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# Path to Happiness

JAMES BURGESS



## **INTRODUCTION**

The meaning of life may seem to be a mystery beyond the grasp of us ordinary folk; but really it is not so very difficult to fathom. The philosophy and beliefs put forward as explanations are many and diverse. Religions and other systems of morality and wisdom are rather numerous, and they seem to disagree with each other on fundamental points. It is so easy therefore to be confused or cynical, and give up looking for the greater purpose that validates our struggles, pain and disappointments.

In this book it is affirmed that life does have meaning and that anyone can discover it. Like any serious matter, it requires effort – and this discovery is not an event, it is a process. We come to realise that in fact there is no other course available to us than that which reveals life's meaning: discovering the meaning of life is the meaning of life.

However, clever philosophy could only ever satisfy the thinking mind. A person is so much more than a complex package of thoughts, and we want to know what to do and why; we want to become skilled in avoiding and solving problems; we want recognition and to have an appropriate place within our social group, to experience love, freedom, achievement and happiness. These matters depend entirely upon what we consider to be meaningful, and it is exactly these questions that are addressed systematically in this work. To find happiness requires that we look for it, and adjust our

principles and policies in order to win it. It is not an accident but a result, a result of making certain life choices consistently, with careful attention to strategy and feedback. We may well need to apply steadfast endeavour over a sustained period of time.

This may not be a comfortable book for people who like to have their own opinions validated, or lack the enthusiasm to think things through. It is intended to challenge conformity of belief and hoped to be controversial. Quite feasibly it could offend religionists, scientists, feminists and all the other ists. Yet the time has surely come for us all to work out what we are doing wrong and take urgent corrective action. Our species is threatened with the criminal ignominy of self-destruction through the abuse of our mother-planet, arising from the wrongness of our collective thinking – how we employ the mind. However, even if those of us who do care are unable to hold sway over those who don't, at least we can find a way through the troubled years ahead without losing what is precious to us personally. And it is our personal process that matters most; we are not responsible for our species' self-harming tendencies, but we are responsible for our own.

## *STRUCTURE OF IDEAS*

There is no greater achievement in life than to master oneself. According to Sufi teachings, it is helpful to look at 7 required aspects or dimensions of self-realisation. If perfected they are together sufficient for exemplary life management. If your car is not happy then typically you will consult an advisor, identify the issue and try something to make it better. Good plan. If you yourself are not happy, then you need to find out why and fix it. Similar process. The car mechanic knows it can only be one of a small number of fundamental problems – perhaps the fuel supply, the engine, the exhaust or whatever. The mind mechanic knows it is one of seven fundamental things. These are clear and universal; though presented differently in Buddhism, Maslow's Hierarchy and so on, the principles are known and renowned across many cultures and centuries.

These 7 qualities help to point to the 7 dimensions:

**Strength; Exploration; Care; Conflict; Questing; Being; Dying**

Within these 7 aspects of life experience, there are subdivisions:

**Strength** – boundaries, identity, choice and truth

**Exploration** – attention, openness, exchange and recognition

**Care** – appreciation, valuing, giving and love

**Conflict** – realisation, decision, completion and freedom

**Questing** – vision, intention, collaboration and faith

**Being** – responsibility, reflection, rectification and release

**Dying** – permission, acceptance, agreement and surrender

For Strength, an earth quality, there are four requirements. We need good boundaries to resist imposition, which requires us to put ourselves in harm's way from time to time so these can be tested. We need a clear identity, so that we know what principles to stand for. We need to show discrimination in our choices, to bring definition to the self, and we need courageous authenticity, by which we prune inappropriate circumstances and people from our lives.

For Exploration, an air quality, there are four requirements. We must master our attention because our life direction is the manifestation of whatever is the focus of mind. We need openness, which includes listening unjudgmentally to other viewpoints, and usually involves study and travel. We need to practise fair exchange, since it is in the give and take that horizons are expanded; and finally we need to experience recognition, the condition of entering another reality and finding it deeply familiar.

For Care, a water quality, there are four requirements. We must find appreciation, enjoying things and people just for what they are. We must learn valuing, in other words having preferences. We must know giving, which is not exchange, it is the exercising of the heart; and finally we must know of love, which is a feeling of the heart which deepens through trust.

Conflict is a fire quality, and to approach it with awareness there are four conditions. Firstly it requires realisation, noticing our physical body response against anything inauthentic; what follows is decision, which cuts away all options except one. Then completion is needed, the closure that prevents the possibility of being sucked back in. The last step is freedom, because occasionally we need to experience the absence of all that binds us in order to confirm we are not fixed into a sterile rut of life.

For Questioning there are four requirements. Without a question there can be no answer, so we need a vision, which is our life quest or question; this has to be followed up by intention, the focusing of attention upon a specific outcome and direction. We also need collaboration, usually including guidance and feedback, since without cooperation of some sort nothing whatever occurs. Finally we have to find faith and the outer expression of the yearnings of the higher self.

Four qualities are central for developing a fuller awareness of our Being. First of all, responsibility, in other words living within our scope of ability and resources and not making silly mistakes. Then reflection is necessary – the recognition that all life mirrors our inner state. This brings us to rectification, through apology and satisfactory resolution of issues, to repair the damage that results from our carelessness. Then we can practise release, the letting go of our attachment to the past and its emotional echoes.

There are four levels of development of the awareness of Dying. To begin with permission and then further into acceptance, allowing what must be to be, since resistance is pointless and shows lack of wisdom. We progress to agreement, so that the process can be fully enjoyed. Finally

surrender is a joyful release into trusting that control and understanding are not required, or indeed helpful.

The text that follows is a fuller explanation of these 28 attributes: What are they? When are they indicated? How to develop them? How to use them? And the results we may expect by growing skilful in their employment. In other words – what, when, where, how and why.

All the concerns of existence, all of our challenges, problems, desires and frustrations can be dealt with by taking on the necessary work to understand and apply these 7 life mysteries through mastering their 28 lessons.



strength: boundaries, identity, choice, truth

## **STRENGTH**

Such is today's world that without being strong enough to hold our own we will probably become victims. So the first principle of happiness and well-being is to command a position of sufficient strength that we sustain our integrity of being and defend our valid claims. This begins with learning how to create and maintain clear, enforceable boundaries.

### *BOUNDARIES*

Lack of good boundaries shows in any feelings we may have of sustained imposition, also confusion and anxiety arising from uncertainty of principles or choices, and any inclinations we may have to deceive or manipulate. Being respected is evidence of good boundaries; so too is showing respect.

It is the boundary that defines the scope and reach of an entity, whether this is a country's border, the front door of your house or the clear definition of self. It distinguishes between included and excluded. Nothing is immutable and, as much as national borders shift over time, so does the scope of self, the personality. Yet we are only as strong as our defences and, moment by moment, we are required to make a statement that defines who we are so that we know what to project and protect. We must defend our boundaries because we are constantly under pressure from external forces that will want to shape us according to their own purposes not ours.

It is entirely unrealistic to believe we can apply discipline over external forces unless we have developed self-discipline. Without self-discipline, our boundaries cannot hold. The very qualities that are needed to be self-controlled are those that control invasive forces in the external world. Employers, salesmen, politicians and parents are examples of persuasive

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forces that are not above taking advantage of poorly-boundaried individuals. It is not only the school bully that we need to defend against; in fact the likeliest people to be invasive at times are probably our lovers, family members and closest friends.

We can identify the need for stronger boundaries in two ways. Firstly the physical body registers this weakness as discomfort; we experience pain or illness when we have allowed inappropriate things to occur. This is not only crying out when someone steps on our toe, it is also the chronic morning cough of a cigarette smoker or the drinker's hangover because they couldn't say No to the offer of 'one-for-the-road'. Social pressure and commercial greed are powerful agencies that make it likelier for us to ingest poisons. Beyond this, there is a physical message in the body when we are imposed upon mentally or emotionally. A feeling in the gut or the heart, sweatiness of the palms, an adrenalin rush, a feeling of sexual urgency, loss of speech, dryness in the mouth and similar experiences are all indicators of possible imposition.

Secondly, we notice that our spontaneity is thwarted or dull. Unless we can readily express our authentic thoughts and feelings, then most assuredly we have been squeezed into a shape that is unnatural. Sadly this is so commonplace that it is hard for people to understand or accept as true. It offends the ego to believe that we are inauthentic. Yet the only legitimate place for us to be, the only authentic work to do, social group to attend, life to live, is one that allows us freely to express who we are without fear or restriction. The reason we do not is that our boundaries have been weak and we have suffered imposition by allowing others' will to dominate our own.

The need for strong boundaries occurs in two scenarios: against those who bully and against those who suck. It must not be imagined that these

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are occasional or unusual occurrences; they are constant and ubiquitous facts of life. The bullies push. Whether they know that they are bullying is entirely irrelevant in this context. Obviously the responsibility rests upon us not to impose upon another by being insensitive, uncaring or abusive. Yet there is an equivalent responsibility not to allow another to get away with being insensitive or abusive against us. We actually enable the bully by allowing them to push us. What is meant by the word bully here is one who disregards the preferences of another and asserts their own because they have the power. Most certainly we include parents, employers and salesmen.

In the opposite direction, the yin rather than the yang, are those who seduce. Flirting is a very obvious example. If a person awakens the sexual appetite of another for amusement with no intention to bring satisfaction, then they are being somewhat abusive. Also emotional blackmail is a device whereby a person draws upon the energy of another, often using social pressure as a tool. A child might elicit extra pocket money with a winning smile and a sob-story, or an old lady might pressurise her dutiful son to visit her inconveniently often, without any attempt to offer an exchange of enjoyable attention. Society would pity the old woman because she is old, in this way friends and neighbours would become the pressure that compels the compliant son, who cannot refute convention however uncomfortable he might feel. Pity very often gives evidence that this sucking behaviour is taking place.

The enactment of good boundaries is entirely described by our knowledge and effective experience of the word No. We must learn what the word means and express this knowledge clearly and consistently. No means No.

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It is elegant and shows grace to enact this without violence. If atmosphere is enough, a glance is redundant; if a glance is enough, a word is unnecessary; if a word is enough then physical force is shameful; if a punch is sufficient then a bullet is criminal. But if a bullet is required then it should be applied. Too much force is violence – but the violence lies in ‘too much’ not the force itself. Certain crimes must be prevented by appropriate force.

If ambiguity has been delivered, then abuse will certainly arise. A parent must expect a child to break the rules if punishment is applied confusingly or inconsistently. Then the parent is the problem not the child. Equally if a husband comes home from the pub and takes his wife without sufficient sensitivity, perhaps once or twice we can point a finger at the brute, but if it's every time, then the issue is more to do with her boundaries than his brutishness. This is not a question of morality; it is a question of reality. If we feel abused then we must speak up. If that doesn't work, then we must remove ourselves from harm's way, or suffer the consequences without blame or self-pity. It takes strength to do this.

Without boundaries there will not be respect. It is not feasible to expect to be respected unless we have clear, strong, consistent boundaries. Further, without receiving respect we will not experience self-respect; without self-respect we will not experience respect from others. They are two sides of the same coin. And without self-respect there can be neither self-love nor happiness.

However idealistic we may be about human nature, about spiritual philosophies of loving acceptance and compassion, the hard truth is that we live in the natural world; and Nature is harsh. Beneath a very thin veneer of civilisation and civil behaviours, the animal nature is strong within us all, and

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acts unconsciously. As survival issues become higher in profile, animal tendencies re-emerge. Animals kill to eat, and fight to claim a place to be.

A mature strong adult demands respect and can enforce their right to defend their own and their family's needs for physical and emotional stability. This claim is enacted by learning the meaning of the word No.

### *IDENTITY*

That which empowers us to apply strong, clear boundaries is Identity. It is inconceivable for a person to be consistent with their boundaries unless their sense of self is well-determined. Equally, it is the application of strong, clear boundaries that creates a specific, unique identity. The snowflake is often celebrated as an example of uniqueness, and the fact that each one is unlike any other is considered a good thing. How incongruous then that the human ego receives such a beating in spiritual teachings! The ego is exactly that which defines the identity as unique; surely it should be celebrated? In Latin it simply means 'I'.

No other being that is alive today, has ever existed or ever will exist, is very much like any other. In fact, when we look at any individual we find their package of idiosyncrasies to be completely different from everyone else's to a remarkable degree. Each of us has somewhat similar physical characteristics, but psychologically this is far from true. The mind of each one of us, and therefore our perceptions and emotional experiences, is absolutely unique.

In order to rub along together, we make rules and suggestions about the extent to which self-expression is permitted. Quite reasonably, it is thought expedient to limit pushing and pulling so that the community can function. Yet we always have to test whether these imposed limits correctly reflect the

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best interests of society as a whole, or whether they serve a powerful, fearful and fearsome elite. And anyway, inwardly or when alone there is really no reason to compress our sense of who we are, what we think, and how we feel. Such unwarranted compression is harmful and must be challenged by informed, mature individuals.

During the formative period of life, as young children, we shape our thoughts and behaviours in alignment with both parents; we copy them. Since we are rather more attentive when they disagree with each other, and it is in our best survival interests to have them in harmony together, we tend unconsciously to adopt a balancing strategy. So the base-line qualities of our own identity are a blend of mother's and father's, and something else in between. For example, if unconsciously mother is always kind and father is always parsimonious, the child might grow to be generous with loved ones and tight-pursed with all other expenditures, and highly aware of this as a successful financial policy.

During the teenage period the appropriate behaviour in order to bond with peers is rebelliousness; but still it is in reference to, and therefore shaped by, parents.

We can see this parental blend of qualities, feelings, beliefs and attitudes as a family template. The third force, that which modifies from the template into individuality, is the creative urge of the self. This is the essence of individual identity, which takes time to unfold and flower. Although hints are in clear evidence during infancy, which become very much clearer in childhood, even during the 20s there remains a lot of uncertainty about how to present ourselves in the world. Indeed the phrase 'life begins at 40' could really better be seen to mean 'identity has matured by 40'. The older we get, the more eccentric (ex-centric) we become, in other words we have our own

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centre of self, which is not excessively that of either our parents or society's norms.

All of our interactions with friends, lovers, family and society demand of us some special attitude. In each case we are supported and encouraged to become individual and interesting to be with, and so a colourful range of expression is generally likely to bring pleasant attention. Family tends to be more restrictive, society less so, provided we stay within boundaries of normality. Lovers are usually more deeply supportive of our emotional peculiarities, and friends are typically far less judgmental than others when we do and say strange things. These are generalisations of course, but perhaps helpful as guidelines.

That said, all of these identity-shaping agencies are also very restricting at times. They all have their own needs and agendas and will not be infinitely tolerant when we rattle their cages or resist their persuasion. Friends collectively create peer-group pressure, society scapegoats extremism, parents project their unfulfilled ambitions upon their adult kids, and lovers have self-centred emotions, which inevitably lead to some degree of manipulation. Let's not get too upset about this; it is the way it is and ever has been so. The rewards and penalties for having our identity align or rebel must be viewed for what they are – the grit that allows the pearl to form. Be aware that the rewards are more difficult to resist than the penalties! A flattering pat on the head can be rather more harmful in fact because it is so seductive. These pats on the head include titles at work, awards and salary increases.

The building of identity is a trial and error procedure that actually never ends, and who we are is an eternal work-in-progress. A great many people

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would benefit from copying an amoeba. This creature's only strategy is to try something else whenever its chosen path is blocked.

Lots of aspects of identity are of trivial importance to us and should not become defining features. Does it really matter to you who wins the match? Do you care much whether right or left get elected? Maybe you do – but maybe you actually don't care. The key issues – what matters – need to be identified and sponsored. Typically, these are best described in terms of qualities rather than opinions. Qualities such as kindness, capability, fairness and humour for example, but it's your choice. Then they can be defined as principles.

A well-defined identity is described by a set of principles consistently applied. A principle is a pre-scripted decision to act in a particular way, no matter how inconvenient. It is not expediency that drives us to self-realisation; it is principle.

Life is change. Always we will come across new situations for which we have no map, no experience, and no predetermined safe course of response available. In such circumstances an unprincipled person can blow about in an unresolved state of confusion with no sense of what to do. This is very uncomfortable and leads to the surrender of will to whomever is clear and dominant. A strong sense of self is the power to stand firm as the winds of change blow hard. Firm identity is a rock.

Even more important than this is the understanding that it is our existential purpose to form the best personality we can. Without this the very meaning of life, though it can be glimpsed, can never be revealed. This is because the meaning of life is different for each one of us and cannot be

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inherited, copied or even learned; it has to be discovered. Discovery occurs as the self becomes itself. This is the essential life mystery.

To complete this life mission requires us to find both clarity and courage. It takes clarity to see which aspects of our identity are inauthentic, and courage to declare that we disagree with what has been imposed upon us. Naturally some of our parents' qualities are indeed completely in alignment with our essence-self, so too are society's norms. But not all of them. The task is to see this and act upon our perception. All in all identity is a creative art-work and there is no legitimate power that has the authority to limit our full spontaneous expression of true self.

### *CHOICE*

Identity becomes identified by exercising choice, therefore choice is the outer expression of selfhood. We choose what to do, what to say, what to eat, where to be and who with; an advanced person can even choose what to think and what to feel. We write our story upon life's blank pages as we make these choices, and then we observe and experience resultant consequences.

Every single one of our choices adds to the story and leads to further options; each contributes something to the life we are building and none is without consequence. A choice is a very important event. It is implied that when we choose one option we thereby deny the possibility in that moment of choosing any other.

The only thing unavailable in a world of free will is choicelessness; choice is an imperative and in fact a moment-by-moment constant of life. Suffering the penalty for not exercising choice is itself a choice – the choice to surrender to another's will or the status quo. Surrender may well be the

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best option, yet if there is to be happiness it needs to be chosen consciously and not imposed.

The freedom to choose needs to be used fully if we are to optimise life circumstances. The potential to choose is undeniable, but the range of options diminishes through a kind of entropy unless we exercise this freedom. Freedom is like money-in-the-pocket, it only has conceptual value until it is spent.

Opportunities flow abundantly through our lives like rivers that have a past and a future. However, they are available for only a short time, and the grasping of them requires vitality. Timing has special importance in this too. A fruit picked early or late usually brings disappointment. It is a tricky balancing skill to have both the patience and trust to allow for ripening, and also the enthusiasm and assertiveness to pick it before its magnificence fades.

Occasionally on reflection we may come to recognise that we are making certain choices regularly, despite the fact that the consequences are sub-optimal. We may wake up each and every Sunday morning wishing we had chosen to have one less drink last night, yet Saturday comes around and we do the exact same thing again. That's not something an amoeba would do. Or the more serious long-term version might be getting caught up with lovers who have sex appeal but no conversation. It's too late the morning after – whether with the hangover or an unsuitable lover.

Since temptation takes so many forms and disguises, we would assuredly benefit from having a pre-determined set of policies, and create the practices of life out of them. These policies contribute in a major way to the form of our identity. Having them does not have to limit the freedom to be

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appropriately spontaneous. It just makes it easier to be who we choose to be if we have a clear sense of our default behaviour – those things we choose in the absence of overriding factors.

The range of choice is unlimited in one sense, in that our options are without number. Yet in another sense, we can add structure to limit the compass of choices available in order to make them more comprehensible and less overwhelming. Esoteric wisdom offers some guidelines. Four basic elements are observed as fire, earth, air and water. We can opt to be more dynamic, more practical, more philosophical or more empathic for example. Three basic attitudes also exist – initiating, stabilising or adaptable. We can opt to be more inventive, more fixed, or more accommodating. These two patterns combine into a rainbow of personality types – from someone who is frequently the person who originates dynamic new initiatives through to the one who can normally quite readily empathise and accommodate another's way of being, and rarely starts anything.

In practice, we access any and all of these modes of being, yet almost certainly have tendencies to be a certain way given certain situations. It is helpful to expand our experience by occasionally choosing differently.

Two aspects contribute to our choice-making. One is mental, where we have thought things through to a point where we have principles and policies, and a formulated philosophy of sorts. The other is rooted in the physical body. We have a vast and meaningful compendium of knowledge stored inside us and it steers us true if only we remember to access it. We access it by simple, yet subtle observation. Many signs exist to tell us what is good and what is not a good thing. Gut feeling is but one; the body has ancient memories coded into it, and these need not be left dormant. They are awakened to the extent that we use them and trust them. Typically they

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are felt as excitement or tension in some particular area. Similarly words can slip into the mouth and announce evidence of unconscious truths – the Freudian Slip is a celebrated example. They speak volumes, but only if we listen will we hear the message they give us.

It is surely trite to observe that life is an abundantly rich experience, and yet that is not how many people see it in practice. It is more typical to meet a person who is disgruntled with their job, frustrated with their children, bored or worse with their partner, and barely able to fend off depression with drugs and television. This suggests a history of poor choices.

Vitality expresses itself through enthusiasm and spontaneity; it is underwritten by confidence and self-love. And surely our primary imperative is vitality? Being alive requires that we make choices, and the absence of this is lifelessness. So to ask the question – why is my life so dispiriting? begs the answer – because you made a series of choices that betrayed your authenticity. Then the question becomes – what can I do? and the answer is self-evident: choose differently – now and from now on, always. How do I know what to choose? Consult your body feelings and your principles. If one choice doesn't work, then make another, and another, until happiness is your normal everyday state of being. It is not a privilege, it is not only a right, it is a duty to live in happiness.

One last thought about choice. It does not always have to be backed up with action. This is subtle, and a secret known to mystics; one can make a choice inwardly. Certain processes of mind can be learned and practised that promote successful resolutions to issues without external engagement with circumstances. In simple terms this is the orientation of attention stubbornly in the direction of optimism. Expectation of good fortune is what attracts good fortune. We must discipline our feelings so that we do not exult in

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failure or the acceptance of disappointment. Self-pity is the rotting of mind and must be avoided at all costs.

## *TRUTH*

Truth as a philosophical concept is beyond the scope of our intelligence; no thinker has been able to come up with a pronouncement that deals with this question convincingly. So we need not concern ourselves with it in that sense. However, we do know what it feels like to experience untruth; it feels wrong.

We need to look at two aspects of untruth – the outer and inner. People tell lies, deceive and manipulate as a strategy to achieve a result they feel they could not otherwise manage. This indicates a lack of power. There is no need for untruth if we have the power simply to state our requirements and have them met. Therefore by allowing our words to register untruth, we are instructing ourselves to diminish our strength and cement impotence into personality.

It gets even worse when the person we are lying to is ourselves. This self-betrayal is the most destructive force of all. If it is your life strategy to deceive and manipulate, then at least be honest about it to yourself! You see, the point is that if you were honest about lying, you would feel somewhat ashamed and, one prays, have then to begin the arduous task of self-rescue. There is reluctance to do this.

Spirit is glorious, powerful, straightforward and indomitable; how can untruth ever be reconciled with that? Those who deceive are turning their back on Spirit.

