

THE WAY OR PATH

'The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.'

Lao Tzu

Ancient Teaching of Inner Development

Throughout human history, in virtually every culture and epoch, there are indications of the presence of a primal universal teaching of inner development and self-realization. Sometimes referred to as the Way, Path, Teaching or Tradition, this spiritual impulse has manifested culturally in different forms and expressions as the esoteric heart of the great religious traditions of the world such as Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Yet it also exists independent of these traditions through forms that are not immediately recognized as religious or spiritual.

This universal spiritual teaching is timeless and is said to have originated from the source of Life itself: "This essential Wisdom has always existed among humanity, and continues to exist." The origins of this 'Great Teaching' are shrouded in mystery and have never been traced or dated: "The Path is not time-bound, having been represented among humanity from the very earliest times." However, the custodians and exponents of this Teaching emphasize that speculations regarding origin and history are of secondary importance, compared to its perennial existence and function as a spiritual nutrient for humanity.

At its heart the Teaching is essentially indefinable and beyond verbalization -- 'Truth without form' -- and cannot be understood by systematic analysis or "imprisoned in perennial, static categories of thought." This is because it is difficult to clearly define something which must be experienced by each person according to their level of understanding and spiritual development. The Teaching is organic in nature and exists at different levels and dimensions. It is sometimes referred to as an art, a science, a journey, a conscious evolution.

Gurdjieff and others have spoken of a 'secret tradition' of wisdom composed of an unbroken line of initiates or an 'inner circle of humanity' who are custodians of an ancient knowledge of human spiritual development:

Gurdjieff suggested the idea of some hidden influence that linked all the generations of men in a way ordinarily unsuspected . . . As a youth, Gurdjieff became obsessed with the idea that there was a purpose and aim behind human life which was hardly ever glimpsed in the ceaseless generations of man. He became convinced that in former epochs man had possessed genuine knowledge of such matters, and that this knowledge was still preserved, somehow, somewhere. (1)

Gurdjieff is widely believed to have contacted such a source of ancient esoteric teaching during his travels in Central Asia. He alluded to this possibility in his description of the ‘Sarmoung Brotherhood’ in *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. The Naqshbandi Sufis also speak of an ancient ‘hidden knowledge’ passed down by initiation and preserved by a chain of succession. They are said to be the guardians of a ‘special training system’ of advanced spiritual teachings which represent a direct path to inner development:

The word Naqshbandi is made of two words. *Naqsh* is painting and *bandi* are the people who do the painting. You could therefore say that Naqshbandi means the *painters* or the *designers* . . . It is also known in the Tradition as the mother-order, as well as *Kwajagan*, which means the *guardians of the Tradition* throughout history . . . For us, there is only one total truth, and that is God. (2)

The purpose of the Teaching is to guide aspirants to enlightenment and human completion by discovering “the river of knowledge from beyond the stars.” A variety of metaphors, analogies and parallels have been employed to describe the nature and process of this inner spiritual development:

- The existence of a certain potentiality or ‘nobility of mind’ residing within every human being, leading to an objective understanding of one’s spiritual destiny and place in life
- The discovery of a ‘treasure’ within the innermost consciousness of humankind. “When there is a light in the house of life, multiplicity is seen as unity and perfection” (Rumi)
- The process of ‘shepherding’ the raw, embryonic human consciousness, allowing a fuller perception and realization of inherent spiritual possibilities
- Unveiling the ‘essence’ or real part of oneself which speaks when other elements are silent. “There is a more objective reality than usually imagined; it is when this transcendental knowledge has been gained that the nature of human life is understood”
- The alchemical process of self-work and inner transformation leading to human completion and self-realization: ‘*Wool through the presence of conscious knowledge becomes a carpet*’
- The regeneration of the human essence and integration with the higher Self by means of the ‘Philosopher’s Stone’ which “purifies the dross to create the gold”
- The ‘refinement’ and ‘purification’ of the human soul and unification with the Godhead: ultimate Truth and Reality

Universal Timeless Nature

There is an inner need and aspiration for spiritual understanding and development in virtually every human being, although it may be unrecognized, given different names or understood in different ways. The basis for the spiritual experience is inherent in the human mind and is a natural development and common possession of humanity: “The essential truth lies within one’s inner consciousness.”

The living truth is alive at the core of each of the world’s religious and spiritual traditions. The ‘way of liberation’ is not the unique property of any one religion or spiritual teaching. At the heart and depth of each tradition there is a transcendental unity:

Q: It seems that many people these days change traditions in the hope of finding truth.

A: It is a lack of insight to change one traditional frame for another. When you go deeply into your own religious tradition you will find the transcendental unity of all religions, the unity of the non-experience, the living understanding. Here there is no quarrel over dogma, ritual and mystical states, nor any place for comparison. It is true that many of the traditional religions have become so identified with secondary factors that they give more hindrance than help in understanding. But if you inquire deeply as a Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Jew, Hindu, and you understand it very profoundly, you will come to the living truth. There are sages and saints in all religious traditions. (3)

The source of higher knowledge, or the ‘mystical stream,’ is essentially one and exists in every culture and epoch. In the words of the Sufi adept Halki: “Numberless waves, lapping and momentarily reflecting the sun – all from the same sea.” Although spiritual knowledge is one unified whole, the primary Teaching is inevitably split into myriad threads, facets and expressions of the same underlying truth: “All authentic expressions of human spiritual aspiration may be seen as having a single source, and that the differences are in appearance only, imposed by cultural and local conditions.”

