Moving Toward the Ultimate

One problem when with talking about *The Ultimate Journey* is that our words and language itself are not designed for such matters. Even our normal ways of thinking have a hard time wrapping themselves around Ultimate things.

Naming the Mystery

We do not know how this universe in which we experience consciousness came to be. Yet everything we surmise suggests it has been governed by laws from the beginning. There are at least 26 constants of nature upon which the existence of a universe necessary for human life depends. And since the beginning of human culture, the great wisdom figures have told us there are values and moral guidelines that are necessary as well. Every culture has lived by values and some kind of morality, and all wisdom figures have said that their source is God, the Tao, Buddha-nature, the Way, Allah, Brahma, Great Spirit, Ein Sof, and so on.

All these names are words we humans have created to point to the source of existence, as well as the source of the meanings and values that are important for human life. But each of these words is a human concept, and not one is the thing itself. All these words are meager attempts to make intelligible to our thinking minds something that is ***just there***. This "Isness" simply appears to our consciousness as soon as we become aware that we exist.

The wisdom traditions describe this Source differently, but all assert that there is a larger Reality, "Something Greater" than our everyday perspective. For Plato and Socrates, it was the World of Pure Forms or Ideas: "There abides the very being with which true knowledge is concerned; the colorless, formless, intangible essence ... knowledge absolute in existence absolute."[1] This World of Pure Forms provides guidance for human life—for those who learn to access it.

Confucius taught that we must follow the "Way of Heaven" if we are to find fulfillment in life, and Lao Tzu called the Source the Tao, while making clear that it can never be captured in a name: "The Tao that can be told of is not the eternal Tao; The name that can be named is not the eternal name. The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth."[2]

In Judaism, Moses brought guidance from "I Am That I Am."[3] Muhammed received guidance for living from Allah (who has 99 names), as conveyed through the angel Jibrīl (or Gabriel). In Christianity, Jesus provided guidance by interpreting the Jewish scriptures as inspired in him by *Abba.* (In English, Abba is often translated as Father, but since Jesus' original language was Aramaic, when he referred directly to this

Source he would have said "Elah"—unless he spoke Syriac Aramaic, and then he would have said "Alaha." We don't know which Aramaic dialect he used.) Jesus probably spoke Hebrew as well, so he would at times have used the words "Elohim" or "Yahweh" for the Source. Whatever words he used, Jesus clearly said that he did not himself think up what he taught, but that it came from Abba, Elah, Alaha, Elohim, or Yahweh.

Some people today assert that the Buddha rejected the existence of an underlying Source, but even a cursory look at his teachings suggests this is not the case. The Buddha did not claim he made up the Eight-fold path, but instead that he discovered it while seeing the truth of all things. "In that instant, I saw," is how he described his dramatic awakening that night under the Bodhi tree.

During that night he "saw" back over a thousand of his incarnations and "saw" the true nature of reality. What he saw in his journey beyond time, beyond the threshold of the everyday world and everyday consciousness, was that there is a path to awakening, a Way that he later put into words and concepts. But to emphasize again, he did not claim to have originated this Way, or the core values of compassion, lovingkindness, and equanimity; he did not say he made up the guidelines for ethical living known as the five precepts. Rather, he told us he saw into the heart of things, that he "saw" the underlying rules of how the universe ***is***, and thus how we should live in it.

If the Buddha had not grounded his message in a transcendental understanding, what he taught would have been completely nihilistic. He often said that it did little good to talk about the Ultimate, but he did not imply that an Ultimate did not exist. And he certainly did not suggest his guidance for moral conduct was not grounded in the Ultimate. The reason he did not spend much time explicitly talking about the existence of an underlying Ultimate Reality is that everyone he talked to assumed it to exist. When he used words like "the deathless" or "nirvana," he knew that every person he was speaking to knew these words and knew they pointed toward an underlying Source of existence, to which beings returned if they found liberation. At the same time, the Buddha knew it was easy to get caught up in words, become confused by concepts, and thereby miss the deepest truths, so he focused on how those listening to him could reach the deathless state, rather than philosophizing about it.

