that all that follows is but an elaboration on the simple fact that God is All.

What does it mean to be All? God is Reality. God is the Source and Substance of all things and nothing. There is no thing or feeling or thought that is not God, even the idea that there is no God! For this is what it is to be All: God must embrace even God's own negation.

Listen again carefully: God is the Source and Substance of everything. There is nothing outside of God. Thus we read: “*I am God and there is none else [ain od]*” (Isaiah 45:5). Read not simply “none else,” but rather “nothing else” – not that there is no other god but God, but that there is nothing else but God.

Let me illustrate. It rained heavily during the night, and the street is thick with mud. I walked to the Bet Midrash (House of Learning) this morning and stopped to watch a group of little children playing with the mud. Oblivious to the damp, they made dozens of mud figures: houses, animals, towers. From their talk, it was clear that they imagined an identity for each. They gave the figures names and told their stories. For a while, the mud figures took on an independent existence. But they were all just mud. Mud was their source and mud was their substance. From the perspective of the children, their mud creations had separate selves. From the mud's point of view, it is clear such independence was an illusion – the creations were all just mud.

It is the same with us and God: “*Adonai alone is God in heaven above and on earth below, there is none else*” (Deuteronomy 4:39). There is none else, meaning there is nothing else in heaven or on earth but God.

Can this be? When I look at the world, I do not see God. I see trees of various kinds, people of all types, houses, fields, lakes, cows, horses, chickens, and on and on. In this I am like the children at play, seeing real figures and not simply mud.

Where in all this is God? The question itself is misleading. God is not “in” this; God is this.

Think carefully about what I have said. It is the key to all the secrets of life.

B'Shalom

17 Shevat 5636

My Dear Aaron Hershel,

You are quite right to raise the verse from Deuteronomy: “*And you shall know this day and reflect in your heart ... that He is God, there is no other*” (4:39). My teacher the Maggid of Mezhrich, may his

memory be for a blessing, taught me concerning this verse, and I will do my best to pass on his wisdom.

Torah cannot be saying that there is no other God, for it is superfluous to even state this. Instead, Torah is saying there is no other reality beside God. Both the physical and the spiritual are aspects of God, the one true Reality.

Some would argue that God is a divine spark inside each being. Others would argue that God is above and outside Creation. I teach neither position. God is not inside or outside; God is the very thing itself! And when there is no thing, but only empty space? God is that as well.

Picture a bowl in your mind. Define the bowl. Is it just the clay that forms its walls? Or is it the empty space that fills with soup? Without the space, the bowl is useless. Without the walls, the bowl is useless. So which is the bowl? The answer is both. To be a bowl, it must have both being (the walls) and emptiness (the space).

It is the same with God. For God to be God, for God to be All, God must manifest as both Being (*Yesh*) and Emptiness (*Ayin*).

Yesh is the manifestation of God that appears to us as separate entities – physical, spiritual and psychological. *Ayin* is the manifestation of God that reveals all separation to be illusory: everything is simply God in differing forms. God is All, there is nothing else (*ain od*).

This teaching is called *shlemut*, the completeness of God. To be *shlemut*, God must contain all possibilities and paradox. To be *shlemut*, God must transcend the notion of opposites and reveal everything as complementary.

God must be both *Yesh* and *Ayin*, Being and Emptiness, simultaneously. *Yesh* and *Ayin* both reside in and are expressions of God's wholeness (*shlemut*). These three terms are crucial to understanding God and almost everything else. It is vital to everything we will discuss that you understand these three words. They are the key to your spiritual awakening and tranquility. Learn them well.

B'Shalom

10 Adar 5636

My Dear Aaron Hershel,

Your last letter reminds me of something my teacher Rabbi Aaron, peace be upon him, once said: “*The entire essence of the divine intention is to reveal all of reality in all of its detail (Yesh) while at the same time revealing the oneness (Ayin) of which each detail is a part.*”

The “details” are the myriad, seemingly separate, beings we humans perceive when we look at the world from the perspective of self (the perspective of *Yesh*). This perspective, however, is not the only one. If we learn to look at the world from a position of selflessness (the perspective of *Ayin*), we see no separate beings, only a wondrous unity.

This can be likened to a person viewing the ocean first from the shore and then from beneath the ocean's surface. From the shore, the sea appears a vast field of waves, each separate and unique. From beneath the surface, the waves disappear into a sameness, a unity without diversity.

Which view is right? Both are right. The waves are no less real for the ocean's oneness. Nor is the oneness less real for the waves.

Separation and unity are both part of the greater reality that is the ocean.

Now, my dear Aaron Hershel, think in terms of Creation. On the surface, we observe and revel in the diversity of beings. We imagine that each is independent and separate from the rest. Beneath the surface, however, we see that there is a unity to all things. There are no separate selves, no independent beings. All Creation is an interconnected web of divine energy. From the surface perspective, we speak of *Yesh*, the world of separate beings. From the deeper perspective, we speak of *Ayin*, the world of unity that is empty of separate selves.

If you can begin to think in these two dimensions, you will be able to understand the secrets of the universe. The key is not to abandon one for the other, but to hold firmly to both.

B'Shalom

4 Nisan 5636

My Dear Aaron Hershel,

Be careful, my friend, for I sense a confusion arising when you think about *Yesh* and *Ayin*. Do not imagine that *Yesh* is the body and *Ayin* the soul. Do not equate *Yesh* with the physical and *Ayin* with the spiritual. And be careful not to mistake *Ayin* for God.

Yesh is the world of separateness. Whether we are speaking of bodies or souls, if we imagine them as separate independent beings, we are speaking in terms of *Yesh*. *Ayin* is that which is empty of self and separateness. From the perspective of *Ayin*, there is no separate self, only the oneness of God.

God is not only this oneness, however. God's *shlemut* (completeness) necessitates both unity and diversity. God is both *Yesh* and *Ayin* and that which embraces them both.

I have recently found a wonderful analogy to explain this teaching of *shlemut*, of God's completeness. It has to do with magnets. A magnet has two poles, one positive and one negative. A magnet cannot be otherwise and still be a magnet. The two poles go together, and only when they are together can there be a magnet. Even if you cut the magnet in half and in half again, it will always manifest these two poles. No matter how small you slice the magnet, its oneness necessitates the duality of positive and negative poles.

Now think of God. *Yesh* (Being) and *Ayin* (Emptiness) are the poles of God. God cannot be God without them, and they cannot be themselves without each other and God. This is what is meant by God's *shlemut*, God's wholeness. All things are contained in and necessitated by God. We will return to this truth over and over again, for it explains the deepest mysteries.

But enough for now. You ask difficult questions, made all the more difficult because the answer is so simple: God is All.

B'Shalom

17 Iyyar 5636

My Dear Aaron Hershel,

It seems my last letter did little to enlighten and much to confuse. That is not bad, for we learn by questioning. Let the answers I offer accompany you through life. In time they may make sense. Now on to your current query: Why did God create the world? What is the purpose of Creation?

Why did God create the world? Because it is God's nature to manifest *shlemut*, divine wholeness and infinite possibility. Infinite possibility must include *Yesh* and *Ayin*, Being and Emptiness. You see, I told you these words would return again and again. Everything can be understood through them.

Do not imagine God as a separate Being apart from Creation who decides to create. God does not decide as we decide. God's will is only to fulfill God's nature, and God's nature is to manifest *Yesh* and *Ayin*, Being and Emptiness. This is God's nature, this is what God is: the Source and Substance of All and Nothing.

Recall my analogy of the magnets. Remember how the two poles, positive and negative, go together and only when they are together can there be a magnet. Can we say the one pole precedes the other? Can we say the one pole creates the other?

No. Each pole arises with the other. Each pole depends upon the other. There is no first and second, there is no primacy of one over the other. There is only co-arising and interdependence. The magnet does not decide to make this happen; this is simply what the magnet is: two poles held in a greater unity. It is the nature of the magnet to hold these opposite poles in a greater unity; the magnet cannot be otherwise.

So, too, with God. *Yesh* (Being) and *Ayin* (Emptiness) are the poles of God. God cannot be God without them, they cannot be themselves without each other and God. Thus all arise together. This is what is meant by God's *shlemut*, God's wholeness. The *shlemut* of God necessitates both *Yesh* and *Ayin*. The manifestation of *Yesh* and *Ayin* is what it means to be God.

Thus those who tell you that our everyday world, the world we see from the perspective of *Yesh*, is illusory and without consequence are wrong. This everyday world is of supreme value, for it – no less than *Ayin* – is God.

Our world is fragile and impermanent, but the temporal and fleeting world of *Yesh* is needed to reveal the powerful and eternal presence of *Ayin*. And both are needed to express the completeness of God.

As always, it is a matter of wholeness: God's unity expressed through the polarity of *Yesh* and *Ayin*. Think well on this.

B'Shalom

5 Sivan 5636

My Dear Aaron Hershel,

You ask that I speak a bit more about the purpose of Creation. My teacher the sainted Aaron HaLevi, may his memory be a blessing, taught: "The main point of Creation is to reveal God's completeness from the opposite perspective. Unity in the midst of diversity."

Creation happens because God cannot be other than God. And to be God, God must manifest both the timeless and the temporal, both the one and the many, both emptiness and form, both *Ayin* and *Yesh*. The human mind recognizes things only in contrast to other things. We know "I" only in relation to "Thou," good only in relation to evil, right only in relation to left, up only in relation to down. The human mind rarely sees beyond these opposites to the Greater Unity that necessitates them. But the mind can awaken to Greater Unity, and in this lies the purpose of Creation and of humankind.

Rabbi Akiva taught: *“Humanity is loved, for God created us in the divine image, and loved all the more for being able to know this”* (Pirke Avot 3:18). Knowing ourselves to be images of God means knowing that we and everything else are *Ayin* in *Yesh*, infinite emptiness in finite form.

What, then, is the purpose of Creation? The purpose of Creation is to manifest God in time and space and to develop a mind capable of recognizing God in time and space. The purpose of humanity is to know that Creation is a manifestation of God.

Why did God create the heavens and the earth? Because it is God’s nature to do so. In a profound sense, there is no “why” or “purpose” to Creation. Creation is because God is.

Is there value in Creation? Of course. Creation is the way God is God in time and space. Creation is holy in and of itself, for in and of itself it is God. Thus we are commanded: *“Be holy for I, the Source and Substance of All Being and Emptiness, am Holy”* (Leviticus 19:2). Be holy, for your nature is holy.

Holiness is the natural state of reality. We are holy because God is holy, and we are God made manifest in time and space. The Torah’s command is to be true to our divine nature and to honor the divine nature of all other things.

I do not expect you to grasp all of this at once. All I ask, my dear Aaron Hershel, is that you look to see if my words are not so. Look carefully and see the holiness for yourself.

B’Shalom

9 Elul 5636

My Dear Aaron Hershel,

You ask me about the purpose of humanity. If we return to our fundamental principles of *Yesh* (Being), *Ayin* (Emptiness) and *shlemut* (divine wholeness), we can derive the true answer.

Torah tells us we are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). What this means is that we are the mirror image of God: where God begins with wholeness and manifests polarity, we being with polarity and rise to wholeness. We have been created to know the Greater Unity of God. We are not here to amass fortunes. We are not here to win wars or competitions. We are not here to earn rewards or make for ourselves a great name. We are here to know God. We are not an accident. We are a necessary extension of God’s Greater Wholeness. We are God’s vehicle for realizing the greater unity of *Yesh* and *Ayin*.

Compare two biblical teachings – the Tower of Babel and the Heavenly Ladder of our father Jacob. In the case of Babel, the people of Earth unite to build *“a tower with its top in the sky”* in order to *“make a name for ourselves”* (Genesis 11:4). God rejects their efforts.

In the case of the Ladder, Torah tells us Jacob had a dream; a ladder was set on the ground with its top in the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it (Genesis 28:12). God blesses Jacob.

Now note: both the Tower of Babel and the Ladder of Jacob reached up from the earth *“with its top in the sky.”* The wording is identical! So why the different reactions of God?

Earth is Torah’s metaphor for *Yesh* (Being), heaven the metaphor for *Ayin* (Emptiness). While both the Tower and the Ladder link earth and heaven, in Babel the people sought to

escape the one and rise to the other. In Jacob’s dream, the two were unified through the two-way flow of divine energy symbolized by the angels. God rejects anything short of completeness – the unification of earth and heaven, *Yesh* and *Ayin*, Being and Emptiness.

This same teaching is conveyed in the *Magen David* (Star of David). The lower triangle, its point aimed at heaven, is the world of *Yesh*. The upper triangle, its point aimed at earth, is the world of *Ayin*. In the center rests humanity. It is our task to realize and reveal the unity of earth and heaven, *Yesh* and *Ayin*.