The essence of spirituality is neither of the East nor the West and transcends culture, geography and time period. Zen poets have expressed this eloquently: “The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike, and awakening is the birthright of all human beings” and “On whose door does the moonlight not shine?”

The spiritual experience of union with the Divine occurs among the mystics of every religion and spiritual tradition, but may be expressed in a different language or terminology:

Can one distill from religious or mystical experience certain pure elements which are common everywhere in all religions? If a Christian mystic has an

experience which can be phenomenologically compared with a Zen experience, does it matter that the Christian in fact believes that he is personally with God and the Zen-man interprets his experience as *Sunyata* or the void being aware of itself? . . . All religions thus “meet at the top,” and their various theologies and philosophies become irrelevant when we see that they were merely means for arriving at the same end, and all means are alike efficacious. (4)

There is something pure and true at the heart of all the world’s religions and spiritual traditions which transcend their external forms and expressions. Each offers a particular path with the same ultimate goal. There is no monopoly or exclusivity in ultimate Truth as all spiritual teachings originate from the same perennial stream and root source: “There are as many ways to God as souls of human beings.”

When viewed from the outside religious traditions seem completely different, yet at their root and in their deepest spirit there is no difference. Fundamentally all religions are one in terms of life and spirit: “Each religion is nothing but a path, a way to reach the summit. You can reach the summit from many directions.” In a sense all religions are the outer face of an inner truth: “Different religions are external shapes within which eternal truths have been articulated to meet the spiritual needs of specific cultures and communities.” Within these outer forms there is a deeper, universal truth – the inner ‘kernel’ or heart of religion.

Within every religion there are different levels of teaching, each appropriate in its own way to those at a certain stage of spiritual development:

The different teachings of the various religions are all beneficial and necessary for people at different capacities and perspectives. Some of these teachings may be of an “expedient” or “persuasive” nature, devised for the immature minds of the masses; others are truly the final teachings, only suitable, at our present stage of evolution, for a minority of highly endowed persons. But all religions have played their constructive roles in promoting human welfare and spiritual growth. As a Buddhist sees it, in the big family of divine doctrines there is a distinction only between the preliminary and the advanced, between the “expedient” and the final teachings, but *not* between the “right” and the “wrong” ones. (5)

Most religions contain both an outer (exoteric) teaching and an inner (esoteric) teaching which points directly to spiritual truth. In metaphorical terms, the esoteric component is the root of a tree while the exoteric component represents the branches of the tree:

In any religious teaching there is an exoteric part, the traditional, and an esoteric part, the Tradition. The exoteric part is very conventional and is not really the essence of the teaching. The essence of the teaching is esoteric. The interpretation on the esoteric level of every tradition, Judaism, Christianity, Taoism, and so on, is the only truth. There are not several truths, there is only truth. Truth can never be objectified, can never be perceived. You can only be it. Truth can only be trans-

mitted through truth. Transmutation can only take place through our real nature, which knows itself by itself, and doesn't need an agent. (6)

The exoteric aspect of a traditional religion is formulated for the needs of a particular community at a given time and circumstance, while the esoteric heart of the religion is universal in nature:

People today keep certain traditional formulations which were formulated hundreds and thousands of years ago. The formulation of this tradition was according to the understanding, the level of the society at the time. This formulation of a tradition is the doctrine. It belongs to the traditional aspect. *Tradition*, as I see it, means that which is truth, that which is transmitted. That means the truth transmits the truth. You can never transmit the doctrine. The doctrine is formulated every twenty or fifty years. You could even say the doctrine appears from moment to moment. So *tradition* means what is transmitted. The truth is transmitted. Ideas, doctrine can never bring transmutation. (7)

Transmission of the Teaching

There has always been a continuous, altruistic stream of guardianship of the ‘Great Teaching’ based on capacity, purity of intention and level of spiritual development. “Human refinement is the goal, and the inner teachings of all the faiths aim at this. In order to accomplish it, there is always a tradition handed down by a living chain of adepts, who select suitable candidates to whom to impart this knowledge.”

In some esoteric teachings, such as Sufism, it is claimed that the Teaching or Tradition dates from Adam himself: “The seed of Truth was sown in the time of Adam, germinated in the time of Noah, budded in the time of Abraham, began to develop in the time of Moses, reached maturity in the time of Jesus and produced pure wine in the time of Mohammed.”

