

Daily Bliss: Practical Ways to Experience God in Everyday Life

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Dedication: For the glory of God and the benefit of all beings.

"The
Real love
I always keep a secret.
All my words
Are sung outside Her window,
For when She lets me in
I take a thousand oaths of silence.
But,
Then She says,
O, then God says,
"What the hell, Hafiz,
Why not give the whole world
My
Address?"

-Hafiz

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Introduction

“If one beholds a lesser and a greater happiness,
Let the wise person leave behind the lesser
To attain the greater.”
-The Dhammapada

Why I wrote this book

I wrote this book because I believe that experiencing God is the highest goal of human life. Because God is everlasting and unconditional happiness, realizing our oneness with It is superior to all other impermanent forms of happiness.¹ For this reason, the search for God should be our first priority, and we should seek It above all other desires.

In my view, oneness with the eternal God is a direct experience that anyone can have if they make a daily effort using specific techniques, such as meditation, that help catalyze this experience. Although the path to the Divine is difficult to walk, it is universal and anyone can understand it. The quest for God-Realization is not only for a select few spiritual professionals; it is an open invitation to every human being. Luckily, in our modern age, many people have enough free time to maintain a daily meditation practice, attend occasional meditation retreats, petition the Personal God in daily prayer, and generally make time for daily spiritual exercises. By sincerely practicing effective meditation techniques, anyone – regardless of race, religion, class, gender, or nationality – can learn to experience their own God-Nature and take significant steps on the path of enlightenment.

This book contains practices I personally do everyday. I believe they can help people experience God, but it is absurd to think that the spiritual path is as simple as following a prescribed method created by someone else. Attaining sustained God-Realization is a lifelong endeavor, and only sincere and unwavering devotion can bring it about. I did not write this book to be an ultimatum or a manifesto, but merely to be a personal testimony and series of humble suggestions based on my own experiences. I wrote this book to inspire people to integrate meditation and prayer into their daily lives, to explain why I think such practices are effective, and also to show that the average person can maintain a serious spiritual practice. It is absurd

¹ I say “It” here because God, in this sense, is a universal experience that transcends any gender, category, or particular belief system. Ultimately, we are all God. I formally define God in the section entitled, “God and Self-Realization Defined.”

to think that your path to God should look exactly like mine, or anyone else's. We are each unique people, and though we may learn about God through many mediums, we all have a completely unique path we alone can walk. Lastly, as I will discuss more in depth later, I wrote this book because my approach of utilizing both Buddhist meditation and a relationship with what I define as the Personal God is an approach with a minimal amount of corresponding literature.

Although there are many paths to the Divine, all of them have a common denominator because they ultimately culminate in the experience of God, who is our own True Nature and is Bliss itself. As the title of this book suggests, we can all learn to experience this Bliss in our daily life now if we make an adequate effort. We do not need to wait for an afterlife to know God. We also do not need to unnecessarily abandon all our "worldly" goals in this life to know It. By consistently setting aside time each day to pray, and especially to meditate, anyone can experience the spiritual freedom that Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, and all of humanity's great spiritual teachers have described in various ways.

There are many teachers who have taught different ways to attain God-Realization, and all of them have their own merits. This book is simply an expression of what has worked for me thus far, and my only hope is that you will be inspired to find your own personal pathway to the everlasting peace that is your birthright. I am not an official spiritual teacher. The source of my writing material is my own meditation practice, my reading of various world scriptures, my monastic experiences in Zen Buddhism, and my own private encounters with the Personal God. I have no desire for other people to affirm my own personal discoveries. However, if you are interested, I encourage you to simply see if the practices I discuss benefit you as much as they have benefitted me.

Ramakrishna once said that all scriptures and teachings are like treasure maps. Once you follow the guidance of the map and find that the X is within yourself, you no longer need scriptures or any external guidance whatsoever. Then it is time to discard the map and start digging! Think of this book as a sort of treasure map. If you do the practices I recommend for a meaningful amount of time and find they are getting you no treasure, you should throw this book away without a thought. But even if you discard this book you shouldn't "throw out the baby with the bath water" by forgetting all about the spiritual path. Continue asking God to reveal Himself to you, and if you are sincere you will soon be led to a path that works best for you individually.

Jesus of Nazareth summed up the mysterious process of the spiritual path by saying, “Seek, and you *will* find. Knock, and the door *will* be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7). I am just a human being with many imperfections, but I may be considered wise only because I continually knock on the door of Truth in the silent temple of daily meditation and prayer. I hope that you too will knock on this door, and that God will reveal to you Its bliss, which manifests the entire universe from Itself as a tiny spark is birthed from the womb of an endlessly burning fire.

A basic outline of my approach

“All this sounds nice,” you may be thinking, “But what do I *actually* do?” Think of this book as my subjective answer to this question. As I mentioned above, my primary message is that *the realization of God is the supreme goal of human life*. This is far from a new idea. In my opinion, it merely re-echoes the universal message of humanity’s greatest prophets, spiritual teachers, and sages throughout history. However, my personal approach to implementing this idea is somewhat unique. Basically, I combine the Zen Buddhist approach to meditation with a relationship with the Personal God that has been strongly influenced by Christianity and Hinduism.

Enlightenment, or the impersonal realization of True Nature (or Buddha, God, etc.) is the goal of my life. Yet I have found it incredibly wonderful and practically beneficial to complement this approach by enjoying a temporary relationship with the Personal God (I define the Personal God in more detail in the section, “Definitions.”). This relationship infuses my daily life with love, joy, hope, and practical guidance that I now find both indispensable and irresistible. As I will later emphasize, this relationship is not merely a sterile belief; it has real effects on me that have radically changed both my worldview and the practical direction my life has taken.

These two seemingly contradictory approaches to the spiritual path can coexist and even complement each other. With that said, the crystalized advice of my book, which I will later elaborate on extensively, is this:

1. Make the realization of God the goal of your life.
2. Utilize Zen meditation as a technology to directly experience your own God-Nature.

3. From the perspective of relativity, make your relationship with the Personal God your primary personal allegiance and satisfaction, and ask the Personal God daily to reveal Itself to you.
4. Seek the Personal God's practical purpose for your life. Whatever you do, view your daily activities as divine worship and selfless service to humankind, and generally view God-Realization as the goal of all your activities.

My perspective is not for everyone, and my goal is not to convert people to my way of thinking. Although I believe that the Personal God inspired this book, I did not receive its content through divine revelation as it is generally thought of. Nor is this approach something I merely created with my intellect; I basically stumbled into it! My views are the result of experiences that arose from the necessities of my personal life, and my fortunate encounter with practices that have benefitted me immeasurably.

My aim is not to claim my approach as “the way” but to stimulate discussion, reflection, and genuine experimentation. Perhaps some Buddhists will benefit from becoming more open to the idea of a Personal God; perhaps some Christians and other theists will be inspired to seek the direct experience of God instead of being satisfied with mere belief; and perhaps some agnostics and atheists will reconsider their understanding of God and of the spiritual path in general.

At the end of the day, my deepest hope is that this book will help sincere truth seekers experience more of God. In its own inadequate way, this book contains a crystallized expression of my current spiritual understanding. Yet my words, however much they inspire you, will soon fade from your mind. I, all spiritual teachers, and all temporary expedient teachings will pass away like momentary sparks in infinite space. God alone will endure, and my deepest prayer is that you and all beings will be set free by experiencing Its ever-present Bliss that you yourself are in this very moment.

