

THE PARADOX OF THE PATHLESS PATH

By Robert Ellwood

Religion is a powerful vehicle for moving along. In the Buddhist image, it is a ferryboat crossing over to the Other Shore. But in the end, religion is supposed to self-destruct.

This is no anti-religious canard, but a persistent realization built into religion itself. One way to look at it is to realize that religions themselves say they are meant to accomplish some middle-level objectives, but are not to become addictions unto eternity. The theosophical tradition says as much by suggesting that each of the great religions was founded by a Master of the Wisdom, who naturally adapted the form of expression of that Wisdom to the time and place in which he labored.

Each religion, then is an embodiment—one might even say an encoding—of infinite truth, suitable for particular cultures but not absolute, and so is destined to give place to new incarnations of the eternal Way as new cultures arise.

In the same vein, the Christian Book of Revelation tells us that the New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven when the old world has passed away, will contain no temple, “for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it.”¹ When the Kingdom of Heaven is fulfilled and God is all in all, no need remains for special times or places for his worship.

The great Hindu sage Shankara describes the truly illumined person as one who has fully realized the identity of God with the Atman within and so lives, as it were, in the New Jerusalem, while bearing no outward mark of a holy man. He abides in but not of the world, even the religious world. “If people provide him with comforts and luxuries, he enjoys them and plays with them like a child. . . . He may wear costly clothing, or none. He may be dressed in deer or tiger skin or clothed in pure knowledge. He may seem like a madman, or like a child, or sometimes like an unclean spirit. Thus, he wanders the earth.”²

Similarly, the Muslim paradise needs no mosque nor call to prayer, but is full of delights sensual and spiritual; the worshipful presence of God and a full abundant human life with all its pleasures present no contradiction in heaven, but are one and indivisible for eternity.

If religion is intended to self-destruct, so also is the individual spiritual path. Not a few spiritual teachers have reminded us that the secret of the path is that there is no

path. When we come to the end of the rainbow, we can look back and see its other end where we set out.

The Heart Sutra of Mahayana Buddhism tells us there is “no path . . . no cognition, no attainment, and no non-attainment.” And “it is because of his indifference to any kind of personal attainment that a Bodhisattva, through having relied on the perfection of wisdom, dwells without thought-coverings.”³ He has overcome because he had no ego-heavy attachment to overcoming, but instead the lightness of the true saint, possessing, in the words of the poet Edward Carpenter, “limpid clearness of mind, as of the sunlight over the hills.”⁴

In the Christian West a parallel realization has arisen. Saint Teresa of Avila describes a state of union with God in which the soul greatly enjoys the divine presence within, and another even subtler and deeper spiritual state wherein the soul merely enjoys, for God has become too near to be known or felt objectively. The wise Flemish mystic Jan van Ruysbroeck wrote, in the fourteenth century, of wondrous wandering in the pathless light of God:

If the spirit would see God with God in the Divine Light without means . . . he must have lost himself in a Waylessness and in a Darkness, in which all contemplative men wander in fruition and wherein they never again can find themselves in a creaturely way. In the abyss of this darkness, in which the loving spirit has died to itself, there begin the manifestations of God and eternal life.⁵

In the Unitive State, which is the goal-less goal of the spiritual life, no map nor compass is needed to find God. Every point on the chart is the same and a compass shows no more than if the entire earth had become the magnetic pole. In the words of the Koran, “To God belong the East and the West; whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of God; God is All-embracing, All-knowing.”⁶

Moreover, though one does not fully get this truth until one is united with the Ultimate Reality we call God, one understands with equal force that the Face of God was there even when one’s own thoughts were furthest from God.

Here is the paradox of the spiritual way. No path exists and nothing is to be attained, yet to realize this we must go some distance from where we set out, whether we call it a path or not, and the nothing-realization can be the attainment of a lifetime.

Clearly, though, this is no ordinary kind of achievement, even in the sense of psychological growth or therapeutic transformation. It is a self-releasement, a letting go of all grasping and clinging, especially of clutching at the notions that we must march down a spiritual path, have goals, undergo growth and change. These notions are of a

piece with presuming to honor God through solemn thoughts and exalted moods, rather than singing with the poet Coventry Patmore

Shall I, a gnat which dances in Thy ray,
Dare to be reverent?⁷

Chögyam Trungpa has it right in the title of one of his books, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*.⁸ Too often we think of the spiritual life as something that can be had, an invisible equivalent to our material possessions. We think of its various “states” or insights as commodities, and spiritual practices like meditation as “techniques” that stamp out saints like an assembly line produces shoes.

Needless to say, real spirituality is quite different. Ideas like these, however subtly we hold to them, are precisely what must be gotten rid of. The spiritual life is a casting aside of all such scaffolding, so that like Ruysbroeck’s pilgrim to no-where we can just circle, or dance, in that Waylessness and Darkness. This means, of course, dancing right where we are when we are just doing things that need to be done, living life as it is lived.

