SPIRITUAL ENLIGHTENMENT

The Damnedest Thing

Jed McKenna

To Lulu, with love.

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Vitam inpendere vero.

Stake life upon truth.

— Juvenal —

1

That which cannot be simpler.

Stop this day and night with me
and you shall possess the origin of all poems.

— Walt Whitman —

She has just finished enumerating for me the many facets of her spiritual journey and is now looking to me for a response; hopefully approval, perhaps even praise. I don't really take pleasure in dashing the hopes of pretty young ladies, but that's my job. I'm the enlightened guy.

"So, the reason you're doing all these things," I count them off on my fingers, "meditating; praying; chanting; yoga; vegetarianism; attending darshan and satsang with realized beings; donating money to Greenpeace, Amnesty International and Free Tibet; reading classical spiritual literature; purifying yourself; abstaining from sex and so on. The reason for all this is what?"

She just stares back at me mutely as if the answer is too obvious to need stating, but it *does* need stating. I want it out here in front of us where we can examine it and poke at it with our pointy little brains.

"Well, you know," she begins, still not quite believing I actually want her to state something so obvious. "Spiritual growth, I guess. I want to, uh, you know, be a better person and be able to love more deeply and, you know, raise my vibrational... you know."

I'm hanging on every word. "Your vibrational what?"

"Uh, frequency? I want to, you know, raise my level of consciousness, to be more in touch with, you know, my inner self, my higher

self. I want to open myself up to the divine energy that's, you know, everywhere."

"Oh, okay. Why?"

"Huh?"

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why everything you just said. Why do you want to raise your levels and be in touch and open yourself up and all that?"

"Well, you know... spiritual, uh, enlightenment."

Ahhh—

"Okay, is that it? You want to be enlightened?"

She looks at me like it's a trick question, but it's not—it's the first question. What are you doing? Why are you doing it? Where's this going? If you know, you'll succeed. If you don't, you won't. That's not just pretty talk, that's the law.

"Yeah, I guess so."

I smile reassuringly. "Good. So, the reason you do all this stuff is to become enlightened—to achieve spiritual enlightenment. Does that sound about right?"

A pause. "Yeah... I guess."

"Well, let's just spend a few minutes talking about it and see if we can make it any clearer. What do you think spiritual enlightenment is?"

She's giving me the big eyes again, but now a bit of perplexity seeps in. It was so obvious a moment ago that it hardly needed asking. Now it's becoming a little fuzzy.

"Uh, like God... God mind... unity, you know, unity consciousness?"

It's always like this with new students. They do the student thing, I do the teacher thing. I'm never quite sure why they came or when they'll go. The whole process is equal parts fulfillment and frustration. I talk, they listen. They ask, I answer. I speak, they... who knows? They something.

How my words are received or what becomes of them after they leave my lips is beyond my ability to control. I speak, that's all. The words flow like song and soothe me. That's my thing. Nodding and maintaining a facial expression that conveys interest and receptiveness is her thing. I'm into the speaking—into my words and how well they represent the underlying ideas. It would be nice to believe that my words were clicking in her mind like the beads of an abacus, but I know they're not and I'm comfortable with that. "Act, but don't reflect on the fruit of the act," said Krishna to Arjuna. Sign me up.

"It's very simple," I tell her. "Enlightenment is truth-realization. Not only is truth simple, it's that which cannot be simpler—cannot be further reduced."

I can see from her expression that that got us nowhere. My bad. I have a copy of the Gita on the table between us. I open it at random with the intention of finding a passage well-suited to the subject I'm discussing.

Works every time. Gratitude permeates me as I read her this statement by Krishna:

"I am come as Time, the ultimate waster of people, ready for the hour that ripens to their doom. The warriors, arrayed in hostile armies facing each other, shall not live, whether you strike or stay your hand."

I fall silent as layers of meaning wash through me one after another and my appreciation causes a swelling in my chest. "Wonderful," I think. "Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful."

The young girl before me nods, understanding the words at whatever level she is able. She knows that the words are spoken by Krishna and that he is speaking to Arjuna, the mighty warrior who has thrown down his arms rather than signal the beginning of a war that will surely scorch the earth and his own family to ash. She knows that Krishna is revealing to Arjuna the truth of how the world unfolds, and she knows that at the end of this conversation—the

Bhagavad Gita—Arjuna's delusion will be dispelled and he will launch the battle.

But that's probably as far as her knowledge goes. I doubt she identifies herself with Arjuna, paralyzed by confusion at the start of the Gita. I doubt she equates enlightenment with the direct experience of reality in its infinite form. I doubt she knows that in her own life war is coming and that she is a breath away from giving the signal that will spark the conflagration that will incinerate her world. I look at this young girl and I know she has no idea where this road really leads.

I smile.

"Unity consciousness is great," I say, and she looks relieved. "Mystical union, being at one with the universe, the direct experience of the infinite. Bliss, ecstasy—a taste of heaven. Beyond time, beyond space, beyond the ability of any words to describe. The peace that surpasseth all understanding."

"Wow," she says, aptly. Her name is Sarah. She's young, early twenties, and I've just pushed all of her spirituality buttons. If I were a guru, that would be my full time job. I shudder at the thought.

"Yeah," she rides on it, "that's exactly..."

"But that's not enlightenment."

"Oh."

"Enlightenment isn't when you go there, it's when there comes here. It's not a place you visit and then remember wistfully and try to return to. It's not a visit to the truth, it's the awakening of truth within you. It's not a fleeting state of consciousness, it's permanent truth-realization—abiding non-dual awareness. It's not a place you visit from here, this is a place you visit from there. For instance, I myself am enlightened, right here, right now. I am free of delusion and unbound by ego, and although I have had the great fortune of experiencing mystical union on several occasions, I am not presently in that state and I have no plans to return to it. Nobody resides in a state of permanent bliss, Sarah, that's just something out of a sales

It's generally understood that anyone can come in when the door is open and take a seat in the other chair if it's vacant. Whether or not I feel like talking is another matter and depends largely on whether or not I feel like talking. An interesting news item on Taiwanese independence ends and I surf through the news channels for something else of interest. There's a lot of financial news at this time of day. I don't care for financial news, or any news, really, unless something big is happening. Nothing big is happening. I check the weather channel for typhoons, tornadoes, hurricanes or flooding, but everything is calm. Oh well.

"You're wearing shoes," I say to Martin.

"Oh jeez," he mutters and takes off his sandals. He slips them behind the chair so Sonaya won't see them if she looks in, but Sonaya sees everything and Martin knows it. I may be the great enlightened guy they all come to see, but Sonaya is the all-seeing all-knowing mistress of the manor and even I am just another dull-witted child in her presence.

I'm looking at the TV and Martin is looking at me. He wants to talk. I suppose I should respond negatively to his attempts to finesse me, but there's nothing on TV and Martin can be interesting at times. I give him a mildly exasperated nod and he accepts.

"I've made a lot of progress on the assignment you gave me," he spurts enthusiastically. I balk at the word assignment, but it's actually fairly accurate so I say nothing.

"Remind me," I say, although I need no reminding. Martin has spent more than two decades in the thrall of one of the West's better known spiritual leaders and has come away with a head full of pseudo-Hindu gibberish as fiendishly entangled as the Gordian Knot. I've been trying to ease him toward the Alexandrian solution of slicing cleanly through the knot in a single stroke rather than wasting further decades trying to untangle it, but Martin is slow in letting go of his belief system and the allegiances that came with it.

Last time we met, Martin brought a book and read to me several

dozen stanzas from the teachings of his former guru. The words were obviously those of a vast mind expounding upon timeless mysteries and I could easily understand why seekers would flock to one of such limitless insight, but when Martin finished reading I had absolutely no idea what had just been said. More importantly, although he thought otherwise, neither did Martin

To illuminate this point for him, the "assignment" I gave Martin was to reduce the selection he'd shared with me down to a single, coherent concept—one lucid sentence. The idea for this assignment came to me as I listened to Martin read his former guru's baffling words with shimmering enthusiasm. I was struck by the exalted sage's ability to mix a few simple concepts together in such a way as to sound sublimely profound without actually saying a whole lot.

The passages Martin read to me had to do with the tripartite of perceiver, act of perception and object perceived; the three gunas of Hinduism; the benefits of silencing the mind, and something about ascending levels of consciousness, each more wonderful than the last. There was probably some overlighting theme that tied them all together into a unified whole that made Martin shimmer, but what the overlighting theme might have been I can't say because that would have entailed listening much more closely than I actually did. It was clear to me that Martin was trying to display his mastery over some Big Thoughts. He also seemed to think that he was educating me, or, perhaps, acting as self-appointed ambassador to me from his previous teacher. But, like I said, I don't know because I lost track of what he read pretty near the beginning.

All I ever really need from a student at the start of a conversation is a flare—a simple locator beacon. The student is traveling from wherever they are at the moment toward the state of abiding non-dual awareness. That journey is what I help with because I am positioned high above with a clear view of the entire terrain. I always know where the destination is, but I need the student to send up a signal to show me their current position. I just need to get a lock on

their location and I usually have it within the first few words or sentences they utter.

For instance, I see where Martin is and I can see that he has himself twisted up in some brambles. He may feel an urge to describe his current position to me in exhaustive detail, but I already know all I need to guide him out. Martin may want to spend the next twenty years studying the local flora, but I will encourage him to pull out a machete and hack his way out and continue his journey.

Sitting next to me now, Martin reminds me about the passages he read to me and my request that he boil it down. I nod and ask what he has come up with. Martin's interpretation of the text and its value was off the mark in the first place, but this little exercise was not really about clarifying the text for him anyway. Rather, it was about coaxing him toward doing his own thinking instead of parroting wisdomesque concepts and abdicating responsibility for himself to any non-Martin authority. In the course of this process, Martin will probably develop a deeper insight into the knowledge he was twirling and spinning like a fancy six-shooter, but that isn't the point.

And, like I said, Martin can be pretty interesting guy. He's in his mid-forties and he's been to a lot of exotic places and done a lot of interesting things. He's a very large man at around six and a half feet tall and nearly three hundred pounds. He's an expert bodyworker and not a bad cook when Sonaya gives up the kitchen for a meal. He's all or part Native American, played college ball for Northwestern, was a Green Beret for six years and a spiritual renunciate for ten. Overall, he's an impressive and likable fellow. He's been in the house for a few months and is generally able to grasp the things he's supposed to and move on. I've known he was stuck on the outside authority thing since he first arrived, but I had never poked at it directly. The last thing I wanted to do was get in a pissing contest about who had the cooler knowledge, his former teacher being a whole different order of magnitude in the guru hierarchy from yours truly, meaning that if I

wasn't careful, I might accidentally send Martin back to the guy who takes twelve hundred words and fifteen references to ancient texts in three languages to say whassup.

What Martin came up with for his "assignment," I realized within a few seconds, was basically nothing more than a simplified rewording of the original text. He was explaining it, not clarifying or reducing it.

"Stop," I say. He stops.

"You're just using different words to say the same thing."

"Well, yeah," he agrees, "but I'm using less words and explaining it in more Western terms."

I flip through the channels and stop to watch Samantha trying to cool an irate Larry Tate. "Why do you think I asked you to summarize the passages you were reading to me, Martin?"

"I thought that, you uh, you were interested in it and might be having trouble, uh, you know, following it," he says.

Larry has stormed out and now Samantha is calling Dr. Bombay, a sure sign that something's amiss, possibly of Dr. Bombay's doing. He probably turned Darrin into a polo pony and now Larry needs Darrin to pitch the big client. Dr. Bombay, however, cannot be reached because he's someplace exotic riding Darrin to victory in the final chukker of the big match. I'm just guessing, of course, but it can't be easy being Darrin.

"Yes, I was having some trouble with it, Martin. I sure was. Now let's try this again. What I'd like you to do is boil this whole complex ganglion of guruspeak down to a single, lucid concept. Summarize it. Hack away at it until you reach the core. Reduce it like an algebraic equation. Burn away all the excess and see what's left."

"Well," Martin begins, and I immediately know we're banging our heads up against his dogged reliance on outside authority. "I think that what he means is..."

I interrupt. "Why does it matter what he means, Martin?"

He stares at me with his mouth slightly open.

"It's *your* head on the block, Martin, it's *your* clock that's ticking." I try a different approach. "What's your mission statement, Martin? What's the point? What is it you hope to accomplish with your life?"

"Freedom from bondage," he replies without hesitation. "Liberation. Oneness with all that is. Unity consciousness."

I manage not to hurl myself out the window. "Okay, okay, that's quite a list, or do you figure those are all different ways of saying the same thing?"

"Well... yes," he replies hesitantly, obviously wondering if I'm an imposter, "those are all different ways of saying enlightenment."

"Really? How do you know?"

"Well, I've spent over twenty-five years..."

"What, Martin? You've spent twenty-five years doing what?"

"Everything. Studying, meditating, purifying myself. Reading, attending lectures, learning everything I could about evolving spiritually..."

It occurs to me that this is exactly where Sarah's current heading will take her. Twenty-five years of unfulfilled searching all for want of a little straight talk.

"What if you were to find out that it was all a waste?" I ask him. He recoils and I sense that he's on the verge of getting up and walking out. "Bear with me here, Martin. We're just talking. Just hypothetically, what if you found out that in order to achieve the enlightenment you speak of, you had to reject all the teachings you've ever received. Could you abandon all this knowledge you've acquired?"

"Well, I don't really think..."

"What's your priority? Enlightenment or the knowledge?"

"I don't think..."

"How long has your guru been teaching?"

"Well, uh, over thirty years..."

"And how many of his students have achieved enlightenment?"

"Well, uh..."

"That you know of personally?"

"Well, uh, I never..."

"That you've heard of?"

"It's not..."

"That there were rumors of?"

"I don't think..."

"What is it they're doing, Martin? The recipe for enlightenment they're promoting—what is it?"

"Uh, well, meditation and knowledge, basically..."

"And in thirty years they've never held someone up and said 'Look at this guy! He's enlightened and we got him there!' In thirty years, they don't have one? Don't you think they should have, like, an entire army of enlightened guys to show off by now?"

"Well, it's not..."

"After thirty years they should have a few dozen generations of enlightened people. Even with only a quarter of them becoming teachers, they should have flooded the world by now, mathematically speaking, don't you think? I'm not asking all this as a teacher myself, mind you. I'm just asking as a consumer, or a consumer's advocate. Don't you think it's reasonable to ask to know a teacher's success rate? The proof is in the pudding, right? Didn't you ask them about the fruit of their teachings when you started with them?"

"Well, that's not..."

"Don't you think it's reasonable to ask? They're in the enlightenment business, aren't they? Or did I misunderstand you? Do they have something else going?"

"Nooo, but they..."

"If Consumer Reports magazine did a report on which spiritual organizations delivered as promised, don't you suppose that the first statistic listed under each organization would be success ratio? Like, here are a hundred randomly selected people who started with the organization five years ago and here's where they are today. For instance, thirty-one have moved up in the organization, twenty-

seven have moved on, thirty-nine are still with it but not deeply committed and three have entered abiding non-dual awareness. Okay, three percent—that's a number you can compare. But this organization of yours would have a big fat goose egg, wouldn't they? And not just out of a hundred, but out of hundreds of thousands—millions, probably. Am I wrong?"

"You're making it sound..."

"I know I am, Martin, and I know how they respond to this point. They say that everyone is coming up together, don't they? They say everyone's going to burst through at the same time when a certain critical mass has been reached, isn't that it?"

"Well, kind of, yeah, but you're making it sound..."

"Why do you think that organization isn't up to its ass in enlightened people after thirty years? I would think they'd have storage problems by now. I would think the world would be beating a path to their doors by now. How much time do they need?"

"It's not exactly..."

"Yes, Martin, it *is* exactly. That's the point. It couldn't be more exact. How is it possible that after thirty years the only case of enlightenment is the one that started the whole thing? I know he's a big deal, Martin. I know the teachings. I know the breadth and scope of this guy. I agree that he's an elevated being, whatever that means. If I were in his presence I would fall to my knees and touch his lotus-strewn feet. He's great, I know it, but we're not talking about someone else, we're talking about you. We're talking about you doing... what? What'd you call it? Breaking free from bondage? I don't see anyone in this guy's organization breaking free from bondage, Martin. Do you?"

I wait. Nothing.

"Can you offer an opinion as to why that might be?"

Martin is silent. He is clearly battling a lot of internal stuff. He looks at me to see what's coming next.

"Martin, I think you might consider the possibility that there's a

serious flaw in that organization. Something near the core. Do you think it's unreasonable of me to say that?"

No reaction.

"Do you think it's at least reasonable to ask? To at least consider the possibility?"

He nods almost imperceptibly.

"My own awakening ran its course in less than two years, Martin. And that's without any living teacher to help me. I've never heard of the process taking longer than that. I really don't see *how* the process could take much longer than that."

When I say this, I don't mean that it only takes two years from the first spark of spiritual longing. I mean two years after the point when the process of awakening actually begins; the primary epiphany, the first step. Let's capitalize that—the First Step. I know that many people spend many years in meditation and spiritual practice without achieving full awakening, and I know that they think it's because they haven't crossed the finish line yet, but it's actually because they haven't crossed the starting line yet: The First Step.

I continue. "It's a process and it takes a certain amount of time. About the same as the gestation period for a baby elephant."

Martin is too polite to ask the obvious question: How many cases of enlightenment could I take credit for? The answer is an average of one or two a year since I began teaching—a dozen or so total. I can't really take credit for them, of course, but it was to me that the universe guided them at critical stages in their journeys. A couple of them are trying their hands at writing or speaking now, but most are just getting the hang of it. I can see two students in the pipeline at the moment who are going to make it, who've taken the First Step. Once the First Step is taken the rest of the journey is sure to follow, unless you die or sustain a massive head wound.

"Martin?"

"Yes."

"Would you agree that there might be a flaw in a teaching that

doesn't produce any graduates?"

He hesitates, then nods.

"If so, it would be a pretty serious flaw, huh?"

He nods.

I nod. "Well, that's an interesting possibility. Maybe you could think about that a bit and let me know what you come up with. Okay?"

He nods.

"Martin?"

He nods.

"I already know the answer. This is for you, okay?"

He nods.

. . .

Allegiance to any spiritual teaching or teacher—any outside authority—is the most treacherous beast in the jungle. The first thing we want to do when we begin our journey is find the companionship and validity that comes with an established group, and in so doing we effectively end the journey before it begins. Martin is a perfect example of this, and perfectly typical. He set out twenty years ago in search of something higher, and now he's forced to confront to fact that all the effort and all the heart he's poured into his search for all those years has not carried him a single step forward. Twenty years he's spent digging himself into a hole, and now he has to climb out and begin the journey.

Which he'll almost certainly not do.

The power of our devotion to teachers and teachings is not a reflection of their value, but of ego's will to survive. It's ego—the false self—that exalts the guru and declares the teaching sacred, but nothing is exalted or sacred, only true or not true.

Anyone familiar with the process of deprogramming someone who has been brainwashed by a cult will be able appreciate what's really involved in breaking free of this kind of allegiance, but there's

really only one real cult—the Cult of False Self—and everyone is a fanatically devoted member. Awakening is the process of deprogramming. Enlightenment is the unprogrammed state.

I explain all this in gentle terms to Martin, appealing to his mind, his reason, and watching his discomfort as heart and mind struggle against each other. In my preferred version of *The Mahabharata*, Krishna and Arjuna are discussing the war that is soon to begin. Arjuna asks if the war will take place on the battlefield or in his heart.

"I don't see a real difference," replies Krishna.

. . .

I don't want Martin to think I'm picking on his group and guru in particular. I don't see any reason to distinguish between one and another. There are any number of reasons why a spiritual organization might not be pumping out the enlightened in droves, not all of them readily visible. One very good reason is that, unbeknownst even to themselves, the members of any spiritual organization may be quite satisfied to simply *pursue* enlightenment. Dedicating one's life to lofty spiritual ideals is every bit as life-defining and purpose-giving as the quest for heaven or power or money or love. Just because there's a flashing neon sign above the door that says "Free Enlightenment! The Shortest & Easiest Way! The One True Path!" doesn't mean that what goes on inside is really about enlightenment, or that the people who go in really want it.

Quite the opposite.

In nearly all cases, the enlightenment being bought and sold is not truth-realization at all, but a state of consciousness so crazy-ass wonderful that you'd have to be an idiot not to want it. So insidiously wonderful, in fact, that its radiance has blinded untold millions of seekers to the fact that it doesn't exist.

So maybe Martin's former organization is more into the talk than the walk, but I don't believe that they're perpetrating any sort of

intentional fraud. I think they're just as convinced as those they convince. In these cases, it's not likely to be anything sinister so much as an organization behaving like an organism that seeks to survive, adapt, and grow. Maybe the organism seeks liberation for all beings or world peace or the expansion of its own doctrine, or simply its own exaltation and empowerment. Maybe the enlightened guy at the top just wants to get laid, or maybe he lost control of the organization to the unenlightened guys below. Or maybe the enlightened guy at the top isn't enlightened at all, but something else. Something truly wonderful, perhaps, but not awake—not truth-realized.

Or, hey, who knows? Maybe Martin's former group will reach their critical mass and they'll all burst into permanent super-happy consciousness together. (Boy, will I have egg on my face when I'm knocking on their door asking if it's too late to sign up!)

The point is that there's really no point in trying to figure out all the possible reasons why seekers don't find. It's just another distraction, and there's no shortage of those. The point is to wake up, not to earn a Ph.D. in waking up. Simply put, as Sarah surmised, waking up is job one, and then, if you still want to liberate all beings or promote world peace or save the whales, great—lucky beings, lucky world, lucky whales. But the bottom line remains the same:

You're either awake or you're not.

4

Placid and self-contained.

I think I could turn and live with animals,
they are so placid and self-contained.
I stand and look at them long and long.

They do not sweat and whine about their condition.
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied,
not one is demented with the mania of owning things,
Not one kneels to another,
nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

— Walt Whitman —

5

Done.

Long enough have you dream'd contemptible dreams,
Now I wash the gum from your eyes,
You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light
and of every moment of your life.

Long have you timidly waded holding a plank by the shore,
Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,
To jump off in the midst of the sea, rise again,
nod to me, shout, and laughingly dash with your hair.

I am the teacher of athletes,
He that by me spreads a wider breast than my own
proves the width of my own,
He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher.

— Walt Whitman —

The most recent visitor to the house to accomplish full awakening was Paul. For the last two weeks he was here I didn't speak to him at all. I only saw him occasionally as he went off for walks or while he sat on one of the garden benches amid the blowing snow. That doesn't mean that's all he did, that's just all I know about. I don't go down and hang out with the guests much and I'm sure that far more goes on in this house than I'll ever know about. I would guess, however, that Paul wasn't doing a lot of socializing during this period.

It was winter when he told me. A crisp night but not frigid, fresh snow on the ground. One of those nights that all the stars came out for in a crystalline vision that awed the wind to stillness. A night so

clear and silent that it felt staged. A perfect winter evening like we see here maybe once or twice a year. That's why I was out walking in it. At a crossroads a couple of miles from the house Paul joined me. I was pleased to see him. I'm always pleased to see anyone when they get where I believed Paul was at that point. He joined me silently and we walked on. It was ten minutes before he spoke.

"I'm done."

I smiled as warmth poured through my heart. Warmed by the memory of the day I came to the same startling and improbable conclusion for myself, and warm for the times I had heard it from others. Warm knowing the journey one takes to arrive at such a place and warm knowing what lies ahead.

That's how it is when you get here—no bells and whistles, no radiant backlighting, no choirs of angels. As Layman P'ang put it, you're "just an ordinary fellow who has completed his work."

"I have no more questions," Paul said. He didn't just mean he had no more questions for me, he meant he had no more questions, period. That's how it is when you get to the end, you're just done. What he wasn't saying, though he could have, was that he now knew all there was to know—everything. He had arrived at the end of knowledge and now possessed the only perfect knowledge. He wasn't saying it because it's too big to say, but I knew he was thinking it because it was true and it's too big not to think.

We continued walking. The moon was three quarters full and lent a radiant sheen to the fresh snow spread like a satin sheet over a slumbering earth.

. . .

Paul didn't say anything else until we got back to the house. It occurred to me that he had probably been "done" for a few weeks and had spent the time getting accustomed to this new and unexpected state. That's how it is at the end. Even if you've been told a thousand times that there's an end to knowledge—to seeking—you're stunned

and perplexed when you reach it. You've spent a few years fighting battle after battle, each more grueling than the one before, and never, *never*, with any expectation whatsoever that you'll ever really emerge victorious in this life.

And then, one day, there it is. Nothing. No more enemies, no more battles. The sword that seems welded to your hand can now be dropped, once your fingers can be pried from it. There's nothing left to contend against and nothing left that must be done, and there will never be anything that must be done ever again.

Even then, it's very possible that you don't know what you are or where you are. It's just over, and nothing comes along to replace it. In novels you see freshly converted vampires wondering what their new status entails. "Am I a vampire or just nuts?" "What's the deal with garlic and crucifixes and sunlight and coffins?" "Am I immortal? How do I verify it?" "What's true and what's myth?" It can be like that. I've heard that the Zen guys say it takes ten years to get the hang of it, and for them that means ten years in the most conducive imaginable environment—a Zen monastery where it's all enlightenment, 24/7/365. Imagine, on the other hand, spending that adjustment period in the midst of a society that devalues spirituality and in which even the spiritual experts are unwitting masters of disinformation. That can be a damned peculiar ten years.

And what comes after? Well, as I understand from practitioners of Jnana Yoga who have spoken to me of it, (my apologies to them and anyone else whose teachings I'm distorting in this book), one emerges from that ten-year period of assimilating as a jnani—one who knows. That's what I am, I suppose, but the process of reduction that brought me from ajnani to jnani is not over. Even now it takes a conscious effort to maintain my false self, my dream character—to animate it, to keep it running. And this trajectory I'm on will take me as close to non-existence as anyone can get and still have a body. In other words, I will continue to channel progressively less and less energy into my dreamstate being, my teaching will reduce down to

it's most refined and least tolerant form, my interest will withdraw from the world, and I will become as minimal as a person can be. Whether or not Jnana Yoga or Zen Buddhism or any other system confirms this process is moot because I confirm it myself, directly. I don't defer to teachers or teachings. I see myself receding in this manner. Writing this book has accelerated the process, but this is where the road has always led.

When Krishna finished what he came to do he entered a forest and just kept walking until he collapsed from fatigue. A passing hunter mistook his feet for the ears of a deer and killed him with a single arrow. That walk might be viewed as the progressive withdrawal of energy, so maybe when my time comes I'll just walk off into the tall corn until I drop from fatigue, and have my feet mistaken for ripe ears of corn by a passing John Deere harvester.

. . .

I don't defer to teachers or teachings? Wow. That sounds like I'm already pretty intolerant, so maybe it's something I should expand on a bit.

Here's the deal: I am fully enlightened—fully truth-realized. I am here, live, on the scene, and I have chosen to describe it as I see it. I don't defer. I don't rely. If what I describe conflicts with the ten-thousand other reports—no matter how revered those reports and those who filed them may be—then to me those reports are nothing more than fable and folklore and should be consigned to the dustheap of history. The simple fact is that I am here and "here" doesn't look all that much like anyone says it does and I'm not going to waste my time or anyone else's pretending otherwise.

It should be noted that "here" isn't mist-enshrouded or poorly lit. It's neither mysterious nor mystical. My knowledge is unflawed and my vision is unobstructed. This is a tricky point to make, but a critical one. I am not interpreting. I am not translating. I am not handing something down that was handed down to me. I'm here,

now, telling you what I see in the most straightforward possible terms.

If that sounds harsh, then get used to it. This is a harsh business. I'm not writing this book to make money or gain followers or to be popular. I'm writing it to get it out of my system. My message isn't that you should believe me about what it's like here, but that you can come see for yourself.

> You shall no longer take things at second or third hand,
> nor look through the eyes of the dead,
> nor feed on the spectres in books,
> You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
> You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.
>
> — Walt Whitman —

. . .

Returning to Paul's transition, the analogy of a caterpillar-chrysalis-butterfly transformation is also apt. (We must rely heavily on analogies—the Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao, and all that.) Unlike the newly emerged butterfly, however, the freshly enlightened have no primal instinct to inform and guide them. When I myself went through this experience I knew it was immense. I knew it was uncommon in the extreme. I knew it was the supreme accomplishment beside which all others paled to insignificance. I could look at or listen to any person and know instantly that they hadn't been through it. And yet, I wasn't to know for *years* that it was enlightenment.

Damned peculiar.

When I finally did put it together, it was a very comforting—albeit mind-boggling, earth-shaking, paradigm-shifting—realization. I had spent years as a closet butterfly moping around with caterpillars and dreaming highly fictionalized dreams of becoming a butterfly. I knew that I was distinctly different from the caterpillars.

I knew that an uncrossable chasm separated us, that I wasn't one of them anymore, that they weren't like me nor I like they. I knew I was able to communicate with them only in the most superficial sense based on my rapidly fading memories of their language and habits. What it took me a while to understand, though, was that the reason I wasn't one of them anymore was because I was something else, and that the difference was absolute. I had earned admission to a whole new reality but I hadn't yet passed into it because no one explained to me that this new order of being I had become was what caterpillars meant when they said "butterfly." After all, who is there to explain such a thing to someone who doesn't even know enough to ask?

Damned peculiar.

How is such a state of ignorance and confusion even possible? Simply put, caterpillars are egregiously misinformed on the subject of butterflies, just as we see in the novels and film that humans are egregiously misinformed on the subject of vampires. And who's to correct them? Vampires don't hang out with humans. Vampires don't return to educate humans, don't mingle with humans, don't care one way or another what humans think. Why should they? They're beings of an entirely different order with only the most superficial similarity to the order of beings to which they once belonged.

And that's very much what the enlightenment thing is like. Instead of vampires and butterflies, just imagine being the only adult in a world of children. Really. Imagine how you'd develop over the years. Imagine how your feelings about children might change. Imagine the person you'd become.

Damned peculiar.

. . .

How many people actually get this far? How many people are really enlightened? Many claim it, but how many actually *are* it? I

have no idea, but I would guess very few. Some of those in a position to speculate have estimated that one in ten thousand take to the idea and one in ten thousand of those actually make it, meaning one in a hundred million. Thinking worldwide and timewide, I'd agree that it's in that range—that there are a few dozen truth-realized beings alive on earth at any time. And how many of those few dozen, like myself, make an effort to assist others? Make themselves known?

Less.

That's quite understandable, really. Once you get past the notion that duality (by any name) is "bad" and unity (by any name) is "good," you also get past any need to "help" or "save" anyone. I, for instance, don't do what I do because I think it needs doing. I am moved by no ethical or altruistic motive. I don't think something is wrong and that I have to make it right. I don't do it to ease suffering or to liberate beings. I do it simply because I'm so inclined. I have a built-in urge to express what I find interesting, and the only thing I find interesting is the great journey that culminates in abiding non-dual awareness.

I heard that Maharishi Mahesh Yogi was very happy with his reclusive life in the foothills of the Himalayas and may never have rejoined society, but that he began hearing the name of an Indian city in his head. It simply appeared unbidden in his thoughts. When he finally mentioned it to someone, they advised that the only way to get the name of the town out of his head was to go there. He did, got swept into a speaking engagement, and the whole Transcendental Meditation movement grew out of it. That makes sense to me. You observe events and you allow the flow of things to do the steering and you go where you go.

So here I am, knowing something that other people want to know and, in this particular instance, being in the right place to say some things that will simplify life for Paul at this point in his journey. There isn't much precedent for a person to stop being one kind of being and start being another, and no one is ever prepared coming

into it. It may be absurd to speak of it, but it's far more absurd to live it. If this all sounds exceedingly strange, let me assure you, it is. And it's something I prefer not to let others struggle with when I see them freshly emerged from their two years, give or take, of soul-wrenching conflict.

So, as Paul and I stood in front of the house and that glorious crystalline night, I was pleased to say to him:

"Welcome."

We spent the next hour discussing weird things like vampires and butterflies and solitude and the next day and the next decade.

"You get the gateless gate thing now?" I asked.

"Oh," he said as comprehension dawned in him. "Ha!" he laughed, which is about all you can do.

I didn't say anything. I wasn't teaching now. I wasn't trying to draw him out or guide him toward certain realizations. He'd already done it all. I was no longer Paul's teacher—he had destroyed me as his teacher. In a very true sense he knew every bit as much as I did. Enlightenment isn't like graduating high school only to start college, or even finishing college to enter the "real" world. It's the final graduation. No more hunt, no more chase, no more battle. Now you can go out in the world and do whatever you want—learn guitar, jump out of airplanes, write books, tend grapes, whatever.

Our teacher-student relationship was over. This conversation was just one guy who'd been around for a while showing the new guy the ropes.

6

It's all about Oz, baby.

Seizing my life in your hands,
you thrashed it clean on the
savage rocks of Eternal Mind.

How its colors bled, until they grew white!
You smile and sit back; I dry in your sun.

— Rumi —

The house is like a small community. People come, stay for week or a year, friendships form, difficult good-byes are said. I'm sure the relationships in the house are deeper and more complex than I describe, but I am pretty insulated from the day-to-day affairs of the household and its occupants, and that's a good thing.

For the last five months or so we've had a mother and daughter with us. The mother, Marla, is one of the many who show up with pretty distorted views about what enlightenment is. I can't really teach her anything for now, I can only encourage her to take a look at her basic assumptions and develop a willingness to revisit them in a new light. As is often the case, she'll probably prefer her romanticized beliefs over the harsher realities and move on rather than change. The misconception about enlightenment stems from, or is at least compounded by, the fact that most of the world's recognized experts on the subject of enlightenment are not enlightened. Some are great mystics, some are great scholars, some are both, and most are neither, but very few are awake.

This core misconception will be a big theme in this book because it's the primary obstacle in the quest for enlightenment. Nobody's

getting there because nobody knows where there is, and those who are entrusted to point the way are, for a variety of reasons, pointing the wrong way.

At the very heart of this confusion lies the belief that abiding non-dual awareness—enlightenment—and the non-abiding experience of cosmic consciousness—mystic union—are synonymous when, in fact, they're completely unrelated. It's possible to have either without the other, and there are countless millions of cases of mysticism and cosmic consciousness of varying degree for every one case of enlightenment. Of course, true cases of enlightenment are unlikely to attract attention to themselves, so it is certain that there are more than is apparent (like vampires!). However, the simple fact remains that enlightenment and mysticism have little or nothing in common.

Anyone, myself included, who has had a taste of mystic union will naturally assume it to be the very summit of human experience, which I believe it is. It would follow from there that anyone who enjoyed more frequent access or greater ease of access to such a rarefied state would be at or near the summit of humanity. All well and good until such a one is labeled spiritually enlightened. He or she may be a divine avatar or love incarnate or the supreme godhead, but enlightenment is something else.

The critical distinction is that one is in the dream and the other is not. One is truth-realized and the other is not. One is within consciousness and one is independent of consciousness. The enlightened have awakened from the dream and no longer mistake it for reality. Naturally, they are no longer able to attach importance to anything. To the awakened mind the end of the world is no more or less momentous than the snapping of a twig. "The wise see the same in all," says the Gita. "The wise are impartial," says the Tao. The enlightened cannot conceive of anything as being wrong, so they don't struggle to make things right. Nothing is better or worse, so why try to adjust things? Members of movie audiences don't leap out

of their seats to save characters in the film. If the movie shows an asteroid blazing toward the earth, the screen remains unscorched and the moviegoers don't race home to spend their final hours with loved ones. If they did, they would be hauled off to the nearest mental health facility and treated for a delusional disorder.

The enlightened view life as a dream, so how could they possibly differentiate between right and wrong or good and evil? How can one turn of events be better or worse than another? Of what real importance is anything in a dream? You wake up and the dream is gone as if it never was. All the characters and events that seemed so real have simply vanished. The enlightened may walk and talk in the dreamworld, but they don't mistake the dream for reality.

Enlightenment is about truth. It's not about becoming a better or happier person. It's not about personal growth or spiritual evolution. An accurate ad for enlightenment would make the toughest marine blanche. There is no higher stakes game in this world or any other, in this dimension or any other. The price of truth is everything, but no one knows what everything means until they're paying it. In the simplest terms, enlightenment is impersonal, whereas what is commonly peddled as enlightenment is personal in the extreme. We'll cover this in more detail as we go since I guess that's what my life and the house and this book are all about. Suffice it to say for now that one of the most mission critical tasks on the road to enlightenment is figuring out what enlightenment is *not*.

. . .

It's funny who gets into the house and how they come. Apparently you don't just show up with your bags and make yourself at home. Marla came from California with Annie, her seven year-old daughter, to be here. She heard about it through the grapevine or from someone else who had been here or something like that. But Sonaya doesn't let people in that easily. (I didn't know all this until Annie explained it to me.) Marla and Annie were sent to a rooming

house in town and were advised to come out for daily visits to see how they took to things, and how things took to them.

Annie also told me how things like chores, meals, bathroom schedules, and other such household matters worked. She seemed to have a pretty good handle on all of it and I was surprised, as always, to get a glimpse of what a complicated ship Sonaya was running, and how skillfully she ran it.

