



the Ego-Less SELF

*Achieving Peace & Tranquility
Beyond All Understanding*

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A Note About Religion, Spiritual Traditions, and Language

During my spiritual journey throughout this lifetime, I have explored many different religions and spiritual traditions, and I have taken various paths within these religions and traditions. However, I have learned that it is best to find one path and deeply immerse oneself in the teachings of that path as opposed to horizontally flipping back and forth between religions or traditions. Contemplative Christianity—an early Christian mystical movement—served as a fulcrum point that permitted me to balance some of the contemplative and meditative traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism with the nonlinear teachings of Christianity, particularly the teachings of Jesus Christ. It is this contemplative Christian influence that is infused into this work.

There are many words that are used in reference to God. Although this book is written from a contemplative Christian perspective, I have tried to be inclusive of other religions or spiritual paths. Moreover, when I refer to God throughout this book, I am referring to the God of my understanding, so please feel free to replace this word with your word of choice, such as “Higher Power,” “God of my understanding,” or whatever word or concept works for you. I also rely on the teachings of Jesus throughout the book to illustrate some spiritual concepts. Jesus was a wise, enlightened teacher, and you do not have to be Christian to benefit from his teachings.

Also, please understand that the language of the spiritual world is subjective, and at times the concepts are hard to capture in words. For example, the linear world of physicality that we live in is understandable to us. We see it, hear it, smell it, taste it, and touch it. It is what we have grown up to understand as reality. The subjective, nonlinear world is fluid. It presents itself on many levels that are not immediately available to us. I have done my best to communicate with you throughout this book on nonlinear, spiritual matters. If a concept is difficult to grasp, try approaching it from a different angle or just sit with it for a time and allow the meaning to come to you.

Introduction

A human being is a part of a whole, called by us the universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest ... a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

—Albert Einstein

Begin by knowing that spiritual experiences are subjective and don't use a strict scientific paradigm and thus lack formal objectivity. According to nonlinear physics, there seems to be no such thing as formal scientific objectivity anyway. The pioneers of nonlinear physics were rather startled by their discovery that we are all intrinsically connected, and they turned to philosophy and the spiritual world to explain their findings. Wolfgang Pauli turned to archetypes and the Kabbalah, Niels Bohr to the Tao and Chinese philosophy, Erwin Schrödinger to Hindu philosophy, and Werner

Heisenberg to the platonic theory of ancient Greece to understand that we cannot separate ourselves from our surroundings. We are not stand-alone entities; we are in constant interaction with the energy surrounding us. We are continuously emitting and receiving biophotons (light radiated from the cells of all living things) from our surroundings. We are connected to everything and can never be alone. Our mere presence changes the world around us for better or for worse.

Heisenberg's uncertainty principle tells us that any attempt to observe an electron alters it. At the subatomic level, we cannot observe anything without changing it. There is no such thing as an independent observer who can stand on the sideline watching the world race by without influencing it. The Von Neumann formula takes this finding even further by proclaiming that the action of the conscious observer alters that which is observed and the *intention* of the observer also affects the physical world. For better or worse, *each one of us affects everyone and everything around us.*

Whether through simple observation or by more complicated human intent, our connection to the energy around us is altered, thereby affecting the outcome of any circumstance. If my intention is positive or loving, the outcome will be more beneficial than if my intention is negative or hateful. What we send out into the world has a way of coming back to us. This is why it is so important to *live life with loving intention.*

Modern culture has looked to science to solve all of humankind's dilemmas, including our level of life satisfaction. But problems of a spiritual nature demand

spiritual solutions that put to use spiritual tools, such as forgiveness, love, acceptance, humility, and surrender. While spiritual problems are not a result of a dysfunction in the brain, they can lead to unhealthy neurobiological changes. Dissatisfaction in life is a problem derived from a spiritual sense of a lack of wholeness created by the human ego.

