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The Journey Begins

In the journey to fulfillment, awakening, to be saved; in order to find liberation, enlightenment, or freedom; to learn how to live in harmony with the Tao or the Good or God—whatever you call the goal toward which the great wisdom traditions have pointed as the ultimate possibility of life—every tradition has said there are stages to pass through and steps to be taken in order to reach this highest possibility.

The wisdom traditions have focused much of their attention on the highest stages, but each has also recognized that we humans, along with other living things, have basic needs and desires—for security, food, safety, comfort, sex, and power. We also seem to have a few desires primarily associated with our species, such as for wealth, praise, and fame. The wisdom traditions have recognized these strong drives within us, but they have taken different approaches concerning the best way to deal with them. Sometimes the basic drives have been characterized as unimportant; some traditions have viewed them as evil or sinful; others have taught that our needs and desires are not bad but are hindrances to reaching the highest possibilities of life.

Beyond these differences, though, all the traditions have agreed that there are higher levels beyond the basic urges and desires. Further, the consistent message has been that we must not let our basic drives keep us from moving up through the stages to the higher levels of meaning and fulfillment.

Our modern western culture, however, following the lead of Freud, Marx, and thinkers putting their faith in a materialistic belief system, has focused a great deal of its attention on ego gratifications and pursuing satisfactions for the basic urges and desires—while paying little attention to the higher possibilities, sometimes even denying they exist.

Many models for the ultimate journey

Through history, however, many models have been developed suggesting ways we can move into the highest levels. One of the earliest began to be taught more than 3000 years ago by the yogic sages of India, and involves moving one's energy and awareness up through 7 chakras or energy centers. As with most traditions, this model paints a vivid picture of what it means to enter the highest realms. A famous text, the *Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, says the higher stages of the journey include withdrawal of all sense awareness, complete concentration, and complete absorption. A modern scholar of Patanjali, Georg Feuerstein, describes numerous gradations even

within the highest stage, as the seeker moves through ever greater realms of ecstasy into complete liberation. It is an elegant, and daunting, picture of the possibilities—as well as the difficulties.

Another beautiful description of the stages of development is given by the Christian mystic St. Teresa of Ávila in her book *The Interior Castle*. In it, she describes seven mansions that a person moves through to reach the highest stage, the attainment of which brings "perfect Peace and Tranquility." Another Christian mystic, St. Catherine of Siena, tells us what it feels like to rest in this highest place. At the time she is speaking she has been very sick and is in great physical pain. Yet she can say: "If only you could understand how I feel. … All that I reveal is nothing compared to what I feel. My mind is so full of joy and happiness that I am amazed that my soul stays in my body. There is so much heat in my soul that this material fire here in front of us (she and her listeners were sitting in front of a fireplace), seems cool by comparison… And at the same time so much love for my fellow-men has blazed up in me, that I could face death for them cheerfully and with great joy in my heart."[1]

In the mystical Jewish tradition of Kabbalah there is also a series of stages, in this case, ten channels or *sefirot*. The goal is to align one's life with the highest levels, but that does not happen all at once. Human life is about moving our attention and alignment up through to the higher sefirot as best we can. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov put the way to do this very simply: "If you are not a better person tomorrow than you are today, what need have you for a tomorrow?"[2] This tradition insists, though, that if you persist in the effort to be a better person each day, the path will lead, according to a modern writer on Jewish mysticism, Rabbi David A. Cooper to "a calm, expansive, spacious state" that "sees clearly the mystery of life." A person reaching this place "rests comfortably in the state of 'not knowing.'"[3] But to achieve this result, Rabbi Cooper says one must always be open to experience "the light of universal truth," which "is always present at all times."[4]

Looking to Buddhism, once again we see that the Buddha spoke about stages on the path, ending with awakening, or liberation, or realizing one's own Buddha nature. A wonderful image of the Buddhist journey is given in the Zen Ox-herding pictures, in which there are 10 vivid images of the steps from beginner to complete fulfillment. And, like the above systems in other traditions, the journey only begins when a person in ready turn some of his or her attention away from a complete focus on the basic needs and desires, and is ready to spend at least some time and energy on the higher stages of life's journey.

