

TRANSMUTATION AND PURIFICATION

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

Nature of the Spiritual Journey

It is very difficult to define a universal yardstick to measure the spiritual progress of every seeker. Real spiritual growth is rarely spectacular and much more likely to be characterized by subtle changes and small, yet steady, incremental steps. Zen teacher Charlotte Beck: "Intervals where we just stay with life as it is get a little longer, and the interruptions of our self-centeredness are a little shorter. The interruptions don't last as long, and we don't take them as seriously. Increasingly, they're like clouds that drift through the sky: we note them, but we are less controlled by them."

Paradoxically, seeking signs of change and growth can act as an impediment to real inner development. Gurdjieff enjoined his pupils to "*never* look for results, *never* to 'philosophize' about what we were doing, but simply to *do* – with faith." The mind is drawn to the notion of a preconceived path with specific stages marked by defining experiences and insights. Spiritual teacher Toni Packer questions this unexamined premise:

Teachings that postulate stages grab the thinking mind. We wonder what these stages are like, and trying to figure them out is an exercise in headaches. Of course the main interest is, "What stage am I in? How many more will I have to go through?" Can we drop the idea of stages and not pick it up again, even though it is prevalent in many traditions? Can we see and feel that any such conceptualization is already a straitjacket? Thought is so powerful – thinking what I am now, what I will be next, judging myself about what I think I am and what I could be. The power of such thoughts cannot be overestimated. They prevent a presence, an awareness that defies all definition. (1)

Many spiritual teachers have warned their students not to become ensnared in end-gaining fixations and compulsive seeking of results. Chögyam Trungpa: "So long as you set up the Self as a goal or target to be reached you will never experience it directly. The harder you try to get to it, the more it will recede away from you. You will only experience the Self when all desire for it has gone." The desire to achieve particular states of consciousness or being actually separates ourselves from the reality of what we are:

Vehicles designed to carry us beyond our conceptual boundaries cannot of themselves carry us all the way back to the state of wholeness we came from. While the shift can occur in the midst of such practices, they do not produce it, they simply point us in the right direction. Using effort to purify virtue, calm the mind, or attain insights is, according to the Taoists, as useless as “beating a drum in search of a fugitive.” “Yogas, prayers, therapies, and spiritual exercises,” says Alan Watts, “are at root only elaborate postponements of the recognition that there is nothing to be grasped and no way to grasp it.” Innumerable other teachers have voiced the same truth. The more effort we make, the more we strain to control what happens in our practice, the further away we get from what is. We become so busy *doing* that we forget *being*. Always looking ahead, we overlook where we are. (2)

The allure, promise and hope of success as a result of relentless effort and goal-oriented achievement in the pursuit of spiritual realization is deeply ingrained in the psyche of most seekers and difficult to overcome. In the words of nondual teacher Tony Parsons: “Life is not a task. There is absolutely nothing to attain except the realization that there is absolutely nothing to attain. No amount of effort will ever persuade oneness to appear. All that is needed is a leap in perception, a different seeing, already inherent but unrecognised.”

Doctrines, processes and progressive paths which seek enlightenment only exacerbate the problem they address by reinforcing the idea that the self can find something that it presumes it has lost. It is that very effort, that investment in self-identity that continually recreates the illusion of separation from oneness. It is the dream of individuality. It is like someone who imagines that they are in a deep hole in the earth, and in order to escape they dig deeper and deeper, throwing the earth behind them and covering up the light that is already there. The only effect of extreme effort to become that which I already am, is that eventually I will drop to the ground exhausted and let go. In that letting go another possibility may arise. But the temptation to avoid freedom through the sanctification of struggle is very attractive. Struggle in time does not invite liberation. (3)

Progressive or gradual teachings emphasize a time-bound approach to spiritual realization which reinforces a subtle sense of separation, incompleteness and duality in the quest for enlightenment:

In the world of time, processes and goals are perfectly appropriate, but there is so much investment placed on the attachment and expectations that surround them – becoming this, belonging to that, processes to change, or to be better, methods to purify, and so on. Important new people and places, masters of consciousness and teachers of truth spring up from everywhere and offer their own particular formula for living. And as we move from one to another we seem unwilling to see that freedom does not reside in one place or another, simply because freedom, by its very nature, cannot be excluded or exclusive. We seem not to see that, as we march towards the next anticipated “spiritual” high, the treasure that we seek is to be dis-

covered not in where we are going, but within the simple nature of the very footsteps that we take. In our rush to find a better situation in time, we trample over the flower of beingness that presents itself in every moment. It seems to me that our attachment to purpose is born from the need to prove something to ourselves. But life is simply life, and is not trying to prove anything at all. This springtime will not try to be better than last springtime, and neither will an ash tree try to become an oak. By letting go our fascination with the extraordinary and spectacular, we can allow ourselves to recognize the simple wonder that lies within the ordinary.