Science improves and saves lives, but the spiritual domain is where healing and happiness reside. In this book, I present this truth to you from my own life experiences. While it's true that subjective experiences cannot be proven per se, there is a "knowingness" that comes from walking through the fire and coming out the other end that is of great, if not greater, value than scientific objectivity. The experience and knowingness gained from being a survivor—whether from addiction, depression, loss of a loved one, or other life-altering event—creates an opportunity for each of us to evolve to a higher spiritual plane. *When seized, life's tragedies become spiritual opportunities.*

The ego is our "false self," "mind," or "small self." It knows of no power greater than itself. It is self-serving and is constantly battling for survival or personal gain. It is always fighting against or fleeing from some perceived fear. It will do whatever it takes to relieve itself of life's "miseries." But it always fails. Its self-destructive line of thinking can drive us into maladaptive behaviors designed to serve only the ego. To the ego, no one else matters. *The ego is the source of all human misery.*

In order for correction to take place—in other words, for joy to replace misery—there must be a change in character. There must be a simple but profound return to the Self—our Divine nature or soul. Reclaiming the Self brings spiritual

healing and transformation.

This is a book about healing. It is not about symptom reduction. I will show you how the ego develops and how it causes all of the suffering in our lives. I will also endeavor to show you who you really are: the Self. The Self is God immanent and is the source of happiness and unconditional love. This book is about a journey of discovery. It is about a return to the Self.

At the end of all our exploring, we will arrive where we started and know the place for the first time!

—T.S. ELIOT

The Creation of the World: A Hindu Parable

“Now that we have the earth and the sky and the mountains and the rivers and the moon and the stars, we will create man. Where shall we hide the truth of his being from him?” asked God.

One angel said, “Let’s hide it on the highest mountaintop.”

And to this God responded, “No, eventually he will learn to scale the mountains. He will find it.”

“Let’s take it down to the very deepest part of the ocean,” another angel suggested.

“No, eventually, man will learn how to go to the darkest, deepest part of the ocean. Do not hide it there,” said God.

“Well, let’s hide it on the moon, then,” said yet another angel.

“No, eventually he’ll reach the moon as well,” God replied.

They continued this way for a time before the answer came to them all at once. They knew exactly where to hide the truth where humankind would never look for it: within

himself.

This is a very old Hindu parable from the oral tradition that has no discernable original source. In all spiritual traditions, the common theme is that as humans, we are always on a quest to find God and our true Self. To do this, we have a tendency to always look outside of ourselves for the truth, but all of the great teachers, saints, and sages have said that there is a place inside of each of us that is absolutely holy, pure, and divine: it is God, and the kingdom of God is within us. We are spiritual beings and Divine by nature. We are not God, but God is within us.

Traditional Western thought often ignores the vast insights provided by the Eastern methods of spiritual transformation. Many Westerners are groomed to measure their worthiness by how much power, control, and security they've achieved. The deep mystery of life has been replaced by a superficial ego game based on the acquisition of material gain, how to have better sex, winning others' approval, and so on. This pursuit has caused anxiety and deadened our sensitivity to the dignity of the Self—our Divine nature. The infinite spiritual domain has been replaced by alienating terminologies, and instead of viewing wounds to our egos as opportunities for spiritual growth, we litigate. While there is a great scarcity of legitimate transformational spiritual wisdom in our society, there is a lot of song and dance about how to become self-actualized (to “fully realize one's potential”).

All of this has left many of us in a state of spiritual crisis. When in crisis, we generally seek the help of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, therapists, and other clinicians. Although well-meaning, intelligent, and knowledgeable, our

mental-health educational system fails to teach a proper understanding of the spiritual world and its role in healing. While mental-health experts can help reduce symptoms, this is not enough. Most of our deepest problems are spiritual in nature. Psychotherapy and mood-altering prescription drugs have little effect on these difficulties of living.

Healing in its true sense goes way beyond the superficial nature of symptom relief. Healing means the removal of the cause of our suffering, which resides in the ego. Every spiritual journey is a movement away from the ego to that which we really are—the Self. The Self is God immanent (the Divine within us). It is the breath of life given to each of us as a gift of love, joy, and happiness. We are born with this gift, for it is who we truly are. However, as we grow and begin to experience the world, we lose track of this gift. Attaching to things outside of ourselves, we place our energy into objects, believing those things will make us happy. This kind of happiness is superficial and fleeting. It never works. It's like the first scratch on a brand-new car—inevitable and devastating. Healing, or true contentment, comes when we realize that we brought absolutely nothing into this world and can take nothing out of it.

In order to grow spiritually, we must come out of the shadows of our egoic, narcissistic self-centeredness. We cannot expect people and things to give us the peace and love we desire, although we endow them with this ability. Only in a return to our core can we begin to find our Self. It is the spiritual journey—not any particular destination—that holds the clues to our yearning for peace, joy, and love.