B’Shalom

5 Tishri 5637

My Dear Aaron Hershel,

Lshana tovah, may the new year be one of blessing for you. You ask a good question: Given that the nature of humanity is to realize the unity of *Yesh* and *Ayin*, how does the individual human go about doing so? The answer is *avodah be-bittul*, the way of self-emptying.

When you wish to see into the emptiness of things and through this to the Greater Unity of God, find a quiet place to sit, loosen your clothing, get into a comfortable posture, your back straight and relaxed. Place your hands palms up on your lap, the left on top of the right to symbolize the unity of Heaven and Earth. Your thumbs should touch lightly over the palms to symbolize the unity of *Yesh* and *Ayin*, Being and Emptiness. For a moment, rock gently forward and back and side to side to settle into a comfortable position. Do not lean to one side or the other, or forward or back, but return to a straight posture with your ears and shoulders, nose and navel aligned one to the other, respectively. Rest your tongue lightly on the roof of your mouth, relax your jaw, and let your gaze fall to the floor about three feet in front of you. Keep the eyes partially open so as not to fall asleep. While Jacob dreamed of Unity, we wish to realize it while awake. Breathe naturally; your mind focused on the breath; and watch.

Watch what? You will know as soon as you begin, for thousands of thoughts and feelings will flood your conscious mind. Distraction by the dozens will seek to draw your attention away from your breath. Just observe them without reaction. Neither argue with them nor agree with them. Just watch them come and watch them go, and all the while attend to the natural rhythm of your breath moving in and out.

Breath and attention to breath are keys to self-emptying. Attending to the breath will carry you beyond the distractions of the mind and return you to the Greater Unity of God from which you arise and in which you dwell. Just as God breathed life into Adam (Genesis 2:7), so God breathes into each one of us at this and every moment. Follow the breath back to God.

Practice this twice each day for twenty minutes, and allow yourself to know the Greater Unity of *Yesh* and *Ayin*. Do not imagine it to be easy and do it diligently.

B’Shalom

29 Tishri 5637

My Dear Aaron Hershel,

You suggest that I did not go far enough in my last letter. You

want to know how the practice of self-emptying works. If the answer helps you to stay with the practice, good. But if it distracts you from it, do not worry about the how and stay with the practice. The wisdom you seek will not come from abstract knowing, but only from direct experience. Nevertheless, here is how it works.

By following the breath, we quiet the mind. Our sense of separateness and independent being comes from the mind's incessant chatter. When we just sit, watch and breathe, when we refuse to follow this or that thought or feeling, and simply allow them to rise and fall of their own accord, the mind slowly ceases its chattering. A deep quiet emerges. Thought ceases.

When thought ceases, the self fades. This is what the Psalmist meant when he sang, "*Kalta nafshi*" [my soul is obliterated] (Psalm 84:30). The "I" - *ani* - becomes "Empty" - *ayin* [in Hebrew the two words are spelled with the same three letters: *aleph, nun, yod*] This is what our sages call *bittul she-me'ever le-ta'am va-daat*, annihilation beyond reason and knowledge, the end of thought.

Do not imagine, however, that the end of thought is the end of the matter. The dissolution of self is not yet the fullness of God. *Avodah be-bittul*, the meditative emptying of *Yesh* into *Ayin*, finds its completion in *tikkun ha-olam*, repairing the world of *Yesh* with love and justice. Empty of ego, we experience a selfless love for all things as an extension of God. Overwhelmed with love, we naturally return to the world of *Yesh* where love can be articulated. We feel commanded to bring our experience of unity, love and compassion to bear in the world of *Yesh*, the world of seemingly disparate beings.

The emptying of self and the repairing of the world with love are two sides of the same spiritual practice. We are not seeking to escape the world, we are seeking to transform it. We do this by recognizing that we are God's vehicle for revealing holiness and acting accordingly.

B'Shalom

4 Tevet 5637

My Dear Aaron Hershel,

Your last letter spoke eloquently of your excitement over discovering the unity of *bittul* and *tikkun*, emptying the self and repairing the world, and I shall do my best to explore this with you further.

Following the model of the angels ascending and descending Jacob's Ladder, the task of each human being is to learn *ratso va-shov*, ascent and descent. *Ratso*, ascent, means to perceive the world from the emptiness of *Ayin*. *Shov*, descent, means to perceive the world from the fullness of *Yesh*, separate being. The first is achieved through the practice of *avodah be-bittul*, the second through the practice of *tikkun ha-olam*.

While I speak of these as two separate practices, they are really one. The emptying of our separate self awakens us to the unity of all in God. This sense of unity is experienced as a deep love for all creation and a sense of being commanded (*mitzaveh*) to reveal God in the world by seeing that the world is shaped by love and justice.

Judaism is not simply the way of *bittul*. It is also the way of *tikkun*. This is the meaning behind God's command: "*Be holy because I, Adonai, am holy*" (Leviticus 19:2). We are to be in our way what God is in God's way. How? The prophet Micah reveals this

to us: "*Do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God*" (Micah 6:8).

To do justly, one must know and honor the diversity of Creation. Justice is the establishment of fair and equitable means of interaction between beings. Justice is the right running of the world of *Yesh*. To do justly, we must learn to respect and honor the seemingly separate entities that comprise the world of *Yesh*, both human and otherwise.

To love mercy is to be compelled by compassion. Compassion arises from a sense of shared suffering. Shared suffering arises from our awakening to the oneness that underlies our diversity.

To walk humbly is to do what needs to be done.

The more empty of self we become, the more filled with purpose we become.

Every moment addresses us with an opportunity to hallow life.

If we are empty enough to hear the address, we are powerful enough to accomplish the task.

In this way, *bittul* (self-emptying) becomes *tikkun* (world repair).

In this way we each become holy.

A difficult challenge to be sure. But one worthy of your highest efforts.

B'Shalom

14 Shevat 5637

My Dear Aaron Hershel,

I must keep this letter short for I am feeling somewhat tired of late. While our sages tell us that eighty is the age of strength (Pirke Avot 5:25), I am finding it a time of growing weakness.

You ask me about *mitzvot* (commandments). I have said that *avodah be-bittul*, self-emptying, leads to *tikkun ha-olam*, world repair. Together these fulfill God's command: "*Be Holy*" (Leviticus 19:2)

To be holy is to meet the world in a manner that builds bridges between seemingly disparate and all too often desperate beings. How? The *mitzvot* are our guide.

When we see the Unity of Being and Emptiness through the self-emptying of *avodah be-bittul*, an awareness arises with regard to our meeting the world. We know what is right in so powerful a way that we feel commanded to do it. There is no real choice. The knowing is too strong. All *mitzvot* flow from this knowing. For example:

Tza'ar ba'alei khayyim - causing no unnecessary suffering to animals

Bal tashkhit - protecting nature from wanton destruction;

Gemilut khasadim - acting with loving kindness;

Bikur kholim - visiting the sick;

Hakhnasat orkhim - offering hospitality to friends and strangers;

Tzedek and tzedakah - guiding all our acts with justice and generosity.

I realize that many Jews today are abandoning our traditions. While this pains me, what hurts even more is their abandonment of the challenge to be holy. One cannot be holy without *mitzvot*, without concrete acts of love and justice. Holiness is not simply an attitude toward life, but the very way in which we engage life.

I do not know what will happen to you, Aaron Hershel. I do not know and will not judge the compromises you may make with the world. But I would ask this of you: Before you allow a *mitzvah* to perish, investigate the principle of holiness it embodies and find another way, a *mitzvah* of your own creation, through which you will continue to live that principle. I will not judge your *mitzvot*, but I will forever challenge you to be holy.

Live with attention, cultivate compassion, establish justice, and you will realize the purpose for which you were created.

B'Shalom

4 Adar 5637

My Dear Aaron Hershel,

It is good that you continue your quest for knowledge. You are wondering about the nature of the human self and would like to explore this. Wonderful!

Torah tells us clearly that we are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), the One beyond Being and Emptiness that is the Source and Substance of both. Thus we, too, must contain both *Yesh* and *Ayin*. And so we do. In human beings, *Yesh* and *Ayin* appear as *Yetzer ha-Rah* and *Yetzer ha-Tov*, respectively.

Yetzer ha-Tov is the human capacity to bridge differences, to build community, to effect harmony. *Yetzer ha-Rah* sees differences where *Yetzer ha-Tov* sees sameness. *Yetzer ha-Rah* sees every living thing as an entity unto itself, as unique and apart from the whole. *Yetzer ha-Tov* sees them all as aspects of God. Both *Yetzer Tov* and *Yetzer Rah* are necessary to us.

A healthy person needs both *Yetzer ha-Rah* with its respect for individuality and *Yetzer ha-Tov* with its insight into interdependence and harmony.

Thus our sages taught that without *Yetzer ha-Rah*, a person would not marry or build a home or raise a family, for these rely on our ability to differentiate and celebrate diversity (Genesis Rabbah 9:7). Without *Yetzer ha-Tov*, a person would be unable to feel compassion and act for the greater good.

An imbalance of *Yetzer ha-Rah* and *Yetzer ha-Tov* brings about unnecessary evil, as the imbalanced self seeks to impose its will upon others. This is almost always a violent imposition. When *Yetzer ha-Rah* is dominant, the violence is done in the name of self-preservation, nationalism, racial purity. When the *Yetzer ha-Tov* is dominant, the violence is done in the name of salvation. In either case, it is the self rationalizing its own greed.

The antidote to greed, evil, and violence? *Bittul* and *tikkun*. Do not forsake these.

B'Shalom

28 Nisan 5637

My Dear Aaron Hershel,

I introduced the topic of evil and now you ask me to clarify. The Torah is clear: "I am the Source and Substance of Reality, there is nothing else. I form light and create darkness, I make peace and create evil. I, the Source and Substance of All do all this." (Isaiah 45:6-7).

Evil is not the opposite of God, evil is a part of God. What, then, is its purpose? It is not a matter of purpose, it is a matter of the unconditional nature of God's *shlemut*, God's completeness. If God is whole, God must contain all possibilities. Good and evil

are but two of the infinite possibilities of God.

Now let us go a bit deeper, for while the potential for evil is of God and therefore necessary to the divine *shlemut*, the various manifestations of evil are not always necessary.

A "necessary evil" arises from the fleeting and transient nature of our everyday world of separate being. Suffering, old age, death, accident, natural disaster, the pain that arises from the passing of time and circumstance – these we call "evil." We call them evil because they thwart our desires and, in the case of death, shatter the facade of our own permanence. In fact, most of what we call evil is simply the nature of things in time and space. For all the pain this causes, it is not willful evil.

Willful evil is unnecessary evil. Unnecessary evil is the evil we humans do when we seek to impose our will on others. Unnecessary evil happens when we act in ways that disrupt unity, foster discord and promote divisions, hatred and fear.

What is the antidote to such evil? *Bittul* and *tikkun*. Unless and until the self is emptied before the Greater Unity of God, there is no true compassion, justice or love. Unless one acts in this world with justice, mercy and humility, there is no hope for self-emptying.

To combat unnecessary evil, we must teach *bittul* and the *tikkun* it engenders.

I realize that this answer may not satisfy. I am not sure there is one that does. Yet this answer is both practical and just. Remember, emptying the self and repairing the world are two sides of the same practice. Practice well.

B'Shalom

11 Tishri 5638

My Dear Aaron Hershel,

L'shana tovah, my friend. May this year be a sweet and constructive one for you. You are right to ask after my health. As you have heard, I am not well, but no matter. Your query about the purpose of Judaism is dear to my heart, and I will answer it as best I can.

The purpose of Judaism is not other than the purpose of any authentic religion: the unification of *Yesh* and *Ayin*, Being and Emptiness, in the awakened consciousness of humankind. Content, not intent, is the basis for distinguishing among authentic religions. Judaism's content rests upon three pillars: prayer, study, and *mitzvot* (holy deeds).

The deepest prayer is one in which the separate self melts away: "*Kalta nafshi (my soul is obliterated)*," sang King David in just such a state (Psalm 84:30). How is this done? Through the practice of *avodah be-bittul* (self-emptying). To this I would add the twice-daily chanting of the *Shema*: "*Hear, O Israel, the Source and Substance of all Being and Emptiness is our God, Source and Substance are One*" (Deuteronomy 6:4).

How should the *Shema* be chanted? I heard from my teacher, of blessed memory, that one should pronounce the word *echad* (one) as if there were nothing in the entire world except God, holding the sound of the word until there is no more breath left to sustain it. The main intent of the *Shema* is to empty us of every illusion of separateness so that we sense that no place is devoid of God and no thing is other than God (*ain od*). Expelling the breath fully

empties us of self and opens us to God.

Study of Torah is the second pillar of Judaism. Our sainted teacher, Reb Shneur Zalman, tells us: “*This is the basis of the entire Torah: that there be the annihilation of being into emptiness*” (*Torah Or*). When we study Torah, God’s unity is revealed in and through everyday reality.

