Three Ways for Seeking the Ultimate

Most of us in the modern western world have the luxury of a base of support for a stable worldly life—enough food to eat, shelter, no wars raging around us, and greater safety and security than most have had throughout history, or have today in many parts of the world (including some locales in the United Sates). Those of us raised in an environment of relative ease and comfort have been conditioned to spend our time protecting and adding to what we have. Thus, our normal lives are focused on making a living, enhancing our place in the social hierarchy, having interesting experiences, seeking sex and romance, creating families, or trying to be rich and famous. The fortunate among us have been able to build and nurture deep relationships.

Throughout history, however, a few, no matter their worldly circumstances, felt called to pursue the "ultimate concern,"[1] to use theologian Paul Tillich's phrase. For those who feel called today, there are three main frameworks for the ultimate journey of life.

***The first* model** is provided by a few individuals who founded or deeply influenced the world's wisdom traditions. Occasionally, a rare individual like the Buddha, Ramana Maharshi, or Anthony of the Desert (who moved to the Egyptian desert in about 270 AD and became known as the founder of Christian monasticism) stopped engaging with worldly urges, motivations, and desires for years—until all ego goals and unconscious drives had withered away. That is, except the one "Great Desire" for awakening, or the "Holy Longing" to be one with the Divine or love God completely. (Absent worldly motivations, an intense, focused desire of this kind is necessary to engage in any life activities at all.)

Perhaps this was what Jesus was doing during his lost years, culminating with his forty days in the desert. But very few have undertaken this extreme way; very few have been willing to endure the difficulties this path requires for long enough to completely disidentify with all personal urges, desires, hopes, and fears. And very few have known how to do it, even if they wished to follow such a path. But although it has been and will be undertaken by only the few, it stands luminously there as a model for some in each new generation.

The second method *offered* by the wisdom traditions through the centuries—another way to overcome the hold of the ego and all unconscious drives—is surrender. To surrender control of your life to a spiritual teacher or to the strict framework of a tradition. To help with this method, the wisdom traditions have developed numerous practices through the ages such as meditation, prayer, chanting, devotion, service to

others, study of the sacred scriptures, rituals, fasting, and more. There is no guarantee any of these practices will work, but they sometimes do, resulting in complete liberation from identification with anything but the mystery which lies beyond the threshold. (The 14th century Tibetan sage Tsong Khapa said that encountering the ultimate is like crossing a threshold into an unknown dimension, one that cannot be described in words.)

In one of these two ways the great saints and sages of history, either on their own or within a tradition, spent years denying themselves an easy worldly life, practiced austerities, and endured many difficulties. They were attempting to purify themselves, to burn away all barriers to a pure heart and mind. They were convinced that only by cutting themselves off from the world and its temptations for a long period would they be able to fulfill the Great Desire or Holy Longing.

The third way is to work with self-examination, self-awareness, dreams, and mindfulness—to intentionally bring the light of consciousness to shine on one's ego and on unconscious motivations. This is the way of Socrates, as well as some independent-minded Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, and others through the centuries. There is overlap between the three ways, but there are also distinctions. This third way, for instance, does not require an abandonment of the world, severe austerities, or surrender to a teacher or tradition.

In the last few hundred years a number of well-known figures in the West have found their way to this path, including Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, writers and artists such Michel de Montaigne, Leonardo de Vinci, William Shakespeare, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Victor Hugo, Leo Tolstoy, W.B. Yeats, William Blake, Dante Alighieri, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In the political world, Mahatmas Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Abraham Lincoln gradually used commitment to and sacrifice for a cause, combined with increasing consciousness about what they were choosing and why, to follow this path.

None of these figures cut themselves off from the world; rather, each engaged fully with it. None surrendered to a teacher or the practices of one tradition. It is not clear which, if any, of these made it all the way to ultimate awakening or union with the mystery, but using self-reflection, service, increasing consciousness, art, and creativity, each traveled a long way. The journey of each was filled with difficulties, but if you immerse yourself in their late words and works, you will discover many of the same insights and wisdom that the saints and sages shared with us.

Taking the first step on this path has been helped along by modern psychology, and psychological insight can be a corrective to some of the errors that arise when

those who do lots of spiritual practice have not dealt with their shadow side. The early steps of this method were defined by Freud as attempting to see that, "where *id* was, there ego shall be."[2] The meaning of this phrase highlights the importance of ego consciousness getting to know the *id,* the unconscious urges and desires we each have, and making them conscious.