"Do you like Sonaya?" I asked Annie.

"Sonaya is love," Annie replied, as if the question were too stupid to ask, which, I suppose, it was.

Sonaya arrived five years ago and simply took over. In the first few months of her time here I learned that she had been with the International Society for Krishna Consciousness for about twenty-five years. She had run households and kitchens when she was with them, too. Her devotions hadn't shifted, she once explained to me. When she was with them she wasn't really with them but with Krishna, and now she wasn't really with me, but with Krishna.

I got it. Not immediately, but eventually I realized that in all things, in every action, in every second of every day, she was practicing a conscious devotion to her lord. It might look like she was cooking for the group or washing floors for her own sense of cleanliness or managing the complexities of a diverse group of people for the benefit of those people or running an accidental ashram for me, but once I got the hang of her and really started paying attention to the way she paid attention to, well, everything, then I saw it. She was present in every moment, and every moment was a devotion to Krishna. It had nothing to do with me or the house or the whole whatever's-going-on-here thing. Sonaya was doing what Sonaya did, and this was just the place where she did it.

And who or what was Krishna to her? Was he the blue-skinned youth of portraits? Arjuna's charioteer? Vishnu? Brahma? I don't know. Sonaya has never been my student in any sense. She has never asked me anything and I have never been tempted to translate her

worldview into my terms or mine into hers. She has the most beautiful and fully integrated faith I have ever been privileged to observe. She could command armies or govern nations with the same apparent ease with which she runs this house. She shines. She is always radiant and soft, even when she's being hard. If there's a mystic in our household, it's Sonaya—she's the mystical one. She possesses effortless correctness and imperturbability at all times and in all things. She is above and beyond the tasks and chores in which she is constantly absorbed. She, like me, is a different order of being, but neither caterpillar nor butterfly. I don't know what that makes her, but I am profoundly grateful to have her near.

From my point of view, of course, Sonaya was heaven-sent. There is no house without Sonaya. No book. No me prattling on and on. Well, I'd still be prattling, but probably only with a slightly malnourished and deathly bored dog for an audience. I love this planet and this universe and this whole human thing, and one of the reasons I love it is because of the magic that holds it all together. When I look at Sonaya I see that magic most clearly.

. . .

Annie delights me. I'm not really able to form attachments with adult humans, but cats, dogs, and children are a different matter. Annie leads me by the hand through the gardens and behind the summer kitchen and down to one of the ditches that run along the road. The property is full of mysteries and wonders that she must share or else she will simply burst as new mysteries and wonders constantly pour in. I'm her relief valve of the moment. As long as she reports to someone the exact wonderfulness of each wonder, she can cross it off her burgeoning list and move on. There's no time for me to take a closer look at the deer prints in the mud of an adjacent farm field because we have to get over to the mailbox to take note of a spider web complete with spider and captured prey, then to the largest of the oaks on the property to see an abandoned bird's nest, then to

the river birches to see an inhabited bird's nest, and we have to hurry or else we won't have time for follow-the-leader before meditation.

A little judicious route-planning might have economized our energy expenditures, but Annie is fabulously well-to-do in this regard and naturally unmindful of those less fortunate. Nevertheless, I am able to hold my own for the first two or three minutes of follow-the-leader. After that, the somersaults, cartwheels, bunny-hops, puddle-stomps and imaginary hopscotch begin to take their toll and I am forced to retire to the less strenuous pursuits of gasping and moaning. I collapse into the grass to await the arrival of stretcher-bearers. Annie helps me wait by sitting on my chest and bouncing.

. . .

Meditation is 5:30 to 7:00 p.m. No one is required to meditate, but everyone is asked to be quiet during this period. I don't meditate much, and when I do it's usually early in the morning, so I like to take advantage of this quiet period to sit on the front porch or in the living room. It's generally understood that this is a time when I'm available to anyone who wants to talk. Sometimes one person comes along and focuses on their stuff of the moment, and sometimes a group will form and a broader dynamic will play out. I don't have a preference. It's usually a pleasant time for me.

The material I teach presents no problems or challenges for me. That's what being a master means, I suppose. I know this stuff front and back, in and out. I could teach it in my sleep and maybe I do. What *is* a challenge is how the information is received. Most or all of what I say fits into the receiving brain in a particular place, but there's always something already there. It's never an empty slot just waiting to be filled. Not only will every slot already be filled, but there will also be security—probably very tight security—guarding it. If I taught English Lit to eighth graders it would just be a matter of keeping it interesting so the connection stayed open while I uploaded new info, but this is different. No one comes here for their

first exposure to the spiritual dimension. Everyone comes pre-educated and the education they arrive with is, for all practical purposes, worse than useless. That's what I deal with and I'm not a master of cranial lock-picking, I just try hard to do my bit and know that success and failure is out of my hands.

It's amazing how desperately we cling to our beliefs. As history shows, the fastest way to reduce otherwise decent people to a state of savagery is by tampering with their belief system. The word for someone who does so is heretic, and historically the punishments reserved for him are more brutal than for any other class of offender. The point is that by the time people come to me, their beliefs are securely in place. No one approaches me and asks to have their hard-won beliefs demolished. They come to build upon what they already have and to continue along the course they've already begun. Demolition, though, is exactly what they need. If, that is, they want to wake up.

But that's a very big "if." How many of them really want what it really is? My opinion is that only a fraction of one percent of seekers of enlightenment are even pointed in the right general direction. I would also say, however, that the percentage is slightly higher if you're looking at the group that has made it to this house or to this book, to me and this message. At the time of this writing, the message you find in this book and that I share with our guests at the house—enlightenment stripped of its spiritual trappings—is uncommon in the extreme. I say that a higher percentage of people sitting with me or holding this book desire enlightenment for what it really is because we all get what we need when we need it. If the universe has set you in front of me or put this book into your hands, then in all likelihood you are closer than most to honestly confronting the stark reality of your situation. It works both ways—when the teacher appears, the student is ready.

Very seldom does someone come along who has already started down the path I extol. Paul was an example of one who did. He was

already in the right mindset and well on his way. For him I was a counselor, a gentle guide and a reassuring voice in the relentless battle he was waging. But that's a rare exception. Most of those who come to the house have already bought into or been sold on the whole sweetness-and-light spirituality thing. They want to become better people, more open, more loving, happier, closer to God, and they want to achieve spiritual enlightenment because, as everybody knows, that's where the spiritual path leads. The yellow brick road may be a trip, but it's all about Oz, baby.

They've been sold on the enlightenment thing and that's what they want. I don't know what they think enlightenment really is because I only have them to go by and they don't know. I ask and I usually get the same vague answers about higher consciousness, tat tvam asi, unity, bliss, oneness, no-mind and so forth. They peddle the same stuff to me that someone else peddled to them with no real understanding being developed during the layover. Small wonder, since—to borrow from Gertrude Stein—there's no "there" there. What they're describing is, for the most part, a whimsical, mythological sort of Heaven/Shangri La/Nirvana for the Hindu/Buddhist/New Age crowd who have managed to step out of their Judeo-Christian upbringing. There's just enough merit in their notions of enlightenment to make it sell, but at the end of the day you're either a caterpillar or a butterfly, and the only way anyone will ever have even the slightest sense of what it means to be a butterfly is to become one. There are no butterfly experts among the caterpillars, despite innumerable claims to the contrary, and I encourage my students to at least consider the possibility that the world is up to its poles in caterpillars who quite successfully convince themselves and others that they are actually butterflies.

Or, to say it plainly, the vast majority of the world's authorities on enlightenment are themselves not enlightened. They may be something, but they're not awake. An easy way to distinguish between caterpillars and butterflies is to remember that the enlight-

ened don't attach importance to anything, and that enlightenment doesn't require knowledge. It's not about love or compassion or consciousness.

It's about truth.

7

Neither holy nor wise.

When the mind is at peace, the world too is at peace.
Nothing real, nothing absent.

Not holding on to reality,
not getting stuck in the void,

You are neither holy nor wise,
just an ordinary fellow who has completed his work.

— Layman P'ang —

Marla comes and sits with me during today's quiet period. She's a little self-conscious and gives me an uncertain sidelong glance as if not believing that it's really okay for her to be here. I don't think I put out much of a guru vibe, but I guess I must put out something because everyone reacts in a similar reverential sort of way. I don't dress like a guru and I don't talk like one. I don't carry flowers, perform miracles, smile beatifically, or radiate anything that I'm aware of. I think of myself as a pretty laid-back guy with only the weakest grasp of what it means to be a human among humans. It's like I can hum a few bars but I have forgotten most of the words. I can't stand in line at the grocery and carry on a normal conversation if it gets much past the weather. I can't go to a bar and have a beer and shoot a game of pool because I can't pretend to share the experiences and interests of the other patrons. In other words, there's no commonality. Commonality at this level is so basic that it's probably not possible to imagine what it's like when it's not shared. No two humans could have less in common than any human and me. I

am a member of no community. Because I live in a different paradigm, I am effectively set apart from humanity.

Yep. Here comes the vampire analogy again.

When humans become vampires they make a trade, even though they don't really understand what they're giving up or what they're getting into. Perhaps irresistible forces compel them, as they did me. To be enlightened—just to take the First Step on the actual journey toward enlightenment—is to be henceforth and forever excluded from the whole human thing. I knew when I started on my own journey that it meant leaving behind human connectedness, and that was perfectly acceptable to me. No one gets to that point without being prepared, however naively, to pay the price.

. . .

I actually don't care to be around Marla very much, not because she won't make any progress from her perspective while she's here—which she won't—and not because she'll quickly leave for the next cool-sounding spiritual adventure—which she will—but because the particular flavor, for want of a better word, of her ego is off-putting.

Marla cloaks herself in spirituality rather than dealing with the fear she seeks to conceal. It's always fear beneath the surface, of course, no matter how it manifests. With Marla, the fear revolves around money and security and relationships and vanity, all boiling down to fear of rejection and loneliness, which further boils down to the black diamond at the heart of all fears; fear of no-self. She's very self-possessed on the outside; calm, smooth, convinced that she's a very open and spiritually attuned person, but I'd much rather be with a raving loony who was directly confronting their bullshit than someone who spends all their energy repressing it. The cloaking thing always strikes a tinny note that would register as jarring and discordant to anyone able to "hear" it.

Here's the most directly I am able to say this: The one and only truth of any person lies like a black hole at their very core, and every-

thing else—*every*thing else—is just the rubbish and debris that covers the hole. Of course, to someone who is just going about their normal human existence undistracted by the larger questions, that rubbish and debris is everything that makes them who they are. But to someone who wants to get to the truth, who they are is what's in the way.

All fear is ultimately fear of this inner black hole, and nothing on this side of that hole is true. The process of achieving enlightenment is about breaking through the blockage and stepping through the hole, and anything that's not about getting to and through the hole is just more rubbish and debris.

. . .

"I had an experience in meditation I wanted to share with you," Marla begins, and proceeds to reel off a string of insights that she feels aid her in becoming free of something or other, or maybe she's overcome an obstacle or slain a dragon or something. I know within the first few words that she's trying to impress me so that I will reward her with praise. It's a common enough dynamic. She assumes we have an unspoken agreement in which her part is to reflect and reinforce my self-image as a Great Spiritual Teacher so that I, in turn, will reflect and reinforce her self-image as a Very Spiritual Person. She assumes we have this unspoken agreement because she had it with the dozen or so other spiritual teachers and it's always worked out well—a nice win-win situation.

I interrupt.

"Have you heard the term makyo?" I ask her.

"Yes, isn't it like something to do with...?"

"It's a Zen thing. Very handy term. In Zen, no one is interested in spiritual growth. No one is interested in self-exploration or self-realization. They're not trying to become better people or happier people. They're not following a spiritual path, they're following a wake-the-hell-up path. They're completely focused on the hot and

narrow pursuit of enlightenment. There's no consolation prize, no secondary objective. Full awakening is what they signed up for. Of course, as students, they have no real idea of what such a pursuit actually entails, so it's the job of the master to see that they stay on course. With me so far?"

She nods a little uncertainly.

"The Tao warns us to beware the flowery trappings of the path, or words to that effect. There are many things to see and do on the path to awakening. It's all new and magical. There are points, for instance, where you can stop and develop what you might consider special powers; prophecy, telepathy, mediumship, magical arts, plate spinning, whatever. During Zen meditation—zazen—the student might merge into timeless unity consciousness. He might unravel all the complexities of his life in a single glorious sitting. He might feel that he has vomited a gigantic ball of molten lead that has resided in his chest for years. He might descend into the pits of hell and slay all his demons. After such experiences, he might run to his master to share his victories and experiences, thinking he's well on the road to enlightenment, only to have the master splash him with cold water by calling it makyo."

Marla is frowning now, realizing that she's the one being splashed with cold water.

"When a Zen master uses the term makyo, he's telling his students that the precious gems they're stopping to pick up or the pretty flowers they're pausing to collect only have value or beauty in the world they've chosen to leave behind. The Tao says 'beware the flowery trappings' because, in order to possess them or benefit from them, you must cease your journey, stay in the dream. Ultimately, they're just a distraction from the tricky business of waking up. Breaking free of delusion takes everything you have. The price of truth is everything. *Everything*. That's the rule and it's inviolable."

She looks sad. I continue in a gentler tone.

"I'm explaining makyo because this is what's happening here.

You have had some profound insights in meditation and you have brought them to me. Understandably so. Western spirituality seems to equate enlightenment with self-perfection, so it's natural to assume that ridding yourself of mental and emotional baggage is the way to go. But what I'm telling you is that, within the context of searching for enlightenment, your experiences are makyo. You bring me these priceless jewels and I am telling you that you should flush them down the toilet and move on."

I pause to let that sink in. The point here is less to aid Marla in her quest for enlightenment than to help her see that she's not on one. I sometimes wonder if I would make a good Zen master—Roshi—but I don't think so. Or maybe I'd be a great one, depends how you look at it. My emblem would be a graphic depiction of the Buddha's head lanced on a pike, complete with dripping blood and dangling viscera. The motto beneath the emblem would be "DIE!" Students would line up outside my door after zazen to come in and tell me their experiences and as soon as the first one opened his mouth I'd start shrieking at the top of my lungs *"You're not him! You're not the real guy! You're the makyo guy! You're just the dream character!"* I'd probably start hitting the student with a stick at this point, which is one of the perks of being a Zen master.

"You're supposed to be dead! Why aren't you dead? Why are you coming to see me? You're the problem! Get out and come back when you're dead. That's the guy I want to talk to, not a stupid dream character. Now GET OUT!"

That essentially defines the quest for enlightenment; the you that you think of as you (and that thinks of you as you, and so on) is not you, it's just the character that the underlying truth of you is dreaming into brief existence. Enlightenment isn't in the character, it's in the underlying truth. Now, there's nothing wrong with being a dream character, of course, unless it's your goal to wake up, in which case the dream character must be ruthlessly annihilated. If your desire is to experience transcendental bliss or supreme love or

altered states of consciousness or awakened kundalini, or to qualify for heaven, or to liberate all sentient beings, or simply to become the best dang person you can be, then rejoice!, you're in the right place—the dream state, the dualistic universe. However, if your interest is to cut the crap and figure out what's true, then you're in the wrong place and you've got a very messy fight ahead and there's no point in pretending otherwise.

. . .

That earlier paragraph—the one with Buddha's head and me screaming at students that they should be dead and all that—that's not why I think I wouldn't make a good Zen master. In fact, that's why I think I'd make a really cool Zen master. The bad part would stem from what I suspect would prove to be poor student retention. As it happens, I'm a very nice guy with an easy-going teaching style and laudable student retention and if I had a banner or emblem it would probably be a minimalist version of the Fool card in Tarot, the fool striding blissfully off the cliff and into the void.

As a Zen master my job would be to infuse in students total knowledge of the absolute. That may sound like a tall order until you stop to consider the fact that it doesn't require knowledge to be enlightened any more than it requires knowledge to obey the law of gravity or to be bathed in sunlight. Since enlightenment is nothing more than truth-realization, it doesn't take much to figure out that if anything requires knowledge and effort and seemingly superhuman powers of imagination, it's not truth but delusion, and if anything is so wildly improbable as to defy belief, it's not the vast ocean or the billions of fish in it, but the inability of those fish to locate water.

. . .

I hear a sniffle. Marla feels rebuked. The master has diminished her offering. That's how she should feel. Those Zen students aren't

getting the giggles when that stick comes down.

"Why do you think I'm telling you this, Marla?"

"I don't know... so I can transcend the common... so I can move past... you know, so I can..."

"We're talking about two different things here, Marla. Okay? You think I'm telling you that the insights you've had in meditation are makyo, right?"

She looks at me and nods.

"No, not at all. This is an important distinction. I'm saying that the insights you've had are makyo in the context of waking up. See, unlike me, the Zen master knows exactly why his students are there. He doesn't have to ask. But it's not like that here so I'm asking you now. What is your desire?"

She starts to say something, but I cut her off. "The universe will give you whatever you want, Marla. That's how it works, even if you don't know it. It can't be otherwise. You don't have to be worthy, but you do have to know what it is that you want. You have to focus. Try to do that. Try writing out what it is you want and condensing it down until you've reduced it to a concise statement of desire or intent. Your path can only be meandering and your life a blur until you do that. Come talk to me when you have something, okay?"

She nods.

"And Marla, I think being a good mom for that little girl would be a perfectly good answer."

She nods and smiles and hugs me. She gets it. I'm sure it hurts to have the master say that her profoundly moving insights are shit, but she gets it. That's good.

8

I don't do heart.

The most useful piece of learning for the uses
of life is to unlearn what is untrue.

— Antisthenes —

My monologues tend to be a little loose, but they could easily be a lot looser. It takes a conscious effort on my part to stay on track and not follow every tempting digression. I like to follow the course dictated by my initial impression of what a student needs to hear, and I usually end by putting the ball in their court. I can say it and they can nod and agree, but that doesn't do any good at all. If you want to benefit from knowledge, you have to own it for yourself and the only way to do that is to fight for it. Emerson said "No man thoroughly understands a truth until he has contended against it." Having the answer isn't enough. You have to do the math.

The chair Marla vacated does not stay empty for long. A fifty-something engineer named Arthur appears and waits for permission to sit down which I give with a slight gesture. That may seem overly formal, but for Arthur it's actually an improvement. The first time Arthur came to speak with me he sat in a half lotus at my feet, which made me a little buggy. After I coaxed him up into a chair we spent an hour disabusing him of his tendency to equate enlightenment with divinity. It's still hardwired into his thinking that the teacher must be regarded as an elevated being, so he never sits without permission and always speaks with formality. Arthur doesn't live in the house but he's a frequent visitor, especially in spring when the gardens need so much help.

Arthur tells me he wants a technique. Rather, he wants *the* tech-

advises Carlito to choose a path with heart. I am familiar with it for the same reason that so many spiritual seekers are familiar with it, because it has that ring of sagely goodness that makes it the one thing out of all of Castenada's writings that gets widely remembered. Does that make it true or valuable? Obviously not, just another cliché. Just another piece of pretty misdirection. I am well aware that a great many of the world's most popular spiritual doctrines advocate a heart-centered approach to spiritual development, but popularity among the soundly asleep may not be the best criterion by which to judge a method for waking up.

"Let me state it plainly, Arthur: I don't do heart. To the extent that I advocate any path, it is a path without heart, devoid of compassion, totally free of any thought for others whatsoever. The thinking is simple: Wake up first. Wake up, and then you can double back and perhaps be of some use to others if you still have the urge. Wake up first, with pure and unapologetic selfishness, or you're just another shipwreck victim floundering in the ocean and all the compassion in the world is of absolutely no use to the other victims floundering around you. Resolve your own situation first, and then maybe your compassion will translate into something of value to others. I suppose that sounds cruel or unspiritual or whatever, but it only works the way it works. Make sense?"

Arthur nods thoughtfully.

"Hey, you've probably visited those foundries where they pour the molten steel that goes into those bridges of yours, right?"

"Certainly. Many times."

"Man, those places are scary looking. They make hell look like Aspen. You reckon there's a lot of different ways they could do that work and they chose the one with heart?"

Arthur chuckles. "Hardly."

"Of course not, because it works the way it works. This waking up thing isn't all sweetness and light. It's a serious business with a failure rate that's nearly absolute. Think about that. You're embark-

ing on an undertaking that millions upon millions of sincere, intelligent men and women have committed their lives to without success. That's a pretty sobering statement. This is a process and it works the way it works or it doesn't work at all. You can't dictate terms. Preferences are irrelevant."

"It sounds like you're saying I may not even want to think of helping others once I myself am liberated."

"I don't know. Maybe, maybe not. Depends on how you're wired, I suppose. You see what I do, this teaching thing, right?" He nods. "Maybe you'll do something like this. Maybe you'll teach. Or, maybe you'll go back to building bridges and just keep it to yourself."

"Hard to imagine," he says.

"It's impossible to imagine, but you're putting the cart before the horse. The simple fact is that you are of no use to anyone else if you're in the same situation they are."

"Jesus," he mutters. It's the most colorful language I've ever heard him use.

"Here's a thought," I continue. "When you're doing the writing, Spiritual Autolysis, do it for someone else. Write it for someone else. Express your knowledge for someone else's benefit. Write it for publication, as if the whole world will see it. Or write it as a series of letters to your son, or to an imaginary friend, or to the child you once were. Whatever. Use the process of Spiritual Autolysis as a means of expressing your own highest knowledge for someone else's benefit. And, of course, keep improving it until you've stated the truth."

"Which I'll never do?"

"What, state the truth? No, of course not."

. . .

The house is rising out of quiet period now and over the course of fifteen minutes it is transformed from a silent meditation hall into a bustling restaurant and social club. I'm amazed to see that there are over thirty people here including a few I don't recall seeing before,

and I wonder if some show up just for Sonaya's cooking. The Krishna Consciousness folks put a major emphasis on cuisine and I wouldn't be surprised if many of their members initially stopped in just to see what smelled so good. Sonaya is a master chef who would be welcomed with open arms by any Indian restaurant in the world. When she is cooking I regret that I have such a small appetite.

I think I should talk about myself a little more, not to demonstrate how remarkable I am, but how ordinary. Obviously, I haven't always been an enlightened guy. I was a cute baby, a happy kid, a problem teen and a wayward adult. No one looked at me back then and figured me for the future wisdom heart of a rural American ashram project. On the other hand, I have always possessed something of an insightful nature. I started struggling with *cogito ergo sum* in my early teens. Throughout my teens and into my twenties I wrote short stories and essays that were trial assaults on the nature of reality, which helped me bring my thinking into focus.

My thunderbolt epiphany came in my late twenties, around fifty pages into reading my first book of a distinctly spiritual nature. As all good epiphanies should, this one struck my brain like a bullet of light and redefined my entire life in a single instant. The realization was nothing more or less than this:

Truth exists.

I was absolutely stunned. The lines of my being were redrawn in a flash. I was staggered by this simple statement, by the sheer absurdity of it. After all, how can someone not realize that truth exists? But the truth is, I didn't. My thoughts were so constantly turned towards denying what *wasn't* that I was effectively blinded to what *was*. The very act of fighting for liberation had imprisoned me. In order to oppose the false, I had to dwell in the half-light where falseness thrives. Finally understanding that truth existed was the equivalent of crawling out of a putrid sewer and into sunlight—sunlight the existence of which I should have suspected all along, but never quite did.

But now I was in the sunlight and it was totally mind-blowing. In that moment I was finally born. "Truth exists!" my mind was shrieking. "It doesn't matter what it is or where it is. Somewhere, somehow, there is truth. I don't care if it's in Christianity or Judaism or Islam or in the most despised cult in the deepest bowels of depravity, it exists and I will not spend another minute of my life flailing blindly around in the filth and miasma of ignorance for any other reason than to find it. The universe isn't vague and ignorant; *I* am vague and ignorant. Something is true and it doesn't matter what it is, I'm not going to be false anymore. I have not even the slightest trace of the slightest reservation about the fact that I would rather suffer and die figuring out what is true than continue this life as a slave to lies and ignorance."

. . .

I just reread those last few paragraphs and they come somewhat close to what my brain looked like after the explosion. Death/rebirth events come in all shapes and sizes, and this was my first. My First Step. This was the one that separates who I was from what I am now. That was the day I set fire to my life and went to war.

The next two years were spent in a state of burning obsession. I quit my job, dumped my belongings, and moved from Chicago to a small town in Iowa. I scoured bookstores and took full advantage of the local library's statewide lending program. I bought a computer and spent hours every day hunched over the keyboard trying to express the truth. I read and I wrote. I edited, discarded, and rewrote. Every few weeks I would delete all my files, reformat all my disks and burn—literally, in a kettle barbecue—all my notes and handwritten pages. I almost never read anything I wrote because the mere act of writing it rendered it obsolete in my thinking. I severed all ties—no job, no friends, no family—and had only a few possessions. I did nothing else. I had no other thought. I went for long walks, thinking, pounding away at whichever door I was stuck behind at

the moment.

And then one day after a couple of years of this I was suddenly done. Just like that: Done. Although I didn't think of it in these terms, I had become enlightened, satoried, awake, truth-realized, a jnani, Buddha, whatever you want to call it. Getting the hang of this new state, however, would take me another decade.

I've been asked if I'd do it all over again if I had the choice, but it's not something I chose in the first place. There was never any decision. I never made any choice. It's not like a career path where you set your sites and go after it. It's more like you're walking along a mountain path that suddenly turns to mud and you find yourself hurtling at breakneck speed into the unknown and before too long, hurtling at breakneck speed into the unknown becomes your reality. And then, one day, equally without warning, you're launched into empty space and, before too long, empty space becomes your reality.

That's where I am now. Empty space is my reality. The void. No-self. I abide in non-dual, non-relative awareness. This is the part that can't be explained. I can't frame it in words even for myself. No one can say "I am enlightened" because there is no "I" to it. There is no such thing as an enlightened person. The person writing these words, the person that speaks to the students, isn't the enlightened one. My personality, my ego, what appears to be me, is just an afterimage—a physical apparition based on residual energy patterns. Jed McKenna is like the outfit an invisible man wears so that he can interact with people without freaking them out.

So anyway, that's a little bit about me.

9

Both in and out of the game.

Apart from the pulling and hauling
stands what I am,

Stands amused, complacent,
compassionating, idle, unitary,

Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm
on an impalpable certain rest,

Looking with side-curved head
curious what will come next,

Both in and out of the game and
watching and wondering at it.

— Walt Whitman —

10

Why chatter about delusion and enlightenment?

Thus shall ye think of all this fleeting world:
a star at dawn, a bauble in a stream;
a flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
a flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.

— Buddha —

It's Thursday night, prime time, so most of the gang is down in the basement TV room watching the week's best lineup of shows. I like sitcoms and dramas when they're well written and somewhat fresh, so I quietly slip into the back of the room and take a seat. Several people see me come in and begin to react but I wave them down and they get the idea.

When discussing personal tastes like food or music or TV and movies and whatnot, I would never mean to suggest that my tastes are in any way elevated. I have a fairly narrow band of appreciation, but it has little to do with enlightenment stuff. With TV, movies and novels I don't shun horror or violence. I get weepy at the right parts, I laugh when something strikes me as funny. The willing suspension of disbelief may come a little harder for me than most, not in the conventional sense but in the sense of forming an empathetic bond with the plight of the characters. The same holds true in "real" life. I see people fulfilling their roles and "acting" like "themselves" and I tend to forget that they really identify with their character and their character's plight.

There's some whispering in the room as word of my presence is

my life that I have people doing all my stuff for me. Actually, I do bully my way into the kitchen after dinner once in a while, order everyone out, and clean the dinner mess by myself. I don't do it to be a good guy or to make a point, I do it because I enjoy it. I like washing the dishes and cleaning the kitchen. Go figure.

I invited Andrew up one day last summer during an afternoon storm. I liked Andrew personally. He was in his mid-thirties, slim, soft-spoken and had been a Buddhist for most of his adult life. As I recall, he was a practitioner of Vipassanna meditation, which may have explained his air of quiet self-composure. I wanted someone to watch the storm with and Andrew seemed a good choice, meaning that he seemed likely to sit quietly and appreciate the storm.

Which he did. When it was mostly over we poured tea and discussed his relationship with Buddhism. I was interested to hear his views and experiences. I've never really understood Buddhism conceptually. I understand Zen perfectly—at least my own highly distilled version of it—but, strange as it may sound, I've never really made the connection between Zen and Buddhism. For one thing, I never figured out how desire got to be the bad guy and compassion became the good guy. Suzuki said that Buddhism wasn't something you had deep feelings for, that just doing normal things like eating meals and going to bed was Buddhism. I read books about it now and then and I kind of get it, but mostly I don't. The reason I don't get it, I think, is because I keep thinking that the point of Buddhism is waking up from delusion, but maybe it's not. Maybe the point is just eating meals and going to bed.

What drew Andrew to Buddhism was interesting, but hearing him talk about it only reinforced my belief that it was something I didn't get. I'm not a theologian, of course, and I have not made a deep study of world religions, but to the degree that I have looked at them I have no problem understanding what they're about. Christianity, Judaism and Islam are all about keeping God happy so he keeps us happy. Hinduism is similar, but with more gods. But

even at that over-simplistic level, Buddhism eludes me. Frankly, I think it eludes many of its practitioners as well, as the discussion with Andrew would tend to bear out.

He was stuck on several points, he said. We discussed a few of them that I'll share here because they reveal important lessons for anyone who is trying to break free from the bonds of delusion (as we say in the enlightenment game).

What Andrew had to say about the Buddhist concept of non-attachment was not so much that he didn't understand it as that he was having trouble achieving it. That, of course, led to the apparent paradox of the desire to be desireless being itself a desire, and that whole tail-chase. Rather than drawing him out on the subject, I decided to simply drone on about it for awhile and see how he responded. Andrew didn't need to be finessed like some of the others. He had the courage and intelligence to see when shown.

"There are two ways to look at non-attachment. One is in the context of living a peaceful, happy life. The other is in the context of becoming awake from delusion—Nirvana, I suppose. Am I correct in believing that Buddhism often has as its goal serenity, freedom from suffering, that sort of thing?"

Andrew confirmed that living a fulfilled and contented life was very much at the heart of Buddhism, but added that enlightenment—Nirvana—was closer to his own.

"Then you'll be happy to know that you can forget about non-attachment." I said. "You're putting the cart before the horse. Non-attachment isn't a key to liberation, it's a by-product."

The attachment thing is just a symptom of a larger and more interesting malady chronically plaguing earnest seekers. More interesting to me, anyway.

"This is a very common error that's found throughout the world's teachings and religions," I continue. "They're often one hundred and eighty degrees removed from the truth. It's the belief that if you want to be Christ-like, then you should act more like Christ—as if

the way to become something is by imitating it. If you want to be an enlightened person, the thinking goes, you should *act* like an enlightened person. Utter nonsense, of course, but widely accepted. Once you're able to recognize this fallacy, you'll be amazed by how common it is. For instance, I myself am enlightened and I possess effortless non-attachment. I know what it is and I know what they mean by it because I have it. I'm not attached to it. I don't cultivate it. In fact, I don't think I ever gave it much thought until I had to answer questions about it. It's just something that came with the deal—a by-product. There are many by-products of enlightenment, but cultivating them, no matter how devoutly, would never actually bring about enlightenment. It's easy to look at an enlightened guy and say 'Hey! He only eats rice. We must only eat rice if we wish to attain Nirvana!' But, of course, that's not true. If the enlightened guy jumped off a bridge, would you jump off a bridge?"

Andrew laughs politely.

"If the enlightened guy jumped off a bridge," I repeat, "would you jump off a bridge?"

He doesn't laugh this time.

"It's everywhere," I continue. "You see it all the time. Why should I turn the other cheek if someone belts me and I wanna belt him back? To act like Christ? When did I get into the acting-like-Christ business? Some great sage in India only sits facing North, so now I have to face North all the time? What if sage-guy is a nose picker? Do I have to face North and pick my nose eight times a day? Why? Because my mission in life is to imitate great sages? I don't think so. Say I'm well fed and you're starving. You come to me and ask how you can be well fed. Well, I've noticed that every time I eat a good meal, I belch, so I tell you to belch because that means you're well fed. Totally backward, right? You're still starving, and now you're also off-gassing like a pig. And the worst part of the whole deal—pay attention to this trick—the worst part is that you've stopped looking for food. Your starvation is now assured."

I let that one sink in for a few moments. There are important lessons here and I don't want to race through them too quickly. The little questions are always portals into larger answers.

"The non-attachment thing is the same," I continue. "If you're looking at it as a key to peace and happiness, then I can't discuss it with any authority except to say that it sounds a little dull. However, if you're looking at it as an important step on the path to awakening, then I can assure you that it's not. Wake up first, and then you can have non-attachment by the truckload."

We discussed non-attachment some more, but the whole thing is really very simple and Andrew said that he felt he understood it much more directly now. I didn't doubt it—that belching part was inspired.

The next thing Andrew and I got into was what it meant to be *in* the world but not *of* the world. This didn't take long because the answer is largely the same as it was for non-attachment: "It's nothing you have to worry about now," I told him, "it's just something that takes care of itself when the time comes. There's no point in understanding it."

He was not so easily put off, so I continued.

"From my perspective," I told him, "unenlightened people seem like a characters in a soap opera. That's what I see when I watch people with all their concerns and hopes and dreams and conflicts and dramas. That's not meant to diminish the human experience in any way, and anyone watching from my seat would say the same thing, but when I say soap opera, that's what I mean. A maudlin, hysteria-ridden, unconvincing, poorly scripted and clumsily acted fiction of no importance and limited entertainment value. I used to be the same as anyone else, of course, living my life as an unwitting character in the soap opera, but now I'm not. Now I'm out of it and free to come and go. But what I can't do, barring a major head wound, is ever mistake the soap opera for reality again.

"So here I am, on stage right now, this very minute, speaking

with one of the characters in the soap opera. This particular character has a storyline that revolves around breaking out of the soap opera itself. This particular character wants to know whether it has an existence outside the dramatic framework of the soap opera, or whether it is nothing more than a two-dimensional character that will cease to exist when the writers kill him off or the show gets cancelled. Will this character succeed or fail in his bid for freedom? Will he continue in his quest or change course? Does it really matter? Tune in tomorrow to find out."

Andrew was very still, very thoughtful. Wisely, he was not insulted, not taking things personally. He was listening, absorbing, but not countering or defensive. I was being a bit of an ass, I suppose, over-explaining, over-stretching already tenuous analogies, just trying to keep myself amused, I guess, but also testing ways of saying things and over-saying things.

"So," I continued, "you, Andrew, are both *in* the soap opera and *of* the soap opera. You desire to break out of the soap and that desire is the dangling carrot that, as actors say, provides your motivation, which, in turn, provides the dramatic impetus for many tragi-comic Andrew-centric episodes."

"And eventual success?" he asked.

I waved a hand dismissively. "Oh, yeah, sure. You can't manage to avoid your own true nature forever. It's a wonder that anyone manages it at all."

Andrew frowned. "You make it sound like enlightenment is..."

"What?"

"Well, like, nothing. Unimportant. Like it's..."

"Beside the point?" I supply. "Imagine that you're watching a soap opera on television but you have the power to step into it. One minute you're watching a goofy TV show, the next minute you're in a hospital room visiting a character who is dying of brain cancer. It's real to him, he's in the pit of despair, but to you he's just an actor playing a role. Nothing is really at stake. How much genuine empa-

thy do you have for his plight?"

"But he's just a fictional character."

I stared off into the distance and waited.

"*I'm* just a fictional character," he said flatly. "*I'm* the one with brain cancer. You've stepped into *my* soap opera."

This is a good lesson—a fun one. Analogy-wise, I could make it a Broadway production of Hamlet instead of a soap opera, but that would tend to glorify these fictions rather than trivialize them. The soap opera analogy is very succinct in making the two points that Andrew and I had been toying with; one, that Andrew himself was a fictional character, and two, that all importance is illusory. But there was another point to touch on while we were in the neighborhood.

"And who created your character?" I asked him.

"You mean, who made me what I am?"

"Who is the author of you?"

"Well, to some degree, I am." Andrew replied.

"Okay, then who is the author of the you that you say is, to some degree, the author of you?"

He gave that some thought. "My true self?"

"Oxymoron. There is no true self. Truth and self are mutually exclusive."

"This is like the nature versus nurture debate about how we develop."

"Okay."

"So there's really no answer."

"Sure there is."

"What?"

"Not you. The author of you is not you."

"So I'm... what? What does that make me?"

"I don't know. What does it matter?"

"Well, obviously..." he began, but fell silent.

"There's nothing obvious about it," I explained. "There's no comprehending the vastness and complexity of the influences that go

into creating the false self—a redundant term—but that's not a problem because there's no benefit to comprehending it either. There *is* a benefit, however, to realizing that who you are has little or nothing to do with you. It may be difficult to imagine not taking yourself personally, but it can be done when you see clearly that who you are has little or nothing to do with you."

"Me who?"

"Well said."

We sat silently for awhile, each with our own thoughts. I spent the time reviewing my own words for effectiveness and possible improvement. Andrew, understandably, spent those few quiet moments seeking refuge and stability in his Buddhist teachings, which I found out when he asked something pretty unrelated to what we had been discussing.