To engage in *mitzvot*, the third pillar of Judaism, is to bring the knowledge of God’s Greater Unity to bear on the world of separateness. *Mitzvot* are behaviors that embody holiness. When we engage in these behaviors, we foster holiness – the just and compassionate caring for all life. Tradition lists 613 *mitzvot*, Micah offers three: do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly. Draw from the former as you work to achieve the latter.

There is so much more to say, but I have not the strength to say it. Be well.

B’Shalom

15 Kislev 5638

My Dear Son,

May I call you son? Our sages say that a parent is one who raises a child, not simply creates one. Have I had the honor of raising you a bit? I allow myself the conceit of thinking so.

It has been quite some time since I last wrote. Your letters have arrived and were read to me, for my eyes grow dim. I was too weak to think clearly and too tired to respond. This letter is being written for me.

My dear Aaron Hershel, I am dying. There is no easy way to say this. By the time you read this, I suspect I will be dead. I am ready to die. All my adult life I have attempted to live with attention to the moment and to respond with my whole self to whatever life presents. Only now will I be able to give my self completely.

Death is the ultimate self-emptying, and to one who practices *avodah be-bittul*, death is not a stranger to be feared, but a friend to be embraced. So much depends upon your practice of *avodah be-bittul*, Aaron Hershel. Make every moment a moment of *bittul*, emptying yourself to make room for others. Do not give it up.

I am tired and I ask for your forgiveness if I do not answer the many questions you posed in your last letters. I write only to say good-bye and to thank you for your love. There is nothing a rabbi cherishes more than a student who trusts enough to question.

Listen, my son, death is real in this world. Do not deny it. Do not cover it over with dreams of *Gan Eden* (afterlife) or *gilgul* (reincarnation). All this is a denial of death’s simple reality: being is temporary, and its passing is often tragic. But *Yesh* is not the whole of reality.

When we look at the world from the perspective of *Yesh*, we see birth and we see death. But when we look at the world from the perspective of *Ayin*, there is no birth and no death. *Yesh* and *Ayin*, Being and Emptiness, are poles of God’s Greater Unity. Only God is real, for only God is whole and complete: Yes, Reb Yerachmiel ben Yisrael is gone, but the One who wore his face these many years is everpresent. And that One wears your face, dear friend, as well. What we truly are is God manifest in time (*Yesh*) and eternity (*Ayin*). Know this, live well, and die easy.

You have been a blessing to me beyond what words can convey. Remember, love is stronger than death (Song of Songs 8:6).

Shortly, I will be no more. Let our love grow ever stronger.

B’Shalom

Dear Reader,

This book is a fictional collection of letters from “Reb Yerachmiel ben Ysrael” to my great grandfather, Aaron Hershel. The *rebbe* is a composite of several genuine Hasidic *rebbe*s, and my *Zayde* (great grandfather), was quite real.

My *Zayde* was immersed in traditional Judaism. As a young man he was a “circuit *rabbi*” bringing *Yiddishkeit* to isolated Jewish communities in small New England towns. What he taught is not unlike what you will find in these letters. He did, as this book says, sit in the corner of his home poring over a small black notebook which never left his side. Although that book was never found, I imagined what it contained, and created these letters as a vehicle for passing on the teachings my *Zayde* had learned.

Are these teachings made up? No. The teachings found in this book go back hundreds of years and are foundational to much of Hasidic philosophy. Is the meditation practice mentioned in the book authentic? Yes. It is called *avodah be-bittul* (the annihilation of all separate existence). The fact that these teachings and practices have parallels in other religious systems points to our common humanity and the universality of spiritual insight and practice.

B’Shalom,

Rabbi Rami M. Shapiro



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CHINESE BUDDHISM & ULTIMATE REALITY

Non-duality from Esoteric Chan/Zen Buddhism

The universal method common to all great religious traditions consists of deep and sincere inquiry from a qualified seeker, and some apt and conclusive answers coming from an authentic instructor – as is instanced in this engaging dialogue taking place in the sacred atmosphere of refined and focused Chinese Chan-Zen Buddhism.

Question: Today's topic is on Chinese 禪 Chan/Zen Buddhism. Could you please tell us about the background of the Chinese Chan 禪 Buddhism you practiced?

Answer: In Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, Chan 禪 or Chinese Zen Buddhism is one of the eight major schools of Chinese Buddhism. The first four schools are doctrine focused, namely: 慈恩宗 "Ci'en zong," 三論宗 "Sanlun zong," 天台宗 "Tiantai zong," and 華嚴宗 "Huayan zong." The other four Chinese Buddhist schools are more pragmatic. These are 律宗 "Lu zong" (Buddhist rules for monks), 禪宗 "Chan zong" (Zen in Japan), 淨土宗 "Jingtu zong" (Pure Land Buddhism), and 密宗 "Mi zong" (Shingon in Japan). The word 宗 "zong" means school or sect. Within Chan Buddhism, there are different sorts of meditation practices to realize Ultimate Reality. This chapter begins with early Chan Buddhism from the Chinese Tang dynasty (c. 600-900). Especially the Chan from Hui Neng (638-713), his southern Chan style of sudden awakening. Dunhuang's Tibetan Zen/Chan is also part of early Chan Buddhism. Hui Neng's teachings and his 'Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch' is called "Ancestral Chan," or "Zu Shi Chan" 祖師禪.

Question: Are there more scriptures and Buddhist Sutras in Chan Buddhism?

Answer: There are many scriptures in Chan Buddhism. The most important Sutras are: 金剛經 The Diamond Sutra, 圓覺經 The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment, 楞嚴經 The Surangama Sutra, 六祖壇經 The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch (in short, The Platform Sutra), 妙法蓮華經 The Lotus Sutra, 楞伽經 The Lankavatara Sutra, and 大般涅槃經 The Mahaparinirvana Sutra. The Platform Sutra is summarizing and recapitulatory here because the Sutra cites and explains the aforementioned Buddhist scriptures and some other Buddhist scriptures, for example, The Diamond Sutra, The Lankavatara-sutra, The Mahaparinirvana Sutra, The Mahaprajñāparamita Sutra, The Brahmajala Sutra, The Vimalakirti Sutra, The Lotus Sutra, The Surangama Sutra, and The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana.

Question: This is indeed a lot of scriptures. So, what are the most important aspects of Chinese Chan Buddhism?

Answer: 見性成佛 or "jian xing cheng fo" is the first important aspect. Directly translated meaning: to see one's nature and become a Buddha. This refers to seeing one's True Nature in Ultimate Reality. I want to emphasize the word "to see" here. Realizing Ultimate Reality, or experiencing Buddha Nature, is about seeing one's True Nature, which is Non-Dual.

The second aspect is called 教外別傳 or "jiao wai bie chuan,"

meaning a special transmission outside the scriptures. The third aspect is 不立文字 or "bu li wenzi," meaning to not establish upon words and letters. The fourth aspect is 直指人心 or "zhi zhi renxin," this means to directly point to the human heart-mind.

Question: The third aspect I find interesting. How can we obtain wisdom and knowledge about Buddha Nature without relying on words for study and reading?

Answer: In Chan Buddhism, written words and the use of the intellect are inferior to practical Buddhist experience. Chan Buddhism does not believe in dispelling ignorance by obtaining as much knowledge as possible to be the ultimate way to seeing Buddha Nature. The wise do not enter into the mud of conceptual thinking. Contrarily, the more knowledge we obtain, and simultaneously cling on to the written word to be the truth, the bigger the intellectual pride becomes. Also, the mind will think too much in terms of duality, meaning over-analysis and attachment to intellectual knowledge. This is exactly the obstacle to seeing one's Buddha Nature. However, as we have seen, written words in the various Chan Buddhist scriptures are not abandoned in the beginning. Before actual Chan meditation practice, the novice needs an outline and intellectual foundation first. Learning to eventually unlearn is the motto here. Here, and after, the Chan practice is about another fifth important aspect, called no-mind 無念 'wunian', or a better translation would be a non-thinking mind.

Question: Could you please elaborate on the aspect of the non-thinking mind?

Answer: Buddha Nature is covered by obscurations of the mind. There are ways of focusing/concentrating the mind, stilling/quieting the mind, cleaning/purifying the mind, and emptying the mind. The Chan method is simple and yet profound, but difficult to perform. The simplicity is that you have to simultaneously achieve both non-thinking mind, and a mind of awareness. The profundity is partly due to clearing all the conceptual, dualistic, and fantasized/fabricated thoughts. Then, the Non-dual Light of the Buddha Nature may become visible. Another significant part regarding Witnessing Non-duality in Ultimate Reality, is having an abundance of good merit/deeds done in this life and past lives. For the novice, a practical way to concentrate on the task at hand is to perform various Chan/Zen arts related to Buddhism. The difficulty is that we all know how hard it is to stop the mind from thinking.

Question: Then, when we are asleep without dreaming we stop thinking. Is this condition of sleep the same as Buddha Nature?

Answer: When we are in the state of deep sleep without dreaming, the mind is not thinking and thoughts are absent. For

ordinary people (not Buddhist Yogis who have mastered Dream Yoga), this state of being is a sort of voidness; voidness because you, the sleeper, are unconscious. However, in Chan Buddhism, this is not the same as seeing Buddha Nature. To see the Buddha Nature, you, as the subject, see the non-dual Light of the Buddha Nature (object). So, our mind is absent of thoughts, and at the same time you, the viewer/witness/seer, are conscious and in the present moment.

Question: Then, what about people with full concentration, and being in the moment of what they are doing where the time goes unnoticed. Do these people see Buddha Nature?

Answer: First, it depends on the person's amount of good merit and past good actions and deeds. This will provide life with fewer obstacles to seeing Buddha Nature. This is why, especially in Mahayana Buddhism, a heart of compassion to help others is so important. Doing good deeds of merit removes the obscurations to seeing Buddha Nature. Second, becoming a vegetarian may help for a more tranquil body and mind. With a purer body the mind will be clearer, and it will be easier to settle into meditative stillness. Third, novice Buddhist practitioners should begin with the recitation of Mahayana Buddhist Dharani/Sutras, the Heart Sutra for example. Prayers and small incense offerings should be done daily to start a mind-connection with Mahayana Buddhism and the Buddha. Fourth, the practice of concentration through Chan/Zen Buddhist arts (Buddhist-related music, painting, poetry, calligraphy, and physical exercises) is good. The Buddhist arts practice is a stepping stone towards a higher concentrated mind.

In an advanced stage adepts perform Buddhist art with utmost precision and focus. The problem, however, is that the mind is still at work because it has to execute the task at hand. So, a non-thinking mind should be at rest, absent of any type of turbulent thoughts, conscious of being in the moment, and holding as few desires as possible. At this stage, the novice is ready for seated meditation, because by doing nothing the mind can be at rest.

Question: Could you please explain a bit more about seated meditation?

Answer: To let the mind come to rest, the body should be inactive in a comfortable posture for prolonged sitting. Seated meditation in half lotus or full lotus is preferred, but crossed legs is also acceptable. Seated meditation practice while counting the breath, following the breath, relaxing the body, sinking the Qi 氣, filling the body with energy, opening the pores of the body, absorbing cosmic energy, opening various meridians, – these are some examples of various practices with differing degree of difficulty to the people in this day and age. Some of these seated meditations in the form of “jingzuo” 靜坐 are in actuality related to Daoism. Regardless, I want to emphasize an important point from personal experience. That is, to see Buddha Nature one does not need Qigong 氣功 – as in filling the three “dantians” 丹田.

Another point I would like to mention is the possible danger of mental hallucinations/afflictions when sitting for too long. The latter, the avoidance of problems around prolonged seated meditation, is described in the Surangama Sutra. These types of Chan meditation, and meditations where the mind (intent/will) uses the method of “guan” 觀 (to watch and observe during seated meditation) are called 如來禪 “ru lai Chan.” Instead, Huineng's

Chan is characterized by not using “guan” 觀 at all. A safer and more direct way towards the Ultimate Truth is utilized. It does not complicate matters unnecessarily. The latter is called “zu shi Chan” 祖師禪, translated as ancestral Chan or early Chan.

Question: If ancestral Chan Buddhist meditation does not watch/observe the breath nor the mind as the ultimate method, then how should we practice this?

Answer: From personal experience, the secret to success in Chan is as follows. The first point, when the mind is open, it is similar to the mind of a child. There is no conceptualization (“wuxin”, 無心); i.e., freedom from conceptual impositions, no duality, no judgment of right nor wrong, no acceptance nor aversion, and also, no past or future, but simply being in the present moment. Do not confuse mere enjoyment of the senses with being in the present moment. One should also have the aforementioned qualities.