A number of specific historical lines of transmission have been identified which may not be entirely independent or exclusive:

- An immemorial tradition of wisdom has existed from the earliest beginnings of human life on earth.
- The ‘Great Teaching’ predates and has survived the ‘Flood’ or some other unspecified planetary disaster.
- The ancient doctrines of the Egyptian and Chaldean masters, as well as Zoroaster and Hermes, are in direct line with the Teaching.
- The Teaching was known to Noah, Abraham, Moses, Solomon, Joseph and Jesus.
- It was known to and practised by a succession of Greek sages, including Socrates, Plato, Hippocrates and Pythagoras.

- The ancient Vedic teachings of India are congruent with the Teaching.
- The teachings of the Buddha and the early Taoist and Zen masters were authentic explications of the same Path.

The Way is the product of conscious study, investigation and experience over a period of countless millennia. Throughout history specialists have guarded this ‘sacred science’ of higher knowledge and practice and ensured its preservation and dissemination. The fundamental insights and methodologies are intact, comprehensive and effective: “Such room as there is for experimentation and ‘re-inventing the wheel’ is limited and limiting.”

The Tradition is an established path of inner development with a prescribed method under the guidance of teachers who have already completed the journey. Teachers of the Way are individuals who have reached the state of self-realization and enlightenment and are thus able to navigate the Path, leading others to the ultimate destination of human fulfilment and spiritual maturity. However, it is also acknowledged that an individual may be able to achieve enlightenment on their own (although such instances are rare) without the support of the Teaching.

A lineage is usually defined as an unbroken line or chain of teachers and their successors which ensures the validity and continuity of a spiritual teaching through the generations. In the deepest sense a lineage is a tradition of ‘truth-seekers’ united by a direct perception of the reality of timeless being and presence, without a primary reference to the past: “The way of approaching truth belongs to a certain current, but there are no entities in a line.”

The direct transmission of a spiritual teaching is qualitatively different from the dissemination of ideas, practices and other external forms: “One doesn’t transmit doctrines hundreds of years old, but the actual present essence of the tradition. One must live the essence in order to be able to formulate it in present language, and so transmit it.”

We might say that tradition is the transmission of Life. It is the essential, living experience of the fundamental non-state. Direct transmission needs no support. It is not bound by memory, time and space. All that is not direct transmission takes place in time and space. It involves memory. This we call ‘traditional’ and it includes rituals, doctrines, beliefs, myths, and so on. These ways of expression and teaching vary according to the individual culture and century. As long as the ‘tradition’ is directly grounded in tradition it is a vehicle for transmission. In other words the timeless background must remain in all its expressions. When this is so, the traditional remains flexible, appropriate and timely. But when the anecdotal, the ‘traditional,’ is emphasized, it loses its source in direct transmission and becomes inflexible. It cannot function for it has lost its original orientation, its true *raison d'être*, its life force. It becomes a shell without the animal in it. (8)

In the Zen tradition the sharing of the Buddha's spiritual insights and teachings is expressed in these terms:

A special transmission outside the Scriptures;
No dependence upon words and letters;
Direct pointing to the essence of one's being;
Seeing into one's nature and the attainment of Buddhahood. (9)

Buddha himself denied that he had founded a religion: "He likened himself to one who had discovered an ancient road leading to an ancient city. The road and city were abandoned and overgrown by jungle, but the traces remained; leading others to the same discovery." The indirect way in which the Buddha's teaching was transmitted from master to disciple is illustrated by a classic story:

One day Buddha was standing in front of the assembly at Vautours Mountain. Everyone was waiting for the daily lesson, but he remained silent. After some time, he lifted his right hand which held a flower, all the while looking at the assembly without saying a single word. Each looked at him without understanding at all. Only one monk looked at Buddha with sparkling eyes and smiled . . . The monk who smiled was Kasyapa, a great disciple of Buddha. Kasyapa reached the Moment of awakening when Buddha raised his flower. At the same time he received the "mind seal" of Buddha, to use the Zen terminology. Buddha had transmitted his Wisdom from mind to mind; he had taken the seal of his mind and had imprinted it on the mind of Kasyapa. (10)

This story illustrates the subtle nature of spiritual transmission and the fact that the essence of an authentic transmission is a mutual recognition of awakened minds:

In one sense there is no transmission of any direct knowledge or understanding from one person to another, because the teaching is reality itself and the direct knowledge and understanding of suchness must be firsthand. In another sense there is transmission, in that conscious participation in reality is not a subjective experience, but is by nature shared in common with anyone who has the same objective experience. Kasyapa was already enlightened when he met the Buddha, he recognized the Buddha's enlightenment, and Buddha recognized his enlightenment. (11)

Traditionally a spiritual teacher transmits a certain beneficial energy or grace (*Baraka*) to their students, much like a chord or vibration which harmonizes with their inner being. This may occur through "a look, a touch or gesture, or a word, sometimes a vivid dream or a strong remembrance. Sometimes the only sign of grace is a significant and rapid change in character and behaviour."