To discover whether a person feels powerless, we can look at the evidence that is found in their words and feelings. They speak words that register blame, self-pity and pessimism. “The government is made up of dishonest fools; my disappointments are the result of the ineptitude of others; my lover is selfish and inconsiderate; it was better in the old days; there’s nothing to be done about it; life’s a shit and then you die”. These words are more than just evidence of powerlessness, they actually create the condition. And this condition is felt as depression, frustration, ennui and petulance. It is thoroughly destructive.

White lies are to be avoided. They turn grey and then black as the degeneration worsens. If someone asks you if you like their new clothes, and in fact you don’t like them, then say so. If they get upset about it, well whose problem is that? Do you really want their emotional immaturity to sponsor your own inauthenticity? Why would you do that?

Even on important matters where truth may cost us dear, we nevertheless need to stand firm and trust that all will turn out well in the end. Yes it does take courage.

There is perhaps one exception, for all but the most zealous spiritual aspirant. In the event that we are being coerced and the price for truth-telling is simply beyond our capacity to bear, then perhaps we will speak falsely. In this case it is enough that we admit inwardly – I am lying to avoid submission to a greater power.

It is certainly a major challenge to adhere to the principle of truth-telling; especially since society is structured around the opposite principle. Two particularly offensive laws exist that speak eloquently of this. One is called ‘caveat emptor’, or ‘buyer beware’. In other words, ‘expect to be cheated’.

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The other is more heinous – in courts, on oath we are required to ‘tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth’. This is absolute nonsense, an absurd, unattainable requirement. It’s made worse by the permission given to prosecutors to bully the witness and interrupt their testimony. His intention is to win, not to discover facts, so how can he not bend ‘truth’ to favour his client’s position?

It is rather similar in ordinary conversations. The other person is always coming from a position and often has a vested interest to bend the facts. In such conversations, almost always emotionality wins over reason; and the loser is truth. We need to notice this. Whenever a conversation becomes highly charged, then truth is in peril.

To speak an unpalatable truth, it is better to speak softly and from our own experience, beginning sentences with ‘I’ not ‘You’. And the words ‘I feel that you...’ count as ‘You’. Furthermore, if we have our own agenda, and if we are more concerned with that than truth, then truth will dissolve into the ethers.

So why go to all this trouble, if the odds are so powerfully stacked against us, and everyone else lies anyway? The answer is found both in spiritual teachings and in our body sensations. ‘The Truth shall set you free’, a much-quoted aphorism, is the short version of a biblical passage that suggests that we first have to get ourselves into a heightened state of consciousness, metaphorically labelled the Kingdom of Heaven. Then we will know the truth and, as a result, become liberated. The implication is that untruth is a prison for the unawakened. In Sufism the path of truth is considered the fast-track to self-realisation.

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But anyway, we need not make this a matter of goodness or morality. It feels so very much better to live without deception. The body thrives on authenticity, and suffers discomfort, and eventual debilitation, when the mouth dissembles. Surely we already know this?

In this world – called the World of Lies by Sufis – what happens when we adopt radical truth-telling as a life strategy is that we offend lots of people very deeply. This leads to rejection and loss; we lose those who cannot face the truth. We can become somewhat unemployable, rather intimidating, out of kilter with our social group and generally thrown back upon our own resources to cope with the resultant isolation. Yet out of these ashes is born a phoenix. What follows is real, deep and profoundly satisfying – a true reward for having the integrity and strength to be authentic in our every action and involvement.

**Strength depends upon four aspects:  
boundaries, identity, choice and truth  
and is developed as we learn to master the word No**

## **EXPLORATION**

Our essential life purpose is to experience ourselves as widely and deeply as possible. This occurs as a result of exploration, or ‘trial and error’. Our path of exploration is both created by, and assimilated by, our power and attitude of attention.

### *ATTENTION*

The mind is a powerful tool, the most powerful we have. Like any device of power it is dangerous if misused and requires training to use properly. If properly applied, then the mind can fulfil the desire of will, and answer the appetites of curiosity. Usually the element of Air is considered as very characteristic of the processes of mind, and indeed we notice that our thoughts and consequential emotions scatter readily as pressures shift. We cannot control easily what we think and feel since the mind is so skittishly responsive to external phenomena, and also internal releases of hormones. But unless we do we will blow about as a candle in the wind, or else become rigid and habitual.

That which controls the mind is attention; attention is the focusing of mind. When we concentrate attention we can channel our thoughts, curiosity, imagination and feelings upon a specific point of interest with a particular attitude. It is a great achievement to master attention completely, probably almost never accomplished by anyone other than yogis, fakirs and such types. Yet we can at least improve ours by two classes of exercise. One is inward-looking in the form of meditation, and the others outward-looking, as the concentration upon a task or a fascinating experience.

## exploration: attention, openness, exchange, recognition

The need for us to focus our attention arises whenever we have a question to resolve or a task to accomplish. The threat of harm is often helpful as indeed we observe when people learn to drive. Youngsters who previously lacked any significant capacity for getting to grips with life become highly present and capable of ‘multitasking under stress’, a phrase which describes motoring rather well. The phrase also describes most of daily life for many people. If we cannot concentrate then we cannot find a useful position in the world and the penalties are piled on until eventually we are forced to learn how. We must somehow win food and shelter, and this is not often possible without giving these matters our serious, concentrated attention.

Another condition exists which can only be properly dealt with by learning how to control attention. When, through ill-discipline, the mind is allowed freedom to wander without limits, it can be very disturbing. At the very least this will lead to dreaminess and confusion, and could be even very uncomfortable when this is allowed to become extremely neurotic. Fear-based thoughts can quite quickly dominate the mind in the form of anxiety, pessimism and even paranoia. The failure to achieve, and chronic uncertainty about things generally, are indicators of poor attention.

Two aspects of attention are evident. Bringing an amorphous congregation of sensory data together is one requirement – in other words pulling outer sensory data towards a centre for perception and interpretation. This information registers through eyes and ears of course, and yet there are many more sources than five. What is called ‘gut feeling’ is just one example of how the body responds to data. A good teacher can calibrate their awareness of how well their message is being understood by noticing the stress upon their own voice and its corresponding tone. A ‘lucky’ poker player has another strategy; we each have our own ways.

To integrate this mass of input data into a laser sharp point of optimal influence requires that we learn how to find the pineal gland. This is a point at the centre of the head and corresponds to what esotericists call the third eye. It takes training to master the ability to locate it, but then what doesn't? Meditation can lead to this skill. For those reluctant to learn meditation, sport is an excellent choice; so too is playing a musical instrument, especially with others. It is frequently referred to as 'being in the zone'.

When we align ourselves completely with this point, then an extraordinary perceptual capacity is offered; we can know what previously we did not. Questions dissolve. Notice the difference between 'questions dissolve' and 'questions are answered'. The true resolution of a quest is for its answer to become irrelevant. Seekers are attached to finding – and yet a higher state is that of impartial observation. In this case the open third eye is employed as an agency through which to experience awe rather than facilitate the power of understanding and manifestation.

As children we are made to develop control of concentration. Society supports the latter yet some consider such force harmful to the child's wellbeing and suggest that play is better than work to achieve the required result. Putting aside the question of age though, it is clear that both approaches have their advantages. In some cases the mind will effortlessly learn to hold itself unblinkingly upon the target of its fascination, and in other cases become obedient to a powerfully stubborn force of will. Two examples illustrate the two outcomes. In one, a person's ability to read the nuances of expression in another's face can reach a near superhuman degree of perceptual acuity between lovers at play. In another, a tired driver can bully their mind to keep awake even when the body absolutely insists on closing the eyes to rest. We see that both joyful fascination and risk-of-death seriousness are effective tools to promote excellence of concentration.

It is well known that in Zen training the master whacks the student very courteously with a stick if they allow their attention to wander. This is not punishment; this is the employment of the body's reluctance to experience pain as a device to help school the student's mind towards exemplary control of attention, if not through awe then through discipline. The carrot-and-stick approach.

Most people are enslaved by mind-control techniques such as political propaganda, marketing, peer-group pressure, parental dominance and so on. A mind that is out of our own control is certain to be manipulated by these forces. Only through control of our thoughts can we control our own circumstances and experiences. Further, it is unpleasant to live in confusion, because such a mental state gives rise to an equivalent state of emotionality – uncertain ever-changing emotions upon which no solid future can be constructed.

A trained attitude of attention generates a condition of searching curiosity and genuine concern. It's like when we travel abroad – we enjoy a little bit of culture shock because it stimulates a deeper involvement in our here-and-now circumstances. We look below the surface of things to determine what they mean.

It is meaningful and helpful to think of life as a movie in which we are the script writer, the director, the protagonist, and even the antagonist too. We create the story with our attention – and the only real test of a good story is in its entertainment value. Part of the entertainment is invested in the feelings we have, and for some people the more poignant the better. Some like romance, some want a thrill, some yearn for spectacle and some actually enjoy violence and horror. Most of us like drama at least to some extent, without which there is no story. What we place our attention on

determines our life scenarios – the movie we are choosing – and the quality of attention determines how we experience them. By training ourselves to control our attention we can make these determinations consciously and correct any errors of choice.

Attention has great power. Focusing upon any scenario will certainly change its outcome. This has application in counselling and therapy where the therapist can stimulate the resolution of an emotional problem simply by directing high quality listening attention. It also has impact upon the realisation of goals – attainment is inevitable for a person who holds a firm course. Keep your eyes on the prize! Also by noticing the echo of what we put out, we can much more easily adjust our direction and take others' feedback into account. It is quite shocking sometimes to observe how few people understand that what happens to them is the echo of what earlier actions they took, and what expectation they hold. By observing cause and effect we reclaim authorship of our lives and authority over our situations.

### *OPENNESS*

Openness is our willingness to modify our perceptions and beliefs. In one sense it is the opposite inclination to that required to firm up Identity. We are examined at each choice-point whether to expand or contract. Both attitudes are necessary in their season, and there is always a fluctuation between these two directions of self-realisation; fluctuation is inevitable and healthy, and actually one requirement of optimal growth is that it is enthusiastically sponsored.

Sentences that begin with the phrase 'I wonder...?' suggest openness – for example: 'I wonder how they do things in the next village' or 'I wonder what Mars is like'. Indeed 'I wonder why...' begins the pursuit of knowledge

and 'I wonder what happens if...' begins scientific experimentation. We notice that in one context wonder is synonymous with awe, and this is helpful for us to identify the quintessence of the mental state that sustains openness; it is wide-eyed, open-mouthed, delight – joyful discovery through curiosity.

Curiosity is an aspect of mind that mirrors spirit itself; it is energetic, it is unbounded, it is innocent of purpose and it is free of dogma. We see it in babies from the first moment they open up to absorb impressions from the external environment. This shows that curiosity is fundamental in a healthy, growthful being.

We are discussing something rather more important than that which underwrites tourism or further education. Every living thing is compelled towards expansion. In the animal and vegetable kingdoms, this is made clear in the physical dimension – old trees and old elephants' tusks are bigger than young ones. For higher species growth continues on the level of consciousness – we get wiser rather than taller. Those who do not are subject to entropy and a diminishing claim on life. We see therefore that unless we expand awareness, we fall into the pit of entropy; we die off.

It is close-mindedness that gives rise to fear and its consequential violence. Wars become unavoidable. Unless, as a species, we develop more openness the outcome will be catastrophic. Inevitably this has implications personally. People ready to change their ways and opinions are more likely to survive and thrive; ever has it been so.

It is in conversation that openness becomes fully expressed. We can read books all we like and, having no sense of committed disagreement, feel that we have openness. Yet until the voice is engaged we really have no way of

knowing quite how dogmatic we really are. Conversation awakens previously hidden or disguised narrow-mindedness. To express and develop openness it is necessary to consider the possibility that the other person's point of view is valid – and occasionally perhaps even that ours is not the best. It is by no means necessary to win an argument, or indeed to lose one; it is enough to contemplate another perspective without bigotry.

The fluctuating nature of life causes us to make creative decisions about when to do 'this' and when to do 'that'. Sometimes it is better to be open, sometimes it is better not to be. Having the ability to be open does not mean that we must exercise it at all times. For example, a person may define themselves as a 'non-drinker' and yet that self-limitation may occasionally be inappropriate and diminish their social influence. A more relaxed version of the same principle may allow for at least a glass of champagne at a wedding.

Being open implies having options – the option not to drink is as valid as the option to drink, and importantly vice-versa. It is a question of finding the correct dynamic balance that most authentically expresses our best strategy for long-term happiness. Neither permissiveness nor harsh self-discipline is likely to lead to the life-condition of joy.

Generally, openness sponsors expansion, and with it comes a wider social reach and more choice. This can bring a tendency to spread ourselves more thinly, so if we are already very busy, it may not always be appropriate. However, if we find life a little dull or uninspiring then it is probably because we need further input and engagement. Typically, to achieve this some effort is demanded, especially as we grow older because we can lose the appetite and urgency to explore. Yet there are many examples of people who make good use of the greater freedoms of age that come from releasing family and work responsibilities. Having a 'bucket list' can be very helpful –

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this is a self-determined challenge to do what we have always wanted to do but never found the time.

The most obvious activity that helps us to remain open is travel. When we meet new scenarios we are forced to awaken new aspects of ourselves, and very often this is accompanied by difficult emotions. In fact without some culture shock we are probably not really 'travelling' at all. Revisiting the same comfortable type of hotel on another beach in Spain is not likely to evoke an emotional response. It is only when we are pushed out of our comfort zone that growth occurs. Strange food, unexpected behaviours, imperfect information, things being out of our control, having none of our home comforts and so on – these trigger our feelings. When feelings are triggered – and only when – then an opening up is possibly taking place. It is surprising sometimes to learn that what we thought of as staunch opinions can quickly shift when we are abroad – even taboo questions of sexual practices, religious attitudes and political opinion.

Of course travel is not the only way through which we can open our horizons. Various media – social networking, cinema, literature and pub arguments all contribute something. Yet in the end openness is best expressed in the expanded qualities we bring to our connection with others through conversation; this most certainly means expanding our social circle to embrace new people with different ideas.

Even when we have a clear personal vision and appetite for advancement, should this degenerate into blind ambition then we lose a sense of healthy fluidity and adaptability. We are social beings and our wellbeing depends upon interactivity. Sharing our goals is a part of this, and in any case essential for success in any endeavour. Such sharing demands that we allow others to influence us with their viewpoints and requirements.

This not only compensates for our own inadequacies and inexperience, it enhances the joyful aspect of life that arises within shared projects.

A lot is said to encourage physical fitness especially as the years pile on, yet what about mental fitness? It is sadly not at all unusual to meet a person whose beliefs, attitudes and understandings are permanently crystallised even before their 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. No significant development of consciousness occurs thereafter. This is death in life. Living things are not fixed; fixity is death. A fixity of mind must be addressed – through exercises and behaviours that demand liveliness in our mental approach. Openness heals – body, heart and soul – and an appetite for life is the deepest evidence of a psychologically healthy person. Inevitably the heart has some resonance with the mind, and so keeping the mind open tends to keep the loving heart softer and more radiant. With this approach, all situations, however demanding, can be rendered somewhat enjoyable, simply by having no prejudice or expectation.

### *EXCHANGE*

Whenever two living things meet there is an exchange of some kind. Living is exchange. Between people, this interactivity is a complex affair having many components on all planes of body, mind and feelings. Even on the basic animal level without any acknowledgement required, we influence and are influenced by those in physical proximity to us, because of our breathing, chemical releases, a tendency to match body language and so on. Also without much awareness of it, we are subject to a moderation of the atmosphere of feelings that arises naturally when two people are near each other. Exchange is central and inevitable as a condition of life.

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As humanity arose out of its roots in the animal kingdom, so too did trade; the exchange of goods and services is particularly emblematic of our species. In the harsh reality of life, swapping surpluses makes good sense, whether your trading partner is friend or foe. Food, skills and knowledge are difficult to acquire and essential for survival and comfort. Bringing the light of consciousness to this phenomenon we notice that there is an inherent sense within us that 'fair exchange' is good and that, in the absence of this, sooner or later we will feel an offended sense of injustice and the need for recompense or at least termination of mutual dealings. The origins of this feeling lie in the sense that personal and tribal survival might well depend upon the fairness of any exchange. So even in the modern era, any continuing imbalances in exchange will likely trigger deeply unconscious survival-type emotions.

This observation can be extended to the fullest depth of human interaction, where what is exchanged is nothing more than attention. Though it might seem inconsequential and insubstantial, our feelings tell us of a hidden truth – that people really do not like to continue to give significantly more attention than they receive, and sooner or later will do something to rectify the imbalance.

The currencies of exchange are varied and usually interchangeable. Anything considered of value can be bartered, overtly or covertly. Food, sex, security, attention, services, prestige, position, permission...these are all used as currency. What is central and incontrovertible is that to maintain harmony both parties must feel a sense of mutuality of benefit, which over time tends towards a perceived fairness.

Whenever we are with another person, we are advised therefore to bring a high degree of consideration to find balance in the exchange that is

occurring. If we are engaged in trading, then it is actually better for us to ensure that the trade is fair. We may feel titillation if we pull off a successful cheat. But really! Is such short-term pleasure and the stolen fruit worth the greater cost? Cheats are always going to be cheated themselves one day, because that is the world they choose to inhabit. Honest people recognise each other and gravitate together because the atmosphere of integrity is a palpable reality for them. Which world is preferable for you?

Every meaningful interaction has fair exchange as its foundation. If we betray the implied contract, then disruption is fast approaching. A husband who no longer shows concern for his wife's feelings will eventually become disappointed with their love-making. A friend who talks and talks and talks should not expect to be tolerated indefinitely however patient and compassionate the listener may be. Both husband and windbag have stepped over the implied line of trust – that exchanges must be reasonably balanced.

On the other hand if we make a point of always being fair, we will be trusted more – not only by those who know us, but also by other honest people since they recognise our integrity. Being trusted, trustworthy and trusting are all interconnected conditions of being – and self-evidently a good and wholesome life reward for a constancy of fair exchange.

A metaphor can be drawn that likens the conscious avoidance of unfair exchange in trade to the realm of exchange of ideas. There are some people who are convinced that their own wisdom is supreme, that they have nothing to learn. An open-minded person does not fall into this trap. What actually occurs when knowledge is communicated is reciprocal. In the more obvious example, everyone has some experiences and understandings that we do not, and from which we can benefit. To believe otherwise is just silly.

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However, there is also a more obscure aspect to consider – that a teacher needs a student in order even to be a teacher. True knowledge is seemingly passed from the more assertive to the more passive, yet it only arises because of the interaction itself – so how can we say which party has contributed more? The question is moot. The communication of ideas is an exchange of wisdom and can only exist when both sides of the equation are committed to and in harmony with the exchange. Teaching and learning arise together, each depending upon the other. Also, a teacher who is not open to further learning cannot inspire students but can only inform them. How could someone with a closed mind ever open the mind of another? It is our curiosity-driven appetite for further understanding that awakens the inspired attention of another.

Consider a situation in which you have gained an unfair advantage – perhaps a shopkeeper has accidentally undercharged you or given too much change. What do you do? The temptation is strong to hide the error, and if this seduces you it is likely to be followed by an unpleasant feeling of shame. It could be worse in the case that you have lost sight of your finer feelings and perhaps even celebrate a sense of having beaten down another person in a contest – behaviour similar to the crowing of a cock. It could be worse still and you decide to return the money with a holier-than-thou disposition. Moralising self-righteousness is very ugly, and so often it is one of the earlier indicators of imminent war.

Another approach is to understand that keeping the money is foolish; it is evidence of poverty-consciousness and leads to further poverty. By cheating, we may well end up with more money but it will never be enough. Poverty has little to do with how much money we have but is a feeling, the feeling of lack. Returning the money is an administrative question – we are helping to rectify a simple error, fully trusting that treating people fairly is

the normal behaviour of a mature adult. Trusting in life is what makes life trustworthy.

The simplest and most commonplace type of exchange is in day-to-day ordinary conversations. Individually they may lack intensity, drama and even importance but as a collection, these events comprise the bulk of our social life, therefore our society and our experience of ourselves as part of the community. In so many ways these describe and define who we are and what is shaping our life circumstances. We do well to attend to them with great care.

It is likely that we try to fit in by understating any extreme positions we may hold. We will probably adopt the conventional attitudes and practices associated with our particular sub-set of society. Such an approach secures our place as part of it all. However, it is no less important to employ these conversations to establish the differences between us and the rest, taking a stance against those who would deny our set, and indeed our individuality.

The resultant friction must not be seen as a bad thing, and should not be avoided entirely. Diplomacy and other social skills can be found in order to minimise quarrels but the complete avoidance of such conflict is not in our best interests. Inevitably this would lead to an inauthentic self-expression and the eventual denial of who we really are. By its very nature, exchange includes friction because it is in essence a vigorous pushing and pulling without final resolution. Were it not so, society would lose its dynamism and we our personality and joy.

## *RECOGNITION*

Linguistically the word is re-cognition, 'again knowing'. It carries resonance with such ideas as understanding, empathy, communion and

remembrance; it suggests a state of reconnection with an aspect of self that has been forgotten. This is the universal aspect. So, there is a part of us as individuals that touches Unity, and this can identify itself as universal; if we can but remember it then we know Unity. It is this that motivates the mind towards spiritual practice. The forgetting itself is an inevitable result of incarnation since the separation that established individuality necessarily precludes our identification with Unity. We cannot be both lost in transcendence and committed to corporeal existence; they are mutually exclusive by their very essence. Yet even as we are bound by physicality, the universal aspect of self knows of itself and yearns to be recognised. The yearning is both a feeling and a perception.

To represent this yearning let's use the analogy of the ocean with its surface and its depth. Its deeper regions are dark and mysterious while its surface is windblown and ephemeral in nature. Each interconnects and informs the other and, despite having very different appearances, they are not in fact separate at all, they are aspects of each other. The depth of the ocean is like the soul; the surface is like the mind. Our yearning for recognition expresses as the soul's dark and mysterious memory, having a womb-like quality that echoes with our pre-birth knowledge of eternal realities. As mind, the yearning is projected upon the surface phenomena and scenarios of life and creates what we consider to be reality. This is called Maya by Hindus and Ishq by Sufis. It is very helpful and perhaps even enlightening to comprehend that the illusion of life has its origins in our soul's yearning to remember itself. If the soul were to remember itself, it would need to soften its boundaries of separation so that it could merge with the stuff of which it is made – pure spirit.

A Sufi story tells of the Salt Puppet who has lived all of his life in the desert until he travels to the sea for the very first time. He dips his toe into

the water to find out what it is and, as the toe dissolves, he learns that he must surrender part of himself in order to find out. His yearning for recognition is more powerful than his delight in self-love, so he walks into the ocean, simultaneously losing himself and rediscovering himself.