"But what about suffering? The Buddha said..."

"Stop."

. . .

If I allowed students to steer these dialogs with their questions, all of our time would be spent going in every imaginable direction but forward. Students, quite naturally, think that it's important to understand. They think that it's vital that their information be correct and precise. They think that this is like school where you have to understand one thing before you can understand the next thing. But all that is about knowing and this is unknowing. All this so-called knowledge is exactly what stands between the seeker and the sought. I can certainly understand their perspective in all this, but I am always amazed when I see other teachers of this stuff letting students drag them up hill and down dale with questions that don't advance the cause. Waking up isn't a theoretical subject one masters through study and comprehension, it's a journey one makes—a battle one fights. Teachers want to be popular and appear wise, so they answer whatever questions anyone thinks to ask, as if they were

teaching the next generation of teachers rather than helping people wake up.

And, having said that, I am also constrained to say that this journey—this battle—has yet to even begin for Andrew. His many years of meditation and spiritual education do nothing to alter the fact that he has yet to take the First Step on his own journey. The First Step is the main thing. That's what everything I teach is really about. Take the First Step and the rest will most assuredly follow. You can traipse about the stage playing a spiritual role and you can meditate and renounce and be selfless and earn merit and burn karma year after year, lifetime after lifetime, and still not take that First Step.

That really sums up the state of awakening in the West where spirituality is a recent cultural transplant with many intoxicating blossoms but no established root system. In her book *Halfway Up the Mountain: The Error of Premature Claims to Enlightenment*, Mariana Caplan has this to say about the Sirens' song of enlightenment:

> *"The most common, widely-held fantasy about enlightenment is that it is freedom from suffering, the transcendence of pain and struggle, the land of milk and honey, a state of perpetual love, bliss, and peace. Enlightenment represents the collectively-shared dream of an idealized and perfect world of pure beauty and joy. It is not only New Age fantasy, it is the secret wish of all people. It is our shared dream of salvation. But it is only a fantasy."*

In short, like most spiritual seekers, Andrew never signed up for enlightenment at all, but for a heaven-on-earth fantasy called, in this case, Nirvana. The question is, once disabused of the fantasy, does the seeker's enthusiasm automatically transfer to the reality? In other words, if you ordered a hot fudge sundae with whipped cream and a cherry, would you be just as happy if the waiter gave you a poke in the eye with a sharp stick?

Probably not.

. . .

So now Andrew wanted to throw the Buddha at me, but I have no use for the Buddha, and, though he didn't realize it yet, neither did Andrew.

"Suffering is irrelevant," I told him. "Compassion is irrelevant. To begin with, neither one of us has the slightest idea what the Buddha said because he didn't write it down and get it notarized. And since he's not here to explain, we're on our own."

Andrew was wide-eyed at this heresy. I sensed that he was thinking about getting up and leaving.

"Hey, this is good news. What I'm saying is that you don't have to rely on the highly suspect teachings of someone who's been dead for thousands of years. You can rely on yourself. If Prince Siddhartha made it on his own, you can too, right? The Buddha was just some guy who got serious and figured it out for himself, so maybe that's his real teaching—that you can figure it out for yourself. Maybe the point isn't that he was some sort of deity or superman, but that he wasn't. That he was just a guy like you or me."

Andrew was rocking back and forth slightly, agitated.

"As to suffering," I continued, "forget it. It's a non-issue. Suffering just means you're having a bad dream. Happiness means you're having a good dream. Enlightenment means getting out of the dream altogether. Words like suffering and happiness and compassion are just bags of rocks. Eventually, you'll have to set them down if you want to keep going."

Andrew sat motionless, his inner turmoil obvious. Nobody likes to have their cherished beliefs dumped on, but dumping on cherished beliefs is the name of the game. We sit quietly for several minutes before Andrew steers us back to an earlier topic.

"So we can't realize our Buddha nature by conducting ourselves in a Buddha-like manner?"

"The Tao says that the sage walks in the world but leaves no footprints. This is just another way of saying 'in the world but not of the world'. What the Tao *doesn't* say is that the unawakened person who

wishes to become a sage must only travel in such a way that no mark is left on the ground, but can you imagine if a sect of anal Taoists read this passage as a directive to never disturb soil or dust? To never bend a blade of grass? It would be ludicrous, but no less ludicrous than many of the things people do to make believe they are the thing they hope to become. There's no point in acting like someone who is already where you want to be, the point is to get there yourself. The way to become a sage isn't to act like one. Become a sage first and then you pick up all the sagely characteristics free and easy."

The misconception about mimicking enlightenment as a way of becoming enlightened can be seen everywhere. If you want to be an enlightened guy—the thinking goes—act like an enlightened guy. If vampires really walked the earth (and I'm not saying they don't), there would be teachers and classes where you could sign up if you wanted to become a vampire yourself, as, I suppose, some people would. If the teacher were a vampire himself, he might just bite everyone and swap fluids or whatever and *presto change-o*, they're all vampires. But if the teacher were just a regular human and not really a vampire, then you might find him handing down specific rules for his students to follow: Don't go out in the sunlight; Don't eat garlic or drink holy water; Don't drive wooden stakes through your heart, and so forth. And vampire wannabes would stand in line and pay their money to hear it. Then they'd return to their lives and struggle to follow their teacher's instructions in the hope that, by doing so, they would eventually achieve vampirehood.

But, as we all know, that's not how you become a vampire, that's how you become a fruitloop. It's the same thing with the non-attachment and the in-the-world-but-not-of-the-world business. If you just want to be happy and acting like a vampire makes you happy, then super, that's definitely the thing to do. But, if you want to *become* a vampire, then wearing black and getting your canines capped isn't going to do the trick.

. . .

Another point Andrew raised that's worth considering here had to do with the edict "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him." From the sound of it, this too was a subject of on-going debate between Andrew and his fellow Buddhists.

"Hmmm," I said, enjoying fond recollections. "I didn't know what that meant when I first heard it either."

"But you do now?" Andrew asked. I think he was convinced that this was a koan-like statement not really accessible to comprehension.

"Sure," I replied. "It means something along the lines of 'When you get to the second stoplight, take a left.'"

Andrew just stared at me.

"It's a travel direction," I continued. "It's not a priceless pearl of wisdom like wear a seatbelt or brush between meals. It's just a simple piece of advice like one traveler who's been to a particular place might offer another who is going there."

Andrew still wasn't getting it, probably because I was amusing myself with guru-babble. I made an effort to express myself more clearly.

"On the road to enlightenment, there is one magic word. It's your mantra, your battle cry. The word is *further*. Very important. Big deal. We don't have to concern ourselves with the importance of further right now, just take my word for it. Someday, maybe in this life, you're going to begin the process of true awakening and a word like further can serve as a very powerful talisman. There's no real reason to dwell on the kill-the-Buddha thing now except to get it out of your head. By which I mean, there's no real benefit to you in understanding this except to not dwell on it anymore. The time will come when you understand it for yourself in totality, and after that you'll probably never give it another thought, just like any single piece of direction on a long journey."

Despite my cautious disclaimers, Andrew was on the edge of his seat waiting to find out why he should kill the Buddha.

"There are times in the process of waking up when those who have traveled the path before you can come to your aid and provide a clue as to your next step. That's really all that any teacher or teaching can really provide—the occasional signpost. It may be in a big general way, like the word further, or it may be in a small specific way, like the kill-the-Buddha thing. When I went through it all, I did it without a teacher or guru, but I had the help of many previous travelers who had taken the trouble to leave signs and warnings and hints along the way. Poets, philosophers, sages—serious people. People who took the time to set down what they knew for those that would come after."

I pause for a minute, unsure that I want to discuss this. I guess I do.

"It's a somewhat disconcerting aspect of the journey that you catch up to, and go beyond, some of your own mentors—move beyond people you've held in the highest possible regard. I was acutely aware of this occurring on several occasions and I can tell you that it's a strange and daunting experience, all the more so because it's quite specific and unmistakable when it happens. These are the giants in the field, so to speak, and the simple though peculiar-sounding fact is that I became very close to these people and in a very real sense, when I came to where they had stopped off, I stopped with them and paid my deepest respects and moved beyond them with a heavy heart. I have no idea how that sounds to someone who hasn't experienced it, but it was a wrenching part of the whole thing and it feels good to tell someone about it."

Andrew seemed absorbed in my reminiscences. I was careful not to mention the names of my mentors to Andrew. The teachers we need will always be there when we need them, no reason to track down someone else's.

"'Kill the Buddha' is one of these signs that has been left by a previous traveler. It has a very specific application. It has meaning at one particular juncture that one comes to on the path, rather late in

the journey, as I recall. It means nothing before you reach this particular place. Then, the time comes when you're there and the next thing you're supposed to do isn't exactly clear to you. In fact, the wrong thing seems quite correct and is extremely tempting. And then, as if from nowhere, this absurd little phrase about killing the Buddha pops into your head and your heart swells with inexpressible gratitude, and you know what to do and danger of slipping back into a coma is averted." I laughed at the power of the memory. "That's life on the path, man. It's a trip."

I spent a few moments in my own fond remembrances before summarizing for Andrew. "It means further. At a very exact point in the journey when it would be very easy to sit down and think you're done, it means 'Get up! You're not there yet. Don't be deceived. Don't be sentimental. Don't be complacent. Keep moving. You think you're there but you're not. You're still seeing two where there's only one. That image you're kneeling in front of—*who*ever it is, *what*ever it is—is just another projection of your own bullshit. Kill the fuckin' thing and keep going.' That's what it means."

I looked over at Andrew. He stared back at me with unabashed awe.

I can appreciate that. It's an awesome thing.

12

There is only one truth.

In all ten directions of the universe,
there is only one truth.

When we see clearly, the great teachings are the same.
What can ever be lost? What can be attained?

If we attain something, it was there from the beginning of time.
If we lose something, it is hiding somewhere near us.

Look: This ball in my pocket:
can you see how priceless it is?

— Ryokan —

but it's pleasant to hear it read by someone for whom it's new.

"I will obtain the Ultimate Truth and Ultimate Reality," she reads slowly, thoughtfully. "That is the ultimate aim of my life in this world—whether my body may remain with me or go to pieces. My bones and flesh may go into complete annihilation or remain with me; I shall obtain the True Form of the Universe. Through innumerable incarnations, good results; I have obtained a human body. I will not lose this golden opportunity and will certainly obtain samadhi and the Real Form of Consciousness. Calamity may come or go, mountains may break upon my head, but I will not leave my promise to obtain nirvanam." She sets the book down and just stares off beyond the lake.

I too relax into a quiet reverie. That's a very nostalgic passage for me. It's the reason I chose that book to bring. The writing of my book is making me take a look back into my own journey of awakening, in which that particular statement of purpose played an important role. I resonated with it when I first read it all those years ago, and made a point of re-reading it often. If I wanted to pass it on to a student today, I'd probably trim it back a bit, but I'd leave the intensity of the commitment intact. That passage figured largely in my efforts to define and state my intent way back when, and it didn't hurt to have a heavyweight in the enlightenment game to identify with either.

"Mountains may break upon my head," she whispers to herself.

After a few minutes she picks the book up and thumbs through it. "Do you do yoga?" she asks.

"No. Basically, that book is a souvenir from an earlier time in my life. I went through a lot of books back then, but I held onto that one because of the part you just read. As you can see, it's a pretty moldy and tattered book. It's spent a lot of time in pockets."

She smiles appreciatively. "You don't like my book though, do you?"

The conversation turns. This is what happens. Is she asking me a

question or just shooting the breeze with Mystic Jed? I don't particularly want to slide into the teacher groove unless that's what she's asking me to do. I'm never comfortable going there without a pretty clear signal. I'm afraid I'll come off like one of those people who you ask "How ya doin'?" and they spend the next hour actually telling you.

"Just not my kind of thing," I say, skirting.

"You're not into Zen?"

Hooboy. I lay back with my hands behind my head and mark the passage of a cloud that looks like Marilyn Monroe when the air vent blows up her skirts. Or maybe it's a Rorschach cloud and my interpretation is warning me about dallying in the grass with pretty young females.

"Really," she says. "I'm interested."

Well, that's all it takes to get me rolling, but I'm still reserved.

"There are two Zens," I say. "One Zen sells books and miniature sand gardens and calligraphy sets and little Buddha statues. The other Zen is about enlightenment."

"My book is the bad one, huh?" she asks.

I laugh. "Yeah, it's the bad one."

"I just started learning about Zen a few months ago," she explains. "It seems really cool. I've read a bunch of books about it and I went to a meeting where a Japanese man talked about it. Do you think all the books I read were like this one?"

"Depends what you got from them. Zen has a very alluring patina to it. People find it very attractive to read about Zen and maybe practice zazen meditation. Have you bought all the special pillows yet?"

She has.

"What else?"

"The little sand garden," she admits with a self-conscious smile. "A statue of Hotei, the laughing Buddha."

"Yeah, I like that one too." I say. "So, that's nice. You enjoy it,

you like reading about it, and you can accessorize. There's nothing wrong with that."

"But it's not really Zen, is what you're saying."

"No, it's not really Zen. It's more like Zen's pretty cousin. Real Zen isn't pretty and you don't need any books for it."

That's the long and the short of it. I didn't want to come down on Jolene's new hobby too harshly, but I have a real love/hate relationship with Zen—rather, I love Zen and hate New Zen. Real Zen is about the hot and narrow pursuit of enlightenment—the shortest distance between asleep and awake. No rules, no ceremonies, no teachings, just the muddy, bloody battle of waking up.

New Zen—the Zen that drives a publishing and merchandising industry—is all about being asleep and staying asleep. Of course, by saying this I'm risking the wrath of all those sunshine enthusiasts who believe that Zen is something you read about and practice and eventually master; as if Zen was a hobby or a religion or a social activity; as if Zen was something that could be done in addition to anything else; as if Zen was about being mindful or mindless or present or silent. But if they're truly interested in waking up, then those miffed Zen buffs are exactly the people who should be grateful for this wake-up call because they're the ones who wanted to make a journey and were duped into sitting down and going nowhere by Zen's pretty cousin.

The decisive test is always the same: How many enlightened? No ifs, ands or buts. No other objective or benefit is of the slightest interest. Where is the steady outflow of awakened beings? Ugly Zen has them and pretty Zen doesn't—period.

"So, it's like Zen's evil twin," she says.

I laugh at that. "Yeah. The evil twin bonked the good twin on the head and banished him to a distant island while the evil twin sold out for fame and fortune and took over the world."

We idly play with that scenario for a few minutes, stretching it further and further, just enjoying the ease of the moment and the

"So, think about what it's like when you go to see a movie. Have you heard the term 'willing suspension of disbelief?'"

She shook her head no.

"It's the deal you make every time you go to a movie. You agree to relax your discrimination and let the movie in. You know the movie isn't reality, but you will sit quietly for two hours and allow yourself to experience it as if it were. You suspend your disbelief in order to form an empathetic bond with the plight of the characters and the movie, in return, agrees not to over-strain credulity and make it too difficult for you to believe. Make sense?"

"Like playing make-believe?" she asked.

"Exactly. And then, when the movie's over, you go back out into the harsh light of reality and stop suspending your disbelief. Okay?"

"Sure."

"So our guy is sitting there, watching the film, completely absorbed and believing that this is all there is to life. He has no disbelief. He is empathetically bound to the characters and events on the screen. After all, what else does he know? The images on the screen are reality and that's what life is."

"Okay," she said, somewhat dubiously.

"But then one day, for whatever reason, he happens to look down and notice that his shackles aren't really locked. His captivity has been an unchallenged illusion."

"Cool!"

"Yeah, that's what he thinks, but scary, too. So he gets himself free of his bonds and, for the first time ever, stands up and looks around. In looking around, it begins to dawn on him that there's another level of reality of which he has always been completely ignorant. That makes him wonder about the images on the screen that he had always unquestioningly accepted as reality, so he looks around and sees the flickering lights overhead and traces them back to source."

"The projectionist's booth," she said.

"Right. So now, where are we? Our guy has freed himself from delusion and begun the process of awakening to the larger reality, right?"

She nodded.

"He's looking around inside the theater, exploring this new, realer reality, right?"

She nodded.

"In this dark theater, he has always been watching the light, right? The light reflecting off the screen? But now he sees the source of the light, the source of the images he mistook for reality before. So now he identifies the projectionist's booth as the true source of reality since that's where the light is coming from—the only light in the whole place."

"C'monnn," said Jolene, feeling that I was stretching it.

"Hey, it's a wake-up story, not a bedtime story. If you've got a problem with it, talk to Plato."

"Hmmm, okay. Go ahead."

"You get the point, right? The guy is in his first stages of breaking free and discovering the truth. He's seeing that what he always thought of as reality was just a two-dimensional trick of light and shadow. He's pulled back the curtain and revealed the wizard."

"Yeah, I get it," she said, smiling, indulging me.

"Delusion!" I cried.

"I *get* it," she said, giggling.

"Okay. So our guy musters the courage to have a look around the theater. As you might imagine, it takes him awhile to adjust to this new and far vaster, far richer reality. It takes time for his muscles and senses to adapt, not to mention dealing with the emotional impact of the fact that his life up until this point has been a sham."

"You're sure this is Plato, right?" she asked playfully. "*The* Plato?"

"Believe me, you're getting the user-friendly version." She laughed and I continued. "Our guy might also see that the aisle leads

to a door, and that light is coming in beneath the door. Maybe he sees it, maybe he doesn't. Got all that?"

"Is that it?"

"No, that's just what's going on. Now we're going to use it to answer your question."

"I forget what my question was."

"I'll wait."

"Oh yeah! The difference between mysticism and enlightenment." She was getting the hang of giving me grief. She rolled up onto her knees as if that was her posture of full attentiveness and I continued.

"Once he's over the initial shock and has adjusted to his new reality, he sees that the theater is actually quite large and full of other people like himself, engaged in all sorts of different activities."

"Plato said this?" she asked.

"No, this is me talking now. Plato didn't have this much fun with it. What we're seeing now is that..."

"There are a lot of people in the theater engaged in a lot of different activities?" she sassed.

"Oh really?" I sassed back. "What sort of people? What sort of activities?"

She was a bit perplexed. "I don't know. It's *your* theater," she said.

"It's yours now," I replied.

So she gave it some thought. To her credit, she didn't just start blurting out answers. I knew she was reviewing the theater in her mind—trying to put it together. If I could only have one teaching tool, it would be the updated cave analogy. Almost any aspect of the journey of awakening can be explained in the framework of the cinema, and on the aisle that leads to the exit. Of course, I've taken a number of liberties with the allegory, but I think Plato would have approved.

"Yamamata Roshi is in the theater," she stated with certainty.

"Okay. What's he doing?"

"Teaching?"

"Teaching who?"

"Me?"

"I don't know, Jolene. Why did you go to see him? Why are you here with me? Why aren't you off buying clothes with your girlfriends or sharing a malted with your best guy?"

"Because I'm not fooled by the images on the screen anymore?" She made a question of it and was watching me, wanting to be told.

"You tell me," I said.

She thought about it for awhile before speaking.

"When I was fifteen I was sitting in church with my parents and I just had this totally powerful amazing thought. I was looking at the backs of all these heads in the pews in front of me it just dawned on me that they were like cows, like cattle, like... like they weren't really human beings. Like they were just cows that were pretending they were people. I thought it was so funny I started giggling uncontrollably and I had to pretend I was coughing and sneak out the back. My mother was *really* mad."

She paused, maybe only putting it together for the first time. "But the thing is, it never really stopped. I still see almost everyone that way. My teachers, my family, my friends. It's like they aren't really awake, or like they just don't get it, or like they're not really there."

She paused again, thinking before speaking. Always a good sign.

"That's why I started going out to your house last year. That's why I went to hear Yamamata Roshi. I wanted to be around people who didn't seem like they had been taken over by aliens. Am I weird or something? It seems to me like I'm the sane one and everyone else is insane, or like I'm awake and they're all asleep, but thinking that way sounds like the definition of insanity."

I remembered that during her impassioned plea for me to treat her seriously that she had said "I don't want to be just another..." but didn't finish the thought. Now I knew what she wanted to say. Cow.

"You worry about that?" I asked.

"Well, I think about it a lot. It's always with me. I feel like I'm not a part of the world anymore, that like, somehow I just... fell out."

"Let's use the theater analogy some more," I said. "I didn't mention it earlier, but when our guy first got out of his chains and stood up, one of the first things he saw was that the theater was full of other people, all the people he loves and cares for, held in place by the same unlocked chains, and watching the same images on the screen like that's all there is. Okay?"

"Okay."

"What does he do?"

She answered without hesitation. "Tries to help them. Get them to, you know, snap out of it. Wake up. Undo their chains and look around. See what's really going on."

"Is that what you did?"

"Yeah, kinda. That's when I started wondering if I was losing it. I tried talking to my mom and some of my friends and even my brother, but they all just treated me like I was being goofy. *Earth to Jolene*, that sorta thing. I stopped talking about stuff when they started getting annoyed and rude about it, like it was threatening to them or something."

"Just a little heads up, Jolene. People don't like to have their version of reality fucked with. Try it if you still need to get it out of your system, but prepare yourself for unpleasant results."

She didn't blink at the strong language. I'm not reluctant to speak forcefully when the need for emphasis warrants it. Steering someone away from their altruistic impulses at this early stage warrants it.

I was lying on my back by this point, eyes closed, soaking up the sun. "So what's the difference between mysticism and enlightenment?" I asked her.

She took her time. Several minutes elapsed during which I had drifted into a light doze. Then, to my delight, she answered the

question correctly.

"I have no idea."

16

The harmony of the spheres.

Enlightenment is to be restored to Divine humor,
to realize that nothing is necessary.

— Master Da Avabhasa —

After showering, I get dressed and consider going downstairs to grab a few books. I have enlightenment vs. mysticism on the brain now, but walking downstairs, finding a book and bringing it back upstairs isn't as easy as it sounds. Everyone is down there now—cooking, eating, and socializing—and the atmosphere is fairly relaxed. If I go down the whole dynamic changes. Everything stops and everyone shifts into a more formal mode and then I'm the center of attention and everyone looks at me expectantly, which is too much fuss just for a book.

We have a huge spiritual library. Several, actually. The main one is in the living room but there are half a dozen others spread throughout the house. Together, they probably hold every spiritual and New Age title from the last hundred years as well as countless versions, translations and transliterations of all the ancient stuff. Almost always, when people come out for a visit or a stay, they feel they have to bring something. Even if they're just coming to hang out or do some work, they often feel that they can't come empty handed, so they bring gifts. The gifts are actually an important part of the whole deal, as is the work they do here. A student cannot approach a teacher like a beggar, hat in hand, only taking. There has to be an energetic exchange. It doesn't matter that I may not ever see the gift they brought, only that they brought it. It doesn't matter

that I don't know the work they do, only that they do it. If you think of approaching a Tibetan lama for his teachings, you would naturally begin by offering him a silk scarf. Not a great one, not an expensive one, not one that's gonna make him do cartwheels. Just a scarf. One of the thousands he'll receive in his wiseman career.

The giver is always the true recipient. It's one of those universal laws that keeps everything balanced.

I said earlier that I was being careful not to mention the idea of bunkhouses on the property for fear that well-intentioned students would zealously take it upon themselves to manifest the teacher's desire. It's really the sort of thing that can easily get out of hand. There have been some truly exorbitant gifts made to me and the household, all of which were returned or passed along. I believe we have now instituted a spending cap of fifteen dollars for gifts with a gentle suggestion that they be either in the form of books or cut flowers.

This teaching gig can be a real stroll on the tightrope. It doesn't matter that to an awakened mind extravagant gifts are mere gestures to be acknowledged and shared. We all see the world through our own filters, so greed, corruption, and sexual impropriety are expectantly projected onto the spiritual teacher. In this vein, I have to watch myself at all times. I can't be flirting with the girls or expressing admiration for nice cars or making casual references to sex and drugs and rock n' roll or telling colorful tales from my salad days.

I originally bought this house planning to live a quiet, peaceful, reclusive existence. Although that plan has long since become laughable, the fact remains that I want to be able to stay here. I don't want to be swept up in some unsavory scandal in the local rumor mills. Me and this unlikely group of people who gravitate to me are not exactly indigenous to the locale. We transplanted ourselves into someone else's garden and I think it's important that we be friendly, respectful, and a little guarded in order to maintain long-term harmony.

On the other hand, I don't lose a lot of sleep over gifts and rep-

utations and all that. It all takes care of itself, and if it doesn't, Sonaya does.

So these days the gifts they bring are mostly books and cut flowers, but it used to be almost anything: little statues of Hindu deities, jade eggs, plants, CDs, jewelry, tarot decks, wall art, candles, incense, t-shirts, food, wine, goldfish, drums, didjeridoos, rain sticks, wind chimes, videos, candy, fresh produce, you name it, people were making an offering of it to me or the house. Of course, there was nothing we could do with most of it. We couldn't display every single item or the place would look like a New Age junk shop. We couldn't eat all the food or find room for all the plants or wear all the tulsi bead necklaces, so I guess Sonaya solved the problem by making it known that books or cut flowers were the preferred gifts for those who felt the need to bring something. That's only a partial solution, of course, because now we were receiving a dozen copies of any book that makes it to the top ten on the spiritual list. If I were shrewd I'd open a small book and flower kiosk in the front yard and sell the stuff right back to them so they can walk in with something which I, in turn, could sell again.

I wonder how many copies of this book I'll be receiving as a gift. *(Joke, guys. Don't.)*

The cut flowers are nice, especially in winter when our own gardens aren't exploding. Practically every room in the house always has fresh cut flowers and it's an added dimension of life in the house for which I am constantly grateful. Cut flowers are preferred over potted plants because we can throw them out after a week. If everybody brought plants we'd be running a nursery within a few months.

Right now there's a specific passage I'm looking for and I think I can find it in one of the upstairs book collections. I'm a fan of transpersonal psychology in general and Dr. Stanislav Grof in particular. I sort through my collection of books by Grof and it doesn't take me long to find the part describing the mystical experience that

I've been thinking about:

> *"It is an ecstatic state, characterized by the loss of boundaries between the subject and the objective world, with ensuing feelings of unity with other people, nature, the entire Universe, and God. In most instances this experience is contentless and is accompanied by visions of brilliant white or golden light, rainbow spectra or elaborate designs resembling peacock feathers. It can, however, be associated with archetypal figurative visions of deities or divine personages from various cultural frameworks. LSD subjects give various descriptions of this condition, based on their educational background and intellectual orientation. They speak about cosmic unity, unio mystica, mysterium tremendum, cosmic consciousness, union with God, Atman-Brahman union, Samadhi, satori, moksha, or the harmony of the spheres."*

That's as good a description of the experience as I've ever heard. I take the book to my big comfy chair in the TV room, turn on the lamp, and continue reading.

I have no personal interest in the distinction between enlightenment and mysticism. I know exactly what one is and have a more than adequate personal acquaintance with the other. The problem—a common one for me—is how to express it. If I didn't have to teach it I wouldn't spend any time or effort learning it. I did my time. I spent thousands of hours with my nose buried in every spiritual, New Age, metaphysical and esoteric book you could name, and quite a few books on religion and Western philosophy too, using the knowledge in books to fuel an unquenchable internal blaze. I obsessed on this stuff when it was critical to my journey, but now that's behind me and my lingering interest in this subject stems from the fact that I am challenged with communicating it. It's also, I should mention, a personal pleasure. I enjoy visiting with a mind that can express these squirrelly contradictions succinctly. All the more so for the rarity of it.

The samadhi that Grof describes is, of course, the most beautiful and profound experience a human being can hope to have, but it is

only of peripheral interest within the context of spiritual awakening. The reason I wish I could get a better handle on these two subjects is, as I've already stated, to be better able to correct the tendency of those on the "spiritual path" to be chasing the one and calling it the other. Everybody wants the radiance and the bliss and the union with the divine, and everyone seems to believe that spiritual enlightenment is the name for it when you have dipped yourself into the divine so many times that it has permanently altered your spiritual hue.

A 1975 New York Times Magazine article entitled "Are We A Nation of Mystics?" refers to a study of Americans in which forty percent of respondents reported having had experienced, at some time in their lives, feelings of being "very close to a powerful spiritual force that seemed to lift them out of themselves." The article's conclusion is that "such intense, overwhelming, indescribable experiences are widespread, almost commonplace, in American society today."

This is certainly in line with my own views on the matter. If anything, I'm surprised that the percentage is so low. But even if only forty percent of Americans can claim to have had a mystical experience, how abiding can we really claim the transformative effects to be? Either we are most decidedly *not* a nation of mystics, or the transformation ascribed to a divine encounter and/or ego-transcendence renders one a mystic of only the most minor and inconsequential degree, especially as the influence of the experience fades with time.

My opinion is that the experience of unity is like the most uplifting piece of music one can ever hope to hear. It raises the bar and makes other music sound tinny and discordant by comparison, but eventually the memory fades and regular music resumes its previous place in one's heart. More to the point, in my view, the mystical experience is something to have, not something to have had. The memory of it begins receding the moment it's over and it quickly takes on the remote quality of a dream. One may remember that one

has had a mystical experience, but that memory bears little or no resemblance to the experience itself.

I don't mean to diminish the transformative impact of the mystical event. There can be no doubt that if all one knows of fire is the dance of light and shadow on a wall, then the direct perception of a roaring blaze will radically transform one's views of reality and one's place in it.

Enough! I'm tired of thinking about it. Words are a lousy means of communication, brains are no place for serious thinking, and indescribable experiences are silly things to try to describe. I close my eyes and release all the events of the day using a cleansing breath until I feel free of all the petty challenges and frustrations that come with the teacher thing. When I open my eyes I find Sonaya sitting in the other comfy chair. She is smiling. Bad sign.

"You have an appointment tomorrow," she informs me. Now she's my booking secretary. "You have to be in Iowa City tomorrow at the boathouse on the river at eleven o'clock to meet..."

"My KGB contact?"

"...Julie Meyers who will be interviewing you..."

"Interviewing me?"

"...for her New Age magazine."

"Interview? What interview? Since when do I do interviews? Since when does anyone want to interview me? Why...?"

But Sonaya is already gone.

17

Would you murder me?

If in hell I could hold one curl of your hair
I'd think the saints of heaven in torment.

— Rumi —

I do as I'm told. The next day I make the twenty-minute drive to Iowa City in my car with my bike attached to a carrier on back. I'm there by a little after ten so I park a few blocks away from campus and get the bike ready. Iowa City is a great place for riding, and the weather is cooperating admirably. Dark clouds are rolling in and the distant thunder provides a rumbling promise of good things to come.

It's Saturday and the campus is quieter than the downtown area, so I go zipping merrily between and around the buildings that once housed the state's government before it was bundled off to Des Moines, at which time the university acquired the old capital buildings and grounds. There are a few students dozing and reading on the grass, a few basketball games in progress, but the gray skies and approaching weather seem to be keeping most people inside so I have wide sidewalks and mostly clear sailing.

After a grand time careening along the walkways of higher education with only one close call involving an inline skater and a Frisbee-chasing dog, I note that it's two minutes to eleven, so I turn down a steep path that plummets me headlong into the river valley where I barely make a right in time to stay dry and follow the riverwalk for a quarter mile to a pedestrian bridge that I shoot across at a heady clip followed by a series of hard lefts and some even harder braking to stop on the boat ramp with my front tire in the drink. I

am at the boathouse and it's eleven on the button.

"Right on time," Julie points out. "Punctuality is the politeness of kings."

"'Politeness of kings' is my middle name," I reply.

"You're lying."

"Only by omission. My full name is Jed Hope-of-Nations Theme-for-Poets Politeness-of-Kings McKenna. My mother thought auspicious naming might make me turn out well."

"And has it?"

"Too soon to tell."

"You probably shouldn't lie to me, you know."

"I would never lie to you."

"Really?"

"No, not really."

"So you would lie to me?"

"You're dancing around the edges of an interesting subject."

"Oh? And how would I cut to the heart...?"

"Just max out the question. Instead of asking if I'd fib to you or steal your recipe for cherries flambé..."

"Would you murder me?"

"Exactly."

"Okay, so would you? Murder me?"

"Sure."

"Under what circumstances?"

"Under whatever circumstances dictate that I should murder you, of course. But see? Here we are digressing into a light treatment of right action theory when we have yet to properly intro... Oh, you're Julie!"

"Yes."

"We met out at the house."

"Yes."

"I've seen you there several times."

"I've been there five or six times, twice for the whole day."

"Did Sonaya put you to work?"

"Oh yeah. One day we tore apart the kitchen and cleaned it down to the floorboards. One day I spent in the potting room in the basement preparing seedling starts."

"That's very interesting."

"It is?"

"Yes. I didn't know we had a potting room. I'll have to look into that."

"Really?"

"No, not really. I'm lying again."

"You do that a lot."

"I just want to get it out of my system before the interview begins."

"Then you're not as punctual as you think because the interview started about twenty lines of snappy dialog ago."

"Oh."

The boathouse is a long-unused stone cabin between the riverwalk and the river. On the river side of the building is a covered porch and a concrete ramp that leads into the water. The boathouse has sat empty and locked up for years and is falling into disrepair, but it's one of the three best places to watch a storm in Iowa City.

Julie is very pretty—slender and tall, with long light brown hair and an easy way about her that I'm sure has coaxed intimacies from many an unguarded interviewee. She asks if she can call me Jed and I say she can. She clips a small microphone to my shirt and plugs it into a micro-cassette recorder that I'll carry in my pocket. Throughout the interview Julie will lean towards me and speak into my neck whenever she asks a question.

I walk the bike around to the covered porch and set it against the building. I gesture for Julie to take a seat on the porch's low enclosing wall and sit down next to her.

"So, what were you doing out at the house?"

"Talking to people about you."

"Learn anything interesting?"

"Sonaya had some amusing anecdotes to share."

"Sonaya is a chronic liar. I'm afraid I have no respect for your journalistic instincts if you were unable to see that."

"Sonaya could no more tell a lie than I could drink this river."

"Actually, she could. In fact, I bet she could murder you too. There's a story about Lord Krishna and his wives or consorts or whatever they are..."

"You don't sound like you really know the story."

"Well, I'm not a Hindu and I don't use parables much so you'll have to bear with me. So Krishna gets this headache and the only way he can get any relief is to put pressure on it so he asks each of these highly devoted females of his to stand on his head to relieve the pain, but they are shocked at the very idea. They think it's a test and that they would spend an eternity in hell if their feet touched the Lord's head, so they all turn him down except for the last one, whose name may or may not be Radha. If you use this I hope you'll have your fact checkers make me look good, or at least that you won't let me offend a billion Hindus."

"My readership is something under a billion."

"So Radha agrees to do it and all the other women are absolutely shocked that she could be so evil as to place her feet on the Lord's head, which would be a mortal sin of the most grievous nature."

"And?"

"And Radha tells them simply that she would be pleased to spend eternity in hell to bring her Lord a moment's comfort."

"Oh... shit."

"Yeah."

"So Sonaya...?"

"Perfect devotion."

"That's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard."

"Yep. That's what I have to put up with."

"You don't mean she'd, you know, are you saying...? For you?"

"Whoa, no. Krishna. It's all about Krishna. She'd gut me like a fish if she thought it would tickle him."

"Nonsense. I won't print that."

"Thank you."

The storm is on top of us now but the rain hasn't started yet. Lightning can be seen to our left and the thunder seems to be clapping down on us from directly above. Then, as we watch, a curtain of water comes traveling down the river towards us and in a second we are within the downpour and can watch to our right as the leading edge of the rain proceeds away from us. The other good storm watching sites in town are both much higher up and afford a much grander view, but being tucked away cozy and dry on the boathouse porch overlooking the river with a pleasant young lady is very heaven.

"I spoke to several of your students, too," says Julie.

"I assume they all spoke of me in the most glowing terms."

"Actually, they did, although quite a few have never spoken *to* you."

"Yeah... I don't pretend to understand a lot of what goes on out there. People come out for their own reasons. I know everything is going exactly as it should, I just don't know how or why."

She consults her notes and comes up with the next question, probably meant as an icebreaker. "What's your most embarrassing moment as a teacher, or don't you have one?"

"Well, I had a guy once who was totally stuck in the mud. Nowhere close to anything interesting, just wallowing in the details of his life. Family problems, money problems, health problems, and so forth. Couldn't get out of it, couldn't get above it. I wanted to encourage him to try to adopt a larger overview, a broader context within which to view his existence, so I told him to pretend that he just found out he was going to die tomorrow, and then look at all these problems in that light."

"That sounds very effective. I could see where that might put

someone's day-to-day concerns into perspective."

"Yeah," I respond somewhat sheepishly, "so could Billy Jack."

She bursts into laughter. "Really? You got it from a Billy Jack movie?"

"Yeah. I saw it when I was, like, ten, and the thing about dying tomorrow was probably my first profoundly moving insight. I mean, there's nothing wrong with the advice, but I regretted it as soon as I said it. I was afraid I'd be exposed as a fraud who just went around repeating kung fu movie wisdom."

"What was your second profoundly moving insight?"