A much earlier description of the path laid out by the Buddha includes these 8 stages: (1) the path to stream-entry; (2) the fruition of stream-entry; (3) the path to

once-returning; (4) the fruition of once-returning; (5) the path to non-returning; (6) the fruition of non-returning; (7) the path to arahantship; (8) the fruition of arahantship. (Stream-entry is when a person commits to a serious undertaking of the Buddhist path to awakening, and entering full arahantship is the final completion of that path.) Bodhidharma, who was a key figure in carrying Buddhism to China, said about his experience of the final stage: "Only the wise know this mind, this mind called dharma-nature, this mind called liberation. Neither life nor death can restrain this mind. Nothing can. It's also called … the Incomprehensible, the Sacred Self, the Immortal, the Great Sage. Its names vary but not its essence."[5] Thus, Buddhism revolves around the idea of progressing through stages to a final condition that is magnificent in its achievement—although quite difficult to realize.

Confucius and Socrates did not give numbered stages for the journey, but both clearly taught there were higher levels of consciousness to be sought—and could be attained. Both taught that working on oneself was essential to reach these higher stages of awareness, and both counselled that it was a long-term process that required discipline and determination. The goal, according to Confucius, was *ren*, sometimes thought of as "human-heartedness," characterized by a person centered in deep empathy, kindness, goodness, compassion, benevolence, and love toward others. Similarly, in Taoism the goal is to live so that one gradually moves into harmony with the *Tao*, the Way of Heaven.

For Socrates and his pupil Plato, the highest goal was to learn to live in harmony with the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. In their world, and for several hundred years thereafter, the most influential path to that goal was to be initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries. It was a difficult process, and involved going through numerous stages, but the reward was great. Plato himself said those who completed the process arrived, “purified and initiated” and “shall dwell with the gods."[6] This process always involves dying to your old life so you can be reborn, transforming the old self into a new person.” Plutarch, one of the greatest writers in ancient Greece, said: “Because of the mysteries ... “we hold it firmly that our soul is incorruptible and immortal.”[7] Several centuries later, the Neo-Platonist Plotinus said about the journey: “We must enter deep into ourselves, and, leaving behind the objects of corporeal sight, no longer look back after any of the accustomed spectacles of sense.”[8] He goes on: “Let us, therefore, re-ascend to the Good itself, which every soul desires; and in which it can alone find perfect repose.”[9]

Like other wisdom traditions, Islam has several different images of the journey to fulfillment, but all involve commitment and effort—some dramatically so, such as the *Malamati* practice, in which a person accepts blame for everything, never directing blame for anything toward another. (This is similar to the radical humility of the

Christian saint, Thérèse of Lisieux). For those practicing *Malamati*, as it was for Therese, there is a commitment to befriend and help all others, no matter how they treat you. Needless to say, to do this all the time, especially with those who are treating you badly, is very hard work.

Another strong current in Islam, and especially within the Sufi tradition, is a special focus on love. For many Sufis, love becomes the path itself, and many make an effort to merge into love, to live from love at all times. Of course, what they mean by love is not the common view today of romantic love for another person, but rather, it is to love the Divine wholeheartedly, and to love all people the same. If done fully, this is very difficult work—because we all have our resentments, fears, angers, and anxieties that arise toward others, and it is very hard to keep from getting caught by these feelings, or to let go of them when we do get caught. But this is exactly the work.