The three most important sections

I recommend reading this book all the way through. However, I wrote this book primarily as a practical manual, so the most important sections to read, in my opinion, are the actual “how-tos” of meditation and prayer. These sections include, “The Practice of Concentrating on the Breath,” “The Practice of Inquiry,” and “Creating Your Own Daily Prayer.” The other practices included in this book are helpful but not as powerful as the three

practices of concentration, inquiry, and directly asking God to reveal Himself. The other spiritual practices are beneficial but ultimately roundabout paths to the Source. These three practices bypass all doctrines, dogmas, and religious rituals by both pointing to your own natural awareness and directly petitioning the Divine for assistance.

It is ideal to work with a spiritual teacher who has realized the Truth themselves, but these three powerful practices can be done on your own. I recommend doing them daily for at least one month. See if you derive any benefit from them. If you do, you should continue doing them. If you do not, forget all about me, but keep seeking God until you find a path that resonates with you!

Chapter 1: Definitions

God and Self-Realization defined

"When I do not know who I am,
I serve You, and when I do know who I am,
You and I are One."

-Hanuman in the Ramayana

I define God-Realization (or Self-Realization, with "Self" as just another way to say God) simply as the direct experience of God, Buddha Nature, or our True Nature, words that I personally use synonymously. The word God obviously has different meanings for different people, so it is important to explain what I mean by "God." When I use the word God, I am not talking about something separate from the observable universe. To me, as a famous Hindu proverb states, "The Creator and the creation are one." God, or beginning-less and ever-present eternal Awareness, has not only created the universe, but has *become* the universe, to enjoy Itself. Yet even though God and the universe are one, God alone is everlasting and the universe is merely It's temporary expression. When the universe ceases to be, It will still be, and will always be.

Furthermore, God is not an idea but is a *direct experience* that is actually the experience of who we really are. We are God, but the majority of us have simply forgotten this. Through countless lifetimes of accumulating illusory habit energy, we have falsely identified with the temporary cloak of our minds and bodies. Because we have forgotten our glorious identity, we ironically have to work hard to realize that we ourselves *are* the One we are seeking. The God I now speak of is the impersonal Absolute that has no name, no gender, no form, no beginning, and no end. Yet even though It is formless, It is continuously and miraculously manifesting Itself as the mysterious and beautiful forms of the present moment. It is manifesting as the universe you are seeing right now and, behold: It is also seeing with your eyes! In truth, It alone exists, and there is no other.

From this perspective, to have "faith in God" means to have faith that the indescribable experience of *being* God is possible to have for yourself in this very life. This is radically different from "blind faith" in a particular conceptual dogma, or from the view that God and the universe are separate. Faith is only a temporary but necessary motivation to practice meditation and live a life of spiritual discipline. Once It reveals Itself, faith will no

longer be necessary. You will *know* that God exists, and will also know what the word “God” really signifies.

God and Buddhism

Because there is some historical tension between the word God and Buddhist philosophy, which is often said to deny the idea of God, I need to say a few words about why I feel my use of God and the Mahayana Buddhist worldview can be harmonized². Many contemporary Zen Buddhists seem to dislike the word “God” but have no trouble substituting it with an entire array of nouns that smoothly take its place. This is often not the case in the Pali canon, which probably contains the earliest discourses of the historical Buddha. However, in the later Mahayana sutras, and in Zen in particular, this tendency is impossible to deny. The words Mind, One Mind, Source, Big Mind, It, Buddha, Buddha Nature, and Tao are found ubiquitously throughout Zen literature, and function as linguistic equivalents to my use of the word God. I can name a few just off the top of my head:

"From One Mind comes duality," it says in *Affirming Faith in Mind*, one of the most famous Zen poems. "Within causes and conditions, time and season, It is serene and illuminating," it says in the *Precious Mirror Samadhi*, another beloved Zen poem that is frequently chanted at contemporary Zen centers. Shunryu Suzuki also famously used the term "Big Mind" (as opposed to small mind or ego) in his pivotal book, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. Lastly, the great founder of Soto Zen, Ehei Dogen, wrote a beautiful essay entitled, "The whole universe is One Bright Pearl." In my opinion, all these nouns could easily be substituted with the word God, and would mean exactly the same thing: "The whole universe is One God," "From one God comes duality," and "Within causes and conditions, time and season, God is serene and illuminating." So the idea that directly experiencing a deathless "It," our formless and indescribable True Nature that I often refer to as God, indeed accords with traditional Zen. The only difference is that I frequently use the word God, a word that many Buddhists seem to have an irrational phobia toward.

As a teaching tool in some Mahayana sutras, the historical Buddha often intentionally refrains from using positive terms to describe

² Mahayana Buddhism (Zen is usually considered to be a branch of Mahayana) generally emphasizes the more positive realization of Buddha Nature, whereas the more negative use of Nirvana in the Pali canon generally refers to the extinguishment of the ego principal. It also strongly emphasizes the aspiration to liberate all beings even though there are, from the Absolute perspective, no beings to liberate.

enlightenment. For instance, he often describes the experience of Truth as “anatman,” which is usually translated as “not-self,” or “shunyata,” which is usually translated as “emptiness.” In my opinion, these concepts were not used to be philosophical postulations, but are expedient words pointing to an indescribable ultimate reality. For instance, in the Lankavatara Sutra, one of the most influential Mahayana sutras for Zen, the Buddha says that, “Emptiness belongs to an imagined reality” (Red Pine translation). What the Buddha is saying to me is that, like my use of the word God, his use of the word emptiness merely points to a fundamentally indescribable experience. In this and other sutras more positive concepts like Tathagatha (One Thus Come) and Buddha Nature are sometimes used to refer to that same experience. Like my use of the word God, both the negative and positive word choices of the Buddha are mere “imagined realities,” or pointers to a direct experience beyond words. For this reason, I feel that the experience of anatman, shunyata, and of God, as the word is used in my book, are functionally the same.

A couple quotations from Ramakrishna, who I believe had a similar understanding of the word God, might further illustrate this equivalence. Ramakrishna, a 19th century Indian mystic, often gave his disciples the Vedantic practice of negating any conceptual views about ultimate reality. He told them to look and see that Brahman (God could easily be substituted here) is not the body, nor the mind, nor the elements, nor “the 24 cosmic principals,” etc. He called this process, “Neti, Neti,” meaning that Truth is “not this, not this.” When this process is followed to the end of all concepts, the devotee then experiences God. But this “God” is not a thing, or even all things, for any type of categorical thinking cannot grasp It. In this sense, God could even be described as the very experience of self-less-ness itself. Ramakrishna described this inconceivable experience in a parable saying that finding God was like a salt doll diving into the ocean and dissolving, meaning that no “I” remains to describe the experience. Like the Buddha, Ramakrishna taught that “God” is the experience of what remains when the separate ego is finally perceived as an illusion.

The Buddha passed his teaching authority to the first Zen ancestor Mahakashyapa because he held up a flower and Mahakashyapa silently smiled, proving to the Buddha that he had understood the teachings. Mahakashyapa did not experience realization by intellectually debating about Self or not-self, or by affirming or denying any concept. Similarly, Ramakrishna was fond of saying that one who experienced God is like a bee sucking the nectar of a flower: when it sucks the honey, there is no more buzzing about “God” or “Brahman” – it simply enjoys. Both the Buddha

and Ramakrishna understood that enlightenment has nothing to do with speculation or philosophizing, and that only silent joy truly testifies to this fundamentally ineffable experience. Although Ramakrishna did not use the same words as the Buddha to describe his spiritual perception, it seems clear to me that their respective realizations were the same.