"I don't know, probably the cogito—*cogito ergo sum*. I spent a lot of time with that one, years, really. If a tree falls in a forest and all that."

"All what? You mean the Zen koan? If a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a noise?"

"That's the one."

"What does that have to do with 'I think, therefore I am'?"

"Well, they're basically the same solipsistic thing. The tree in the forest thing isn't a koan because it has a very specific answer..."

"Which is?"

"Yes."

"Oh! Well, I'm sure a hundred generations of our best thinkers will be grateful..."

I laugh. "The answer is yes because the question says so. The question establishes that the tree and the forest are known to exist without being seen, so it naturally follows that any sounds therein exist without being heard."

"It sounds more like you found a loophole in the question."

"More like a wormhole into the deeper question. What do we know for sure? That's the real question. That's what the cogito is. That's what solipsism is. This isn't theory. This isn't belief or faith. This is the basic fact of existence. It's all about figuring out exactly what we know for certain as opposed to everything else. It's truly

amazing that something so glaringly obvious and irrefutable is so universally ignored by science and philosophy and religion."

"And that is?"

"That we don't know anything—*can't* know anything."

"Can you define 'anything'?"

"Solipsism is defined as the belief that the only thing you can know for sure is that you exist, and that any other true knowledge is impossible. But, like I say, it's not really a belief. It's just the way it is."

"So I know I'm sitting here, but..."

"No. You know that you are. Body, planet, space, time, people, everything else is taken on faith."

"So I'm not sitting here..."

"No, you don't know that either. All this doesn't mean that what seems to be isn't, just that it's unverifiable. You could say that it's highly *likely* that you're sitting here, but that's not true either. There's no particular likelihood whatsoever that your perception of reality has any basis in reality."

"Damn, that's a little freaky. You're not the usual spiritual teacher talking about higher states of consciousness and deeper states of love, I see."

"No. I don't go there. I'm more a truth guy. Your magazine doesn't cover this stuff a lot?"

"Not really, we usually cover ascended masters and channeled entities and prophecy and yoga and all that stuff."

"And tantra."

"Oh yes," she laughs. "Tantra sells magazines."

"Well, we've touched on right action, solipsism, bhakti yoga Sonaya-style, and Billy Jack," I say, but am interrupted as lightning sizzles through the sky above the buildings across the river and the already heavy rainfall seems to double in an instant. The battering drops of rain give the normally languid river a tumultuous appearance that jibes well with the raging skies. We stop talking for awhile

and just enjoy the show.

"What's next?" I ask when the storm settles down a bit.

"Okay," she says, referring to her notes and then leaning into the microphone at my collar to speak. "You're enlightened but you obviously have an ego. Isn't that a contradiction? Doesn't the ego have to be annihilated to achieve nirvana?"

"Oooh," I coo appreciatively. "Good question. Both are true. Yes, I have an ego and it looks similar to the one I dropped to, as you say, achieve nirvana. But then I came back all enlightened and everything, and I needed something to wear. I look around and there's my discarded ego lying in a pile on the floor so I slip into it and here I am."

This is something a lot of students and seekers get hung up on and there's really no satisfactory answer except to say 'Come see for yourself'. Ramana Maharshi addressed this point this way: "The 'I' casts off the illusion of 'I' and yet remains as 'I'. Such is the paradox of Self-realization. The realized do not see any contradiction in it." The *un*realized, though, *do* see a contradiction, but, frankly, the unrealized see a lot of things that aren't there.

I continue answering Julie's question.

"You've probably heard the saying, 'Before enlightenment a mountain is a mountain, during enlightenment a mountain is not a mountain, and after enlightenment a mountain is a mountain again.' Well, it's like that. Before enlightenment I believed my ego was me, then enlightenment comes along and no more ego, only the underlying reality. Now it's after enlightenment and this ego might be slightly uncomfortable or ill-fitting at times, but it's all I've got. The idea that your ego is destroyed in the process of becoming enlightened is roughly correct, but it's not complete. Before enlightenment, you're a human being in the world, just like everyone you see. During enlightenment you realize the human being you thought you were is just a character in a play, and that the world you thought you were in is just a stage, so you go through a process of radical decon-

struction of your character to see what's left when it's gone. The result isn't enlightened-self or true-self, it's no-self. When it's all over it's time to be a human being in the world again, and that means slipping back into costume and getting back on stage."

"But now you know...?"

"Sure, because now you're actually in the audience, watching the drama. I could never mistake the play for reality again, or my character for my true state. Happily, I never know what my character is going to do or say until he does it or says it, so the whole thing stays interesting."

"There still seems to be a lot of contradictions. First, we can't know anything..."

"It's *all* contradictions. Whitman said, 'Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes.' He was addressing the inherent problems of discussing this stuff. As far as not being able to know anything, that's just a starting point of inquiry, like taking stock of your gear before beginning a long hike. If you're going on a voyage of self-discovery, you'd want to start by saying 'Okay, what do I know for a fact? What is absolutely certain?' And that's what the cogito is. I wish we could start a fire."

"Huh? A fire?"

"Yeah, right here on the terrace. A small bonfire, a bottle of wine, this storm. It's really a delightful moment. I feel like we're wasting it with all this talk."

So we sit quietly and watch the storm for awhile. Julie is a good storm watcher. You can tell good storm watchers because they're lucky. Without any conscious effort, they're always looking in the right place at the right time. They don't have to snap their heads around and say, "Oh, I missed that great bolt of lightning," because they were looking right there when it happened. Jane Roberts said that miracles are nature unimpeded, which is a good way of saying that if you take your hand off the tiller, the boat will steer itself and do a vastly better job of it than you ever could. Julie seems to have

that ability to relax into the moment and let the universe do the driving.

If there were a secret to happiness in life, I'd say that was it.

18

Open Sky

If you're not amazed by how naïve you were yesterday,
you're standing still.

If you're not terrified of the next step,
your eyes are closed.

If you're standing still and your eyes are closed,
then you're only dreaming that you're awake.

A caged bird in a boundless sky.

— Jed McKenna —

19

My sign is to have and give no sign.

My birthplace is placelessness,
My sign is to have and give no sign.
You say you see my mouth, ears, eyes, nose-
they are not mine.

I am the life of life.
I am that cat, this stone, no one.
I have thrown duality away like an old dishrag,
I see and know all times and worlds,
As one, one, always one.

— Rumi —

The storm abates and we decide that all of our good interview work has earned us a meal. She wants her magazine to pay but I ask nicely if I can buy and she says yes. With me pushing my bike we cross over the swollen and muddy river and make our way to the heart of town where there are several good restaurants to choose from.

"Can we continue the interview?" she asks.

"Sure," I say.

"Can we go back to where we started for a minute and talk about right action?"

"Sure."

"You hear the term right action used a lot in spiritual circles. It's one of the steps on Buddhism's Eightfold Path, but I don't think you mean rules of abstinence. Right action always sounds like a term for some higher heart-centered morality, but you make it sound very

specific and, I guess, not so moral, if it would allow you to murder someone."

"Do you know what agapè is?"

"Yes, it's like the highest form of love. Divine love."

"Yeah, that's what everyone thinks, but it's not really. It's one of those things you can't understand until you have the direct experience of it. Love as we know it is like a shadow of agapè—like the candlelight flickering on the wall and not the flame itself. It's a very different thing at its source, but love is the closest representation of agapè available, so that's what it gets translated as. Right action is the same deal. Morality is a just a shadow of right action. Right action isn't the highest degree of morality any more than agapè is the highest degree of love. When you understand and are able to act from right action, morality is no longer necessary—it's instantly obsolete and discarded. This is at the heart of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Arjuna, as a moral creature, throws down his weapon and refuses to launch a war. Krishna converts him to a creature of right action by freeing him from delusion and Arjuna takes up his weapon and launches the war. Right action has nothing to do with right or wrong, good or evil, naughty or nice. It is without altruism or compassion. Morality is the set of rules and regulations that you use to navigate through life when you're still trying to steer your ship rather than let it follow the flow."

"No shit?"

I laugh. "No shit. The Tao says 'When the great Tao is forgotten, kindness and morality arise.' That's what it means."

"No shit?"

"You kiss your mother with that mouth?"

"So, like, your character's up on the stage..."

"...and he's fulfilling his role. He sees the future flowing towards him and he moves with it. He's not stopping to consult someone's book of rules."

"So if the flow tells you to launch a war...?"

"Sure. You launch a war."

She pauses to ponder. "I think I'm like that at times, in the flow, but not always, not in big things. I think I'd be scared to set my morality aside."

"That's perfectly natural. It's a trust you develop a little at a time as you learn to relinquish the illusion of control."

"Is that what people like Sonaya or, you know, devoutly religious people are doing?"

"Very much so. Basically, the act of faith in something other than self allows you to release the tiller—to surrender. Whatever the reason for doing it, whatever name you give to the new steering agent or agency, it's going to be a very positive change because it's going to be the infinite and unerring intelligence of the universe that takes over."

"So like, born-again Christians...?"

"Right. They have abandoned the illusion of control. It doesn't matter why you do it, just that you do. This is the point of distinction and the root teaching of all major religions. Christians say, 'Not mine, but thy will be done.' Hindus say, 'Brahma is the charioteer.' Muslims say, 'It is the will of Allah.' It's all the same thing. Fear and ego—in other words, ignorance—are keeping your hand on the tiller. Release the tiller for whatever reason, and the steering takes care of itself."

"So when people talk about being 'off the path'...?"

"Then they're just reading the terrain from ground level. They don't have the larger picture. Returning is the motion of the Tao. Everything is in a constant process of returning to its true state. To really be 'off the path' would mean to be outside of consciousness. There is no such place."

Julie says she would like a portabello mushroom sandwich for lunch so we cut down to the co-op grocery where there's a decent sandwich counter. I park my bike and we go in, order, and browse for a few minutes while our food is prepared. I pick up a copy of maga-

zine about enlightenment. The cover asks the question, "What does it mean to be in the world but not of it?"

"So," says Julie, reading over my shoulder, "what does it mean?"

I thumb through the issue and quickly confirm my suspicions. They're basically redefining the question as "How can one pursue a spiritual life in a material world?"

"According to them, it means 'How can you have your cake and eat it too?'"

"Which, obviously, you can't, right?"

"According to them, you can."

. . .

This is the householder versus renunciate question. Anyone who wants to repackage enlightenment for mass consumption must first create the illusion that it's comfortably within the customer's reach. It may be *true* that the price of truth is everything, but true don't pay the bills. In the commercial model, the price of truth is whatever you can comfortably afford.

The magazine I'm holding has brought together quite a lineup of spiritual luminaries to shine their brains on the in-the-world question, which, of course, they must if they hope to convince a sincere and intelligent audience that the absurd is true and the obvious is false. It may sound like an impossible feat, but the editors and marketers know that people will buy anything as long as you package it right. Religious architecture is a soaring monument to this truth.

I'm not naive about these things. I know that book and magazine publishers aren't in the business of enlightenment. They're in the business of selling books and magazines, not truth, and they know that seekers will gladly pay to be reassured that, common sense aside, they *can* wake up without quitting the dream. Such is the state of spiritual publishing today, of *spirituality* today, and ultimately it's all because ego will do anything to survive.

I spend a lot of time in front of the shelves in new and used

bookstores, surfing the web, thumbing through magazines; always looking for someone who says things well, who can talk about the state of being enlightened and, more interestingly, the process of getting there. Of course, when the subject is enlightenment, you're pretty much confined to saying what it's not because there's no saying what it is. For every few hundred publications that claim to have something valid to say on the subject, perhaps one does, and for every few hundred spiritual leaders shepherding their adoring flocks ever higher up the mountain, perhaps one will be driving them over the edge and into reality.

That's not to say that all spiritual leaders are unenlightened. Following the same irrational impulse that drives me to try to express what I know, an awakened person might, on rare occasion, become a spiritual leader. But when they do, it's never to enlightenment that they lead. How do I know? I know that no spiritual teacher leads to enlightenment because there *is* no leading to enlightenment. There is no *teaching* of enlightenment. Hence, the inevitable outcome we see all around us—everyone's grooving on the gurus and everyone's getting more and more spiritual, but nobody's waking up.

When it comes to the teachingless teachings, you have to take your business to Zen and Advaita, being careful to avoid the tourist traps where you can unwittingly walk in circles for years or lifetimes. For instance, Ramana Maharshi prescribed the use of the inquiry "Who am I?" to be used relentlessly as an auger for drilling down through all the layers of ego and delusion. But this process of self-inquiry has itself become mired in layers of ego and delusion. Repackaged for mass consumption. Ramana's students have become teachers, and their students have become teachers, and the diamond at the core—the process of self-inquiry—has become the cheese in a dozen bait-and-switch operations. Those lured in by the simplicity and directness of self-inquiry are sucked into a morass of teachers and teachings, gurus and babble, ego and delusion, from which they are not likely to soon emerge.

Five words: Ask yourself "Who am I?" Five words that render all other words—including those of Ramana Maharshi—superfluous. Five words that need no explanation, no amplification, no elucidation. Five words that grant self-reliance and self-determination. But a complete spiritual teaching that fits on a matchbook cover is not what anyone really wants. Self-reliance is not what anyone really wants. By what mechanism does such a simple thing as self-inquiry get mangled and bloated beyond all recognition?

Ego. *Always* ego.

The fundamental conflict in the spiritual quest is that ego *desires* spiritual enlightenment, but ego can never *achieve* spiritual enlightenment. Self cannot achieve no-self. That's why anyone who wants to sell enlightenment must first reduce it to more manageable proportions—to something ego *can* achieve. Enlightenment Lite—Less filling, tastes great.

Enlitenment.

The fundamental conflict can only be resolved by altering the equation. Yes, it's cheating, but everyone's okay with it. Spiritual enlightenment gets redefined as something attainable by ego, and now the equation works to everyone's satisfaction. Ego gets to continue the noble quest and a thriving spiritual industry continues to thrive. Of course, no one gets the grail, but if you understand the fundamental conflict, you'll see that no one really wanted it anyway.

The quest for the grail is about the quest, not the grail.

. . .

Listen!

Here's all you need to know to become enlightened:

Sit down, shut up, and ask yourself what's true until you know.

That's it. That's the whole deal—a complete teaching of enlightenment, a complete practice. If you ever have any questions or problems—no matter what the question or problem is—the answer is always exactly the same:

Sit down, shut up, and ask yourself what's true until you know.

In other words, go jump off a cliff.

Don't go near the cliff and contemplate jumping off. Don't read a book about jumping off. Don't study the art and science of jumping off. Don't join a support group for jumping off. Don't write poems about jumping off. Don't suck up to someone else who jumped off.

Just jump.

. . .

I return to Julie's question about the magazine's in-the-world-but-not-of-the-world cover. "It means what we talked about," I answer her. "It means that you're playing your role on the stage, but you don't confuse your role with yourself or the stage with reality. It means you know that you're playing a character in a staged production. To switch analogies, it's like lucid dreaming. You achieve normal waking consciousness within the dream so that you're *in* the dream but not *of* the dream."

"I doubt that's what they'll say in the magazine," she says.

"Doesn't matter," I reply. "There's no benefit to understanding it. It's something you're familiar with because it's your reality or you're not because it isn't."

I thumb through the magazine and see ad after ad peddling books and teachers and products in a pornographic mockery of man's desire to know the truth—money-lenders in the temple.

"What would they say it's about in your magazine?" I ask Julie.

"How to be a householder and a recluse at the same time, but that's not possible, is it?"

"If you mean, can you get a deal on enlightenment—can you be awake without having to wake up—the answer is no. If you mean can you live a spiritual, compassionate life and still raise kids and have a house and a stock portfolio and a demanding career and all that, I assume the answer is yes, but it's really not my thing."

. . .

Our code name, Beatrice, is called, meaning our sandwiches are ready.

"What do you think of people?" asks Julie.

I'm a little surprised by her question and I just stare at her open-mouthed. "Uh..."

"You don't have to answer now," she says. "Just think about it and maybe we can talk about it while we eat."

"Um... okay."

There's no seating in the co-op so I grab an extra plastic bag at the checkout and we sit at a picnic table nearby using the bags to keep our butts dry. I have ordered a roast beef sandwich that caused Julie to look at me somewhat askance, surprised, I suppose, that I'm a carnivore. The trees are dripping on us a little but we don't seem to mind.

"I see people the same way vampires do."

Julie chokes. "As food?" she asks around a mouthful of sandwich.

"Oh, yeah, sorry. No, not as food. The vampire analogy has a few bugs in it. I forgot about the bloodsucking thing."

"I think that's a pretty big part of it. So how do vampires see people?"

"As partial. Half alive. Half awake. Potentially awake, but not."

"Like zombies?"

"I don't know, that seems like too much. On the other hand, I look back on my own life before enlightenment and zombie doesn't seem too bad. Like I was sleepwalking, or like I was alive but *I* wasn't there. That sounds backward, but that's what it's like. Let's use lucid dreaming again. If you woke up inside a dream, how would you see the other people in the dream? How seriously would you take things?"

She's chewing very slowly. I think she's paying attention. I return to the stage analogy.

"Imagine you're in the audience watching a play, and you slowly come to realize that the actors don't know they're actors. They think that they're normal people going about their normal lives, unaware that they're on a stage, performing. You could never even believe such a thing would be possible if you yourself hadn't been up there yourself believing the same thing."

"That would be pretty weird," she agrees. "So you're sitting here with me right now, and we're both up on the stage, and from your perspective it's like being with a...? Oh! That's why you seemed uncomfortable when you heard the question! You didn't want to call me a zombie. That's so sweet!"

I give her my aw-shucks-ma'am grin. "I don't know, maybe. I don't mind answering any question as honestly and accurately as I can—that's my thing—but it's just not always possible. Just saying that I view people as half-asleep—or, as the Tao says, as straw dogs—doesn't come close to addressing the larger question of who I am and what the stage is and what the other players are doing. So, yeah, to me unawake people are sort of not really present, but if you think about it, this is the place for that. What on earth is the point of being enlightened on earth? If anything is a little goofy, it's sitting in the audience of a dramatic event that is performed solely for the amusement of the performers. Really, if anyone at this table could be reckoned in any sense lesser, it would be me because I'm the one who walked off the stage in a huff saying, 'I didn't want to play anymore.'"

"Damn," she says.

"Well, that's really just the beginning. The difference between us isn't that I'm enlightened and you're not. The difference between us is that I know it and you don't. I possess selfless awareness and you don't. I know that's starting to sound like guruspeak, but it's the simple truth. The truth is identical for both of us. I haven't achieved a better status than you. When you hear someone say that searching for enlightenment is like fish in the ocean struggling to find water,

me with questions that arose in their discussions while I toiled.

"Not so fast." I interject. "Go get wood and seats and whoever else wants to joins us and we'll build a nice fire in the courtyard-to-be to inaugurate the new building. We'll ask Sonaya to come out and light it when it's ready."

They burst into a flurry of activity and I sit down to eat. It's a cool evening, almost chilly, so the fire will be nice. Word gets back to me that Sonaya has a puja ceremony scheduled for the new building and that we should proceed without her. It starts drizzling which is actually very pleasant.

"Jed?"

"Yes?" I reply around a mouthful of bread and rice and cheese. I turn and see that it's Sarah. The last time I spoke with her we agreed that she'd try to see beyond the generally accepted views about the benefits of her spiritual beliefs and practices and return to me when she had some fresh insights to share. After a few moments she hasn't spoken so I look and see that she's fighting back tears.

"Oh no, honey, what's the matter? Here, c'mon, sit down." I am not in the least bit immune to the tears of pretty young ladies. She sits on the grass next to me and I wrap an arm around her. She nestles in and releases some pent up tears.

"I couldn't do what you said... I tried... I thought about it a lot..."

I laugh and rock her playfully. "Is that all? You had me worried, I thought something was wrong. You know what it means when you get stuck on something like that?"

She looks up at me teary and childlike. "What?"

"It means you should come to me and ask. If people don't come to me and ask questions, I'm out of a job. You don't want to put me out of a job, do you?"

She laughs.

"What did I tell you? I said, 'No worries, mon.' Didn't I say that?" She nods. "And here you are, all worried about a silly ques-

tion. Here's what we'll do... are you going to hang around for the fire and to hear the old wisefool drone on tonight?"

"Yes," she says.

"Okay, just relax and enjoy the evening and come talk to me afterward and we'll see how you feel, okay?"

"Okay."

"Good, now buzz off. If they catch me with my arm around a pretty young girl like you they'll accuse me of impropriety and I'll have to become a wandering ascetic. You know what that means?"

"What?"

"Homeless. Living in dumpsters, washing my armpits in gas station sinks, fighting rats for scraps..."

"That's terrible! Okay, I'll go!"

"Come see me afterward," I remind her.

She gets up and goes to help with the setup. I continue eating my meal in the drizzle as a firepit is dug and ringed with stones and filled with logs and then surrounded by lawnchairs and makeshift benches. The seating is not evenly distributed. It's mostly on one side with only one seat, the most comfortable, all by itself facing the rest. I watch in amusement and amazement and the Grateful Dead line runs through my mind as it often does: "What a long strange trip it's been." How did I end up here? How did such a simple thing as a yearning for truth evolve into this?

And, more interestingly, where is this evolution going? Here? To this? To this house? To these people? I watch them as they prepare the fire for our evening together. Is this it? Is this what it was all for? Is this teaching thing I do what it's all been moving toward?

The answer, I know, is no. Close, but not quite there yet. The picture is not yet complete. Even now the larger pattern of my life is only beginning to reveal itself.

To explain this I have to say something about the way my mind works—the way I view and move through life. Simply put, I don't think. I don't make choices or decisions. I don't weigh possibilities

and select one over others. Instead, I observe patterns and move with them. I have refined sense of rightness and not-rightness that guides me in all things. No decision in my life is made through ratiocination. I wait for unfolding. I sense currents and I flow with them.

You don't have to be enlightened to operate this way; you just have to release the tiller. Once you do, an entirely new way of flowing through life opens to you—a way that is based on rightness and sensitive to not-rightness. So when I look at my own life, my own story, I look for the pattern, the unifying theme, the sum of the parts that explains my existence.

It's not this, I know that much. It's not this house. It's not these people. This is all just another tile in the mosaic. The self-immolation of what I've since termed Spiritual Autolysis was a critical element, but not the defining one. The point of my existence is not enlightenment—enlightenment too is just another piece. Who I am now, what I have become, is not the end-result; just another piece of a larger picture.

But what larger picture? What does it all add up to? What will the puzzle look like when complete? I sit on my now-soggy butt eating my now-soggy dinner and I wonder what single outcome ties together all the seemingly unrelated twists and turns in my peculiar life. The answer to that question is only now coming into focus.

The book. *This* book.

It all makes sense in light of this book. This book is the big picture, the full expression, of me—of my existence. The book is what it's all been about since day one and before. Hundreds of seemingly unrelated bits of my life that make little or no sense in any other context resolve into focus. The book is the thing. These people—my students—are all on their own journeys, but they are also playing a critical role in my creative journey, and this book is and has always been the true destination of that journey. Everything points to this. All indications confirm it. The pattern is clear. It's all been about this book.

Idly, soggily, I wonder what comes after.

. . .

Eventually, everything is ready and the fire is roaring and everyone is standing around waiting. I can see that a lot of anticipation has built up, a lot of energy. Everyone has worked themselves up into an expectant euphoria that I'm happy to plug into and take for a ride. I shuffle down from the knoll to my seat but remain standing. They applaud my approach and I applaud them right back.

I begin by smiling my ass off. I can't help it. The whole thing just bubbles up inside me at times. "What a trip!" I hear myself saying and the energy increases faster than I can release it. "What an utterly insane and magical ride we're on. Is this not the damnedest thing? Is it not?" Everyone is nodding, responding to the energy—feeling it. I feel them and they feel me and we all feel this thing that we're sharing and creating together.

"Check it out," I say. "I'm the enlightened guy, and you're all the guys who want to be enlightened guys too, so we're all here in this beautiful place with the lovely rain and the beautiful fire and what could possibly be better? What could be more cool? Am I really the teacher? I look at you guys, each one of you, and I see people I'd like to have for my own teachers. I see heart centering and I'm in complete awe and admiration. I see courage and intelligence and I wish I possessed it in similar measure. I see sincerity and strength and pulsing life-force. I think of Sonaya inside and my heart nearly bursts with gratitude." I make eye contact with each of them in turn, staying with each for a moment, acknowledging each, sharing.

"This is it. Not some other time, not some other place. Right here. Right now. I am standing at the exact center of infinity and I see perfection and beauty and absolute delight everywhere and in every thing. The touch of the slightest breeze, the sight of a single star through cloudswept skies, the howls of coyote pups in the distance, and the sheer glory and beauty of it all is enough to tear me to

shreds and all I can say is thank you, thank you, thank you!"

There is clapping and hooting and tears and hugging and hand-holding in the group. Not because of the words, but because that thing that was bubbling up has bubbled over and soaked us all. It's a surging wave of energy and if the chairman of the PLO and the Prime Minister of Israel were sitting here right now they'd be in each other's arms weeping and that's a fact because this is the real deal mystical shit and no one is immune.

"In other words," I yell, "I'm in a great fuckin' mood!"

This brings a renewed round of catcalls and applause and hooting. Everybody's up and making contact now, making noise. I pull a piece of folded paper out of my pocket and read it aloud.

"This is a poem by Rumi I've been carrying around." I clear my throat and began: "'I said Oh no! Help me! And that Oh no! became a rope let down in my well. I've climbed out to stand here in the sun. One moment I was at the bottom of a dank, fearful narrowness, and the next, I am not contained by the universe. If every tip of every hair on me could speak, I still couldn't say my gratitude. In the middle of these streets and gardens, I stand and say and say again, and it's all I say, I wish everyone could know what I know.'"

I look at the faces and they're all open, all joyous, all radiant. I pass the poem around. We let the moment ride. I take my seat and watch the fire and smile at these wonderful people.

"When you start bursting with that whole mystical love-gratitude thing," I tell them, "Rumi's your guy."

21

Pasupatastra!

I am He.
I am The Sage.
I am The Superior Man.
I am the Crown of Creation.

I am daft, clouded, obscure.
I eat when hungry, sleep when tired.
I move with; not across, not against.
I rub my chin at the appointed hour.

I see only patterns.
I have no eye for detail.
I don't go. Why go? Go where? It comes.
I don't try. I don't do. Nothing goes undone.
I don't take sides. I have no preferred outcome.
It's all me. It's all mine.
Otherless, what's to want?

I have amazing powers!
I get good tables in restaurants.
I haven't stubbed a toe in twelve years.
I can destroy the universe with a thought.

— Jed McKenna —

22

Truth-talk in the dreamstate.

In the knowledge of the Atman,
which is the dark night to the ignorant,
the recollected mind is fully awake and aware.

The ignorant are awake in their sense-life,
which is darkness to the sage.

— Bhagavad Gita —

It's probably twenty minutes before everyone settles down. When they do, the talk gradually turns to matters that various members of the group have obviously been discussing amongst themselves. I am content to sit back, listen, and get a feel for the different personalities and how they interact with each other. Occasionally I am called upon to hand down a ruling, but I keep it brief and generally bounce it back in the form of a question. It's all very light and easy.

At one point one of them, a pretty sincere guy named Brendan, asks me what the meaning of life is, but he tosses out the question in a casual way suggesting that he considers it unanswerable, so I let it go.

"Jed," says one of the guys, Randy, "when you say that there is nothing to know in order to be enlightened..."

"Yes?"

"I just can't reconcile that with any of the world's great teachings and religions. I mean, what about Yoga and Vedanta and Buddhism? What about Greek and German philosophers? What about Christianity and Islam and Judaism? How can there be nothing to know?" Obviously this is something he's really struggling with. "It's

incomprehensible. It's just too much. I can't get a handle on it."

There is a murmur of agreement. The questions seems to resonate with all of them.

"I know what you mean," I reply. "The only thing to get a handle on is negation—the tearing-down process. I know you want to learn something, to embrace something, to understand. Humans are comprised of emotion and intellect, so it's only natural to want to follow one or both of these aspects of ourselves inward to the truth, but you can't. You could spend a thousand years with your nose in books or at the feet of masters and still be no closer to waking up from delusion. The fact is that no amount or combination of knowledge can bring about truth-realization."

Everyone is attentive now. This is something that has concerned them all. They are seated and standing, a few are kneeling or seated in the wet grass, but they are all focused on the words like campers listening to a ghost story.

"Nor is it something you grow into or develop. It's not an emotion or a state of consciousness. This can be a little trickier to understand until you realize that emotion and consciousness are the same thing, or, more accurately, that emotions *are* states of consciousness. For example, half an hour ago I came down to the fire and started talking and we all entered into a non-ordinary state of consciousness together—a sort of group euphoria. Fifteen or twenty minutes later we had all returned to ordinary consciousness. That's an example of an altered state, not so different than being in a blinding rage or head-over-heels in love. You look back on something like that from your normal state and it seems like you were a different person. Drugs, breathwork, meditation and other things can alter your state of consciousness, but self-realization—truth-realization—isn't a state of consciousness."

I look around at firelit faces and see frustration. They don't understand how it can be possible to get something that's not within their reach—to be something they can't become.

"You want to bring this whole thing down to the level where you can deal with it, but that's not possible. Truth isn't an idea or a concept. It's not in libraries or in the words of sages. It doesn't come in a flash of insight or a peak experience. It's not a feeling of bliss or ecstasy. It's not a concept to be understood or a feeling to be experienced. It's not in your heart or your mind. It's further."

There's a charge in the air. The fire is dancing, the light rain is falling, but there's another element present as well. Everyone is on. Everyone is plugged in to the words. Everyone is very present and focused. They sense that they may be on the verge of taking an important step forward, and if all goes well, they are.

"So, you're saying," says Randy, "you're saying that all religions and philosophies... See, this is where I can't wrap my mind around it... you're basically saying that all of man's spiritual teachings... like none of them are...?"

He stops, not even sure how to frame the question, but I know it's the question they all want to ask. To my ear it's like two notes sounding together in just such a way as to suggest an entire symphony. A pattern is beginning to reveal itself and if I don't mess it up, it could develop into something pretty cool.

"What *am* I saying?" I ask them. "We're talking about lies. Important lies. Lies right at the heart of who and what we are. We're making serious accusations. We're committing heresy because that's what heresy is—truth-talk in the dreamstate."

This is the fun stuff.

"Spiritual awakening," I continue, "is about discovering what's true. Anything that's not about getting to the truth must be discarded. Truth isn't about knowing things—you already know too much. It's about *un*knowing. It's not about becoming true, it's about *un*becoming false so that all that's left is truth. If you want to become a priest or a lama or a rabbi or a theologian, then there's a lot to learn—tons and tons. But if you want to figure out what's true, then it's a whole different process and the last thing you need is more

knowledge."

I'm going to use a lot of words to say what I want to say, but ultimately I'm only saying one thing. I pace back and forth before the fire, watching the light dance on their wet, attentive faces.

"The shortest and simplest way to address Randy's question is to say that all belief systems are just the stories we create in order to deal with the void. Ego abhors a vacuum, so everybody's scrambling to create the illusion of something where there's nothing. Belief systems are simply the devices we use to explain away the unthinkable horror of no-self."

This is unfolding nicely. I sometimes have a hard time gauging response to my words because what's completely obvious to me might be completely unbelievable to someone listening. For some of those listening, I suppose, a blanket denouncement of all of mankind's religions and philosophies is humongous, and for some it's old hat. For the purposes of tonight's lesson, it's just a stepping stone.

"Beliefs are candles that man uses to ward off the surrounding darkness. They are the charms we use to hold infinity at bay, to dispel the black cloud that hovers over every head."

I don't want to move on without nailing this down. They don't have to believe me or agree with me, but I want them to keep up with me. What I'm going to say tonight isn't really for them to understand tonight, but to take with them, and they won't be able to do that if they drop out at this point.

"What's going on here?" I ask. "What's the deal? Who am I? *What* am I? What lies beyond? What's the point? Those are big questions and all the religions and spiritual traditions represent our attempts to answer them. Obviously we can't answer correctly, but that's okay because we don't have to, we just have to answer adequately. We don't have to make the black cloud disappear, we just have to make it seem dark gray instead of black. Our explanations can be ninety-nine percent unsatisfying and that's good enough because we don't need the black cloud gone, we just need it taken

down a notch."

I stop speaking and let the words hang. No one moves. No one speaks. I know they're silently reevaluating their own beliefs from this perspective, but now's not the time. I proceed.

"Ever been depressed?" I ask them. "Really depressed? Like nothing means anything? Like there's no point to anything?" I can see from their reactions that they all know what I'm talking about. "And what's the worst thing about those dark moments? Where do they get their power?" I wait a moment so they can think about it, so they'll recognize it when I say it. "From their undeniability, isn't that right? From the fact that there's no argument? When you're in that state, don't you know perfectly well that it's true?"

Heads nod. A few muffled assents.

"That's right. When you're in that space, you know it's not just a mood. You're seeing something you don't normally allow yourself to see. Your moments of blackest despair are really your most honest moments—your most lucid moments. That's when you're seeing without your protective lenses. That's when you pull back the curtain and see things as they are."

A long silence. A heavy silence. Now it's personal. They've all experienced those unfiltered moments. They've all known the feeling of utter futility. And most importantly, they remember that at the heart of that black despair is the knowledge that that's what's real—everything *is* futile.

"Picture a hand sweeping away one of those beautiful Tibetan sand mandalas," I say quietly.

I find my water bottle and take a drink. This still isn't quite where this whole thing is going, but it's definitely an important stop. I don't want to leave to soon, or stay too long. After a few moments I break the silence.

"Anybody know any ghost stories?"

They laugh and the pall that had descended on them is somewhat dispelled.

"What about atheists?" asks Martin. "They don't have any belief system to shield them."

"In this context, there is no such thing as an atheist. If anything, we're all agnostics and the only distinction between any two is one of degree. Everybody believes something, but only as much as they have to—enough to function. The cloud is still there, of course, hanging over every head, mocking every hope and dream, but thanks to our religions and philosophies, it's somehow not totally black, just a very dark gray, and we can go on about our lives."

Is it vampires who can't enter until they're invited? I play with that idea for a while just to keep myself amused until the invitation arrives.

Randy delivers it. "So what you're saying is... it's all like... I mean, everything? Everything everybody believes, it's all just... like, lies? Like, bullshit?"

This isn't just any question, it's one of the biggies. This is a question that has to be asked and answered in the clearest possible terms—in the manner most likely to penetrate and stick. We've spent several minutes building up to it, preparing the way for it, but if I stopped now and gave a pop quiz, none of them would be quite sure what *it* was.

That's the point. That's the reason that the big questions get the big production. This isn't a song we're singing or a mountain we're climbing—it's a dream we're unweaving. There's absolutely no chance that we're going to unravel a fantastically complex, multi-layered tapestry in a single evening, but the thread we're tugging on tonight can never be retightened. The fabric cannot be mended.

The bell cannot be unrung.

I let Randy's question hang in the air for a few moments, allowing the entire line of inquiry establish itself in silence. All eyes are watching me expectantly. "What's the wisefool gonna say?" they wonder. That's part of the drama. They've heard it played the same way so many times that they have to wonder if I'm going to tapdance

around the question with stock answers about respect for other people's beliefs and the validity of all viewpoints and how there's room for all of us. They expect politically correct evasions because that's what they've always heard. But this time it's different. I'm not answering a question, I'm confirming a suspicion.

"Yes."

I pause for dramatic effect.

"No belief is true. No. Belief. Is. True."

I just leave it hanging out there for a while, letting it imprint itself on these minds so that they'll be able to revisit it and confirm it for themselves later. This is a very big concept, but it's going to get bigger in a minute.

The only movement is the dance of the flames and the falling spring rain. I speak only loudly enough to be heard. "All beliefs. All concepts. All thoughts. Yes, they're all false—all bullshit. Of course they are. Not just religions and spiritual teachings, but all philosophies, all ideas, all opinions. If you're going for the truth, you're not taking any of them with you. Nothing that says two, not one, survives."

That's what I say. It rings true because it *is* true. It sounds a clear note that will resonate in these people's minds until its vibration has shaken their false belief structures into heaps of rubble. I mean, how can it not? I'm not telling them something *I* know, I'm showing them something *they* know.

I take a break so everyone can do the math rather than just watch the teacher do it on the blackboard. As tempting as it may be for me to believe that I can wake people up by shaking or slapping them or by just looking deeply enough into their eyes and coaxing them out, I know that the trance they're in can't be so easily broken. This sort of direct assault, though, is my version of whacking them with sticks like the Zen guys do.

And now, because they still don't really see it—

"Okay Brendan," I say. He looks startled to be singled out.

"What's the answer to your question?"

"I, uh, I don't know. What question?"

"The meaning of life. Didn't you ask me what the meaning of life was?"

"Um, well yeah, I was just, uh, joking. I didn't really expect...um, an answer or anything."

"Why not?" I address my comments to the whole group. "Why shouldn't we ask what the meaning of life is? Hell, shouldn't that be, like, the *first* thing we ask? Why should that of all questions be a joke? What are we, livestock? How can we do anything until that most fundamental of all questions is answered?"