(4)

Viewed from a larger perspective, the Path consists of “endless steps” which draw the seeker back to the reality of the present moment: “Give up the search for something to happen and fall intimately in love with the gift of presence in ‘what is.’ Here, right here, is the seat of all that you will ever long for. It is simple and ordinary and magnificent. You see, you are already home.”

When we venture forth on the mystical journey, we may imagine our destination as a place far away from where we are, in every sense – someplace profoundly, essentially, other. But at the end of the path, there is no final ascent to a transcendent, otherworldly realm. Rather, the quest leads seekers back to the suchness of the present moment, to “just this.” Setting down the burdens of identification, the attachment of the ego, and the weight of self-consciousness, we find ourselves back where we started – the same place but appareled in newness and unimagined splendour. Indeed, the fragmented terrain we left, the “lesser world” in which we have spent most of our lives, turns out to be the Promised Land to which all wisdom traditions have pointed. The world has not changed – it is still replete with all the characteristic suffering and dilemmas of existence – but we have changed, and we see it with new eyes: the eyes of life itself. In the wake of illumination, when conditioning no longer obscures our vision, the world is transfigured, and the sages of every lineage sing its joyful praises. In the midst of earthly turmoil and distress, they see overflowing wonders. (5)

Throughout history, the world’s great spiritual traditions have pointed to the fundamental ground of existence and the great mystery of Being. At their heart, the various teachings embody a universal truth which transcends time-bound and cultural expressions of spirituality. “There is no path. The path is created by the mind. It’s like flying into the sky. It’s an open sky, free sky, you just have to open your wings and take a jump. When you fly into the sky there is no path.” Professor John Greer points to this essential experience: “Enlightenment is not something that you can search for. When all searching ends, when you just stop, when you’re still, then something opens up from inside. Enlightenment is not something that we have lost. It is our natural state.”

The Perennial Philosophy sees something within us that calls us back to our beginnings. It is not a return to something we left behind so much as a recognition of

something that has always been. As it is impossible to attain that which we never lost, seekers must simply remember what is, and *be* the “suchness” that they are – in other words, experience directly the most basic fact of being alive in this very moment. This suchness, so often mentioned in the mystical wisdom traditions, is simply what always is, but often goes unnoticed in our busy days and thought-filled minds. (6)

Transformation of Conditioned Patterns

For most people the structure of their personality is based on habitual conditioned mental and emotional patterns which produce a form of “slavery” to both inner and outer influences. The work of inner transformation consists of observing these patterns and then reducing their effect through the application of open attention and awareness. “Change by choice becomes possible only when we have free attention, a level of attention that is not completely absorbed by conditioning. The ability to act and respond (rather than react) depends on the ability to maintain such a level of attention.”

As we practice attention, we see the conditioning that runs our lives more and more clearly. We see how our reactions and conditioned behaviors create difficulties and suffering for everyone, including us. At first we are not able to change our behavior, but continued work in cultivating attention eventually opens up the possibility of acting differently. One day, instead of reacting to a situation, we see another possibility and do it. Everything changes. With this first cut into a pattern of reactive behavior, we realize that we can live and function in the world without relying on conditioned behaviors and the self-images underlying them. We can live in attention. Now, as soon as we are aware that habituated patterns are operating, we use attention to cut through them and then do what the situation requires. (7)

As a result of inner work, the powerful grip of personality gradually weakens over time. Zen teacher Albert Low describes this process: “A veritable explosion had occurred, but debris remains. Old habits, mind states, reactions are still there, as well as irritation, anxiety, ambition. But they have lost their grip. Old enemies rise up, crumble and return to dust, and that tyrant the old king is broken, he needs be fed no longer.” In many traditions sitting meditation is used to dismantle the conditioned patterns of the personality and liberate the inner essential being of the practitioner:

Personality suggests a rigid or permanent inner structure. Our personality is the strategy we have devised to cope with life. In this sense, the castle *is* our personality. As we sit over time, dominant features of our personality fade. In those who have been sitting well for a long time, personality tends to disappear and leave openness. In a sense, the more we sit, the less personality we have . . . Over time,

good practice makes us more responsive to what's going on. Instead of an unvarying response, however, we respond more freely in a way that fits the situation. Practice enhances our ability to respond appropriately. Personality no longer gets in the way. (8)

When we begin to free ourselves from conditioning a more spontaneous approach to life emerges: "The self that seemed so solid and predictable begins to melt, and we become more comfortable with our true self, which is fluid and unfixd."