The living reality is beyond words and thought but can be passed from one person to another by mind-to-mind transmission based on mutual affinity and comprehension. What is important in spiritual transmission is the inner dynamic and essential understanding of the teacher, not the outer manifestations and secondary phenomena surrounding him or her:

In a word, what constituted the life and spirit of Buddhism is nothing else than the inner life and spirit of the Buddha himself; Buddhism is the structure erected around the inmost consciousness of its founder. The style and material of the outer structure may vary as history moves forward, but the inner meaning of Buddhahood which supports the whole edifice remains the same and ever living. While on earth the Buddha tried to make it intelligible in accordance with the capacities of his immediate followers; that is to say, the latter did their best to comprehend the deeper significance of the various discourses of their master, in which he pointed the way to final deliverance. As we are told, the Buddha discoursed ‘with one voice,’ but this was interpreted and understood by his devotees in as manifold manner as possible. This was inevitable, for we have each our own inner experience which is to be explained in terms of our own creation, naturally varying in depth and breadth. (12)

There is a mutual relationship between teacher and student in the transmission of a spiritual teaching: “Receiving it, the person is sanctioned to teach; giving it, the person passes on authority.” Ultimately the student must reach his or her own deep insight and understanding of spiritual truth and not “walk in the shadow of their teacher.”

Nature of the Path

The Teaching is an ‘organic whole’ and specialized science with its own postulates, laws and learning methods resulting from the discovery of universal spiritual principles and their significance for humanity. “It is not based on dogma but on objective knowledge resulting from the application of certain spiritual laws of nature that are adapted to the specific needs of each time and place, application of which requires direct observation, the renewed analysis of the circumstances and practical verification.”

The operation of the Teaching is a skilled and complex undertaking or ‘technology’ requiring a sense of measure, correct application of developmental impacts and a sensitivity to the requirements of ‘time, place and people.’ In many cases the Tradition has no outward “spiritual” cloak or aspect, enabling it to operate more effectively in the world without overt resistance or conditioned preconceptions.

The Teaching is organized and projected in a manner which is practical and useful in order to produce its full spiritual effect upon a human being, group or community. “It is not a magic way or an accelerated progress. It is hard and a lifelong work, but at every stage one is provided

with the instruments and the knowledge of how to use it.” Like any specialized field of study the Way has a comprehensive body of knowledge, trained and skilled teachers and its own methods, procedures and experiential exercises. This Teaching is based on a precise knowledge of which tools, ideas and techniques are truly useful in a given circumstance. Omar Ali-Shah: “In the Tradition we are following a technically exact and disciplined activity. Everything we do, everything we use, our music, our recitations, our colour combinations, are technical instruments within the overall context of the Tradition.”

The attainment of higher levels of spiritual development comes through the confluence of knowledge, capacity, effort and method. The foundation of this consciously directed process of inner growth is based on right design and measure: “The design is perceived by those who have the experience to know it, the measure is the consequence of this perception.” In other words, knowledge of the end creates the means:

The Teaching, for its part, is carried out – and is able to cross ideological boundaries – because of a knowledge of the objective: an objective which is at worst postulated as an assumption that it exists; at best glimpsed; and thenceforward is the subject of repeated attempts to devise a means to recover this glimpse. The working hypothesis or traditional framework provides the structure by which the would-be illuminate attempts to approach this goal. In the case of the School, knowledge alone provides the basis upon which the structure can be devised. ‘Once you know the end, you can devise the means.’ The end does not justify the means – it provides it. The means, employed in this sense, is the structure referred to in some literature as ‘The Work.’ (13)

The purpose of the Teaching is to furnish “spiritual nourishment” which leads to a true understanding and realization of one’s essential nature and place in the universe. This extended perception or ‘conscious evolution’ provides an “extra-dimensional view of the origin, possibilities and place of humanity in the larger picture and one’s relationship with the Supreme Being.”

Spiritual understanding can be cultivated and provoked in others when the conditions are ripe and “the desire for truth is accompanied by the means for attaining it.” The experiential nature of the enlightened state is encapsulated in the saying ‘*to taste is to know.*’

A variety of methods may be employed to reach the same goal. “Out of wheat many types of food are prepared, using different methods. In the same way, there are many systems of spirituality.” The various methods are ‘skilful means’ designed to lead the aspirant to a fuller, higher understanding of the meaning and purpose of life. Each approach inevitably leads to the same ultimate goal – direct perception of one’s real nature:

Many kinds of food are needed to make the child grow, but the act of eating is the same. Theoretically, all approaches are good. In practice, and at a given moment, you proceed by one road only. Sooner or later you are bound to dis-

cover that if you really want to find, you must dig at one place only – within.

Q: Surely there is something valid and valuable in every approach?

A: In each case the value lies in bringing you to the need of seeking within. Playing with various approaches may be due to resistance to going within, to the fear of having to abandon the illusion of being something or somebody in particular. To find water you do not dig small pits all over the place, but drill deep in one place only. Similarly, to find your Self you have to explore yourself. (14)

Different paths suit different natures with different modes of evolution. In order to make the Teaching practical and effective it may have to be formulated in many different ways and approached from different levels. Ramana Maharshi: “I approve of all schools. The same truth has to be expressed in different ways to suit the capacity of the hearer.”