This is somewhat close to the naivety of a child, and yet not entirely the case. There is also the quality of “non-stickiness” of the mind, called non-abiding (“wuzhu”, 無住). In other words, the wise do not hang onto anything or any place. The second point, building further on the first point here, is open awareness. I think open awareness is much more important than trying to intentionally stop the upcoming thoughts. When there is open awareness, eventually, in a natural way, upcoming thoughts will diminish. Until the mind becomes “open and clear as the sky.” So, this is a much more direct, wise, safer, and easier way to accomplish the goal. Open awareness truly works, and is also the missing link to successful Chan meditation.

Question: This open awareness method sounds familiar to the Tibetan Buddhist way of meditation. How can this still be called Chinese Chan Buddhism?

Answer: The Chinese Chan/Zen and Tibetan Great Perfection Buddhist practices are often seen as distinct vehicles nowadays. The early formative years of Tibetan Buddhism and early Chan according to the Dunhuang manuscripts, actually show the divide was not always this distinctive. I recommend you investigate further about Tibetan Zen. For instance, I observed many Chinese and Taiwanese monks practice traditional Chan Buddhism first, and in a later stage then practice Great Perfection (大圓滿 “da yuan man”) techniques. Thus, in real-life practice, this combination proves to be fruitful. The result is to experience Buddha Nature and witness the Non-dual Light of Ultimate Reality.

I want to emphasize: Non-duality is absent of good and bad, and beyond virtue and vice. But this does not mean people can act immorally!

Question: Are there more methods to practice Chan Buddhism effectively?

Answer: When you read the story of Huineng's youth, you will discover Huineng's enlightenment occurred after hearing the Diamond Sutra. This detail is very crucial. The aforementioned aspects of open awareness and a non-thinking mind at ease could also be effectively implemented when hearing Buddhist discourses on Sutras. Some people may think Huineng's story is fictional. However, in reality, combining the aforementioned Chan aspects and hearing attentively with a non-judgmental attitude is good; I

confirm this method to be authentic. For people not artistically inclined, they should hear as many Mahayana Buddhist Sutras as possible.

Question: Why do Chinese Chan monks who practiced decades of seated Chan meditation still not see Buddha Nature?

Answer: The outcome is most of the time not under our conscious control. It should occur spontaneously and in a natural way. While the applied method is nonforceful, it is not wise to force the outcome. The harder we try the more we fail. So, do not think of the result during your practices. Then, Buddha Nature or the Non-dual Light, will appear in front of our eyes. It could also occur when we are fully relaxed, outside of formal seated meditation when the mind is completely at ease in open awareness. This is the true meaning of “Sudden Enlightenment” or “*dunwu*” 頓悟. So, the outcome can take place anywhere and at any time in the waking state.

Question: You speak about enlightenment here. Does this mean if one sees Buddha Nature (Non-duality in Ultimate Reality), one has become a Buddha, i.e. the Awakened One or the Enlightened One?

Answer: Partly correct. The Enlightened One has experienced Non-duality in Ultimate Reality, meaning this realized being is Awakened indeed. However, as time goes by after the Non-dual Awakening, we proceed with Pure Land Buddhist mantra recitation. For example, one will discover the Ultimate Reality has another aspect different from Non-duality as well. Therefore, Awakening from Non-duality alone is not complete Buddhahood.

In Chinese Chan Buddhism, if one has experienced Non-duality and seen the Buddha Nature or Pure Being itself, but the person is still embodied, then suffering is still not completely eradicated. Non-duality, also called the Secret of Mind (Intent) 意密 “*yi mi*,” is one of three aspects of Ultimate Reality/Truth – three esoteric Chinese Buddhist Secrets or 三密 “*san mi*.”

This second aspect of Ultimate Truth could be realized through esoteric Chinese Buddhist Pure Land devotional practice. The practice relies completely upon the external (outside oneself) saving power and mercy of the Buddha Amitabha, or “*A mi tuo fo*” 阿彌陀佛 in Chinese. The esoteric Chinese Buddhist Secret of Mantra (Speech) 口密 “*kou mi*,” may be elaborated in the next article.

Question: What transformation does the person undergo after realizing Non-duality?

Answer: After the glimpse of Non-duality, mindfulness, Pure Awareness and Great Compassion (*Bodhicitta*) arise naturally. The vast immenseness and indescribability of Non-duality will humble the person. The person will feel small compared to the Universe, and he will automatically become Silent. “Silent,” here, means the person is struck by the indefinable nature of Non-duality Itself, where words and intellectual thinking become limited and fail to explain Non-duality. The Awakened being will simply not try to explain nor analyze Non-duality, because it is impossible. The inevitable consequence of the Awakened person knowing Non-duality while still embodied on earth in the world of duality, is that the Awakened person may probably become perplexed because of knowing the existence of Non-duality. It may sound contradictory that an Awakened One having realized Non-duality will become

confused, but this confusion is almost unavoidable – because human beings are so used to duality in everyday life growing up on earth. Duality seems programmed into our brains and habits. The solution is to keep the duality of this world separate from the Non-dual Reality. This avoids ignorant and immoral behavior.

Question: Could you please explain more about mindfulness and Pure Awareness?

Answer: Alternatively, and in general, people need a gradual approach from mindfulness towards Pure Awareness (Pure Consciousness). I think people should first have self-reflection of their behavior, daily actions, and thoughts. Moral self-reflection is fundamentally important. Other than through Buddhist arts and daily activities, mindfulness is practiced mainly through seated meditation and counting/following the breath, though the risk is, one may fall into a sort of present moment enjoyment only, or a dull blankness. Especially, practitioners who don’t have true faith in the Buddhist path, or do not desire nor believe in Buddhist Liberation as a way to escape the cyclical existence of rebirth, will be at risk. Mindfulness then becomes diluted, altered, and limited, nothing more than an add-on tool for psychology or stress-relief. This is not the ultimate goal of Mahayana Buddhist meditation. The aspiration for doing Buddhist meditation is to know Ultimate Reality and Buddha Nature.

Further, a higher stage of mindfulness would be mindfulness of the mind, meaning watching/observing the thoughts come up and disappear/dissolve. This gives a clear perception of thoughts. This nature of mind practice could also eventually lead to open awareness.

Then, even a higher stage would be, “Who is the one watching the mind’s thoughts?” This will lead to the “I” of Pure Awareness, and thus to Pure Consciousness. An outcome of this latter stage is that one should be able to “zoom out” from all external phenomena appearing in the seer who simply watches both the mind and the changing phenomena, but at the same is fully detached from them. After one achieves and retains this quality, Buddhist Dream Yoga becomes fairly easy and natural. However, do not attach to the skill of dream yoga, i.e. trying to achieve Buddhist Yoga or Union with The Primordial Buddha Vairocana in the conscious dream. While conscious dreams can be pleasant and fantastic as a practice for self-awareness, dreams are always illusory. So, I do not recommend dream yoga as the ultimate way for Buddhist Yoga/Union. More teachings about esoteric Buddhist Yoga/Union may be elaborated in the third and final article in future. All this is related to the Mantrayana Tantric esoteric Buddhist school of Chinese Zhenyan/Shingon Buddhism.

Question: Are babies or young children born with the Dharma Body?

Answer: In reality, all babies are born “pure” in the sense of Non-duality, where they are non-analytical, non-judgmental, non-discriminative, non-preferential, and living totally in the present moment. I have never seen a newborn baby that is wicked or vile. The innate pureness was once existent in every one of us, but later this pureness got “covered” when the individual started to grow up. In other words, this is a kind of evidence; everybody is born with the same “pureness.” The concept of rediscovering or unveiling our True Nature, recovering what we once were, totally makes

sense to me. However, babies and very young children are unaware/unknowing of Non-duality, of Ultimate Reality. So the naïve pureness of babies/children differs from an adult realizing the Ultimate Truth.”

Question: What are your thoughts about Chan “gong’an” 禪公案 or better known as Zen koans?

Answer: Koans will give you a riddle type of question to ponder upon. It is designed in a way to let you contemplate until you give up. Because frankly, there is no answer to the question. The question can never be logically explained. When one realizes this, then we may get this “ah-hah” moment. The knots of intellectual thinking are untied and the mind becomes as clear as the sky, so to speak. The mind is finally at rest.

Another function of *gong’an* is to let us know the answer in Chan Buddhism and its fruition. The complete understanding of Non-duality is beyond the intellect and thinking mind. Non-duality can never be explained in words in its totality, only limited to what’s understandable to our human mind. So, if someone asks, what is Chan?, true knowers always remain silent – because it can not be expressed in words. To speak a part about Ultimate Reality is to leave out the rest, so they will not even try to open their mouth for a second. They leave Ultimate Reality as what it is, in all Its Completeness. This is the meaning of “*ru shi*” 如是 “as is” or “it is what it is” – better explained as “to let it be as it is.” The Chan Buddhist expression of Non-duality is best left being an example of itself, and that is by being naturally and intentionally Silent. But this should not be confused with ignorant silence.”

The Light of Lights is Not the Sun

(Poem by Lam Fu-Ho)

When the time comes, be prepared.
Outside formal seated meditation.
It could happen any time!

During the waking state,
in every place imaginable.
Go beyond duality!
There is more than what meets the eye...

Hear the Truth!
The mind becomes vast like the sky,
openly to receive everything.
This is restfulness – The Non-dual Light unveils Itself!
“How can there be no good and bad!”... and gone.

The impression leaves us astonished and troubled for years.
Thus you should know that The Light is Non-duality!
A simple question, and yet never explainable.
The intellect is truly limited.

Beyond virtue and vice, you should stay morally.
The Mystery of Non-duality is the ultimate gong’an/koan.
No answer possible!

Chinese Buddhist Yogi Lam FuHo (born 1986) began his journey in Chinese Universalism (Confucianism, Daoist philosophy/geomancy, Mahayana Chinese Buddhism) in 1990. He believes Universalism will lead to more peace through mutual understanding. Since 2015 he further practiced solely esoteric Chinese Buddhism; Chinese Chan/Zen Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism and Zhenyan/Shingon from Hong Kong. His aim is to attain full Buddhist Realization.

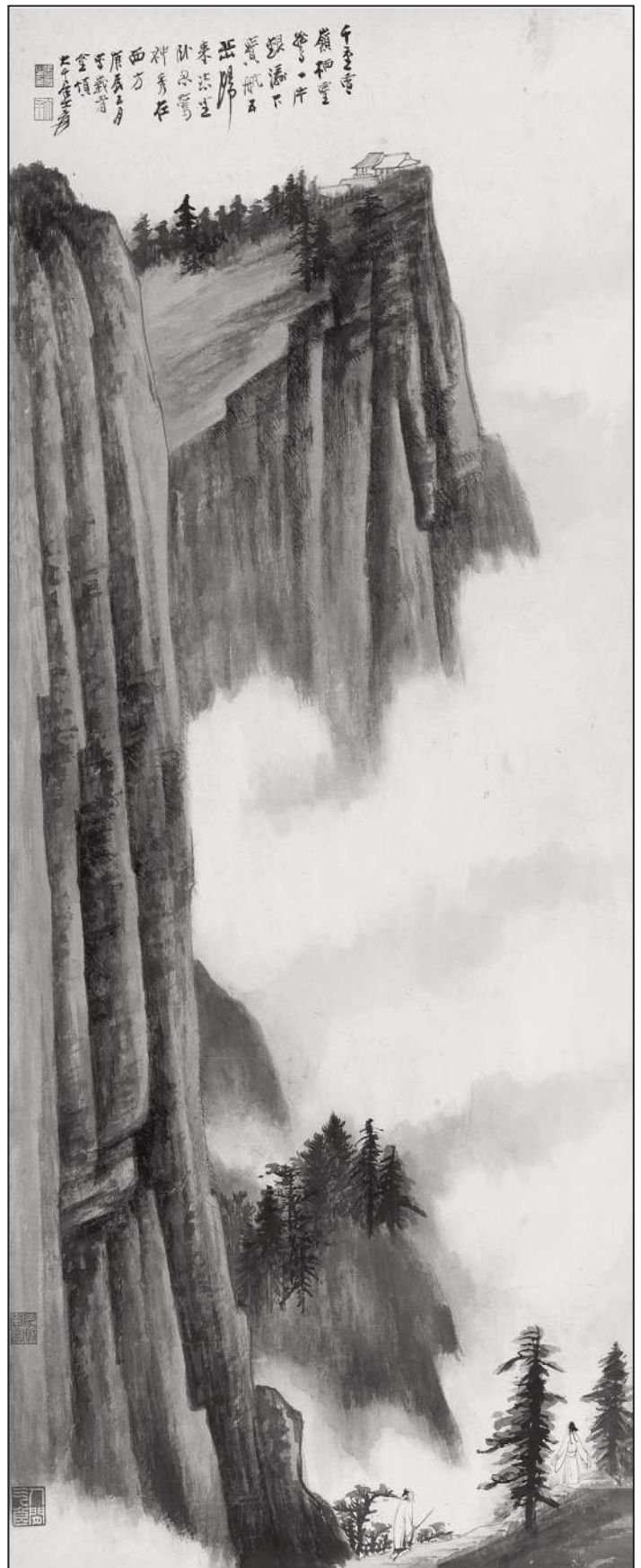


Illustration from Zhang Daqian 張大千 (1899-1983)
Sacred Buddhist Mountain Emei, Sichuan China

ROOTS & SHOOTS OF MINDFULNESS

& Penetrating the Soil of Human Awareness with Kindfulness

When we first began our study, practice, and research of mindfulness in the early '70s we knew fewer than a handful of people who were involved in this path of practice. As our practice and research matured, we began to develop mindfulness-based programs in medicine, higher education, and business. In the mid '70s and early '80s, we knew of no one else bringing these methods into the mainstream. Gradually over the years a groundswell of insight, interest, and research has emerged, creating a host of benefits and challenges, clarity and confusion, that inspires and confounds the modern mindfulness movement.