The exact same thing is true of every other great wisdom figure we know: None claimed they personally created the wisdom or values they taught; rather, they said they were conveying what they had "seen" through a glimpse into the depths of the Mystery. Neither Moses, Jesus, Confucius, Lao Tzu, Muhammed or any of the other great sages and shamans of human history said they had personally created the rules

for living they taught; rather, they said they had *seen* how we should live, that it had been revealed to them.

Of course, their respective messages appear somewhat different to us today, but my guess is that the differences come from the different world situations each was living within, as well as the impossible task of putting what they saw into words. They were each attempting to convey the true nature of Reality, as well as the guidelines necessary to bring oneself into harmony with it, but they could not avoid the confusion that words and differing cultures create. They could only hint and suggest, using riddles, metaphors, stories, and parables. And then, when the traditions began to pass down their teachings in a structured way, the messages became more distorted with each passing generation.

What Is God?

Most reading this essay grew up in a culture where the word "God" was used to point toward the Ultimate, so let's focus on that word for a moment. God is a word that points to a concept, an idea that is somewhat different in every human mind. No person's concept is "the thing itself," and no human has the only correct concept. The same is true for the words Tao, Allah, Yahweh, El, Elohim, Father, Great Spirit, the Absolute, and on and on. These are all human words we use to describe human concepts in an attempt to understand and speak with others about the indescribable—the Mystery within which we exist.

The names Jesus, Confucius, Muhammed, and the Buddha refer to human beings who lived in the past, but each name brings forth different concepts in each person's mind. Each of us has a different understanding of who these people were, sometimes radically different. And no person's concept is "right." No one has an exclusive claim to the accuracy of his or her concept.

In the same way, emptiness is a concept, nothingness is a concept, and selflessness is a concept. The same for non-duality and no-self. Each is a concept, and everyone's understanding of these concepts is different. Salvation is another concept, as are Enlightenment and Awakening. The crucial thing to understand is that these words do not point to anything more real than the phrase "everyday world." The everyday world is just another concept in the mind. All words point to human concepts that have different meanings in each person's mind.

Although it might be even harder to grasp, "you," who you think you are, is a concept. When you have the thought "I" or "me," these are concepts in your mind that point to an ephemeral and changing image that exists only in your mind. None of these images are the "real you." In fact, much of "you" is hidden from your conscious mind in your

unconscious, excluded from your image of yourself. Further, who you are to each person you know is different, sometimes radically different, because each person knows only a small part of the whole. The same is true for your images of other people, as well as for your images of the objects in the world around you.

What I am trying to make vivid is that every word we use points to concepts that are not real things. All our words point to concepts in our minds which have different meanings in every human mind. Further, all our concepts are constantly changing within our own minds. This is very hard to understand with the thinking mind, because this is not how we were enculturated in the modern world. We were taught to look for hard facts, not slippery concepts that are different for each of us. But anyone who truly grasps this underlying truth will find it extremely valuable, for it opens up the world in new and exciting ways and reveals dramatic new possibilities for growth and fulfillment.

If you begin to explore the nature of your own mind, you will gradually recognize that everything you are thinking and seeing is a concept created in the mind by a process that you do not understand. No one understands it. The concepts you have just appear, as if by magic, and very few are consciously chosen. When you were young, you did not consciously create or choose any of the concepts that appeared in your mind, and few people ever learn to choose their concepts skillfully. But if you begin to explore the nature of reality more deeply, you will see that there is no solid, final reality out there. It is all concepts. All and everything is the play of light and shadow. Your mind takes this shimmering rainbow of existence and turns it into concepts with which you construct a reality, using the framework into which you were enculturated. For most people, the world they experience springs forth from an unconscious source their whole lives. But you can learn to work with the creation of your reality in a conscious way. This, however, requires training, discipline, and effort.

If you begin to do this, you will start to understand that words and concepts are simply tools to be used when useful—and laid aside when not. No concept in your mind is “The Truth.” Wisdom is to know which words and concepts are useful in a particular situation, and how best to use each in the situations you encounter. Words and concepts have great value because they are terribly useful for functioning in the everyday world. They are totally necessary as tools for that purpose.