All human life unfolds within an infinite energy field of consciousness. Each life is beset by challenges that are, in

fact, opportunities for spiritual growth. These spiritual opportunities can lead us from humiliation to humility and the experience of humanity. In other words, humility leads to a humble acknowledgment of what it means to be human. The field of consciousness is comprised of the power of transforming energy. It is available to you and me. If we tap into this energy, we join our place in the great mystery of creation. Hidden within us is a replica of the mystery, but many of us are simply not aware of this power or presence. Because we are unconscious of this awesome mystery, it is not reflected in our lives, our characters, or, especially, our hearts. We do not recognize the transforming power that can shine forth when honestly beckoned. However, I believe that we all share a basic call to transcend the selfishness and suffering of our egos and come into contact with the Divine within. When you recognize it, you will know that you are home.

Primal Fears

Alienation and death are our most primal fears. Take comfort in knowing that you are part of the field of consciousness and can therefore never be alone, and because the Self, our Divine nature or Soul, lives forever, we never die. Once we move beyond these fears, we can begin to ease the unconscious fears that continue to cause us suffering. Fears about our worthiness and fears about our need for power and control, for example, cause us to place our happiness in the hands of people and circumstances rather than where it belongs—through an abiding faith in God.

Who Am I?

I am not a theologian. Other than Adam, it is impossible for one to say that all of his/her words are truly original. Along the way, I have encountered many good teachers and have been, I believe, a good student. Unfortunately, I could not always tell whether the lessons were positive or negative ones. I have tried to give credit throughout this text to those whose teachings were positive, valuable, and timely.

My path to get here seemed like the “pinball theory of life.” Much like many of your life paths, I suppose, it was tortuous and, at times, very twisted. My high school biology teacher taught me that nerves operate on the principle of “all or nothing.” This is the way I thought of my early life. In college we called ourselves “maxers” and prided ourselves on taking everything—especially alcohol and drugs—to the extreme. There was never enough alcohol or drugs, and no amount could fill up the hole within us. We were thirsting for something that the alcohol and drugs could not give us. *Where do you go when you have gone too far?* The way back home—back to the Self—is an existentially lonely one, and I took many wrong directions.

The sixteen-century mystic Saint John of the Cross said, “Silence is God’s first language.” Life is different now, thanks to God and compassionate people who have changed my life. Silence and solitude have replaced screaming guitars. The constant “chatter” of the left hemisphere of my brain has been replaced by the silence and serenity of the right hemisphere. The spiritual journey has pulled me from the future into a spiritual state best described as “enlightenment.” This was not something I could do on my own, but was a gift from God.

I am very grateful and humbled to be a follower of Jesus Christ and to try in my inept, human way to live up to his ideals, sharing what I have learned along the way. I believe that if the spiritual approach is not in everything we do and are a part of—schools, government, families—then nothing will ever work out right. It is only in the spiritual, nonlinear world that everything just seems to work out.

Mine is a story of movement and grace and of losing in order to ultimately win. The movement is a steep climb up a mountain from which I can see reality from an expanded perspective.

I do not know anything, but I have knowingness about the spiritual realm and the paths I took on my journey to the state of enlightenment. I cannot prove anything to you. Regardless of what you think of me and my experiences, please judge the messages in this book on their own merit. This book is my attempt to explain the knowingness that God has granted to me. I have no interest in converting anyone or trying to change others. Attempts to do so do not work. In the Buddhist sense, I ask that you keep an open mind and use the world as your wet lab. If the message fits, use it. Otherwise, discard it.

How can we accept that the world is perfect just the way God created it and that all suffering is caused by the ego? How can we trust in God and have the faith that He will care for us if we ask? Why does bad stuff happen? Know that these challenges are opportunities to increase your level of spiritual consciousness and get closer to God. Everything simply depends on the way it is observed and understood. For example, hitting bottom due to alcoholism or another addiction is a wake-up call that tells us we have gone too far and that it is time to return home. An alcoholic or addict is

not truly who we are. We are God immanent, the Self. The ego has submerged the Self behind an endless morass of definitions, both good and bad, that affect our mood states. But always remember, there really is only one true, joyous you: the Self you were born with. Happiness is our birthright as a result of the Divine nature found in all of us.