As human beings we are partly motivated towards self-love and self-proclamation, and partly motivated by universal love and self-surrender. Demanding to be recognised for your achievements and your wonderfully charismatic personality is entirely valid – all power to you as you make your claims! Yet the equal and opposite yearning for recognition is soul-based and only ever fulfilled by surrendering to Unity. This can be achieved through a spiritual practice that awakens the transcendental state. Such practices do not need to be religious in the sense that they belong to a system of belief. Yet neither can they be equated simply to our love of Nature or music. We can indeed access transcendental states through these and other things – but not just by liking them a lot. Perhaps theoretically we can arrive at the gate to transcendence alone, but in Sufism it is not thought either effective or wise to make the journey without guidance. The risk of self-deception is high, and there is also a quite realistic risk of possession too. We began this study with an emphatic foundation of strong boundaries for good reason. The light of self-discovery is juice to those agencies that feed on others. We must guard against them.

Recognition arises when we have mastered exchange. The exaltation of the principle of exchange is found within the state of ‘reflexive self-consciousness’. This phrase is also known as the ‘Golden Rule’, which explains that it’s a good idea to be aware of the impact we are having on others in all of our behaviours since we get back what we give out. If we want to receive abundance then we need to be generous; if we want to be

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loved then we must be loving. And to the point in hand – if we want to be recognised then we have to offer it first.

Without exception, everyone we meet is a pale version of their potential selves – we are all capable of a greater depth and width of self-expression. This potential can be awaked by recognition. As we recognise potential in another, then they can feel the recognition as an energy-field and step into this field, which is created by the attention we are giving to it. In other words, we create a mental image of a world in which this person has realised further aspects of themselves – and they can then bring it into reality by making their claim. This claiming is also called assumption.

Parents have a profound responsibility to co-create a positive, encouraging story of their child’s capabilities. So too do priests and teachers for their followers. It is perhaps controversial to make the observation that history’s infamous criminals – from Genghis Khan to Stalin – don’t even scratch the surface of the evil perpetrated by religions and teachers that disallow self-expression on moral grounds, and point to the Great Denier in the sky as their Authority for their bullying psychological violence. They brainwash their flock into being afraid to live and even more afraid to die. One message is enough – by following the Golden Rule you will come to recognise yourself and then you will know Unity. All else is padding.

**Exploration depends upon four aspects:**

**attention, openness, exchange and recognition**

**and is developed as we learn to master the word Hello**

## CARE

There are many meanings attached to the word 'Love', so many in fact that a great deal of ambiguity has arisen about whether the various interpretations are all pointing to the same thing. Parental duty, lust, and national chauvinism are all called love, yet they are so very different in feeling. Here we use the word 'Care' to indicate a feeling that expresses as kindness and consideration. Its foundation lies in appreciation, and reaches its culmination as a fullness of joy in the heart.

### *APPRECIATION*

Appreciation is the act of raising the value of a thing or person. It is very exceptional indeed for anyone to lack the capacity to feel and show appreciation for things – possessions, performances, social groups, music, Nature, and animals are some obvious examples. It is a greater achievement and entirely normal for us to feel and show appreciation for people. Saying Thank You is an art. Whom we appreciate speaks volumes about who we are; so too does how we show it. If we notice whom we appreciate and how we show it, then we can learn what is of greatest value to us.

It may be useful to remark upon the opposite principle, depreciation, and its relationship to the idea of deprecation. Putting somebody down has the reverse outcome to what is usually intended and the accuser inevitably suffers in the end. This is because we get back what we give out. In fact if we notice that someone is speaking negatively about another, we are wise to be rather objective. Such comments probably say more about the accuser than the accused. Whatever we say contributes to the life we are building so we are advised to speak only positively in the knowledge that any negativity will rebound upon us sooner or later.

In order to refine our knowledge of what appreciation really is, we need to draw a distinction between two quite different things – the bubbling up of a lovely sense of giving that spontaneously pours out towards a person, and the strategy of exchange.

We can acknowledge that a parent funds their child's education, and that a man offers flowers and compliments to a pretty woman. An interesting question is this – would the child still get the money if they wanted to study rock music instead of a 'proper' profession? Would the woman still get her flowers if the man had no desire for sex? In other words, are they showing appreciation for the person as such, or their usefulness in fulfilling our own agenda? It may be that the parents value social respectability more than their child's creativity, and that the man puts greater value on sex appeal than personality and friendship. In such cases these gestures are not being extended to people at all; they are being given in support of generalised qualities such as sex appeal and compliance with family reputation.

There are social conventions to instruct us how and when to show our appreciation – examples include applause from the audience, presents at Christmas, the graduation ceremony and a wedding party. These are helpful and encourage us all to express what we feel. There is a danger however that we express what we are told to feel whether or not we are actually feeling it. This renders the gesture empty and insincere, and clouds our ability to know what we do actually feel. It can slowly rob us not only of our authentic expression but even our capacity effectively to feel genuine appreciation. This is not only a theoretical danger for the sad minority. A lot of people have in fact lost the awareness of the heart as that centre which registers love; they may think love and behave love, but actually they don't feel it.

The child will accept the money and the woman will accept the flowers because that is what they are offered, but if given falsely in the name of love when the true intention is exchange then there will likely be resentment and disdain created not goodwill. The outer gestures are symbolic, they convey the implication of care, a heart-feeling, and so to show appreciation in its fullest reach there must be heart resonance, empathy and sincerity. Within this is the willingness to open up to a greater degree of emotional intimacy, implying greater willingness to respond to the other's needs.

Many adults carry negative emotions that arose in early childhood because they were not adequately and accurately appreciated for who they truly were. These needy emotions are triggered unconsciously when they receive gestures later in life. If we offer flattery simply to fulfil our own agendas then we are using their neediness to our advantage. This is better avoided – better for them, better for us – since it never leads to a wholesome outcome.

In contrast to flattery or predetermined social requirements, a more natural behaviour would be to express what you feel in the moment you are feeling it. A smile, a touch, a gasp of pleasure, or any real expression of spontaneous joy, is worth more than an expensive piece of contractual love tax. In the first case both participants are raised up, in the second there is measurement and the strong risk of cynicism.

## *VALUING*

Certain people and things are worth more to us than others. For some reason we value them as more important. This may not be in accord with poorly understood or entirely misconceived religious ideals such as that 'we are all equal in the eyes of God', but it is the case, and indeed so it should

be. It is our own eyes that we look through and here on Earth we have our own needs and preferences, which are the motivations that inform our choices.

If appreciation is seen as the capacity to raise in value, then valuing is the specific enactment of that capacity according to some characteristic theme of our life. Whom and what we appreciate influences the heart, and the extent of that influence is determined by what we value most. This determination may be idealised as a set of principles but it is what we practise that makes the difference. In Exchange, value is accorded to a thing by what is paid for it, which is usually money or money's worth. But here we are studying Care and deepening of love, so coin will not do as a metric. The measure of love is almost a meaningless idea since its perfection is surely in that it has no need for reciprocation. Yet Care can be measured in some ways, even if the final count is always subjective and intuitive. We can ask ourselves questions to find out how we are actually ranking in importance the people and things that we care about. Questions like how much time we spend, how much attention, how much forbearance we have towards them, and perhaps most importantly which way do we choose when we have to make a choice between them and others?

Our resources are limited, and our attention is single, so choice is unavoidable. Our friends and family put pressure on us to spend time with them, so for example with whom do we spend Christmas Day? Also they have differences of philosophy and morality – should we try to avoid falling in love with someone of another social rank or religion because we are taught to do so and advised that otherwise we will suffer condemnation?

It can be very eye-opening to do a self-examination exercise to bring clarity to this. We can record how we actually spend our time and resources,

seeing who dominates our attention, and noticing whose voice usually holds sway. It might be shocking to see in black and white quite how much of our life is spent in service of expediency and how little reflects our ideas of what principles we stand for, and what preferences we believe we have. People might say they value their children as the priority above all else, and yet come to learn that TV might get 10% of their hours, work 25%, and as little as 1% for the children. Maybe that's acceptable, but we never hear nostalgic recollections bemoaning a life wasted through spending too much time with the kids do we?

So we can look at how we allocate our attention, time and money, and see if that is a sincere statement of how we rank the importance of our life treasures. At this stage it is enough to notice the facts of the matter and allow feelings and realisations to come to the surface. If done with a serious attitude this exercise alone will probably make a difference to improve how well the future unfolds for us.

In this action of valuing, and despite appearances, we are choosing what to value in ourselves. We are not so much concerned with others as we are their qualities – the qualities themselves. This is because they are actually also present within us and we enjoy celebrating them. How we define ourselves is actioned by the values we are drawn to in others. That is why valuing is so important – because it shapes and fulfils our desire nature. What we value is what we desire, so by showing value preferences in our appreciation we give shape to our desires. By giving shape to our desires, we add to their clarity, and therefore the likelihood and ease of speedy manifestation.

Desire is not much appreciated by certain religious types, but this disparagement arises largely from an error in interpretation of nomenclature.

care: appreciation, valuing, giving, love

Desire is not craving. It is good and wholesome to allow your passion to vibrate to its fullest satisfaction. The wisdom teachings are against need, not against the enjoyment of spontaneously doing what you want. It is not desire but craving that locks things up too tight for life to flow. Desire is a compelling energetic force that pulls together a vision and the resultant scenario, fulfilling the vision's potential by making it substantial. It is the energy of life, the creative energy.

Without the idea of Value, then nothing can have greater value than anything else. We would be constrained in our capacity to feel appreciation because we couldn't ever feel more of it. If we have ever tasted love then we want more and more of it because we value it more than other feelings.

The richness of our experiences is a perfectly reasonable measure of our existence and its worth. As we mature, so we evolve the substance of our life as we expand the width and depth of our encounters. Width is relatively easy – we do more types of things. Depth is not; we need to take new things to heart. Width and depth can operate against each other. Doing more similar things can actually make us too busy to experience them deeply. Perhaps you feel friendly with a hundred people – but are they friends? How many deeply touch our heart? Diversity does not mean profundity, and in the end it is the depth that evolves the value of life, quality not quantity.

## *GIVING*

The word Giving is very often misused. It is used at Christmas to describe an exchange of presents; it is used in politics where Gift Aid is a politically correct term to describe one of the enslavement processes of economic hegemony. A person who works very hard for a thousand hours to develop a talent is told they have a 'gift'. Even what appears to be

altruistic charity is not often untainted by a need for recognition and appreciation as a condition of the charitable act; anyway giving is not cold.

Giving is an outpouring of the heart made substantial with a physical gesture. If there is any exchange at all then it is only the exchange of resonance through heart empathy; it is not giving if something is expected in return. The only appropriate expectation is that giving is met by receiving, although it is usual social courtesy to acknowledge that this receiving is taking place by saying Thanks. Thank You, well spoken, vibrates the heart centre and soothes the atmosphere.

Giving can be a very powerful event that shifts things. The box of chocolates and the long stemmed rose are meant to be extravagant in order to communicate the message sincerely that the heart is in charge of finances for the moment. Giving always costs the giver, and time is a stronger currency than money because it's the thought that counts. The power within the event is in its ability to make the receiver feel genuinely appreciated and cared for.

The sad fact of the situation today is that anything having a natural spiritual aspect will be bent out of shape by economic and political processes – in other words greed and fear. These two motivations are heavy, they cannot sustain the lightness and spontaneity required to bring Giving to its exaltation. A truly blessed moment of grace occurs when one gives freely and unthinkingly to another and each feels raised by the special warmth of sincerity that arises.

Giving is an aspect of love; it is an enactment of love, and it must occur in an atmosphere of love or it is not real. Typically that which is given is in response to some scenario immediately unfolding, so therefore an important

part of the gesture is timing and applicability. Some things are entirely diminished or inappropriate if given too early or too late, so a part of the gift is the demonstration of knowing when it is best presented.

There is a distinctive atmosphere associated with Giving; it tends to be one described by wide smiles, gentle touch and warm tones, often with laughter and exceptionally, even tears. In fact a gift that brings tears can be the very best of gifts – since the depth of a gift is in the atmosphere that accompanies it. It is an atmosphere of healing, which unburdens the anxieties of the soul and allows greater relaxing of stressful defences. When this atmosphere is co-created by both giver and receiver, then each feels better off. The receiver needs to be elegant and gracious not timid and self-deprecating. A mendicant illustrates this, the mastery of receiving.

It is understood by the dervish that Giving is a type of spiritual practice. In learning how to master the spiritual condition of Care, an aspect of our training is the perfecting of Giving. It is best perceived as a type of energetic radiance emanating from the heart centre and causing a magnetic shift in the psychic field of energy. This magnetism is often called charisma and is seen as a quality of the person – but it is much more than that, it is an expression of power that shifts realities.

One primary understanding is that perfecting our giving inevitably attracts more giving, so we can even free ourselves of the need to be paid. This freedom is thoroughly empowering for a seeker. Seek out beggars and make sure you make eye contact as you give kindly from the heart. This is not a religious teaching about morality; it is not a metaphor either. It is a specific literal instruction that will teach you how to master Giving and thus to some extent free yourself from the need to earn. By doing what the heart loves, we attract what the body needs. The dervish is also aware that his

receiving enables another's giving; this is a type of self-sacrifice by the dervish because the merit goes to the giver. He knows that all that is required to bring balance to Giving is Appreciation, and that saying Thank You properly involves the heart.

When Giving is embraced completely, as if it were woven into our character as deeply as love itself, then we become conduits for the flow of abundance and enjoy a rich life, populated by those who feel rich and appreciative themselves. So we would then see Giving not as an action but as a presence that shows in the mastery of abundance.

It is because we behave as if we were rich that we become rich. This is such a difficult lesson for us to learn – yet well illustrated by this true story. Rosie wanted to participate in one of Findhorn's introductory weeks but couldn't persuade them to take the smaller sum she felt she could afford. They told her to really believe that the money would come. Trusting this, and in good faith, she wrote a cheque for the large amount having insufficient funds in her bank account to cover it. Then two odd things happened. The bank accidentally credited her account with the exact same amount on the exact day the cheque was presented for payment. Weeks later, on the day she got the letter asking for it back, she saw a newspaper article about a similar situation elsewhere where another bank had claimed for repayment and lost its case. So she returned their letter and sent off the article with it – and heard nothing more from them ever again.

## *LOVE*

Mystics teach that all comes from God and that love is the magnetism of yearning to return home. On a cosmic, physical scale, what keeps the dynamic order of the universe is a binary polarity between centrifugal and

centripetal forces. The centrifugal force of division and separation has its counterpart in fear; love is the centripetal force of the cosmos.

Since there are only these two directions, they are as intimately connected as breathing in and breathing out. When not attending to love we are attentive to fear. When not giving attention to fear, then we attend to love. These are directions – we move towards Source or away from Source according to whether we experience love or fear. We move towards Love or Fear as we give attention towards God or away from God.

It is not realistic, nor is it appropriate, to expect to live our lives without fear. Fear has an awful reputation, and yet it is what saves us from forces that could and would deny our individual existence. It is entirely appropriate, at all costs, to avoid merging with entities that have no intention or ability to care for us – and fear of such entities is a true protection; it is a communication that tells us we need to escape. Even in modest day-to-day situations only some of what is offered is good for us, so some caution is indicated in all interactions. Fear has also the ability, through metaphor, to awaken insights into the beliefs we hold. The specific fears we have describe something of the way in which we have adopted limiting beliefs. Perhaps claustrophobia is indicative of feeling unable to expand our lives enough, perhaps fear of heights suggests the opposite. The intensity of the fear gives a clue to show how powerfully liberating it will be when we have grasped its origins and reoriented to adopt its allegorical wisdom.

However, when caution is thrown to the wind, then what bubbles through is love. It is trusting and innocent, seeks to harmonise and share, and is inherently optimistic and expansive. The register of Love is most intensely felt in the heart centre as the movement from urgency towards

self-annihilation in blissful union, and of course it feels lovely. We can observe the power and urgency of love expressed as much in a baby's irrefutable desire for mother as in the hot attraction between lovers. Both couples demand the fullest intimacy with the object of their heart's yearning for union.

A person whose heart centre is open cannot fail to radiate joy and warmth generally. The radiance is seen and felt by others within the atmosphere of the person, who is inevitably well liked, trusted and sought after. They can also focus this energy as a healing force by directing it at another person. Any parent has learned to comfort a child after a minor bump or scratch by 'kissing it better'; it actually works. Love attracts; it is a magnetism that draws to it whatever has a similar quality. People are attracted to us because they have some love for the qualities they see in us and admire, as of course we are attracted to them for similar reasons.

We are mostly conditioned by religious teachings that we should love everybody. Then when unsurprisingly we find we cannot, we will possibly feel guilty or inadequate as a person. But in fact we should not love everybody. Some should be feared and excluded from having any influence over our children or indeed anyone we love, including ourselves.

Love is a force, a power, and it must be employed with some awareness of its effect. Directing the radiance of our love upon another will shift their attention, influence their condition, and may significantly impact their lives. This clearly needs to be done with some awareness of the responsibility we have not to manipulate others against their best interests. Offering sex, food, or pretty things, as an incentive to attract and keep a mate will not optimise the likelihood of authentic love and is more likely to block it. What

will generate love is love. If we constantly look for its Source in our mate, then we will be loved.

Sufis teach that love's enemy is sentimentality. This is very instructive. It is the distortion of a principle not its counterpart that is its enemy. Sentimentality distorts love. That which is genuine and spontaneous is authentic and without agenda – these are love's qualities – whereas sentimentality is prescriptive, manipulative and imprisoning like fear. Romance novels, slushy movies, fairy stories and porno sites share the same basic elements of sentimentality. They create unreasonable expectations and bring judgemental structure to what must remain unconditioned.

By a very large margin, the most popular topic for people to consult counsellors about is the love that they are or are not experiencing in sexual partnership. Whatever we may want to think, their own Love Story is the topic that most people care about most of all. And for them the love is always somehow wrong. It is either absent, imperfect, abusive, shared with a rival, hidden and never expressed and so forth. Very few people are completely contented with their relationship's current status – and it is always the other person's fault!

The main issue seems to be the difference between what is expected and what is received. Changing expectations and showing more appreciation goes a long way towards improving the situation – together with having clear boundaries consistently enforced.

Sexual partnership is inevitably going to trigger old hurts from childhood and expose both partners, usually simultaneously, as being less mature, less loving and more selfish than they would like to believe about themselves. This is not likely to support peace and happiness. And this is the exact

point. Love relationships are better approached as serious social contacts rather than fantasy-fulfilment birth rights. The difficulty we have discussing early intentions and later problems, often arise as a direct result of sentimentality. Programmed to think that 'love conquers all' and that we should expect to 'live happily ever after' sets us up for disappointments and a blameful attitude. Anyway it is problematic discussing something that is so poorly described as Love, which lacks clarity and accurate definition.

As a serious social agreement, relationship has to accommodate difference of outlook and expectations on most major life issues. These include sex, money, where to live, how to socialise, spiritual practice and belief, diet, sharing housework, involvements with each other's families, which drugs are allowed, which TV channel to watch...and so on. All these, and then on top of it all the biggest – whether and how to raise children.

In fact one-to-one relationship is a very demanding life track, a tricky socio-economic alliance with occasional flurries of joy and sorrow. Through them we learn who we are, our strengths and weaknesses, our idiosyncrasies and prejudices, and where we stand on important matters. It is foolish to expect that our partners can compensate for our own inadequacies or save us from facing the feared and painful feelings that still haunt us from childhood. We have to deal with them ourselves, and with luck our partner will have understanding and patience while we do. To make relationship work, it is helpful to show constant care and concern, be expressive of appreciation for those things we are grateful for, and frequently offer small, sincere gestures of thanks.

Love can grow in the heart of a sincere devotee of spiritual practice. This could be through prayer and worship but it doesn't need to be. We don't have to follow anyone's ideas about what is spiritual, as long as we know

care: appreciation, valuing, giving, love

ourselves. By appreciating things of beauty and by living in harmony with Nature and neighbours, then love will arise. It comes gently and surreptitiously, without the flash bang of romance. We notice its presence by the small things. We enjoy others being happy; we get excited by the rain and snow as well as the sun; we react less belligerently to injustice, we learn how to get lost in music and dance, and our eyes look for, and so find, proof that life is good.

This is the love that needs no companion. It is simultaneously self-love and love of life. It is tolerant, forgiving, humorous and light, yet also reliable, strong and steady, is not needy and demanding but feels abundant and kind. When we have this type of love to offer, then our beloveds feel more recognised, cared for and safer, more alive and free from imposition; together we feel joyful, yet apart we feel joyful too.

**Care depends upon four aspects:**

**appreciation, valuing, giving and love**

**and is developed as we learn to master the word Thank You**

## CONFLICT

Conflict is unavoidable in life, it is a defining feature of our environment. Teachers who advise us to shun it are being unrealistic, almost fanciful. We will certainly experience it, and it is best to welcome it and bring wisdom and truth to the matter instead of the pink and fluffy delusion that by offering our blind obedience to the status quo we all live happily ever after. There are indeed times to turn the other cheek, and yet there are also times to defend a principle with our lives. First of all comes the realisation that all is not well. From this we start the process by which, in the name of Freedom, we say Goodbye to unwarranted limitation.

### *REALISATION*

Realisation is the process of exposing illusion. A realised person can expose illusion.

There was a time before the Internet, when the propaganda machinery was very effective in covering things up and very few people knew what was really going on. Things changed very quickly when ordinary people gained access to ideas and facts intentionally hidden from them previously. It was all the more so before the invention of the printing press. In the West before the Gutenberg Bible, the general population could not read and had no ability to wrest control of their own thought processes from the priests. The Renaissance period, significantly triggered by the expansion of reading, can be identified linguistically. In previous literary works the prefix 'self-' was very rarely used. By the introduction of the prefix as in self-realisation, self-worth, self-satisfied and so on, we are shown how self-awareness was developing rapidly at that time in history. We see from this how information develops self-awareness; in fact it is a requirement of it.

## conflict: realisation, decision, completion, freedom

As a result of the Internet, we are expanding our awareness further. We are now aware more than ever before that the processes of communal decision-making – government, military and big business – are in no way structured, or indeed intended, to serve the general population at all. The extent of the corruption is shocking, and the acts of inhumanity that have been carried out secretly are truly terrible. Facts are constantly coming to light that are destroying the illusion that we are living under an authority that is fundamentally good and designed to serve us.

Beyond politics though, whatever parts of life that are not working well for you need to be examined carefully. What are the facts of the matter? Putting aside feelings and linguistic evidence for the moment – what is actually occurring? Does your lover really behave lovingly towards you? Does your employer really show tangible appreciation for what you do? Does evidence show that your children are really free from harmful influences? Are you really honest about your feelings – honest with yourself, honest with others?