Crucially, you cannot change the meanings of words and concepts just because you want to, for your understanding of the words and concepts you use is deeply embedded in your unconscious. Further, when interacting with other people, you must use words and concepts in the way they have come to be used in the culture in which you are living. You could call a hammer a rock, and at some point in the distant past

that usage might have taken hold, but trying to change it now will only confuse you and everyone else. The language conventions within which we live started long ago, and changing how you work with these tools is not easy, and almost never worth the effort.

As you grasp this new reality, you recognize that wisdom is to learn to use the words and concepts of your culture skillfully, while holding them lightly, knowing they are tools, not hard, fixed things—including the words God, selflessness, Yahweh, Allah and the rest. None of our words are ultimately real things. They are, however, relatively real. In fact, everything we know and think is relatively real. That is not a problem. It is not something we need to get beyond. Getting beyond the relative reality of the everyday world only takes us to the relative reality of the words and concepts we use to talk about the mystery beyond the threshold. (Tibetan sage Tsong Khapa used the image of crossing a threshold to describe what happens when we move into the Mystery beyond words or concepts). The crucial thing to grasp is that everything the mind thinks, will ever think on this side of the threshold, is limited to the relatively real.

What, then, is real? All and everything is "just as it is." There is nothing beyond ***what is***. Reality cannot be pinned down further in words or concepts, or with our thinking minds. Whatever ***is*** Real beyond the veil of our thinking minds we cannot think. We cannot describe it except by using relatively real words.

All is not lost, however, for we can "Be" it. We can step into that field. We can get beyond our words and concepts and open into Pure Being. We can catch an intuitive glimpse beyond the threshold into the Mystery.

St. Paul was sharing this truth when he said: "For now we see through a glass, darkly" and "now I know in part," conveying the limitations of what we are able to see before we cross the threshold. But Paul says that when he crosses the threshold, "then shall I know."[4] And with that knowing, he shall also be "known." Perhaps, in that place, as many mystics have reported, "The knower and the known are one."[5]

Glimpsing the Ultimate

From my own glimpses, and aided by the insights of Tsong Khapa and Meister Eckhart, I have come to better understand something I have been trying to grasp for a long time: How to think about such words as emptiness, nothingness, selflessness, no-self and such. What I have finally come to see is that emptiness is empty. Emptiness only has a meaning in comparison to something that is different from it. The word emptiness has no meaning except in relation to something that is not empty. Neither "empty" nor its opposite can exist without the other. (If it interests

you, play with the thought "There is no God" in the same way—for that assertion only has meaning if you hold a specific concept to which it is opposed.)

In the end, emptiness and words like it are just more concepts. Because they sound vague, they avoid some of the problems of theistic words, but they are just words trying to explain the unexplainable. After wandering in the wilderness of non-dual "thinking" for a long time, when I finally came to see this, something dramatic happened. Robert Thurman describes the happening this way: "The world is back!" (Thurman discusses Tsong Khapa's ideas in depth in his audio program, *Buddhist Theory of Relativity*, and James Finley does the same for Meister Eckhart in *Living Wisdom: Indestructible Joy and the Path of Letting Go*.)

Upon seeing that concepts such as emptiness, nothingness, no-self, and the like do not capture a final reality any more than does the concept "everyday world," I penetrated for a moment with what Thurman calls "wisdom's diamond drill"[6] to the heart of reality. I saw both emptiness and the everyday world for what they are—relatively real. The world, it turns out, is real, but relatively real, just as emptiness is relatively real. They are simply two sides of one coin.

Penetrating to the heart of existence and non-existence, I saw that all and everything is one interconnected construct of the mind. There is no separate hard reality. Ultimate Reality certainly does not contain a separate, fixed thing called "I" or "me." Having the idea of a personal self is a useful construct to function in the everyday word, but it is not an ultimate thing.

I saw that everything arises simultaneously as a part of the whole of existence. No part can be separated from the rest, for everything is an inseparable part of the whole. Therefore, everything arises simultaneously, leading to the Buddhist idea of dependent origination—your perception of yourself and everything else is always mutually arising. Nothing can arise that is completely separate from the rest. I can create concepts of separate things to use as tools—from quarks to atoms to solar systems to an infinitely expanding universe to multiple universes—but these are not things in themselves, just useful tools, useful concepts. Useful when used skillfully.