Life has conditioned us to create and protect the self, and this habit doesn't die easily. Still, we can begin to let go of this conditioning by paying attention to the behavior patterns that serve to keep the self intact. With practice we can become aware of conditioned responses before acting on them. In Buddhism this is the point of liberation. The moment a thought or desire pops up, we can choose to respond in a way that is different from our habitual, self-serving response. Mindfulness allows us to seize the moment between the impulse to act and the action itself. We can choose to respond in a new and creative way, or we can choose to simply watch as the impulse fades away. Either way, we have claimed our freedom. (9)

One of the consequences of spiritual work is a reduction of self-absorbed behaviour in favour of a more inclusive approach to life. P.D. Ouspensky observed this change in himself after he had worked with Gurdjieff for a number of years: "The first thing I could record was the weakening in me of that extreme individualism which up to that time had been the fundamental feature in my attitude to life. I began to see people more, to feel my community with them more."

As our spiritual practice ripens, we become more stable and centered, so that the inevitable challenges of life no longer shake us and we begin to see things just as they are. The compulsive self-centered mind is held in abeyance and the real self emerges to meet the challenges of life. A long-time practitioner of Zen writes, "I have lost much that was not really myself, and as a result the burden of the false self which I was carrying around has become lighter. I do not yet know who I really am, but I know better who I am not, and this means I can move about and flow more easily through life."

This practice of fearlessly being who we are – precisely the person we naturally are, with no affectation, no pretension – requires a lot of integrity and a lot of humility. If we are true to ourselves in the depths of our being, then we can be true to all other beings. Without any self-conscious effort, we just respond spontaneously to what needs to be done . . . During this time together, we are constantly paring down, continually letting go of these opinions, these fixed thoughts for or against. And we are committing ourselves to listening, to accepting whatever comes along, rather than closing up or defending ourselves against it. (10)

When a spiritual teaching is fully understood and actualized there is a fundamental reorientation and a fresh perception of life. Advaita teacher Jean Klein describes this process in his own self-realization under the guidance of his teacher:

The old patterns of thinking and acting – of false identification with the body – having lost their concreteness, no longer had any hold. It was a reduction from dispersion to orientation, a strengthening of the fore-feeling of truth. It became more and more present and less conceptual. This *being* understanding gave a new direction to my life. Everything was perceived in a new way. I became more discerning, and although I made no voluntary changes, many things that had occupied places in my earlier life just dropped away. I had been lured by names and forms as I strove for having and becoming, but with the orientation of energy there came a new order of values. You must not interpret this as adopting a new morality of any kind. Nothing was added or given up. I just became aware of the “clearness,” *sattvas*, and a transformation spontaneously followed from this awareness. (11)

The reduction of the ego and conditioned patterns of thinking, feeling and perceiving allows our real self to emerge. “When the sense of self is in abeyance, we are all whole – not just whole but *the whole*, without all the anxiety that invariably goes with the sense of a separate *me*. In living presence there is no sense of time, no inside or outside, no me and you – just wholesome being without walls that would separate and divide us.”

When forms that you had identified with, that gave you your sense of self, collapse or are taken away, it can lead to a collapse of the ego, since ego *is* identification with form. When there is nothing to identify with anymore, who are you? When forms around you die or death approaches, your sense of Beingness, of I Am, is freed from its entanglement with form: Spirit is released from its imprisonment in matter. You realize your essential identity as formless, as an all-pervasive Presence, of Being prior to all forms, all identifications. You realize your true identity as consciousness itself, rather than what consciousness had identified with. That’s the peace of God. The ultimate truth of who you are is not I am this or I am that, but I am. (12)

Harmonization and Integration with Everyday Life

Spiritual maturity develops and ripens from within, but expresses itself through the ordinary circumstances and activities of everyday life. Our inner life is manifested in a harmonious integration with the outer world in all its myriad aspects and potentialities. One of the great challenges of the spiritual journey to enlightenment is to harmonize two seemingly different aspects of reality – the world of form and change (*samsara*) and the realm of timeless, transcendent spirit (*nirvana*):