The poets speak

Many, many poets have spoken of these things. The Sufi poet Rumi says, "Gamble everything for love, if you're a true human being."[10] In another poem he says about love, "The stars come up spinning every night, bewildered in love. Life freezes if it doesn't get a taste of this almond cake."[11] And another: "Love has taken away my practices and filled me with poetry."[12] In still another he says of the deepest love he is trying to describe: "This is the true religion. All others are thrown-away bandages beside it."[13] And, to make the importance of love vividly clear, he says: " The way you make love is the way God will be with you."[14]

It cannot, however, be emphasized enough that this path is difficult, for we keep getting stuck. Rumi says:

> You have the energy of the sun in you,
> but you keep knotting it up,
> at the base of your spine.
> You’re some weird kind of gold,
> that wants to stay melted in the furnace,
> so you won’t have to be coins.[15]

Yet there is definitely a way through, if you will just keep doing the work. Rumi says:

> The soul is a newly skinned hide,
> Work on it with manual discipline,

and the bitter tanning acid of grief,
and you'll become lovely too, and very strong.[16]

Ultimately, if you persevere, you will emerge into the highest stages of the journey, and amazing things can happen. When a person steps into this place, Rumi says:

He fills with light, and colors change here.
He drinks it in, and everyone is wonderfully
drunk, shining with his beauty.[17]

Another great Sufi poet, Hafiz, gives a wonderful image about the importance of loving others. He says that most of us are constantly looking for someone who will love us—looking into the eyes of everyone we meet, hoping to find love coming toward us. But if everyone is always looking for love from others, who is left to give love? So the work, according to Hafiz, is this:

Why not become the one who lives
with a full moon in each eye
that is always saying, with that sweet moon language,
What every other eye in this world is dying to hear?[18]

In the modern world, the Sufi tradition continues in various forms, such as through "The Work" of George Gurdjieff, the mysterious teacher from the Caucuses in the middle of the last century. Gurdjieff developed a system, thought to be based on the Sufi tradition, along with elements of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, that involves years of inner work, physical practices, and an image of moving through stages of development to a fulfillment that encompasses the total human possibility.

Another framework that has had a profound impact on western thought is the idea of the "great chain of being," which holds that there is a hierarchy of values and meanings that exists beyond all cultures and beyond individual opinions. This tradition holds that life's fulfillment comes from moving up the chain to its highest level. These ideas have greatly influenced western thinkers for more than two thousand years, and were influential with many of those who created the Renaissance, and then modern science. For instance, Sir Isaac Newton, Rene Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, and G. W. von Leibniz all worked with this model, and it was important to Shakespeare, as well as Dante Alighieri when he wrote of the different circles of the Inferno, the Purgatorio, and the Paradiso in his *Divine Comedy*—a work that became a central pillar in the creation of the modern world. (No less a scholar than T.S. Eliot, Dante and Shakespeare were the two poets who had the greatest influence on the world we live in now.) And Dante ends his culture-shifting poem with these lines, with a glimpse

into the highest realm of heaven, seeing the Ultimate, the Final Cause. This was his vision:

> High phantasy lost power and here broke off;
> Yet, as in a wheel moves smoothly, free from jars,
> My will and my desire were turned by love,
> The love that moves the sun and the other stars.[19]

Thus the western world, no less than the east, has been deeply influenced by ideas that rest on an understanding that human life is about moving up through levels or stages—if one is to reach complete fulfillment. And love has often been the single most powerful word to capture the essence of the highest stage.

Coming to America

Jumping across the ocean to America, in the 19th century the Transcendentalists plunged headlong into finding the highest fulfillment life can offer through inner work and self-mastery. Their ideas come down to us most notably in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and his student and friend, Henry David Thoreau. Like Socrates, neither developed formulated stages for the journey, but each spoke fervently and often about the necessity of doing inner work with determination and self-awareness, and that those who did so could gradually move into the highest levels of human possibility. Furthermore, their descriptions of the highest possibilities echo the great wisdom traditions. In Emerson's view, "We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity."[20] Our task is to learn to align with that intelligence and live under its influence. When we do, we will spontaneously "choose the good and the great deed," and then "deep melodies wander through the soul from Supreme Wisdom."[21]