In the same way, I saw that my concept of my ego self, as well as my images of other people and objects in the world are real, but only relatively real. I saw that these relatively real things should be respected for what they are, but not given overly much importance. I saw that the ego lives of others are only relatively real, but I also understood that they are powerfully important to many people, so they should be respected.

In the bedrock of ***what is***, I saw that what I perceive and experience is not determined by a reality "out there" but is greatly influenced by where I focus my attention. And to a great extent by what I expect to see. Therefore, as Dr. Gerald Jampolsky said, "To perceive the world differently, we must be willing to change our belief system, let the past slip away … and dissolve the fear in our minds."[7]

William James—unlike most others I have focused on in this series of essays—did not spend much time in an expanded state of consciousness. He tried, studying it intensely in both a personal and scientific way. But although he was perhaps the greatest philosopher as well as psychologist in American history, he was not able to enter expanded consciousness very often. Yet he developed a deep intellectual and intuitive understanding of it, and his words can help us understand it ourselves. With deep insight he saw that, since we tend to "disbelieve all the facts and theories for which we have no use," it is crucial to realize that the way we look determines what we see. An extremely valuable example: James advised, "Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact."[8] He went on to say that love, faith, trust, and generosity reveal what cynicism, suspicion, hatred, and fear can never let us discover. Think of the implications if more people practiced this insight.

Once you have glimpsed that there is no hard, fixed reality out there, and seen that nothing is completely separate from anything else, you begin to intimately know that you are a part of everything. You come to see that Existence is one, Being is one. All and Everything is One. To use a metaphor, if everything there is is one body, then the ego "you" is a cell in that body, but the largest you is the whole body. In some schools of Kabbalistic thought, *Adam Kadmon* signifies the entire world which arises as the first refraction of the light of *Ein-Sof* (the Infinite). This first emanation of *Ein-Sof* created everything that is, and each of us is a piece of that original emanation of light. And our largest self is the light itself. Similarly, in the Upanishads of India, *Purusha* is the universal spirit. It literally means "man," or all of humanity. It is the eternal, authentic spirit, the cosmic being or self, the one consciousness. It is in everyone at all times. It is eternal and indestructible.

Whatever imagery works for you, glimpsing the primal interconnectedness of all things brings forth a natural response of compassion. It brings forth in me gratitude for the miracle of Being, the miracle of Existence. It moves me to do what I can to serve the whole, to keep the one body of existence healthy and strong, vibrant and alive—just as a cell in my body naturally functions to keep the whole body functioning well. (Unless, of course, it has become a renegade like a cancer cell.)

When I see this clearly, when I can rest in the experience of this vision, I have no anxiety or fear. There is no pressure to do or be anything, for I know that my small

ego self is not in charge. I am simply a part of the whole and need only fulfill the natural rhythm of the whole, and if I will move into harmony with *That*, I will naturally serve the health and well-being of the whole.

It is crucial, however, when absorbing these insights, to avoid falling into the pit of "you create your own reality." The way this idea is often understood is a misunderstanding. The ego does not create the reality in which it is embedded. The ego can gradually change what is included in its thinking, how it thinks about itself and the world, but this kind of change is slow and difficult. It is possible to escape the gravity field of the thinking self, but no one can do this simply by thinking, "I am not my ego." This is just another ego thought. Only by a fundamental shift, a profound seeing that "I" am not the ego will I even begin to make such a change.

History has given us models for this kind of profound shift of identity, the two most famous being that of Jesus and the Buddha. Jesus had done nothing to attract anyone's attention outside of friends and family until the age of 30—when he went off to the desert for forty days. When he came back, his identity and life mission were deeply intwined with the Divine, and he spoke with an authority his neighbors had never heard before. And from that profound shift he dramatically affected world history in just three years.

The Buddha began his night under the Bodhi tree with a sense that he had not accomplished the aim for which he had given up everything and to which he had devoted all his time and energy for six years. The handful of fellow-seekers he had been traveling with had even abandoned him because they considered him a failure. Yet he emerged from that night a transformed being, walking and speaking with a dignity and presence that had a profound effect on countless people thereafter. And following that night he had a message that hundreds of millions of people have used to organize their lives during the 2500 years since that event.