Q: Different teachers have set up different schools and proclaimed different truths and so confused people. Why?

A: They have all taught the same truth but from different standpoints. Such differences were necessary to meet the needs of different minds differently constituted, but they all reveal the same Truth.

Q: Since they have recommended different paths which is the one to follow?

A: You speak of paths as if you were somewhere and the Self somewhere else and you had to go and reach it. But in fact the Self is here and now and you are that always. (15)

The Path is dynamic, creative and organic, adapting itself to each place and time. “It is always fresh, as a spring leaping out of the ground.” Because the Teaching is essentially formless it can only be organized to a certain extent. In the words of D.T. Suzuki: “Anything organic and spiritual has no geometrical outline which can be traced on paper by ruler and compass. It refuses to be objectively defined, for this will be setting a limit to the growth of its spirit.”

There is a natural ebb and flow, of ups and downs, in the spiritual journey. Sometimes periods of withdrawal and contemplation are alternated with complete immersion and involvement in the experiences of life. “Does it matter whether you pull the cart or push it, as long as it is kept rolling.”

Q: How does one go beyond the mind?

A: There are many starting points – they all lead to the same goal. You may begin with selfless work, abandoning the fruits of action; you may then give up

thinking and end in giving up all desires. Here, giving up is the operational factor. Or, you may not bother about anything you want, or think, or do and just stay put in the thought and feeling ‘I am,’ focusing ‘I am’ firmly in your mind. All kinds of experiences may come to you – remain unmoved in the knowledge that all that is perceivable is transient, and only the ‘I am’ endures.

Q: I cannot give all my life to such practices. I have my duties to attend to.

A: By all means attend to your duties. Action, in which you are not emotionally involved and which is beneficial and does not cause suffering will not bind you. You may be engaged in several directions and work with enormous zest, yet remain inwardly free and quiet, with a mirror-like mind, which reflects all, without being affected. (16)

Because different spiritual methods apply to people at different levels of development and potentiality, preliminary practices are sometimes necessary to prepare the aspirant for the stage of formless awareness and direct insight. Jean Klein: “The words, the activities, are a crutch and this support gradually loses its concreteness . . . The formulations are symbols, pointers, and ultimately you do not see the symbol but that to which it points.”

Certain spiritual methods are for purification and elimination of the obstacles preventing self-realization. “These spiritual practices are not for knowing one’s own Self, which is all-pervading, but only for getting rid of the objects of desire and attachment. When all these are discarded, one remains as one IS. That which is always in existence is the Self – all things are born out of the Self.”

In some traditional teachings two primary approaches to liberation are recommended: the path of knowledge or the path of devotion. The first is based on inquiry into the nature of the self and the second on unconditional surrender to God or a Higher Power. The path of knowledge removes the sense of a personal “I” while the path of devotion removes the sense of “mine.” Ramana Maharshi clarified the path of devotion which is often misunderstood by the Western mind: “Surrender can never be regarded as complete as long as the devotee wants this or that from the Lord. True surrender is love of God for the sake of love and nothing else.”

These two traditional approaches to spiritual understanding appeal to different natures and temperaments:

Generally speaking there are two ways: external and internal. Either you live with somebody who knows the Truth and submit yourself entirely to his guiding and molding influence, or you seek the inner guide and follow the inner light wherever it takes you. In both cases your personal desires and fears must be disregarded. You learn either by proximity or by investigation, the passive or the active way. You either let yourself be carried by the river of life and love represented by your Guru, or you make your own efforts, guided by your inner

star. In both cases you must move on, you must be earnest. Rare are the people who are lucky to find somebody worthy of trust and love. Most of them must take the hard way, the way of intelligence and understanding, of discrimination and detachment. This is the way open to all. (17)

The Direct Way

The direct way or path is considered the culmination of the spiritual search and is sometimes called the ‘royal path.’ It is centered on and stabilized in the final destination and supersedes all other spiritual paths which are based on a progressive, time-bound approach to spiritual development and realization. The direct path is always available and can be lived in every moment of life:

There is such a way, open to all, on every level, in every walk of life. Everybody is aware of himself. The deepening and broadening of self-awareness is the royal way. Call it mindfulness, or witnessing, or just attention – it is for all. No one is unripe for it and none can fail. But, of course, you must not be merely alert. Your mindfulness must include the mind also. Witnessing is primarily awareness of consciousness and its movements. (18)

This way is more subtle than gradual paths of inner development: “The reality of direct perception cannot actually be described, for it can only be known to the perceiver. There is no fixed way or path, for any means can become an end in the hands of the unenlightened.” The simple, yet mysterious nature of the direct path is captured in a classic exchange between a Zen master and his disciple:

When Joshu was with Nansen, he asked, “What is the Way?”
Nansen: “Your everyday mind – this is the Way.”
Joshu: “Do we need any special conducting or not?”
Nansen replied: “No. When we turn towards it, we turn away from it.”
“But if we do not need any special conducting, how do we find the Way?”
Nansen: “The Way transcends both knowledge and no-knowledge. Knowledge is illusion, no-knowledge is indifference. When you really arrive at the point where not a shadow of doubt is possible, it is like vastness of space, empty and infinitely expanding. You have no way to either affirm or to negate.”
This is said to have led Joshu to a spiritual awakening. (19)

The direct path points to our natural state of pure awareness and being which transcends the mind and body, while the progressive approach seeks to gradually eliminate the obstacles and impediments to self-realization. “Living is to be found in the timeless *now*. So don’t accumulate more things, learn new ways to meditate or relax or purify. All this accumulation of states and sensations and techniques is nothing but vanity.”