Going far beyond Freud, however, psychologists Carl Jung and Roberto Assagioli honed the tool of conscious awareness to move toward the ultimate goal of the journey. Late in life, Jung had a series of near-death experiences and came away with a much more profound understanding of the higher reaches of the journey. Assagioli underwent a severe ordeal while in a Nazi prison with the same result. Growing out these experiences, both expanded the work of psychology into the realm of the highest stages of the ultimate journey.

This third way is not new, but there has been more attention paid in modern times. It is being followed by many today, often combined with aspects of the first two. By becoming more conscious of our inner demons and desires and integrating them more fully into a healthy self, important steps toward the ultimate can be taken. Bu not all. Other things are necessary as well, but several valuable steps can be taken. And the dangers of self-delusion on the journey (described more fully later) can be greatly diminished.

Each of the three paths is fraught with difficulty and peril, so combining them has much to be said for it. Insights gained on this third way can offer a corrective to the pitfalls of the first two. And this third way has special potential in the modern world—especially for those whose trust in the traditions is low or who cannot imagine themselves submitting to a teacher. But this path has its own problems and dangers (also to be discussed later). But whichever of the three paths draws you to it, each can offer the determined traveler a way to the top of the mountain.

How does one achieve true awakening?

This question remains: How does one get to such a place, a state in which, as Rumi said, "all imaginable joys" will be "rolled like pearls to your feet"?[3] The first thing is to truly accept what Rumi and so many others have said: to reach this place requires work, pain, and sacrifice. As mentioned before, Jesus underwent a painful last few days—and then crucifixion—as the price paid to fulfill his calling. Many of his early followers died violent and painful deaths to stay true to their paths.

The Buddha had a peaceful death at an old age, but he spent six years practicing the most severe austerities, at one point starving himself until he could touch his backbone through his stomach. It was only through such experiences over

many years that he was able to cut all connection to his life in the world, as well as to his body's urges and desires.

After his awakening, he wandered around completely at peace and unafraid, responding to those who came to him to seek advice and counsel. And, during those forty-plus years, it was reported by various observers that he was serene, generous, content, friendly, giving, magnanimous, energetic, always available to those who sought his help. When pandits (Hindu scholars) came to dispute with him, he said, "There was no possibility I could be thrown into confusion or embarrassment."[4]

And he had completely mastered his body as well as his emotions. In the middle of winter someone saw him sitting in meditation on a hard, cold cow path with only a little straw under him for a cushion, and asked if he was uncomfortable. The Buddha said:

> Rough is the ground trodden by the hoofs of cattle;
> thin is the couch;
> light, the monk's yellow robe;
> sharp the cutting wind of winter,
> Yet I live happily with sublime uniformity.[5]

In a similar vein, 2500 years later—after Peace Pilgrim had gone through years of struggle and letting go—she wrote:

> I can say to my body, 'Lie down there on that cement floor and go to sleep,' and it obeys. I can say to my mind, 'Shut out everything else and concentrate on the job before you' and it is obedient. I can say to my emotions, 'Be still, even in the face of this terrible situation,' and they are still.[6]

Peace Pilgrim said the ego is always driven "by wishes for comfort and convenience on the part of the body, by demands of the mind, and by outbursts of the emotions."[7] But once you have freed yourself from its control: "You are now in control of your life. Your higher nature, which is controlled by God, now controls the body, mind, and emotions."[8]

One of my favorite images of complete freedom is that of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, who inspired Coleman Barks to begin his translations of the poems of Rumi. Bawa was a Sufi mystic from Sri Lanka who emigrated to the United States in 1971, at the age of 71. Before that time, he spent many years living in the jungles of Sri Lanka and traveling to holy sites, gradually relinquishing any connection to his ego life and his identity in the world. In doing so, he seems to have reached a place of complete peace and freedom.