No one is leaping up to answer, least of all Brendan.

"So, Brendan, if you'll do the honors—what's the meaning of life?"

He looks like a deer caught in the headlights, but he thinks about what's been said here tonight and puts it together.

"There is none," he says.

"None what?"

"There is no meaning. There is no meaning of life."

Click.

That's it. That's where this whole thing has been going. Saying that no belief is true is simply the inversion of this crisp, perfect statement—life has no meaning.

"Thank you Brendan. Very nicely done."

And while that perfect statement may be the final destination of this evening's lesson, it's not the final destination of the process of self-realization. It's just the beginning—the starting point of inquiry. Like I told Julie at the boathouse, you have to start this journey by taking stock of what you know for sure. Wishful thinking and fear-based fairy tales don't play here.

"I'm not a priest," I continue to the silent group. "I'm not a holy man or a guru. I have no teaching. I'm not representing any lineage or system. I'm not telling you the black cloud is okay, I'm telling you

it's infinitely big and infinitely black. I'm not saying you can live with it, I'm saying that the black cloud is reality so deal with it and if it kills you, so the fuck what?"

I don't know how they're taking it, but for me this is the best part. This way lies freedom—the *only* freedom.

"No one who plans on waking up has the luxury of pretending that the cloud is okay. It's not okay. It's not dark gray. It's reality—*your* reality—and if you want to get real, that's where you have to go."

"But..." says Randy.

"No buts. Listen: One millionth of one percent false is completely false. Everything in duality is false—false as in not true, not true as in bullshit. There are no exceptions. Black and white, no shades of gray. Truth is one, is non-dual, is infinite, is one-without-other. Truth is dissolution, no-self, unity. There's nothing to say about it, nothing to feel about it, nothing to know about it. You are true or you're a lie, as in ego-bound, as in dual, as in asleep."

Silence. That felt good. The fabric is rent. Whatever stories at whatever degree of belief these people use to shield themselves from reality have just been structurally destabilized. The stories may survive for weeks or months or years, but their demise is now assured and the time will come when each of these people gets what they came here for—a direct confrontation with reality.

Or not. Never bet against Maya. Truth is infinitely simple, delusion is infinitely complex. There's no over-estimating our ability to avoid making eye contact with the obvious. Maybe some of them will now scramble deeper into their stories, but for those who are here to hear, the leveling note has been sounded.

Once again, Randy asks the question they all want the answer to. "So all beliefs are bullshit, as opposed to...like, what?"

"As opposed to facing facts. As opposed to saying 'Fuck it. I'm going to see for myself.' As opposed to declaring 'Truth or Bust!' and meaning exactly that. Truth at all costs. Truth regardless of conse-

quence. Truth at any price."

Phew!

. . .

I slump into my chair and let everyone sit quietly with their thoughts while I sit with mine. That was a tricky thing to try to convey. Did I say it well? Did I leave out anything important? I replay it in my head and am satisfied that I made the best of a difficult but critical piece of communication. It's a few minutes before anyone even moves around and I think I started to doze off. Eventually, the dialogue picks up again.

"Well, is it true that all religions are built upon the same foundation?" one of them, Marla, asks. "That they all contain the same truth?"

That's a good cooling off question. The intense part is over and now I can use this as a ramp to slide us all back down onto a more mellow—dare I say?—groove.

"Oh gosh, yeah, maybe, I suppose, if you really want to stretch a point, but not in any sense that would be of practical value to someone who was trying to wake themselves up. That's the sort of qualification I'd make if I wanted to appear open and accepting, but I would certainly never try to help anyone awaken by suggesting they make a study of world religions or spiritual teachings. I mean, I can pick up a Bible or the Koran or the Talmud or the Upanishads or the Dhammapada or any of the noteworthy spiritual texts and I—me, Jed—can decipher them within the context of truth. I can see what they say that's of possible value, I can see what was probably valuable before sleeping minds rewrote it, and I can see what's just nonsense. In short, I can read the great spiritual teachings of the world from the perspective of one who has made the journey and judge them based on their effectiveness as maps for others making the journey.

"Now, to answer your question in a way that might be of some value to you, I would say yeah, okay, you could say that all the major

religions and great spiritual teachings have the same truth at their core, but realistically, that does not make them useful to someone who is seeking enlightenment because the useful stuff is tangled up with too much useless stuff. They say that a million monkeys banging on a million typewriters will eventually produce the complete works of Shakespeare, but I don't want to be the guy who has to read through it all."

That gets a laugh. The mood is loosening up a bit. Mad, iconoclastic, nihilistic heretic guy is gone and funny, mellow, wisdom guy is back.

"You're looking for an exact map and these great texts are thick bundles of pages covered in scribble. Yes, some of the lines in all that scribble are actually somewhat accurate, as far as they may go, but you're not going to have any way of knowing which ones are right until you've made the journey yourself, by which time, of course, you'll no longer need the map."

Even Martin, with his strong ties to Vedic scripture, seems attentive and thoughtful.

"You've all heard the saying 'When the student is ready, the teacher appears.' Well, that means a lot more than just the mysterious arrival of gurus in a timely manner. It means that the knowledge you need will appear when you're ready for it. The ability to open the next door is never denied, but the ability to open the door after the next is never granted. In this sense, you'll have many, many teachers. In this sense, a passage from the Bible might be exactly the right thing at exactly the right time, but that doesn't mean the entire Bible is the right thing all the time. Even the books and teachings I like the most I consider ninety percent useless."

I look around at the faces and see a spectrum of comprehension ranging from near empty to near full. That's to be expected.

"It's all about unlocking the next door," I continue, "and having ten thousand keys doesn't mean a thing if none of them opens the door you're standing in front of. 'Teacher' is just a word for the key

you need to open the next door. After you're enlightened, you can revisit these great books and the great teachings to your heart's content and then they'll no longer be mysterious or impenetrable to you, but they'll still be of no use to you because you'll already be enlightened, so it would really only be a recreational pursuit."

"Then why do you have all those books in the house?" asks Rita.

Good question. Because, I'm tempted to say, a dozen new ones mysteriously appear every day.

"Most of the books inside are of no value to someone trying to wake up. I can't think of one that I'd hand to a student and say, 'Here, this is what you need to know.' Worst by far are those that appear the best, like writings on Zen and Advaita. If I were to only allow useful books in the house, there'd probably only be a few dozen."

I expect the next question to flow straight from my last statement, but they surprise me. Instead of asking which books I'd hang on to, Mary speaks up. "Then why don't you write one?" she asks. "A book about you and Sonaya and the house and all your students?"

Everyone bursts into applause and hooting to express their approval of the idea. When they settle down, I reply.

"It's too far out," I say. "No one would ever believe such a thing could happen in Iowa. Hell, I hardly believe it myself."

Everybody laughs.

23

Big hitter, the Lama.

"So I jump ship in Hong Kong and make my way over to Tibet, and I get on as a looper at a course over in the Himalayas. A looper, you know, a caddy, a looper, a jock. So, I tell them I'm a pro jock, and who do you think they give me? The Dalai Lama, himself. Twelfth son of the Lama. The flowing robes, the grace, bald... striking.

"So I'm on the first tee with him. I give him the driver. He hauls off and whacks one—big hitter, the Lama—long, into a 10,000-foot crevice, right at the base of this glacier...

"So we finish the 18th and he's gonna stiff me. And I say, 'Hey, Lama, hey, how about a little something, you know, for the effort, you know.' And he says, 'Oh, uh, there won't be any money, but when you die, on your deathbed, you will receive total consciousness.'

"So I got that goin' for me, which is nice."

—Bill Murray, *Caddyshack*

24

I've done what I came to do.

Who calls my poems poems?
My poems are not poems.
Knowing my poems are not poems,
together we can begin to speak of poems.

— Ryokan —

That last half-hour was unexpected. Delivering the whole black cloud talk was not premeditated, but, as I say, I don't really plan these things, I just follow the flow and play my part and enjoy the ride.

"You talk a lot about the light of intellect and the power of discrimination," one of the guys asks out of the blue, as if he's been saving it up. "Is your third eye open?"

That's a sign that the fun stuff is over and that goofy metaphysical stuff is starting. Nothing to do but make the best of it.

"Yeah," I reply reluctantly, "well, if you're asking just from curiosity about me, the answer is I don't know. I get a bit confused when the discussion turns to metaphysics. If you're asking because you want to know if mystical powers are necessary to achieve enlightenment, then the answer is no; no superpowers required. If you're asking whether or not you get mystical powers as, like, a bonus when you become enlightened, then the answer isn't so clear. I don't see auras or know the future or anything like that. I suppose I could go out and develop some mystical skills, but I wouldn't know what to do with them. I have no such desire."

"On the other hand, I have, uh, heightened abilities might be a good way to put it, that most of you haven't gotten around to devel-

oping or recognizing in yourselves yet. These abilities are not really related to enlightenment directly, though—at least, they don't hinge on it, nor it on they. I'm talking about the ability to manifest desires, for one. To shape your personal reality. Another might be the ability to view life not in detail, but in broad patterns, as if from a greater altitude, and to flow through it from that more elevated perspective. That's why I get hesitant when asked about my third eye and all that. Someone who doesn't have the knowledge to shape his personal reality might consider it a power or as something mystical, whereas to me it's just something I know how to do. I started doing it for very practical purposes before awakening and I never thought of it as anything but the way things really work. There's no great mystery to it, it's only magic when you don't know how it works. Once you know, you know. I don't think the guy who adjusts the timing on my car is a mystically empowered dude, he just knows how to do something I don't."

I smile at the rapt faces dancing in the firelight. They're listening. Strange as it may sound, I sometimes forget that people are actually listening. I guess I sometimes get the feeling that I'm just singing my song because it amuses me to do so. I forget that it actually amuses others also.

"Which two or three dozen?" Mary asks, and it takes me a moment to realize that she's jumping back to my statement about which books would remain if I were more discriminating about the library.

"Oh, I'd want to be a little careful answering that," I say. "The reason for the books I'd choose wouldn't be that they are particularly enlightened or enlightening books, or even specifically on the subject of enlightenment. My choices would be based on what I feel is useful knowledge on the path to enlightenment, which is very different from enlightenment itself. In this light, I'd have a bunch of books and maybe some movies, too, because they're often a common experience we share and can provide an interesting framework for

highlighting certain issues..."

"Like what?" she asks.

I think about some of the movies I've seen in the last few years that most everybody would be familiar with.

"Well, *The Matrix* would be a good example of a movie I could get a lot of use out of. *Total Recall*, *The 13th Floor*, *Blade Runner*—those are all good looks at the flimsy and even arbitrary nature of what we consider reality. *Joe vs. the Volcano* is another one I'd use because of the parable-like view it takes of the death-rebirth process. There are probably a few dozen more if I thought about it. The Peter Brook version of *The Mahabharata* certainly. *All the Mornings of the World* would be a nice look at the teacher-student relationship. *What Dreams May Come* to demonstrate the relationship between thoughts and reality. Plenty of others, for different reasons. *Harvey*, just because."

I pause to consider and decide I'd better stick with general recommendations not too open to misinterpretation. I don't want to mention any books that would require me to include a lengthy disqualifier.

"As for books, besides the ones that you would all guess—various versions and translations of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Tao Te Ching*—there'd be a version of *The Mahabharata* accessible to Westerners. *The Three Pillars of Zen* by Roshi Philip Kapleau, *Stranger In A Strange Land* by Heinlein, *The Razor's Edge* by Maugham, *Walden*, *Leaves of Grass*, Emerson's essays, anything by Stan Grof, *Hero With A Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell, *Holographic Universe* by Michael Talbot, and so forth—all good for different reasons. There would also be a small collection of channeled material, some spiritual novels with a theme of rebirth..."

Almost everyone reacts at the same time to the mention of channeled material. The general response seems to be a mixture of surprise and disbelief.

"I find channeled material very useful and interesting, not just

for teaching but for my own understanding of the phenomenal world in which, as you can see, I exist just like anyone else. If you want me to be specific, I'd say I like Michael for understanding ego and personality structure. When it comes to personal reality, I like Seth. If I have questions about flow and manifestation and desire, then I read Abraham. I might be forgetting something, but those are the main ones I like. *A Course In Miracles* certainly has its moments."

"So those channeled entities were instrumental in your own...?"

"Oh, no, no, not really," I wave a hand dismissively. "It's more like, combined, they make up my user's manual for being a human on earth—Being Human 101. This is why I want to be careful about this discussion. I like the books I mentioned, but I don't really look at them that often. Usually just when I have a specific question."

"So what do you read for amusement?" asks Mary.

"Besides Harlequin romances? I like Osho—the enlightened guy formerly known as the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh." Some surprise registers through the group about this, which is quite understandable. If one equates enlightenment with sainthood, then Osho might come off as more of an anti-saint, especially if one has only heard the stories of murder plots and free love and power grabs and tax evasion and the ninety Roll Royces. I like his teaching style. I like his take on Zen. I am in awe of his mind.

"And novels. I read a lot of fiction." I can see from their reaction that I need to say more. "All right, you got me. I spend a lot of time just killing time. I play video games, read books, watch movies. I'd say I probably blow several hours a day that way, but I don't see it as a waste because I don't have anything better to spend my time on. I couldn't put it to better use because I'm not trying to become something or accomplish anything. I have no dissatisfaction to drive me, no ambition to draw me. I've done what I came to do. I'm just killing time 'til time kills me."

This seems to have a quieting effect on the group. I suppose they hadn't considered the possibility that enlightenment was the end of

a lot of things we don't normally think of as having ends. Finally, Mary breaks the spell by returning us to the discussion of books.

"What if you were stranded a desert island," she asks, "and could only have one book?"

"Easy," I reply, "*Calvin and Hobbes*."

Everyone laughs. I close my eyes and lean my head back and everyone takes that as a signal to give me some peace. They talk among themselves but I am not listening to them. I'm listening to everything and nothing and feeling the light rain on my face and breathing the fresh night air, bringing it all the way down so it cleanses me and carries away the heaviness that builds up after long periods in character. I'm not tired or ending the evening, I just want to not hear my own voice for awhile. I want to pay attention to the rain and the breeze. I want to let one topic fade out so that a new and fresher one might come along.

25

The Uncherished Sword

This sword is an ugly, meaty tool.
Not one for pageants and ceremonies,
Not one for a collector's wall,
Not one to show the grandkids.

It has no scabbard, no tassel,
No craftsman has left his mark.
The handle is cracked and dry,
The metal has lost its shine.

Dull and dirty, pitted with age,
Dried blood caked at the hilt.
Once it held a razor's edge,
And shone with the light of the sun.

But now it sits unused, forgotten.
When beheading time comes,
I know right where it is.
But beheading time is over.

Why read about another's sword?
It's your head that's still attached.

— Jed McKenna —

26

The Golden Rule.

The great path has no gates,
Thousands of roads enter it.
When you pass through this gateless gate
You walk the universe alone.

— Mumon —

Watching the fire brings back memories of when I was just a regular person. I fondly recall a drinking buddy with whom I used to carry on lofty and semi-coherent philosophical discourse back in my twenties. Obeying Thoreau's precept that the big thoughts require big spaces, we would take our debates outside and shout back and forth across roaring bonfires, busy streets, still ponds—never sitting, never standing still, and never making a whole lot of sense. He was in the process of inventing a version of Christianity that suited his larger-than-life persona and I was working through Thoreau and Whitman. When we were done with the big thoughts we'd spin and spin until we'd fall down and cling to the earth until it stopped moving. Why? Haven't a clue. Made sense at the time.

"Jed?"

"Yes, Mary."

"What does it mean in Zen Buddhism when they say that to achieve enlightenment one must pass through the gateless gate?"

"The gate refers to the barrier that stands between the unawakened mind and enlightenment. From the perspective of the person

wishing to become enlightened, this gate appears enormous and impassable. It's what you see as the difference between you and me. I tend to think of it more as a series of doors, each of which must be unlocked and passed through before progress can continue, until finally the final door is opened and you look back on your great journey only to find that you never moved an inch and that there never was a gate. No doors, no locks, not so much as a line drawn in the sand."

"Oh, I see. And how is that useful?"

Good question. I think about it for a moment. I recall my own pre-enlightened thoughts about the gateless gate. "I don't believe it is. It's just something you notice once you get past it."

"Oh, I see. And when they talk about a finger pointing at the moon?"

"Okay, when they talk about a finger pointing at the moon, they're saying you should look where the finger's pointing, not at the finger itself. Don't mistake the finger for the moon."

"I see. And how is that useful?"

"Well, for instance, if you were to start making a big deal about me, then I would use the finger pointing at the moon thing to get you back on the right track, to put your attention back where it belongs, on the moon, not the finger. Make sense?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Reading about Zen lately, Mary?"

"Yes, because you talk about it so much."

"Well, use the opportunity to sharpen your sword of discrimination. Much of what you'll read about Zen is a finger pointing at the finger pointing at the moon rather than at the moon. Keep that in mind and let me know if you have more questions."

Other questions come and I deal with them; kundalini, diet, psychedelic drugs, this movie, that book, this guru, that poem, this shortcut, that fad. I'm in a very relaxed state, but eventually the subject of bliss comes up and gets my juices flowing again.

"I know enlightenment is a state of ecstasy and bliss..." begins a newcomer named Jeffrey.

"Excuse me?" I interrupt.

"I mean," he replies, "I know it's about, you know, the experience of..."

"Bliss?" I ask. "Ecstasy?"

"Yeah, so what I was wondering..."

"Stop."

I don't know whether to laugh or cry.

"How many of you think that? Show of hands, please. How many of you equate enlightenment with bliss or ecstasy or whatever?"

Several hands go up. Mary, who was asking about Zen, doesn't raise her hand. One who I know is already beyond the First Step doesn't raise her hand either, but nearly half of them do.

"Fuck bliss," I tell them. "Bliss is for children. Bliss is for tourists, for rubes. Do you really think that spiritual enlightenment is going to be like an endless orgasm?" This provokes a few muffled titters. "A permanent high? Heaven on earth? No more problems. No more worries. Just sitting around being *happy* all the time? Doesn't that sound a little, I don't know, *sleazy*? Like all we're really doing here is trying to cop a great buzz?"

I pause to let them contemplate it for themselves.

"Enlightenment isn't a peak experience. It's not an altered state of consciousness. It's not a happily-ever-after fairy tale. Spiritual enlightenment means waking up—as simple and as difficult as that. Bliss is just the heaven myth repackaged for a slightly hipper crowd—heaven on earth, heaven here and now. It's really too silly to talk about.

"But the larger issue here is how such a ridiculous idea got into your heads in the first place. That should be a pretty sobering question. If such a bizarre notion was so firmly rooted in your thinking, what else is in there? If your beliefs aren't your own, whose *are* they? Who are *you*? You must re-examine all of your assumptions, and only

a small fraction of them are readily visible. Unchallenged beliefs can define you and determine the course of your life. Maybe the whole reason you're on this spiritual track in the first place is due to the unchallenged belief that this path leads to rapture. Maybe you don't really want to go where this really leads. Maybe you're just in it for the fairy tale. I would guess that that's true of over ninety-five percent of Western spiritual seekers."

I look around and see everyone staring at me wide-eyed. Is my zipper open?

"Think for yourself. That's the golden rule. Think for yourself. Make it your mantra. Tattoo it on the inside of your eyelids."

I perform a theatrical bow. "Thank you ladies and gentlemen. You've been a wonderful audience. Drive safely. Good night."

They applaud on cue and begin talking among themselves, all still a bit energetically buzzed. I plop down into my chair to watch the dying embers. The light drizzle is still falling and a constant buzz of tiny sizzles can be heard as the moisture meets the heat. I am vaguely aware of a presence somewhere behind me and assume it's Sarah.

"If you're too tired to talk tonight we can get together tomorrow," I say.

"I'm not tired," she replies as she approaches and sits down on the wet grass beside my chair. She pulls her legs up and wraps her arms around her knees. We watch the fire together in silence for a few minutes before she speaks. "I'm afraid I might be in the wrong place," she begins. "I'm not sure I'm really cut out to learn what you're teaching."

"That's certainly possible," I say, wondering if it isn't actually pretty likely. But no, I don't think it's likely at all. This whole thing can come off as awfully one-pointed at times, but the fact of the matter is that the pursuit of truth is in itself a lifestyle choice, and one that can be fulfilling in many ways aside from the actual achievement of the ultimate goal. This is a journey of steps, and every step is, in

a very real sense, its own journey.

"In a way, what we're doing here is an intellectual approach to spiritual development. Do you think you'd be more comfortable with a more heart-centered approach?"

Of course, what I'm really asking her is if she prefers the fairy tale after all.

"Maybe," she says weakly.

"Maybe," I echo. "But, you know, it's not an earth-shattering decision. It's not something you have to get really hung up on. My guess is that there are some things you're supposed to learn while you're with us. Maybe not everything, maybe just one or two smaller things. The universe is funny about how it puts us exactly where we need to be to pick up the next piece of the puzzle. I mentioned to you that bit about there not being any winners or losers, right?"

"Yes, I remember," she says.

"And here you are right now getting a little panicky, thinking that where you are isn't where you should be. And I agree with you, maybe you should be moving on soon, nothing wrong with that. But I doubt that your time here was wasted or that you don't still have something to pick up while you're here. See what I mean?"

She nods to say that she understands, but as someone who spent three quarters of his life nodding at things he didn't understand at all, I tend to observe nodding heads and muffled assents with a degree of skepticism.

"How old are you, Sarah?" I asked.

"Twenty," she replies.

"Well, let's take an honest look at this. First, you're not going to be crashing through the gateless gate anytime soon. Is that something that weighs heavily on you? Do you feel like you have to do well or excel at this spiritual stuff?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Do you think you might be uncomfortable here because you don't feel you're progressing quickly enough?"

I was above and somewhat behind her so all I could make out was the nod, but I could tell she was getting a little emotional about it. I ask how long she's been with us and she says about a week. I laugh.

"Well, there comes a point in the journey when it's very appropriate to put a lot of pressure on yourself—maybe even the kind of pressure that can break your mind and land you in an institution." She turns and looks up at me with fear in her eyes. "I wouldn't worry about that just yet," I reassure her. "Do you know what I was doing when I was twenty, Sarah?"

"You were probably already enlightened and teaching people like me," she answers.

Now I really laugh. "Sarah, when I was twenty I was totally lame. A smart, beautiful, spiritually sophisticated girl like you wouldn't have looked at me twice. Little depth, no sense of direction, no acquaintance with spiritual matters. Just flailing my way through life. The person that I was at twenty could never have found his way to this house, to this thing we have here—could never have understood it even in the broadest sense. You're light-years more developed and awake than I was then. Now, that doesn't mean you'll be fully awake by the time you're thirty, but who knows? Nobody knows anything."

Clearly, Sarah only half believes me. "It's true," I affirm. "I didn't start getting interesting until I was nearly thirty. Before that... you don't want to know."

She's smiling now, a little relieved and a little shocked to hear that someone she had placed on too high a pedestal wasn't really the product of immaculate conception.

"You have many years of this spiritual adventure in front of you, probably many lifetimes. Try to take it one step at a time. Even looking two steps ahead can be very intimidating, know what I mean? Breathe more deeply, drink more water, meditate more often. Take it easy. You're not struggling to climb from hell into heaven, you're just having an in-the-body experience. It's not evil, it's just life, and

when it's over, you die—easy as falling off a log."

Sarah has heard this from me before, but I'm not surprised that she still believes that she's in a bad place and must get to a good one. It's easy to say that there's no race, that there are no winners or losers, but it's a whole different thing to actually *get* it. This is one of those iceberg deals where it looks fairly small and benign up top but there's a huge mass of hardened obstruction hidden beneath the surface. I don't think that hearing me spout off on the subject is really going to melt anybody's iceberg, but like I said from the outset, my role is to sit here and talk about the things I know about, not to get invested in outcomes. Maybe I'm planting seeds, maybe I'm inserting subroutines for later execution, or maybe I'm just babbling in the wilderness. Who knows? Nobody knows anything.

"Is any of this making any sense?" I ask her.

"Yes, kind of," she says. "I think I feel, like... I don't know... like something is wrong with me, like I have to keep, I don't know..."

"Struggling."

"Yeah, like nothing is good enough, like I have to become this... like I have to totally cleanse myself, purify myself, and until then I'm... like I'm not..."

"Worthy?"

She sighs. "I guess."

"Like you're an outsider? Not like others? Not valid?"

She visibly reacts to that. Not valid.

"So you feel like you're not a valid person? Like you're not real? Not like other people? You must feel terribly out of place almost all the time, like you don't belong anywhere. Is that how it is? You always feel like you're always outside looking in?"

She is nodding and sobbing lightly.

"And so now you don't feel like you belong here either because everyone here is in place and you're out of place so you want to leave?"

Something releases in her. "My whole life is like this," she says

through tears and sniffles. "I'm always an outsider wherever I go. I never fit in." The crying gets heavier now. "Everybody else fits in... I never... I'm not like regular people... I don't know what to do..." I let her go on for a minute or two and get herself nice and cried out. No point in talking to her before then. I don't do a lot of personal counseling work like this has turned into, but what the hell? I actually have a soft spot for her problem.

"Cool," I say after she has calmed down a bit. "Very cool."

"Huh?" she asks. "What's cool? Why?"

"For two reasons, actually."

"What?" she asks.

"Everybody is full of shit, Sarah," I say and let it sit there for a moment before continuing. "I don't mean that in a negative way, despite the sound of it." She giggles. "I'm just saying, that's the deal, it's built in. There's no alternative, everyone is full of shit. By shit I mean falseness—false beliefs, false perceptions, and the false personality that's based on them. It's like when you're asleep and dreaming, your dreams are full of what your waking self would consider falseness, right? Not real? When you wake up you see them as absurd fictions and wonder how you could have believed they were real while they were happening, right?"

"I guess so."

"Well, enlightenment is really nothing more than that—waking up from a dream. You, me, here, now, it all seems very real and solid, doesn't it? So much so that the question seems absurd, right?"

She agrees.

"But isn't a dream the same way? Isn't it convincing when you're in it?"

"Yes," she says.

"That's delusion. Exactly the same. This is the dream. The question is, who is doing the dreaming and how do we wake up? How do we get real? That's what all this enlightenment stuff boils down to. It's about waking up and seeing what's really true, and to do that we

have to become progressively less asleep. We have to fight and scratch and claw our way to wakefulness. In the same sense, if you want to be more true, then the way to do that is by becoming less false, less full of shit. If you want to be less full of shit, then the way to do it is to go inside yourself with the spotlight of discrimination, find the shit, and illuminate it. Illumination destroys it. Lies disappear when you really look at them because they never had real substance, they were only imagined. That's what you were doing just now—bravely shining a light inward, digging deeper—and that's cool. It's not easy and it's not fun, but that's the process. That's how the good stuff happens. That's how icebergs get melted back into the ocean."

Someone near the fire is playing with burning sticks and I am reminded of a scene from the Peter Brook and Jean-Claude Carrière adaptation of *The Mahabharata*. While dancing with burning sticks, Krishna is speaking to Arjuna who fails to appreciate the absoluteness of the struggle they have embarked upon. To save Arjuna, Krishna has sacrificed a mighty and beloved ally, the magnitude of which Arjuna cannot comprehend. "Yes," says Krishna, "Ghatotkatcha has saved you. To preserve your life, I sent him to his death. Tonight I'm breathing in joy. I was born to destroy the destroyers, and I became your friend out of love for the world."

"What's the other reason?" asks Sarah.

"Huh?"

"You said very cool for two reasons."

"Oh, because I know exactly what you're talking about because I was exactly the same way, and I'll tell you what I wish someone had told me when I was feeling confused and alienated. I wish someone had told me that there wasn't something wrong with me and that I shouldn't be trying to make it right—that I should stop trying to pound a square peg into a round hole. I wish someone had told me that I wasn't like everyone else not because I was defective, but because I was designed for other things. Being different might seem

like a curse, but the important part is that it's also a blessing. I wish someone had told me to stop trying to fix the curse part and start figuring out the blessing part. Does that make any sense to you?"

I guess it does because she spends the next several minutes with her arms around my neck releasing what feels like a lot of pent-up tears. When she has spent most of it and we are able to converse again, her speech is noticeably less constricted and her laughter seems genuine, as if a belt around her chest had finally been removed and she was able to breathe freely for the first time in a long while.

Cool.

27

Has any one supposed it lucky to be born?

Has any one supposed it lucky to be born?
I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die,
and I know it.

I pass death with the dying
and birth with the new-wash'd babe,
and am not contain'd between my hat and boots,
And peruse manifold objects no two alike and every one good,
The earth good and the stars good,
and their adjuncts all good.

I am not an earth nor an adjunct of an earth,
I am the mate and companion of people,
all just as immortal and fathomless as myself,
(They do not know how immortal, but I know.)

— Walt Whitman —

28

Raw human things.

The universe is the unity of all things. If one recognizes his identity with this unity, then the parts of his body mean no more to him than so much dirt, and death and life, end and beginning, disturb his tranquility no more than the succession of day and night. —Chuang Tzu

The next morning I'm up by seven. I shower and dress in a hurry, grab an apple on my way through the kitchen and shoot out without anyone seeing me. I stowed my gear in the trunk before going to bed last night so as soon as I'm in the car I'm ready to go.

I learned from a late-night internet check after the fireside chat last night that today's weather was expected to be picture perfect—a rare occurrence for April in Iowa—so I made plans to take advantage of it. My skydiving equipment bag was already prepared for the season, so all I had to do was throw some clothes and a towel in a backpack, double-check to make sure I had my log book and a few other odds and ends, throw it all in the trunk and make sure the car wasn't blocked in by others so I could make a hasty departure this morning. And that's where I am now—making the thirty minute drive to my home dropzone on a morning that promises to be ideal for jumping out of airplanes.

I might be Johnny Enlightened, but I'm not Joe Cool. I always have a nervous stomach on the drive to the airfield that stays with me until I exit the aircraft for the first jump of the day, and today is no exception. It's like a low-level dread. If anything, it's a little worse than usual today because I haven't done any jumping since December when I made it down to a dropzone, DZ, in Florida for a few days.

After my first jump I'm always fine for the rest of the day. It's nice to think that enlightenment lets you transcend emotions like fear at will, but as they say to the beginners in skydiving, if you're not afraid of jumping out of an airplane, there's definitely something wrong with you.

Although I don't enjoy the fear, which manifests for me mainly as a grumbly stomach, I actually don't dislike it too much either since it really has no specific element. I'm not, for instance, particularly worried about injury or death, so the nervousness is pretty much a low-level anxiety that's more in the gut than the heart or mind. Like I said, once I've made that first jump of the day the anxiety is forgotten until the next time I make the drive.

I've made approximately one hundred jumps in five years, so it's not like I'm not a hardcore skydiving enthusiast. I don't take part in relative work, where groups of jumpers create mid-air formations. I don't do canopy relative work, where stacked formations are created under open parachutes. I don't do swooping or any fancy landing stuff that requires high-performance gear. I don't do free flying or strap a board to my feet or wear a bird suit either, although I'd like to try a bird suit which would turn me into a human wing and let me transfer much of the vertical energy into horizontal flight. I don't subscribe to the magazines or wear the clothes or go to the skydiving conventions, which are called boogies. Basically, I just like jumping out of an airplane two and a half miles high and falling toward earth at a hundred and twenty miles an hour once in a while. It's like committing suicide but changing your mind with a few seconds to spare. Just one of those raw human things.

I also like getting away from the house and stepping out of the whole spiritual teacher groove for awhile. Walking or biking, even by myself, doesn't get me out of it because my mind stays on it—keeps gnawing at the challenge of how to say things better, more clearly. But I can spend an entire day at the dropzone and not think about that stuff at all.

Nobody at the DZ identifies me with anything out of the ordinary, like being rural America's contribution to the illuminati shortlist. They just see me as a forty year-old guy who likes to jump out of airplanes now and then, which doesn't raise any eyebrows there. I don't totally fit in, but it's an okay place not to totally fit in. I hang out between jumps and talk to other divers and come the closest I ever get anymore to being a part of something.

I enjoy the drive. I open the windows and turn up the music and try to keep my mind off my nagging stomach. The day is shaping up nicely. Clear, warm days in April that aren't too windy are few. The temperature is in the low seventies and the wind is less than ten miles an hour. This is my first time jumping this season. I was at the DZ a month earlier to pick up my rig after having my reserve chute repacked by a licensed rigger, which has to be done every four months, but that was March and nobody was even thinking of going up.

When I arrive at the dropzone there is a refresher course being given to the beginners whose instruction was interrupted by winter. I take a seat in the back, always glad for the opportunity to listen to seasoned jumpers talk about the sport and share their experiences. When the class takes a break I go up and say hello to the jumpmaster who trained me. We talk about the weather and the new crop of students and the jumping we both managed to get in down south over the winter.

It's after ten o'clock before the plane is fueled and ready for the first run. It's a Cessna Caravan that holds more than a dozen jumpers per load. Manifest, the office where the planeloads are organized, hasn't put me on the first run. I watch as several skydiving virgins are briefed by their jumpmasters in preparation for tandem jumps. They receive training about how the process will work and what their role in it will be. In tandem jumps two people use the same parachute. The back of the passenger's harness is attached securely to the front of the tandem master's harness. The chute for tandems is much larger

than for singles and has a drone chute to reduce freefall speed to what a single diver would experience, one hundred and twenty some-odd miles an hour, rather than the wicked two hundred that the combined weight of two bodies would achieve. People who visit for tandems tend to clog the works at the DZ, but the regular jumpers have to be grateful for the influx of cash they represent because DZs are marginal businesses and those who use them regularly want to see them survive.

Many of the tandem jumpers come with friends and family, so the crowds can get heavy; kids running around, lawn chairs, coolers and video equipment everywhere, people standing with their necks craned back, one hand shielding their eyes, the other pointing skyward. It can be tricky packing a chute on the floor of a hangar when there are kids and dogs running around. Tandems are all scheduled for mornings, so by early to mid-afternoon everything usually settles down and only the regulars and students remain.

I watch as some tandem jumpers receive their instructions and get suited up. They wear jumpsuits, goggles, and sometimes, altimeters, although the tandem master will keep track of their height and make sure that the main chute is deployed at the correct altitude.

Manifest calls my name for the second run and I start preparing a few minutes after the first load takes off. I want to be one of the first on the plane so I can ride it to 14,000 feet or higher before hopping out. It won't be refueling between the first and second loads, so I need to be ready. It's a warm day so I'm jumping in just shorts, a t-shirt and strap-on sandals. I slip into my parachute, carefully connecting and adjusting the leg straps, which will support my weight, and the chest strap, which will keep me from spilling out the front. I strap my altimeter to the back of my left hand, drape my goggles around my neck, and approach another readied jumper so we can inspect each other's rigs.

When the plane is back and the pilot has set the small portable stairway in place, I wait for a jumpmaster to let me know when to

get in. I'd like to be first in and last out, but if there's an advanced freefall student on this run then he and his one or two jumpmasters will be last out. It turns out that there is an AFF student on this load and he is only on his second or third level so he will be diving with two JMs holding onto him all the way from his exit until the time when he deploys his chute at around 5,000 feet. I wait as the student and one of his JMs get in and make their way all the way forward so that they're sitting against the back of the pilot and co-pilot seats. I'm in next and I position myself in the next most distant position from the door, which is between the student's legs, my back to him, his legs to either side of me just as mine will be around someone else shortly. I take a moment to confirm that my altimeter is set to zero. Within two minutes it's like a can of sardines in the plane and we're rolling to one end of the runway in preparation for takeoff.

Once we're at the downwind end of the runway and turned around, the pilot locks on the brakes and revs up the engine. The whole plane shudders with the power build-up. Finally the pilot releases the brakes and we surge forward. After a few hundred feet we're in the air and the airport is shrinking beneath us. Someone passes around a container of breath mints and I take one and pass them along.

Some of the divers are wearing full gear with jumpsuits and helmets with facemasks and audible altimeters installed near the ear that will alert them when they have reached pre-set altitudes. There's a group of four or five near the door that will exit together with their videographer to perform a complex series of relative work formations. There's another videographer on board who I guess is for the advanced freefall student behind me. The videographers wear special helmets with video cameras on the side and 35mm SLR cameras on top that they control with a hand unit. They are very skilled skydivers.

The student between whose legs I am nestled is a big guy who is uncomfortable in these tight confines. He's very fidgety. One of the

most important things you have to do when you're wearing a rig is guard your handles—your cutaway handle, your hand-deployed pilot chute or rip cord, and your reserve chute handle—but there's more to be careful about than just the handles, as I'm soon to find out.

The entire ride up is windy because this plane has had its side door removed for the day. Usually, the door is left closed for a relatively calm ascent, but the door for this particular aircraft is not ideally suited to being open and out of the way in flight so it has been left on the ground near the fuel storage tanks. At around 9,500 feet the relative workers and their video guy take their positions, some inside and some holding on to handles and standing on foot pegs outside the plane. On a three count they're away and the plane surges upward from the abrupt loss of more than half a ton of weight.