Realisation occurs the instant that conscious intelligence replaces unconscious ignorance. Very often it is a eureka experience, a momentary pop! of awakening, and yet there is usually a history of indications. It is the normal, though dysfunctional, condition of humanity that we block out any information that will make us remember certain feelings that still trouble us from childhood. So wherever there are signs whose implications are disturbing for us, then we are inclined not to see them. The pointers are often small and ambiguous: he lingers for another drink at the club, she takes a second too long to laugh at his joke, we breathe more heavily after climbing the stairs, the phone rings a little less often...then one day perhaps something becomes glaringly obvious or perhaps we are simply ready to face truth at last. Change is in the air.

It is very important to become quite specific about the exact information and the conclusions drawn from it. In that we are probably facing up to childhood issues, it is highly likely that objectivity is in short supply. For example, his late drinking could be entirely the result of stress at work. It need not be that he no longer loves you and has another, more beautiful, girlfriend who is pregnant with his baby. In fact, the realisation here may be that your suspicion borders on paranoia and it is that which drives him towards the bottle!

What replaces this type of exaggerated pessimism is realism. Realisation is realistic not fanciful. We are awakened into our investigative mode – we want to ask questions and challenge the answers until we are completely satisfied that we know the truth. When we have it, this is felt in the body. There are likely to be other feelings, perhaps we feel betrayed, sad or angry – but one of them is that in some way we actually feel more relaxed. The body has been having to tense itself against untruth, which intuitively it classifies as a kind of subtle psychic poison, and yet when realisation is deep and truly authentic, then the body sinks into reality like a homecoming. This probably holds the key to reaching deeper awareness – that the physical body has better access than the mind to the undercurrents of atmosphere within scenarios. And this is where to begin the investigation.

The mind is so mercurial; it is not fixed upon much and so is easily pushed around and often deceived. This is particularly true of the mind of a deceiver, and we are all that at times even if the condition is of self-deception rather than lying. The analysis of facts is helpful and of crucial importance to prove the case, but the motivation is our suspicion that all is not well, and the subsequent yearning for the end of the tense atmosphere of untruth. This is a feeling. We feel that something is not quite right, not as

it should be, not what we are being told – and this stops us from feeling entirely relaxed and trusting.

We all live in our little bubbles. That which we feel we can deal with is included, all else lies outside. What interests us is in, what we find tedious is out. The bubbles are created and maintained by our focus of attention, we simply ignore what we can't or won't relate to. We actually train our perception and the mechanics of interpretation to not get the outside data. It is not heard, not seen, not inferred and so not understood. As we grow in consciousness, so the bubbles expand to embrace more of all that is. Or perhaps a better image is that they grow until they pop and leave us enclosed in a bigger bubble. Realisation is the popping of the bubble. Here we reach an interesting stage of personal development – a shibboleth of the seeker, the litmus test. When the bubble pops, some people collapse like the popped bubble, and others feel the expansive freedom-exhilaration of the richer reality that replaces it. If we are strong of faith, then we believe that all change is good, indicating the greater joy which is certain to come, albeit sometimes indirectly, as a result.

The moment of Realisation is a watershed. We are unable to refute the evidence any longer; it is the case and that's that. Approaching this watershed, time takes on an intriguing quality. Perhaps the passage of time has seemed routine and lacklustre, yet it starts to speed up and spark with life force. Urgency elbows its way through a jumble of complacency demanding something real. The acceleration continues and it becomes inevitable that some major event is approaching, that a life shift is imminent. This feels exciting or stressful according to our personal approach to life and stage of development.

We can become more perceptive to the clues through training. Generally speaking, any group process involving a spiritual dimension will help. Meditation, martial arts, or sacred dance are all helpful – as too could be a 12-step meeting, a Christian prayer group or even a knitting circle if focused with the intention to support personal growth. Truthful though they may be, friends and family tend not to be sufficiently objective, but judicious feedback from non-involved peers can be hugely productive if we can put the ego aside to hear what is being said to us. Such feedback encourages, or forces, us to look at a situation differently, therefore we will indeed see it differently, often stripped of illusion.

Why should we bother to look below the surface of things? Surely trouble will find us in its own good time! Indeed, this is exactly the point. Trouble will catch up with us. Whatever is false will eat away at the foundations of our life and render insecure what we love and what we need. In the end truth will out, and any decisions based on false assumptions must fail.

Nonetheless, despite this, the vast majority of people are living in denial of what is actually going on for them. Their lives are false. This creates such tension between mind and body that both thoughts and feelings are corrupted. Often the voice – that which marries the two – sounds flat or stressed and cannot carry sincerity or joy. The bubble they live in cannot reconcile with much else and so it shrinks, even at a fairly young adult age. Life then becomes a circuit of routines that obfuscates and confuses what is true – the mind cannot reason, and feelings become sentimental replicas of what is shown as normal on soap operas or in their own set. Love, truth and happiness are all constrained or completely forfeit.

## *DECISION*

Realisation leads to Decision in a straightforward, courageous person. Most people are neither, and hide the truth from themselves in order to avoid facing up to the need for a difficult decision, for which they lack the courage. Courage is not easily developed at all, but what can replace it is faith.

We lack Realisation either because we have insufficient information, or an inability or unwillingness to interpret it correctly. Most often, the reason we have insufficient data is that we have not looked – we are ignorant through choice. Realisation is what changes this standpoint of willing ignorance. Our major excuse: ‘how could I do anything? I didn’t know!’ disappears. But now we realise what is the case, then what will we do?

Decision, like incision, is a cutting. A decision cuts away other possibilities so that only one path forward remains available to us. If this is not the case, then it is not a decision, it is a proposal. Decision commits us irrevocably to an action that consumes resources such as time, money and effort. It is necessarily risky. We risk the loss of reputation, position, opportunity and confidence as well as wasted resources. This is far too big a risk for the majority of people, so most follow the path of least resistance from cradle to grave.

A decision is surely called for when the realisation occurs that current circumstances are sub-optimal for the pursuit of happiness. We try something, it fails, so we try something else repeatedly until all is well. This lasts a while until all is no longer well and a step-change is needed. Then, either we accept and adapt to outside processes, or we follow the formula –

Realisation, Decision, Completion, Freedom. In this case we are our own agency of change; this is what it means to be self-determined.

Some determinations have little consequence – they are choices we make to express our preferences and attitudes but do not awaken any great strength of will. Other determinations are of such significance that we are shaped and defined by them; they call upon us to be authentic and strong-willed. These important questions often relate to career, marriage, having children, coping with a family, diet and health, and spiritual belief. Decisions about these things are of profound consequence. Typically such matters shift us into a more serious way of being. They tend to be things in life that test us, challenging who we are and our ability to stay centred.

Indecision as a way of being leads to a particular type of life, basically passive, and it sometimes leads to such passivity that a distortion of self occurs. It is not at all appropriate to be constantly subject to the will of another, so we have to find a way to make our claims on the world. Perhaps we prefer to make them infrequently, only for matters of the greatest importance, but make them we must.

There is the need to consult both mind and body. The mind thinks things through. It tries to grasp the situation in hand clearly and anticipate the likely outcomes for whatever options are available. The body however registers the wisdom of that aspect of intelligence called the unconscious; it feels things. Each part, the more masculine mind and the more feminine body-feeling, have their own way of knowing what's best, yet they do not always agree.

A life strategy that depends upon only one side of this polarity will fail in important ways. It simply is not enough to trust either reasoning or

intuition; both are required. In Nature, animals do very well without thinking – yet we do not live in Nature. Humans are strategic and make plans about how to gain advantage over others, and the thinking mind is needed to cope with this. It is also a tool for Curiosity to scratch its itch with.

In order to function, the mind requires data and patterns. We collect information and then we apply this to our model of reality to interpret. This model is based on previous experiences, from which we have constructed a unique 'life pattern' to tell us how everything holds together. This is what we use to anticipate potential outcomes. Any decision we make is a plan to influence how the future unfolds for us, so our attempts at anticipation are central to success in life. And yet plans 'of mice and men' tend to be blown around in the winds of change, so we cannot rely upon them very much as forecasts or guarantees for our future wellbeing.

The intuition that we all have becomes increasingly reliable the more we rely upon it. It is very useful as a final question before enacting any plan. The best way to cut through the complexity and nuances of feeling is to ask a simple question of yourself. Perhaps there is an offer of a new job, or a new lover, an invitation or a request – then ask yourself: 'do I really want this now?'. Yes means yes and No means no, but what about maybe? Maybe means No. This simple wisdom protects us from agreeing to something inappropriate. The body's intuitive knowledge is more trustworthy than the mind. If it cannot be moved to say Yes, then it is saying No, or at least 'not yet'.

There are tremendous advantages in being decisive. The whole pace of life accelerates constantly. People, events, openings and understandings come along at great rapidity. We create a life that is more active, more

determined. It is not another's but our own will that determines what unfolds. This fast pace need not threaten our inner tranquillity since we evolve the easy ability to handle whatever arises. Each decision is a new question we are putting to Life – 'what happens when I...'. And Life responds with challenges to rise to, and experiences to assimilate. This ability has to be claimed and earned, so those in their 20s might not be as competent as they will be later. In contrast, the energy and enthusiasm to decide to tackle new situations tends to diminish in later years. To stay young, stay decisive.

Life is not a trial, it is trial and error. That's what it is. We are not 'on trial', as some people and religions seem to think, we are organising a trial on our own behalf, with the specific intention of experiencing the error. From this, and only from this, we grow in knowledge. From our contemplation of error, we revisit our strategies and set out on another adventure-trial. All of this is fully energised by will as it operates through its decisions.

A very important question to address early in adult life is whether to live by expediency or principle. What is expedient is easier and more pleasure-oriented. Principles are prescriptions for our decisions, they are deeply challenging, and designed to lead to long term joy rather than immediate pleasure. Again we look to both mind and body. The mind loves philosophy and tends to have beliefs, opinions, moral codes and ideals. The body communicates through its health; if it has not health then we might question whether the mind's philosophy or the disobedience of will is responsible, because assuredly one of them is. We need to find a set of principles to live by, which supports the body's wellbeing yet can be implemented by the will. Tricky!

conflict: realisation, decision, completion, freedom

Nor must we think that a principled life is necessarily more worthy. If it does not lead to happiness then it is not. The danger of sticking to principles rigidly is that the body becomes rigid. This necessarily means that our principles are wrong. Health and happiness are right, and the body shows both physically and emotionally how close we are to rightness; its rigidity will lead to discomfort and death.

So how do we know what to do and which principles to adopt? We simply decide upon something and then, in our eternal evolutionary journey, we allow life's processes of trial and error to persuade us in the fullness of time to decide differently.

### *COMPLETION*

There is a universal formula that describes interactions between people. Firstly there is exclusion, then casual enquiry, then intimacy, and then separation. These interactions can be imagined as the reaching out of strands of psychic energy like tentacles. At first they have little impact but, as intimacy develops, they become as if sticky. The closer two people get emotionally, the stickier become the tentacles until they are increasingly inseparable. Of course this is a colourful metaphor, but very apt. In order to regain freedom after involvement, we need to separate these tentacles – and this is what Completion is. We enter relationships all the time, some casual, some intimate, and these are our involvements. Some touch our feelings and some do not. To end a casual association is as easy as walking away, but if feelings have been awakened then we know to expect some degree of poignancy upon leaving. Clearly if we have feelings for someone then the sticky tentacles have some pull upon us and tug at our freedom. How able and willing we are to untangle these connections is an important measure of maturity and wisdom.

The tangling comes about because of expectation. People expect us again today to be loving and caring about their needs, if we have been so yesterday. Being loved and loving sets up a deep feeling of belonging, and if this seems threatened then typically a person will feel bereft and vulnerable. Wherever we have allowed there to be expectations of us, then we have a duty to fulfil them or offer explanation for why not.

Duty is not much honoured in the West outside of certain military circles and dynastic families; ordinary people no longer feel so much bound or motivated by it and it is nowadays imposed by law rather than social pressure. Yet on the path of happiness, it is a definite milestone. Duty, honour, nobility, integrity, trustworthiness, dignity, maturity, responsibility, authority, gravitas – whenever these words accurately reflect in a person's character, then we can feel fairly certain that that person will make a real effort to finish whatever they start. This introduces the other side of Completion. We finish things properly not only in deference to others' feelings, but because we choose to become mature as responsible adults. Professionals – nurses, accountants, architects and lawyers – understand this, that's why we go to them. Also it is a very important aspect of Hindu teachings. To them karma is duty. We work off our karma bit by bit by doing the right thing.

It is Completion that bridges the space between Decision and Freedom. So it is not enough to have the acuity that brings realisation and the will to make decisions unless we also have what it takes to complete upon our commitments. What happens if we lack Completion is that we get sucked back in. The sticky tentacles bind us tight. One meets a surprisingly large number of single mothers who became pregnant the last time they had sex with a man whom they had already decided to leave, failing to enact in a timely way the celibacy aspect of their completion process. In fact following

a separation all of the issues come up that had to be dealt with but were not – particularly how to communicate during conflict. The irony is that the couple may not have needed to split up if they had lived up to their mutual commitment to find a way to talk things through openly and honestly, with neither asserting advantage through bullying or manipulation. And if they still cannot, then often their lawyers get the money instead of their children.

When an involvement is ready to end we may well want to scoot off immediately without tidying up – as children and teenagers so often do – but there is a price to pay for such an attitude. At the extreme end, it is the failure to tidy up that is threatening the world with dire pollution of our air, water and food supplies. Tidying up means dealing with all the consequences of our decisions and, as a species, we have failed in this. On a personal level, without proper completion we do not reach maturity. Year by year our involvements simply become tame repetitions of the same old problems that we cannot deal with except by remaining distant and shallow, then life itself loses meaning and no choice holds any profundity. More than that, our decisions lack punch and we become increasingly impotent, lacking in influence, lacking passion and easily swayed.

It is the wise individual who learns how tidying matters up is exactly the same as tidying up oneself. It seems so inconvenient sometimes to finish things off properly, but in the long run it saves a lot of effort and inconvenience. This is because the future advances in alignment with our own state of being. If we see that a person's home is a real mess – every room untidy, numerous half-finished projects in evidence on the floor and three days of washing up in the sink, then would we trust them when they propose yet another new scheme and make more unrealistic promises? We have a pretty good idea what future they may expect – messy and out of

control, often in stress, ever subject to external forces and never in command.

Perhaps it is spontaneity and flowing acceptance that we find most joyful, but such freedom is only reliably available to us when we have learned to keep away the imposition of stress and misfortune, which requires us to be on top of things. This demands occasional use of strong will. Now we reach the deeper, esoteric aspect of Completion. Our clout in the world, which enables our dreams to manifest and protects us from being abused, is dependent upon will; and it is Completion that strengthens will.

The reason we always do what we say we will do is because otherwise we will let the strength of our will diminish. Every time we fulfil a promise, we add another reason for others to trust us, another reason for us to become more confident. Over time, being like this as a way of life, we come to know that what we say will be will indeed come to pass – perhaps not always but usually whenever it is humanly possible. The ever-increasing confidence is evidenced by our demeanour and tone of voice, so we learn to command respect and impress upon situations with the dignity of our being. We gain the trust and support of others and can expect to be taken seriously. This in turn adds to our capacity to create chosen outcomes, free of external interruptions, free of stress and anxiety.

## *FREEDOM*

Freedom is a state of mind as much as it is the capacity to resist invasive forces and do what we choose. Nietzsche speaks of the slave mentality that locks up the minds of people and binds them into their own personal prisons. To be free we have to find a way to shrug off unconscious obedience and any expectations of limitation that impact our sense of liberty.

The gaoler is not for us a violent uniformed official, an identifiable controlling force of armed authority. For most of us it is the disapproving glance, the wagging finger, the boss's reprimand and the religious ideal. We are held in place by the gossipers that threaten our reputation, employers who might not give us a good reference, parents who wield the power of emotional blackmail even over their adult offspring, friends who envy our achievements, strangers with a different dress code or preference in music. We have been trained like dogs to salivate at the sound of the master's bell, and this process of conditioning began at birth and is never-ending. In fact *in extremis* it is indeed actually backed up by an armed automaton who serves a tyrannical authority.

Most of us though are too complacent or intimidated to question and challenge the rules enough to be a threat to the possessors of power. As Rome understood very well – give the plebs bread and circuses and they are under control. Social security payments and TV works well enough in the current era, and if people do eventually take to the streets then tear gas and riot shields can be deployed before bothering with the military solution.

Generally we are not free. The illusion is granted in order to keep us tame, but the extent to which the State will go to keep us down is without

limit, and entirely without humanity. The State is as much caught up in this as we are, and there is none capable of acting differently in order to change things politically. Captains of this terrible ship of State come and go over the centuries, seemingly in control, but they are not – the ship's course is set by other processes, which have irresistible levels of momentum.

We pray that there is some progress, that humanity's inhumanity is slowly being transformed towards decency – but for now it is better to understand that nothing much can be done to destroy the evil leaders that control us, or tear down the grey institutions through which they impose their dark will. This may seem to be unduly pessimistic, but it is not. The realisation may in fact be enough to free us.

If a person truly raises Freedom up as the primary principle of life, then it can be claimed. Even living in this age of the violent State bully, freedom can be asserted by the few. Yet it is so precious that we need to want it with a passion. Of course, the simple truth is that most people don't. For them, there are many more important things in life. Animals mostly have freedom and yet little or no security. Humans have collectively elected to place as more important such things as belonging to a community, complete absence of hunger, predictable conditions, ownership and family lineage. If these things take precedence in our lives then freedom does not.

Freedom is not a concept or a set of behaviours, it is not even an attitude – it is passionately free of all of this. What is the difference between freedom and passion? It is actually not meaningful to distinguish between them, except perhaps that freedom is both passion and peace. When we are at peace, it is because passion is at rest; when not at peace, then passion is in evidence. Peace is therefore an aspect of passion, passion of peace. To validate this idea, we look at infants; they are either sleeping peacefully or

## conflict: realisation, decision, completion, freedom

passionately involved in life – they are born with the expectation that desires exist in order to be fulfilled and enhance their sense of joyful satisfaction.

As we expand in order to enjoy and claim the passion of freedom, inevitably sooner or later we encounter resistance. This is how we experience limitation – and mostly it is imposed by illegitimate agencies. Nature has the power and right to constrain us but for adults all else is false or self-imposed.

Let us draw attention to the relationship between Conflict and Freedom. We must encounter conflict if we are to claim freedom, and we must prevail or move on. The resistance we encounter is nothing more than the identification of whatever limits our freedom. Sometimes we lack the power to progress in a given direction, so we must accept this and let go of our intention. We see how the word Goodbye aligns with both freedom and conflict. When we have learned to say Goodbye easily and completely, then we can enter conflict passionately. This fearless full-on commitment increases our chances of success. There is no fear of failure since we can move on without nostalgia or any attachment to winning and losing.

Inwardly we are restrained by the fears implanted in the psyche by those forces that moulded us during childhood. These are not known to us. They are hidden inside, locked up and lurking. Until we face them, they continue to control us. But how can we face them if they are in hiding? We cannot. Yet outwardly, these fears are made known in conflict, and in fact only in conflict. Therefore the courageous seeker of freedom passionately welcomes conflict as an opportunity to face down another fear in order to win another slice of freedom. This continues indefinitely, although the encounters eventually become increasingly subtle and move beyond the level of winners

and losers. In consciousness conflict creates two winners – both parties become more aware and neither has an attachment to a specific outcome.

Freedom has one of two directions – freedom from and freedom to. We are not free to do what we choose unless we are free from what prevents us. What prevents us is nothing more than the fear of conflict. Having overcome that fear, then what freedoms are then available to us? We ask: what actually are we free to experience? And the answer is – anything realistically imaginable. In a person who has established their freedom, apart from the constraints of Nature it is only the limited reach of imagination that sets the boundaries of possibility.

The way to establish freedom is to find the inner spirit and allow it free rein. This shows typically as spontaneous, unpredictable and quite often eccentric. If we do this, then for a time it is likely that we will find it more convenient to move on than to engage constantly in the conflicts that arise. We say Goodbye to people and circumstances that restrict us until we find a situation where we feel at ease. Then we need to face down whatever attempts to control our joyful self-expression. This can be done gently and lovingly, as long as it is done convincingly.

Having claimed our freedom, then what? It, like money, is fully enjoyed only when it is surrendered. So how can we reconcile our passionate freedom with an equally strong desire for involvement? We want relationship, family, career and a sense of belonging to our tribe. How to have both involvement and freedom?

The answer to this conundrum lies in a Sufi teaching: it is meaning that brings freedom to involvement. Having invested our freedom in things that we value, it is the meaning within them that is the transformed aspect of the

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freedom invested. Involved as parents, as householders, as co-workers or bosses, as team-mates or just members of a friendship circle, we find the meaning of life in the dynamic interplay between what we allow and what we prevent. This interplay helps define us, it is how we figure out who and what we are. If the spiritual aspect of life becomes primary we tend to refine our involvements, and let go of anything of lesser consequence until we have nothing to protect or defend, and so nothing whatever to fear in the slightest. Without fear, we know complete freedom, and so can choose and expect a life of joyful celebration.

**Successful conflict depends upon four aspects:  
realisation, decision, completion and freedom  
and is developed as we learn to master the word Goodbye**

## QUESTING

What is life's meaning? Discovery. In order to uncover more wisdom and have a greater depth of experience it is necessary to look for answers and adventures. We can bring added focus to what is around us already, but the true seeker will always reach beyond their circle of comfort and journey forth. To step forward requires a decision about the direction, and finding that direction is the function of Vision.

### *VISION*

Vision is like memory but applied to the future. Usually it is created deliberately by the imagination yet on occasion, albeit rarely, a person can receive a picture from the future without using the conscious mind to make it up. In olden days, mystics and saints were celebrated for the latter type although today the former is usually what is meant. The word itself implies that the sense of sight is central, and for the majority of people that is probably the case because we generally favour sight over the other senses. It is totally reasonable however for anyone to 'see' their preferred future as an auditory exercise. One imagines that composers have a 'vision' for a piece of music based on auditory and kinaesthetic senses – they might know what they want it to feel like as well as the sound of it. Chefs might be more concerned with the gustatory aspects of their forward planning – and that's what this is, a plan. Envisioning is planning, and in particular it is detailed expecting.

Whenever life is dull and unfulfilling then it lacks vision. The general condition of life is that entropy surreptitiously robs every situation of its vitality, so we are constantly being drawn by this towards the boredom and pointlessness of life without meaningful involvements. Unless we reaffirm

our enthusiasm, then we lose spirit, we ‘die off’ gradually and become part of the unthinking mass of dispirited folk that tend to see themselves as powerless victims. Yet with vision, we are questing, we are willing to explore and overcome. And this is lively; it is exciting.

A good vision – good in the sense that it serves the visionary well – is optimistic yet realistic, both overarching and detailed, is consistent with the visions of others, is inspiring and is expressed in form. The form can be pictures, words or indeed even numbers. A surprising fact about accountants is that they generally have an exemplary ability to envision. The most frequent application of the principle of visionary projection may well be the ‘cash flow forecast’, which an accountant prepares for the bank in order to secure a loan. From the document, the bank manager will get an immediate picture of the client’s vision in overview and in detail. The detail establishes the workability of the proposal, to show how it all fits together realistically. When we see that businesses and banks use this principle of detailed visioning, then we know that it must work because otherwise they wouldn’t use it. They may not fully grasp how it works, but they do know that it does. So let’s look at how it does work.