When our biological needs for *security and survival*, *affection and esteem*, and *power and control* are developmentally repressed or compensated for by unhealthy means, the ego turns outside of itself to find happiness. Fr. Thomas Keating, a leader in contemplative prayer, refers to these categories as “egoic value systems for happiness.” We will be looking at these in depth in Chapter 2. Misplaced desires become avenues for failed experimentation. It is in spiritual recovery that we find true healing. The use of spiritual tools—forgiveness, surrender, humility, unconditional love, gratitude, acceptance, and so on—are necessary to alleviate the spiritual maladies of desire, pride, fear, helplessness, and guilt.

Throughout this book I will attempt to help you on your spiritual journey toward a return to your Self, and I will share my personal story of grace on my own journey home. In Chapters 1, 2, and 3, I describe the development of the fear-based human ego and how its distorted beliefs—including the belief that happiness can be found outside of ourselves—cause all the suffering in the world. In Chapters 4 through 10, I discuss the spiritual journey of transformation, which leads to the disassembly of the ego and describe various spiritual paths, techniques, and tools that will help you get there. I hope you will find something of yourself in this journey. It is my utmost wish that this book will inspire you in your own

spiritual voyage. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to enter your world.

As the Buddha taught, “Rare is it to be born a human being, rarer still to have heard of Enlightenment, and even rarer still to pursue it.”

How It Is: No More “Me”

“Enter in through the narrow door, for wide is the door and broad is the road which leads to destruction, and many are those who travel on it. O how narrow is the door and how difficult is the road which leads to life and few are those who are found on it.”¹

—Jesus speaking in the Gospel of Matthew 7:13–14

Our first leg on the spiritual journey involves ridding ourselves of our egos. Jesus said, “For he who wishes to save his life shall lose it; but he who loses his life for my sake shall save it” (Luke 9:24). While this saying seems like a paradox, to experience spiritual transformation, we must surrender everything to God—every opinion, every motive, every action, every prejudice—in fact, our entire lives. Both trust and love are necessary to transcend the ego—trust in the existence of a higher reality, which I personally call God, and love for this higher reality, as well as an intense longing to realize it. Surrendering everything to God—all that we are attached to through the ego, including our very lives—is a path to ultimate freedom.

Once we get beyond all egoic attachments to life, there is

a raw base energy that is Divine. It is unconditional love, a warm-hearted, cohesive, purposeful intelligence. This is *le point vierge* (virgin point). It is the center not touched by sin and illusion; a point of pure truth; a spark belonging only to God. It is the secret center of the heart that only God penetrates. In order to reach this point, we must completely empty ourselves and, in our poverty, be receptive to His will and His will only.

When we have the courage and determination to surrender all to God, the “I,” “me,” and “mine” of the ego are gone. They are replaced by a persona that lives in this earthly world but is not attached to it. We live for the next world, whatever that might be. The false self of the ego is absorbed into the Self, who sees the essence of things and is not distracted by the egoic notions of comparison and contrast, ownership and personal gain. What remains exists for service to others and sees the world as perfectly just the way God planned it. There is little need for material things, and Madison Avenue marketing doesn't work, because the greed and grandiosity of the ego that fueled it no longer exist. This loss of the ego also rids one of the fear of death, for death is an illusion: only the illusory self can die, since the Self is eternal.

After surrendering everything to God, I experienced incredible anger and rage as my ego sought to stave off its ultimate fate. The ego is very manipulative and is all about survival. There were several people who, because of their lack of integrity, had caused my ego much anger and frustration. The ego raged at these individuals as it fought for its survival as a separate entity. The intensity of the anger was quite shocking to me, as it was far beyond anything I could

remember experiencing before. Then, at some point, my body became overwhelmed by severe abdominal pain. After each bout of pain, cramping, and vomiting, the attempt to surrender this agony to God was met with more of the same.

Somewhere in my mind—after a long period of struggling to surrender—I recalled Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s story of enlightenment. In her story, she described an acceptance of her pain. I received the awareness that the ego was not an enemy and could not be surrendered or dispensed with, but must be assimilated into the Self. The ego must be loved into wholeness and thus transformed but not rejected. Love and acceptance of the pain led to instantaneous relief, remarkably with no residual effect, after hours of vomiting and heaving. All was replaced with a sense of calm, and I could finally catch my breath. In this awakened state, I discovered that reality is in essence the glory of the Divine and our true nature is love.