Our intent in composing this brief article is to offer an overview of some key perspectives on Mindfulness. For people relatively new to Mindfulness it is helpful to have a deeper understanding of the roots, shoots, and trends of mindfulness in order to appreciate a broader view of the deeper meaning, purpose, and value of this vital practice.

These VUCA times

Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity, are teaching us a lot about the value of mindfulness. We are learning that it takes courage and determination to wake up – to be fully present – and to sustain a meditation practice; to keep our hearts and minds open discerningly and objectively, to care deeply, be curious, investigate, and question the nature of reality. To embrace this challenge we risk being continually surprised, frequently distressed, disappointed, confused, or overwhelmed by the joys and sorrows of our complex world, and of stepping out beyond the pale of worldviews and habituating norms that define our consensus “reality.”

To the degree to which we wake up with mindfulness and learn to open our hearts and minds, the walls of our conventional, familiar, consensus view of reality become more clear, open, and transparent, revealing a deeper, vaster, multidimensional, and interrelated view of the actual nature of reality than we have previously imagined. This is why what we call mindfulness meditation is traditionally known as Vipassana, or “Insight Meditation.” Mindfulness gives us access to insight and the direct, non-conceptual intuitive wisdom that liberates us from our misconceptions regarding the nature of reality and the true nature of ourselves. While engaging in such pursuits is likely to expand our consciousness, it may also narrow the circle of people in our life’s work who can comprehend what we are searching for. As poet William Stafford reminds us:

“There's a thread you follow.
It goes among things that change.
But it doesn't change.

People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.”

While mindfulness is certainly widely adopted and practiced, our experience is that surprisingly few people are aware of its deep roots and origins in wisdom traditions – its more profound meanings, value, highest implications, and most intriguing applications. Our intent here is to offer insight, inspiration, and illumination on these facets of the jewel of mindfulness as it shines out in our modern times.

Roots of Mindfulness:

Mindfulness as a technical term has its historical origins in the ancient Pali word *sati* used by the Buddha in his teaching on mindfulness over 2600 years ago. *Sati* literally translates as “memory,” as in remembering what you are paying attention to in the present moment of awareness. In an attempt to meaningfully translate treasured Buddhist meditation manuals, the English translator, Rhys Davids, was the first to offer an English translation using “mindfulness” in 1881, and by 1910 mindfulness had become the generally accepted norm. Davids was inspired to use the term “mindfulness” by its use in an Anglican prayer that says, “*Always be mindful of the needs of others.*” Interestingly, from this initial choice to translate *sati* as mindfulness, there is an implication that mindfulness is also akin to a newly emerging meme of “kindfulness” which reminds us that we pay attention to what we care about. The widespread use of the term “mindfulness” has endured to this day, where we find the meaning of mindfulness continuing to be adapted. It is incorporated into common use with an ever expanding variety of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) that are emerging within health science, corporate, and high-performance arenas of contemporary culture.

Unfortunately, the meaning of the term mindfulness is also becoming increasingly misconstrued through its association with deep relaxation without mindful awareness, creative imagination visualizations, getting a good night’s rest, “mindfulness chairs,” mindful men’s clothing, or even “mindful mayonnaise” – all of which have little or nothing to do with the meditative practice of mindfulness. Some respected teachers in the realm of mindfulness have gone so far as to say that the word “mindfulness” has all but lost its original meaning.

Roots of the Modern Mindfulness Revolution

While the teachings of mindfulness practice have endured for millennia since the time of the Buddha, the contemporary “mindfulness revolution” was propelled into modern times by the colonial thrust of the British Imperial Army invading and conquering the Buddhist kingdom of Burma on November 28, 1885.

For centuries the Burmese people regarded their king as “the protector of the Dhamma” – the liberating teachings of the Buddha which, when taken to heart, have the power to free us of our delusions and confusions by opening our wisdom eyes to directly discern things as they truly are. Mindfulness is the primary practice of these liberating teachings, and its power lies in quieting the conceptual dualistic overlay of thoughts to allow direct insight into the true nature of reality to arise clearly in the mind.

As the Brits marched into the capital city of Mandalay, the Burmese people looked on in horror as their beloved king and his family, surrounded by British soldiers brandishing rifles, were taken from the royal palace and unceremoniously loaded in an oxcart that carried them to a waiting steamship that would carry them into exile. The royal palace was then transformed into an officers’ club for drinking, dancing, and socializing. A profound wave of concern rippled through Burmese society giving rise to an unprecedented cultural revolution that activated the Burmese people to protect the teachings of the Dhamma. Foremost among these cherished teachings was the practice of mindfulness.

Up to this time in Burma and throughout SE Asia, the teachings and practice of mindfulness had been mostly held within the monastic community of ordained monks and nuns, while the religious practices of the lay community focused primarily on generosity and giving of alms to generate spiritual merit, with the assumption that lay people were unlikely to actually realize enlightenment through practicing meditation. With the advent of the British invasion and the king’s exile, visionary teachers within the monastic community, led by Ledi Sayadaw, launched a cultural revolution intent on teaching and encouraging the practices of the Vipassana tradition of insight meditation that mindfulness comes from, to penetrate more widely throughout secular society. In the decades that followed, a contemplative cultural revolution spread throughout Southeast Asia giving rise to a renaissance and wide diffusion of mindfulness teachings.

Three Main Streams of Mindfulness Practice:

The next wave of mindfulness revolutionaries appeared as droves of globe-trotting spiritual seekers, peace core volunteers, government spooks, and mind scientists who traveled to Asia in the 1960s and 70s intent on seeking out enlightening teachers, wisdom teachings, and liberating contemplative technologies. Word of inspiring teachers and meditation retreats quickly spread through the social networks of those times, drawing early waves of contemplative pilgrims to the monasteries and meditation centers of Southeast Asia to get their first immersive and transformative experiences of intensive mindfulness meditation practices, which were often presented in 10 day silent retreat formats.

Through the influence of many of these early adopters of mindfulness, three principle streams of mindfulness practice have flowed into modern Western culture.

One stream of mindfulness practice came to the West through the teachings of Mahasi Sayadaw, U Pandita, Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, and other Thai and Burmese teachers of the “forest monastery” tradition which emphasized a blend of mindful breathing, noting and noticing of the nuances of momentary changing experiences, mindful walking, mindful eating, integrating mindful awareness into every activity, and resting in open clear awareness without grasping at any momentary experience. This lineage of mindfulness practice is widely referred to as “Insight Meditation,” and was introduced to the West primarily through the influence of Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg, and Joseph Goldstein, who co-founded the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts in 1975. Kornfield later also co-founded the Spirit Rock Center in Marin, California in 1988 with a number of other teachers.

The wise and creative teachings offered at these two Centers alone have inspired tens of thousands of people over the past 40+ years, giving rise to hundreds of other practice centers around the globe, and playing a significant role in inspiring the global diffusion of mindfulness practice into higher education, medicine, business, military, government, sports, and other arenas of modern life. Within this stream many other respected teachers, including Anagarika Munindra, Dipama, Ajahn Amaro, Ajahn Sumedho, Thannasaro Bhikkhu, Taungpulu Sayadaw, and Rina Sircar, to name but a few, have deeply inspired the diffusion of mindfulness teachings throughout North America, UK, and Europe.

The second stream came to the West from the Burmese teacher U Ba Khin, the Accountant General of Burma, who founded the International Meditation Society in Rangoon in 1952 where he attracted the attention of many international students and teachers. As a lay practitioner and respected lineage holder of the Vedana Vipassana tradition of mindfulness practice, and also a respected accountant, U Ba Khin accepted the invitation from the Burmese government to assume the role of Accountant General and to assume leadership in order to route out the corruption in the Burmese Treasury Department. U Ba Khin accepted this appointment with two conditions: first was that one wing of the Treasury Department would be transformed into a meditation hall where members of his staff could come and meditate at any time; second, was that everyone on his staff and in the Treasury Department would train with him and participate in at least one intensive ten-day silent Vipassana style mindfulness retreat. As U Ba Khin said, “I refuse to work with incompetence.”

U Ba Khin’s style of mindfulness practice focused on developing concentration through single pointed concentration on the breath, and then the close application of mindfulness by scanning or “sweeping” mindful awareness slowly through the body from the top of the head to the toes, over and over again, for up to 20 hours per day, leading to a profound state of vivid mental clarity and the purification of embedded congestion within the gross and subtle body. In this austere and intensive style of practice there is only sitting meditation, with no mindful walking, yoga, mindful eating, or other practices at all.

In his later life, U Ba Khin passed his legacy of teachings on to seven teachers, including S.N. Goenka (a Burmese business man who is widely known in the West), Robert Hover (a former

“When mindfulness practices are extracted from the cultural, motivational, and ethical contexts in which they were originally developed as profoundly transformative and liberating practices, and then repurposed, reformulated, branded, commodified, or aggressively marketed for use in a secular context with the beneficial though often narrow purposes of reducing stress, enhancing attention, or boosting performance, a host of potent potentials intrinsic to the more traditional, holistic, and spiritually significant practices are often discarded.”

U.S. aeronautical engineer), Ruth Denison (a German pioneer in embodied practices), and John Coleman (a British MI6 agent), each of whom carried these liberating teachings back to North America and Europe. In particular, Goenka's approach to teaching mindfulness has become very popular and widely available in the West and around the world, especially as the teachings and retreats are offered free of charge. After retreats, the students are encouraged to make donations and “play it forward” to freely fund retreats for future students.

A third stream of mindfulness teachings came to the West in part due to the U.S. invasion of Vietnam, where the monk Thich Nhat Hahn and his community were practicing and teaching mindfulness as an integral practice in their non-violent peace work amidst the terrors of the war. As the war raged on and many of his colleagues were brutally murdered, Thay, as his students call him, took refuge in France where he founded the Plum Village International Meditation Center, and began to teach his unique and highly accessible form of mindfulness which emphasizes the practice of mindful breathing, mindful walking, and the repetition of meditation phrases or “*gathas*” that are synchronized with the inhalation and exhalation of the breath. Developing deeper ease and continuity of meditation practice, phrases like “calming...,” “smiling...” or “arriving home...” help to calm and focus the mind and quiet the tendency toward random narrative during meditation practice. Today there are hundreds of centers around the globe teaching Thay's style of mindfulness practice.

One of Thay's greatest gifts of contemplative technology for modern practitioners is the encouragement to bring a gentle, heartfelt, compassionate inner smile into mindfulness practice, to help us to “smile to our sorrow” and realize that “we are more than our sorrow.” This convention of smiling with practice has rapidly diffused through the networks of mindfulness instructors, and over the past 20 years has become a new norm of how mindfulness is often introduced and practiced in the West.

Beyond these three primary streams, there are other streams, lineages, and teachers who emphasize a variety of aspects or approaches to the practice, and there are also many teachers and centers that weave together teachings and practices drawn from these different traditions.

Mindfulness Blossoms as Compassion and “Lovingkindness”

“Being present with kindness and compassion is being mindful.”

- Jon Kabat Zinn

As the practice of mindfulness deepens and matures, it flows and fruits as engaged compassionate concern and creative altruism, embracing and responsive to the needs, not only of ourselves,

but of all beings who suffer and experience vulnerability or injustice in their lives, society, and world. As many of the foremost Western mindfulness teachers and movements have matured in their practice, the nature and tone of their teachings have warmed, shifting from a more austere and terse focus on “bare attention” and taking on a more heartfelt, though often fiercely compassionate, tone that encourages their students to blend their mindful awareness with a merciful, open hearted approach to mindfulness practice.

It is becoming increasingly more common for mindfulness teachers to expand their studies and practice of mindfulness to draw inspiration from traditions that give greater emphasis to heartfelt qualities such as gratitude, genuine friendliness, compassion, lovingkindness, self-compassion, and engaged social justice action, into mindfulness education and training. This heartwarming, compassionate impulse may be integrated into mindfulness practice simply as a gentle, merciful, inner smile as one musters the courage to look within and mindfully, whole-heartedly embrace the tension, apprehension, sadness or rage found there. Or, it may be intentionally cultivated as a robust practice of meditation such as lovingkindness – or *metta* – wishing well to ourselves, others, and all beings; or generating radiant compassion regarding and embracing the presence of suffering in our lives, relationships, and world; or activating an explicit dedication to practicing mindfulness with an intention of realizing one's true nature and highest potentials for the benefit all beings.