As Barry Wood has pointed out in his perceptive little book, *The Only Freedom*, mystics use terms like Waylessness and Divine Dark just because they are unlimited; therefore they refer not only to a “profound” or “far away” divine nature, but also to God here and now, right where we are, in the midst of our ordinary days, which can also seem wayless and dark.

Turning around, though, one can also understand that Waylessness is freedom because God is everywhere, and Dark can really be that superabundance of Light which blinds until our eyes adjust.⁹ God’s Waylessness and Darkness are not just things that come in exotic cloisterish raptures, but can be with you and me as we wash dishes or play with the children.

This aspect of the spiritual path has affinities with the archetypal psychology of James Hillman and his school. These post Jungians present human consciousness as a vast and complex cave of images, rank on rank, with neither beginning nor end, though the light may shift from one to another. As therapists of the soul, they view the great human temptation as trying to order the images arbitrarily, or to subordinate one to another, when instead we should be prepared to see and live each just as it is, as though the cave of images itself were Ruysbroeck’s Waylessness and Divine Dark.

Hillman has argued against the “forcing-house” role of an ego. He identifies ego with the heroic figure, conquering and overcoming. As heroes we “ascend” at the cost of fecundity and diversity; in the end our conquest is futile, for heroes like all others finally go down to Sheol.

Wholeness, for archetypal psychology, is not a sort of ego-integrity, but rather is a self at home with the multiplicity or polytheism of the images, each received in its time with joy. A human life is envisioned as the successive embodiment of many gods. Hillman states: "Polytheistic psychology would not suspend the commandment to have 'no other gods before me,' but would extend that commandment for each mode of consciousness."¹⁰

Understandably, Hillman is skeptical of ideas of "spiritual growth" as projects of the imperial ego. The ego wants to worship one God and press forward on some straight and narrow way toward Him because, more covertly, it wants to be one God. The notion that we ought to keep "growing" till we are in the grave is merely a fixation on the maturation process of childhood and youth.

Adult life is not progressing "to" anything; it is, rather, the subtle and infinitely varied polytheism of experience afforded by fulfilled relationships and fertility on both the psychic and biological planes. It is not going anywhere because ideally it is already there; it is giving rather than getting, exchanging rather than holding, guided like Ruysbroeck's wanderer by love rather than goals.

In this light, spiritual paths represent adolescent views of spirituality. Indeed, this image illumines much about them as many people seem to understand them: the thirst for truth and commitment, the need to organize our world, the preoccupation with the ego-self and its problematic, the view of personal time as an arena for "growth" and attainment. All of us go through times—often far past physiological adolescence—when needs like these are compelling and must be dealt with. But just as adolescence properly gives way to maturity, so the path must give way to pathlessness and love.

Yet the opposite peril also obtains. Love, fully living in deep exchange with the Other and others, is not easy, and without it pathlessness becomes chaos. One confuses every whim with divine prompting, every desire with guidance, and may well fall into a black hole of spiritual (or material) hedonism, full of energy but no light. Still, until we are really there, we need some sort of a plan.

There is another way to look at the path than as a map to be followed. That is to look at it as a travelogue describing where we have been and whither we could go. One of the best travelogues of this sort is Evelyn Underhill's classic book, *Mysticism*.¹¹ Drawing from many spiritual writers, she outlines a series of stages through which a great number of them seem to have passed on the way to Waylessness: the Awakening of the soul, the Purgative Stage, Illumination, the Dark Night of the soul, the Unitive State.

These are not, again, to be seen as steps to be checked off, at the end of which course one becomes a certified saint. Underhill emphasizes that many great souls have

varied the path, sometimes skipping one or another stage, combining two or three, or even remaining on a “lower rung” but doing it very well. It is undoubtedly ill-advised to be constantly taking one’s spiritual temperature and worrying too much about where one is at. But just as previewing a trip to a far country can help us appreciate it when we arrive, so can knowing something about the normal ups and downs of spiritual experience help us to understand what is happening. Whether it’s a difficult or a good passage, one can realize others have been there before, that seeming blackness can be overcome and seeming joys may not be all they seem. Let us then look at Underhill’s stages with a view to seeing how they can help us to avoid addiction to a spiritually materialistic path and find the pathless center.

The first, the Awakening, can come in a number of ways. Saint Francis of Assisi heard the painted lips of a crucifix in a dilapidated chapel tell him, metaphorically as well as literally, to “rebuild my church.” Some have experienced violent and wrenching conversions. Others have known a slow and undramatic but persistent inner yearning for deeper spirituality, often within their natal religious tradition.