There are basically two known approaches to truth, the gradual and the direct. In the direct approach the premise is that you *are* the truth, there is nothing to achieve. Every step to achieve something is going away from it. The “path,” which strictly speaking is not a path from somewhere to somewhere, is only to welcome, to be open to the truth, the I am. When you have once glimpsed your real nature it solicits you. There is therefore nothing to do, only to be attuned to it as often as invited. There is not a single element of volition in this attuning. It is not the mind which attunes to the I am but the I am which absorbs the mind. In the gradual approach you are bound to the mind. The mind is under the illusion that if it changes, alters states, stops, etc., it will be absorbed in what is beyond it. This misconception leads to a state in which a truth-seeker has bound himself in his own web, a web of the most subtle duality. (20)

The progressive way is a path of purification and elimination which proceeds in stages and is characterized by certain experiences. But in all experiences one remains in a subject-object relationship which is “an expression of life but is not life itself.”

Q: Why do you say that the path of stages or different levels keeps you in the subject-object relationship?

A: Progression can only be known through experience, comparison and interpretation, in other words, through memory. There must be a centre of reference, otherwise, how could you talk of stages? All levels belong to the mind. But what you already and constantly are is not a level, nor a state, nor an experience. These are impermanent and have a beginning and an end, but your real nature is causeless and timeless. How then can you reach the non-state through a series of states? These states may bring you delightful experiences, it is true, but they are sugar for the I-image, nothing else. Stages are a creation of the ego to keep it alive in a more and more subtle way. Although they bring about a certain purification and elimination, they can never bring you a hair’s breadth nearer to the non-state. (21)

In some instances, proponents of the direct path may use elements and methods drawn from a progressive teaching, such as body-work or sitting meditation, as a support or aid: “We live in space and time. Although the axis shifts in one moment it takes time for past habits to fall away.”

Q: Does meditation differ in the two ways?

A: Absolutely. In the progressive approach meditation is a discipline to still the mind and bring it to an absence of thought. But the mind can never be permanently still. To associate no-thought with silence is false identification. Silence is beyond the presence and absence of thought . . . In the direct way sitting meditation is used only as a laboratory to watch how your mechanism functions. You give no hold to what you watch so that from the beginning the emphasis is

on listening and watching. At other times the word ‘meditation’ refers to your background, the stillness or presence in which all appears spontaneously. (22)

Although the elimination of past conditioning is one of the goals of the progressive path, there is a subtle sense of end-gaining in which the ego is still engaged when pursuing a path based on stages of development and attainment of a projected end or destination. “All practice and technique belongs to the egoic mind as the intellect loses its natural sensitivity and flexibility because it is put into a frame.” The desire to change and develop spiritually may be an escape to prevent one from confronting the reality of the ego’s subjective power and desire to maintain itself:

Begin by questioning your desire to change. Your practices are only an escape from facing the first question. Through discipline you may alter the position of all the objects on your table but that is superficial change. Real transmutation comes when you tip the table over and all the objects slide off! See that you are constantly escaping from facing your ego head on. The mind is sly and seduces you down many roads rather than release its control on you. When you see something clearly the pattern loses its power. No amount of striving can bring you to clear seeing. When you see your mechanism clearly the energy, the axis, of your being immediately shifts and transformation occurs. (23)

From the perspective of the direct way the gradual or progressive path is driven by a number of unexamined assumptions which are ultimately spiritually unproductive. These include end-gaining, striving, anticipation, accumulation and achievement, qualities of mind which involve “turning round and round in circles within the same old structure” and “attempting to come to that which is timeless by working through time.” In contrast the direct path asserts that “there is nothing to attain since what we are looking for, we already are” and “in projecting a goal you can only go away from your real nature, what you are now.”

The great Indian sage Ramana Maharshi taught the direct path through self-inquiry by enjoining his followers to question “Who am I?” When asked what his method was he replied: “There is nothing to be reached. You are always as you really are, but you don’t realize it. That is all.”