The Dangers

The danger those of us who have not had such a profound transformation must deal with is this: If we convince ourselves we can create our own reality without a total shift of identity, we will try to create the reality that our egos wish for. Even more dangerous, all the unconscious urges, ambitions, fears, and anxieties that have shaped and molded our lives up to this point will still be active and we will try to create the reality they crave. The only solution is a change of identity like those undergone by Jesus, the Buddha, and a few other exemplars such as Ramana Maharshi, Teresa of Avila, and Peace Pilgrim. Short of that, you and I will still be living under the influence of our egos and unconscious drives. In that place, our work is to

come to truly know all the parts of ourselves as thoroughly as we can and gradually do the work to shift our identities to higher levels. But this is no small matter, and certainly not accomplished by the thinking mind alone, or simply by saying "I am not my ego" or "I create my own reality."

If we come to believe those ideas before a total transformation has been accomplished, we will think our personal desires deserve to be fulfilled and we will have fallen into narcissistic nihilism. In this place, the ego thinks it deserves what it wants. And so do all other egos. Organizing in this place, we will be in a world where all egos are constantly competing with each other for the "good things" of life. But since lots of "good things"—like fame, power, money, and the most desirable partners—are limited in supply, our lives will be lived in a dog-eat-dog world. This kind of life always ends badly.

This is the reason that every person who is not completely awakened, or continuously one with the Divine, needs to be guided by a moral code. And it must be a moral code tied to one of those developed through the centuries by the great wisdom traditions, for if every ego felt free to create a moral code for itself, each of us would do it in a way so as to maximize our own advantage. The result? A totally nihilistic world, where each ego is trying to get what it wants any way it can.

Of course, some people claim they are being guided by their "higher self," and perhaps a few are. But all too often this is just a rationalization for the ego to do whatever it wants. Few of us have truly learned to tell the difference between the voice of the higher self and that of the ego. It is not easy, for the ego is very clever at disguising itself as the voice of the higher self. Of utmost concern, the more a person has gotten in touch with the higher self, the greater the danger, for the ego learns the language of the higher self and becomes skillful at presenting its desires in that voice.

Thus, to truly be able to participate in the creation of reality, you must first come to know at a profound level who you really are, beyond the ego, and then you must turn control of your life over to that which is beyond the ego. Only after these steps can you, the deeper you, participate in the creation of the larger reality of which you are an inseparable part. Only then do you realize that your personal urges, ambitions, fears, and desires were organized to fulfill ego desires and unconscious drives. Until you know this fully and completely, trying to create your own reality is an attempt to manipulate shadows. The world is not real in the way the ego imagines, so the ego will never succeed in creating its world.

To escape this trap, the ego must understand and accept that existence is not organized to fulfill ego wishes and desires. The ego must accept this fact if the real

you is ever to cross the threshold and dwell there for any length of time. This is the meaning of the Third Zen Patriarch's words in *Verses on The Faith Mind*:

The Great Way is not difficult
for those who have no preferences.
When love and hate are both absent
everything becomes clear and undisguised.
Make the smallest distinction, however
and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart.[9]

What, Then, Is Awakening?

With this preparation, I can now try to say how I understand awakening, or becoming fully enlightened, or opening into Christ Consciousness, or living fully from Buddha-nature, or becoming One with the Divine, the Tao, or God, or any other words one might use for stepping into the Ultimate. Each of these phrases has come to mean for me a state in which the heart and mind are pure, free of all ego desires and unconscious cravings, having no remaining personal preferences. This does not mean there is no order to one's life. The lives of the great saints and sages suggest that order at this level of being comes from living in harmony with the Unseen Order, living spontaneously from the promptings of the Source. A life so lived usually consists of time spent contemplating the mystery, being absorbed in bliss, serving others, and/or contributing to the good of the whole.