In another essay, Emerson made a clear distinction between the person we ordinarily are and the person we could be. In the first case, our everyday self is, "the facade of a temple wherein all wisdom and all good abide. What we commonly call man, the eating, drinking, planting, counting man, does not, as we know him, represent himself."[22] Behind this facade, however, is "an immensity not possessed and that cannot be possessed."[23] If we will only open to it, we will discover that, "From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things."[24]

The goal of the Transcendentalists, according to Emerson, is to let that light "have its way through us."[25] If we will do this, if we will give ourselves over to that transcendental light and let it shine though us, the result will be this: "When it breathes through the intellect, it is genius; when it moves through the will, it is virtue; when it flows through our affections, it is love."[26]

Walt Whitman, the quintessential American poet, owed a great debt to Emerson for his support and inspiration, and in turn Whitman was desperately trying to convey a key transcendental message when he wrote:

> There is that in me—I do not know what it is—but I know it is in me.
> I do not know it—it is without name—it is a word unsaid,
> It is not in any dictionary, utterance, symbol.
> Something it swings on more than the earth I swing on,
> To it the creation is the friend whose embracing awakes me.
>
> I plead for my brothers and sisters.
> Do you see O my brothers and sisters?
> It is not chaos or death—it is form, union, plan—it is eternal
> life—it is Happiness.[27]

Following a profound mystical experience, Whitman captured the feeling so many have had about the change that occurs when one enters the highest level of the journey, saying he is either now asleep, or truly awake for the first time: "I cannot be awake for nothing looks to me as it did before, Or else I am awake for the first time, and all before has been a mean sleep."[28]

Many of those who have experienced the highest stages of the journey have tried to convey this message—that when one steps into that space, it is "more real" than anything experienced before. It is certainly more real than the everyday reality we often assume to be all there is, with all the issues many of us spend so much time and energy caught up in and focused on.

Of utmost importance, there are countless reports through the centuries from the greatest among us that experiencing the highest level of the human possibility is the "pearl of great price." It is the one thing that is most important, that which is most real and most true. It is also obvious that anyone who has **not** had an experience of these highest stages of the journey cannot tell us much about them, or judge their validity. That would be like someone who has never tasted chocolate telling another person who has tasted chocolate what the one who had actually had a taste **should** have experienced.

A few key figures in modern psychology have given attention to the higher levels, including Carl Jung, Roberto Assagioli, Abraham Maslow with his hierarchy of needs, Erik Erikson and his work on the stages of psychosocial development, and the developers of the Spiral Dynamics hierarchies. And the American philosopher Ken Wilber has synthesized a number of these ideas and offered several hierarchical models through the years. He has written extensively about the highest levels, which

he names the psychic, the subtle, the causal, and the nondual in his book *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* (his designations are borrowed from the yogic tradition). In his writings, Wilber emphasizes how, in order to reach these highest levels of our potential, we must move up through the various stages by way of intention, effort, and determination—until we reach complete fulfillment, which he believes is possible.

To begin the journey

The crucial point of all the above examples is that human history has been shaped and guided from its earliest days by images of the necessity of moving up through stages to reach the highest possibilities. Yet today, mainstream western psychology and much of our culture is focused on fulfilling the needs and desires of our lower levels only, while ignoring the age-old message of the wisdom traditions.

This means that anyone interested in deeper meaning, true fulfillment, or awakening must realize that life's journey involves several stages, some of them far beyond our basic needs and desires. Let's tentatively say there are 10 stages (other common models use 7, 8, 9, and 12). But using a model of 10 stages, the basic wants and needs (security, food, safety, comfort, sex, power, wealth, praise, fame) all fall within the first 5 levels. Also within these 5 levels are many goals that are given a great deal of attention in the modern world: having less tension and anxiety, overcoming depression, finding romance, being able to sleep better, losing weight, having a healthy diet, becoming more productive and efficient, becoming a success, developing greater self-esteem.