The Buddha explicitly denied the primitive theism of his day and, as a teaching tool, often chose to use specifically non-theistic terminology. Yet I would argue that Ramakrishna's view of God, and my own, are pointing to the same experience he called enlightenment. God is not a Being in the sense of a positive attribute to be merged with, which implies a "thing" merging with a "Being." Rather, God is merely a symbolic word describing what remains when all concepts and ideas drop away. The Buddha called this experience "enlightenment," "anatman," "Buddha Nature," etc. Sometimes I call it God. God, for me, is simply another way of pointing to the ineffable experience of enlightenment, a concept that is inseparably central to nearly all forms of Buddhism.

Some contemporary Buddhists contest this view that Buddhist teachings about ultimate reality and more "theistic" ones are really the same, and their viewpoint is understandable. In writing this book, I am not pressing an ideological agenda, but merely advocating the sincere search for Truth. I am not really interested in this philosophical debate, or whether the universal experience of God is called enlightenment, the Absolute, True Nature, Buddha, anatman, Him, Her, or any other temporary expedient name. All I care about is experiencing It for myself, and this experiential and dogma-transcending viewpoint is the spirit in which this book is written.

The Personal God

I believe it is possible to experience enlightenment as described by the Buddha and simultaneously maintain a relationship with what I call the Personal God. This balance is similar to how many awakened Buddhists maintain temporary dualistic relationships with their friends and family. Ultimately, we *are* God, but we can temporarily enjoy a relationship with what I call the Personal God. The Personal God arises out of the Absolute, temporarily plays the role of Creator, and directly intervenes in our lives according to His own will. I don't believe in this personal aspect of the Divine because someone told me to or because I read about Him in a book. Rather, I believe because I experience, again and again, His direct intervention in my life and His often unmistakable responses to my prayers.

I now find His love and hyper-intelligent guidance so irresistibly magnetic that a life lived unmindful of Him is now inconceivable to me.

Yet even the Personal God, like all individual beings, is an impermanent manifestation of the Absolute and is therefore unreal. He is only impermanent, however, in His role as Creator from the perspective of duality. In reality, God is both the Creator and the created, beyond both, and capable of doing anything. Yet even from the perspective of relativity, the Personal God is immeasurably powerful, and can do things for you that you cannot do for yourself. As I will talk about in the second part of this book, the Personal God has unconditional love for you, and developing a relationship with Him has many other immense benefits. It should also be said that the Personal God has no gender, but that I primarily refer to God as “He” because I deeply resonate with the idea of God as Heavenly Father. Many people prefer to worship the Divine Mother and refer to God as “She.” Since this distinction is based on a subjective preference, neither is more correct than the other. God has infinite aspects, including male, female, and beyond.

While it is undoubtedly wonderful, this love relationship is ultimately an illusion since the Personal God is another form of duality. Put simply, the Personal God arises out of God as a temporary split between the devotee and the Absolute. For this reason, the *realization* of God is superior to having a relationship with the Personal God. Only God-Realization can end the suffering that comes from identifying ourselves as a separate ego, and therefore it transcends the more limited benefits of viewing God relationally. I personally seek God-Realization above all, but I choose to *enjoy* a relationship with the Personal God because I have what Paramahansa Yogananda calls “a devotional temperament.”

However, the fact that He is a temporary manifestation does not discredit the reality of the Personal God, just as the ultimate oneness of all things does not destroy the relative distinction between you and your actual father, mother, or friends. In fact, the Personal God is far *more* real to me than any human being, and developing a relationship with Him produces far greater happiness than any human relationship ever could. It is necessary, though, to frequently drop the idea of Personal God away and delve deeply into pure meditation. In the end, the whole point of the spiritual path is to *experience* God, and in this experience you will find that you have been It all along.

This seeming contradiction between the personal and impersonal aspects of God is beautifully expressed by a mythological image of Vishnu, the Preserver of the Hindu trinity. In this image, Vishnu (representing the

Absolute) is reclining on the back of a cosmic snake in an ocean of milk that probably symbolizes infinity. Out of Vishnu's belly a lotus flower has bloomed, and seated on this flower is Brahma the Creator, who manifests the physical universe with His mind. A "Day of Brahma," during which the universe is manifest, lasts many billions of years. A night of Brahma lasts just as long, and during this time the universe remains unmanifest. It is said that for an entire day and night of Brahma to pass, Vishnu blinks His eyes *one time*... Wow!

This mythic image symbolically points to the way I relate to the Personal God. Firstly, the image expresses that the Personal God is real, and that we can relate to Him in His temporary role as Brahma the Creator. That said, the Reality from which even the Creator springs (Vishnu, in the metaphor) is the Sole Existence beyond all duality – eternal, indescribable, and nameless. While it is wonderful, beautiful, strategically beneficial, and even fun to commune with the Creator, true freedom only comes from directly experiencing oneself and all things as God Itself. This Reality is continually manifesting Itself before our eyes, and It alone exists. While Vishnu playfully pretends to be innumerable forms, in truth there is no other.

Chapter 2: My Story

“Physician, heal thyself!”

-Ancient Jewish proverb

To be honest, I am writing this section nearly a year after I thought I originally finished this book. When I began this project, I intended to give general advice to readers and say as little about myself as possible. This strategy was not adopted because of general shyness, but because the experiences I have had of the Divine are the most sacred, unspeakable, and deeply personal experiences of my life; it is only with great hesitation and difficulty that I can write about them publicly. At the end of the day, I only do so because I sincerely believe that God Himself wants me to write this book and perhaps to use my story for the benefit of other people.

I was also hesitant to make myself too prominent in the text because the history of spirituality is full of cases where mere human beings become synonymous with the lofty ideals they advocate. We often focus far too much on spiritual teachers rather than striving wholeheartedly to embody in our own lives the essence of their teachings. Jesus, for instance, taught a radical philosophy of love for all people and an all-consuming devotion to the Divine, but his movement has, in many cases, devolved into empty hero worship. Similarly, the historical Buddha taught a radical philosophy of abandoning all desires for the highest goal of enlightenment, and now people rub his head for good luck at Chinese buffets. I am not comparing myself to these great masters, but merely pointing out that I was conscious of this negative human tendency to overemphasize the importance of imperfect spiritual teachers as I wrote this book. I had the firm determination to be as brief, plain, and impersonal as possible, and to let my ideas speak for themselves.

However, as I’ve gotten older, I’ve learned that no one is above their own story, and that stories make ideas more relatable. History is peppered with all sorts of strange and potent ideas, yet each of these ideas was generated in a human carrier who came to his/her conclusions in the chaotic factory of their own intimate experiences. Stories provide a context for the ideas we care about, and they often express those ideas with a greater vividness than mere philosophy. With the sincere hope that talking about myself will benefit others, I will proceed with a telling of my own story. However, this book is not meant to be an autobiography, and I will only share a few relevant general trends in my life that have led me to the convictions I’ve developed about God and the spiritual path.

My early life through high school

I was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1990, and I am 24 years old as I write this. Religion was the last thing on my mind for most of my life as a thinking person. Yet because of my heritage and birthplace, I was familiar with the popular stories and basic philosophy of Judaism and Christianity. As an American, and even more so as an Oklahoman in the nation's "Bible Belt," I grew up in a region spiritually dominated by the Judeo-Christian tradition. I was born in a Jewish family, but for the vast majority of my family members Judaism was a cultural and ethnic identity rather than a religious one. We celebrated Passover and Hanukah the same way many Christians celebrate Christmas and Easter as secular holidays centered mostly on gift-giving and family bonding.

My mother converted to Christianity when I was a child, and I subsequently began attending some non-denominational churches. I also went to Catholic schools. During these years I attended countless masses and church services. I never significantly reflected on them, but I usually enjoyed them. The non-denominational churches were an entertaining spectacle to me. I liked the music, the social interaction, and the general environment of the institutions (the continuous presence of candy and soda also helped). The Catholic services were also aesthetically pleasing to me. The rituals, the colorful priestly garments, and the liturgy were all delightfully weird, and stimulated my budding artistic imagination.