As for "the Ultimate," the most I can say is that Ultimate Reality involves a sense of Being, a sense of Existence. *Being* is. It is the starting point. How did Being come to be? We do not know. It is a mystery to us. The two most solid things we have are a felt sense of Being and Consciousness of our existence. Behind that we cannot go with our thinking minds. Thus, the closest approach we can make to speaking about the Ultimate is to say that we are aware of Being, of Existing, and of having Consciousness. And, going one step further, these things do not seem personal to us alone, but are somehow shared with others.

Words fail miserably here. Thinking fails. Our thinking minds have not been able to understand Consciousness, Being, or Existence. These things are just there, at the beginning, whenever we start to think, and our concepts cannot satisfactorily explain them to us. We can only "Be" consciousness, "experience" existence. Words and concepts cannot take us further. We create concepts and words to point to these things, but this is the thinking mind attempting to create something substantial to hang on to. This is the thinking mind's attempt to reify, make real, something that is ultimately a shimmering play of light and shadow.

Guidance From the Source

Let's go back to the place where our personal stories begin. When we come into the world and begin to live a human life, it is not possible to organize a life in the world around a "shimmering play of light and shadow." So, Reality is split apart, "torn asunder" to use a more Biblical phrase. We now have an everyday world, which our ego learns to navigate, and *All That Is*—to which the traditions apply various names, such as the Tao, Abba, emptiness, no-self, God, the Absolute, Yahweh and many more. The traditions also tell us that *All That Is* can give us guidance for our lives, and each tradition provides its own version of that guidance.

To move through this life in which we find ourselves, then, one way forward is simply to live according to the guidance of one of the traditions, using the names and guidelines that tradition prefers, asking no further questions. But in the modern world, as we encounter other names and traditions—with the proponents of each proclaiming they and only they have the right name—it is easy to get bogged down in trying to decide which name and tradition is correct.

William James, trying to avoid this confusion, called the Ultimate the Unseen Order. This phrase has the advantage of conveying one thing that is central to all traditions—that there is an underlying order in the universe that arose simultaneously with the arising of *All That Is.* Unless this were so, there would be no coherent universe, but only unrelenting chaos. James also emphasized that all the wisdom traditions say that the only way to a fulfilled life, the only way to experience the "supreme good," is by "finding the right relationship" to the Unseen Order.

James made clear that the common thread in all the wisdom traditions, their shared view of life's ultimate goal, is to come into harmony with the Unseen Order. The only way I know to accomplish this is to use the core guidance of the traditions, which all say:

1. Life has a meaning beyond personal desires and whims, and there is a higher Good that is not organized around fulfilling ego desires or unconscious drives.

2. Some values and moral guidelines are grounded in a Source that lies beyond personal preferences. This is the only escape from nihilism.

3. True fulfillment only comes from living in harmony with the Unseen Order.

Circling back to a problem I have addressed several times: All attempts to explain this guidance to ourselves or to each other must use words and concepts, thus all such attempts will be incomplete, only partially accurate, and will always be subject to differing interpretations. This means that every system of moral guidance, all values

and meanings we are given will be problematic. Every interpretation is subject to human error, which makes it hard for anyone trying to live in the everyday world to know what is right or how to act. Further, the uncertainty created by this situation gives the ego great latitude to persuade each of us that the things our egos want is what the Unseen Order wants.

Sometimes I wonder if all the differences we argue about when discussing the Ultimate are differing projections by each of us onto the veil that hides the Mystery from us. It is quite possible that our ego minds create all the differences we think we see, as each person projects onto *All That Is* the image that his or her ego desires.

Maybe, then, the best way forward is to stop talking about these things, as the Buddha suggested, and just follow his rules for living. Or commit ourselves to following the words of Jesus, as passed down to us in the Sermon on the Mount. Or commit to another tradition or teacher. But which one? And whose interpretations? "Ay, there's the rub,"[10] to adapt Shakespeare's wonderful phrase. There is always a "rub," a complication, such as the fact that after the Buddha said we should not talk about these things, he talked about them numerous times, and gave moral imperatives and various rules for living that he said were non-negotiable—which can only mean that they were grounded in an Ultimate of some kind. Further, the Buddha clearly indicated that a person could not even start on the Way he was offering, or reap its fruits, without first committing to some of these moral precepts.