Seen through the lens of the Perennial Philosophy, our spiritual journey is a path that connects the two essential but seemingly incompatible halves of our being. The half with which we are all familiar is defined by duality; opposition and contrast are everywhere in our ordinary surroundings. We are conditioned to see things dualistically, within an either/or framework. Our lives constantly swing between fortune and loss, pleasure and pain, good and evil, and all the other polarities that characterize everyday experience as we know it . . . The other half of this fundamental polarity is nonduality, that forgotten dimension where unity is found in multiplicity. All the world's sacred traditions and sages identify nonduality as our true nature. It is the source from which we came. Sometimes referred to as the absolute, the invisible, the Divine, or simply suchness, this aspect of our being has no boundaries, divisions, or oppositions. It is the state of being we yearn for and the goal of our journey home. (13)

Most people are lost in and identified with the changing circumstances of the outer world and pay little attention to nurturing their inner being, or developing a meaningful relationship between these two worlds. It is a great mistake to regard spirituality as divorced from the everyday world of phenomena and experience:

What's wrong is that spirituality is regarded as something extraordinary, something completely out of touch with everyday life. You step out into another sphere, another realm, so to speak, and you feel that this other realm is the only answer. That is why it is so important for us to talk about spirituality in connection with all the aspects of relating with our familiar world. It is possible for us to see ordinary situations from the point of view of an extraordinary insight – that of discovering a jewel in a rubbish heap. You have to start with what you are, where you are now. Concept cannot exist in the present state, but awareness is very much there. You are aware of the present state. You are *now*, you are not past, you are not future, but you are now. In that state of awareness, you don't need to cling to concepts about who you are or who you will be. (14)

The discerning seeker can distinguish between teachings which promise higher states of consciousness and the attainment of powers and worldly abilities, and those which harmonize with the simplicity and wonder of the present moment's timeless mystery:

In undertaking a spiritual life, what matters is simple: *We must make certain that ours is a path with heart.* Many other visions are offered to us in the modern spiritual marketplace. Spiritual traditions offer stories of enlightenment, bliss, knowledge, divine ecstasy, and the highest possibilities of the human spirit. Out of the broad range of teachings available to us in the world, often we are first attracted to these glamorous and most extraordinary aspects. While the promise of attaining such states can come true and, and while these states do represent the teachings in one sense, they are also one of the advertising techniques of the spiritual trade. They are not the goal of spiritual life. In the end, spiritual life is not a pro-

cess of seeking or gaining some extraordinary condition or special powers. In fact, such seeking can take us away from ourselves and from awakening. If we are not careful, we can easily find the great failures of our modern society – its ambitions, materialism, and individual isolation – repeated in our spiritual life. In beginning a genuine spiritual journey, we have to stay much closer to home, to focus directly on what is right here in front of us, to make sure that our path is connected with love and a simple, compassionate presence. Listening with the heart to the mystery here and now is where meditation begins. (15)

In order for action in the world to be skilful and effective, there must be a basic underlying foundation of intelligence and awakened consciousness, sometimes called “an inner authentic presence.” Jack Kornfield: “The very walking itself is the goal because each moment that you are mindful, fully in the present, freed from greed, hatred, and delusion, is a moment of liberation as well as a step toward final liberation.”

We are also learning that action, although necessary, is only a secondary factor in manifesting our external reality. The primary factor in creation is consciousness. No matter how active we are, how much effort we make, our state of consciousness creates our world, and if there is no change on that inner level, no amount of action will make any difference. We would only re-create modified versions of the same world again and again, a world that is an external reflection of the ego. (16)

Spiritual insight and understanding integrate the relative and the absolute, the secondary and the primary dimensions of life and reality. Tibetan Buddhist teacher Tarthang Tulku: “We are centered in the immediacy of experience, and yet still participate in its outward forms to manifest our inner experience. This understanding is true integration, a genuine connection of our whole being with the reality of experience, with the ‘now’ which is unlimited by time and space.”

Q: Can we look at one’s spiritual development as a linear progression?

A: Here we come back to the question of seeing things from the level of absolute or relative reality. In teaching or in practice, it is often useful to think of the deepening of meditation and insight as the development of more frequent moments of wisdom, over a period of time. Thus, on this relative level, practice is a progression, an improvement over time. In fact, from the absolute level, time does not exist. Time is a concept, the only thing that exists to our perception is here and now. There is only the present moment. The use of time and the use of the word *path* is only a relative way of speaking. With this absolute understanding, we come fully into the moment, and the path is complete. There is no improvement, only being here now. (17)

References

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