As mindfulness matures into kindness on a societal level, we are witnessing the emergence of more university programs that explicitly include compassion science and encourage compassion-based practices as part of their curriculums. Among the most respected programs in today's world are:

*Stanford University's CCARE Program (Center for Compassion & Altruism Research and Education) (<http://ccare.stanford.edu>);

*The Greater Good Science Center (<http://greatergood.berkeley.edu>) connected with *Stanford and UC Berkeley; University of Wisconsin's Center for Healthy Minds (<http://www.investigatinghealthyminds.org/cihmDrDavidson.html>); *Mind and Life Institute; and Max Planck Institute's Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences' ReSource Program (<https://www.resource-project.org/en/home.html>)

Vital Considerations:

When mindfulness practices are extracted from the cultural, motivational, and ethical contexts in which they were originally developed as profoundly transformative and liberating practices, and then repurposed, reformulated, branded, commodified, or

aggressively marketed for use in a secular context with the beneficial though often narrow purposes of reducing stress, enhancing attention, or boosting performance, a host of potent potentials intrinsic to the more traditional, holistic, and spiritually significant practices are often discarded. Among the most potent contextual elements of mindfulness teachings that are most usually disregarded or “snipped off” in the Mindfulness Based Initiatives are:

- Creating a cognitive frame of reference, or reverence, that regards mindfulness as a profoundly “relational” and ennobling practice, connecting one’s life, practice, and quality of being to a wider sphere of meaningful influences and interrelationships. This includes traditional practices of refuge, dedication, and explicitly altruistic motivation in one’s mindfulness practice. Such a relationally meaningful sense of dedication and purpose for one’s practice expands the significance of mindfulness from a self-development practice – dedicated to reducing one’s own personal distress, enhancing one’s attention, or boosting productivity – to encompass a wider, more altruistic expanse. This expanded approach to mindfulness practice actively encourages developing a foundation for practice based on ethics, humankindness, cultivation of curiosity, lovingkindness (metta), compassion (and self-compassion), generosity, altruistic motivation, and dedication.

- The traditional holistic systems view of “wise mindfulness” within the integral liberative context of the Noble Eightfold Path taught by the Buddha. In this comprehensive approach, “wise mindfulness” is intimately related to “wise view” regarding the actual nature of reality. When a “wise view” congruent with reality is established, then “wise intention” emerges; with “wise intention” in place, “wise speech” arises; with “wise speech,” helpful “wise actions” flow; with “wise action,” wise and non-harming modes of livelihood come into being; with “wise livelihood” established, “wise effort” arises which nourishes, deepens, and sustains “wise mindfulness.”

To ignore or compromise any of these noble factors diminishes the wisdom and liberative power of all of them. To extract mindfulness from this framework of enlightening wisdom that frees us from fallacious views of reality, and aligns us with the actual nature of reality, with a motivation that is in harmony with, and discerningly optimizes the circumstances of our lives and relationships, rather than creating stress or harm to ourselves, others, or our world, is to sadly miss the vital potency and extra-ordinary potential of understanding and practicing “wise mindfulness.”

- Cultivating mindful discernment of those qualities of being and actions that are “wise” and to be encouraged and developed, as well as being vigilant for the arising of “unwise” sub-optimizing tendencies that are not to be encouraged or fed into. This ethically discerning approach to mindfulness provides a much broader context and meaning for mindfulness practice than a more narrow approach limited to a non-discerning, “anything goes” quality of open awareness.

- The recognition of the following vital indicators of progress in mindfulness practice:

1. Becoming ever more aware of change and impermanence at subtler and subtler levels of experience;
2. A profound sense of vibrant, aware, selflessness that arises through the recognition of “wise view” revealing all things to be

interdependent, interwoven, and multidimensional;

3. The recognition that any tendencies to reify or hold on to any fleeting experience will lead to frustration and suffering;

4. The heartfelt valuing of naturally emerging compassion regarding the suffering of confused and vulnerable beings; and

5. A deep sense of wonderment regarding the nature of reality.

While many of the secular adaptations of mindfulness include some of the elements listed above, they often fail to encourage and value the vital inclusion of these factors as an intrinsic part of the practice. While we can certainly carry on with whatever form of mindfulness practice or MBI that we are involved with, it is helpful to expand our understanding of these important considerations as we participate in the expansion of the “mindfulverse” of our modern times.

Non-Dual Source Traditions of Mindfulness

“What is mindfulness? Mindfulness is to be aware of everything you do every day. Mindfulness is a kind of light that shines upon all your thoughts, all your feelings, all your actions, and all your words. Mindfulness is the Buddha. Mindfulness is the equivalent of the Holy Spirit, the energy of God. Doing everything in our daily lives in the presence of God is mindfulness.” - Thich Nhat Hanh

While the early roots of mindfulness are most clearly articulated within the Theravadan tradition of Buddhist inner science, the universal nature of mindfulness as a natural resource, is not limited to Buddhist, Asian, or modern secular variants, but has flourished and been honored throughout the ages by many of the world’s great wisdom traditions.

The mystical Kabbalistic teachings of the Jewish tradition regarding the indwelling (feminine) presence of God worshipped as *Shekhina* – encourages practitioners to align and attune with the experience of this living universal Presence within them. Serious practitioners within this tradition devote a whole day of each week, the Sabbath, to cultivating and abiding in this sacred presence.

In mystical Christianity, mindfulness is related to “*practicing the presence of God.*” As Sister Bernadette Roberts so eloquently observed, “*Emptiness is two things at once: the absence of self and the presence of the Divine. Thus as self decreases, the Divine increases.*”

As mindfulness is making its way into Arabic culture, one translation for mindfulness that has emerged is, *Alyagadha althehneya*, which can be translated as, “Your mind being present.” According to Faraz Rabbani, “*Mindfulness (taqwa) is to shield oneself from all that displeases Allah. The mindfulness of faith (iman) is to shield oneself from eternal punishment through faith. The mindfulness of submission (islam) is to shield oneself from sin through obedience. The mindfulness of spiritual excellence is to shield oneself from heedlessness and distraction through complete turning to Allah Most High.*” ...Foremost of the mindful (*muttaqin*)” refers to being the most virtuous, honored, and beloved of Allah’s servants – those of the greatest mindfulness (*taqwa*).” <http://halaqah-online.com/v3/images/stories/jalanku.jpg>

The deep nature of mindfulness is made explicitly clear in the teachings on the nature of mind found within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Some years ago in London, the Dalai Lama explained that “... *there are two kinds of mindfulness: contrived and natural.*” While we can “practice” contrived mindfulness through effort and intention, “natural mindfulness” is engaged simply by

remaining “*naturally and gently in the essence of awareness itself.*” He explained that as soon as the mind is disturbed by ordinary notions and reifications, we become lost in identifying with the contents of the contrived mind. Yet underlying this ever-changing creative display of mental activity is our true nature, or home, of natural mindfulness, an elusive though accessible quality of effortless, abiding, natural awareness (*rigpa*) that is the ever-present dimension of awake awareness within each of us in every moment of our lives. The Dalai Lama acknowledges that this experience of natural mindfulness, or *rigpa*, “*is beyond words, thoughts, and expression and is difficult to communicate.*”

Echoing the Dalai Lama’s wisdom, Anam Thubten, a wise and popular contemporary Tibetan teacher, offers the insight that, “*Pure consciousness is present in each of us right now and we can be aware of it, but we cannot practice it or attain it. We can’t attain it because it is already present within us and it’s not the effect of a cause. It is not the result of our spiritual practice because it is already present in each of us. Therefore, the only thing we can do is practice being aware of it in the moment.*”

Mingyur Rinpoche offers further insight regarding this effortless approach to mindfulness, saying: “*What do we recognize? Awareness: the ever-present knowing quality of mind, from which we are never separated for an instant. Even though normally we do not recognize awareness, we can no more live without it than we can live without breathing...Discovering our own awareness allows us to access the natural steadiness and clarity of the mind, which exist independent of (ever-changing) conditions and circumstances, and independent of our emotions and moods.*”

This ancient wisdom is echoed by Jon Kabat-Zinn in his lucid foreword for the Mindful Nation UK Report, when he explains that, “*Basically, when we are talking about mindfulness, we are talking about awareness – pure awareness. It is an innate human capacity that is different from thinking but wholly complementary to it. It is also ‘bigger’ than thinking, because any thought, no matter how momentous or profound, illuminating or destructive, can be held in awareness, and thus looked at, known, and understood in a multiplicity of ways which may provide new degrees of insight and fresh perspectives for dealing with old problems and emergent challenges, whether individual, societal, or global... Awareness in its purest form, or mindfulness, thus has the potential to add value and new degrees of freedom to living life fully and wisely and, thus, to making wiser and healthier, more compassionate and altruistic choices – in the only moment that any of us ever has for tapping our deep interior resources for imagination and creativity, for learning, growing, and healing, and in the end, for transformation, going beyond the limitations of our presently understood models of who we are as human beings and individual citizens, as communities and societies, as nations, and as a species.*”

Mindfulness, Collective Intuitive Wisdom, & Human Flourishing

“The world we have made as a result of the level of the thinking we have done thus far creates problems that we cannot solve at the same level of thinking (i.e. consciousness) at which we have created them... We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if humankind is to survive.” - Einstein

Could it be that the global surge of interest in mindfulness is an evolutionary impulse perfectly responsive to the challenges of these VUCA times? From our many years of practice, research,

and work bringing mindfulness to organizations and communities around the globe, it seems that the greatest value and most highly leveraged application of mindfulness may be to follow Einstein’s advice and equip individuals and innovative teams with the skills necessary to raise or refine the level of their personal and collective consciousness in order to source the intuitive wisdom and guidance necessary to bring forth breakthrough – disruptive innovations and solutions to complex global problems.

As the key to accessing the most subtle dimensions of intuitive wisdom, the greatest value of mindfulness in this age may be in its capacity to liberate us from our collective ignorance by opening our minds to the wisdom we need to flourish together in this beautiful and fragile world.

One of our most cherished visions and aspirations is to develop cohorts of altruistically motivated, sincere, and disciplined individuals and teams, intent on employing mindfulness for accessing or “sourcing” insight from deeper, subtler strata of personal and collective intuitive wisdom, in order to bring forth the insights and innovations necessary to resolve the dire challenges of these treacherous times while promoting human flourishing and thriving for generations to come.

Closing comments:

It is our hope that this article has left a deeper appreciation of the relevance of mindfulness, and a glimpse of its more profound dimensions, or deeper insight regarding the complex issues of how mindfulness is expressed in our times. Through the interfusion of our minds may this article create and send ripples of inspiration and benefit to all beings, that all may awaken fully to precious moments of ever deepening wisdom and compassion.



Dr. Joel and Michelle Levey are founders of Wisdom at Work, faculty for University of Minnesota Medical School, founding members of ISSSEEM, and early pioneers in the fields of mindfulness, contemplative science, and collective wisdom. Their seminal work has inspired leaders in hundreds of leading organizations around the globe including NASA, Google, World Bank, Intel, British Parliament, M.D. Anderson Cancer Research Center, and the World Government Summit. They have been fortunate to study with many of the world’s most respected teachers in various mindfulness lineages and other traditions of meditation and were encouraged by many of them to teach. The Leveys’ published works include *Living in Balance: A Mindful Guide for Thriving in a Complex World*; *Mindfulness, Meditation, and Mind Fitness*; and *The Fine Arts of Relaxation, Concentration, and Meditation: Ancient Skills for Modern Minds*. To learn more, please visit: <http://WisdomatWork.com/mindfulnesspioneers/>

SHARING THE SECRET OF MINDFULNESS

Dissolving the Habit of Sleep-walking

Mindfulness is undivided attention. Whether we read, write, work or watch something, our attention should be riveted to the thing we do. Mindfulness is the solution to many of our problems. It's not easy to have rapt attention on something for a long time, yet, repeated practice will bring us to this state of attentiveness or mindfulness. So what is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is just the opposite of sleep-walking. It is to become fully conscious, aware, and awake during the waking hours and also sleeping like a tiger, with alert tranquility. As the practice of "providing a running commentary" on one's actions becomes more and more intense, it becomes a habit. Even thoughts are observed, slight movements of the body are observed, breathing too is observed. All actions, even a heartbeat, are really voluntary. All this should become more conscious activity, and then comes the real fun and joy of life.