The Awakening is a time of great inner excitement and joy, for much that had been covered is now released; one’s horizons of awareness and experience expand immensely, perhaps to infinity, or so it seems. Yet it also, like all stages, contains prospects for danger. So powerful can the awakening experience seem, there is a temptation to absolutize and to conclude that the particular religious context or belief framework within which it has occurred is the complete and final truth, when actually it may only have opened the door of wonder a crack. Further, the Awakening stage is inevitably full of emotional churning, and it can take one on a roller coaster of highs and lows. One needs to fix deep and well-directed channels for the new transcendent energies.

That is the role of the second stage, the Purgative or Preparative. This is a time when a regular rule of life is important. One must make reasonable but disciplined efforts to harmonize all of one’s lifestyle around the spiritual adventure, so that all one’s doings are consistent with it. One also needs to set times for prayer or meditation or other practice. Only with such effort can the spiritual life be habituated so it becomes part of oneself, and so its joy may seep down to the deepest levels of being.

When that labor is well done, it can eventuate in the beauties of the Illuminative stage. This is the Golden Age of religion as it is normally understood—a time when one often senses the presence of God, finds prayers answered, experiences great satisfaction in religious rites, and attains overall peace of soul. For many this is what faith has to offer, and it is enough.

Nonetheless, subtle temptations lurk in the Illuminative stage. One can become as addicted to spiritual delights as to those of the table or the bottle, and so long as we

see the spiritual realm as something apart from the rest of life—something encountered in holy hours and sacred places—then we may cling to them in a spiritually materialistic manner. The sweetness of the divine experience itself thus becomes a snare which binds us to its confections rather than releasing us to wander the world in love.

A few souls are called to liberation from that trap by a second and more profound purgation. In Evelyn Underhill's travelogue, this is the stage best known by the name given it by Saint John of the Cross, the Dark Night of the Soul. Just when everything seemed to be going well, to our surprise and distress we encounter great emptiness and meaninglessness, as though the spiritual life were all a fraud or as if God inexplicably had abandoned his faithful devotee. One may feel lost, as if on a desert without a compass, or trapped in a dark cellar. Some have undoubtedly lost all faith or even gone mad at such times.

Yet, gradually, if we persist, we slowly come to realize what is happening. We are being forced to relinquish all attachment to religious moods and feelings and to the practices that induce them, to make way for the presence of God or Ultimate Reality alone, as all in all, and to clear the path for sheer giving love as our compass and guide. In other words, we are led to make the path no path, to let the channels of the Spirit we had prepared overflow so they are no more, so that the glory of God may fill our world as the waters cover the sea.

Then we have arrived at the Unitive State, in which God is nearer than hands and feet, so near that we are not self-conscious about the presence of God so much as we know deep within a continually bubbling joy and love, and live not for self but to let that love sparkle into the world. The unitive soul may continue traditional religious practices, delighting in such signs of God and being far past petty opposition to such practices. But the spiritual life now comes from a deeper source and is free of all bondage whether human or divine.

Looking at the spiritual course, then, as a travelogue we see that while regularity is called for, the purgative program must be for the sake of simplification of life and channeling energy; it becomes addictive if one gets attached to the fruits of practice themselves, or comes to pride oneself on one's faithfulness.

By the same token, attachment to the path as a program one must get through, or as a compulsion toward "growth" at all costs, can easily become an end in itself, quite at odds with the simple freedom in love and joy that is the whole point. Here one would have to concur with the great Lotus Sutra of Buddhism that a child who merely presents the Buddha a handful of flowers crushed in his tiny hand in love is closer to enlightenment than those who attempt to gain it by mighty learning and power meditations. The point is just to let go, to live, laugh, love.

The theosophical tradition presents stages of spiritual life fundamentally similar to those described by Underhill. C. W. Leadbeater, for example, in *The Masters and the Path*, describes a probationary period of discipleship under a Master which clearly corresponds to the time of purgation in Underhill's schema. This is followed, according to Leadbeater, by three successive initiations, in which various delusions are overcome and inner powers developed; he also lays stress on the growth of joy and love, which makes clear these initiations roughly parallel the illuminative stage.

It is the fourth initiation of Leadbeater, however, which provides the most striking analogy. It is compared explicitly to the crucifixion of Christ, an ordeal of utter aloneness and suffering that the initiate must undergo to reach the highest realizations; its similarity to the Dark Night of the Soul is unmistakable. After desolation comes the supreme state, equivalent to the Unitive state and here called Nirvana. It is intense and vivid, not far off but near at hand, reached not by going anywhere but by opening our consciousness to its glory here and now. We need only let go and see.¹²

Yet such things are so easy to say they quickly become platitudes. To *really* get there involves more. That is why it helps to know something of the lay of the land. Here an outline of a spiritual path, like Underhill's or Leadbeater's, can be useful. You aren't addicted to it, you don't labor to make it happen, but you can be confident that if you open yourself to spiritual awareness something like it will happen. So when it does you aren't surprised, and you can handle it. No attainment, no non-attainment . . . no addiction, no anti-addiction . . . just wayless freedom led by love.

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