What happens to the mind in building a vision is essentially two-fold. One aspect is the overview. In this, the mind has to place its stake in the future by making a claim that aligns with others’ claims. Most of the near future is identical to most of the near past in that we have cosmic and local terms of reference that are reliable, because they do not change. The sun rises every day and Market Day is Wednesday. Any vision that ignores this will fail. Yet certain aspects of the past can evolve, and will evolve in accordance with somebody’s vision. For example typically nowadays we have goat’s cheese and olives on sale on Wednesday afternoons. That fact began when someone’s idea became a vision.

The second aspect is to test the vision for reasonableness by constructing the details. If the production cost of goat's cheese points to a selling price way above customers' expectations or ability to pay, then on the face of it the vision is no good. Or if the vision is to produce wine, sunbathe and do scuba diving and barbeques, enjoying top quality Guinness and Irish folk music every night in an authentic pub, then there will be an issue of reasonableness. Where in the world would that be possible?

As we look at these two sides and construct a reasonable detailed, inspiring vision, then the mind goes through a particular process. The mind is shaped by this process – it takes on the shape of the vision. Then all of our perceptions are modified to align with this vision-shaped mind. This changes what we look for, and therefore also what we see. As we look for ways to realise the vision, we see opportunity where previously we did not. It is because we are seeking that we find. Somehow the banker understands that a mind shaped by the cash flow forecast is likely to bring the outer world into conformity with the plan.

Of course the overview comes first. Perhaps I see myself as a successful doctor living in a nice well-located house with a happy, healthy family, recognised as a competent specialist by my interesting circle of friends, some of whom I have known since childhood. The detail then follows – I must keep in touch with specific school friends, go to a medical university, be open to relationship, and willing to work hard for many years at low wages. A vision without such detail and realism is little more than fantasy. Increasing the level of detail – I want a green house and a redheaded wife – tends to add to the likelihood and swiftness of achievement.

If we find ourselves at a loss to find a vision that stimulates us to look at these details, then we may benefit from something akin to a Vision Quest.

questing: vision, intention, collaboration, faith

This is a specific term that describes a Native American practice whereby under guidance a seeker endures hardship and with the help of meditation or drugs opens up the mind to receive an inspiring motivation for their life direction.

The currents of life are many and powerful. The two general tendencies that battle each other are the twin forces of evolution and entropy, and all of us are stretched out between them. Other forces are all expressions of these two, and they are numerous. There are forces of Nature, geopolitical realities, collective imperatives and the personal ambitions of billions of people. If we allow ourselves to drift within these oceanic currents of change then we will get carried away and end up as the result of someone else's cause. Whereas with vision, we have our own little boat to ride the waves, and it has its own tiller to direct our path – and, to some extent at least, this takes us where we want to be.

Our life is ours, no-one else's. That it is we who write the story of our own lives is not negotiable, we must, and no-one else could. We can write the story so that we are powerless and boring if we choose to do so. Alternatively we can do our very best to realise a unique and enjoyable, creative way to express who we are and what we like. For this we need more than a vision though, we must bring it into form.

### *INTENTION*

Wishing and wanting are different. We wish upon a falling star, we make a wish before blowing out birthday candles, and we even wish that we could change things that have already occurred. Wishing is fanciful. Wanting has an entirely different body state, different focus of the mind and different expectations of outcome. When we are truly convinced that we want

something, then we are much more likely to set about getting it. Intention goes even further, it means that we have indeed decided to allocate sufficient time and resources and will exert effort tenaciously until we succeed. It is a commitment to realise our vision. Linguistic roots are suggestive of tendons, and points to straining and stretching towards fulfilment of a purpose. Whereas decision frees us to move on and vision shows what we imagine as a better situation, intention indicates that we are ready and willing to push ourselves beyond previous limits to reach out and make our claim.

In life, some of what we need or enjoy simply comes to us without effort, other things we attract consciously. This shows how the power of yin operates – we want and hope. But intention is yang – we claim and overcome. If necessary, we will struggle, we will persuade, we will cajole, we may even clash, but we will not depend upon or expect luck or favours. By our clear focus and impressive will, against the odds and until the job's done, to the exclusion of other matters, we intend to succeed.

Until it becomes clear and compelling, a vision moves through various chapters in its story. Perhaps we see a fictional character whose qualities we admire, or a place, or an occupation. Perhaps we meet a person who has successfully created their lives the way we would like ours to be, or perhaps we have nursed a dream since early childhood. Our ideas about what might occur for us are also shaped by commentary from parents and others. This visioning procedure is vague and extenuated over time, even to the extent that we may not know how to answer honestly if asked what we hope the future holds for us.

Yet all this changes in the instant that intention occurs; it must. Intention must know its goal. So in one sense, intention is the crystallisation of vision.

This proves to be the more challenging aspect for many – they can achieve so much as long as they know what is required, but lack the punch to crystallise their own vision into intention. So they end up serving the ambition of another. Whom should we serve? We can happily serve our own inspired vision, or even that of another person. Or, lacking a spiritual dimension we might need to call our hopes not vision but ambition and serve that instead, probably having our success measured by money and titles. To serve the ambition of another person though – this is poor substitute and rather soul destroying. We shouldn't have to work just for the money; if we trust then money will come to us when we are doing what we are enthusiastically moved to do.

Following this instant, when our own intention has been recognised as the master of what is to come, different behaviours become apparent. This master can be rather pushy, is always on the case and quick to seize opportunity. It becomes more serious with an announcement, when our intention is made known. Firstly we are likely to tell our partner – if not then why not? – and afterwards our committed path is revealed to a wider circle, then even the public. After this we realise that we are truly engaged; we have chosen to invest our freedom in this way. Some aspects of life must now change. We will talk to different people, go to other places and generally rework life patterns so that they support our new direction. Probably we will need a budget too.

In every moment there is uncommitted energy, an infinite range of opportunity that responds to whatever forces are momentarily active. If you ask someone 'will you please do this for me', there is a real chance that they will. If you do not ask then the chances are much less, probably in fact close to no chance at all. Your question acts upon their uncommitted energy and triggers an outcome, one that furthers your dream of what you want to take

place. This way of being is very opportunistic and assertive. The affirmation we live by is that each scenario, each moment and each person is an aspect of the means of manifestation.

We notice that the application of vision is moment-by-moment, notwithstanding the existence of a bigger, overall conceptual statement of intention. The more detailed is the plan, the easier it is to make small things serve the big thing. In other words, if we really know exactly what we want then we have no ambiguity in making all the little choices and requests that will bring accomplishment.

Those who are like this as a way of being tend to stand out. They are by no means always popular, they tend to leave the rest behind in the shadows feeling envious or inadequate. Successful businessmen, executives, politicians, sportswomen, performers and top musicians are all examples. Anyone who gets to the top or even near the top has learned how to move clear vision into intention. Yet there are plenty of others – whoever is reliably able to convert a problem into a solution really. It is experienced early on in school examinations, which test us as much for our power of intention as our knowledge.

We do so much to secure our lives. We have family protocols, insurance policies and savings, and we lock doors and keep guard dogs; some even believe that owning a gun makes them safer. Perhaps some of this helps – but really! – it seems rather fear-based doesn't it? The most powerful tool we have, that which protects us more often and more effectively than a Rottweiler, is the mind. If we can shape the mind, train it to be obedient to the will, then none of these security practices and devices are required. There is extraordinary power in the focused mind.

questing: vision, intention, collaboration, faith

Let's try a visualisation: every cell of the physical body lines up north and south like iron filings responding to a magnet, every feeling and every thought is entirely excluded from consciousness except one intention, and we stoke up our passionate enthusiasm, absolutely convinced that we have the power and the right to achieve our clear purpose. Imagine this concentrated into the smallest point in the third eye, then projected into the world as a laser beam. It is this that projects the story of our vision into the world of form.

### *COLLABORATION*

The quest that we are on is always the quest for self-discovery. However often we may get caught up in the details of emotional release and enquiry, in the end we come back to the main question – who am I?

From one perspective, this is so profound and complex that it is not even easy to understand the question itself, let alone the answer. And yet it is central to whether we live with disappointment or happiness. One helpful realisation is that there could never be individual identity without others to be different from; we are who we are in relation to others. Therefore, as others change so do we, and so the whole matter of identity is ephemeral – we are exactly who we are only for now and only with this person.

From another perspective this question's overarching importance gives us the simple answer to every other – the answer to every single question is the very answer to this one, who am I? Am I a person who is willing to suffer pain or significant inconvenience to stand for a principle? Am I a person who wants another cup of coffee now? The beauty of it lies in that nobody cares what the answer is except us – not from the highest

perspective. There is no right or wrong answer; in every moment we may freely choose who to be, although of course there are always consequences.

Optimal choice is rather less what we do, and more with whom we do it. Since we are shaped by our interactions with others it is important to choose them wisely. This is the reverse of what is commonplace. Most people end up with a certain circle of associates as a by-product of pursuing a goal. We might enjoy numbers and end up fiddling tax returns for unprincipled businessmen to get rich; we might love art and spend our lives in the company of those manipulative types who use our creative designs to sell something horrible for Big Pharma or the tobacco industry. In both cases our goal is to secure a livelihood, yet so often the price we have to pay for that is to be moulded in our thoughts and attitudes by unloving influences.

This is not acceptable for true seekers. If we quest for happiness, then we must practise happiness. Being in the company of unloving people because they pay us is not a strategy that promotes happiness. If in pursuit of our goals we are obliged to collaborate with those we disapprove of, then either the goals or the strategy is false. We absorb the qualities from those we associate with. If the boss is an angry, impatient bully, we may well go home and be just like that with our beloveds, perhaps not on day one, but over the years bit by bit these qualities will creep into our personality. It could be in the reverse sense in that we bring the resentful, longsuffering, bullied version into our home life rather than the bullying version.

It is better to become more aware of what qualities we can notice in a person before engaging with them in any involvement. Sadly many couples have little idea about the truth of the person that they are sharing their life with until the glister of the courtship and honeymoon periods proves not to

be gold. Being sexy and fun is lovely on a Friday night – but how is this useful on Monday morning, or at 4 am when the baby is still crying?

Naturally we will have to deal with people who are walking a shady path and will come across attractive people with very unattractive qualities. Partial exclusion or total refusal to engage with them may be required. Or at least, let them not intrude upon the deepest centre of self nor corrupt what is precious to us! As a general rule, a few key indicators are enough to determine whether a person is likely to move us towards or away from our purpose of self-discovery, and its resultant happiness. For example we could choose kindness, honesty and sensitivity, and have nobody routinely in our lives except people who themselves hold these qualities as life principles.

However ardent may be our intention, no vision can possibly be realised unless it is married up with the visions of others. Having another cup of coffee is collaborating with the visions of a vast number of people from the Sumatran coffee picker saving to buy her daughter her first pair of shoes, to the successful cafe owner who hopes to sell his business for a profit on which he can retire comfortably. The secret to having our dreams come true is to marry it up with others' dreams. Then a team of people is created whose collective power is immeasurably greater than ours alone; alone we are actually quite powerless. The trick to entering a mutually helpful collaboration lies in two abilities.

The first thing is to become very clear about what we want to happen next. This clarity comes out of the vision and intention stages of Questing. Certain aspects of this are emphatically required, some are preferred but not essential, and some are irrelevant. What is required must by definition be nonnegotiable, a deal breaker, what is irrelevant should be ignored, and what remains is the area for negotiation.

The second ability is negotiation, or shall we call it communication? Depth communication is always a negotiation of sorts. Our method is to act assertively upon the other in order that we hold true to purpose, and yet also having sensitivity to try to attract their full and enthusiastic willingness to fulfil our requirements. Being sensitive, to their inner state as well as their outer demands, is much likelier to win cooperation and will also set the mood. Collaboration in the mood of enthusiasm and harmony is both more effective and more enjoyable.

Children learn early on how best to negotiate. First you soften then you ask politely and repeatedly. The softening has to do with forming rapport, developing empathy and so charming the other person. A charm is a spell. Being charming is a powerful tool of persuasion and employed by most successful people. It has the effect of softening the resistance of the other to make them more biddable. However, the key to collaboration lies mainly in the operation of the word Please. When we ask the right person, in the right way, at the right time, and we use this word, then invariably things move in our direction. What is truly wonderful is when two people want exactly the same thing, when each is asking the other for what they both want. When, through this process of empathy and clarity, collaboration is the blending of two mutually harmonious visions, then a special energetic condition arises, called synergy. Then the whole is a dimension greater than the sum of the parts and as if by magic, things work really well.

When the collaboration is sexual partnership the same principles apply. Your vision and mine have to become substantively married. The umbrella of love, fidelity, honesty, trust, openness, sharing and caring is often assumed, perhaps legitimately. Yet the detailed interpretation of how to reconcile these rather angelic qualities with earthy realities will always eventually cause friction, then we will rub and chafe until something shifts.

questing: vision, intention, collaboration, faith

The issue will be one of three types – nonnegotiable, negotiable or irrelevant to your happiness.

If before entering committed relationship we would talk about our boundaries and preferences, we could avoid many of the clashes. But if we do clash – then we try to remember that emotional outbursts are just that. And they are not effective to resolve issues in the long term. What works is negotiation. This necessarily means surrendering something we want a little in order to protect something we want a lot. Yet under no circumstances whatever should we go against our principles. Those are nonnegotiable.

## *FAITH*

Sufi teacher Hazrat Inayat Khan explains that there is no significant difference between faith and self-confidence. To grasp the implication of this, we will want to understand that at the highest reaches, we identify God as an aspect of self, as much as we identify self as an aspect of God. Having confidence in ourselves necessarily means that we trust whatever impulses come from our higher selves – which we simply cannot differentiate from God; and this trust in our higher self is faith.

This interpretation, linking faith with self-confidence, is liberating. We no longer feel the same religious duty to God. Instead we claim full responsibility for our own lives, accepting the gift of free will, and leave God to its proper place in the Universe as Unknowable Prime Cause and Most Fascinated Caring Observer. We are not parented by a loving but stern Finger Wagger in the Sky who booms out loud on Sunday, and sighs accusingly as we plummet into the Nether Regions when the time comes to shift off this mortal coil. These old fashioned images of a man with a white beard were marketing devices of early churchmen to claim their place in

society, encouraging uneducated poor folk to project their superstitions, hopes and fears onto the images. A stern father with the power to send you to Hell was what they came up with.

Faith evolves in us the more we trust in it; this begins in childhood and reaches greater maturity as our life experiences validate our beliefs. The first stage is to trust in our impulses. They are felt in the physical body as unexplained inclinations to do something or go somewhere unexpectedly, and are observable as the normal behaviour of infants. As intelligence awakens we are told what is real, and put our faith in the parents who tell us. At some point we find out that Santa Claus is a fabrication, that our 'all-powerful' worldly father has human frailties and faults, and mother is not always soft and kind. This challenges our sense of security and it becomes necessary to think for ourselves, putting faith then in our powers of reasoning. People who have reached this stage are not common. For millennia the processes of religious indoctrination has distorted the way we reason and, because most religions teach rather silly ideas that generally drive out rational analysis, it is an unusually sharp and true mind that can still penetrate through the deceit and illusion to see things as they really are. Even Einstein blinkered himself from seeing the reality of Quantum Mechanics by stubbornly holding to a false belief in religious doctrine.

Less common still are the ones who have the keen sensitivity needed to have conviction in the heart's capacity to access the deeper truths that mind cannot hold. And going even beyond that, there is the faith of soul consciousness, a still point of certainty that shines clear and bright, even as the body, mind and heart are faltering with doubt, guiding us to do what needs to be done, in the certain knowledge that all is well and always will be. This is mature faith, it is not blind, nor is it logical, nor is it a compulsion of the body or heart. It arises out of dormancy, awakened by the seeker's

diligent approach to our quest – careful, insightful reflection upon our involvements. This delivers an understanding of how life works, what it all means, and that it simply must be the way it is.

There is no greater reward than faith, because it is the guardian that holds watch at the gate of the heart. In other words it doesn't allow anything into the heart that would rob it of joy; strong faith ensures that the default condition of life is joy. We may well take pleasure in the ups and downs of emotional adventures, yet when all comes to rest we settle again into peaceful certainty. This is the soul's condition before incarnation, and so our return to it is a blessed remembrance; at last we remember who we are!

Questing can now be seen in its full range. Vision, sharpened into focused intention and supported by collaborative involvements, leads us ever towards that place of faith that dissolves the question 'who am I?'. The question disappears because in faith it really doesn't matter who I am. How could anything as momentary as individual identity be worth our committed attention when we could instead focus on the sacredness of our faith in the eternal? So we may now correct an earlier belief that our quest is to find God through self-discovery, or even to find self through God-discovery. The question becomes: how to perfect my faith?

So how do we?

It takes a bit of a rebellious attitude and individual courage to actually see that most people get it all wrong – life's meaning that is – and that very few care enough to do what is needed to understand what is really happening. A children's story speaks of the mass hypnosis and collective delusion that allows the general population to see the naked emperor wearing fine clothes. It is the innocent child that speaks up – 'he has no clothes!'. This first stage

– to refute what is self-evidently false – is the beginning of a long journey. This refutation is born as a glimmer of suspicion, perhaps later becoming a decided private opinion but not yet safe to talk about.

Then we may spend time with people who have different opinions and beliefs from ours, and study traditional and modern philosophical and spiritual teachings. In this way, hidden within the lies and nonsense of scripture we uncover something golden – we find similarities of teachings across cultures and across the centuries. From this we build a mental model in the form of wisdom and morality, and this shapes our beliefs. As a result we make different types of choices, we walk new paths, learn new ways of behaving and new ways of seeing things.

This alone will not do much to open the heart, which we need open to access the deeper mysteries; for this we need to feel love and express it. Body, mind and heart are all interconnected agencies of perception. The body grasps sensory input, the mind interprets this and calls it reality, and the heart seeks to know the meaning of the experience in the context of its world of love, harmony and beauty. The heart's teachings are more poetic and inspiring than logical, 'all you need is love', and 'love will find a way' are expressions of faith rather than intelligence. Not false, but not reliable life instructions either.

There are no reliable life instructions. Whereas one might think that this revelation is terrifying, it comes hand in hand with its counterpart revelation – that whatever occurs and what could ever occur is only a reflection of our ability and appetite to cope with it creatively. This is exciting, empowering and life-changing.

questing: vision, intention, collaboration, faith

Faith offers calm certainty; it provides us with serenity in a storm. Only life-turbulence can examine and so improve our ability to demonstrate this fact. In the event of a hurricane, we can enjoy the storm thoroughly until it is time to slip easily into its unmoving centre. We will not master this practice without hurricanes to play with – so why not go looking for a few of them? We must do this if we want to test the courage of our convictions and consciously become an independent agency of Creation. These are metaphorical hurricanes, more properly identified as dire life circumstances or emotional crises.

To bring us to a fuller state of self-realisation, we must open up the channel that allows divine inspiration ready access to influence our thoughts, feelings and decisions so that we guide our own lives with soul awareness. Instead of identifying ourselves as a physical body with a personality and soul, we say 'I am soul, employing this personality and body for this brief lifetime'. The soul's perspective is not subject to illusion, what is seen for what it is. Yet it knows that no-one else could see it the same way and that truth is subjective. The freedom that arises through faith is entirely exhilarating; it is fearless, joyful, innocent and beyond the reach of worldly constraints. Nothing compares to it. In soul consciousness, lacking fear or confusion, our desires are met much more easily, and life can become a playful passage from one delightful surprise to the next.

**Questing has four aspects:**

**vision, intention, collaboration and faith**

**and is developed as we learn to master the word Please**

## BEING

Arrival in this world as a baby is quite shocking for the soul. No amount of forewarning could educate spirit to know what it will feel like to descend into its opposing principle. Materiality is as ardently keen to contain and deny spirit as is spirit to inspire and raise up matter. Having no strength or comprehension, the baby's position is very vulnerable so its inner imperative is to secure itself from harm and find a place to be. This is thrusting.

We get lost in the passion of pushing and pulling, and forget there was a particular purpose to the thrusting – to find a secure place in a dangerous world. Long after we find a reasonably safe situation the momentum of thrust still continues. By now it has transformed from seeking to provide for immediate needs to seeking money for luxury and as insurance against every risky eventuality. We can become locked into this as a way of life, and lose sight entirely not only of the soul's purpose but even its existence. This is the beginning of madness, yet so prevalent that we consider it normal.

The soul has its own purpose for incarnating and this is not fear-based at all. It is not interested in security but more accepting, easy and naive, not at all thrusting. In fact the less we push and the more we observe and respond, the closer we can tune into the soul. It is intuitively understood that soul awareness is more likely to arise on a mountaintop than in a marketplace, through peace and stillness not busyness and goals. The polarity between these two principles is the dynamism of life – half of who we are wants to achieve and the other half wants to contemplate existence. It is a rare individual that lacks either of these attitudes to some extent; even the coarsest materialist will become reflective and perceive sacredness at times, whilst the wildest mystic still needs to secure food and water. So we contrast being with doing – being is passive, without thrust.

being: responsibility, reflection, rectification, release

Any happiness that depends upon particular external circumstances is not true; it is not secure because it depends upon our doing whatever is required. Being happy is not ‘doing happy’. Real happiness is an attribute of being not doing and in adults this inevitably depends upon reaching such maturity that we willingly accept certain responsibilities yet can firmly reject inappropriate ones.

### *RESPONSIBILITY*

This word is so often said with a heavy voice or launched at another person like an accusing missile: ‘it’s your responsibility!’, yet its origins clearly indicate the ability to respond. If a doctor is present at a medical emergency then they have the responsibility to deal with it simply because they can. Undoubtedly it is suggestive of emotional maturity and adult attitudes. A certain type of person welcomes responsibility – the responsible ones. It is these who are entrusted with important matters, who are relied upon to make decisions and complete tasks. They generally find themselves in the centre of things and respected, so they attract kudos and develop gravitas. The word is used falsely to allocate blame. Quite wrongly, phrases like ‘you’re responsible’, ‘it’s your fault’ and ‘you’re to blame’ are used synonymously, but these are quite different things.

A mature adult has a responsibility to respond authentically to whatever occurs. Beyond this existential duty of authenticity, we can add further obligations by giving our word to others or by deciding life principles. If we affirm kindness as a life principle, then we may feel we have an obligation towards a hungry beggar, whereas volunteer soldiers have responsibility to disarm enemies because they said they would. One saves a life, one takes a life, and both are acting out of a perceived sense of duty.