Sleep-walking

Most beings on earth are sleep-walkers. They are not aware of what they are doing, saying, or thinking most of the time. Life drags them further on through the linear one-way track of time without consciously walking it. In a certain way, they are getting ready to compete with robots their mechanical behavior. The living being is turning into a machine. Why is this called sleep-walking? It is sleep-walking when we are not conscious of what we are doing at any particular moment of time. Thinking that "everything is just routine," we live unconsciously. Especially with the advent of the mobile phone now, most of our attention is on our phones, tabs, watching videos, news items, messages, etc. Even when we take attention off these devices, we are still helplessly inattentive.

On the other hand, for a conscious being, waking from sleep on up until going to bed is all done consciously. This is mindful work. This is conscious work, not dreamy, sleep-walking work. You may be combing your hair a thousand times every day. That shouldn't be an unconscious action, but conscious, attentive action. That fits with mindfulness.

The Nagging Problem

Let's understand the problem. What exactly is this sleep-walking we fall into? "Sleep-walking" is failing to pay any serious attention – rather, any focused attention at all – to what we do, what we say, or where we go. Why don't we pay attention to things? We may have some excuses. We travel by the same roads to our daily destinations, we live in the same places, we use almost the same things every day. Thus, we become so familiar with all the things we do and use in our daily lives that we think don't need any special attention. For a person who has opened and closed a gate a thousand times daily for years, doing it another time some day is

not something which needs attention, or so he thinks. Thus, things don't draw much of our attention. As we travel by the same roads, we don't see the same buildings, trees, etc., with same interest and attention that a little child sees them for the first time. We don't pay serious attention to fetching things like a scientist does to fetch an electron. This is sleep-walking in real life.

Those who think that such sleep-walking is good will argue that paying attention to routine issues is an unnecessary waste of energy and time. However, those who say this condition is bad feel that attention is needed for every little work. Who is right? The answer comes: even a school child has heard his teacher say, "Pay attention!" Distraction is not praised anywhere.

Alert Tranquility

My guru, Swami Bhuteshanandaji Maharaj, had a paper-weight on his end table. On it were the words "Alert Tranquility" over a tiger's image. The tiger was apparently relaxing. But all the same, it was fully conscious of the surroundings. My guru used to show this and say that such should be our way of life: alertness always, even when relaxing.

The one who thinks that alertness and attention are necessary even to do simple chores is correct. Attention is a must for anything and everything. A casual mistake may lead to a great disaster, like fire accidents that happen due to neglect, and road accidents that happen due to a moment's dosing off, for example. How many of us have spilled coffee while picking up the cup without looking at it?

The habits of casualness, inattentiveness, and unconscious living are not limited to routine activities alone, but get transferred to other activities as well. Let alone doing routine things unconsciously, as if in sleep or dream, we do even important things unconsciously. And that is where the danger is. Philosophers have told us time and again that a person's capabilities are seen in the way he/she does the simple things of life. When simple things are done in a haphazard fashion, bigger things may readily become areas of disaster.

Therefore, alertness and attention are necessary; they are the oxygen of life. This is beyond all doubt. And all this, in a somewhat more technical way of speaking, is called mindfulness. Being mindful is the way to efficiency, perfection in work, and ultimate fulfilment. The mind must be disciplined. Discipline brings alertness and mindfulness.

Why Practice Mindfulness?

Let's begin with some crude example. Where has any work been accomplished when there is a violent lunatic at work? People with imbalanced minds have no control over their thoughts. Thoughts spring from the subconscious mind, which is filled with latent impressions. Between the subconscious mind and the conscious mind, there is a door called "I," the ego. That door is open

and unhinged in people of questionable sanity, because their ego has been battered and tortured badly. They will suddenly scream, howl, murmur, break and tear things, then simply go to sleep. Whatever their subconscious mind belches out, they do. Everything in them is beyond all control.

What about our minds? The door between the subconscious and the conscious minds in our case is closed forcefully, so as to be able to present ourselves as decent individuals to society. The chaotic subconscious is closed off from throwing tantrums on the conscious level because we wish to present ourselves as gentlemen, educated men and women before society, etc. We smile, laugh, shake hands, and pretend to be well-mannered people, but inside it's all precarious. This is a similar situation to a room in your house that is full of dirt, dust, with things thrown here and there, upturned furniture around, and so on. When a guest comes, we draw the curtain so that he can't see what's inside. Similarly, we manage to keep the door between the conscious mind and unconscious mind shut by using our wills so that nobody can see our chaotic personalities. At night, when our ego is weak during sleep, the door opens and the chaos creeps out as restless dreams.

Is this situation that bad? In a way, yes, sadly. Our subconscious is the storehouse of past impressions which express themselves as diseases, problems, habits, etc., dwelling in our bodies and minds. These problems tell us about our situation within. So everything is not necessarily fine with us, even though we think we are doing well.

Tip of the Iceberg

Our apparent casualness and inattentiveness are all only the tip of the iceberg. The problem is deep-rooted and great. When we are not attentive in doing our daily chores, or anything for that matter, we are showing symptoms of a deeper ailment. Instead of trying to cure that ailment, what we do is either try to escape, or intentionally provoke this mindless attitude by adding to our inner restlessness. How?

Social media is one great distraction. The mobile phone has not come as a saviour, but as an eater of our attentiveness. You hardly see any person not using phone while travelling, going places, or visiting museums, etc. Adding to our usual distractions, we now have this apparatus, which brings us countless news items, videos, and so on, to further drag us away from whatever little strength of mind we might have. These forms of distraction and diversion are not solutions to the problem, but means of attempting to escape from problems.

Actions done with a distracted mind can never be perfect. There will always be some error or other. Further, actions themselves are not just means of survival. They are positive expressions of inner creativity. Work can be done in two ways: the slave way, or the master-ful way. The slave way is drudgery, work done with tremendous discontent, hate, lack of will or purpose. The master-ful way is work done as an expression of inner creativity, love, and with tremendous will power behind.

Further, proper work is not labor, but the manifestation of inner energy and love, which is why we are on earth. Work brings joy, satisfaction and peace only when it is the manifestation of inner creativity. Artisans in ancient times, when there was no mass

industry, might have been poor, but they led satisfied lives because there was contentment coming from expression of their inner creativity. Anything, even simply sweeping the floor, can be an expression of inner creativity. For this, however, one thing is needed: attention or concentration. Attention is needed for any activity, but much more to do great work. Thereafter comes tremendous inner satisfaction and peace.

Change Should be in the Air

Therefore, we have to change. Running away from problems only adds more problems. Facing problems is the best method. We cannot directly handle our subconscious minds. We have no control over what is within. But there are ways to organize, clean, purify, and better our subconscious impressions. This is the positive approach of mindfulness.

Managing to survive is one way of living. Living every single moment of life positively is another way of living. These are poles apart. Those who are casual, disturbed and "diversified" are always unhappy. They grumble about their workplace, house, situation, life, everything. Their work is shabby, they often forget things, they grumble always due to having more and more work to do; they are unhappy with everything. But those who are mindful are happy with their work, and do things in an orderly fashion. They keep things meticulously in order, lead marvellous lives, and enjoy everything – as Vivekananda said, "exquisitely." For them, all work is the same. In the end, it's happiness that matters.

Ask the Masters Who Came Here

What the ancient spiritual masters announced as *dhāraṇa*, what thousands and thousands of *yogis* practiced for millennia, is now, in this random age, is given the name, "Mindfulness."

There are several ways in which mindfulness is practiced nowadays. The Buddhist method is "dividing" the mind into two parts: one the observer, the other the doer. The observer "sees" what the person does, constantly. This observer goes on giving a running commentary of all the actions of the individual. "*You now turn the key and open the door. You shut the door now, slowly and gently. Take one step down, another next step, then the next. Around you, you see the walls and the staircase; yes, that's the ceiling...*" In this way, one part of the mind gives a commentary of what the person sees, does, and even thinks. This is basic mindfulness. The Vedantic way is to know that there is the *Atman*, the eternal *Sākshi*, or Observer, for whose sake all activity is done.

For one thing, it's not the amount of work you do that brings happiness, but the quality of the work done. This quality of work is directly proportional to the concentration and attention you bring to the job. That attention is the direct consequence of mindfulness. Mindfulness, therefore, is important to the acquiring of money, wealth, peace, happiness, health, and spiritual well-being. It is even more important in study and meditation.

How to practice mindfulness? For beginners, about one hour per day for the first few days is a good start. If possible, make your cell phone work for you consciously as well, by narrating to it, verbally, or noting down all that you do for one hour. You stood up, walked to the table, went to the kitchen. Yes, don't be bored, note it all down, and do it with awareness. Then extend this mindful

period to two hours, and so on. When the mind becomes bored and dreamy, awaken it again.

Is Mindfulness Tiring?

You might say: "I am exhausted with the amount of work I have to do. Should I add one more task to my existing ones?" Fortunately for you, being mindful of yourself and your activities is not an extra task, but an instrument to do things quickly and better. Do you know why you get exhausted from working for a few hours? You get tired by doing even a little work because you are not concentrated and alert. Your attention is elsewhere, but you are forcing your mind to do the work at hand. This conflict is what is exhausting you.

We mentioned the subconscious mind. Reverting back to this story, as we said, the subconscious is the storehouse of all past impressions – good, bad, and indifferent. What are impressions? *Samskaras* are imprints of all that you have thought, said, and done. Not a single byte of data is lost. Your inner computer has such a wonderful memory. This imprint of past deeds becomes the blueprint for your future existence. So, the data processing inside is efficient and stupendous.

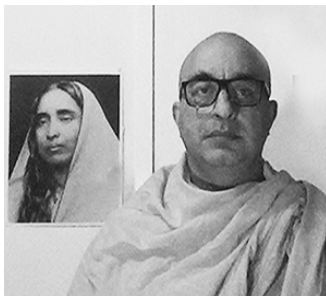
However, since we have only fed confusing *samskaras* to our subconscious, and since the subconscious mind, like our conscious mind, is distracted and diversified, there is no coherence, no orderliness, and no method. You have just thrown whatever objects you have gathered into a big hall – medicines, tables, chairs, shelves, books, dust, dirt, and a huge mountain of junk is the result. But a healthy subconscious is needed for conscious actions. Subconscious mind prepares the blueprint. How can it prepare a proper blueprint?

But, if we do things with attentiveness, mindfully, calmly, as worship, and as expressions of our creativity, even 16 to 18 hours of continuous work shouldn't exhaust us. We should be as fresh as we were at the beginning of the day.

Mindfulness is the Way

Doing things consciously is the way to both a successful career and peaceful lives. For the spiritual aspirant, mindfulness is the greatest help. First of all, our lives become organized. We don't repeat our wrong actions again and again and blame the environment, our life, or our boss anymore. We are calm and collected, concentrated and attentive. Our work bears fruit. When our work is good, joy permeates our personality. We grow. As Sri Krishna said, "Performing the day-to-day activities as worship, an individual becomes perfect." [*sva-karmanā tam abhyarchya siddhim vindati mānavah.*]

Swami Sunirmalananda is a sannyasin of the Ramakrishna Order, and the monk in-charge of the Vedanta Society of Holland. He is Swami Bhuteshanandaji's disciple. The Swami had the privilege of serving his guru for a decade before serving the Ramakrishna Order's centers in Brasil and Geneva.



Ecstatic Song of Ramprasad

*"O dreaming mind, awaken now!
And remain awake!*

*Sleeping with eyes open as you walk through
the world is the strange sleep of delusion.*

*How long will you remain deceived by
egocentric projects and projections, your
original awareness remaining veiled by
dreams imagined to be real!*

*This dream-life of empty repetition,
this constant drive for gratification,
wastes your precious powers, O mind.*

You are dreaming!

You dream away your existence.