Reality is simply the loss of the ego. Destroy the ego by seeking its identity. Because the ego is no entity it will automatically vanish and Reality will shine forth by itself. This is the direct method. Whereas all other methods are done only by retaining the ego. In those paths there arise so many doubts and the eternal question remains to be tackled finally. But in this method the final question is the only one and it is raised from the very beginning. No *sadhanas* are necessary for engaging in this quest. There is no greater mystery than this: ourselves being the Reality we seek to gain reality. We think that there is something hiding our Reality and that it must be destroyed before the Reality is gained. It is ridiculous. A day will dawn when you will yourself laugh at your

past efforts. That which will be on the day you laugh is also here and now. We are actually experiencing the Reality only; still we do not know it. Is it not a wonder of wonders? (24)

Ramana Maharshi sometimes used analogies to describe the direct path of self-inquiry: "There are a number of rivers; some flow straight, some wind and twist zig-zag, but all of them ultimately become merged in the ocean. In the same way, all paths become merged in the path of self-enquiry, just as all languages become merged in Silence."

Q: Why should Self-enquiry alone be considered the direct path to Realization?

A: Because every kind of path except Self-enquiry presupposes the retention of the mind as the instrument for following it, and cannot be followed without the mind. The ego may take different and more subtle forms at different stages of one's practice but it is never destroyed. The attempt to destroy the ego or the mind by methods other than Self-enquiry is like a thief turning policeman to catch the thief that is himself. Self-enquiry alone can reveal the truth that neither the ego nor the mind really exists and enable one to realize the pure, undifferentiated Being of the Self or the Absolute. (25)

Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj also taught the path of self-inquiry, stressing that the practice of mindfulness or 'witnessing' opens the door to self-inquiry:

Q: We were told that of all forms of spiritual practice the practice of the attitude of a mere witness is the most efficacious. How does it compare with faith?

A: The witness attitude is also faith; it is faith in oneself. You believe that you are not what you experience and you look at everything as from a distance. There is no effort in witnessing. You understand that you are the witness only and the understanding acts. You need nothing more, just remember that you are the witness only. If in the state of witnessing you ask yourself: 'Who am I?', the answer comes at once, though it is wordless and silent. Cease to be the object and become the subject of all that happens; once having turned within, you will find yourself beyond the subject. When you have found yourself, you will find that you are also beyond the object, that both the subject and object exist in you, but you are neither. (26)

The direct path addresses the fundamental problem – our mistaken identification with the body and mind – and points our attention to the experience of reality as it is, the Self. Jean Klein: "The starting point of the direct path is the deliberate rejection of the subject-object duality which is the framework of all our usual activities (metaphysical speculation included). Travelling along this path is an entirely upstream journey implying the complete rejection of our usual mental activities, even in their highest form." The direct path is guided by the sword of

discrimination which is grounded in the non-dual background of ultimate reality lying behind the world of concepts and appearances. “From the beginning the mind knows that it is limited and lives in welcoming a new dimension. The intellect has not been conditioned and its fluidity is vitally important for this last discernment.”

The basic tenet of the direct way is that we are not the body, the senses or the mind, but the light beyond all perceptions: “Your global non-state is already there. It is natural to you, and it ‘waits’ for the deep relaxation of the habits of body and mind.” In the direct teaching one faces the Ultimate Reality immediately and views the body, senses and mind through the prism of the Ultimate. Purification moves from above to below.

A teacher of the direct path points to ultimate truth through his or her own experience and realization. In the words of Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj: “I trusted my teacher’s words and kept them in my mind and I found that he was right: that I was, am and shall always be the infinite Reality, embracing all, transcending all.”

The aspirant is encouraged to experience the essence of life itself, to see life as it really is in all its naked glory. This direct path to spiritual truth is centered, writes Thomas Merton, “in the pure unarticulated and unexplained ground of direct experience. The direct experience of what? Life itself. What it means that I exist, that I live: who is this ‘I’ that exists and lives?” The direct path leads to a clear perception and understanding of the bare facts of truth:

On the level of the mind, ordinary understanding, the nearest we can come to objectless truth is a clear perspective, a vision of the objectless. I often call this a geometrical representation. The contents of this representation are what could be called the facts of truth: that the mind has limits; that truth is beyond the mind; that truth, our real nature, cannot be objectified, just as the eye cannot see itself seeing; that truth, consciousness, was never born and will never die; that it is the light in which all happenings, all objects appear and disappear; that in order for there to be understanding of truth, all representations must dissolve. When this representation, the last of the conventional subject-object understanding, dies, it dissolves in its source – the light of which the mind was informed but could not comprehend. In other words, understanding dissolves in *being* understanding. We no longer understand; we are the understanding. This switchover is a sudden, dramatic moment when we are ejected into the timeless. (27)

Although the direct path to Truth can be understood intellectually, it must be actually experienced in its deepest reality before it can be manifested in the crucible of daily life:

It is true that in an ultimate sense there is nothing to teach or learn, nothing to know or do. Yet one is not entitled to say that unless one has actually realized down to one’s bones the truth of those statements. For truly to know that there is nothing to know is to know a great deal. Spiritual traditions are full of such

glittering truths as: “You cannot enter a place you never left”; “The Absolute is a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere”; “Who sees not God everywhere sees Him truly nowhere”; or “Refrain from seeking buddhahood, since any search is condemned to fail.” These quotations reflect the awakened awareness of the masters . . . What others have written about their own deep spiritual experiences can be valuable in showing the way and inspiring one in the spiritual quest – up to a point . . . For the Way, to be a Way, must be walked. Religious doctrines remain mere concepts until translated into actions. It is by acting out the profound teachings that we are transformed. (28)

Our true nature is beyond division and separation – it is complete and lacks nothing. Jesus alluded to this state of wholeness: “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of them.” Reality is infinite and timeless: “We cannot take hold of it; we can only allow ourselves to be seized.” This is why great teachers of the non-dual path such as Shankaracharya, Ramana Maharshi and Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj stress that “there is no question of going anywhere, arriving anywhere or doing anything; you are already there.”