All of us at some point carry the duty of care, as parents, pet owners, bosses and lovers. In this role we extend the awareness of need beyond our own demands and take on another's requirements to some extent. This trains us in 'reflexive self-consciousness' and this ability to see ourselves reflexively, from the other's point of view, is the essence of spirituality. Learning how to do this is the task of a seeker because it is a necessary and sufficient skill to open up the doors of perception that lead towards full realisation.

Indeed, the journey from childhood to maturity is substantively measured by the responsibilities we accept and properly discharge. The more we take on the more we attract and, provided we do what we say we will, the greater the responsibility the greater the person. Properly discharging our responsibilities is a requirement of peaceful being. If we fail to complete upon a promise, then we lose integrity and cannot stand firm in who we are. The people we have disappointed will feel the right to question us and put on pressure to do what they want us to do. Then, pushed, we cannot easily be at peace.

In Buddhism, the teaching is to 'carry the heaviest burden that you can comfortably manage'. Beyond this, responsibility is constricting. It is typical and sad that so many find their lives pinched – the boss is stern, the spouse is demanding, the priest is judgmental and even God seems annoyed with us all. This is not descriptive of excessive responsibility but poor boundaries. On the other hand, the complete absence of responsibilities leaves us empty and drifting through a meaningless life, because they are what holds involvements in place, prerequisites for any meaningful interactions.

We can categorise three types of people according to their readiness to take on responsibility. Some grasp for it, some shun it and some are

discerning. Those who grasp are mostly motivated by ambition or guilt perhaps even feeling that they can burn off lots of karma, receive accolades and collect a nest egg as they do. The avoiders can be selfish and pleasure seeking and, if so, not to be trusted. When discernment is introduced we have the one who says Yes or No by choice and after considering the implications of giving their word. They don't want to raise unfulfillable expectations, which would lead to stress or disappointment.

Management training centres on how to deal with responsibilities. We are shown how to make job lists, practise tasks, communicate clearly, confront the unacceptable, accept the unconfrontable, and concentrate upon the matter in hand. Spiritual training does too. We are shown how to balance our own needs with others', our lower self with higher, and life in this world with life in the next. What they share is the developing of our ability to respond to what occurs, by being highly aware of the external environments in which we express our internal motivations.

At either activity the more advanced practitioner arrives at the very same secret, and anyway a truly responsible person masters both realms. The secret is that we are responsible for everything that occurs in our own lives. This is a counterintuitive proposal. The esoteric explanation for it lies in that we create our circumstances out of three centres of being. We could call them the unconscious, the conscious and the super-conscious aspects of the psyche – equivalent to body, mind and spirit. This proposal requires our serious attention, and to validate its truth requires a stretch of our normal intelligence to include deep intuition.

The unconscious, body-centred, aspect of intelligence links us to the animal nature, our species-lore, even planetary imperatives and whatever still lingers at a cellular level of our inheritance from the Big Bang and

everything since. How can we even glimpse what that is? Only God has no unconsciousness, the rest of us will always have an area of unknowing yet nonetheless, to a significant extent, this motivates us and informs our decisions. The spiritual, super-conscious aspect of intelligence links us to the soul and its unique interpretation of how to be as God-like as possible.

Whenever our circumstances differ from what we choose consciously, it is because of misalignment between the unconscious, conscious and super-conscious aspects of mind. To align more closely we need to bring more intuition to bear as the soul's voice and the body's speak to us in their own mysterious languages.

Someone who reaches an extraordinary depth of responsibility stands apart. They understand that self-responsibility is a requirement of freedom. Being offered the divine privilege of Free Will is the most awesome of all possible responsibilities. If we claim it we are free to create whatever we can imagine from out of our hopes and fears, and there are few able to hold this power without buckling. So most buckle down under the yoke imposed by those who claim authority. We are free of imposition only after having dealt fully with an existential requirement to take total responsibility for all our parts whether or not we understand what they are. Our ability to do so stems from the understanding that we create all of our scenarios ourselves. So whatever we direct our attention towards is necessarily our responsibility to deal with. One option is simply to observe it with no need to thrust; this is the option that Lao Tzu recommends.

### *REFLECTION*

Often a word that seems to apply to two different meanings in fact reveals by artful ambiguity that the meanings are not really different at all

but together suggestive of a hidden truth. This word reflection is used to describe what we see physically when we look at a special piece of glass, and also what we perceive mentally through contemplation of events and feelings. These are disconnected activities – and yet when unified by their shared name they point to one of life’s most beautiful secrets.

The difficulty we have in revealing this secret lies in two things. Firstly, we have been brainwashed into a belief in our own powerlessness, that we are subject to external causes, a frail impotent being in a terrifying world overseen by a ruthless God. Secondly, it goes against an even deeper illusion about the very nature of substantial reality itself – which is explained by Hindu concepts and Quantum Mechanics but poorly understood by the Western layperson. It takes faith, training, meditation and contemplation, usually in combination, to realise within what has been taught for thousands of years in the East and decades in the West – that the observer influences the observed.

Leading-edge physicists and ancient mystics at last agree with each other in all but nomenclature, although the scientists are less ready to admit this. The reality in which we live is not as it seems to us – but to a mystic as to a physicist it is a field of energy in various forms and vibration, some beyond the perceptual capacity of normal people, which changes in response to an observer’s attention. Because of this it is not meaningful to say whether light, therefore energy, is a thing or a probability, a particle or a wave. Like Schrödinger’s cat, it is both dead and alive, material or subtle, according to what you look for. If you seek particle, you find particle; if you seek wave, you find wave. Didn’t Jesus say something similar?

Life itself is this field of uncommitted energy waiting to give form to express whatever it is we are looking for. It is nothing other than a reflection

of what our mind expects to find, a mirror therefore. When we contemplate life we are doing the reverse process – moving from the external world into the world of mind. Therefore life is the reflection of mind and the mind reflects upon life; each is a mirror of the other.

Instead of investing our sense of self in externals, we have the option to become self-reflective. In this case we identify ourselves with our feelings and qualities more than our achievements in the world. This is not denying the importance of successful endeavours, not at all, but just taking time to recognise what they mean.

There is a recognised practice in Sufism called Muhasaba, which carries the suggestion of embodiment of accountability. Put another way, we take a reckoning of our situations and notice how the body feels about them. Let's say we examine our lives according to seven criteria and bring to mind our current situation and status – say health, social life, love life, work, creative projects, spiritual practice and adventure. We might record that all is well, except that life feels a bit old and dull instead of fresh with new adventurous possibility. What we do with the awareness is another question – but the awareness is priceless. Even if this is a little too formal, the wisdom is that life is our feedback system. From observing and contemplating upon what is occurring, we gain important clues about how to adjust our ideas and choices. If the lowly amoeba can adjust its direction when its intended path is unsatisfactory then might we not try the same strategy?

Also one helpful device is to look back to a year ago and remember what were our circumstances, feelings and attitudes then, and in what particular ways are we different now. If they are more or less exactly the same, then we perhaps might wonder why that is so? Is it because we have done nothing about being dissatisfied? It is part of our responsibility to optimise

our own life through active endeavour and effort. The direction of changes or the lack of significant movement shows how well we are doing with this.

There is another dimension to reflection, which becomes available in meditation. This is a technique that allows us to access more subtle aspects of mind. There are many ways to meditate including for example mantric chanting, yoga and guided journeys – through them the mind settles into a calmer state, its grasping busyness at rest. Perhaps the most direct is the practice of watching the breath. We simply focus our thoughts on the physicality of breathing noticing the air movement, and its effect upon the body. When extraneous thoughts occur we return the attention to the breath.

The ability to do this develops with practice, and very few beginners slip into it immediately, yet the rewards are worth the effort. Because of the principle of resonance it is certainly much easier to meditate with others.

We find that, briefly at first and later for sustained periods, we can touch another world of perception. The gross mind, the monkey mind, is mercurial and shifts like the wind unless we find the discipline to concentrate. In meditation the ‘subtle mind’ reveals itself when the grasping mind is at rest. It is always there and functional but its voice is so quiet that it remains unheard until the monkey stops chattering, which it almost never does. Perhaps just before sleep or quietly in Nature we can touch into this state of mind. Normally though, an experienced mediator can access it very quickly by changing their focus of attention and breathing rhythm.

The gross mind mostly seeks to project fantasies upon the outer world, or analyse matters so that reality is circumscribed by definition and compared to what is known. The subtle mind doesn’t do that; it observes

with peripheral attention, not concentrating on the detail but allowing revelation of the whole picture, thus seeing the hidden connections and patterns of influence between things. This alternate mode of perception is centred in peace. There is no excitement, no desire or curiosity; it is beingness. Over days, months and years the deepening builds and we find that the benefits are truly remarkable. In normal daily life the mind becomes untroubled, clear and open; situations resolve quickly and easily and whatever we take on is more straightforward. The time it takes to realise our desires tends to shorten, yet the availability of time itself expands – contradicting those who complain they have not the time to sit still for twenty minutes each day. Without effort or intention such feelings as anger, resentment, anxiety and confusion soften, then slowly drift away. What also occurs is that we see the way things really are in life; the fog clears.

Contemplation is a related function of mind and arises out of meditation whenever a thought is intentionally introduced to the subtle mind. The thought itself comes from the gross mind but is gently planted like a seed into the subtle mind so that new insights can be revealed. With familiarity of this process we can learn to employ the subtle mind rather than the analytical gross mind to facilitate our understandings. This is especially important when the subject of our contemplations are not always suitable for analysis and left-brain thinking, such as questions of spirituality, relationship and feelings.

### *RECTIFICATION*

As responsible adults we will come to see upon reflection that much of what has disturbed the peace could have been better handled by us. To some extent we are at fault if we had the ability to respond to a situation

better than we did. To make this right and correct the error we need to make amends.

Let us be very clear that this action is self-serving and therefore legitimate, it is not meant to be a way to ease guilt. Guilt is always wrong, so is blame. Whatever is done out of either of these two motivations will create a worse problem than we are trying to address. This viewpoint is only controversial among the blameful and the guilty. One of the main distinguishing features of a truly spiritual person is that they have renounced these two horrors of existence, which are fear-based religious control devices. Both guilt and blame are to be ardently avoided no matter what social inconvenience arises as a result. We make amends in order to rectify our error in acting insensitively to another's needs. This says nothing about our worth as a person and does not relate to questions of morality at all. It is the normal behaviour of responsible people, clearing up after themselves.

There is a very good chance that we don't notice that we have acted insensitively – this is exactly what insensitivity means. Whenever we impose upon another they always give off signals, unfortunately they tend to be subtle and ambiguous. A mature person is one willing to be responsible, therefore more sensitive, and this willingness inclines us towards learning how to read the signals.

Reading can be quite an art. At one end of the spectrum we can read into how North Korea is feeling vulnerable, unappreciated and judged by the international community; their response is to send a signal in the form of a nuclear weapons programme. At the other end we no longer feel quite as warmly welcomed by a shopkeeper who dislikes our new nose ring because his own daughter happens to wear one, a gesture against his strict parenting.

Signals take many forms and how we respond to them makes a life-defining difference to who we are. Too often there is escalation – the international community makes North Korea suffer poverty through economic sanctions, and the simple nose ring becomes emblematic of dissent rather than beauty and is joined by a few other pieces of body metalwork and some intentionally ugly tattoos. These responses are misinterpreted of course, and escalation worsens, even beyond redemption. The necessary atmosphere, which softens suspicion towards trust, is created when genuine apology is met with real forgiveness.

The doctrine ‘turn the other cheek’ is not meant as an invitation to be treated as a doormat, it is meant as an empowering esoteric practice, the life practice of a highly evolved person. Such a person knows that we should serve our own interests, that altruism is false, and yet they are always kind and considerate. How can these two things be reconciled? The explanation is that at this higher dimension of life it is seen that the Golden Rule works – whatever we do is eventually done back to us. If we want to be forgiven then we must forgive first.

The life practice of forgiveness frees us not only of blame but also of guilt. Typically these two imperfections of attitude are deeply embedded in our psyche, and register as an emotional flinch. Yet slowly, steadily over the years forgiveness heals the flinch. As this occurs, we become more spontaneous, self-assured and joyful. More than that, as we move away from the blame-guilt paradigm, our resultant authenticity of being becomes attractive. We are trusted, liked and tolerated despite all of our eccentricities.

Following 911 only 2% of Americans thought that their government’s foreign policy might have contributed to the attack; 98% thought there was no US responsibility. This seems very naive to non-Americans, but it’s

surprising how very few people accept that what happens to them is explained by what they did before. If the US was an enlightened person not an imperial force they would have responded very differently to the attacks.

At a very advanced degree of realisation, a person can use forgiveness to make things right. Instead of seeing forgiveness as a way to excuse someone's bad behaviour, we can see it as an energy form, which radiates from a particular type of person, and whose effect is to soften resentment and anxiety in others. Generally a peaceful person is forgiving; a forgiving person is peaceful. So we see that forgiveness promotes peace, is an aspect of peace, and in fact a pre-condition of it.

So basically, whether 'right' or 'wrong', we need to look out for signals and take action to reassure and recompense. Do we have the responsibility to ensure that we are not misinterpreted? An evolved person will think so and, knowing that others could be less capable of sensitivity, do their very best to be non-provocative and properly understood. Also they apologise easily when needed: 'Sorry I did it, it won't happen again and here's a bunch of flowers'.

The bunch of flowers is important as physical evidence of sincerity, their value being both symbolic and intrinsic. Sometimes a gesture is enough, and sometimes there needs to be value compensation. Whether the reparation is enough to rectify the issue can also be read within the signals received in response. If these are unconditionally relaxed and warm then there is little doubt – otherwise there may be a need for discussion, a chance for the aggrieved party to vent their feelings, from which further understandings may arise. This venting could well test our patience and depth of humility.

## *RELEASE*

We are each of us bound up by our very physicality and all of our other attachments, yet the eternal truth of who we are cannot be permanently constrained. The eternal self is often called soul, and is made of fiery, expressive spirit whose essence-nature is absolute freedom. Before deciding to incarnate, soul had little or no comprehension of how it might feel to be encased in clay; it had no way to understand what it would be like to live in a world run by the fearful and violent.

The measure of how shocking and distasteful this is can be seen in how quickly a new born baby loses its purity of being and develops nasty qualities – by the time kids go to school they all have an aspect of personality that is far from angelic, as it was at birth. Here we have the fundamental story of human experience, the interplay of ego and soul locked in a fragile body. One part is too angelic to live in the world and has a wistful yearning and the compulsion to reclaim its spiritual heritage; the other part is concerned with survival questions and tends to become fearful and overwhelmed by the harshness of physical life.

It might be helpful for us to re-think what the ego is. Surely it is not more or less than our best survival strategy expressed as a personality? It has some of the qualities of a protective shield whose purpose is to secure a place and path for the soul's journey home. As the years go by ego develops strength and starts to explore interesting possibilities, which are most delightful when they centre on caring relationships. Through conflict and resolution it firms up its standpoint and decides upon a visionary quest, by which it establishes its own creative take on life, a collaborative way of being that is deeply rewarding and yet free of imposition and compromise.

It is a watershed point of awakening when the ego learns to trust the soul. This is the tipping point, when faith replaces fear. Following this there is a process of shining the light of faith into the dark corners of our fears. Fear knows that it cannot survive light. Light is absolute in its confidence, and fear is fearful and so doubtful of its own worth; therefore fear hides. It has clever disguises and strategies such as confusion, deceit, dogma, denial, misinterpretation, self-glorification, self-repudiation, addiction, anxiety, habit, and so many more. Light uses gentle weapons such as love, trust, forgiveness, beauty and joy – but mostly faith. Strong in faith, we can seek out hidden fears and win them over to the light. In this action we loosen our ties, which bind us into the imprisonment of fear; so we find release. This process acts out in day-to-day life events. From one moment to the next we journey on and we have encounters with people, with physicality and with ourselves. In every encounter the light and dark are entwined. Battling away like lovers, neither one is able to defeat the other as long as we draw breath.

Breath itself is exactly balanced between life-affirming and life-denying. As much as we cannot learn only to breathe in, we cannot learn to live only in light. What we can do is have faith that on exhalation as we release life-giving air we remember that it will soon be replaced upon inhalation with fresh air. That's how faith works – when we see the release of our beloved attachments, instead of feeling regret we choose happily to keep in mind that something new and better is on its way.

The people in our life are there as an expression of both light and dark, faith and fear, and are meant to come and go in their seasons. These changes occur in order to optimise vitality since without letting go of what has been we simply cannot progress to what can be.

As we evolve, we notice the shades of light and dark become more subtle. Wrong and Right, those glaring primary colours, become pastel shades, and even shimmer so that we lose certainty about which is which. Somehow the definitions lose their absoluteness and therefore their usefulness as the moral compass of life; they lose their grip on us. We come to see that wrong and right are constructs – relational, contextual, subjective and ephemeral. If we seek what is absolute and objective, because we need to find something reliable and call it Truth, we will become dis-illusioned. When the illusion is released, then we release our attachment to knowing Truth. The best we can ever do is to walk a path towards Truth. This path is very clearly signposted: in every situation, Fear is saying ‘not this way’ and Faith is saying ‘this is the way’.

In studying the formula: Responsibility, Reflection, Rectification, Release, we are gaining insight in how we move from Questioning to Being. We learn that when we reflect upon our chosen responsibilities we can make things right and be released from the attachments that hold us tight. Tightness is not freedom, not a soul quality, and words that feel like tightness are clues for us, the signposts of fear. These include things like ambition, need, control, angst, prideful self-love, bigotry, poverty, grasping and revenge, and of course anything we are obliged to do subject to the pleasure of a stern overseer; they deny us freedom.

If we want to move away from fear towards faith then we will release tightness in favour of an easy way of being. What we once desperately pursued – recognition, security, wealth – can now be easily released, along with many other comforts of the ego. The ego has been energetically binding itself up for a complete lifetime, so the process of release cannot be instantaneous; it takes time. It is seen as what people do approaching death.

being: responsibility, reflection, rectification, release

The very first lesson for us as babies when we arrive into this world is how to breathe. Nothing subsequently encountered is more important and yet typically we give it no attention. It ain't broke so why fix it? Death approaches and it becomes appropriate to learn how to breathe well. Of course death has been approaching since the very first breath, and yet only mystics have taken that fact as central to their way of life. To practise their mysticism they first learn how to breathe, just like newborns. Perhaps it sounds strange to be advised that now we are more keenly aware of the end we should start again at the beginning. Yet herein lies the mystery of life – and how could it be found elsewhere? Breath is life, so the mystery of life is breath. All of what we do and what we are shows in how we breathe, and Sufis teach that when we master breath we master life.

Learning to control the quality of breath we learn to ride the changes in life in joy not fear. Daily breathing exercises enable this. Emotion normally influences how we breathe and interrupts the natural rhythm. Following a committed period of breathing practice we will learn how at will to make our breathing slow, relaxed, deep and rhythmic. This necessarily gives us the ability to put aside our emotions if we choose to do so. We soon find that all of our intrusive attachments have their foundation in fearful emotions, and we can choose not to have them anymore. By affirming faith release can then be achieved; it is the letting go of the emotional attachment to fear.

**Conscious beingness depends upon four aspects:  
responsibility, reflection, rectification and release  
and is developed as we learn to master the word Sorry**

## DYING

Generally in the West people hold a negative attitude to death as though it were to be avoided at all costs. Dying therefore is mostly seen as a sad process punctuated by loss and failure. Sufis teach differently. In fact perhaps one of the greatest rewards for the student of mysticism is an explanation of what occurs after we exhale for the very last time.

For most people their attention is focused externally upon the circumstances of life. They believe their feelings are the result of outer scenarios and that they will be happy if they have love, success and security. The mystic has an entirely opposite understanding, believing that the outer life is the result not the cause. So by choosing to feel faith, peacefulness and happiness, they attract situations to reflect these feelings. The mystic trains the mind to engineer an inner condition of contentment, and leaves the externals to work themselves out. This is the purpose of meditation, mantra and breath work, coupled with a particular attitude of being.

This formula maintains during and following dying. It is taught that certain practitioners such as Zen Buddhists hardly even notice the passage at all. For them, death doesn't change anything very much. Their sense of self and sense of life is hardly touched by death. We may compare this to a trip abroad to a very exotic place. It is true that we feel different and act differently, but only on the surface. Beneath that, our sense of self and sense of life is hardly touched by the experience although it may well have a transforming effect on us. Death is like that, except that we are guided and nurtured by our eternal loved ones. Whatever we felt before death will be almost identical to what we feel immediately afterwards.

## dying: permission, acceptance, agreement, surrender

The attitude we have towards dying is central to our ability to live well; this is because of faith. If we learn to have faith in death then we have faith in life too. Some think that death is the end of everything, some think life continues in the eternal torment of Hell or at best surrounded by squeaky-clean harpists dressed in white; most don't think about it at all and, if asked, admit to being entirely undecided about what to expect. It contrasts radically with a more Eastern approach where celebration and sacredness merge into a life philosophy that embraces death as the completion of a short chapter in a very long story, and dying just as a transition to the next chapter.

To understand dying we have to look at what it is and what purpose it serves, so it is useful to study Sufi cosmology. Any attempt to put forward a model for the nature of reality will only ever be a rough guide, so we do not accept this cosmology as Truth; it is at best a helpful guide that triggers insights and settles the mind. It is neither possible nor appropriate to be deterministic about Sufi ideas. Sufism is an oral tradition, its ideas are passed down more through poetry, dance, allegorical stories and in direct experiences between guide and student. No scripture exists, although commentaries have often been written, some of which are highly intellectual philosophical works. An aspect of the teachings is important in the context of the study of dying; this is called the 7 Planes of Consciousness.

dying: permission, acceptance, agreement, surrender

## *7 PLANES OF CONSCIOUSNESS*

Universal Consciousness can be seen as a self-aware field, from the subtlest to the densest expression of energy, which has seven distinct levels of vibration demonstrating its various qualities. The individuation of spirit as soul is followed by its descent towards the possibility of physical manifestation. During its descent the soul is impressed to a lesser or greater degree by each level, and typically each of us has a fundamental life attitude that portrays one of these planes more than others. Some of us are more loving, some more courageous, others are very earthy, and some are very mental and so on, according to which plane resonates most closely with us.

### **7<sup>TH</sup> PLANE: UNITY**

This is beyond existence and the manifest state; it is impersonal, transcendental, eternal oneness. Although we can touch this state through spiritual practice, we cannot live our lives in this condition of being.

### **6<sup>TH</sup> PLANE: PURITY**

This plane has the qualities of purity, lucidity, stillness, solitude, freedom, and absolute peace; there is a remarkable capacity to examine and understand the inter-connectedness of all of life. This insight makes for compassion, so forgiveness becomes possible; it is forgiveness that leads to purity. '6<sup>th</sup> plane souls' are innocent and subtle, but they can be cold, demanding and controlling, with an unrealistic longing for perfection and an inclination to retreat from life, including an aversion for physical sensuality.