The next twelve hours of my life are difficult to explain. There was no sense of time or place. In the subjective, nonlinear world, there is no time. Christian writers call the experience “mystical union” and the Vedantists call it “Samadhi” (a superconscious state; the fourth type of consciousness after waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep). The Bengali mystic Sri Ramakrishna linked the occurrence of Samadhi to the rising of kundalini energy or the “spiritual current.” I had been preparing for this experience for a long time, but it was like nothing I could have imagined. My mind was totally overwhelmed by an incredibly powerful energy or infinitely great force that rendered it completely silent. The only event in my life that was even remotely similar was when, as a child, I stood a few feet away from a railroad track and felt the immense power as a train roared by.

food, gambling, shopping, and so on. For me, the path I chose to achieve higher consciousness was to alter my brain with chemicals. While some of the drugs brought me close to what I was seeking, I could never hold on to that feeling of connection. This is because it was a connection built on ego.

Desire for “something more” comes from a sense of lack and incessantly drives us to try to fill the hole that exists within us. This is described by Aldous Huxley in his classic *The Doors of Perception*, where he states, “It has always seemed to me possible that, through hypnosis, for example, or autohypnosis, by means of systematic meditation, or else by taking the appropriate drug, I might so change my ordinary mode of consciousness as to be able to know, from the inside, what the visionary, the medium, even the mystic were talking about.”⁴

The problem with the drug experience—like other external approaches to happiness—is that one cannot own it; it is always fleeting. You can get so close—only to have it slip away. Looking out at the field behind my house and watching the trees rustle, I can go back to 1969 when I used cocaine for the first time at a farmhouse outside of Fredericksburg, Virginia. I recall saying to God, “Where has this been all of my life? This is the way I always wanted to feel!” This is the chase, and it is endless, because we can never really own and possess that sense of peace and connection that comes from drug use. For example, instead of helping me find my Self, drugs just caused me to get lost in my bathroom. And so it goes, on and on, as if there will never be an end to the search.

Let me give you my definition of the Self. It starts with the understanding that the kingdom of God is within all of us.

The Ego-Driven State

What is it about our brains that make them so personally and intersubjectively secretive and misguided? The answer to this and all forms of human suffering is the ego. The ego wants to look at every mystery from its own perspective. *How in the world could God allow me to go through so much suffering and pain?* All challenges are potential spiritual opportunities. However, it is all quite mysterious and unknowable. Quantum physics studies the subatomic world and notices it does not follow the rules expected of nature (laws of classical or Newtonian physics). It is beyond our current understanding, at least from the scientific paradigm. All we can say is, “I don’t understand.” In our limited world where we see so little and hear a very narrow range of sound, we expect God to act like we would act in our ego-driven state. It is our own thinking—the delusions, judgments, and obsessions espoused by the ego—that must be questioned. It is our limited view, our imprecise perspective, that is questionable. God is doing just fine without any help from us.

Nothing real can be threatened, and nothing unreal exists. Planted in each of us is the knowingness of the eternal Self. The mind cannot grasp this—it is knowingness without need of explanation or requiring any form of defense. It just is. Many of us refer to our bodies as “I.” We are not our bodies. In physical reality, science tells us that the body is made up of “stuff” called atoms with neutrons, electrons, nuclei, and so on. We are each actually 99.9 percent space. The important question becomes, what is the 0.1 percent physical reality? This 0.1 percent isn’t really stuff at all but vibrating energy or light. We come from the Light (or the breath of life) and are

overwhelming times devoid of personal control. Faced with one, I pondered the existence of a benevolent God. How could a loving God allow such misery and pain to enter one's life? If such a God existed, did I really want to be a believer in such an entity? This sort of painful dissonance overwhelms the ego. It is at moments like this that a spiritual opportunity is presented. Looking back on that time in my life and others subsequent to and later in life, the pain, emptiness, and existential loneliness created a crack in my ego, allowing the Holy Spirit to begin its work. Although it took years for me to realize it, this was a spiritual opportunity.

The tragedy of human life interests me—those points when the ego is shattered, thereby allowing the Holy Spirit to shine and do Its work. These tragedies are opportunities to get closer to God. The Holy Spirit is a power, not a person. It is the spirit of God, a Divine gift. It is a source of joy to the heart and light to the eyes, and creates life on a whole new level of spiritual awareness. It cultivates and inspires kindness, goodness, gentleness, and charity. The Holy Spirit is a gift of spiritual wisdom to be used for the betterment of humankind. As you will learn throughout this book, the incredible power of the Holy Spirit transformed my being.