It seems clear that, if we are going to attempt to approach the Mystery and find a path into harmony with it, we must learn from those who have gone before us. No one can make the whole journey without help and guidance. But anyone who shares what they have learned must use words and concepts, so what they say will always be imprecise and subject to interpretation. Thickening the plot, it is usually the ego that does the interpreting. This is not a bad thing, as long as we understand the limitations of words and concepts. The path up the mountain requires that we follow directions from those who have gone before. Although this is necessary, we must always remember that all guidance will be imprecise, because it must be given in words and concepts.

At some point, climbing the mountain toward wisdom and understanding involves crossing a narrow, dangerous bridge. On one side lies a pit of traps set by misguided and power-seeking teachers and organizations, each using words and concepts to lure the naïve traveler off the bridge and into their grasp. Falling into their arms can feel relieving for a time, because it seems we are freed from the burden of making difficult decisions. And it can be valuable to use this side of the bridge as a place to rest for a while. But it is easy to be lulled to sleep, and never return to the journey.

Falling on the other side of the bridge carries us into snares of our own making, into ego wishes and unconscious wants that open into the abyss of narcissism. The siren song on this side is the ego convincing us that we can figure out the mysteries of the universe by ourselves. Falling in the direction of narcissism often feels good at first. It is like feeling weightless in a falling elevator; you feel you have broken free of the law of gravity.

But this is not true freedom; the elevator will eventually hit bottom with a crash. All wisdom teachings tell us that values and morals have been part of the fabric of the universe since its beginning. If we do not respect them, we will crash headlong into them at the bottom of the fall. With the crash we will discover that we have become prisoners of our own petty urges, slaves to endless desires for more—more of that which never brings true satisfaction. As D. H. Lawrence said:

"We are not free when we are doing just what we like … We are only free when we are doing what the deepest self likes. And there is getting down to the deepest self! It takes some diving."[11]

Because we have so many different motivations within us, motivations that conflict with each other, to try to follow all of them is a fool's errand, doomed to failure. If we always follow only our personal urges and desires, trying to maximize our pleasures and minimize our pains, we will end up spiraling down toward greater frailty, increasing sickness, and finally into a meaningless old age and death.

The only way through is to find guidance, surrendering personal wishes and desires, and following the wisdom and discipline of an institution or teacher. It is impossible to find one's way through the jungle of narcissism without this kind of help at points along the way.

Gradually, however, as we learn and grow, our sense of what we are doing will become stronger and we will feel increasing clarity about the right path for ourselves. As we gain wisdom and strength, we discover that we can, we must, increasingly find our own way. Guidance will still be valuable, but as our connection to the Mystery deepens, we will be able to provide discipline from within ourselves, and our intuition will provide an increasing sense of the direction we must go.

As we continue up the mountain, we will feel our lives increasingly in harmony with the Unseen Order. There will, of course, be rough stretches. When they come, remember that all the great wisdom figures have said the journey is not easy, but that following the trail toward the Summit, the Source of the River of Existence, the Ultimate, is the only way to a fulfilled and complete life.

[1] B. Jowett, M.A., trans., *The Dialogues of Plato* (New York, New York: Random House, 1937), 252.

[2] Wing-Tsit Chan, trans., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), 139.

[3] Exodus 3:14 (King James version of the *Bible*).

[4] 1 Corinthians 13:12 (King James version of the *Bible*.)

[5] Larry Chang, ed., *Wisdom for the Soul: Five Millennia of Prescriptions for Spiritual Healing* (Washington, District of Columbia: Gnosophia Publishers, 2006), 523.

[6] Robert Thurman, *The Central Philosophy of Tibet* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 169.

[7] Gerald G. Jampolsky, M.D., *Love is Letting Go of Fear* (New York, New York: Bantam Books, 1970), 13.

[8] William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy,* "Is Life Worth Living?" (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1912), 62.

[9] Seng-ts'an, *Hsin Hsin Ming: Verses on the Faith-Mind*, trans. Richard B. Clarke (Buffalo, New York: White Pine Press, 1984), 3.

[10] Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett and William Montgomery, eds., *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, second ed. (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 698.

[11] D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (London, United Kingdom: Penguin Books, 1971), 13.