### **5<sup>TH</sup> PLANE: SPLENDOUR**

Innocence and peace are strongly present here, and the emphasis centres in sacredness, worship, and rituals to glorify the wonder of God. Sometimes priestly, the 5<sup>th</sup> plane soul is very sensitive and often finds life too jarring, so

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retreats from conflict and ugliness. They seek ecstasy and splendour and yet can become frustrated, feel too imperfect and even be reduced to self harm.

#### **4<sup>TH</sup> PLANE: WISDOM**

This is the plane of the master and hero, featuring the study of power, will, justice, authenticity, truth, and faith. There is a forthright attitude to life always seeking clarity in situations and relationships. Compelling idealism endows great reserves of strength to overcome obstacles but can turn into fundamentalism, manipulation and abuse of power; there is also the danger of violence, addiction and obsession. The 4<sup>th</sup> plane soul commands respect, has a fiery, passionate intensity, and must be independent and purposeful. Here is the battlefield between soul and ego that generates wisdom.

#### **3<sup>RD</sup> PLANE: LOVE, HARMONY AND BEAUTY**

This plane affords deep connectedness with Nature and simple beauty, a longing for harmony, and a loving, trusting temperament. Heart-centred, joyous and playful by nature, 3<sup>rd</sup> plane souls are gentle, childlike, and particularly sentimental, but can be very naive, needy and dependent, lacking in sophistication, and longing for an unrealistic romantic ideal. This often makes for a lack of boundaries and even victim consciousness that draws them into abusive situations.

#### **2<sup>ND</sup> PLANE: ASTRAL**

The Astral is to do with all functions of the mind, inventiveness, genius, imagination, and also emotion and intuition. Souls that have been strongly impressed by their Astral Plane experiences during their descent tend to be very resourceful and creative, they think abstractly, can memorize and reason well, they have perceptiveness, insight and understanding, and are invariably humorous, witty and bubbling with ideas, inspiration and creative solutions. Yet they can also be rather enigmatic, bored easily, restless,

dying: permission, acceptance, agreement, surrender

changeable and have no great ability to ground their many crazy ideas, then they get confused, muddled and tied up with unconscious drives.

### 1<sup>ST</sup> PLANE: PHYSICALITY

The Earth Plane brings the soul into the density of matter, and this is experienced as extreme limitation. Survival issues shape personality as we learn to discriminate between accepting the unacceptable, and striving to overcome. 1<sup>st</sup> plane souls are often content, having a slow, heavy rhythm and enjoying the pleasures of the senses; they can become intoxicated by the world's sensuality if they lose sight of instinctual wisdom through greed and over indulgence. Human imperfection and divine perfection are married when the nobility of the soul shows in their compassionate, practical response to the human suffering that typifies this world.

### THE SOUL'S JOURNEY

The soul makes the journey from Unity through the planes into the Earth realm; the descent brings us into incarnation. Some Sufis, especially those in India conversant with Hindu ideas, accept reincarnation as part of it all; others believe in only one incarnation. In another idea, upon incarnating the soul separates into a large number of lives distributed through space and time, simultaneous not sequential, each life having its own earthly agenda. One by one, each part completes its mission and, on dying, surrenders its body, returning to the Astral Plane. There it rejoins its soul-siblings awaiting the time when all are complete so they can become unified once more. Then the ascent is underway and the long journey home is undertaken in reverse order through the planes.

We can ease our passage from this world to the next by focussing on the passageway. The last breath is our passageway, and if we can experience that with the right attitude of mind then we can optimise what comes next. In a

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very real sense our life is not more than the training we need to perfect the last breath. All that is carried forward is condensed into this last breath, and all else falls away. The mind survives with all of its qualities and knowledge, to live on after the passage is complete; nothing else does.

When the will to live is no longer strong enough; vitality is lost and our grip on physical life is insufficient. One imagines it feels rather like the sweet joy of surrender to sleep at the end of a very tiring day. Much is written elsewhere about what happens next, for example in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and *Home with God*, one of the series *Conversations with God* by Neale Donald Walsh. In brief terms it is more or less something like this:

Upon death, our centre of identification becomes external to the physical body and we look down upon what we previously thought of as ourselves, and find that we still exist even though the body has died. Unless we are really stubborn, this proves to us that death does not end life. What follows depends upon what we expect to happen, according to what we have been taught to expect and also worked out for ourselves. Some people may well see the Pearly Gates, others who believed that death was the end will not see anything until they eventually realise that they still exist. Many of us will be drawn to reunite with our family as well as love partners. We are met and shown how to settle into our new adventure.

Secrets and insights are revealed during a process whereby we revisit our personal history. Firstly we see it all again from our own point of view, then as if we were on the other side of things. We get to experience what it was like for those we met to have had an encounter with us. If we were loving we will feel loved; if we were invasive then we will know what it's like to feel invaded. This process brings the gross monkey mind to a more refined condition, such that it can be surrendered, allowing us to progress towards

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reunification with Source. All of this takes place in an atmosphere of bliss, and eventually we feel ourselves to be pure loving joy and nothing else.

In Sufism, this last embodied moment can be rehearsed in the practice known as ‘die before you die’. We will look at how this can be done following the formula: Permission, Acceptance, Agreement and Surrender.

### *PERMISSION*

On asking a Sufi master if he is able to play the Saz or the Oud, he might answer, ‘It plays me Inshallah!’, or if you ask, ‘Are you a healer’, he will perhaps respond ‘I have permission to do this work’. His response is well chosen in that he places himself as the passive participant in something much bigger. He affirms that it is not his will driving the event but that of some imperative that he allows, something greater that flows through him. Linguistically, per-mission means exactly that – a through-flowing – yet in normal use it now carries the restrictive implication that we could say No, and indeed we prefer to say No, but reluctantly we are saying Yes instead.

We are hard-wired to resist death – that fact is called the survival instinct, and so any initial reluctance to acknowledge that we are approaching death is entirely legitimate. And yet one of life’s few certainties is that we will die, so there always comes a moment of truth that this life is closing off soon and nothing can be done.

Huge social pressure is at play because we are discussing one of life’s terrible taboos – DEATH! TV often shows the event for our entertainment, and in movies inevitably the comforter of the dying fibs unconvincingly ‘You’ll be fine, it’s only a scratch!’ or something similar. Rarely if ever will we hear ‘Yes, my friend, it is now time to prepare enthusiastically for your greatest adventure!’. Society generally disapproves of death and dying; it is

not thought polite to die but if you must then 'at least have the decency not to talk about it'. If a friend announces their intention to go on a special trip to somewhere exciting then usually we will congratulate them – 'you lucky devil!', even if it is so far away that we will never see them again. Try saying that to a person who announces that they are dying! We are forced by convention to offer sympathy and so reinforce the message that dying is at all costs to be avoided and yet you, poor soul, you have failed in this task. The powerful implication is that because no-one wants it, death is to be feared, that we are victims, and that each one of us is extremely reluctant to go into this mysterious tunnel.

King Cnut was such a revered leader that his Viking followers had very unrealistic expectations of his powers. He sat on a beach and commanded the tide not to wet his royal feet. He did this ironically to demonstrate to his simple minded subjects that there are forces beyond even a king's remit – that the ocean's tidal authority is irresistible. Same as death. It will come and we have no power to change that; the best we can ever do is postpone the final event for a short while. Yet the Sufi is trying to teach us that even the power of music and the power to heal are not ours – it is all, God willing, just flowing through us for a period of time. Inshallah – God willing – is the acknowledgement that we are constantly subject to greater powers than we can conceive, and any claims we may make to go against them are futile.

Having no power – that is real food for thought! What we used to do we can no longer do, and that is non-negotiable. Actually for most of our lives we have been facing up to the loss of abilities and the ending of what we enjoy, whereas from now on those things will not be superseded by new skills, interests or people, and there's the rub. The future seems to be running out and we cannot replace it at the supermarket.

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If permission is clearly a reluctant Yes, then acceptance is softer in its reluctance. Knowing that we have no power to change things, then we must come to a place where we can accept them.

### *ACCEPTANCE*

Acceptance is the procedure by which we come to own what is presented to us. It seals a relationship between giver and receiver. In this particular scenario, we are being offered safe passage from this world to the next by the ‘Angel of Death’. We have no say in whether to die, but most definitely we have the last word in how to do it, well or badly. Acceptance is what opens up the possibility of dying well.

Firstly, let us consider what alternative there is to dying. Apart from a few advanced fakirs and yogis, for everyone ever born it would mean never-ending physical decrepitude and therefore severe painful limitation; eternal torture. Death is release and relief, the most precious of all gifts, even including incarnated life. If we knew birth was a one-way ticket to perpetual physical torture, we would abstain. It simply makes no sense to shun death and fear it because it is the one thing that makes the risk of incarnation bearable.

What we resist is always inclined to push harder and this is no exception. Yet whatever we wholeheartedly own finds its way somehow into our harmonious beingness. In order to own it fully, it will be very helpful to understand why we are dying now and like this.

This question ‘why’ can be answered from the past or from the future – what gave rise to this? and what purpose does it serve? These questions are unlikely to be understood from the perspective of the ego because the fearful ego is that which is about to be annihilated, and its primary concern

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is now, and always has been, to avoid annihilation. We need to identify ourselves not as a body that has soul but as the soul, which has an important transition at hand during which it will lose its current ailing body. The soul is not completely happy to be encased in clay and can feel exaltation in the promise of the discarnate freedom and joy that it remembers and will soon experience again.

From the past perspective then...why am I dying? We must surely trust that death is fair; if we cannot trust in this, then we cannot move forward in consciousness. If we believe in the possibility that death is arbitrary then faith eludes us. We need to remember that faith is a choice; it requires both will and surrender, we must choose it if we are to be free of the fear of death. And, if death is not arbitrary then our earlier choices are surely the cause of its timing and manner. These choices arose from the super-conscious and the unconscious parts of us no doubt, but they were supervised by the conscious part. Some of the things we have thought, said or done were at odds with our physical body's need for a healthy life.

Eating badly, working stressfully, living in a poor environment and a thousand other imperfections in lifestyle together cause the circumstances of death. Reaching insight into this is a real life achievement. Yet there is also an underlying psychological explanation for why we ate harmful substances and worked in an industrial zone. Most would say they had no choice, but that is not an acceptable analysis for a self-empowered seeker of truth. We need to discover the mysterious processes whereby our imperfect psyche would rather let the body die off early than deal with its neurotic emotions. Dealing fully with this question is the evolution of consciousness; this is what life is.

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If we try to answer the question from the future, we will want to shift perception to examine how exactly it will be to our advantage, as a soul, to move forward now. There is only one rational explanation, and that is that in some important way, the future is better for us with a new scenario. This body and life are no longer optimal for our purposes so we need to move on now. Strong in faith, we trust that each occurrence in life is in service to our best long term interests and our death is no exception to this rule. We affirm that, by releasing our grip on this life, we are willingly opening up to a better one.

### *AGREEMENT*

Agreement is reached when two parties that disagreed find alignment with a common approach. Here the soul and the ego strongly disagree about what is best – and that needs to change. This last chapter of life could be the most profound and joyful, the best one, but we have to get the ego on board or it might not be. The ego has no capacity to change the final outcome, but it can really spoil this last journey.

The whole business of Free Will has to be fully understood in its reach and ramifications. Either there is or there is not Free Will, and the idea that there is not would imply the existence of a Controlling Force. Such a force is usually identified as God and described, often angrily, as rather harsh and uncaring, One who permits injustice and catastrophes, and allows the innocent to suffer. The absurdity of this description of a loving God beggars belief, so we know it to be false. The idea that there in fact is Free Will says nothing about the existence itself of the Divine, but implies the non-existence of Divine Intervention. If it is God that bestows Free Will then why and how could there ever be Intervention? It's just not Free Will if an all-powerful Supervisor can change our decisions.

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Freedom implies responsibility not the opposite. It has to be claimed, celebrated and often defended. One gift of Free Will is that we are free to adopt it and equally free not to. It is strange that most people choose not to and find something external to hold accountable for their frustrations and disappointments. But in fact we are in the mess we're in because we have handled things badly, not because God intervened just as we were about to get it right – nor indeed would intervene to prevent our species' self-destruction. Other conscious beings might, but God cannot, having already created a world in which Free Will is one of the laws. Laws are immutable.

Free Will is either absolute, or it is a lie. Freedom is not a relative concept, so anything which denies our ability to decide things for ourselves puts an end to it. On the face of it, death does exactly that. However, what we need to see is that the gift of Free Will belongs to the soul not the body, and even death itself arises out of the choices the soul has freely made. Soul has a different agenda to ego; ego is usually very reluctant indeed to die, whereas soul is the author of the dying. The very existence of Free Will implies that, as souls, we are choosing to experience death. Dying is the current expression of our free will – we want this. The part of us that finds agreement with dying is the soul, so as we adopt the state of Agreement, we align ourselves with soul consciousness and slip away from ego imprisonment.

As we approach our irrevocable incapacity, we are somewhat hurried along by its ruthless implacability. That which we have not completed needs to be finished, words of appreciation and other gestures of kindness need to be brought up to date, documents may need to be signed, assets disposed of, friends and family prioritised and comforted, wisdom legacies imparted, embarrassing compliments endured and so on. In fact the ego has quite a lot

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to attend to, since this is its most self-defining project. How to live is the lesser test of creativity and maturity; how we die is the greater examination.

After spending a lifetime thrusting to achieve and grasping the rewards, anxious not to lose face or lose our grip, now the lesson becomes how to relinquish that power gracefully. We must find an inner place where it is truly joyful to let everything simply drift away and out of our controlling ego's reach of influence.

It is better now to anticipate what comes afterwards and prepare for that. It is true that most of what follows death is unknown – but in what way does that differ from life? Most of the future is unknown anyway. However quite a bit is not. There are some things that we are safe to assume will continue after death because it is better to assume them and risk their being disproved than not make the assumption. We decide to make two assumptions – that we continue to exist as who we are, and that Free Will operates. Done well, these two affirmations will carry us through peacefully because they show that the ego's fears are surrendered to the soul's faith.

## *SURRENDER*

At the very moment that we gasped our first breath it became certain that we would one day sigh our last. We have been approaching death all our lives with no possibility of reprieve. Powerless in the inevitability, we have no choice about it and like everyone else, princess or pauper, must surrender in the end. Yet we do have a choice about how to surrender. We can raise a white flag, lower our heads and feel defeated, or we can offer ourselves willingly as if to a lover. Surrender can be bitter or sweet, to an enemy or to our Beloved, and it really does matter which approach we take.

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According to Sufi teachings it matters because we create the circumstances of our next reality out of what is held in the emotional-mental body as we release our very last exhalation. In this passage-moment it is important to be thinking positive thoughts and feeling a peaceful sense of anticipation. The mood best suited to this ultimate adventure is naked trust coupled with delightful fascination, as if with your best and only lover. Nakedness implies vulnerability and the absence of defences, and is also suggestive of the willingness to embrace. If we want to have heart-joy in the moment of passing, then we can learn to embrace death as a lover, and dying as cosmic foreplay.

On leaving this world, we return at first to the Astral Plane – a film with Robin Williams, ‘What Dreams May Come’, shows a version of this realm. On this plane, the reality that we inhabit is clearly, immediately and dramatically created in each instant as a reflection of what we have in the mind. Indeed this is the same process as that on Earth, but here it is so much slower that the causal relationship is not at all obvious and appears not to be so. The mind can be very disturbed and restless, and is as easily able to imagine monsters as rose gardens. On Earth the slowness protects us from foolish dreams and ideas suddenly taking form, yet on the Astral no such safety device exists; it is time to face all of our dreams – nightmares too!

On the Astral Plane nothing is brought forward except for the mind, with its ability to shape our surroundings and responses to what occurs. This ability is exactly what is promoted and developed through meditation and prayer. These are mental exercises; they train the mind so that it learns not to wander too far off topic or indulge in frightful fantasies – useful talents in any realm.

A strangely apt metaphor for how the mind can be readied for the Astral Plane experience is found in flirting. The thing about flirting is that its fascination lies in the very uncertainty of what it might lead to; it could be nothing, yet it could be everything. The mind orients so as to read the subtle signs in an ever-changing highly charged atmosphere. It is backed up by feelings that have to be held around the midpoint between promise fulfilled and possibility denied, hinting at the potential for passion whilst maintaining poise. This is the best mind-set for dying since every breath theoretically could be our last, and one day one of them will be. The irony is delicious – using sex games for dying not birthing. Also of course, flirting is light-hearted fun, and death, having been heavily burdened with so much inappropriate seriousness and pessimism, could use a bit of that.

Long before death itself threatens immediacy, the Sufi will study the practice called 'die before you die'. This means living each moment as if death is nearby. To live in this way requires, and so develops, an attitude of surrender, and yet this is coupled with the sense of celebration. This is because each breath is proof that the previous one was not the end, so the preciousness of existence is remembered; and it is remembered in every moment as a constant of life. This is in no way significantly different from the Hindu practice of Sannyasin. All attachments are surrendered one by one – position, security, purpose and all things familiar until at last life itself is released. The practice robs Death of its tyrannical power and turns it into a collaborator with no other duty than to receive the final exhalation – it has no claim over the dying itself. Dying thus becomes an aspect of life and not an aspect of death. In this last breath, the culmination of our lives is best expressed as calm assurance that all is well and just about to get a lot better because we have faith that it will.

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All of our relationships change as family and friends modify their involvements with us. Death is mysterious and powerful and they simply cannot know what we are feeling as we move towards meeting it. Their own feelings can be triggered deeply in the anticipation of loss, of radical change and of an unpredictable future without us. As with most things, the intensity of an experience becomes richer and more honest as it approaches the end. Loved ones identify the deepest truth of our meaning in their lives through which we gain valuable insights into how well we have lived. Their love and respect will carry forward to the next chapter as defining qualities within us. When we compare the worth of their love to the worth of our life achievements, we come to measure ourselves as between whether ego or soul has been more influential in structuring the features of our lives.

It is not only relationships that feature differently; all the little things reveal their life-preciousness – the crackle of an open fire, the colours of sunset and the scent of honeysuckle become as soul-ticklingly delightful as the smile of a granddaughter with jam on her face. It is easy to see that it is not the fire, flower or sunset that have all become special; this is an inner quality that we have realised within ourselves, arising out of surrender. In this blessed state of being, we learn that beauty, love and joy like all things come out of us; we have but to choose them and they are revealed.

How sad that we had no such realisations earlier, yet how glorious that we should be rewarded now with this embodied insight! We can be completely relaxed knowing that, unless we stress against it, then life itself, even now, is more glorious, more beautiful and loving than anything we could ever imagine. Poet and teacher, Leonard Cohen captures this idea advising us to ‘slip into the Masterpiece’ where to discover the mystery of life. The Mystery is like a ball of uncommitted energy with a centre and edge, swirling and shifting restlessly, shaped by determined enthusiasts,

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loved by the loving and feared by the fearful. In this context we see that Life and Death are not substantively different things, except perhaps that death punctuates the changes more dramatically and except for birth is the most intense expression of life. Its main purpose is to re-energise and inspire a tired soul and to move things along. A person whose life was circumscribed with doubts and obedience will be less likely to enjoy an easy passage than a person strong in faith and bubbling with enthusiasm. And so perhaps these are the qualities to live by so that we can die by them too – calm faith and passionate enthusiasm.

**Dying well depends upon four aspects:  
permission, acceptance, agreement and surrender  
and is developed as we learn to master the word Yes**

## SUFISM

Sufism is a word used to describe a package of practices, attitudes and behaviours observed in certain mystics who live mostly in the Middle East. A practitioner of Sufism is called a dervish ('one on the threshold') and a master is accorded honour if referred to as a Sufi. Their reputation for having exceptional, even magical, abilities is not at all spurious.

### *SUFI ORIGINS*

*(Open Path, The Sufi Way)*

There is disagreement among religious scholars and Sufis themselves about the origins of Sufism. The traditional view is that Sufism is the mystical school of Islam and had its beginnings in the first centuries following the life of the Prophet Mohammad. Indeed, most Sufis in the world today are Muslim and many of them would consider a non-Islamic Sufism impossible. There is another view, however, that traces the pre-Islamic roots of Sufism back through the early Christian mystics of Syria and Egypt, to the Essenes, the ancient Pythagorean orders, and the mystery schools of the Egyptians and Zoroastrians, among others. It is these roots that gathered into the trunk known as Islamic Sufism.

*(Sufism: Wisdom of all Faiths, Sufi Inayat Khan)*

The word Sufi may come from a Persian word meaning wisdom. From the original root many derivations can be traced; among them the Greek word Sophia is one of the most interesting. Wisdom is the ultimate power. The point of view of the wise differs from that of followers of religion. The wise, whatever their faith, have always been able to meet each other beyond

those boundaries of external forms and conventions. Mystical ideas are unintelligible to the generality of people. The mystics have, therefore, usually imparted their ideas to a chosen few only, to those whom they could trust, who were ready for initiation and discipleship. Sufis have appeared at different times and their expression of wisdom has differed to suit their environments, but their understanding of life has been one and the same. The same herb planted in various atmospheric conditions will vary in form accordingly, but will retain its characteristics. Sufism's foundation could perhaps be attributed to the teachings of Abraham, but the greater number consider that it arose contemporary to the teaching of Zoroaster. Every age of the world has seen awakened souls, and as it is impossible to limit wisdom to any one period or place, so it is impossible to date the origin of Sufism.

*(The Unity of Knowledge, Idries Shah)*

The connection between the ancient practical philosophies and the present ones is seen to have been based upon the higher-level unity of knowledge, not upon appearances. This explains why the Muslim Rumi had Christian, Zoroastrian and other disciples; why the great Sufi 'invisible teacher' Khidr is said to be a Jew; why the Mogul Prince Dara Shikoh identified Sufi teachings in the Hindu Vedas, yet himself remained a member of the Qadiri Order; how Pythagoras and Solomon can be said to be Sufi teachers. It also explains why Sufis will accept some alchemists to have been Sufis, as well as understanding the underlying developmental factors in Rumi's evolutionary philosophy, or Hallaj's 'Christianity'; why, indeed, Jesus is said to stand, in a sense, at the head of the Sufis.

*(Origins and Nature of the Sufis, Robert Graves)*

According to Ali el-Hujwiri, an early authoritative Sufi writer, the Prophet Mohammed himself said: "He who hears the voice of the Sufi people and does not say Amen is recorded in God's presence as one of the heedless." Nor are the Sufis a sect, they have no sacred city, no monastic organization, no religious instruments. They even dislike being given any inclusive name which might force them into doctrinal conformity. "Sufi" is no more than a nickname, like "Quaker". Sufi schools have indeed gathered around particular teachers, but there is no graduation and they exist only for the convenience of those who work to perfect their studies by close association with fellow Sufis. The characteristic Sufi signature is found in widely dispersed literature from at least the second millennium B.C., and yet Sufis are still active as ever. They number some fifty million; there are no hierarchical degrees among them, only a general undisputed recognition of greater or lesser capacity, some may come dressed as a general, a peasant, a merchant, a lawyer, a schoolmaster, a housewife, anything. To be "in the world, but not of it," free from ambition, greed, intellectual pride, blind obedience to custom, or awe of persons higher in rank – that is the Sufi's ideal. The individual is offered a "secret garden" for the growth of his understanding, but never required to become a monk, nun or hermit, like the more conventional mystics; and he is enlightened by actual experience – "he who tastes, knows" – not by philosophic argument. The earliest known theory of conscious evolution is of Sufi origin.