Today I thank God for my misfortunes. It is true that humiliation goes before humility. What seemed so unfair and unfortunate at the time turned out to be a turning point leading to spiritual transformation. The world may not have changed, but spiritual growth has allowed me to see the world from a very different perspective. The world does look quite different when we accept our condition and stop trying to control people, places, and things. When the ego is deflated and humility manifests, defiance and grandiosity fade. We

can now accept life on life's own terms.

As composer and jazz musician John McAndrew sings in "Give Me New Eyes":

When black clouds come over me,
They darken my skies
If it's how I look at things
Then give me new eyes ... give me new eyes.⁶

Always the most real and important work is that which is accomplished deep within one's soul, leading to an increased capacity for love and service to others. It is imperative to note that love is not an emotion but is actually a way of being in the world. There is no opposite of love as it is unconditional in its quality. Unconditional love cannot be purchased at any price. It can only be freely given from the heart. It is love and humility that deflates the ego and allows for true joy in living. It is only through selfless service to others that we find true personal happiness. This is the Divine paradox of "giving it away to keep it."

The Spiritual Journey

The great spiritual traditions of both East and West, although different in their methods, agree that by spiritual discipline a person can radically change his/her life and attain deeper meaning and more complete integration. We can radically change and find more complete fulfillment and greater freedom of spirit than can ever be found in the pursuit of material goods and money. There is more to human

life than just trying to “get somewhere.” All spiritual traditions believe that the highest ambition lies well beyond worldly ambition and the narcissistic requirements of the ego. These traditions tell us that spirit can achieve higher and higher degrees of illumination, leading to a greater understanding of the meaning and purpose of life.

God wants us to become intimate with Him and, in the process, fulfill our spiritual destinies. Along the way, we learn many hard lessons. Every one of us is on a journey—a journey back home. This is the essence of human desire. We all want to be connected and loved deep down inside. However, attachment to worldly things takes the energy of the life force and channels it away from the true source of our desire: intimacy with God.

Attachment to people, places, and things of this world lead us into sorrow and addiction. We often place more value in obtaining things than in attaining the true source of our desire. Then we must protect what we have obtained. This “owning” is a proxy for our true desire—the realization of our connectedness with God. Whenever we value worldly things more than the love of God, we set ourselves up for attachment and addiction. Somehow, in one of these lifetimes, we need to learn how to detach from these worldly compulsions and obsessions, thus allowing for a pure union with the Divine (enlightenment).

We are all perfect. We are just perfectly where we need to be in order to take advantage of the opportunities for spiritual growth in this lifetime. God knows there are many such opportunities. Being human gives us the opportunity to make spiritual decisions every moment. In these decisions, the lessons of life are learned. The lessons of life can be hard,

- The ability to be genuinely nonjudgmental and totally forgiving;
- The ability to reach a point of detachment from the world—to be in this world but not part of the petty, egoic, day-to-day struggles.

Once Again, Surrendering the Ego's Unconscious Programs for Happiness

Go back and review Chapter 7 for a moment. That chapter discussed three steps for letting go of the ego's unconscious programs for happiness, which have been causing you so much misery and suffering. Those steps are:

Step 1: Affirmation of basic goodness (Self);

Step 2: Becoming aware over time of whatever in us is opposed to the image in Step 1;

Step 3: Dismantling the emotional programs of the ego—healing the problem and not just managing the symptoms.

Continually working on these three steps and eliminating the secondary gain of the ego is critically important for spiritual transformation. As you vertically dwell down into the defects of character and surrender them one by one to God, the Self shines through. The ego's unconscious programs for happiness are exposed and no longer influence your thinking, feeling, or behavior. Total deflation of the ego allows for the emergence of pure Self.

Remember, the ego is not bad, but it is the source of all suffering. The origin of the ego is the Self, and now it is on its journey to its home. The Self reabsorbs the ego, so to speak. While this egoless state is the prerequisite for enlightenment, enlightenment can occur only with Divine assistance.

These three steps help us get rid of much of the force of the ego, but when using a contemplative approach, there are several more steps. These steps, as described by Saint John of the Cross—a Spanish mystic, Carmelite friar and priest, and major figure of the Catholic Reformation—highlight the struggle the spiritual aspirant generally goes through late in the spiritual journey.