This is an account by one of Bawa's students, Jonathan Granoff (a credible observer, having been a well-known lawyer, Vice President of the Committee on Disarmament at the UN, and President of the Global Security Institute). Several years after Bawa came to the U.S., Granoff recounts this powerful experience:

> One day, while I was there, a fellow came in absolutely shaking with rage, filled with enormous violence and hatred. I was sitting right by (Bawa), and this guy pulls out a knife, the kind of knife that you use to cut bamboo. He pulls it out and he's screaming. I understood enough to hear that some tragedy had befallen his family …
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> When he pulled the knife, I was very close, close enough that I could have easily sucker punched him. … But my conscience said: 'No, it's not for me to step in front of the sage. I'm here purely as a student, and it's not for me to intervene.'
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> So here sat this small, frail man in front of a knife-wielding crazed attacker—filled with anger and rage. At that moment, Bawa opened his arms fully wide. He had no shirt on.
>
> He leaned his neck backwards, exposing himself fully to this flood of violence, and looked, with eyes of melting gentleness, at his assailant and said: 'My brother, will taking my life give your soul the peace it is seeking?'
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> It was as if the molecules in the room began to scintillate and vibrate with the power of Love. That love just filled the space we were in like a tangible presence, and the man with the knife became like a puppet, whose strings had been cut. He collapsed on the ground, dropped his knife, and gazed at the sage's eyes.
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> Bawa embraced him with such kindness, an almost motherly absorption, and said, 'Go home and clean yourself, then come back, my child.'"[9]

What is Awakening

A striking observation about the great saints and sages is that none of them acted in ways that involved personal desires for money, comfort, status, power, or fulfilling shallow sexual whims. They lived in an awakened state, but at the same time understood that most people live in the world of time and need cultural values and engagement with that world, so the great saints and sages helped those in need and served people at the level of consciousness where they found them. They did not disparage the ego lives of the people who came to them. They did, however, when the time seemed right, encourage those who were ready to move on to a higher stage of the journey.

These wise ones had fully experienced, integrated, and come to rest in a place in which there was no separation, a place where they felt the cares and needs of others to be as important as their own—sometimes more so, because their personal concerns and desires were no longer central. The energy these wise ones radiated was love, compassion, wisdom, peace, and joy. Although they were usually kind and accepting of others, they would sometimes challenge followers, but they did so to serve a higher good. They could be demanding, but only of those few aspirants who came to them for guidance and seemed ready for the challenges of the journey at a higher level. (In this circumstance, challenging someone who is ready is a powerful form of love.)

Taking into account my own journey and that of a number of people I have known for a long time, and studying the examples of saints and sages who seem to have made it all the way to the ultimate destination, my definition for complete awakening, full realization, onement with the Divine, union with the Tao, and loving God continually with heart and soul and spirit is:

1) Escaping fully from the control of the urges, needs, drives, buried wounds, and scars that inhabit the unconscious. This does not mean they do not exist, but that one is conscious of them and never taken over by them. Rather, they are integrated into the whole in a heathy, compassionate, meaningful way.

2) Freeing oneself completely from control of the ego, subduing its demand to be the center of attention; to stop listening to the messages that suggest the pursuit of one worldly goal after another. This does not mean killing the ego, but rather gaining its help for a life in service of something higher.

3) Living in harmony with the mystery, with that which is greater than the personal self.

Are all these different ideas—awakening, realization, onement, union, loving God, and more—the same? It depends entirely on your definitions. You see, all are concepts put into words, words used to describe something that we do not understand and cannot be accurately put into words.

Enlightenment is a word for a concept. Similarly, the Tao is a concept. God is a concept. Each is an idea that is different in each human mind. And no person’s concept is “the thing itself;” no human has a monopoly on the correct concept. The same is true for the words Realization, Yahweh, Elohim, Allah, Father, Great Spirit, the Absolute, and on and on. These are all human words we use to describe human concepts—as we try to understand and speak about the indescribable, the mystery within which we exist and of which we are an intimate part.

Although the names Jesus, Confucius, Mohammed, and the Buddha refer to human beings who lived in the past, each name brings forth different concepts in each person's mind, and all our concepts differ, sometimes radically. Crucially, no person's concept is "right" for any of them. No one has an exclusive claim to the accuracy of his or her preferred concept.

So, awakening, enlightenment, union, and salvation are just words we use to describe concepts in our thinking minds. All such words are valuable—tools to be used when useful. But all should be laid aside when no longer serving a useful purpose. Wisdom is to know which tools are needed in a particular situation, and how best to use each tool when appropriate.