Yet despite this religious environment, I never had an experience of God or actually reflected on the meaning of what was being taught. In time, religion lost its importance to me. By the time I entered high school, there wasn't a neuron in my conscious brain that was meaningfully interested in religion, and as I began to read more about other subjects I essentially became an agnostic. I was primarily interested in reading secular literature, listening to good music, getting in shape, hanging out with my friends, getting a girlfriend, getting good grades, etc. I took the attitude that God's existence and what happens after death is unknowable by definition, and that religions were primarily social phenomena that could be explained through the secular lenses of intellectual disciplines like anthropology and sociology. Then, in my senior year of high school, my worldview underwent intense and life-altering changes.

Angst

When I became a senior in high school I went through a period of bewildering internal existential angst and depression. On a personal level, I was confronting some painful experiences resulting from my parent's divorce. I had not had meaningful contact with my mother for nearly 8 years, and was getting into more frequent conflicts with my dad and stepmother at home. I had never really dealt with these feelings, and it seemed like they were surging up from my subconscious, demanding to be addressed.

Earlier in high school I had turned to drugs, mainly marijuana, to assuage my pain, and at one point my grade point average dropped to something like a 2.0. My dad drug tested me and almost sent me to military school, but he decided to pull me out of my Catholic school midway through my sophomore year and send me to a local public school. After getting caught by my dad I abruptly stopped all my drug habits and sought salvation in self-improvement. I became seized with ambition and motivation; I soon returned to my Catholic school and got a 4.0 GPA. I read literature, became the vice president of my class, participated in school plays, joined the cross-country team, and wrote for the literary magazine. Because of my comeback, I felt triumphant and brimmed with hope and pride. I felt like I was finally succeeding in life, and ultimately aspired to be a famous author, comedian, or something similarly grand.

Yet when my senior year began, I felt like I had been standing on a glass covering that suddenly shattered beneath me, launching me into feelings of dread and meaninglessness. On the outside, I appeared to be my usual jovial self, and I was maintaining and even succeeding at most of my responsibilities. Yet internally I was dealing with some depression from my Mom's absence. I also felt the natural stress of getting into college, making money, and figuring out what I wanted to do in life. More significantly, I was becoming achingly conscious of my own mortality, and consequently lost hope in any form of outward achievement. The thought terrified me that what awaited everyone after death was inevitable oblivion, and that everything on Earth was therefore meaningless and even cruelly unfair. I often felt like life was some sort of trivial and absurd joke, and I was unable to find solace in the things that had previously interested me.

I was also increasingly bewildered that no one seemed to be bothered by this absurd state of affairs. How did so many people mindlessly and contently live out their laborious daily lives, endure suffering, and pursue their superficial goals when everything ended in the inescapable yet unimpressively cliché silence of the grave? Why was no one freaked out that we were spinning through endless space on a pinprick planet in a

universe whose existence no one could rationally explain? Why was no one also utterly baffled by the terrifying thought of oblivion? I felt surrounded by people who acted like robots, either ignoring or completely denying the reality of life as it is.

The things I had put my hope in (fame, achievement, recognition, etc.) seemed comically useless in light of our miniscule place in the unfathomable cosmic magnitude of the universe. I would often reflect on the seemingly infinite galaxies expanding away from each other, and on how my cliché little life on planet Earth would soon be ruthlessly taken from me for no apparent reason. The feeling of cosmic indifference was only part of my hopelessness; I also became disgusted with the blood-stained history of the human race. It was hard to accept the harsh realities of history like the Holocaust, World Wars, school shootings, ruthless capitalism, pestilence – more tragedies than any single brain could process. To tell the truth, I sometimes felt like the Earth was like a horror movie I was stuck in, and that everything I did was meaningless because it ended in total oblivion.

At a certain point, after months of anxiety, depression, and existential angst, I summoned the courage to ask my Dad to see a therapist. I also remembered a book that had impacted me deeply at the age of 16: The Dhammapda.

Electrified

When I was 16, my friend lent me the Dhammapada, which is a short collection of sayings attributed to the historical Buddha. The book inspired me to practice meditation a few times that year, and I found that doing so calmed my mind significantly and even generated some blissful states. Yet as I became more ambitious in secular matters, I forgot about meditation and became engrossed in my self-improvement project. Then, in the spring of my turbulent senior year, I remembered the feeling of calm I derived from the meditation I had done 2 years before, and decided to reread the book.

Rereading the Dhammapda triggered something in me that is difficult to describe. It literally electrified me. I felt like a light bulb had gone off in my inner being, and that the essence of the truths described in the book might hold the solution to what I was enduring. I didn't just believe, but intuitively knew, that the path of meditation contained something that I had always been yearning for – something that could truly become the medicine for my suffering. I soon purchased a guided Buddhist meditation book and CD, and started practicing meditation each day for around 20 minutes. I immediately found that the practice had both physical and mental benefits,

and it helped me process my difficult feelings and thoughts. When I would still my mind with the tool of my breathing, I could clearly see that I was not my thoughts or feelings. They would simply arise and disappear on the screen of my awareness like illusory shadows, and I left each session feeling relaxed and centered. I had found a natural medicine that experientially improved my quality of life. Yet despite my emotional enthusiasm for the Dhammapada, I remained intellectually skeptical about Buddhist ideas like enlightenment and Nirvana.

In this period, I also read the book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, and this inspired me to learn more about the specific tradition of Zen which I almost immediately became enthralled with. I was soon practicing Zen-style meditation everyday, listening to online dharma talks, and reading a number of other books about Zen. I naturally gravitated to the tradition of Zen, and felt like a fish swimming in water the more I learned about it.

I found in Zen a religious tradition that suited my own intellectual nature. The practice was powerfully effective, yet also simple and easy to understand. The teachings made sense to my intellect and did not require faith as it is conventionally defined. I also deeply appreciated the fact that Zen has no official dogma and emphasizes that the Truth is a *direct experience* that can be realized in this very body. There were certainly concrete teachings, and also intellectually paradoxical stories like koans, yet it was understood that they could not help you until you experienced the essence of these teachings for yourself. It was also understood that all the teachings essentially pointed back to my own natural awareness, a view that transcends the façade of empty dogmatism and ritualism all too often parading as genuine religion.

Despite my enthusiasm, participating in spiritual practices had some baggage for me at this time. It took some time for the teachings of Zen to chisel through my Judeo-Christian lens. In Zen, I did not have to profess faith in a dogma without verifiable evidence. I had always been suspicious of accepting truths like, "Jesus is Lord," just because some person in a pulpit said so, or because some guy named Paul said so in a 2,000-year-old letter. There was, to be sure, an emphasis in Zen literature that it took faith to believe an enlightenment experience was possible to have for yourself, but the teachings also emphasized that mere belief was not sufficient and could even be a hindrance.

Additionally, Zen was rooted in an actual *practice*, a practical method of meditation that I immediately found to be physically and mentally useful. I remember going to many church services growing up and thinking to myself afterwards, "Well, what next?" I would sometimes get inspired, but I

never felt like I possessed an actual tool to go deeper into God. There was reading the Bible, of course, but it always seemed ludicrous to me that the Truth could be contained in any single book, or that merely reading something could enable me to experience something as infinite and mysterious as God. In zazen (seated meditation) I had found a practical technique that had natural physical benefits, but also held the possibility of deeper spiritual experiences. Yet to go deeper I did not need to suspend my own intelligence. It took no special leap of faith to follow my natural breathing, to pay attention to the present moment, and to ask the basic and natural question, “What is aware?”