Step 4: The Night of Sense

In Step 4 there is an intuitive awareness of the facts that *one cannot find happiness in the gratification of the ego's programs for happiness and one cannot find happiness through the symbols we use for achieving a sense of security and survival, affection and esteem, and power and control.*

There is an upside and a downside to this conscious awareness. On one side, you are now in a place of internal freedom for the first time since you were a small child. You have now created the space for the Holy Spirit to do its work. However, you have been living under the delusions of the ego for so long that there may be disillusionment, discouragement, or even some degree of depression. This is to be expected, as any radical change can precipitate a process of grief. Perhaps when feeling empty, alone, or even abandoned, it is possible to feel like God is not there for you.

God is always there for you. This is only a projection of unresolved grief or belief that God is displeased with you. Also, do not be saddened for not living up to the impossible expectations of the idealized image you had of yourself. Do not dwell on the past and how things should have been or could have been if only the cards were dealt differently. Doing this is an ego trip. Be patient as you continue to single-mindedly engage in your spiritual pursuits.

Step 5: The Night of Spirit

When liberated from most attachments and freedom has been attained, the freedom *from something* must now change to a freedom *for something*. In the spiritual life, it is love, which allows us to fulfill the two great commandments: to love God and to love others. Sometimes, it may feel like you are working so hard on your spiritual program but nothing is happening. This can lead to frustration. This is not uncommon. There may be relatively long dry periods, and then all of a sudden, a leap of spiritual growth takes place. Remember, everything happens when the conditions align for it to happen. These difficult periods can still be very productive and lead to a deepening relationship with God. This is when our persistence and dedication are tested.

The ability to delay gratification with discipline and dedication is critical. We must be able to hold desires in abeyance and surrender our personal will to God at every moment. Ultimately, everything must be surrendered to God. Therefore, each thought, desire, feeling, craving, and impulse is surrendered to God. As you do this, you will find your mind

becoming increasingly quiet. The movement into the serenity of the right hemisphere is taking place. You will suddenly understand that there is no “in here” and no “out there,” as everything seamlessly merges into one. As this happens, you will appreciate unconditional love.

When the understanding that you are one with everything moves and settles into your heart, you have achieved the nonlinear realm. You are now radiating love from the heart and bypassing much of the analytical left hemisphere. This is one of the most joyous times along the journey; you will see love and beauty in everything. The world is vibrantly alive. The joy you can experience in the simplest of things is incredible. I recall sitting in a Japanese garden on the campus of Furman University watching the motion of the water in a small creek and the dance of the algae as the stream caused a most incredible waltz to manifest. My whole body shivered in delight. This was but one beautifully joyful moment along my spiritual journey.

When the ego returns to the Self, which is its true origin, there is an incredible sense of returning “home.” You have a sense of complete and utter silence, peace, and absence of fear and suffering, and the realization that death and the sense of a separate self are just an illusion. The body ultimately returns to its origin—dust to dust—but the Self goes on forever and is truly one with all creation. Deeply understanding our union with all living things creates a sense of seamless connection within. Even in our aloneness, we feel aligned with everything and everyone.

In the gospel of John, Jesus delivered the following blessing, which speaks directly to this nonlinear unity: “So that they all may be one; just as thou, my father, art with me,

and I am with thee, that they also may be one with us: so that the world may believe that thou didst send me. And the glory which thou gavest me, I gave to them; so that they may be one just as we are one. I with them and thou with me, that they may become perfected in one; so that the world may know that thou didst send me, and that thou didst love them just as thou didst love me.”⁶⁵

The Top of the Mountain

As I have indicated, there are levels of spiritual consciousness even beyond that of unconditional love. Who can tell if one has reached the top of the mountain? Only those who have been there, and even then, they can only tell you what the top of the mountain looked like to them. However, the experience of enlightenment has been described in very similar ways by those who have reached for it, and have the grace of God to thank for the experience. For thousands of years, in all areas of the world, and among all cultures, the experience has been described in very similar fashion. It is the Self returning Home to its maker. It is the Light returning to the Light. It is outside of the linear, material paradigm we live in, and our language fails to grasp the experience.

One of the great problems in understanding the nonlinear world of the unmanifest is that our English language deals with concepts and interactions between unmoving objects, and because of this, the quantum world is removed from us by the nature of our language. Our language works in terms of nouns and verbs, so we see only objects and their

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