The next to go is a skyboarder who is having a tricky time negotiating his way around inside the smooth-floored wind-filled plane with the snowboard-like ski strapped to his feet. He tumbles awkwardly out the door and another jumper nearby sticks his head out to confirm that the skyboarder managed a safe exit. He gives a thumbs-up indicating to the rest of us that all is well.

Behind me I'm aware of the jumpmaster and the student practicing hand signals and reciting dive flow one last time as the plane banks and heads for higher sky. Everything is going smoothly and I'm just plain happy; looking at the window, checking my altimeter, basking in the anticipation of falling through the sky two and a half miles above the world.

Then all hell breaks loose.

At first I have no idea what's going on except that I'm being assaulted from behind. It turns out that the student is actually on his first jump and has just erupted into a full blown panic attack—flailing and scrabbling and releasing a shrill keening sound that I associate with grieving Arab women. The JM who was sitting beside the student is acting to calm and restrain him and I've been pushed forward and somewhat onto my side by all the activity. I'm aware of five

or six jumpers watching the whole melee, including the student's second JM and his videographer, and I'm aware that time has slowed markedly so that a piece of cellophane swirling in the wind vortex inside the plane holds my attention for what seems like several minutes. Then things get really interesting.

As I'm trying to get myself up into a sitting position on the smooth surface of the floor I hear the JM behind me call out "Open container!" The outer pack that's attached to the harness and which contains the main and reserve parachutes is called the container. The fact that one is open inside an airborne plane with an open door is a serious piece of news and it takes me a moment to realize that it's my container he's talking about. That's as long as it takes for the second JM to come to the same realization. He was up on his knees in front of me and now he scurries on hands and knees around me to get access to my back. I have no idea what the status of my parachute is, but I certainly have read enough incident reports to know what can happen if a rig opens inside an aircraft with an open door.

My mind races through the scenarios I have read and allows me, in an instant, to envision the true potential of this situation. If the back of my rig comes open, then my tightly compressed, spring-loaded pilot chute will burst out of the container exactly as it was designed to do and bite into the wind which is swirling chaotically through the fuselage. There will probably be a delay of about a second as the pilot chute burbles inside the plane before it finds its way out the open door, and that's when things will really start to fly, literally, beginning with me.

As soon as the pilot chute goes out the door, my death will be certain and the only question will be whether or not the other passengers and the plane itself make it back safely to earth. With my pilot chute sucked out of the plane, my main chute will follow instantly behind it, which is exactly how it's supposed to work. Obviously, once my main chute opens and heads out the door there will be no hope for me, I will be sucked violently out of the plane.

Anyone between me and the door when that happens will go too, as will a section of the fuselage aft of the door that my body will go through rather than around. A big guy like me might take out a section of the plane's tail assembly as well.

In short, grim.

My mind courses through this entire scenario in about a millisecond, even as the second JM is still scrambling to get control of the back of my rig. I am back on my side now, completely passive, viewing events with detached equanimity. Joy surges through every fiber of my being. I am embarrassed to be this happy in these circumstances, but I can't help it. I am in the hands of fate and half a second away from a truly spectacular death. I see the eyes of the other jumpers as they huddle away from the door and out of the path they know I might soon be taking. They watch us and I see their perplexity as they see my elation. They probably think that I am nuts. They may even believe that the whole incident is my fault. I don't care. I am so alive with the thrill of the moment that I am surprised that the onlookers don't all break into grins of their own just from their proximity to me.

After a few moments I hear the JMs talking. Mine is hugging me from behind, his arms around my chest, using his body to hold my container closed rather than trying to redo whatever has come undone. The other JM seems to have the student calmed down. I knew that if there had been a door on the plane we would have simply closed it and made a hasty landing, but without a door the situation is different. The primary jumpmaster orders all jumpers to jump, including the student's videographer. The student, the two jumpmasters the pilot and myself will all land with the plane. The situation is explained to the pilot and everyone who can jump waits for an adequate spot to deplane and away they go, abandoning an imperiled aircraft for the safer ones on their backs. The pilot, knowing that there is an unsecured rig on board, begins a steep descent, not wanting to risk catastrophe any longer than necessary.

I have never landed in a small aircraft before and am enjoying the ride down with its steep descent and tight banking turns. Going up was never this much fun. At around two thousand feet a thought occurs to me and I say to the JM hugging me from behind "What about the AADs?"

I can't see the look that passes between them, but both JMs yell "Pull up!" at the same time. The pilot, not knowing the reason for the order, reacts abruptly and sends me sprawling free of the JM holding onto me. I expect my container to burst open and prepare for a last-second expression of gratitude, but it doesn't and I immediately press my back up against the wall of the plane, although it is impossible to get a secure purchase on the slippery floor, and there is nothing to grab onto. The JM gets on his knees beside me, slips a hand in between the fuselage and me, and yells that he has it, whatever "it" is.

AAD stands for automatic activation device. Not everyone has one, but I wear a former student rig so I do, and I know the student does and, as it turns out, one of the jumpmasters does too. The AAD has a built-in altimeter and will automatically deploy the parachute at a thousand feet if it isn't already out. Normally, it would be safe to have AADs turned on in a descending plane because they only activate over a certain rate of descent which a descending plane doesn't normally reach, but because we are going down faster than usual, the risk of one or more of them deploying was very real.

I know of cases where AADs have saved lives. If someone loses consciousness or for any reason can't deploy their own chute, then the AAD will pop it for them. They still might have a hell of a landing, but not as bad as it could be.

I also know of AAD failures and tragedies, including in-plane deployments. Not pretty. The primary JM—not the one with his hand holding my container closed—gives instructions to the pilot and makes sure the student is calm. He then gets up to his knees and turns off the student's AAD, which is accessed from the top of the

rig. He crawls to me, turns mine off, and then stoops forward so I can turn his off without having to move away from the wall.

Once the AADs are all off we are able to land without further incident. When the plane has come to a complete stop the JM with his hand on my back rolls me forward and secures my rig before letting me out of the plane. It would truly suck to go through all that and then have my rig pop open on the tarmac and pull me into a spinning propeller. I don't know if that can really happen, but I am in too good a mood to find out. No one on the ground knows there has been an incident yet because the skydivers who jumped are only starting to land now and they're a bit off-target because they didn't wait for a perfect spot from which to jump. Of course, people on the ground quickly figure out that something is wrong when a plane lands with four skydivers still aboard.

I get out of the plane and walk off into the grass, away from the plane and away from the approaching people. I don't want to talk. I don't want to spoil this wonderful moment. I could be involved in the sport of skydiving for an entire lifetime and never again have such an intense, hyper-alert experience. I am still soaking in the wonder of it and don't want to waste this time yapping about it. I drop my rig and step out of it and stretch out my arms and let waves of gratitude flow through me. What a wonderful fucking world. What a wonderful fucking life.

I stash my rig, which will have to be repacked anyway, and head off for a walk. I duck into some nearby woods and find a path and just amble along, replaying the experience and relishing the exhilaration. Half an hour later I return to the main hangar and realize that everyone thinks I went off to be alone because I was so shaken by the experience. The whole thing is already well on its way to achieving the status of local legend, and my fellow jumpers quickly realize that I am cool with it and happy to discuss it. I end up telling it half a dozen times that afternoon. A great additional benefit of the whole thing is that the DZ owner is so apologetic that he makes sure that

I am scheduled to make every second jump run for the rest of the day. By the time dusk sets in and the plane is rolled back into the hangar, I have gone up six times and come down under canopy five—the most jumps I've ever made in a single day. And, not realizing that I would have gladly paid extra for a day like this, they don't charge me a dime.

All dropzones, in my experience, have firepits. For the second night in a row I find myself staring happily into the flames, this time with an entirely different group of people and in an entirely different role. I drink lite beer, smoke cheap cigars, and listen raptly to high-flying tales of adventure and bravery and tragedy. This is a special breed of people and I'm honored to sit among them.

. . .

Okay, that was fun. Now back to the enlightenment stuff.

29

Layers.

Concepts can at best only serve to negate one another, as one thorn is used to remove another, and then be thrown away. Words and language deal only with concepts, and cannot approach Reality.

— Ramesh S. Balsekar —

I get home after eight o'clock and go straight upstairs to spend half an hour relaxing in the tub. Skydiving may not seem like a very physically demanding sport, especially since only twenty minutes out of the whole day was actually spent in freefall or under canopy, but by the end of a day at the DZ I feel as if I've spent eight hours digging ditches. Constant low-level tension, heat and sun, uncomfortable kneeling when repacking the chute, cramped fifteen or twenty minute climbs in the plane, the abrupt deceleration when the chute anchors itself into the air and less-than-gentle landings can all contribute.

The tub is a whirlpool and there's a stereo in the bathroom so I'm able to listen to relaxing music while I luxuriate in the hot water with the pounding jets. After a while I turn the jets down but leave the recirculating heater on and drift off for as sweet a nap as was ever had.

When I come downstairs I find that a late dinner is just wrapping up, so I commandeer the kitchen, close the doors, and begin the clean up. I have almost nothing but good things to say about Sonaya, but *damn!* that woman can trash a kitchen. She only does the cooking, never the cleaning afterward, so she's not motivated to minimize the mess.

Chris comes in carrying a load of plates and glassware. Chris is okay in small doses. He tends to be very fixed in his opinions, so there's really no point in trying to teach him anything until he is able to clear out some room in his head. His teacup is full, in the Zen sense—no room for anything else. That doesn't stop me from teaching him though. It's not my job to figure out where the words go once they leave my mouth. I'm sure Chris knows exactly why he's here with us and I'm sure he's wrong, but he'll get what he came for despite not knowing what it is, and eventually he'll leave with it though he'll be disappointed because he didn't get what he thought he came for. This is not terribly uncommon. I don't know why Chris is here and I'm not all that interested. I don't think about anyone's reasons, real or imagined. That's not my job. My job is to speak, to transmit, to say what I know. Reception is out of my hands. I have no interest in the results because I already know the results. I'm enlightened—I know how it all turns out.

Chris has his hand firmly on the tiller of his life. He's in control. He's making the decisions and he's determining his own fate. Captain of his own destiny may be how he thinks of it—his own man. If I were some revered master in Japan, Chris is one of those guys who would slave in the kitchen for ten years without ever speaking with me. If I taught with results in mind, Chris would never even be allowed to open a book or converse on spiritual matters until we pried his hands off the tiller. Rigid ego can scuttle the ship before it gets clear of the harbor. I've watched much smarter people than myself, much braver people than myself, break their ships fatally on the rocks because they were too full of themselves to release control. This stuff isn't about brains and balls, it's about desire and flow and purity of intent.

"Hey," says Chris like we're pals, "can I ask ya something?"

"Nope."

"Excuse me?"

"I like to do the dishes alone, Chris. Find me afterward and we

can discuss whatever you want."

"Oh, okay. Hey, that's cool."

I continue with the cleaning. When I bought the house it had a perfectly good dishwasher which I immediately took to the dump and replaced with additional counter and cupboard space. I don't have strong anti-technology feelings by any means, just an aversion to dishwashers. Cleaning a kitchen seems like one of life's little pleasures, and yes, I thought so back in the days before I had an army of little elves keeping the place tidy.

Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh says that there are two ways to wash the dishes. The first is to wash the dishes in order to have clean dishes. The other is to wash the dishes in order to wash the dishes. I do it in order to wash the dishes, but since I spend maybe an hour a week in this attempt at mindfulness, I figure it's best not to make myself out as being a real in-the-moment kind of guy. Many very bright people seem to agree that there's a great deal to be said for mindful action, but except for an occasional stint at the kitchen sink, I'm not one of them. Nor do I think of myself as one of those simple people who takes pleasure in the little things. In fact, if I can get back upstairs before Chris or anyone else snags me for some conversation, then I'll be spending the rest of my evening with Lara Croft battling our way together through perilous Himalayan monasteries in search of the Dagger of Xian. But will I make it upstairs before a student corners me? Not likely. As I continue cleaning I'm amused to imagine a Tomb Raider-like game wherein a harried spiritual teacher has to battle his way through a maze of clamoring students in his bid to get to his well-appointed home theater room. Instead of weapons, however, the students would hurl questions of a spiritual nature at the beleaguered teacher who must answer correctly in order to make progress. The game would be a sort of twenty-first century version of the old Japanese dharma dueling where enlightened guys would get into contests to see who could talk the talk better. Why did they do that, one might ask? Well, why

not? Why am I teaching and writing a book? Just because. Gotta do something. If they still had dharma dueling I'd be happy to represent Iowa in my conference. Well, I'd at least subscribe to a newspaper and follow it in the spiritual sports pages.

I digress. That's where my mind really goes when I wash the dishes. Not no-mind, monkey mind. If I were one of those revered Japanese masters I'd probably make myself slave in the kitchen for ten years without ever speaking to me.

I finish the kitchen and make my way upstairs. I get the PlayStation going and advance the game to the point where I left off last time. I am reminded that where I left off last time was at the beginning of a very tricky set of wall climbs and backward leaps that demand mid-air turns followed by grabbing an opposing wall. Failure, of course, results in a long fall and impalement on sharp sticks, which are, for good measure, set in a pool of bubbling lava.

The trick is that there is no trick. You just have to do it fifty times and get killed forty-nine. It can get a little frustrating.

I know what you're thinking. You think that I'm bringing Lara Croft and the Tomb Raider game into this book as a method of introducing another analogy. You think I'm going to say that a soul develops through many lifetimes on earth in the same way that in Tomb Raider one develops one's game character through all the increasingly difficult challenges throughout the course of an entire game. I don't blame you for thinking that, it's actually pretty suitable. I mean, here's the character in the game—Lara. Unbeknownst to her, she is being controlled and animated by unseen forces. See? There's a nice higher-self/lower-self thing going there. Lara faces a series of challenges, each one of which she must master before moving on, and yes, she may "die" and be "reborn" many, many times in the course of mastering even one of these challenges before moving on to the next. As the controlling entity or "higher-self" of Lara becomes more adept, the challenges become more difficult, eventually culminating in the final challenge, battling and slaying the ultra-mega-badass

dragon, after which the game is complete and no further "births" are required. You could even take such an analogy further by pointing out that the "oversoul" in this teaming is always confronted by a specific goal, and whether the game character is swimming blissfully toward that goal in cool blue waters, or whether she's up to her eyeballs in a sizzling pool of lava is a matter of complete indifference to the higher entity. All that matters is that she's progressing.

Yes, I can certainly see why you might think that that's why I'm mentioning my game, but you're forgetting something. This book isn't about the evolution of the soul or the relationship between higher and lower self. It's about abiding non-dual awareness—spiritual enlightenment—and the reason I mention playing the game is because, after washing the dishes and tidying up the kitchen, that's what I go upstairs to do.

. . .

Chris comes in and takes the adjacent seat and, with not the slightest hint of compassion for my female heroine's plight, begins lecturing me on the nature of illusion and the horrors perpetrated by the demonic ego. I finally figure out the trick to the second backward jump/twist/grab as Chris sits next to me using his hands to help him express his insights into the whole big soul/little soul thing.

"It's like we're divine beings," he informs me, "like gods, but we're enshrouded in darkness so that we're not awake to our true heritage. It's like a homeless person living on the streets in total destitution, not knowing that he is the son of a billionaire and heir to a massive fortune."

Chris is speaking passionately now, as if empowered by his own dismay. One hears conspiracy buffs speak in similar tones, puffy with self-importance and smug in the belief that they have penetrated more deeply than the common run—the herd—into the hidden realms. Running apart from the herd is certainly better than running

with it, I could tell Chris, but of no substantive difference if you're still running in the same direction.

I'm not too put off by Chris' rant on the nature of delusion or the fact that he presumes to educate me on this issue. Communicating is a powerful key to understanding, whether it's by oral expression or written. The mind naturally aligns itself into a more coherent state when it seeks to transmit knowledge than when it is merely processing and storing it for its own needs.

Lara gets to the top of the wall and has to pull herself up. The top of the wall is sloped though, so she falls off before I can make her grab again. She plummets and lands on another slope that she slides down. This time I grab the lip when she goes over. I have her pull herself up but I don't know what to do with her next. I try a backward jump/twist/grab thing and she dies a gruesome death.

"I mean," Chris continues, "just look at it! Ego! It's all ego! Everyone is imprisoned in a darkness of their own design. God hasn't abandoned us; we've abandoned Him! That's the great irony of it all, of all the suffering, of all the human misery, it's all so unnecessary. It's all self-inflicted. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi says 'Go and tell the world, no one has the right to suffer anymore.' and this is exactly what he means. Wake up, that's all you have to do—wake up and all the pain and suffering instantly disappears."

There's a major Maharishi enclave about an hour south of us here in unlikely Iowa, complete with university and a meditating community, not all of whom, judging from the ones who make it to us, are entirely enamored of the TM movement. I suspect that Chris hasn't been authorized to deliver and translate the Maharishi's teachings, and I briefly wonder how he might take something I might say and repackage it for someone else's benefit.

"So," I ask as a new Lara begins the climb, "you see enlightenment as a sort of emancipation from the bonds of ignorance? A freedom from ego?"

This is Chris's big thing—make that Big Thing—bondage,

delusion, ego, all that. He's had other Big Things in the past and he'll have more in the future. There are all sorts of Big Things to have, but they're never the final destination they may at first seem. They're more like island stopovers on a perilous ocean journey. But as they must, all such islands disappear beneath the rising sea and the journey perforce resumes. Love, God, compassion, guru and consciousness are examples. They're all very tempting havens, very safe and snug at first, but none of them are final destinations as anyone who stops on them will eventually come to realize. But that's no reason not to stop on them. Life is not a race and the only destination is the journey itself.

"That's what it is," he answers me. "Freedom from bondage. Breaking free of the chains that enslave us and keep us thinking we're just lowly biological life-forms when in truth we're divine beings. Just like you talk about with the guy in Plato's cave releasing the chains that bind him to ignorance. That's just perfect. That's exactly what it is! That's what Maharishi means!"

I don't have a formal teaching as such, but I know that the Maharishi does and I know that he has gone to great lengths to protect it from exactly this sort of inevitable distortion. It's no different from the children's game of Operator where a story is passed down the line from person to person and then the resulting story is compared to the original and everyone marvels at how little they have in common. No light, no matter how pure, can pass through so many filters and end up anything but murky and dark. If I were attached to results I might think of this book as my legacy—my gift to future generations that will reflect my teachings as pristinely a thousand years from now as it will the day it goes to press—but I don't have any thought like that. This isn't *my* teaching, it's the *only* teaching and this is just my way of delivering it. If we were to strip out the excess in this book it would probably be a tenth the size and would just be my way of saying what any enlightened guy would say. It's not personal. It's not regional or ethnic. It's not a Western Christian's

version as opposed to the Inuit shaman's version or the Tibetan Buddhist's version. It's not on that level. What's true is true regardless of region, culture, planet, galaxy or dimension. It is what it is and I'm just the guy who happens to be saying it right now. If you put ten books by ten enlightened people together and stripped out the excess, they'd all be the same. That's how it is at the core. The reason for all the excess is that there's no saying it directly because there's no *it,* so everything has to be communicated indirectly—what it's not, what it's like—never what it is.

I observe with interest the fact that Chris's insights into the nature of delusion avail him not in the least in his bid for freedom. Ironically, he is imprisoned by his own views of freedom. He does not possess his views; they possess him. All his knowledge and his urgent desire to express it and to have it validated stems directly from his ego's need for reassurance that he is ahead of the curve, which, of course, stems directly from his fear that he is well behind it.

While it may be interesting for me to dissect someone's fear patterns and see how they reinforce the hold of ego, it would probably not be useful for me to point it out to Chris. He would not be receptive. His ego hangs from his neck like an anvil. He thinks he's going to think his way out of his chains, as if they were mere thoughts that contained him. He is tossing around Maharishi and Plato as if they were his allies rather than his jailers.

By the time Lara makes it to the top of the wall again I have figured out that I have to make a series of leaps with a constant tendency to the left in order to find a flat place to stop. Sadly, when I get there, a knife-throwing Ninja and a blade-throwing machine cut poor, intrepid Lara to fishbait.

Chris is intimidated by me. He's also a little wobbly on the ideas he's asserting. That's why he's behaving in this loud and assertive manner. If he were on a fast track to awakening then it would be quite proper and fitting that he feel wobbly and threatened. He would be plunging headlong into the gnashing jaws of self-annihila-

tion. But Chris isn't on a fast track, he's just stumbling through some conceptual challenges. The forest of delusion is treed with concepts, and all concepts amount to the same thing—you're still in the forest. Chris is wobbly and assertive because some small part of him knows that his exciting new discoveries do not mark the end of his journey, but the start of the real one.

I set the controls to Lara aside and watch Chris as he continues to pull back the curtain and reveal the wizard, but instead of Chris and the steel-plated garment in which he is so inviolably wrapped, I see the goddess Maya, architect of this magnificent palace of delusion. She and I both sit listening to Chris. She smiles at me and I smile back in wonder and admiration. We watch Chris expounding on freedom even as his attachment to his ideas of freedom form the walls, floor and ceiling of his cell.

"How do you do it?" I ask Maya for the thousandth time, no less awed than the first. "Smoke and mirrors?"

She smiles. "Layers," she says, as if that's the key to this seemingly impossible spectacle we behold. I understand. The only materials she has for the construction of this great edifice are veils so flimsy and transparent that they seem woven of nothing more than wisps of dreamstuff. I suppose if that's all you have to work with, then you're going to learn a lot about creating in layers.

Maya winks and is gone. I'm back with Chris and a fresh Lara, ready to begin the climb again. Chris is busily equating delusion with hell and bondage and evil and dark forces. Was I ever this tiresome? Oh, yes. Far worse, I'm sure.

Lara makes it to the top again and is frantically shooting the Ninja as her health reserves dwindle, but her valiant struggle is for naught. Dead again.

"You need more firepower," says Chris. He's right. I start her again at the base of the wall climb but this time I change her weapon of choice from sissy pistols to Uzis and top off her health reserves just to be on the safe side. I make the climb and the tricky leaping grabs

and pull up to the sloped floor and leap back and forth until I start taking knife hits from the Ninja but not the blade throwing machine because I've stepped out of it's line of fire. I pull the Uzis and shoot the Ninja considerably more than is absolutely necessary. Success! I save the game so that the next time I get her killed I won't have to go through that particular ordeal again.

Chris, in the meantime, has moved on to the subject of God. It sounds like Chris has a lot to say about God, some of it not entirely flattering. Well, at least he's heading in the right direction. I'm reminded of an amusing parable wherein a young student approaches the local guru and declares scornfully that he has thought about it and has decided that he is an atheist. The student is surprised that, rather than being shocked or angry, the teacher seems pleased. "What are you happy about?" demands the perplexed student. "I have just told you that I don't believe in God, so why do you smile?"

"It means that you have started to think," the teacher replies. "Now keep thinking."

I want to send Chris away, but I want to send him away with something to chew on. Problem is, Chris has his teeth clamped onto victimhood and dark overlords oppressing a spiritually hungry mankind, or somesuch. I'm not concerned about his current level of understanding so much, that always changes. On this journey, if you aren't constantly disgusted by how naive and foolish you were just a few days ago, you've stalled. What I'd like Chris to do, however, is become a bit less rigid in his views. To not embrace them so tightly that he ends up spending undue amounts of time pinned under them. That's no small task, I know. Insights on the journey of awakening are hard-won treasures, but they must all be jettisoned eventually, and the sooner the better. The less we resist that releasing and the faster we seek the next treasure, the easier and less painful our progress.

"Have you heard of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters?" I ask.

"You mean electric Kool-Aid and all that? From the sixties?"

"Right, and the magic bus—the first magic bus—before the Who, before the Beatles."

"Oh," says Chris flatly. "Cool."

"You've probably seen pictures of the bus, or one like it. Very psychedelic, a real work of art. Should be in the Smithsonian," I muse. Chris is looking at me strangely, as if I have slipped out of phase with our conversation. "The name of the bus, you know, above the windshield where the destination sign goes, was 'Further.'"

"Wow," says Chris, nodding, wondering if I'm done yet so he can continue his lecture on the insidious nature of duality.

"*Further*," I repeat, gazing steadily into his eyes. "Why do you think they named it that?"

"Well," he begins, wanting to have the answer. "I guess because they were traveling around in it and they were saying, you know, onward, further, always more to see, somewhere else to go. The spirit of adventure."

"Yes," I agree. "It's funny, though. For me, the word 'further' was the single most important word in my own journey. It was like my mantra, but it had very specific and poignant meaning. There were many times when the word further came to my aid. Like when I'd think I had finally arrived someplace solid, someplace worth staying, and then I'd remember the word further, and what I understood further to really mean, and I'd realize that as much as I might like it where I was, I really wasn't where I was going yet." This is an oversimplification meant to soften Chris up a bit to the idea that where he is isn't where it's at. "Even though I may have attained knowledge and understanding beyond my wildest hopes, even though I may have surpassed my highest expectations of what I might accomplish, even though I may have moved beyond many of my own mentors, the word 'further' was always there, echoing in my mind, reminding me that there's only one objective of the journey and that I wasn't there yet."

I look to see if any of this is penetrating. Chris is nodding,

indulging me, waiting for his turn to talk again.

Oh well. At least Lara made it to the next level.

30

Even the poorest thing shines.

My daily affairs are quite ordinary;
but I'm in total harmony with them.

I don't hold on to anything, don't reject anything;
nowhere an obstacle or conflict.

Who cares about wealth and honor?
Even the poorest thing shines.

My miraculous power and spiritual activity:
drawing water and carrying wood.

— Layman P'ang —

It's around one in the morning and the house is settled down for the night. I'm basically a night person, although I struggle with it. The problem is that my schedule seems to shift forward every night (and day) so that one day I might be going to sleep at four in the afternoon and waking up at midnight, and a few days later I'm back to what the world considers a normal schedule—at least for a day or two. If I kept the hours I'm most comfortable with I'd probably go to sleep at four a.m. and get up around noon regularly. That's the schedule I tend to stabilize at when I'm not trying to be normal.

So now it's one in the morning and I'm sitting in the living room sorting through the books, seeing what's come in since I last spent time looking through the shelves. There are several thousand books in the house, most of them spiritually related to one degree or another, so that, as it happens, the place I most enjoy book browsing

is in my own home.

That's on the one hand.

On the other hand, most of these books make me cringe with distaste and annoyance and I have an urge to use them to fuel a huge bonfire. In the context of having a well-stocked spiritual library that is amusing to browse, I enjoy it. In the context of not further confusing students already punch-drunk on bogus and conflicting spiritual knowledge, I want to make a pile and light a match.

That, for example, is an interesting topic not addressed in a single one of these books that I know of—context. How can anyone understand anything if they don't have a working grasp of context? And yet, I'd be willing to bet that few, if any, of these spiritually-minded authors, even the most highly esteemed of them, address this simple tool of comprehension in simple, straight-forward language.

Small wonder, then, that the world is trying to wake itself up by going more deeply to sleep. It's no great surprise that "no-mind" is considered synonymous with "awake," or that truth is thought to be found through years of deprivation, or that desire and materialism have become the fashionable enemy of spiritual development. Nor is it any great surprise that Eastern teachings have been embraced in the West as methods of psychoanalysis, stress relief and alternative medicine. Still, I keep thinking that spiritual aspirants, East *and* West, are going to someday awaken at least to the degree of realizing that, by any reasonable standard of success, the pursuit of spiritual awakening has proven to be the most abysmal failure in the history of man.

The emperor has no clothes, and sooner or later everyone is going to see what's staring them right in the face. When that happens, perhaps, there will be a major shift—a mass exodus away from the complexity and futility of *all* spiritual teachings. An exodus not outward toward Japan or India or Tibet, but inward, toward the self—toward self-reliance, toward self-determination, toward a common sense approach to figuring out just what the hell's going on around here.

A wiping of the slate. A fresh start. Sincere, intelligent people dispensing with the past and beginning anew. Beginning by asking themselves, "Okay, where are we? What do we know for sure? What do we know that's true?"

A spiritual revolution.

All nonsense, of course, and I know it, but that's the sort of drivel that runs through my head whenever I spend time examining what passes for spiritual wisdom in this world. Enlightenment—truth-realization—is exactly the same for all beings in all times and all places. Any attempt to dress it up or to make it proprietary merely obscures it and makes it less accessible. Seeing exactly how obscured and inaccessible it has been made tends to frustrate me, at least for a few seconds until I remember that everything's exactly as it should be and cannot, in fact, be otherwise.

Maya has entered the room without my noticing. She stands behind the chair across from me, her hands resting on the seatback. "Do I exist?" she asks me.

"Of course not," I reply.

"Then how silly to get angry with me."

"I know."

"All these books, all these teachers, all these organizations—they're all doing their job. Not so much as a hair out of place in the entire universe, as well you know."

"Yes."

She moves around the chair and sits down. We meet as former adversaries. She is supremely beautiful, I think. She is all the beauty of the world.

"Would you prefer my other face?" she asks.

"Either is fine."

She smiles. She is endlessly beguiling.

The pitter-patter of tiny feet pulls me out of our meeting and I am surprised to find Annie bounding into my lap. She's dressed in a one-piece jammy thing with built-in feet and a bunny motif. She

nestles into me, curls her legs up and plants a thumb in her mouth. Her mother, Marla, is not far behind. She is in her nightgown. She apologizes for her daughter's intrusion, but I assure her that it's quite a welcome respite and invite her to take a seat. She explains that Annie napped too long this afternoon and has managed to disrupt her normal sleep rhythms.

Marla goes to the kitchen to fix us some tea. Annie is snuggled in but still awake. I see she is wearing a necklace so I pull it out and find a yin-yang pendant attached.

"What's this?" I ask her.

"Yingyang," she replies. I laugh.

"I think *you're* a yingyang," I tell her.

"I think *you're* a yingyang," she rebuts.

"No," I say in turn, "I'm pretty sure *you're* the yingyang."

Apparently I have crossed a line. She adjusts herself so that she can press her forehead firmly to mine, fixes me with her most solemn gaze, and assures me in no uncertain terms that if anyone is a yingyang, it is indeed me.

"Okay," I reply with equal solemnity, "I'm the yingyang."

She nods once and holds my gaze to let me know she means business. Finally satisfied, she curls back up in my lap, thumb securely in mouth, and that's where we are when Marla returns with tea. There's a lap blanket draped over the top of the chair Annie and I are hunkered down in so I grab it and lay it over her, tucking it in around the edges. Her mother notices the necklace.

"I got that for her at a gift shop in town. She saw it and just had to have it."

"Maybe she was Japanese in a previous life," I suggest.

"Well" says Marla, "I think she wanted it because I have a yin-yang symbol tattooed uh, here," she indicates the lowest region of abdomen that might still be politely referred to as abdomen, "and she's seen it."

I smile. "What was the thinking with the tattoo?" I ask.

"Oh, you know, I was young, I wanted to be cool, I wanted to defy my parents, I wanted to demonstrate that I was in tune with the balanced nature of the universe, all that stuff. Since I've been here, though, in this house, I've heard people describe it differently than I thought. I think they're repeating things you've said. They make it sound more, I don't know, dark, I guess, but I'm not sure they understand it all that well either. I had planned to ask you about it, but not at one in the morning."

"That's okay, and it's certainly nothing sinister. As you know, the yin-yang symbol is generally viewed as representing the dual nature of reality. The equal and opposite nature of balancing forces, always in harmony, all that."

"But...?" she says.

"But there's more. There's the third element."

Marla's eyes shift to the necklace hanging from her daughter's neck. "What third element?"

"Containment. The circle—the whole. Finiteness."

Marla nods a little uncertainly.

"Without the element of containment, the opposing elements could not exist, much less maintain their balance. The container is what defines the whole of which black and white are the two aspects."

Her look is asking why that matters.

"That matters because duality is always finite. Duality is always contained, always within a finite sphere outside of which it cannot exist. It's the sphere that defines the context within which opposites exist. As an analogy, humans can't survive in outer space, so they need life-support systems in which they can survive. Space suits and space ships are like bubbles in which humans can exist—environmental bubbles conducive to human life within surroundings that aren't. Planet earth is such a bubble. Bathyspheres and submarines are others."

"So the circle represents the finiteness?" she asks. "The yin-yang

symbol isn't the symbol of universal harmony and balance, it's the symbol of duality and the false universe?"

"Well, it's both, I suppose, depending on your mood."

"And what's outside the sphere? What's outside the bubble?"

"Exactly."

"Excuse me?"

"That's the question. That's what all this spirituality stuff is about—what's ultimately true? Once you've arrived at the conclusion that reality as we think of it isn't reality at all, then the question becomes, what is? What's beyond the dualistic illusion? What's beyond context?"

"Space?" she guesses. "Infinity?"

"Sure. The truth is out there—the void, the abyss, no-self—and our fragile little bubbles are what let us float around in the infinite, able to enjoy the experience of somethingness where only nothingness exists. The illusion of opposites—good and bad, love and hate, joy and sorrow—these aren't available out in infinite reality, only in bubbles."

She mulls that over for awhile. After a few minutes she asks the question I've been nudging her toward.

"So why is nothingness better than somethingness?"

This is a big question. Why is unity better than duality? Why is truth better than the lie? Why is the infinite better than the finite?

Why is awake better than dreaming?

"I never said it was," I respond.

"But..." Marla stares at me for a few moments, taken aback, assimilating. I smile as I watch her confusion. "But..."

"I'm standing right on the edge, Marla. I'm in the bubble, I'm out of the bubble, both, neither, but whatever I am, I am *not* in the business of encouraging people to leave the bubble. I don't proselytize. I'm not selling anything. I'm not saying one thing is better than another. I simply stand here, both in and out, and try to aid those who come to me. Some will exit the bubble. Some will get a glimpse

of the infinite, decide that it isn't what they wanted after all, and turn back. I don't try to stop them or convince them that truth is better. For those who have questions, I have answers because I answered them all for myself. For those who want to proceed, I have guidance because I made the journey. For those who make it through, I have advice because I know what it is to be both within and without. But if you want to know what I really think, I think the bubble is a magnificent amusement park and leaving it is a damn silly thing to do unless you absolutely must. And I would advise anyone who didn't absolutely *have* to leave to just head back in and enjoy it while it lasts. The good and the bad. The white and the black."

Marla holds my gaze for a several seconds. She knows what she's just been told but she's having trouble processing it. Annie is sound asleep now. Marla comes and picks her up without waking her and whispers thank you.

After they go I let my mind continue playing with the whole bubbles in infinity monologue. Needs some fine tuning, I decide. My mind floats back to my earlier thoughts and my unceasing amazement that something as seemingly simple and inevitable as truth has been utterly mired in confusion and misdirection. I am not surprised to see that Maya—goddess of confusion and misdirection—is back in the chair opposite me.

"So who are the priests of all religions?" she asks me.

"They are your shepherds," I respond, "keeping the sheep in the fold, away from the cliffs."

I know this. I know that the religions with their promises of an afterlife form an interior layer of containment and that the eternal rewards and punishments they speak of are as finite as the one in which they speak. Bubbles within bubbles. Turtles on top of turtles.

"And who are the saints and sages of the great spiritual traditions?" she asks.

"They are your final level of containment. They are the weavers of the final web, masters of subtle misdirection—convincing because

they are convinced. For every million that get near the edge, perhaps only one steps over."

She smiles. "And where do I dwell?"

"In the heart," I respond. "In fear."

"Fear of what?" she asks.

"Fear of being haunted by meddlesome Hindu deities?" I ask, but she's already gone.

31

Selections from

SONG OF MYSELF

Walt Whitman

Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much?
Have you reckon'd the earth much?
Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me
and you shall possess the origin of all poems,

You shall possess the good of the earth and sun,
(there are millions of suns left,)

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand,
nor look through the eyes of the dead,
nor feed on the spectres in books,

You shall not look through my eyes either,
nor take things from me,

You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.

. . .

I have heard what the talkers were talking,
the talk of the beginning and the end,
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.

There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now,
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.

. . .

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed,
and luckier.

. . .

Have you heard that it was good to gain the day?
I also say it is good to fall,
battles are lost in the same spirit in which they are won.

. . .

I exist as I am, that is enough,
If no other in the world be aware I sit content,
And if each and all be aware I sit content.

One world is aware and by far the largest to me,
and that is myself,
And whether I come to my own to-day
or in ten thousand or ten million years,
I can cheerfully take it now,
or with equal cheerfulness I can wait.

. . .

Have you outstript the rest? are you the President?
It is a trifle, they will more than arrive there every one,
and still pass on.

. . .

I know perfectly well my own egotism,
Know my omnivorous lines and must not write any less,
And would fetch you whoever you are flush with myself.

. . .

The clock indicates the moment—
but what does eternity indicate?

. . .

All forces have been steadily employ'd
to complete and delight me,
Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul.

. . .

Each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll,
My left hand hooking you round the waist,
My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents and the public road.

Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you,
You must travel it for yourself.

It is not far, it is within reach,
Perhaps you have been on it since you were born
and did not know,
Perhaps it is everywhere on water and on land.

Shoulder your duds dear son, and I will mine,
and let us hasten forth,
Wonderful cities and free nations we shall fetch as we go.

If you tire, give me both burdens,
and rest the chuff of your hand on my hip,
And in due time you shall repay the same service to me,
For after we start we never lie by again.