A lot of people today are taking courses and workshops in the hope of making the first five stages of their lives better. There is nothing wrong with this, up to a point. They long to look better, sleep better, be a little less anxious or depressed. Many are trying to bring more peace into their lives; to become a bit less caught by fears and anxieties; a significant number are looking for others to socialize with; many are searching for a romantic connection; others are simply trying to feel like they are OK, trying to find a group that will tell them they are fine just the way they are. At the unconscious level, a significant number are motivated by a desire to feel important, sometimes individually important, sometimes through "group narcissism." (My group is important, so I am important.)

It is little wonder, then, that in response to a rising tide of people in search of programs, groups, teachers, and preachers to serve their egoic desires, many such programs are being marketed today; in fact, it has become a growth industry. Just look at the incredible number of workshops, books, seminars, mindfulness programs, yoga classes, podcasts, YouTube videos, TED talks, and college extension courses offered with the promise of meeting these first 5 level longings. New offerings spring

up constantly and are often popular and lucrative. Even many churches and spiritual groups, the traditional home for the higher search, are being pulled by the gravity of today's culture into focusing on ego drives.

And many people do need help with these things, and helping them is valuable. Providing opportunities for people to feel better and solve daily life problems is important. But, in the rush to fulfill the demand for help with the basic levels, something very important has been lost—the dramatic distinction between lower-level drives and our innate aspiration to move into higher levels of growth and development. Thus, it is crucially important to recognize that most programs being offered today will never satisfy our true hunger. Programs at this level will never bring actual fulfillment.

Furthermore, spending a great deal of time and energy at this level of development is always, in the end, disappointing. As I once heard it said, "You will never get enough to be satisfied if what you are pursuing turns out to be something you don't really want." It is like eating a meal made up of empty calories. If you are starving, this can be worthwhile. But such a meal will not meet your long-term needs, and if you keep eating empty calories, you will end up eating more and more without ever being filled. You will gain weight, but never be healthy or feel good. Similarly, the perennial message of the wisdom traditions is: Taking care of lower-level desires can never bring true satisfaction, will never fulfill your deepest longings.

Consequently, one disturbing result of our modern focus is that many of us are using teachers and groups and programs dealing with lower-level drives to avoid hearing what we actually need to hear. The hard truth is, a lot of us need to be pushing ourselves more than we are, if we truly wish to find love, wisdom, peace, and joy—the traditional fruits of a fulfilled life. Thus, instead of looking for someone to tell us we are OK, many of us need to hear the difficult message that the only way forward is to buckle down and do the hard work of transforming ourselves—if we want to live into the highest possibilities human life has to offer.

Of course, we must also "let go," relax our striving if we are to open into the higher dimensions. As a wise teacher once captured the paradox, spiritual fulfillment is something that can never be achieved through effort, but is only achieved by those who make a great effort. But that conundrum is a story for another time.

For now, let us focus on the lesson that, to move into and through the higher levels of human possibility, we must do the hard work that all the wisdom traditions say is the path to true fulfillment. The consistent message is that unless you transform yourself, grow beyond the way you are now, you will never find salvation or enlightenment; you will never be fully awake; you will never come to know the Good,

the True, and the Real; you will not find your way into harmony with the Tao or God. To find these things, a radical transformation of who you are is required. And part of that transformation will mean leaving behind your old self rather than making it feel better. As Jesus said, to do this work a person must "deny himself, and take up his cross."[29] The Buddha's radical example of completely and totally leaving his old life behind gives the same message.

In this framework, the greatest need most of us have does not concern spending time and energy on programs that speak to the first 5 stages. What we need most, if we are to find true fulfillment, is to recognize that there are higher stages to life's journey, and we need to seek out authentic guidance and effective tools to help us move into and work with the higher levels. There are people and programs that offer these things, but each of us must do the necessary work to find them, and we must sort out for ourselves the ones that speak to the higher levels, versus those that are being widely marketed that speak to only the first 5 stages.