I also enthusiastically resonated with the Zen teaching that Buddhahood could be attained in this very body through wholehearted effort. Much of the modern Christian world has become so one-sidedly, and even pathetically, focused on the afterlife that it would seem from their worldview that that Earth is nothing but a waiting room for Heaven. It is astounding to me that so many people have superimposed a ridiculous place where naked babies play harps on clouds while they and all their literal relatives are reunited forever onto the profound concept of the Kingdom of God. This way of thinking always seemed childish to me, and as I read more of the Bible it increasingly seemed unfounded in scripture. For the Old Testament teaches that man is made in God’s own image, and in the New Testament Jesus taught that “the Kingdom of God is *within you*.”

In Zen I found an earthier teaching, which I eventually learned was far more in harmony with Jesus’ original use of “the Kingdom of God” than the majority of teachings currently offered in his name. For the real “Heaven” is a state of *realization* that is present this moment but for most people remains unperceived. Coming from my Christian background, it was truly a breath of fresh air to find in Zen a tradition that almost exclusively emphasized the spiritual potential of human beings *here and now*.

During this period, I was ingesting Zen teachings and Zen literature like an eager sponge, and in the stories of the Buddha and the long lineage of Zen masters I found a profound source of spiritual inspiration. I read about men like the Buddha, who was a prince blessed with all the material pleasures he could imagine, but felt so existentially dissatisfied that he abandoned his wife, child, and everything he had ever known to find the end of suffering through meditation in the forest. I read about masters like the sage and poetic genius Ehei Dogen, who risked his life to study with Zen masters in China and practiced with immense effort for years in deep meditation before experiencing his True Nature and eventually revivifying Zen in medieval Japan. I read about the great master Hakuin, whose fear of

death and hell prompted him as a child to become a monk, and who practiced a truly impressive amount of intense meditation before finally realizing his True Nature and becoming the greatest and most prolific teacher of his era.

Through reading the lives and writings of these fascinating teachers, I gradually realized that what conventional religion, and American society in general, offered me to assuage life's suffering could never truly satisfy me. Western psychology's mostly secular suggestions of positive thinking, intimate relationships, satisfying careers, etc., seemed like substance-less shadows to me in light of my inevitable death. Like the masters who blazed the trail before me, I knew I had to look deeper to find a more ultimate fulfillment. This idea of enlightenment gradually began to electrify and captivate me from the day I first set my eyes on the Dhammapada, and it restored my hope in life I had felt was permanently lost.

With my daily meditation practice and new fascination with Zen, I felt happier, more peaceful, and more prepared to deal with the suffering that led me to meditation in the first place. I also felt blessed that I had found a tradition that resonated with me *both* intellectually and spiritually. Yet my experience of meditation was still mainly surface level and, like many practitioners in the West, I often mistook my own intellectual ideas for the Reality they were merely pointing to.

Then, by the grace of God, without seeking or expecting it, I had an experience that radically and permanently altered my perception. If I spent many lifetimes working to describe it in 1,000,000 books with linguistic mastery and poetic adeptness, my efforts would only amount to a fickle arrow pointing to a single microscopic grain of sand in an infinite desert of radiant Perfection. Yet for the good of others and in obedience to the Lord I will speak of it, knowing that in doing so I will inevitably mask its unspeakable essence in the vomit of human words.

Born again

A couple months or so after beginning my daily practice, I listened to an online Zen podcast that talked about the illusory nature of the self. During my next meditation session, while the teacher's words were floating through my mind, an enlightenment experience occurred. There are truly no words to describe this, but I realized in an instant that there is no "me," but that there is One who alone exists, and that "I" *was* this One! My sense of self, thoughts, feelings, body, and even the entire universe mysteriously flowed out of this One but were empty in themselves, and were but

temporary manifestations of the One Reality. The universe is Its expression of Itself, but It Itself cannot be fully expressed by any form. If the universe ceased to be at this moment, It would still be, and will always be.

I did not merely think this or understand a “thing” outside of me to be understood, but experientially realized It as my own nature. I had been transformed, and understood the real meaning of the word salvation. With the Buddha before me I could say with certitude that, despite the undeniable suffering of the phenomenal world, there are in reality no separate beings who suffer. And with the great master Jesus I could testify that I had truly been born again. To my utter astonishment I did not gain anything, but merely realized what had always been wondrously true. The miraculous glory of what was revealed to me is impossible to convey and inconceivable to the rational intellect. I cannot convince you with my words that this happened to me, or enable you to have such an experience yourself. All I can do is humbly testify that it is possible to experience what is called God, and to encourage you to practice meditation until you yourself realize It.

This experience was, by far, the most transformative and definitive moment of my life. It forever altered my perception of reality and revealed, through a direct experience beyond the intellect, my True Nature. Now, despite what occurs from the perspective of mind and body, I perceive that my True Nature – my real identity – is always peaceful, changeless, indestructible, and ever-present. Yet even attempting to describe It is to defile It. In contrast to the actual experience, all philosophical speculations, intellectual definitions, and attributes of the One such as “existence,” “non-existence,” “eternal,” “beginning-less,” “empty,” “Real Self,” and “non-self” etc. are comparable to feces being thrown by an ape. You cannot know It through mere belief or through someone else’s description, however poetic or philosophically subtle. You can only experience It yourself. And even though practice can help to catalyze the experience, you cannot force it to occur. It can only reveal Itself to Itself by Its own grace.

I have no desire to share this sacred experience for the sake of sharing, and am even somewhat repulsed by the thought of doing so publicly. I am only describing this experience here to emphasize that the views offered in this book are not based on blind faith or intellectual sophistry, but on my actual experiences in meditation. If you talk to any of my family or friends, you will discover that my ego is still as needy, irascible, and ridiculously imperfect as ever. I still need to work on myself and deepen my spiritual practice. But if a lazy and undeserving dunce like me can be blessed with such a powerful experience, I know for a fact that we all can be!

I have no desire to convince anyone that this happened, or to convert people to some view about ultimate reality. I am merely describing an awesome experience I had which so far transcends ordinary perception that only lofty words like “God” or “True Nature” are functionally appropriate. All I can say for certain is that this experience occurred and permanently altered my perception. Whether you believe that or not is none of my business. Yet I share it here to encourage people on their path and to provide a context for the worldview shared in this book, a view based not upon intellect alone, but upon the power of life-altering experiences in meditation.

Please understand that my words, and the words of every teacher who has ever attempted to describe God, are temporarily useful lies! There is a reason that the sages equate enlightenment with “*realization*,” for nothing is gained in the experience. Rather, things are merely seen as they are without the filter of illusion. I have written merely to inspire others to practice, but don’t let my words fool you; It cannot be gained or lost, and It is never separate from this very moment!

Carl Jung and a reexamination of religion

A recent book was hilariously and accurately titled, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*. After my mystical experience I soon understood the profound meaning of this seemingly obvious statement. I discovered, as anyone who has a powerful spiritual experience soon discovers, that the mundane problems of life still demand to be addressed in all their maddening detail, even after enlightenment. Yet I now realized that mundane experiences were themselves the manifestation of enlightenment. This knowledge revealed a spiritual bliss within seemingly ordinary moments, each one the gateway to experiencing the formless God. I also realized that although my True Nature was eternally perfect and ever-present, my ego still needed improvement in a relative sense, and also needed to engage in disciplined spiritual practice to maintain the actual perception of God. It is one thing to experience God, but we must learn to maintain this realization in all situations and to embody It ever more perfectly through an exemplary life of service to all beings. Both these tasks require a lifetime, or even lifetimes, of dedicated effort. It is perhaps the central paradox of the spiritual path that, although we are already Buddha in this moment, it takes a serious amount of spiritual work to continually perceive this and uniquely embody It in the context of our suffering world.