*Your dreams are fueled
by selfish desire.*

*"Replace the darkness of this deluded sleep
with genuinely peaceful repose,
selfless concentration on Kali's Feet of Light.*

*This is the radiant treasure
that you truly desire.*

*The essence of your being will awaken
through this devoted contemplation,
and you will be enlightened by Her Light,
experiencing ecstatic Love
and transcendent insight.*

*O mind, your life is the vibrant life
of the entire universe.*

*Awaken into perpetual meditation
and every dream-veil will dissolve."*

(Translation, Lex Hixon)

SRV Associations 2025 Dharma Visits to Portland, Oregon

SRV Associations 2025 Three In-Person Retreats

For details: srvinfo@srv.org / www.srv.org

May 2025

5/21 Wed 7:00pm Talk/Q&A on Select Upanisads, Portland
5/23 Fri 4:00pm Arrive at Windwood Waters for Retreat
5/27 Tues 12noon Retreat Ends (Stevenson WA.)
5/28 Wed 6:00pm Arati & Satsang, Camas, WA Shrine
RSVP at srvinfo@srv.org to receive directions

Memorial Weekend Retreat at Windwood Waters

Subject: The Deep Spiritual Significance of Sanskrit Slokas
Releasing the Inherent Power in Sanskrit Words for Self-Realization
(via Vicharana & Manana on Key Philosophical Phrases)
Friday, May 23rd – Tuesday, May 27th

September 2025

9/10 Wed 7:00pm Talk/Q&A on Select Upanisads, Portland
9/12 Fri 4:00pm Arrive at Windwood Waters for Retreat
9/16 Tues 12noon Retreat Ends (Stevenson, WA)
9/17 Wed 6:00pm Arati & Satsang, Camas, WA Shrine
RSVP at srvinfo@srv.org to receive directions

September Navaratri Retreat at Windwood Waters

Subject: Part 2: The World's Great Mother Scripture
Deeper Probes into the Srimad Devi Bhagavatam
Friday, September 12th – Tuesday, September 16th

December 2025

12/10 Wed 7:00pm Talk/Q&A on Select Upanisads, Portland
12/12 Fri 4:00pm Arrive at Windwood Waters for Retreat
12/16 Tues 12noon Retreat Ends (Stevenson, WA)
12/17 Wed 6:00pm Arati & Satsang, Camas, WA Shrine
RSVP at srvinfo@srv.org to receive directions

December Retreat at Windwood Waters

Subject: Master of Self, Observer of Nature
Everything One Needs to Know About Witness Consciousness
Friday, December 12th – Tuesday, December 16th

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May 23rd through May 27th

Memorial Weekend Retreat at Windwood Waters
Deep Spiritual Significance of Sanskrit Slokas
Releasing Thought & Word Power to Illumine the Mind

Thought, word, and deed are one of the great triputis of existence. Of the three, the word, connected intrinsically with hearing and listening, educates and galvanizes the mind. It carries both the power of thought and the ability to engender action. The ancient Sanskrit language, ever associated with Spirituality and Divine Life over countless ages, is naturally imbued with the subtle power of conscious intelligence, that fortuitously emerges when the force of concentrated Awareness is placed upon it – which is what will take place in this transformative retreat centering on the sacred Devabhasha, the "Language of the Gods."

September 12th through September 16th

Navaratri Retreat at Windwood Waters
Part 2: The World's Great Mother Scripture
Probing the Divine Mother's Incomparable Wisdom

In part 1 of this series, which occurred around Navaratri of 2024, profound teachings from Skandhas 1 through 5 of this voluminous scripture were studied in-depth, centering around The Divine Mother's many aspects, Her dimensions of Consciousness, and Her seed words of power, called bijams. Skandhas 6 through 12 also contain an abundance of Her special transmissions of spiritual life, including a copious listing of Her 108 sacred Names, praises and gifts offered to Her by all the other deities in India's diverse pantheon of gods and goddesses, Her revelation of the Four Yogas, The exceedingly rare attainment of pure mind, and the special status of Her spiritual children – the Devi Bhaktas.

December 12th through December 16th

December Winter Retreat at Windwood Waters
Master of Self, Observer of Nature
Everything to Know About Witness Consciousness

As advanced spiritual seekers have come to know, mature discrimination between Consciousness and matter, or between the Soul and nature, marks the difference between those who seriously set foot on the path towards liberation and those who are still courting salvation over a series of births. In other words, the transmigrating soul must put an end to its constant circling and repetitive cycling on the wheel of samsara, and return to its original perfection as the changeless, Supreme Soul, the Atman. The status which gets attained just prior to this release into unbounded freedom, is called Kaivalya by the luminaries. There, the soul has become Sakshi, the Witness of all.

SRV Associations 2025

Online Weekend Seminars with Babaji Bob Kindler

Three partial days of classes on the Wisdom of Mother India
& engaging satsangs with Babaji and students.

SEMINAR 1 March
Ishvara's Nondual Teachings 28 - 30
What Sri Ram Transmits in the Adhyatma Ramayana

Ishvara, and Its emanations called Avatars, are often seen by living beings (those who believe in and strive to worship and reach Them) as doorways into salvation leading to freedom from suffering. This view describes these great ones as “looking down and out” at a beleaguered humanity. For more enlightened beings, however, there is the “looking in and up” perspective that culminates all journeys in space and time into the superconscious Formlessness of Brahman. Such merging of the fleeting separateness of the individual into Ultimate Reality is Ishvara’s final boon and greatest Secret.

When an Avatar descends to the earth plane, like in the case of Sri Ramachandra in the Treta Yuga, the teachings of Nonduality He emanates and transmits duly help to throw wide the doorway to heaven/salvation for the lowly and the down-trodden, but also succeed in opening the gate of transcendence to reveal the higher purpose of human existence, that of liberation from the worlds of name and form, i.e., escape from the bonds of both physical matter on earth, and from the realms of subtle matter in heaven.

In the Adhyatma Ramayana, teachings pertinent to this great Secret of unbridled Existence, of unconditioned Consciousness, of Pure, nondual Awareness, are given out by this Avatar, whose followers and devotees still number in the millions here on the Bhur Loka – even after thousands of years have passed!



SEMINAR 2 June
Swami Vivekananda's Vijnanagita: Pt. 2 27 - 29
Key Teachings of the Avatar's Messenger

At the time of Swami Vivekananda’s Mahasamadhi celebrations, one of the best activities to undergo is the deep study of his wisdom words. The world has been fortunate to have the visitation of such an incomparable soul, whose incarnation in these days and times was attended by a willingness to share knowledge of all types with all people. Never has such an unbounded storehouse of higher wisdom poured forth so unstintingly, as it did in his case. There was nothing that he could not shed light upon.

The Swami Vivekananda Vijnanagita is a compilation of facets of this boundless ocean of wisdom, revealing to all interested beings eternal truths ranging from the essential oneness of all religious traditions, to the innate perfection of the human soul.

SEMINAR 3 August
Sri Krishna's Great Swan Song 15 - 17
The Lord's Conclusions in the Uddhava Gita

In the many-faceted life of Sri Krishna, accompanied by its several divine songs (gitas), the Uddhava Gita, spoken and transmitted to the Lord’s disciple at the latter stage of his life, is replete with spiritual knowledge, all gleaned over the span of a truly divine lifetime of sportive play combined with selfless service. Much like the Lord’s song to Arjuna, earlier, what Uddhava received from his master was life transforming, and timely as well, seeing that the age they were incarnated in (Dvapara Yuga) was about to expire, and the Avatar was soon to disembody and return to His Eternal Abode. Thus, the teachings offered to Uddhava were infused with an urgency that was in keeping with leaving the body and departure from the earthly realm – all in an enlightened state.

Within the 24 chapters of the Uddhava Gita are to be found, among others, teachings from the 24 teachers of the Avadhut, all found at the outset of the scripture. The duality of bondage and liberation is also taught, as well as in-depth wisdom on the 3 gunas and their causes. Clarity on the Four Yogas find a home in this Gita as well, and the entire Sankhya Yoga system of philosophy receives elucidation and rendering by the Lord. And of course, Krishna’s signature teachings on the laws of karma are transmitted in a most adept way, making the Uddhava Gita a prime source of jnanam, bhakti, karma, and meditation/contemplation.



SEMINAR 4 October
Mother Kali in the Kali Yuga 24 - 26
Sri Durga's Negativity-Transforming Child

For the auspicious period of Navaratri in 2025, a two-day seminar on the powerful teachings and divine personage of Mother Kali will be offered, focusing in on the always stultifying nature of Her terrible wrath and terrific appearance. For the age termed the Kali Yuga, wherein all manner of violence unleashes itself upon a shocked and dismayed humanity, the Divine Mother in Her especially aggressive form embodies Herself forth out of Sri Durga’s Third Eye in order to treat and dispatch the demons of negativity springing from alien forces of ignorance, without and within.

What is not known about Her special manifestation, or what goes overlooked for the most part, is the unsurpassed and unconditional love that She bears for Her precious spiritual children.



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**In 2025 we are studying *God Lived with Them, the Life Stories of Ramakrishna's Direct Disciples*, by Swami Chetanananda, and *Inspired Talks* (starting in June), by Swami Vivekananda, and other books to be determined.*



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*From the early 1970's through the late 1980's, Lex Hixon hosted **In the Spirit** from WBAI, in NYC. As a list, the fruit of this selfless work reads like a comprehensive Who's Who of the spiritual, artistic and intellectual heart and mind of both Eastern and Western cultures. Over 300 programs can be downloaded at www.srv.org*



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- Programs on Sri Ramakrishna, Divine Mother, Ramana Maharishi, Sri Aurobindo



How Essential is Holy Company?

From the company of the good arises nonattachment.

From nonattachment arises freedom from delusion.

Through freedom from delusion arises steadfastness.

And from steadfastness arises freedom in this very life.
- Shankaracharya

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Babaji Bob Kindler, Spiritual Director



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Bring your questions
from classes and studies

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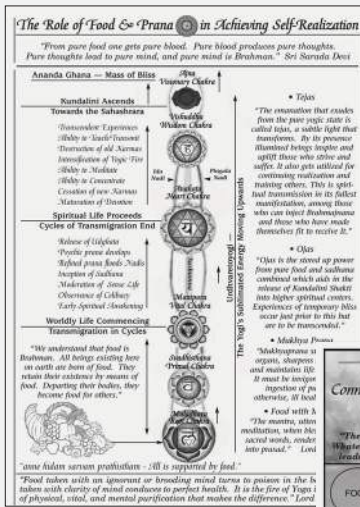
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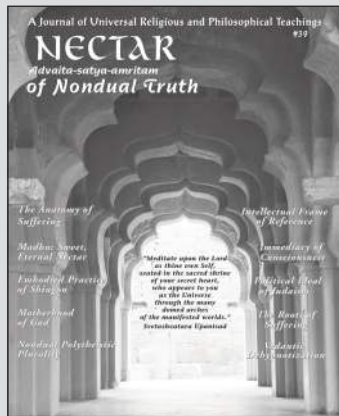
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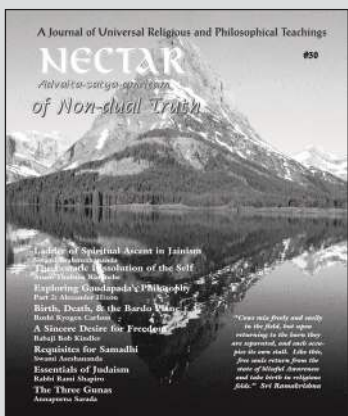
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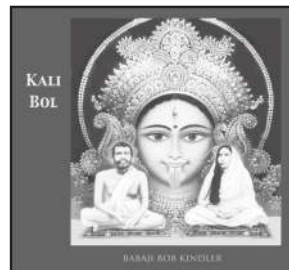
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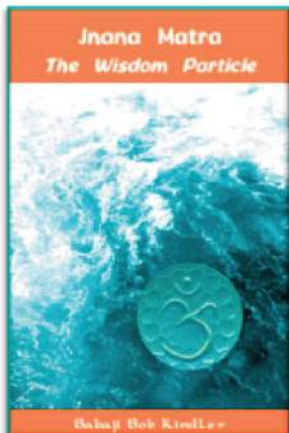
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Reclaiming
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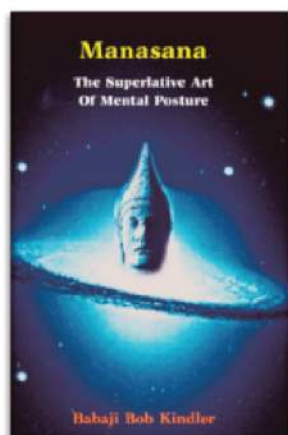


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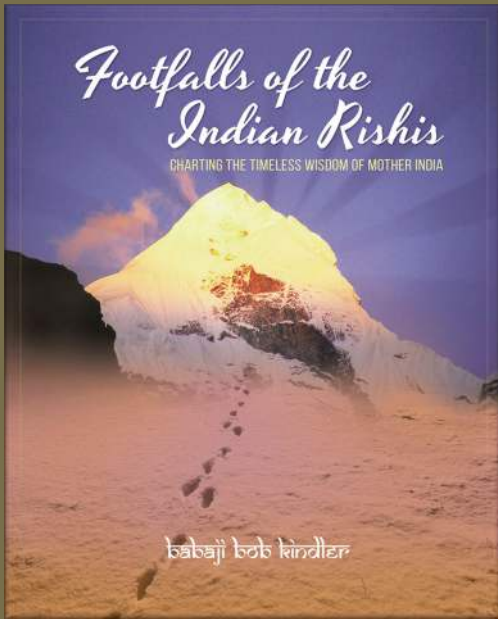
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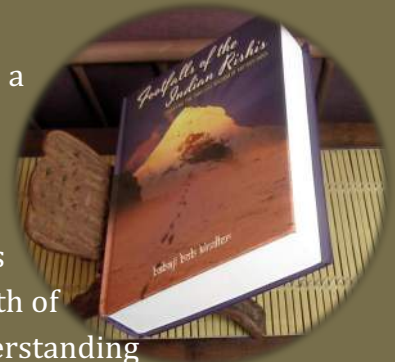
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