This path might be difficult, but the possibilities are great. The novelist Herman Hesse described his image of the highest possibility in *Siddhartha*: "I had never seen anyone with such a gaze, I had never seen anyone smile, sit, and walk in such a way. In truth, that is just the way I would like to be able to gaze, smile, sit, and walk—so free, so worthy, so hidden, so open, so childlike, and so mysterious. Truly, only a person who has penetrated to the inmost part of his self gazes and walks like that. I, too, shall surely try to penetrate to the inmost part of my self."[30]

The novelist D. H. Lawrence gave us the same message: "Men are not free when they are doing just what they like. Men are only free when they are doing what the deepest self likes. And there is getting down to the deepest self! It takes some diving."[31] In other words, because we have so many drives and needs within us, if we just keep following our egoic urges and desires, we will never get to the deepest, or highest, levels of our possibilities.

So, on your journey to fulfillment, wherever on the path you might be,

Fare forward, voyager!

[1] Blessed Raymond of Capua, *The Life St. Catherine of Siena: The Classic on Her Life and Accomplishments as Recorded by My Spiritual Director*, trans. George Lamb (Charlotte, North Carolina: TAN Books, 2003), 146.

[2] Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Ethics: You Shall Be Holy*, vol. I (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 395.

[3] Rabbi David A. Cooper, *Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Louisville, Colorado: Sounds True, 2005), 69.

[4] Cooper, *Ecstatic Kabbalah*, Introduction, iv.

[5] Bodhidharma, *The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma,* trans. Red Pine (New York, New York: North Point Press/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 23.

[6] Plato, *Plato's apology, Crito and Phaedo of Socrates*, trans. Henry Cary, M.A. (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: David McKay Publisher,1897), 96. "he that arrives there purified and initiated shall dwell with the gods"

[7] Russell Roberts, *Dionysus* (Hockessin, Delaware: Mitchell Lane Publishers, 2008), 34.

[8] Plotinus, *Thomas Taylor the Platonist: Selected Writings*, ed. Kathleen Raine and George Mills Harper (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969), 155.

[9] Plotinus, *An Essay on the Beautiful*, trans. Thomas Taylor (London, United Kingdom: John M. Watkins, 1917), 30.

[10] Coleman Barks, trans. *The Essential Rumi*, (New York, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 193.

[11] Barks, *Rumi*, 103.

[12] Ibid., 104.

[13] Ibid., 10.

[14] Ibid., 173.

[15] John Moyne and Coleman Barks, trans., *Open Secret: Versions of Rumi* (Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala Publications, 1984), 71.

[16] Barks, *The Essential Rumi*, 176.

[17] Moyne and Barks, *Open Secret*, 29.

[18] Hafiz, *The Gift: Poems of Hafiz*, trans. Daniel Ladinsky (New York, New York: Penguin Random House Books, 1999), 322.

[19] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Cantica III, Paradise*, Canto 33, translated by Dorothy Sayers and Barbara Reynolds, (New York, New York, Penguin Books, 1962), 347.

[20] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson's Essays*, ed. Arthur Hobson Quinn (New York, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), 87.

[21] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Divinity School Address* (London, United Kingdom: Philip Green Publisher, 1903), 36.

[22] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays: Representative Men, Society and Solitude* (London, United Kingdom: George Routledge and Sons, 1885), 60.

[23] Emerson, *Essays: Representative Men, Society and Solitude*, 60.

[24] Ibid., 60.

[25] Ibid., 60.

[26] Emerson, *Emerson's Essays*, 148.

[27] Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself* (Aurora, New York: Roycrofters, 1904), 68-69.

[28] Walt Whitman, from an early manuscript Whitman drafted as he was preparing materials for the first (1855) edition of Leaves of Grass. Papers of Walt Whitman (MSS 3829), Clifton Waller Barrett Library of American Literature, Albert H. Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.

[29] Matthew 16:24 (King James version of the *Bible*).

[30] Herman Hesse, *Siddhartha* (Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala Publications, 2000), 38.

[31] D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York, New York: Thomas Seltzer, Inc., 1928), 9-10.