The months rolled on, and I soon graduated high school and worked as a pizza delivery driver in the summer. I soon had to figure out what to do with myself, and in an unromantic but sensible way I moved from Tulsa to Norman to begin college at the University of Oklahoma. During this time, I found two authors that radically changed the way I thought about religion, especially Christianity. In my local library I found *The Second Coming of Christ Within You*, a commentary on the gospels by the Kriya yoga master and prolific author Paramahansa Yogananda. This commentary made a clear distinction between Jesus the man and Jesus the Christ, and helped me reinterpret the teachings of Jesus. I now began to see the harmony between his teachings and other religions, and perceived in his many of his sayings the ingenious expressions of an enlightened person.

Around this time, I also discovered the works of Carl Jung. Reading Carl Jung radically altered my thoughts about religion, dreams, God, and the symbolic function of the human psyche. At this time, I was almost exclusively practicing Zen and considered more theistic religions fundamentally inferior to it. Yet as I read more Jung, my mind began to open up to see the value of more traditional religious expressions.

To Jung, much of religious imagery is archetypal in nature, meaning that in his view it arises spontaneously out of the collective psyche and is also the psyche's expression of itself. Seemingly a-rational phenomena described in scripture, like the virgin birth and the death and resurrection of Christ, for instance, express psychological processes that are impossible to convey through conventional logic and ordinary language. Yet these powerful images, which are all-too-often taken literally, contain richly symbolic meaning that point to the greater reality that revealed them. Additionally, Jung realized through cross-cultural analysis that shockingly similar themes occur in the various religious and mythological systems around the world, and that these themes and images spontaneously reoccur in ordinary people's dreams at night. Jung even observed that people who were agnostics and atheists in their conscious lives dreamed of traditional religious themes seemingly against their own wills, something I was beginning to experience myself. This led him to hypothesize that much of religious imagery was not created by people with their own conscious agendas, but rather was *revealed* by the collective unconscious as an archetypal demonstration of its own unseen nature.

I was particularly interested in Jung's archetype of the "Self," or the totality of the personality, both conscious and unconscious, and his idea of the God-image inborn in every human mind. Jung never claimed to have proved God, but merely to have observed a "God-image" inherent in the

psyche that spontaneously manifests itself in myths, dreams, and religious symbolism around the world. In Jung's view, figures like Christ, Krishna, and the Buddha are worshipped around the world because, for unknown reasons, they and their life stories come to represent the Self.³ Ordinary people project their own innate divinity onto such figures without knowing it, thus mistaking the shadow of the image for the substance of their own Higher Self. However, in a positive way, archetypal lives like the life of Christ express symbolic truths about the God-image from which we can derive spiritual nourishment through ritualistic observance and inward contemplation.

Jungian psychology is a vast and profound field of study. It would be impossible to explain simply, and I am not an expert in it. For the purpose of this book it is enough to say that studying Jung helped me reassess the symbolic value of scriptures like the Bible. It also got me interested in my own dreams, which I began to record nightly in a notebook. Ultimately, through reading Jung, I realized that religion partially functions as a symbolic system for expressing ineffable and universal human experiences. I realized that I could learn from the powerful stories of the Bible and other scriptures by viewing them as archetypal symbolism expressing something about God and the human psyche. I could go to churches and learn about God in the archetypal life of Christ while simultaneously understanding that someone in India learning about God in the archetypal life of Krishna is worshipping the same God. Later that year, when I went to a Zen monastery and bowed daily to a statue of the Buddha, I similarly understood that the statue was merely a symbolic image that archetypally expressed my own Divine Nature.

Perhaps most significantly, reading Jung got me interested in following my own dreams. Like my understanding of God Itself, my understanding of the Personal God is based upon my actual experiences. More than anything else, following my own dreams made it undeniably apparent to me that there is an Intelligence greater than my ego who is aware of me, and who is actively guiding me through life to fulfill Its own purposes. I also found that religious imagery, most notably of Christ and of traditional Christian symbolism, appeared in my own dreams with astonishing repetitiveness even though I only had a faint conscious interest in it at first. I could not view these dreams as mere coincidences. Through the power of these dream images, I became increasingly convinced that

³Along with God-men such as Jesus and Krishna, Jung discovered that the archetype of the Self often appears in mandala imagery, wherein many complex sides of a symmetrical shape lead back to a common central point.

religions like Christianity, Islam, and the great branches of Hinduism began as revelations from God Himself to aid in the spiritual development of the humanity.

During this period, I became fascinated by the variety of dreams I had, and my growing consciousness of their importance altered my primarily impersonal view of the Divine. During the last few years, I have had hundreds of dreams that I believe were revealed to me by the Higher Self – dreams that made me intimately aware of His guiding presence in my life. I have had dreams containing profound religious imagery whose beauty and power were awe-inspiring; I have been shown my own future in pristine detail; I have been guided to do specific works that I did not consciously think of (the idea to write this book, for instance, was revealed to me in a dream); I have received teachings about meditation from dream teachers and even directly from the Spirit; I have been shown past lives I've lived; I've been told by God Himself that He loves me!

Dreams, for me, were the primary gateway through which the Personal God revealed his reality as my Divine teacher. I had realized at the deepest level that I *was* myself the Divine, but, from my ego's perspective, I found in dreams that there was an Intelligence that seemed to be continuously communicating with me. This Intelligence was not my ego, but was aware of everything I was doing and was actively guiding me. The Personal God, I realized, was playing hide and seek with Himself by splitting Himself between the ego and the Higher Self.

It was during this period that – upon becoming more and more convinced of the Personal God's reality – I began praying daily and found that I often received unmistakable answers to my prayers through signs, unexplainable synchronicities, and dreams. Towards the end of the year I prayed to the Personal God to tell me in a dream if I should go to the Zen monastery I had been planning to live at for the summer. Sure enough, I had a dream that night in which I arrived at the monastery safely, was well received, and had the intuitive conviction that I was in the right place.

Life at a Zen monastery

My decision to live at a Zen monastery arose from multiple factors. I had been reading the works of Zen masters like Ehei Dogen, who extolled the monastic life for its many spiritual benefits. I had also been listening to podcasts from Zen centers and monasteries around the country. I was fascinated when teachers talked about multi-day meditation retreats and the benefits of studying with teachers who had received dharma transmission in

a traditional Zen lineage. I also realized at this time that my meditation practice had hit a glass ceiling. I wasn't practicing with a group, I often had trouble staying motivated, and Oklahoma had a limited range of teachers and sitting groups to choose from.

One day, midway through my freshman year of college, the thought flashed across my mind to go live at a Zen monastery. It seemed, almost immediately, to be the appropriate thing to do; the idea was irresistible and brimming with promises of spiritual adventure. I researched on the internet and discovered that Great Vow Zen Monastery in Oregon had a residential summer program where people could study with the teachers and live at the monastery for two months for donation only. I researched the teachers' credentials, listened to their podcasts, and found that I resonated with their overall philosophy and had a good gut feeling about them. I intended to stay for only the summer, but I ended up staying 6 months.

My family was perplexed and worried that I had entered a cultish organization and wouldn't return to school. But since I had gotten good grades during my first year in college they generally trusted me. Additionally, I assured them that I intended to finish my degree and that school was a major priority for me. As a side note, I learned from this journey that I cannot live to please my family. I am accountable to God alone, and although I have natural love for my family and certain familial duties to fulfill, the path to enlightenment is far more important than family and is my greatest priority. However, having received a 4.0 GPA all the way through college and graduate school, I also discovered that getting good grades can help appease family and be a means to justify more "irrational" spiritual adventures.