Some visitors ask me, “Please show us a path that will lead to Reality.” How can I? All paths lead to unreality. Paths are creations within the scope of knowledge. Therefore, paths and movements cannot transport you into Reality, because their function is to enmesh you within the dimension of knowledge, while the Reality prevails prior to it. To apprehend this, you must stay put at the source of your creation, at the beginning of the knowledge ‘I am.’ So long as you do not achieve this, you will be entangled in the chains forged by your mind and get enmeshed in those of others. Therefore, I repeat, you stabilize at the source of your Being and then all the chains will snap asunder and you will be liberated. You will transcend time, with the result that you will be beyond the reach of its tentacles and you shall prevail in eternity. (29)

Simple bare attention is the gateway to the expansion of consciousness that leads to a direct perception of Ultimate Reality or the Self. “The moment attention is sustained because it interests us, then we will see that as the attention grows, it becomes alertness, alertness becomes intelligence, intelligence becomes awareness and illuminates consciousness and its infinite content.”

To know that simple, changeless being is our true nature and to be able to live this truth in all circumstances of life is liberation and freedom: “When self-concern is quiet, in abeyance, heaven and earth open. The mystery, the essence of life, is not separate from the silent openness of simple listening.” The direct way is grounded in *being understanding* and points back to our original nature as it unfolds in the timeless present: “Truth is not found by striving for the attainment of a goal in the future, but it has to do with seeing *what is* this very instant.”

References

- (1) Ernest Scott *The People of the Secret* (London: Octagon Press, 1983), pp. 157-158.
- (2) Omar Ali-Shah *The Rules or Secrets of the Naqshbandi Order* (Reno: Tractus Books, 1998), p. 15.
- (3) Jean Klein *Who Am I?* (Dorset, England: Element Books, 1989), p. 110.
- (4) Thomas Merton *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), pp. 42- 43.
- (5) Garma C. C. Chang *The Practice of Zen* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 200.
- (6) Jean Klein *Transmission of the Flame* (Santa Barbara: Third Millennium Publications, 1990), pp. 133-134.
- (7) Jean Klein *Transmission of the Flame* (Santa Barbara: Third Millennium Publications, 1990), p. 133.
- (8) Jean Klein *Who Am I?* (Dorset, England: Element Books, 1989), p. 110.
- (9) D.T. Suzuki *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 20.
- (10) Thich Nhat Hanh *Zen Keys* (New York: Anchor Books, 1974), pp. 41-42.
- (11) Thomas Cleary *No Barrier: Unlocking the Zen Koan* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), p. 37.
- (12) D.T. Suzuki *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), pp. 53-54.
- (13) Idries Shah *Learning How to Learn* (London: Octagon Press, 1983), p. 73.
- (14) Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj *I Am That* (Durham, North Carolina: Acorn Press, 1982), p. 202.
- (15) Devaraja Mudaliar *Day by Day with Bhagavan* (Tiruvannanallai, India: Sri Ramanasramam, 1977), p. 233.
- (16) Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj *I Am That* (Durham, North Carolina: Acorn Press, 1982), p. 50.
- (17) Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj *I Am That* (Durham, North Carolina: Acorn Press, 1982), pp. 312-313.
- (18) Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj *I Am That* (Durham, North Carolina: Acorn Press, 1982), p. 324.
- (19) D.T. Suzuki *Living by Zen* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1972), p. 40.
- (20) Jean Klein *I Am* (Santa Barbara: Third Millennium Publications, 1989), p. 19.
- (21) Jean Klein *Who Am I?* (Dorset. England: Element Books, 1989), pp. 85-86.
- (22) Jean Klein *Who Am I?* (Dorset. England: Element Books, 1989), p. 93.
- (23) Jean Klein *Who Am I?* (Dorset. England: Element Books, 1989), p. 90.
- (24) Ramana Maharshi *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* (Tiruvannanallai, India: Sri Ramanasramam, 1984), pp. 130-131.
- (25) Arthur Osborne (ed.) *The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1978), p. 112.
- (26) Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj *I Am That* (Durham, North Carolina: Acorn Press, 1982), p. 303.
- (27) Jean Klein *Open to the Unknown* (Santa Barbara: Third Millennium Publications, 1992), pp. 65-66.
- (28) Philip Kapleau “The Private Encounter with the Master” in Kenneth Kraft (ed.) *Zen: Tradition and Transition* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), pp. 67-68.
- (29) Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj *The Nectar of the Lord’s Feet* (Dorset, England: Element Books, 1987), p. 49.