Words and concepts are central for living a human life in the everyday, relatively real world. But that which lies beyond the veil of our thinking minds cannot be thought. Yet, at moments we have the capacity to glimpse beyond the threshold of words into the mystery. As Rumi says:

> People are going back and forth
> across the doorsill where
> the two worlds touch.[10]

Crossing the doorsill is to move into and become the mystery that cannot be put into words. Rumi says: "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field."[11] People through the ages have had moments of crossing the threshold into that field, but when they come back and try to put what they saw into words, those words are not "it." Words point to concepts, but the mystery is beyond all concepts. Trying to capture the mystery in words is like trying to catch light in a glass jar.

In another poem Rumi says, "Keep your mouth closed over here, to open it over there"[12]—which I take to mean it is best not to speak of the dimension beyond the threshold when in the everyday world. Why, then, did Rumi himself say so many words about it? The answer is that he was in a mystical state when he spoke his poems. His consciousness was over there, across the threshold, so he was not speaking "over here." It is just that the people who were hearing his words were "over here."

To make this vivid, listen to his words when, one day, he had been across the threshold and was beginning to come back into the everyday world from being in that "field." He says, in an exasperated tone (remember, he is speaking his poems out loud while in a mystical state, and someone else is writing them down): "This poetry, I never know what I'm going to say. I don't plan it. When I'm outside the saying of it, I get very quiet and rarely speak at all."[13]

This does not mean there is no value in trying to write and say words about the ultimate. Everyone on this side of the threshold needs words about it and guidance for how to seek it. The crucial thing is for those who have glimpsed the mystery but are now back in the everyday world writing about it to remember that their words are coming from the mind and are not the thing itself.

Needless to say, this definition of the ultimate sets the bar very high, and everyone must come to his or her own definition. For me, however, it is valuable to realize that there is a reachable, although difficult, ultimate possibility toward which we can aim. It is there. Many have tasted it. But only a small percentage of human beings through the ages have been able to stay in that field permanently while continuing to live in a human form.

The rarity of complete realization used to trouble me greatly, but no longer. My job is not to judge where I am on the journey, how far I have come, or how much further there is to go. My job is simply to do the work I can see that needs be done right now. This is the wisdom at the heart of the *Bhagavad Gita*:

> Desire for the fruits of work must never be your motive in working.
> Perform every action with your heart fixed on the Supreme Lord.
> Renounce attachment to the fruits.
> Be even-tempered in success and failure.
> Work done with anxiety about results
> is far inferior to work done without such anxiety,
> in the calm of self-surrender.
> They who work selfishly for results are miserable.[14]

Or, as T.S Eliot, inspired by the *Gita,* put the same idea: "Do not think of the fruit of the action. Fare forward."[15] In the end, Eliot concluded for himself: "For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business."[16]

[1] Paul Tillich, *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue*, Donald McKensie Brown, ed. (Glasgow, United Kingdom: Harper & Row, 1965).

[2] Stephen A. Mitchell and Margaret J. Black, *Freud and Beyond: A History of Modern and Psychoanalytic Thought* (New York, New York: Basic Books, 1995), 193.

[3] Andrew Harvey, *The Way of Passion: The Celebration of Rumi* (New York, New York: Penguin Putnam, 1994), 309.

[4] Paul Dahlke, *Buddhist Essays*, trans. Bhikkhu Silacara (London, United Kingdom: Macmillan and Company, 1908), 13.

[5] R. K. Pruthi, ed., *Buddhism and Indian Civilization* (New Delhi, India: Discovery Publishing House, 2004), 3. (From a Sutta of the *Anguttara*.)

[6] Peace Pilgrim, *Peace Pilgrim: Her Life and Work in Her Own Words* (Sheldon, Connecticut: Friends of Peace Pilgrim, 1982), 23.

[7] Peace Pilgrim, *Peace Pilgrim*, 23.

[8] Ibid., 23.

[9] Jonathan Granoff, "Foundation of Dignity," *Tikkan Magazine*, October 2009.

[10] Coleman Barks, trans., *The Essential Rumi* (New York, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 36.

[11] Coleman Barks, *The Essential Rumi*, 36.

[12] Andrew Harvey, *The Way of Passion*, 300.

[13] Coleman Barks, trans., *Open Secret: Versions of Rumi* (Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala Publications, 1999), 37.

[14] Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, trans., *Bhagavad Gita: The Song of God* (Hollywood, California: Vedanta Press, 2002), 40-41.

[15] T. S. Eliot, *T.S Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays*, 1909-1950 (New York, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1952), 134.

[16] T.S Eliot, *T.S Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays*, 128.