This day before dawn I ascended a hill
and look'd at the crowded heaven,
And I said to my spirit
When we become the enfolders of those orbs,
and the pleasure and knowledge of every thing in them,
shall we be fill'd and satisfied then?
And my spirit said
No, we but level that lift to pass and continue beyond.

You are also asking me questions and I hear you,
I answer that I cannot answer, you must find out for yourself.

Sit a while dear son,
Here are biscuits to eat and here is milk to drink,
But as soon as you sleep and renew yourself in sweet clothes,
I kiss you with a good-by kiss and open the gate for your egress hence.

Long enough have you dream'd contemptible dreams,
Now I wash the gum from your eyes,
You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light
and of every moment of your life.

Long have you timidly waded holding a plank by the shore,
Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,
To jump off in the midst of the sea, rise again,
nod to me, shout, and laughingly dash with your hair.

but it is the role of the teacher to keep them moving forward rather than standing around deepening things. Self-realization isn't about more, it's about less. The only construction required for awakening is that which facilitates demolition.

Actually, I often don't reply to the email and letters sent to me at all because it is clear that the writing is the process and that no response is required. I'm being used as the target recipient in a process of Spiritual Autolysis in which my only role is to exist as an ideal in the student's mind. This can be a very intense and accelerated process. It is not uncommon for a writer to send me a message every day apologizing for the one they sent the day before, embarrassed that they could have been so foolish, and enthusiastically sharing their newfound level of comprehension which, if all goes well, will be tomorrow's source of embarrassment.

Still, handling email takes time and I can only take care of three or four per hour. This morning I manage to respond to a dozen before I get too fuzzy-brained to continue. I turn off the computer and step out of my office and right into Jolene's butt.

"Oh. Hello Jolene's butt," I say wittily.

She turns and looks up at me. "Oh, hi! I wasn't sure if you were up here. You're so quiet."

She's on all fours with a bucket and a brush scrubbing the oak floor of the main upstairs hallway. Most of the floor is still wet so there's no point in trying to go past her. I plunk down on the floor, back against the wall. I like watching other people work.

"How's it going?" I ask.

"Great!" she says exuberantly. "I went to the library and read Plato's cave allegory and some commentaries on it. I've been thinking a lot about, you know, what we discussed."

"Which was...?"

"Oh, uh, the difference between mysticism and enlightenment." She has stopped working to talk.

I indicate the uncleaned part of the floor. "I can't authorize a

break."

She giggles and resumes scrubbing.

"I wonder why you and I might have been discussing the difference between enlightenment and mysticism," I say.

"Well," she explains, "we were talking about Yamamata Roshi and Plato's cinema...."

"Yeah, I remember all that. I just can't remember why I would think that this was a particularly relevant topic for you."

"Zen..."

"Ahhh... Zen."

"We were talking about the difference between the Zen-that-sells-books and the Zen-that-leads-to-enlightenment..."

"Dang," I exclaim. "That's a pretty interesting topic. What'd we come up with?"

"Well, we were talking about Plato's cinema and the difference between..."

"Enlightenment and mysticism."

"Yeah, right, because, I think you were saying... trying to show me, that the books and everything I was reading about Zen..."

"So, the Zen-that-sells-books is about mysticism and real Zen is about enlightenment?"

"Um, I don't know..." she says. "I mean, yeah, real Zen is about enlightenment, isn't it? Yes, I know that. But I don't know if the Zen-that-sells-books is about mysticism or if it's just, you know, selling books. I guess I didn't think this part through very good."

"Did you think through the cinema part?"

She lights up. "Yes! And I know the answer! Mystics stay in the theater, but the theater isn't the whole thing. It's not the final, total, most ultimate thing. Enlightenment isn't in the theater. If you want to be enlightened you have to go up the aisle and out the exit to the sunlight and totally leave the theater!"

"Leave the theater," I muse, "that's interesting. So everybody's sitting there watching the movie..."

"The cows!" she blurts out. "That's what happened to me in church! I stopped believing that the movie was really reality. That's when I undid my chains and I stood up and saw all the people I knew still sitting there... just like you said. But you haven't read Plato's cave in a long time because your version is way funny." She has stopped scrubbing again.

"Maybe it's Plato's version that's way funny. Keep scrubbing," I say and she does. "Yeah, I haven't read it in a long time. So you're saying the mystics are in the theater?"

"Yeah," she says, "but the rest of the theater isn't reality, it's just a different part of the whole fake thing. It's more real than the movie, but it's still not really real."

"And the mystics know that?"

She doesn't blurt out the answer to this, just continues working the brush in small circles. I think I hear her humming, but then I realize she's hmmm'ing.

"Nooo," she says in the hushed tone of one who has just unmasked a secret plot. "They don't! That's it, isn't it? They're a little more awake, but they're still not awake because they think they're, like, totally awake, but they're still in the theater... like the light on the screen... the light in the projector isn't the real source either, it's just a tiny spark of the true light, the sun... that's what I read. So the people in chains watching the movie are, like, asleep, even though they don't know it, but so are the people who aren't chained anymore... Oh wow, like me! And maybe the mystics are the most awake of all, or maybe whoever is the most mystical is the most awake... But if they knew about the sun, about the light in the projector just being a tiny spark, then they wouldn't be in the theater, they'd be heading out, so then they don't know either, really. Wow! I think I'm really starting to get this!"

"So you're sitting here telling me you're not awake? That must be pretty weird for you."

"Cuz I asked you, in the park at the lake, I asked you why you

said you weren't a mystic. That's why! You're not in the theater! That's the difference! You kept going. You're out in the sunlight, in the real source!" She has stopped scrubbing again. "That's what awake means! That's what enlightened means!"

"If you're not going to do the floor, then I'll have to." She starts scrubbing again.

"I don't know much about what mystics are all about," she continues, "but that's the whole thing. No matter how great a mystic guy you are, no matter how great everyone thinks you are, if you're still in the theater..."

"I don't think you can talk and scrub at the same time. If Sonaya came up and saw the job you're doing..."

She redoubles her efforts. "If you're still in the theater, you're still not awake. You're still asleep, but, like, you're dreaming that you're awake. You still don't know what reality is... like, the sun! The theater is like a dream, and... But... hmmm. So a mystic, or anyone like me who's not a mystic but not in chains either... It's *some*thing, but it's not *the* thing."

"Okay," I say, "so, I'm enlightened and that means I'm outside the theater? In the sun?"

"Uh, yeah..." she answers tentatively.

"But here I am, talking to you."

"Yeah..."

"I wonder if I had to go through all the levels to get out. You know, first step out of the chains like you did in church, then become a little mystical, then more, then more, until I finally became so totally mystical that I left the theater entirely. See what I mean? Did I develop and evolve spiritually inside the theater? Or did I just go straight for that path and out into the sunlight?"

She turns her attention to the floor while her mind chews on the question. It's no small question—does one achieve truth-realization in stages or in a single step like the fool of tarot deck taking a leap into the void? And, if the latter, then how many steps are involved

in becoming the fool that takes the leap?

"Omigod! Omigod! That's what you're saying, that's your point! This whole thing started with you saying you're not a mystic. You said I'd be disappointed because you weren't a very mystical guy. Can you do that? Can you just go right out without doing the whole mystic thing?"

Boy, she shines when she's happy.

"Good question," I reply. "Offhand, I don't know. I did a bit of mystical stuff. I had experiences of undifferentiated consciousness—mystic union—on several occasions and it had a big effect on me, so I can't say from personal experience that someone could just head right out. Get back to work." She does. "I can certainly say that you don't have to rise up through the mystical ranks or progressively more refined levels of consciousness to finally graduate into, uh, the sunlight, and if I were to guess, I'd say there's no reason you couldn't do it without having first been dipped in the divine. No reason that I can think of, anyway."

Of course, that's in the space of a single lifetime. Who knows what development may have occurred through numerous incarnations? But this isn't the time for all that, and the fact remains that I'm not a very mystical guy.

"This was so cool! Is this how it always works? I asked you these questions and I don't even think you answered them. You just somehow showed me how to answer them myself. Is that, like, your method? Is it always like this?"

"I don't know. Hang around and find out for yourself."

"This is really cool! I really had a total blast going to the library and figuring all this out. It's like I was on a mission or something, I got obsessed and it was great! I really feel like I'm learning something important. I've never really felt like that before. I've always done well in school, but I never learned anything I thought of as, like... *important*."

"Yeah, great. You've done well in school, you're learning impor-

tant stuff, you're a student of Plato and all that, but this floor looks like you wiped it with a muddy sock. Didn't those Zen books at least teach you anything about being mindful in tasks?"

"What's my next thing?" she asks, completely ignoring my criticism. "Do I get another assignment now? Or like another question I have to work on? What do I do now? Besides the floor."

"Well, I don't really have anything prepared. I'll have to give it some thought. So, anyway, according to this little theory of yours, do you think Yamamata Roshi is enlightened? Or just a mystic?"

"He's..." she begins but stops herself. "Oh, gosh. I don't know. I have to think about it."

Atta girl.

33

No-Self is True-Self

The man in whom Tao acts without impediment
Does not bother with his own interests
And does not despise others who do.

He does not struggle to make money
And does not make a virtue of poverty.

He goes his way without relying on others
And does not pride himself on walking alone.

While he does not follow the crowd
He won't complain of those who do.

Rank and reward make no appeal to him;
Disgrace and shame do not deter him.

He is not always looking for right and wrong
Always deciding "Yes" and "No."

The ancients said, therefore:
"The man of Tao remains unknown.
Perfect virtue produces nothing
'No-Self' Is 'true-Self'
And the greatest man is Nobody"

— Chuang Tzu —

34

The point of the ride is the ride.

My barn having burned to the ground,
I can now see the moon.

— Taoist saying —

I did give Jolene her next "assignment." It was a simple one. "Next time we speak," I told her, "let's do it without the cave-theater analogy. Try to explain all this stuff to me in the most unadorned terms." And when she shows up ready to do it I'll let her proceed, but not for me. I'll have her explain it to someone who's not already familiar with it. When she's done, she'll possess a clear understanding of the difference between being asleep within the cave, being awake within the cave, and being out of the cave, and if that's all she ever gets from her time with me then she'll at least be literate enough to order off the spiritual menu for the rest of her life.

I make my way downstairs looking for some lunch. As usual, the fridge is stocked with leftovers that have somehow improved with age. I grab some seb pulao, apple rice, and a masala dosa and make a plate, which I nuke for a minute before spooning on some pear chutney. Kings and princes don't eat this well.

I eat standing up in the kitchen. The house is surprisingly quiet. A few of the gang stick their heads in and say hello or ask for help clarifying some point or another, (Q: "Why am I always so dissatisfied? Why can't I ever just be content?" A: "You weren't born to be content. Your discontent is the engine that drives you, be grateful to it." Q: "What does it mean if I saw a blue pearl during meditation?" A: "It means you saw a blue pearl during meditation." Q: "Where's

the cream?" A: "Top shelf behind the juice."), but for the most part the house is unusually silent. I don't think there's anything special going on, it's just one of those low energy days. Everybody's probably lying around, taking naps, reading, keeping to themselves.

In fact, I don't know what to do with myself.

I don't feel like sitting in front of the computer. I don't feel like sitting in front of the TV. I don't feel like reading. I don't feel like taking a nap. I don't feel like going anywhere.

Okay, I guess I'll just stand here.

Eventually, Julie makes her way in. She tells me she's spent the morning in the living room just looking through the books and reading this and that. I'm glad to see her although I notice that she seems a little frayed. She asks about continuing the interview, which I'm happy to do. She goes to find her purse where her tape recorder and notes are. When she returns she clips the mike to my shirtfront and I stick the little recorder in my pocket after she turns it on.

"Ready?" she asks.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Okay," she says, consulting her notes and leaning in to my collar to speak. "Question twelve; Jesus said..."

"Stop," I say. She does.

"I don't do that. I don't respond to statements like that. I don't because I can't. We don't know what Jesus said, why he said it, or if there even *was* a Jesus. Now, if Jesus comes into the kitchen right now and starts talking, I can handle it. I can deal with him. I can hold my own with anyone on this subject. What I *can't* deal with is any statement that begins with 'Some book says that some dead guy said...' See what I'm saying?"

Julie nods.

"Make sense?"

"Yes," she says, "it makes perfect sense. I'm surprised I've never heard anyone say it before."

"In the process of waking yourself up, you quickly realize that

there's no outside authority. You have to verify everything yourself. If you adopt something someone else said, it's only after you have verified it for yourself. If Jesus, Buddha, or Lao-Tzu made it, you can make it. There's no choice about this—you can't walk in someone else's shoes and there are no turnkey solutions. Question thirteen?"

She smiles. "Question thirteen. We touched on belief last time we spoke and you said that you don't operate at the level of belief. Did you mean that you don't have any faith or beliefs?"

Not a bad question. I can see where readers might wonder, but I have to think about who I'm really speaking for—about what's really going on here. Someone in my position never encounters an impartial observer, and nothing I say is ever really about me.

"The answer isn't that I am or am not a person of faith or belief. The truth is that faith and belief are non-issues for me. In a very loose sense I suppose you could say I believe indiscriminately—ghosts, bleeding statues, alien abductions, cattle mutilations, crop circles, prophecy, demonic possession, whatever. I let all of that stuff in practically unfiltered because it's more fun that way and because I have no reason not to. I mean, if you view dualistic reality as a dream, which I do, no discrimination is really called for. Where do you draw the line in a dream? It's all good. Nothing of importance to me hinges on how I view such things, so I just view them."

"So you're going to try to completely tap-dance around the question?" she asks with a twinkle of amusement.

"Yeah, well, I was kinda hoping..." I reply with schoolboy charm.

"Well, toughen up, mister," she says through gritted teeth. "I'm a hardcore journalist and I want straight answers." We both laugh but as I watch her it becomes more apparent that she's not as together as she was the last time we spoke. She seems to be jittery. She's obviously not well rested, but it's more than that. She's slightly frazzled. She's doing well with it and handling the interview nicely, but it's there, just beneath the surface. She's on the edge of something, but of what?

"Umm, well, the real answer is that I no longer possess belief or faith in the way you mean. The question simply doesn't apply—like if I asked you if you prefer antler wax or antler cream. I might say that I don't believe in belief, but that's a little cutesy, albeit accurate. I think of belief and faith as being ways of dealing with things you can't know for sure, and I am not involved in not knowing for sure. Homey don't play dat. I don't have any gaps I need filled. I should point out that this isn't peculiar to me; this would be the stock response you'd get from anyone in my situation."

"By 'situation' you mean fully enlightened?"

"Uh, well, there's no partial enlightenment, but yeah, anyone who knows what I know would say the same thing. Belief and faith aren't factors in enlightenment. I mean, I have beliefs, I suppose, as anyone must. That's why the answer isn't a simple yes or no. I have beliefs regarding personal reality and the afterlife and wherever else we can't see within the dream so that we have to use imagination and intelligence to tell us what's there, but none of that has any bearing whatsoever on enlightenment. I'm rambling now, that's what I do when I try to answer questions I shouldn't mess with—questions that don't really translate well."

"Don't translate how? From an unenlightened person to an enlightened one?"

"And back again, yes, kind of. Enlightenment is comprehensive. It's an entirely different paradigm. My reality is not your reality. All the rules are different. It's like I speak a different language altogether, and the reason we can communicate at all is because I used to speak your language and I remember a little of it. Less everyday, it seems. Is that getting across at all? I'm not saying it well."

"Actually," she reassures me, "it's very interesting. So if another enlightened person were here right now, you and he could understand each other perfectly well?"

"Damn, I'm watching an analogy meltdown. Yes, sort of, theoretically, he and I would speak the same tongue..."

"But?"

"But it wouldn't happen. There wouldn't be anything to say." I played both sides of a mock conversation to illustrate. "It'd be like 'Hi, how's it going?' 'Good, thanks, how about you?' 'Oh yeah, fine. How's the enlightenment thing working out for you?' 'Oh, real good, thanks. Really getting a kick out of it. You?' 'Oh, same, yeah. Real pleased.'"

She's giggling now, amused by my little performance.

"There's just nothing to say. Caterpillars may talk to each other, but butterflies don't. It's like... you know how vampires are?"

"Ahh, vampires again," she says. "No, I don't know any personally."

"Well, the thing with vampires is you never see them hanging out together. That's because they really don't bond well. They don't desire each other's company or anyone else's. That's just the way of it. It's a solo deal. Nature of the beast."

"You have a real thing for vampires."

"Yeah, I need all the help I can get talking about this stuff."

"But back to the original question: Wouldn't an enlightened Zen master believe in Zen? Wouldn't an enlightened Sufi believe in Islam?"

"You're talking about vehicles and destinations. Once one has arrived at the destination, the vehicle is discarded, forgotten. If I take a train to Chicago I get off the train and enjoy Chicago. I don't drag the train around behind me. It did its job. I don't need it any more. Of course, if one is going to turn back and help others with their journeys, then he would rely on the vehicle he knows."

"Which, in your case...?"

"Many vehicles."

The kitchen window faces north and provides a wide view of the clouds as they make their easterly trek. This cold front has brought with it an astounding range of cloudscapes so varied that simply by going outside and turning around we can enjoy majestic and varied

panoramas in all directions. Storms brewing in the west and raging to the south. Mountainous white cloud formations so massive and looming that there is an almost surreal imminence to them. From the kitchen window, of course, we can't see in all directions, but what we can see is stunning.

Julie startles me by leaning in close and speaking into my collar. "What do you want?"

I look at her, trying to gauge the intent of the question. Seeing my confusion, she holds her notes up for me to see. "Right there, question fourteen; 'What does Jed want?'"

It's still not clear to me what she means, but the answer is probably the same no matter how the question is interpreted. "I don't want anything. I don't want."

Her eyes go wide. "I *knew* you were gonna say that! I've been thinking about it for days and I just can't put it together. How can you not *want* anything? What does that even *mean*? What is life without desires? Goals? Dreams? Don't you have aspirations? Isn't there something you'd like to achieve or some quality you'd like to possess? It seems like life is all about expanding and attaining, moving toward the next thing. Ambition, growth, conquest. You can't mean that you... I'm not even sure how to say it... you don't *want* anything? You have to want *some*thing."

I'm amused by her perplexity. "Well, I might want a cup of coffee or some new video game or something, but there's nothing in any larger sense that I want."

"World peace?" she tries. "The liberation of all sentient beings? Fame and fortune? Power? Prestige? Wealth? Adulation? Uh, your own island? Six-pack abs? Compose a symphony? Dinner with the Buddha? There must be something... something that drives you, something you... you know, *want*."

I answer through my laughter. "Sorry to be so bland, but no, nothing. Well, maybe the abs. I don't have to wish for possessions because I have a pretty good idea of how the universe works and my

wishes are fulfilled practically before I know I wished them. World peace and the liberation of sentient beings would indicate a belief on my part that something was wrong or that something needs fixing, and I'm not capable of any such belief. I'm certainly not a bodhisattva or a satguru, as I understand those terms. The other things you mentioned are just... uh, outer adornments. They would have no meaning to anyone in my, uh, situation."

"You say it that way, anyone in your situation, because...?"

"To make it clear that we're not really talking about me, but any awakened being. These things I'm saying aren't special facets of Jed McKenna. They'd be true of anyone who is awake."

"And when you say outer adornments, you're saying... what? That power and prestige...?"

"Power, prestige, wealth, adulation, six pack abs, sure, whatever defines us. However we describe ourselves, think of ourselves, project ourselves. Every feature, trait, characteristic, feeling, belief, opinion. All of it. Self-ness."

"It's all just, like... worthless? Is that what you're saying? Like... a person is just a costume?"

"A costume, yes. Worthless is redundant in a game without stakes."

"So the costume is the false self." She makes it a statement.

"Again redundant because there's no true self, but yes, the costume represents the fictional self—ego. We erect ego to compensate for the lack of direct self-knowledge. Lack of perception of true-self is translated by the individual as non-existence of true-self. In other words, because true-self is unseen, it's assumed not to exist."

"Can't see it so it must not be there."

"Well, can't see it because it's *not* there. There is no true self to perceive—there's only false self and no-self. One looks for true self and finds nothing, as if one's true self was no truth at all."

"Which it kind of is. Isn't that what you're saying?"

"Yes, and it's the dread of that nothingness that keeps one's

attention outwardly fixed. I use the term 'dread' to denote that we're talking about a vague, faceless quality. Not many people actually put a name to it. They seldom come right out and say that deep down inside they feel insubstantive or without basis. Those that do stand a good chance of being medicated or institutionalized."

"But what about when people explore their inner selves? Make journeys of self-discovery? Aren't they going within to find the truth?"

"They're just exploring the ego—making a study of the false self—which is a lifequest as valid as any other. But you don't wake up by perfecting your dream character, you wake up by breaking free of it. There's no truth to the ego, so no degree of mastery over it results in anything true. Putting attention on the ego merely reinforces it."

The tape recorder snaps off so we pause while Julie puts in a fresh tape. When she's ready I continue.

"This actually gets kind of interesting if you want to understand people better, understand what motivates them, why they do what they do. The deepest truth of any person is no-person. One may insist otherwise with every thought and feeling, but that doesn't change the truth. It's not fear of death that drives humans, it fear of non-being—oblivion."

I know that I'm all over the road with this and the apparent contradictions are piling up, but it's a fun topic to play with and I have a pretty good sense that we're in the ballpark of what I should be saying to Julie at this point.

"For instance, shame. The underlying cause of all shame is the deep and unshakable suspicion that I am an imposter. I sense the absence of true-self in myself, but not in others, so I naturally assume others to be real. Seeing the outer shells everyone else has so convincingly erected and not knowing them to be hollow, I necessarily feel singularly fraudulent and, of course, shameful."

"Oh, jeez, I'm trying to follow this. So someone, say me, so I

don't have the direct experience of my true nature so I'm forced to create..."

"Create, project, maintain. Constantly."

"Project an image of... of *me*... but I think I'm the only one doing it because everyone else looks real?"

"Sure, how could it be otherwise? Everyone else seems genuine, while you have some degree of awareness of your own inauthenticity ranging from maybe none at all on any conscious level, to a degree that could cause a meltdown."

She pauses for a moment, eyes downward, considering.

"So, none at all, meaning... meaning some people are just totally oblivious? Just live their lives totally unaware...?"

"You don't really need to ask me that, you can see it all around you. People completely in character. No inkling that things may be other than they seem. Still shackled in Plato's cave. The degree to which one is unaware of one's fraudulent nature might be considered the degree to which one is in the grip of Maya—delusion, the dream-state. It's very tempting to believe that one evolves over the course of who-knows how many lifetimes, becoming progressively more and more awake from life to life. Increased awakeness would naturally translate into greater dissatisfaction with fraudulence, falseness, and delusion, and a corresponding desire to know what's real. Extend the line forward and it results in a complete break with ego and an awakening into..."

"Truth." Julie pronounces the word like a death sentence. "One's true nature."

"Sure. And that's also why the process of waking up can look a lot like a massive breakdown. In fact, I suppose that's essentially what it is—a complete break from one has always assumed to be reality. That's why depression, for instance, might be hard to combat; because it can be perfectly rational response to a highly irrational situation—namely, life—especially when the depression revolves around futility or insignificance. After all, you can't be much more

futile or insignificant than a character in a dream. The way to defeat rational depression is not to try at all costs to turn back from it or to cling to the illusion of meaning, but to plow right on through it and see what's on the other side. Rather than recoil from the horror of nothingness; plunge headlong into it. What's there to lose? But, of course, the point of depression isn't to conquer it."

"What's the point of depression?"

I look at her, wondering what she's really asking—wondering why I'm really answering. The truth isn't always the best answer, but when in doubt I tend to go with it.

"Same as the point of any other ride in the park. The point of the ride is the ride."

That stops her. She pauses, thinking. Her agitation is becoming plainer now, closer to the surface.

"So no one... no one even *has* a self? That's what your saying, right? There is no... no real... there's no truth...?"

"Oh, everyone has an underlying truth, but yeah, no one knows it any more than your dream characters know they are products of the sleep state of a larger self."

"No one who's not enlightened, you mean?"

"Yes," I confirm, "that's the distinction."

She's not comfortable hearing this. "So unenlightened people don't know themselves? Don't know their own true natures?"

"And so they have to create artificial selves because..."

She jumps in. "Because that's the only self they know. And that's the ego? That's the false self?"

"Right."

"So when they talk about annihilating the ego...?"

"Right. They're saying that if you destroy the false, then only the true remains."

"Jesus. So I'm constantly constructing a false self?"

"Constantly, yes. That's how you spend your energy—your life-force. It all goes into projecting the illusion of you. You're constantly

projecting an external representation of yourself that is always a work in progress, always shifting and evolving."

"Which everybody does?"

"Interesting point. Yes and no. It's a matter of degree. When you think of truly selfless people, this is the level at which a difference exists. A selfless person has found definition in something other than self. Rather than projecting, they're fulfilling. They have relinquished their self-defining role to some outside agency. Motherhood might be a good example, or giving one's life to God, or dedicating oneself to a cause or a creative endeavor. They're still on stage, it's still a costume, their life-force is still spent animating their character, but they are stepping into a role rather than creating one."

"So, giving oneself over to a higher power...?"

"Higher, lower, whatever. The giving over is the crucial factor. It doesn't matter if it's to God, or country, or the carving of a walking stick."

"A walking stick?"

"Thoreau wrote a story about a guy who transcended self through absolute dedication to a single task—carving a walking stick."

"So, like, Sonaya...?"

"Yes. Sonaya."

"You said yes and no."

"Right. A selfless person has dedicated—or abdicated, to put it another way—himself or herself to a single defining ideal, but the process is fundamentally the same whether one selects a single ideal or a dozen or a hundred. All those things that define a person—career, community, family, and so forth—are all just pre-defined roles that one steps into, animates. In a very real sense, they're all acts of abdication, but who is abdicating? What is being abdicated? Those are the real questions. What is left when all context is dropped? What is left when you remove church, job, relationships, hobbies and everything else? More layers? Nature? Nurture? Perinatal influences? Past life influences? Okay, but what's beyond

. . .

Julie plops down on the couch next to me and we sit and silently watch the sky unfold and refold. It looks like there's a mean storm coming in but I know that it won't turn out that way. This cold front produces some spectacular sights, and also creates many illusions. What looks like a monstrous thunderhead now will likely turn out to be no more than a darkening and a sprinkle of rain before the next event takes shape and rolls in. I hunker down, put my feet up, and enjoy the show.

Julie still seems slightly wired, as if a current was rippling just beneath her surface. It's a subtle thing, but she's clearly uncomfortable. She's bottling something up and I wonder if I'll be around when it blows. When I continue speaking, I try to adopt a lighter tone.

"We're all afloat in a boundless sea, and the way we cope is by massing together in groups and pretending in unison that the situation is other than it is. We reinforce the illusion for each other. That's what a society really is, a little band of humanity huddled together against the specter of a pitch black sea. Everyone is treading water to keep their heads above the surface even though they have no reason to believe that the life they're preserving is better than the alternative they're avoiding. It's just that one is known and one is not. Fear of the unknown is what keeps everyone busily treading water. All fear is fear of the unknown. If someone in such a group of water-treaders betrays the group lie by speaking the truth of their situation, that person is called a heretic and society reserves its most awful punishments for heretics. If someone decides to stop struggling and just sink or float away, every possible effort is made to stop him, not for the benefit of the individual, but for the benefit of the group. To deny at all costs the truth of the situation."

"Whistling past the graveyard," Julie intones. "Rearranging deckchairs on the Titanic."

I laugh. "Yes, but it's not just death that has everyone flustered. Anyone can create a scenario to deal with death. But what's beyond that scenario? Another scenario? And another? Eventually you run out of turtles."

"Huh? Turtles?"

"A student goes to his teacher and asks 'What does the world rest upon, master?' To which the teacher replies 'On the back of a giant turtle.' The student, not to be so easily put off, asks 'And what does the turtle rest upon, oh wise one?' To which the teacher replies 'Upon another turtle.' The student is not ready to give up. 'And what does that turtle rest on?' he asks, to which the master angrily replies, 'Don't you get it? It's turtles all the way down!'"

Julie laughs and nods her head.

"The truth of the situation is that eventually, there's nothing. Infinity. Eternity. The void. The abyss. Eventually, every water-treader has to deal with the fact that it's just him, the infinite ocean and nothing in-between."

"And that everything else is a lie."

"Basically, yes. The body is just a rental car and this planet is just a motel. This is nobody's home, though some treat it like a permanent residence—as if the worst thing that can possibly happen is that you pick up and move on. How absurd, and yet, how absolutely vital to the experience. Look at things in this light and you'll see the countless ways in which society encourages the externalized self and mocks, discourages and combats the very notion of turning inward. Alan Watts called it the taboo against knowing who you are. In order to break with one's false self, one would have to break with..."

"...everything." Julie says. "Family, friends..." Her voice falters as she considers the ramifications. "Everything. Everything you are... everything you know... everything... *Really* everything."

I decide I'd better back it off a notch.

"So the main point here is that I, as an enlightened person, have direct and abiding knowledge of self. You, as an unenlightened per-

son, don't. You, therefore, have built an identity with which you, uh... well, identify. You think of you as you. Now, maybe in the darkest hours of the night, in your heart of hearts, you know that it's all a facade and you bewail your falseness and yearn for truth or substance or a foundation or whatever..."

"Bewail?"

"It's a word, isn't it? How about bemoan?"

"Bewail's okay," she relents.

"Well, so there it is. That's the fundamental difference between an enlightened person and an unenlightened one—having or not having direct knowledge of self. The latter being the breeding ground of ego."

She's staring out the window. When she speaks, it's not intensely, but not casually either. "So everyone's just treading water... not really doing anything... not really going anywhere... Because it's a boundless sea, right? Endless. Where's there to go? You go forever and ever and you're still nowhere. Everyone's just pretending... it's all just..."

I'm aware that she's not really speaking to me now. She's working things out for herself. Doing the math. Seeing what's always been right in front of her.

"And it takes, like, every ounce of energy just to stay afloat and stay with the group. I can see that. All anybody's really doing is pretending. Everything I've ever done... my whole life..."

I decide to give her something specific to shine on. "The Tao says that the sage sees people as straw dogs, and that's what it means—all exterior, no interior. Empty costumes populating the stage like zombies. All appearance, no substance. Yes, the unenlightened look like zombies to the enlightened—like fictional characters animated by mysterious forces. No one home. If a person were born enlightened, rather than going from unenlightened to enlightened and having the experience of being made of straw, I think he'd find this a damn spooky place. Busy, populated, yet strangely uninhabited."

Julie is still and silent. Her eyes are wide and unblinking, star-

ing off into nothing. When she does speak, it's with a distant quality, as if she's merely thinking aloud.

"You know, I have done a lot of research since we've started this interview. Bookstores, the library, magazine stands, the internet. I even went back to the co-op and bought a copy of that enlightenment magazine you were looking at."

"Sorry to hear that," I say.

"Why?" she nearly shouts, very present now, arms tightly crossed, holding herself together, addressing me very directly. "Because none of that stuff is what you're talking about, is it? They call it enlightenment, but it's something else, isn't it?"

She leaps up and begins pacing. She's processing, unraveling, coming undone. Fun to watch. A controlled breakdown, or maybe not so controlled, we've yet to see. This is what I saw in her, of course, the chaotic energy she was trying to keep suppressed.

"Jesus, when they told me I was going to Iowa to do a piece on a spiritual master, I thought it was a euphemism for 'you're fired'. *Iowa*, for chrissakes!" She stops pacing and looks to me to see if I appreciate the improbability of it. She continues pacing.

"I've been thinking about this a lot. I haven't been getting much sleep lately," she laughs without mirth. "This is really confusing me. I mean, I think of myself as someone who is on the spiritual path. I mean, I'm a spiritual person. I do all the spiritual *stuff*. I do yoga and I meditate and I'm a vegetarian and I'm compassionate. I catch spiders and put them outside instead of killing them. I read all the books, I attend all the lectures. I have pictures of mandalas and saints on my walls and I send money to support a little girl in Paraguay or maybe it's Uruguay although I'm not sure there really is a little girl if you really want to know the truth, and if I really think about all this I think I'm doing it all because I want to be a good person and I want to be spiritual and loving and open and compassionate, but also because I'm on the path and I have always assumed that the path leads to enlightenment and freedom from bondage and all that...

and... and..."

"Breathe."

She breathes.

"And it's all bullshit, isn't it?" She stops pacing and thinks about it for a few moments before continuing. "So I go out this week and I start reading all the current best-sellers on enlightenment to prepare for our next interview and as I'm reading all these supposedly spiritually enlightened people and it's like a light went on in my brain—it just clicked."

I wait to find out what her epiphany was, although I pretty much already know. I don't mean to detract or minimize it in any way. I really have a thing for epiphanies. They're my *raison d'être*, so to speak.

"You said it yourself," she continues. "Of *course* you could murder me. You could smoke crack and shoot Bambi and eat human eyeballs and draw mustaches on all the saints if you wanted, couldn't you? Because it wouldn't make any difference, you're enlightened. You're there. You're it. You don't have to *act* enlightened. I *know* you're enlightened, I'm not an idiot! I know what I'm looking at. But how come I've never seen it before? I've been into all this spiritual shit for fifteen years. I've done darshan and satsang with all the big names—hell, I've interviewed most of them. What does that make them? What does that make *me*? It's like a sick joke. It's like you say—I'm just spending my whole life treading water because that's what everyone says to do and I never questioned it but now I am questioning it and I think that if I keep going this way I'll end up sitting on my deathbed no better off than if I stomped the living shit out of every spider I ever saw!"

I make no response. This is an important time to let her flow with the whole thing. She is visibly processing herself into a new level of awareness and the only way I can help is by not interrupting. This is it—the First Step. It's not the realization of what is, but of what's not. It's the grand *dis*illusionment. Enlightenment is still a

ways off, but the process is now beginning—has now begun. In a few years I'll ask her how the enlightenment thing is working out and she'll say "Real good, thanks. Really getting a kick out of it. You?" But that's still a ways down the road.

"Enlightened doesn't even seem like the right word. I look at you and it's like you're... *real*... fully realized... I don't know... you're not... I don't know. You're awake and I've never seen an awake person before! And what are these other guys? It's not even similar. They're just like bliss bunnies and love drunks getting high on the divine or kundalini energy or on doing the guru thing. They're all about consciousness, but it's not really a consciousness thing, is it? Hell, I've experienced unity consciousness and it was totally mind-blowing and all that and I guess I always thought that was the destination of the spiritual path, but... it's like when someone called religion the opiate of the masses... that's all this spiritual stuff is but like a higher dosage or something... it's like a vast conspiracy all designed to keep people where they are by convincing them that they're going somewhere when they're just sitting there, like you say, floating, treading water, pretending. And no one knows it's a conspiracy, do they? I mean, I'm a New Age *journalist!* I've been going along with it all my adult life and I never knew... I never intended to defraud anyone... I thought I was running separate from the herd... What a joke! I've been right along side of it every minute!"

I am amused that she calls the entire dualistic universe—Maya's Palace of Delusion—a vast conspiracy. "Can I just say something for the record?" I ask.

"Sure," she says.

"I don't eat human eyeballs or shoot Disney characters. I'm a nice guy. I'd hate to see that in print."

She laughs a bit hysterically. "Actually, I don't know if I can write the article now. It was just supposed to be a simple piece on, you know, a spiritually elevated guy and his little ashram in America's heartland. What is it now? Some exposé that's supposed to

bust the New Age wide open? Tear down the world's great religions? Awaken a narcotized humanity? No way. That's the end of that. But now I don't even want to be a writer anymore, not in the way I have been... I don't know what I want to be... The whole spirituality thing is just, like, the most pointless merry-go-round. *God!* I can't stop thinking about this! My mind has been trying to get a handle on all this since I saw you on Saturday. I'm only really beginning to understand it all myself and I can't believe anyone can even *think* about anything else! I keep thinking 'This is it! This is the only game in town. The only dance there is. What else could possibly matter?' I look at other people going about their normal lives and I want to scream! To shake them and wake them up! How can anyone watch a movie or go to work or eat a sandwich with this huge freakin' thing staring them right in the face? I mean, am I going insane? I know I'm not, but am I? Is this normal? Really, you can tell me. Am I being, like, the most total whack-job?"

She has stopped pacing and is glaring at me.

"Me now?" I ask.

"Yes!" she says, laughing edgily.

"First, you're the only one who ever thought there would be an article. I don't understand why Sonaya does anything she does, but I know that she doesn't send me off to meet journalists so they can write about me. Second, no, it's not normal, it's a whole lot different than normal. You're being born. What you're doing now is the start of a much larger process. I can advise you to whatever degree you wish, but here's the key to minimizing the pain—don't resist. It's like you're going to stop treading water and sink away from the group and let yourself drown. You will resist, of course, it's natural, but try to let things take their course and trust in something higher; God, Krishna, Elvis, whatever. I went through the exact same thing and I've seen others in the same place. It's not unusual and you probably won't go nuts. That's the good news."

"Aw damn, I hate the sound of that. That was the *good* news?

What the hell's the *bad* news?"