On a quiet Oklahoma morning I packed my car and drove to Oregon, and I can say without a doubt that it was the most important and impactful decision I've made thus far in life. I ended up staying at the monastery six months and have since returned twice, spending a total of 9 months there in the past 5 years. It is difficult to describe the immense impact that Great Vow has had on my life. I have written about the experience more extensively in blogs, and I plan to write more about it in the future. For this book I will briefly share six primary lessons from my experience there.

Firstly, I learned the priceless value of extended periods of meditation. At Great Vow, there were 4 hours of daily seated meditation and 8-10 hours during monthly week-long retreats. At a monastery, everything is tightly scheduled and most daily choices are made for you. You don't have to worry about what you are going to eat, what you are going to wear, what plans to make, etc. Additionally, long periods of silence greatly diminish the

mental waves resulting from normal social interaction. In this context, I was able to single-mindedly focus on my meditation practice to the exclusion of all else, and I discovered that doing so powerfully facilitated the progress I was making in my practice. I also learned the value and unrivaled power of participating in extended 7-10 day meditation retreats, which I now regard as indispensable for people who are serious about meditation and the path to enlightenment. I now plan to go on meditation retreats on a regular basis throughout my life, largely due to the initial retreats I experienced at Great Vow.

Secondly, I learned the value of group practice and the necessity of being part of a spiritual community if a suitable one is available. Just as a boat moves faster with many rowers, a spiritual community practicing together makes more progress on the path to enlightenment than a solitary meditator practicing alone. Thirdly, I learned the immense benefits of studying with teachers, a process I describe more in depth later in this book.

Fourthly, I came to the conclusion that spiritual enlightenment, or the actual *realization* of God Itself, is more important than having a temporary relationship with the Personal God. I realized that the goal of my life itself was enlightenment, but that as I walked the path I could *enjoy* a relationship with the Personal God which, in a relative sense, was both real and deeply meaningful to me. I also realized that to delve deeper into meditation I must, at times, let go completely of the Personal God or any ideas of God to actual experience what God is. It was during this time of being constantly pulled between a personal and impersonal view of the Divine that the ideas expressed in this book were refined in the fire of my daily experience and personal necessity.

Fifthly, I learned more clearly the meaning of “the middle path,” or of seeking spiritual knowledge while at the same time acknowledging our human needs, beauty, and imperfection. Life at Great Vow was serious and rigorous, but also joyous. While I was there, I participated in many joy-filled festivals, formed life-long friendships, and had many satisfying belly laughs. On off days the monks watched movies, ate pizza, created art, and even had a fully functioning marimba band! To quote the poet-sage Mary Poppins, who explained the middle path with a famous and apt proverb, I learned that “a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down.”

Perhaps more than anything, I was deeply humbled and inspired to go deeper in my personal meditation practice. In Oklahoma I was “a big fish in a small pond,” and had developed the reeking stench of spiritual pride in what I had so far experienced. I’ll never forget the day I arrived at the monastery and met Chozen Bays, the abbot. I tried to express my spiritual

understanding to her and pompously told her about the many Zen books I had read thus far. I'll never forget when she smiled semi-sarcastically – as if a baby had just babbled – and said, “That’s nice, but the important thing is that you *practice*.” By far, the most important thing I learned at the monastery is that continual meditation is necessary to experience the Buddha who cannot become a mere idea or the cherished memory of an impermanent awakening experience.

I realized that there was much deeper for me to go on my spiritual path. I met monks who had been, in a sense, in a continual monastic meditation retreat for over a decade. I worked with the abbots who had been practicing with highly respected teachers for 40 years each, and they were far from impressed by my one year of practice experience and handful of deep experiences. Like an 8th grader who suddenly drops to the bottom of the totem pole when he/she enters high school, I realized that I had a lot more work to do and much further to go on my own spiritual journey.

Living at a monastery is not for everyone, nor was it a long-term living situation for me. I eventually returned to college and recently graduated with my Masters in Social Work. I want to have a career in the world and probably won't ever become a lifelong monk. Yet I can authentically say that long-term periods in a monastery were immensely spiritually beneficial for me. While monastic practice is not for everyone, I now feel that at least some degree of retreat practice is indispensable for anyone who takes meditation seriously. It seems that an active life in the world awaits me, but I plan to regularly dip back into silent retreats throughout my life.

I feel an inexpressible amount of gratitude for having experienced the power of meditation in a context like Great Vow, and for having had the karmic fortune to participate in 9 retreats there. I am now convinced beyond doubt of meditation's superior joy, and the superior ambition of the “Great Vow” for the enlightenment of oneself and all beings over any form of material success. It feels so strange to reflect on how my seemingly normal life in Oklahoma led me to be permanently shaped by life at a Zen monastery. I often feel like a beggar who stumbled onto a fortune he didn't earn or seek. Yet I am now convinced that God Himself led me there as part of a plan existent long before my birth, and that He chose Zen Buddhism as my primary path to God in this lifetime. Praise and glory to Him who is both the seeker, the path, and the final goal!

Reading scriptures

Ironically, my current love for the Bible was strongly kindled during my stay at the Zen monastery. I remember reading parts of the New Testament there and having the realization that Jesus was describing experiences similar to the ones I had had in meditation. His cryptic utterances like, “Before Abraham was born, I Am” and, “I and the Father are One,” seemed to express the mind state of an awakened being (John 8:58 and John 10:30). Even the Apostle Paul wrote unmistakably mystical things like, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). The unity between Zen Buddhism and the teachings of Jesus was a refreshing discovery, but the last thing I expected in going to a Buddhist monastery was that my worldview would become more Christian!

Rediscovering the value of the Bible kindled my curiosity and set me on a journey to discover the essence of the world’s great religions. Throughout the period leading up to my stay at the monastery, and up to the present day, I have dedicated significant time and energy to reading a diverse array of world scriptures. This process has both shaped my worldview and also given me a more broadminded understanding of the spiritual path. In Buddhist meditation I had found a tangible practice that would engage me for the rest of my life, but through studying world scriptures I realized that the path to God was as potentially diverse as the billions of people who walk it.

Perhaps the most influential and paradigm-shifting scripture I studied was the Bhagavad Gita. This text solidified reincarnation as a staple of my worldview (a belief also shared, with some subtle modifications, by the historical Buddha), and also expressed a balanced approach to the personal and impersonal aspects of the Divine. In the Gita, Krishna is simultaneously the Personal God of Divine Love calling the devotee to Himself, but in reality He is everything and Himself is pretending to be the devotee. I also found this balance between personal relationship and impersonal realization beautifully expressed in the teachings of Jesus. He prayed to his beloved Heavenly Father for guidance, but simultaneously realized that, “I and the Father are one.” I felt particularly drawn to Jesus as a Jewish man, and over the past five years have been continuously reassessing my own Judaism and relationship to the historical Jesus. I now regard Jesus as the Jewish messiah promised in the Old Testament, but I primarily see him more generally as an awakened master and teacher of universal Truth.

I have also been impacted by the poetic power of the Qur’an, the Tao Te Ching, The Ramayana, many Buddhist sutras, Sufi poets like Hafiz and Rumi, classical Zen writings, and other ancient texts. My growing feelings about the essential harmony between religions was also reaffirmed by

reading authors like the great teacher Paramahansa Yogananda, particularly his *Autobiography of a Yogi*, and the sayings of the great spiritual master Ramakrishna. I was directly led by the Personal God to the teachings of Ramakrishna, and it was largely through his teachings that I became inspired to utilize prayer to the Personal God for the purposes of enlightenment. He also helped me see that the path to the Ultimate Truth, which he called Brahman, and devotion to the Personal God, whom he worshiped as Divine Mother, had the same end goal of realization and could be harmonized. It was his humble prayer to the Divine Mother for pure love, and his concept of “the ego of knowledge,” that inspired part of my own life prayer that is found later in this book⁴.