*STRUCTURE*

Its relationship with Islam has ever been somewhat ambiguous. Some countries embrace Sufism proudly supporting its study and practice; others forbid it completely. One uses its form to further tourism, legally prohibits it and yet also allows it to exist quietly. Occasionally Sufis are tortured and assassinated even nowadays. It is said that Bennett, a student of Gurdjieff, was an intelligence officer for the British who used his Sufi connection to assist Ataturk in re-establishing the great nation of Turkey in its darkest hour. Throughout the ages as sultans, viziers or even court jesters, Sufis have often had political impact despite their inherent inclination towards other-worldliness. When a Sufi is said to be ‘in the world not of the world’ it means that they are detached from any particular outcome, yet generally they work diligently to promote peace and beauty wherever they are.

It is structured as an initiatory hierarchy for the purposes of training. An initiate, called a dervish, is part of a tariqat – for example among others the Naqshbandi, Mevlevi, Chishti, and Qadiri orders. Guidance is given and has qualities of spiritual mentorship, psychological counselling and profound beloved friendship. Traditionally on Thursday, many will get together and, to entrancing music, practise ‘devran’ – moving in a circle – whilst chanting the sacred names of God in order to reach higher states of consciousness. Not all orders are musical, some use teaching stories of the Mullah Nasrudin, some study their deceased teacher’s writings; some are bizarrely antisocial and some pillars of the community. All involve serious discipline and, as the foundation of their interaction, a remarkable degree of sacred respect towards each other. Over the centuries, there have been many celebrated teachers, none claiming supremacy over the others. These include Ibn Arabi, Al Hallaj, Rabia, Inayat Khan, Gurdjieff, Irene Tweedie, Idries Shah, and of course the famous Persian poets Hafiz and Rumi.

## *MYSTICISM*

Mysticism is the study and practices of those who, above all else, yearn to know God. This knowledge is not merely theoretical, intellectual, religious or spasmodic; it is experiential and total. The mystic's way of being is a constant poem to glorify, a dance to explain, an artwork to beautify, a joy to appreciate – everything is prayer and each breath is a new opportunity to worship. It is entirely incomprehensible to others how such a person could be so unmoved by worldly matters, shunning not only fame and fortune but also ambition, security, flattery and even opinion, which are obstacles to faith and simply dissolve as faith strengthens.

In this world wherein the masses feel insecure and tend to scapegoat an eccentric, it is expedient to keep secret any extremes of unusual behaviour. Also power-possessors nip in the bud any signs of rival influence and it is easily seen that a true mystic has power. So, often knowledge is intentionally veiled because the seeker is careful not to ignore prevailing political imperatives. Within Islam, wherever Sufi teachings go against Koranic law, an accommodation is made. A codified language has developed that allows Sufis to speak of the mysteries in allegory so as not to offend the orthodoxy. Rumi's poems are filled with references to wine for example, by which he means Spirit.

A teacher reveals the secrets to the student slowly over time, in private and orally. This is not only to protect against persecution; there is a deeper purpose at play. Any knowledge that is hidden becomes mysterious, and even the words used – like occult, esoteric and arcane, which simply mean 'hidden' – take on a certain atmospheric quality. Some people are attracted by this, some are repelled and even find the words themselves to be somewhat intimidating. It takes effort and courage to break through this veil

of secrecy, and this attitude of breakthrough actually puts the seeker into the particular state of being to be receptive to the wisdom thus revealed.

Today in the West, the veils are all but ripped asunder, and uncounted thousands are using the tools and language of the mystic whilst in an everyday state of being. It is not uncommon to see people employing them to gain kudos and income. Naturally the resultant corruption brings ridicule to the teachings, yet strangely this leads to greater freedom for the sincere seeker. Society has no fear of what is ridiculous, so persecution is currently at a very low ebb in developed countries. It is highly convenient that the casual enquirers are drawn to the charlatans; everyone is better off.

As a man can never truly understand a woman, so a seeker can never fully penetrate the heart of the mysteries. Like a veiled and dusky maiden, the Mystery reveals itself only through what atmosphere may shine through the eyes. A mystic whose eyes do not speak of love and power, of joy and knowledge and of proximity to God is not a mystic. So a seeker approaches knowledge as a suitor would a maiden – with flowers and soft tones, with music and incense, and with persistence, patience and no insistent expectation, just ardent hope.

The knowledge passed from sheikh to mureed has the outer form of practices in breath, sound, light and wisdom. Yet without presence and eye contact, the inner essence cannot be passed. This is the secret that is hidden in plain sight. Those who have the knowledge always recognise it and therefore identify each other, even in silence, by the quality of light that shines through the eyes and suffuses the atmosphere. Others cannot see it. Sufis see beneath the surface of what is presented, having startling insights into personality, and perceive the causes and ramifications of situations rather than only the immediate and apparent results.

## *PRACTICES*

The light practices are mostly visualisations, although there is also training in how to gaze at the sun, also how to modulate the gaze upon another to avoid the giving or receiving of psychic projections. Sound practices are mostly in Arabic, one of the four mantric languages and therefore onomatopoeic. The enunciation has a physical massaging effect upon the inner organs of the body, and also trains the emotional body to learn deeper states of perception, which then can be called upon at will. Wisdom teachings correct imperfections in our intellectual grasp of the nature of reality, and instruct us in the appropriate behaviour to adopt in our interactions. This shapes the mind differently and creates non-ordinary perceptions, rendering belief redundant. Finally the essence-teaching is in breathing practices through which is achieved an harmonious integrity between the three bodies – mental, emotional and physical – so that the fourth body is awakened – soul consciousness.

An advanced student will retreat frequently to perfect the practices. Such retreats can last up to 40 days, and involve fasting and continual prayer for as much as 20 hours a day. Coming back into the world after a long retreat one sees quite mundane things as extraordinary manifestations of the Divine. A London rush-hour, a red door, a fried egg and the eddies of a river appear as magical utterances of the Holy Name, and a flower with its scent, colour and bestowal of joy feels close to being an hallucinatory event. This can only ever be hinted at and never fully explained to one who lacks faith. The very workings of the mind of a retreatant are forever transformed. If the dervish achieves a shift of maqam then the default condition of life is raised up. Maqam means platform, table or foundation and is a measure of the achieved station of the dervish, the lowest possible station that they could ever fall into. For some it is simply never possible to descend below

the state of loving kindness, for others, they know only joy and for the most advanced, called a *madzûb* or 'holy fool', they know nothing except ecstasy.

We now consider the concentrations. These are composite combinations of breath, light, sound and wisdom, and are employed in order to attain particular states of being. We can see them as forms. They are simultaneously forms of prayer, of knowledge, of yoga, and of soul-expression since they touch each of these various realms of being, which are in resonance with the elements of water, air, earth and fire respectively. The essence of these practices cannot be disclosed in this written explanation of course but it serves to illustrate, and perhaps inspire the reader to seek out a teacher. You seek your teacher by deciding and intending to find one, and then, when the opportunity presents, you choose Yes or No by noticing whether their glance impresses strongly upon your heart. Two basic types of concentration underpin Sufi prayer; these are *wazifa* and *zikr*. They take the form of Arabic words, and can be seen as gateways into limitless realms of universal connectedness.

*Wazifas* are also known as the '99 Names of God', or the 'Beautiful Names'. They are archetypes. The dervish repeats a combination of *wazifas* an exact number times according to the strict guidance of the sheikh, in order to call up the specific subtle energy indicated as if it were a medicinal herb or a magic spell. The effect, over time, is to bring about a return to the integrity of being. The sheikh offers a particular *wazifa* combination to rectify psychological imbalances, to further the realisation of dormant abilities and perceptions, and to empower and instruct the student in knowledge of Divine qualities.

*Zikr* means remembrance. Each repetition is said to polish the heart so that it becomes a more faithful mirror in which is reflected God's perfection

of love. As the dervish progresses towards this ideal, all blemishes of personality are burned off. It is a fire practice, it generates both heat and light, and brings about personal transformation. This often occurs by attracting conflict – both in outer and inner worlds – and is passionate, powerful and uncompromising in its intention to remember the state of Unity in which we all have our origin. The reason given for outlawing Sufism in one country is that the over-zealous young dervishes were losing their minds in psychosis; the Sufis themselves saw this rationale as political manipulation. Both agreed however that the practices can be dangerous.

The outer expression of the practice is verbal; this allows us to hear what it sounds like so that we can remember that sound when doing the practice in silence. Also, by learning the correct pronunciation, inner changes occur within both mind and heart to register the meaning we create for it. This meaning is captured and reflected by the manner of our sounding the word, most especially the tone of voice.

The inner expression is a far deeper experience; performed in silence, it is called the *fiker* of the practice. Typically the inhalation carries half of it, and the exhalation carries half, although sometimes a third aspect is added when the breath is held before exhalation. With *fiker*, the mind loses its grasping quality and moves into an altered state. The deepest secret of the practice is called *fiker-as-sirr* and is beyond mind and entirely passive. It is felt, after completion when the echo of the practice returns from beyond the beyond, as an inner condition of knowing.

## *DESIRE FOR UNION*

One result of doing such practices is that we become very sensitive to atmosphere and can be easily disturbed by the jarring influences of others who are more worldly in their outlook and attitudes. It is also the case that each of us is moulded somewhat by the impressions we pick up from whomever we associate with. The Sufis like to congregate together so that they can relax with kindred spirits enjoying fellowship. Much is gained when a group of people operate collectively as a unit. Also, praying together with others is as much of a wholesome community-building force as is working together; we can find great joy in both.

For Sufis, the desire for union takes on no higher expression than during a sema. This is a special gathering of dervishes in large numbers who celebrate spiritual states by chanting and moving in response to music. The chief sheikh leads the circle in chanted prayer to the words of zikr or wazifa as a group of musicians play drums, flutes and strings, often with very complex rhythms and with haunting melodies. On occasion a dervish will spontaneously enter the circle and whirl, as did Mevlana centuries before, to achieve a state of ecstatic bliss. The atmosphere is electric and passionate, and the celebration continues through the night until all are satisfied.

Whirling, or Turning, is associated with the death of Shams of Tabriz, the wild mendicant who became the guide of Jalal-uddin Rumi, who is also known as Mevlana. His grief caused him to grasp a pole in the mosque and walk around it for hours without end until at last he found some solace. The Mevlevi Order, which arose out of Rumi's teachings, incorporated this as a spiritual practice and, throughout the centuries other tariqats have adopted it to honour Mevlana, even to the point of wearing a Mevlevi crown instead of their own whenever they turn. Rumi is America's most popular poet today.

Prayer is a process of body, mind and heart that aligns with the soul. It is a powerful tool and has no equal or equivalent to speed a seeker forward on the quest for reunification. Three categories of people exist in this context – those who do not believe in prayer, those who are obedient to prescriptive forms of religious indoctrination, and those who have discovered how to use prayer as a method of soul-recognition. It is a way to reach a higher state of being and focus intention through the operation of gratitude and affirmation. We affirm, ritually, with heart-centred appreciation, that our desire is now aligned with our expectation. This is how magick works. Prayer is magick, and Sufis are as much magicians as they are mystics.

In contrast to prayer, meditation has no agenda and is not an agency through which to realise desire; it is the opposite of that. The purpose of meditation is to settle the grasping mind so that a condition of peace may be found. In this passive state the workings of the Mystery become clear and we learn how to see the patterns that connect causes and effects. We understand how it all works and come to see that, despite appearances, everything is the way it should be and that there is nothing to do about anything. No injustice could actually exist, no imperfection is invalid. Things are the way they are and if we feel dissatisfied in response to frustrating events then we need to learn how to dissolve our inner dissatisfaction. This all becomes clear through meditation because we raise our perspective of consciousness to a higher level so that we can look down at the realm of polarities, and see both sides of everything.

We also see that in essence we are one with the One. What we are is an aspect of God, not separate. Yet in order to know God's qualities, we must experience the power to create freely, which of course is the single most undisputable defining quality of a Creator. Therefore we have to become separated to the extent that we forget who we really are and where we came

from. If we are not given forgetfulness then we are not free to create our own creation because we would be too strongly influenced by our knowledge of God's will. Following another's will is not Free Will, even if that other is God. We would live our lives, as so many people actually do, second-guessing God, whereas the Bestower of Free Will presumably wants us to be willing to be free. Therefore we must remain unconstrained by any ideas of what God wants and confidently make it all up for ourselves.

Yet the forgetfulness could never be absolute. We were birthed by God and that unparalleled event left its mark, the same as an umbilical cord is marked by a navel. The mark of God is experienced essentially as a feeling. This feeling is a yearning to recognise and reconnect with what birthed us, and is called Ishq by Sufis. All desire is an expression of Ishq. Even though our desire nature has been corrupted by our worldly struggles, it is nonetheless a divine force, the power of longing to know ourselves fully as unique component parts of the Source. If we could but untangle the corruption, we would see that Desire is the magnetic force of attraction between us and God – a signpost to Home.

The world we inhabit is fully described by all the things and people in it, and also all of our hopes and fears, our loves and joys, our purposes and challenges, and everything else that we think, feel and experience as sensation. Every single detailed part of it all comes as a direct result of the interaction between Ishq and physicality. Physicality is the illusion of fixity. Nothing is fixed; atoms move eternally without rest. Our belief in permanence arises out of a psychological need, and it is this which prevents us from seeing beneath the veil of deception that is the world. We project our needy misunderstandings upon the energy-field of life as desire, and what is reflected back is the illusion that we choose to interpret as reality.

The best metaphor is found to be the mirror. This is what life is – a mirror in which outer events completely reveal the inner truth. Look at yourself in a mirror and you will see a reflected face that registers an attitude of mind. If you interpret this as angry or intimidating, then you will stiffen up against it, which of course makes the reflection even scarier. If you interpret that face as hurt and deserving of compassion, then you will soften, which of course makes the face more lovely and enables you to relax further. Be sure of two things – that the reflected face will never take the initiative, and that it nevertheless will always respond immediately and appropriately. The worm Ouroboros, celebrated in esoteric wisdom, is depicted as angrily biting its own tail – its length is such that it cannot see that the pain making it so angry is delivered by its own teeth.

All that occurs is simply our own projections coming back to us; all the pain and frustration is self-created. There actually are no limits other than what we impose upon ourselves, no power beyond our own, no law that can claim authority, no morality, no luck – good or bad – that we did not create for ourselves. We are simply looking at ourselves revealed, and when we wake up to this we can claim full responsibility as self-empowered creators of every single aspect of our life experience. Instead of looking out at the world for truth, it is better to turn within and see it there inside us.

The length of the worm's body is allegory for time. Time is the distance between our creative output and the mirrored results of it. Because of time we do not see directly that we are the cause of all that occurs. When faith is affirmed however, the illusion begins to dissipate and time changes its quality. Life gets faster; then the manifestation of what we desire becomes more immediate and more completely in alignment with the heart.

## *WAY OF BEING*

The practices are tools employed in order to achieve a particular outcome, and that outcome shows within the Sufi's way of being. Some say that their life-purpose is to perfect the personality. Personality is the interaction between society and self – not only how we connect and express but also how we defend. How well we are doing in rising to the huge challenge of becoming a good person is measured by the never-ending examination of personality.

Diligently following any path at all is empowering, and this particular path is very well established indeed; its followers become powerful. This necessarily means that Sufis are subject to strong projections from their students and the general population. Whether these are projections of persecution or adulation, they need to be defended against. Yet the love of the Sufi heart bubbles up and radiates out to all and everything in a rather childlike undefended manner. Perhaps we may come to understand that to appear somewhat childish is not a bad strategy to diminish both adulation and persecution. We begin to realise that with a Sufi nothing is quite how it seems. This is because they have no investment in the outer world, the 'world of lies', and find the inner world much more satisfying and authentic.

Central to the personality and way of being of a Sufi is *Adab*. This word is very difficult to render into the vernacular languages; we simply don't have the concept of the profound sacred respect to which it refers. A mystic sees God in everything, therefore everyone, and wants to demonstrate this in every moment. Moreover, they see each moment as a completely new beginning. To meet a person then, is done as if for the first time. What a wonder to behold! If a flower triggers awe, then how much more awesome is a person! The Sufi's way of life is to remember God in each moment and

perfect the personality to be appropriate as if in the Divine presence, which of course we always are.

When a group of people all interact within Adab there is a special atmosphere that is settled, peaceful and beautiful, yet highly charged in the way we feel at sunrise – fresh and exciting, pregnant with potential, and yet also mundane and dependable. Without Adab there is no place for Sufism to be; it is a matrix that contains the knowledge and shows that the knowledge permeates human behaviour. Adab is like a sheath for the sword of Truth. One could say that Adab is the proof of Sufism.

The daily practice of conscious breathing can even extend to the continual awareness of breath. It is inevitable that the breathing rhythm becomes slower and more even. This in turn settles the emotional body so that the practitioner is released from emotionality, even as they become more aware of fuller nuances within their feelings, and indeed can easily read the feelings of others. The wazifa exercises train the dervish to be able to choose a particular state of being at will, in response to any arising need or desire. Zikr takes them permanently out of the ordinary world into another in which they have little or no interest in day to day matters. The elegance of the irony underpins the paradox within Sufism – one becomes completely indifferent to outcomes just as one is learning to bend reality at will. Non-ordinary abilities are developed, yet hidden from the sight of unbelievers simply by their unlikelihood. The faithful however accord the Sufi the highest degree of admiration, and trust in their ability to heal and explain. The capacity to diagnose and treat psychological imbalances is truly impressive. It is even quite noticeable that the atmospheric radiance of their being is enough to spread peacefulness and joy by presence alone.

*DIE BEFORE YOU DIE*

One could say that the king and queen of all the spoken practices is the word Bismillah-irRahman-irRahim. Practising Muslims repeat this every day. Its normal rendering is something like ‘I begin in the name of God, who is compassion and mercy’, yet an examination of its linguistic composition goes well beyond this workaday interpretation and is very inspiring.

Rahman and Rahim both derive from an older source word, Rahm, which is itself the marriage of two components, Ruh and Maīm. Maīm is feminine and its resonance with the universal sound for mother is not coincidental. It represents the unfertilised potential for birth and yet is more like the watery promise of life than a specific life form. The undifferentiated preface to life, the appetite for creativity, the yearning of a womb to be filled, the willingness of a woman to offer her life-force in response to a clear projection of possibility.

Ruh is spirit; it has fiery heroic qualities of spontaneous freedom, assertiveness, courage, clarity, penetrative force, vision and joyful exuberance. It delights to discover Maīm as would a child coming home to mother, or a lover enfolding his beloved within his ardent attention. Their marriage is as much sponsored by the child-to-be-born as by the sperm’s death wish. As woman is to birth, man is to death; homemakers and warriors have their first joint statement in Rahm – the fertilised womb.

The polarity of expression for Rahm is found in Rahman and Rahim. Rahman is a solar force, the general unconditional radiance of caring, compassionate love to all and everything. Rahim is lunar force, the yin, is sensitive to the specific needs of another person, and is considered to be the reward of the faithful.

The word Allah is found contained within Bismillah. Allah is the sound of breathing. Breathing in Al, breathing out Lah. Al is the affirmation of new life – the next first gasp that claims the possibility of life, and without which there is nothing. Lah is the sigh of release, the surrender into the cycle of the inevitable processes of life, and so eventually death. Now incarnate, the masculine and feminine principles have reversed their direction, the male asserts survival and the female allows self-disintegration in order to nurture evolutionary possibility through the new birth that follows death.

Silently hidden between the inhalation and exhalation is another sound, which is a non-sound. Called Hu, it is actually beyond naming since it is the symbol for transcendence. Masculine yearns for transcendence; feminine reaffirms incorporation into cycles of life. Al-Hu-Lah.

A third polarity is contained within the word Bismillah. The Shem, abbreviated in Arabic to sm is the Light. This is spirit in its essential form. The ‘B’ is clearly indicated shaping the sound verbally as ‘Buh’ – the mouth opens up to reveal its accommodating principle, a metaphor for the womb.

Light is held within the womb, the matrix of form and physicality, becomes rhythm in breath, and reaches out to express love to all, especially those who need it. Bismillah. Each inhalation is new life; each exhalation marks the end of something that cannot be relived; it is death. In every breath, we die to what was and are reborn to what is. This is not philosophy, mystical mumbo-jumbo or persuasive rhetoric; it is simply the literal fact of physical life. Recognising the unequalled importance of this truth, the Sufi’s last chapter in life is the practice called ‘die before you die’. If you live remembering that you are always close to death – a mere breath away – life becomes very real indeed.

## *JOURNEY HOME*

Sit comfortably, with back straight, and breathe deeply in a completely relaxed, slow rhythm, without holding the breath. Concentrate your mind upon the physicality of breathing, always returning to the breath when it drifts, just noticing how air moves and how the body registers that movement. Continue this, beyond any measure of time, until the gross mind settles and the subtle mind emerges.

In the state of subtle mind, slowly rise through the 7 planes by using these keyword concentrations to pull the mind into focus:

1. Physical
2. Mental / Emotional
3. Soft Heart
4. Strong Heart
5. Sacredness
6. Stillness
7. Transcendence

Move from one to the next, until the mind expands into Universality. Hold this state of being for minutes, as long as possible, then vibrate the sound Hu repeatedly in the heart in order to return to normal awareness. Sit in silence without thinking for a while.

## *THE SALT PUPPET*

*Once upon a time there was a puppet made of salt who had travelled a long time through dry and desert places until one evening he came upon a sea which he had never before seen and didn't know what it was. The puppet asked the sea: 'What are you?' 'I am the sea' it replied. 'But' the puppet insisted, 'What is the sea'. 'I am'. 'I don't understand' said the puppet made of salt. 'I want very much to understand what I can do to know you!'*

*The sea replied "That's easy, touch me!"*

*The salt puppet timidly touched the sea with the tip of his toes. At that moment he realised that the sea began to make itself perceptible, but at the same time he noticed the tips of his toes had disappeared. 'What have you done to me?' he cried to the sea. 'You have given a little of yourself to understand me' the sea replied.*

*Slowly the salt puppet began to walk into the sea with great solemnity as though he were about to perform the most important act of his life. The further he moved along, the more he dissolved but at the same time he had the impression that he knew more and more about the sea.*

*Again and again the puppet asked 'What is the sea?' until the wave covered him completely. Just before he was entirely dissolved by the sea he exclaimed: 'I exist!'*