"It's not bad, really, but it's definitely transformative. What's happening to you is like a death-rebirth process. This is just the beginning. You can't go back. You can't stop. What you were before this started, who you were, is basically behind you. This isn't completely rare; life is full of transitions like this. A move or a new job might be a small one. Becoming a vampire would be a relatively big one."

She's looking pretty frayed by all this. "How bad?" she asks.

"It's not that it's bad... well, yeah it is. It rewrites everything. You don't really know what I mean by everything yet, but you're starting to. Your life has just entered a period of revolution and I think you can probably expect not to be really settled again for quite some time."

Her intensity fills the room. I've seen people require hospitalization at this stage. She paces back and forth, muscles taut, eyes bright. This may be the most awake she's ever been... so far. "Am I turning into, you know, a vampire?"

"Lao Tzu said that what the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the rest of the world calls a butterfly."

She is looking at me hopefully. "Say that again."

"What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the rest of the world calls a butterfly."

She nods, thinking—thinking as hard as she can. She's in a mild state of shock brought on by the emotional toll of this whole thing building up in her over several days and further exacerbated by poor diet and lack of sleep. On top of all that there's the total disruption of normalcy, the thrill of self-discovery and the fear of entering unknown waters. Quite a mix. I know one person who had to be handcuffed by police, strapped face-down on a stretcher and transported by ambulance to a facility for psychological observation at this approximate stage of the transformation. It can be a dicey time.

Zen guys, among others, talk about this part, but for the most

part a severe psychological break is not a big selling point for a spiritual teaching. People want all the goodies—the perfect knowledge and the freedom from suffering and all that—but no one wants to pay for it. This is the price, where Julie is now, or the beginning of it anyway. The simple fact is that it's a bloody mess, and the love-and-bliss crowd doesn't sign up for that. They want the enlightenment that doesn't include relinquishing one's place among fellow water-treaders. They don't want to stop treading, don't want to slip, alone, into blackness. They want the other enlightenment, the one where they can stay with the group and keep their carefully constructed personalities and just be happy. Preferably, really really really happy.

I like happiness as much as the next guy, but it's not happiness that sends one in search of truth. It's rabid, feverish, clawing madness to stop being a lie, regardless of price, come heaven or hell. This isn't about higher consciousness or self-discovery or heaven on earth. This is about blood-caked swords and Buddha's rotting head and self-immolation, and anyone who says otherwise is selling something they don't have.

I never doubted that Julie's conscious intent in speaking to me was to interview me for an article, but I certainly never thought for an instant that Sonaya's intent had anything to do with an interview. With Sonaya, though, you don't ask, you just wait for unfolding.

Julie sits next to me staring blankly out the window and trembling slightly. Sonaya enters, takes her by the hand and gently leads her out. She'll take Julie to one of the bedrooms, make her some tea and let her rest. Of course, for Julie, nothing's over. It's a long way from over. Her entire life has culminated in this beginning. She has just left solid footing forever.

I unclip the mike and set the recorder aside. Twenty minutes later Sonaya returns and sits next to me on the couch where Julie had been.

"She'll sleep," she says.

Sonaya scrunches down into a more relaxed position and puts her feet up on the coffee table next to mine and we sit silently—tranquil, content, happy just to watch the shifting sky and idly wonder what's coming next, but not worried, knowing, each in our own way, that whatever's coming is gonna be good.

But hey, that's a no-brainer—it's *all* good.

Do you see O my brothers and sisters?
It is not chaos or death—it is form, union, plan—
it is eternal life

It is Happiness.

— Walt Whitman —

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Why Not?

Spiritual enlightenment sits next to an empty milk carton
on an orange lunch tray in a gradeschool cafeteria.
It's lying in the grass in a ditch beside a rusting hubcap.
It's on the button holding closed the left cuff of a somewhat
important man's shirt.

Enlightenment can be found next to the elevator on the
fourth level of the airport parking garage.

You can ask your dog for it, but he may not give it to you.

Look for it next to the pen in the pocket
of the checkout girl's red vest,
But only on Wednesdays.

Enlightenment is in the trunk, behind the jack.
You can hear it in the squeak of a hinge at the local library.
It's in the breeze blowing unheard through an unseen tree.
It's in the space after the exhale and before the inhale.

You can find enlightenment in church,
in that scratch on the back of the pew in front of you.

You can find it in the desert,
just before the wind picks up again.

Enlightenment is nothing.
Delusion is the greatest wonder.

Enlightenment was in your coffee cup
before you poured in the coffee.
Now it's in your coffee cup.
Two point two billion years
before your coffee cup was created,
Enlightenment was in your coffee cup.
An hour and fifteen minutes
after time swallows the universe,
Enlightenment will be in your coffee cup.

You've always known where it is
because it's exactly where you left it.
How can you not return to a place you never left?
You are dreaming that you are unenlightened.
You are dreaming that you are awake.

The question is: Why?
The answer is: Why not?

— Jed McKenna —

Epilogue

Spiritual enlightenment *is* the damnedest thing.

It is, literally, self-defeating. It is a battle we wage upon ourselves. Truth is a uniquely challenging pursuit because the very thing that wants it is the only thing in the way of it. It's a battle we will kill to lose and must die to win. The great enemy is the very self that wages the war, so how can there be victory? When self is destroyed, who wins? Why would anyone, knowing the price of victory, undertake so senseless a battle?

Arjuna wouldn't. He weighed the cost against the gains set down his weapon rather than launch such a war. The *Bhagavad Gita* is the story about why he picked his weapon back up. It is summed up in these two lines:

> The unreal has no being;
> The real never ceases to be.

If I were to reduce this book and my teachings to their essence, I would say it all comes down to nothing more than this: Think for yourself and figure out what's true. That's it. Ask yourself what's true until you know. Everything else in this book, everything else I have to say on the subject, turns on that center.

That's the note I'd like to end on. It's your show. It's your universe. There's no one else here, just you, and nothing is being withheld from you. You are completely on your own. Everything is available for direct knowing. No one else has anything you need. No one else can lead you, pull you, push you or carry you. No one else is necessary to your success. It cannot be simpler—*you* are asleep and *you* can wake up. If you understand that, you'll understand that it's the best news you could possibly receive.

Behold! The way is open unto thee.

. . .

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. This book is more about getting to that First Step than the rest of the journey. Once you've begun there's no stopping or turning back, but as we say in the skydiving game, you have to watch out for that First Step, it's a doozy.

I'll leave you with one final glimpse behind the veil:

Row, row, row your boat,
Gently down the stream.
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,
Life is but a dream.

About the Author

Jed McKenna is just an ordinary fellow who has completed his work. He made his home in Iowa from 1988 until 2000. Now he wanders the earth, eating out of dumpsters, washing his armpits in gas station sinks, and working on his next book, tentatively titled *Spiritually Incorrect Enlightenment: Wipe that silly grin off your face and Wake Up!*

He is no longer teaching.

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E-Book Bonus Content

Preview Chapter
This is a preview draft of a chapter slated to appear in Jed McKenna's upcoming book, SPIRITUALLY INCORRECT ENLIGHTENMENT: WIPE THAT SILLY GRIN OFF YOUR FACE AND WAKE UP! It is provided here as part of the bonus material for buyers of the e-book version of SPIRITUAL ENLIGHTENMENT: THE DAMNEDEST THING.

. . .

Recipe for failure.

This day before dawn I ascended a hill
and look'd at the crowded heaven,

And I said to my spirit
When we become the enfolders of those orbs,
and the pleasure and knowledge of every thing in them,
shall we be fill'd and satisfied then?

And my spirit said
No, we but level that lift to pass and continue beyond.

— Walt Whitman —

Kamiel came prepared. He carries a bulging, well-worn, triple rubber-banded notebook full of thoughts, ideas, and questions accumulated during several years of reading spiritual books, attending spiritual gatherings, and participating in spiritual internet discussion groups.

"A lot of teachers," he informs me, "say that the necessary first step in awakening is dissatisfaction; a gnawing discontentment on the feeling level. Is that what you mean when you talk about intent?"

Most of Kamiel's reading in recent years has centered on the works of Ramana Maharshi, Nisargadatta Maharaj, Ramesh Balsekar, Jean Klein and that whole crew. He seems philosophically inclined toward the peculiar brand of nonduality and neo-Advaita Vedanta that attracts a growing audience these days. Its allure seems based on its simple core truth; not-two.

While not-two is not exactly true, two *is* exactly *not* true, and therefore succinctly marks the endpoint of dualistic thought—you'd think. Where nondual enthusiasts go astray is in trying to erect a philosophical structure atop this simple truth. Truth is always simple and never provides the basis for any philosophy, but Kamiel is determined to believe that his ramshackle nondual philosophy is structurally sound. I've explained to him that you can't build a philosophy of This on a foundation of Not-This, but he is quite attached to his improbable little edifice and not yet ready to decamp.

Which is perfectly fine. Waking up is a stop-and-go journey. It takes a lot of hard work to reach a plateau like nonduality and pausing to rest and acclimatize before moving on is part of the process. Nonduality may not be the final destination new arrivals might suppose, but getting there is an impressive and challenging feat and the views are rewarding in all directions. What's more, I like Kamiel and generally enjoy talking with him. He asks good questions that elicit interesting answers. I'm usually limited to speaking in monologues rather than dialogues, but it's the student who calls the tune and Kamiel makes a good job of it.

"Well," I respond after thinking about his question a bit, "I guess it's a matter of degree. Let's try out a new analogy. I'm making this up on the fly so bear with me. Here's the situation: You're sitting in your skyscraper office a hundred stories off the ground thinking about how successful you are and how your life is just grand. With me so far? In terms of satisfaction, you're *very* satisfied. You have it all; fancy office, great views, the respect and admiration of those around you, everything you ever wanted. Okay?"

"Okay."

"So, you're like that—happy, content, well-satisfied—for however long; months, years, decades. But then one day, for whatever reason, dissatisfaction begins to creep in. Something about your office starts to bug you. It starts with little things. You're dissatisfied with your curtains; they don't go with the credenza at all. 'What was I thinking?' you wonder. 'How could I have been so blind?' And now that you're looking more closely, it's obvious that the carpet is a fiasco and the artwork is just an embarrassment. One minute you're happy, the next minute you're very, very dissatisfied.

Extremely dissatisfied. This office is simply not an accurate outward representation of your inner professional. You've outgrown it."

"It actually sounds like a pretty cool office."

"Yeah, well, that's what everyone else thinks; your friends, colleagues, your family. They think you've got it made and that you're nuts for wanting to mess with it. Of course, you're only dissatisfied when you're in the office. You pretty much forget about it when you're anywhere else. Right?"

"Right."

"And you're following the analogy, right? These things can be a bit wobbly the first time out. Your office represents your relationship to the larger questions of life and your dissatisfaction represents..."

"Got it."

"Good. So what's the answer? What do you do about this very dissatisfying office of yours?"

"Uh, I don't know," he shrugs. "Redecorate?"

"Yeah, that sounds right. But this time you're going to be very serious about it. You're going to bring in a top-notch decorator and strip the place down to the floorboards and start from scratch. You're not going to be a mere dabbler; you're going all the way with this. You're a serious professional and you deserve a serious office. See what I mean? See how what started as a gnawing little dissatisfaction has grown into a life-transforming event?"

"Okay," he says dutifully.

"So that's what you do. You go out and buy books and magazines on interior design. You talk to people and attend lectures and events. You hire the best decorator you can find; someone you resonate with deeply. You yourself are being transformed by this experience. You yourself are growing, developing, expanding. It's very challenging, but you're taking a no-nonsense approach. It's slow going, but little by little change is occurring. Your office is starting to look and feel like a genuine outer representation of your inner professional. It may take years to get it right, but nothing will stop you. This is too important. In fact, it has become one of the most important things in your life, right up there with home and family. See

what I mean?"

"Yes," he says eagerly. "The master decorator represents the guru and the redecorating process represents the spiritual transformation we undergo when we truly begin to challenge our beliefs and seek higher knowledge. What started out as kind of a gnawing dissatisfaction has grown into the impetus for important change, and although it might seem like a bad thing at first, this is how the process of change works. This is how we develop, how we grow."

"Exactly," I say. "Nobody acts from contentment. We need problems to solve or else we vegetate. That great office was once something we strived to get, then it was achieved and enjoyed in contentment, but then discontent sets in to let us know that it's time to move on."

"So," says Kamiel, "that's what the teachers are talking about when they discuss the dissatisfaction needed to spur us on, right? It might seem bad or uncomfortable, but it's really a good thing?"

"Sounds right," I say.

"And that's the sort of determination and focus that's required in order to awaken from delusion? To become truth-realized?" He smiles, excited, like he's just now getting the big picture. "So that's what you mean by purity of intent!"

I smile back. "Fuck no. That's what I mean by recipe for failure."

His dismay is instantly apparent. I've cut him off in the first rush of a new grokking and now he's confused and hurt. I did this intentionally. I didn't allow myself to be drawn into this "A lot of teachers say…" conversation just wanting to make a point; I wanted counterpoint. That's what the dialogue has been up until now because I wanted to make a clear distinction. This is the critical distinction between seekers and finders. This is where the line is drawn; a line the existence of which "a lot of teachers" don't even suspect.

"That's the sort of pathetic, half-assed approach that is absolutely certain to keep you confined to your current state. That's the sort of approach that everyone takes and that's why they fail."

He visibly and audibly gulps. "Oh."

"The very people and institutions that are supposedly dedicated to waking us up are doing exactly the opposite. They are lulling us into a more comfortable sleep. That's what we really want and that's what they really provide."

He doesn't seem pleased. "Oh, God… well then… then what drives the process of true awakening?"

"Purity of intent, but what does that really mean? Okay, you're back in the office again, totally satisfied with everything. Life is great. Okay?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. So now dissatisfaction starts to creep in on you, but this time the dissatisfaction stems from the fact that you smell smoke."

"The building is on fire now?"

"Wake up and smell the coffin, Kamiel. The building has always been on fire, you were just repressing that knowledge until now. But now you're aware of it and it's causing you some dissatisfaction. Quite a lot, in fact, and more with every passing moment. Now for the first time you realize that the flames are right outside the door and the temperature is rising. Acrid black smoke is pouring in. The door bursts into flames. There is no exit. Now you're very, *very* dissatisfied with your office. In fact, you're starting to hate your office quite profoundly. See how this dissatisfaction—this gnawing discontentment on the, uh, feeling level—is of a more immediate and compelling nature then the dissatisfaction brought on by the decor?"

He nods mutely.

"Sure. Now your dissatisfaction with your office is quite intense. Searing, really. In fact, your dissatisfaction is so intense that it feels like *you're* on fire, like you can't stand to be in your own skin, like anything would be better than more of this. Now you have no thought at all for career, home, or family. Due to a change in your personal circumstances they've all been reduced to complete irrelevance. Beliefs and concepts disappear and even death is suddenly small. You're very focused now. You're in the moment; very present. The flames are feet away. Your dissatisfaction with your office is well beyond anything even a master redecorator could handle for you, agree?"

He nods.

"And there's no return, is there? No going back. The fire is here. It's a fact. Do you see that?"

He nods again.

"And you're completely alone in all this. There's no rescue. Your office is engulfed in flames and there's no one here to save you. Not Jesus or Buddha or the Pope or your mama. This is *your* dissatisfaction. This is *your* problem. This is *your* agony. This is *you* about to burn to death, okay?"

"Okay."

"Okay. So what do you do?"

"Huh?"

"Your world is burning. The whole office is in flames. You're in a hopeless, no-escape situation. The pain has started and will only get worse. I think we can safely say that your dissatisfaction is now quite pronounced. What do you do?"

"Christ, I don't know. Go out the window?"

"Really?"

"Hell, I don't know. What else?"

"Yeah, I guess so. You're in this inferno of an office while outside the window is blue sky, white clouds, and freedom from suffering. That seems like the only possible solution given your very dissatisfying circumstances. But—"

"But *what?*"

"Well, that's not Hollywood glass in those skyscraper windows. You start flinging yourself against the window but it doesn't give. Your dissatisfaction is of such intensity that you might break bones and crack your skull from hurling yourself desperately against the window, all to no avail."

"Yeah, then what? What happens?"

"Well, the obvious thing is that you might simply perish in the hellish inferno. No law against dying."

He looks at me desperately.

"Or, maybe you have some object that allows you to break the window out. Or maybe the sheer intensity of your—what are we calling it, dissat-

isfaction?—allows you to break through the unbreakable window. So, *boom!*, you blow out the window. Now there's nothing left in the equation but you, the raging fire, and a hundred story plummet to the sidewalk below. Everything is suddenly quite simple. Perhaps for the first time, your life is perfectly clear."

"Yeah? Then?"

"Burn or jump, I guess."

"Burn or jump?"

"Do you see another option?"

"Burn or jump," he says flatly.

"When you become so dissatisfied with your office that the hundred story plummet and the sidewalk seem like the better option, so dissatisfied that you actually hurl yourself out the window, then you know the level of dissatisfaction necessary to awaken from delusion."

He is silent for several moments, head bowed, thoughtful. "I guess dissatisfaction isn't the right word."

"Maybe not," I agree. "I call it purity of intent, but that doesn't really capture it either."

"And that's something every enlightened master went through?"

"You say it like there are countless enlightened masters dotting the spiritual landscape, but there are extremely few, and now you know why."

"Jesus..." he mumbles, seemingly sincere in his effort to truly appreciate what he's just been told. "Jesus."

I deliver the moral of the story in three easy pieces.

"The price. Of truth. Is everything."

"Jesus."

Interview with Jed McKenna

This interview was created as a special thank you for readers who purchase the e-book version of SPIRITUAL ENLIGHTENMENT: THE DAMNEDEST THING from Wisefool Press. This interview was conducted over the course of a year, mostly by email and builds upon themes discussed in the book, so it is suggested that you read the interview only after you've read the book at least once.

"I never went in search of spiritual enlightenment. It was never my goal. I just wanted the truth, whatever the price. I didn't realize until several years after the successful conclusion of that search that what I had achieved was called spiritual enlightenment, and even now I don't know what's so damned spiritual about it." –JED MCKENNA

On enlightenment...

Q: What is enlightenment?

JM: No-self.

Q: Okay, what is no-self?

JM: Abiding non-dual awareness.

Q: Okay, what is—?

JM: I can't tell you what it is; no one can. It's not a thing, it's not a concept, it's not a place. There's no explaining fire to someone who's never seen fire; no description can do justice to the direct experience of fire. I use terms like abiding non-dual awareness and no-self and truth-realization not because they capture it, but because they seem the least misleading.

Q: Most people define spiritual enlightenment very differently from the way you describe it, as if they are talking about something completely different. How can there be such disparity?

JM: Enlightenment is absolute. It doesn't come in varieties or degrees. It's not open to interpretation. But the most important thing is that it's self-verifiable and completely available to reason. Anyone who wants to understand *can* understand. It doesn't require interpreters or intermediaries. It's

just sitting there, right out in the open, for anyone who cares to look. No one has to rely on me or anyone else. Becoming enlightened may be a real ball-buster, but enlightenment *theory* is a breeze. The first chapter of the book is titled "That which cannot be simpler." That's an exact statement. Enlightenment is that which cannot be simplified further; cannot be further reduced.

Q: Which brings us to the question of who is enlightened? *Who* is writing the book? *Who* is teaching? It's very difficult to reconcile the appearance of self with the claim of no-self.

JM: And yet, there it is. True self is no-self and there's just no way to make it sound reasonable. I can't express it in a way that anyone is going to get it. I'm aware that there's an apparent contradiction, but it doesn't appear to me. It's like the gateless gate thing. It looks one way from there and another from here. All I can say is come here and see for yourself.

Q: That sounds like a leap of faith, not logic.

JM: No, it's simple math. Anyone can verify for themselves the truth of non-duality; the fact that all is one. Any reasonably able-minded person can put it together on their own. From there, it's a short step to no-self. Once you have established in your own mind the truth of nonduality, then countless fictions, like the idea of a separate self, shall not long stand.

Q: You say "reasonably able-minded person." What's really required by way of intelligence for this undertaking?

JM: Not much. It all really comes back to intent. If the intent is in place, everything is in place. If the intent isn't in place, no amount of intelligence will make any difference.

Q: So logic is the tool of the mind and desire is the tool of the heart?

JM: Sure. Good. Logic—mind—is the sword and intent—heart—is the will to use it. Nicely put.

On the book...

Q: It's often said that for a book to do well the author must actively promote it through appearances and media exposure. Why won't you do book signings or radio interviews or any of that?

JM: I could answer that a lot of different ways. I could say that the nature of the book doesn't lend itself to that sort of exposure, which is true. I could say that I'm not disposed to undergo that sort of personal exposure, which is also true. But the larger truth is that the book will succeed or fail on things other than marketing and PR. My job was to competently write the book. The publisher's job is to competently produce the book and make it available. How the book fares in the marketplace is none of our concern.

Q: Do you care if it succeeds or fails?

JM: I'd be amused if it succeeds. I'd be relieved if it fails. I had an urge to express certain things and now I have and the urge is gone. That's really the whole story.

Q: But you're doing another book.

JM: Yeah, there's more material, more fun stuff, but the first book is the complete expression. It satisfied my desire to share what I know. Anything else I write will just be what I consider amusing elaboration.

Jed on Jed...

Q: We've received many questions about you personally. People want to know about your history, your relationships, your finances, everything. For instance, do you have friends? Do you socialize beyond the student/teacher relationship?

JM: This whole thing really has nothing to do with me personally and it would be counter-productive to shift the focus onto me.

Q: It's easy to understand why people would be curious.

JM: I'm not relevant to anyone's search. I'm just a finger pointing at the moon. There's nothing to be learned from the finger. Everybody's eager to find a distraction from the real work of waking up, but that's all it is, a distraction.

Q: You dropped a bombshell on the last page of the book by announcing that you've stopped teaching. How did you come to that decision?

JM: There was no decision involved, just an observation. It's easier to understand if we state it more accurately. It's not that I stopped teaching; it's that I reached the end of the learning process necessary to bring the book into being. Everything, it turns out, was about the book. The many hundreds of hours I've spent in dialog with seekers at all levels or comprehension was a part of the book's process of becoming. The completion of the book marked the conclusion of the teaching thing.

Q: Because, as you've said, everything you have to say is in the book?

JM: Because everything was always *about* the book. Not in the sense that I planned it that way, but in the sense that that's the way it is. You could look at in a very linear fashion and say that I started writing the book on such-and-such a date and finished the book on such-and-such a date, but that's a very narrow and incomplete view. That would be a very narrow and incomplete way of looking at any creative journey. Once you remove the blinders of time and space and see the flow of things passing into and out of being, you get a much broader and less linear sense of the flow of things.

Q: What you've called an oceanic view.

JM: Right. You can't really isolate an oceanic event, a wave, for instance. Where in space and time did it begin? Where in space and time does it end? Who can say? It's just one part of something much larger. Why try to chop it into little pieces?

Q: For the purposes of comprehension.

JM: For the comfortable illusion of comprehension, sure. And that's great, nothing wrong with it. But, to bring it back to the teaching thing, I didn't decide or choose to be done with it, I simply observed that it was over. There it goes, and with it, frankly, goes my interest in spiritual matters.

Q: What about the next book?

JM: I tried to keep SPIRITUAL ENLIGHTENMENT pretty tight. The next book, SPIRITUALLY INCORRECT ENLIGHTENMENT, will be a bit looser and have a bit more edge, but it's not going to be the next stage or the next level or anything like that. The first book is complete. All I can do in future books is express the same things differently.

Q: And anyone who would like to have you for a teacher?

JM: Seeking a teacher is just ego seeking a reprieve. Giving oneself over to a teacher or a teaching or the Beloved Guru or whatever is all about staying asleep, not waking up. First rule in this business; you are completely on your own. Ego clings to a teacher like a drowning man clings to a log. The teacher is beloved the way the log is beloved. The teaching is sacred the way the log is sacred. The log is the savior, saving us from sinking into the cold black depths.

Q: But what of the students who achieved their awakening under you?

JM: I was just there for them. A midwife can hardly take credit for the child.

Q: Will you miss teaching? Do you think you might return to it?

JM: I don't think I could if I wanted to. The teacher role is a false persona just like any other—a costume. It's not the "real" me and I doubt I could muster the energy needed to animate the role anymore. It was a garment I wore and have now cast off. It served its purpose.

On spiritual teachings...

Q: Rather than aiding people in their quest for spiritual enlightenment, it seems like you sometimes encourage them to abandon it. You seem to advise people to see it for what it really is, not necessarily so they can attain it, but so they can stop trying. Does that seem like a fair assessment?

JM: Definitely. What it really is is so far removed from what many seekers are seeking that it's only humane to try to wave them off. Of course, unfulfilled seeking is its own thing—its own life theme—and that's what most people are really doing. For them, the seeking is the point, not the finding.

Q: But they are not aware that they are seeking for the experience of seeking, and not for the actual attainment of that which is sought?

JM: Sure, necessarily so. And here I should remind you that in the context of being a human being on planet earth, seeking truth makes sense and finding it doesn't.

Q: You've actually said that enlightenment is a bit silly.

JM: Yeah, the whole business is a little goofy.

Q: It's strange to hear an enlightened master refer to spiritual enlightenment as "goofy."

JM: I don't know. It's all goofy. What's not goofy? The First Noble Truth isn't "Life is suffering," it's "Life is goofy." The goofiest people are the ones who take it the most seriously, and no one takes it more seriously than someone who wants to awaken from it.

Q: So, spiritual seekers are the goofiest people?

JM: Well, the world is full of strangely serious people.

Q: Are you trying to avoid saying that spiritual seekers are the goofiest people?

JM: No, I'm not saying that because I don't think spiritual seekers in general are all that serious. Someone who is truly in the process of awakening would be the most serious imaginable person, but that doesn't apply to many people.

Q: Enlightenment is usually touted as the greatest of all achievements, as self-perfection, as the highest aim of humanity, the ultimate goal of every search, but you make it seem almost pointless at times.

JM: Well, I wouldn't want to give the impression that it's almost pointless. It's *perfectly* pointless. Awakening to your true nature is like dying; it's a certainty, inevitable. You're going to get there no matter what you do, so why rush? Enjoy your life, it's free. Cosmic Consciousness and Altered States and Universal Mind are the names of rides in this vast and fascinating dualistic amusement park. So are Poverty and Disease and Despair. Enlightenment, though, is not another ride. Enlightenment means leaving the park altogether, but why leave the park? In the park you can be a saint or a yogi or a billionaire or a world leader or a warlord. Be good, be evil. Happiness, misery, bliss, agony, victory, defeat, it's all here. What's the big rush? When the time comes to leave the park, you'll know and you'll go, but there's certainly nothing to be gained by it.

Q: So you encourage seekers to abandon the search.

JM: I'm not trying to *en*courage or *dis*courage, I'm just trying to express something that is difficult to express and about which virtually everyone with an interest is egregiously misinformed.

Q: As you say in the book:

> *In most cases, the enlightenment being bought and sold is not enlightenment at all, but a state of consciousness so crazy-ass wonderful that you'd have to be an idiot not to want it. So insidiously wonderful, in fact, that its radiance has blinded untold millions of seekers to the fact that it doesn't exist.*

Does this seem to capture it?

JM: Essentially. The enlightenment that seems desirable isn't enlightenment, and that aspect of us which is able to desire enlightenment is unable to achieve it; won't survive its onset. Day destroys night.

Q: So seeking is doomed to failure?

JM: That's a matter of context. I look at spiritual seekers and they seem, on the whole, pretty content. Maybe that's because what they're really seeking

is contentment. Seeking enlightenment is an inherent paradox, but who's really seeking enlightenment? In the introduction to her book *Halfway Up the Mountain: The Error of Premature Claims to Enlightenment*, Mariana Caplan says:

> *The reality of the present condition of contemporary spirituality in the West is one of grave distortion, confusion, fraud, and a fundamental lack of education.*

In my opinion there's no real reason to discriminate. The East is no better off in this regard. She also says:

> *The subject of enlightenment itself is one of the biggest arenas of naiveté, ignorance, self-deceit, and confusion in contemporary spirituality. A close second to enlightenment is the category of "mystical" or "spiritual" experiences.*

I might turn it around and say that contemporary spirituality is one of the biggest arenas of naiveté, ignorance, self-deceit, and confusion in the quest for enlightenment, but you get the idea.

Q: It seems like many spiritual teachers adopt the names, clothing or titles of their spiritual heritage, but you steer clear of those trappings.

JM: Well, I don't have any particular teaching or lineage, and no guru ever renamed me because I never had a guru. In any event, I wouldn't want to give anyone the impression that truth was proprietary or the exclusive domain of some foreign or ancient culture. Truth is one's personal domain, any time, any place. If I were to wear robes or have a Hindu name or a Japanese title that would only serve to mislead those who ask me to point the way. I don't point East or West; I point right back at the seeker.

Q: So you don't think a student needs a guru? That seems to be matter of endless debate.

JM: Whatever it is they're seeking in Guru-based traditions might require a guru, I have no idea. I'm defining spiritual enlightenment as truth-realization and that doesn't require anything but purity of intent.

Q: Purity of intent meaning like you describe in the book when you talk about your own journey?

JM: I had a student named Alexander. At one point in his awakening he decided that he needed access to a library in Chicago. I never knew why, but he was sure that the next thing he needed could only be found there. So he started hitchhiking from Los Angeles with no hesitation. He had no money and he looked unkempt and scary so he had trouble getting rides and had to do a lot of walking. He walked right through his soles so he had to insert folded newspaper inside his shoes several times a day. It was winter, so he had to do odd jobs along the way for a used jacket, boots, food; quite an ordeal. Three weeks later he makes it to Chicago. He sleeps in a doorway, eats whatever he can find. He carries books with him that he reads whenever the demands of surviving allow.

Q: That sounds like a grueling hardship.

JM: That's my point. If you were to use the word hardship to Alexander as he sat exhausted, cold and hungry in that doorway, he'd have just stared at you as if you were a yapping dog. I'll also point out that six months earlier Alexander was a very normal guy with a wife, kids, a house and a job.

There is no hardship, there's only the next thing, the next step, the next battle. The point is always to get the next door unlocked. The bible says to pluck out your eye if it offends you. If Alexander's eye were preventing him from opening the next door, it wouldn't occur to him not to remove it. That's the fuel that drives this journey. It's not in scriptures or temples. It's no one's to give or withhold. That's what I mean by purity of intent.

On the process...

Q: You describe a process of awakening that generally takes two years, plus another ten to integrate, yet many spiritual teachers describe enlightenment as the result of an instantaneous transformative event.

JM: I would guess that they've undergone the kind of experience that Bucke talks about in the book *Cosmic Consciousness*; some sort of mystical insight into the heart of creation or something equally transcendent and transformative. Great stuff. I've had mystical experiences myself and I wouldn't even try to express the wonder of them. But the idea that someone can awaken to no-self in a flash is simply absurd. Such people are talking about something wonderful, but it's not truth-realization. It's not abiding non-dual awareness.

Q: There's a lot of talk among spiritual teachers suggesting that we're currently undergoing a massive shift in consciousness and that mankind is entering a new age of spiritual upliftment. Do you see such a shift taking place?

JM: No.

Q: Could you expand on that answer?

JM: Noooooooo.

Q: Could you—?

JM: People who talk about an enlightened humanity are talking about a world where the lamb lies down with the lion and everyone is happy and healthy and whole. In short, a world without conflict, without drama. But that would be very silly since the whole point of duality is division. The whole point of opposites is opposition. This is a drama, not a still-life, and no awakened being would ever suggest that everything wasn't just perfect the way it is.

To return to the amusement park analogy, imagine a group of self-proclaimed visionaries who want to smooth out all the roller coasters so there were no scary plummets or loops, just long, slow, safe circles. Great, but what's the point?

Q: From the book it seems like you never engaged in any of the normal spiritual activities. You're not a meditator, you never used a koan, never had a mantra, never had a guru or teacher. This challenges a lot of people's closely held beliefs about how spiritual realization is attained.

JM: I never thought of waking up as a spiritual pursuit, I just wanted to get to the truth. Looking back, I can see where I might have used the word "infinity" in a koan-like manner; kind of a Western version of mu. Infinity is beautiful; it destroys everything it touches. It annihilates all concepts, all beliefs, all sense of self. No teacher, teaching, book or practice could ever be as effective as simply allowing the thought of infinity to slowly devour you.

Q: Even more so than Spiritual Autolysis?

JM: Spiritual Autolysis invariably leads to infinity. I mean, where else?

Dr. Pillay Interview

These last four questions came from Dr. Kriben Pillay, editor and founder of *The Noumenon Journal*.

1. ENLIGHTENMENT IS DEFINED A FEW TIMES AS 'ABIDING NON-DUAL AWARENESS'. IS IT POSSIBLE TO SAY MORE ABOUT WHAT THIS IS?

The term Non-Dual Awareness is an attempt to capture the living reality of otherlessness in words. This term—Non-Dual Awareness—seems like a reasonable portrayal of the state from *within* the state. The word Abiding distinguishes it from any of the fleeting states commonly mistaken for, or sold as, Spiritual Enlightenment.

Actually, I think the worst term for Spiritual Enlightenment is Spiritual Enlightenment. As I said in SE:TDT, I didn't realize until several years after my awakening that what I had achieved/become was what people meant when they said Spiritual Enlightenment; at least, what those people meant who used the term to mean the absolute state rather than a higher-level dreamstate like Unity Consciousness. The experience of Unity Conscious certainly *feels* more like something you'd want to call Spiritual Enlightenment, but it's not lasting, so what is it? A sweet dream. The most wonderful thing we can experience, I'd agree, but not a permanent awakening from delusion.

The best term might be Truth-Realization. The term Spiritual Enlightenment perpetuates the mist-enshrouded, mountain-top mystique, whereas Truth-Realization sounds natural, reasonable, and within reach. Spiritual Enlightenment is for the ultra-elite, but truth is everyone's business.

2. HOW WOULD SPIRITUAL AUTOLYSIS WORK IF SOMEONE (STILL UNENLIGHTENED) WENT AROUND SAYING THAT ENLIGHTENMENT IS 'ABIDING NON-DUAL AWARENESS'?

Exactly. That's the question. Calling it Abiding Non-Dual Awareness might be an adequate description from within, but is it useful from without? Is it useful for the seeker to know and call it by that name? And the answer is, I think, not very.

In the book, I made an effort to convey the daily reality, even banality, of my experience. I wanted to hold myself up as an awakened being and say "Look, this is it. This is what it's really like." So the term Abiding Non-Dual Awareness serves that purpose, but it's probably not the most illuminating term for the seeker.

For the purposes of trying to achieve this state, I think the terms No-Self, Truth-Realization, and Non-Duality are of more practical value.

3.YOU MENTION THAT YOU ENJOY BOOKS WRITTEN BY THOSE WHO HAVE ATTAINED ENLIGHTENMENT AND WHO WRITE WELL ABOUT WHAT IT'S LIKE. CAN YOU NAME A FEW AUTHORS?

I'm going to sidestep this question in order to provide a more pertinent answer. The goal of the genuine seeker is always to take the next step, to open the next door. Waking up is not a scholastic pursuit or a conceptual challenge. The ability to take the next step is the only thing that matters, and it can come in any package; a book, a stubbed toe, an advertising jingle, a leaf of grass. If your intent is in place, then the universe will act as your librarian and you'll always have you what you need when you need it.

4. SOME TEACHERS LIKE U.G. KRISHNAMURTI POSIT THAT THE INDIVIDUAL CAN DO NOTHING ABOUT BECOMING ENLIGHTENED SIMPLY BECAUSE IT MEANS THE END OF THE INDIVIDUAL SELF-SENSE. YOU ARE EMPHATIC THAT IT CAN HAPPEN THROUGH CONSCIOUS INTENTION, AND THAT IT SHOULD TAKE NO LONGER THAN TWO YEARS AFTER THE FIRST STEP HAS HAPPENED. HOW WOULD YOU VIEW U.G.'S VIEW, (AND BALSEKAR'S, WHOM YOU QUOTE), BECAUSE IT BRINGS UP THE OLD DEBATE OF DESTINY AND FREE WILL IN THE

PURSUIT OF ENLIGHTENMENT?

Yes, I'm emphatic. Not only *can* it happen through conscious intention, it can *only* happen through conscious intention.

To say that the individual can do nothing to break free of dualistic perception because it results in non-dualistic perception is like saying a living being can't step off a cliff because it results in death, or that a dreamer can't wake up because he's dreaming. It's absurd.

However, if U. G. Krishnamurti *et al* were saying that self cannot achieve no-self, then that's perfectly correct. The end of the one marks the beginning of the other. No one can have their cake and eat it too, despite what so many would have us believe.

Is it a paradox? Yes. Can it be explained so people will understand? No. Can anyone come see for themself and understand it directly? Yes. How? Claw, scratch, bite, and burn. Burn everything.

Think for yourself and figure out what's true. That's the master key. Ultimately, that's my only advice. The clock is ticking and you're completely on your own. Forget concepts. Forget philosophy. Forget spirituality. Forget what anyone else says. Don't try to dictate terms. Just think for yourself and figure out what's true.

Hey, how hard can that be?

–JED MCKENNA

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