Studying scripture is not sufficient to experience salvation, which can only come by revelation through wholehearted meditation and the grace of God. Yet many of the views in this book have been influenced and reaffirmed by what I consider to be scriptures inspired by the Personal God. It is from my study of different scriptures that I came to the conclusion that religions are merely paths to God for people at different stages of spiritual development. This path culminates and is finally fulfilled in the direct experience of God Itself, an experience which no symbol, ritual, text, or religion could ever possibly describe or contain.

I also gradually realized that the profound experience of God that I had in meditation had been shared by many human beings throughout time in a variety of unique circumstances, and had been described in various poetic ways. Zen masters called It Buddha Nature; Jesus called It the Father; many Jewish Sages called It Yehova or Adonai; Hafiz and Rumi called it Allah; Lao Tzu called it the Tao; Vyasa, the supposed author of the Bhagavad Gita, called it Krishna; Ramakrishna called It Brahman, Divine Mother, and many names besides. The point of their teachings, I realized, was not to promote a specific vocabulary as “the best” or “the only way,” but merely to point us back to the nameless God within us waiting to reveal Itself in the temple of silent meditation and devotion. With more and more regularity I began bowing down to this nameless God and asking It to reveal Itself to me, a practice which has infused my life with a passionate spiritual vitality.

⁴ Here is the Ramakrishna’s prayer: “After my vision of the Divine Mother, I prayed to Her, taking a flower in my hands: “Mother, here is Thy knowledge and here is Thy ignorance. Take them both, and give me only pure love (for Thee). Here is Thy holiness and here is Thy un-holiness. Take them both, Mother, and give me pure love. Here is Thy good and here is Thy evil. Take them both, Mother, and give me pure love. Here is Thy righteousness and here is Thy unrighteousness. Take them both, Mother, and give me pure love.” (The Gospel of Ramakrishna)

Encountering the Personal God

After I returned from the monastery, I lived with my Mom in Tulsa and attended a community college for 6 months in an effort to discern what I wanted to major in. Later that year, I moved back to Norman to attend the University of Oklahoma where I majored in Social Work. During this period, and for the next three years, I regularly attended churches with my Mom in Tulsa and also by myself in both Norman and Tulsa. My Mom is a Christian who is one of the sincerest and wisest religious people I know, and she has a deeply intimate relationship with God. The combination of living with her and attending these churches greatly enhanced my relationship with the Personal God and taught me a variety of useful tools for discerning His will.

During this period, I had the gradual and transforming inward revelation that the Personal God unconditionally loved me as His own child. This revelation did not occur through any outward act or in a single dramatic moment; a combination of powerful dreams, prayer, personal intuitions, church sermons, and scriptural study slowly built this irresistible new conviction. To me, the wonderful teaching that “God is love” is the crown jewel of what the religion of Christianity has to offer. It is the most important thing to understand about the Personal God, and yet His love is so vast, awe-inspiring, wonderful, and healing that no mortal will ever truly understand it fully. Before I began consciously participating in Christianity, I believed in the reality of the Personal God because I had witnessed His guiding power in my dreams and experienced mysterious responses to a number of my prayers. Yet at this point I did not have a revelation of the “personality” (for lack of a better word) of the Personal God, which is best described as unconditional love, or understand His personal love for me as a unique being He created.

In a similar way to how my enlightenment experience in meditation altered my understanding of God Itself, this revelation about the Personal God’s unconditional love was a paradigm shift in how I conceived of the Personal God. The American culture I grew up in generally defines and categorizes people based on what they *do*, particularly in reference to their place within the market economy. The Personal God, by contrast, defines me by who I am and, more importantly, by who *He* is. I cannot adequately convey how utterly freeing and healing it was for me to realize that God unconditionally loves me, and that this love is not at all based upon my worldly works, or even upon my own efforts at spiritual righteousness. I

realized His love can simply be received without effort, a priceless gift whose depths can never truly be fathomed. And like the sun, this love shines radiantly on me and everyone without making even a hairsbreadth of distinction, for the Personal God does not distinguish between His children but loves all with an equally passionate zeal whose real intensity can only be hinted at symbolically.

I used to conceive of the Personal God almost exclusively as an all-knowing intelligence that was guiding me in a direction He had determined long ago. I had long desired to do His will, but I now realized that He cared about *me* more than anything I could do for Him. I was no longer merely a servant of God, but His son, His friend, and His precious beloved. My personal identity was no longer defined by the limiting attributes of being American, male, white, Jewish, etc. My deepest identity as a person was the beloved child of my Heavenly Father, something no one could ever take from me or diminish. I was in a *love relationship* with the Personal God, a status far more satisfying than the dry works-based relationship I had been cultivating.

Furthermore, I realized that this love was not merely the act, but the literal nature of the Personal God. To use a coarse analogy, I now think of God's love in perhaps the same way that a scientist thinks about gravity; the love of God is not merely an act, but a changeless law whose reality can be discovered but is never "given" because it has always been there. I also felt more and more empowered during this period to love other people in a way I had never thought possible. The Personal God's love is not only something received, but it also flows outward into good works and into every interaction we have with other people. In finding the Personal God, we find His unconditional love. And in finding that Love, we become the channel through which it is expressed to others. Could anything be more fundamentally wonderful?

Additionally, I discovered in this period that the Personal God has a specific purpose for my life. This gave me a hope, not only for spiritual things, but for an actual material destiny that I believed was planned out for me long, long before my birth. The bedrock of a relationship with the Personal God is about love and devotion, but as a byproduct He gradually reveals a "Plan A" that is far better than any plan we could devise with our own mind. The Personal God soon began revealing to me through dreams, prophecies, and His voice that I had specific gifts I had been unaware of. For instance, He led me to begin writing songs and eventually showed me that He wanted me to make an entire musical album, something I had never even considered.

In this period, I also began learning the skill of hearing the Personal God's voice, which most people falsely think is the exclusive privilege of special prophets. At first, like many people in our reason-dominated civilization, I thought this phenomenon was either archaic superstition or outright hallucination. Yet when people at church prayed for me who didn't know me, they often spoke things about me that they could not have possibly known on their own. When I was first beginning to write songs, for instance, and was hesitant about the process, someone at the church prayed for me, whom I had just met, and told me, "God showed me that you will write songs He will give to you that will bless people."

This and many similar prophetic situations occurred in these years. I couldn't believe that these were mere coincidences, and I became convinced that people could actually hear the Personal God's voice and receive pictures from Him in their mind in the same way that the prophets of old did. I realized the Personal God is not a far off being, but an active participant in my life who is capable of speaking to me directly and without a mediator. Also, during this period, and largely through my mother's influence, God also began to reveal His ability to speak to me through signs. He also revealed His ability to respond to prayers concerning my specific needs, which increased my faith in His reality and His ability to provide for me. Living my daily life with the support and love of the Personal God has been such a privilege and an unexpected wonder that, in many ways, I cannot help but share it with other people.

These revelations about the Personal God were often channeled through the medium of the Christian church, and I am convinced beyond doubt that this was part of the Beloved's plan for me. Yet I have learned, again and again, that God is One, and when we are seeking Him He will reveal Himself through various paths, organizations, and teachings. But the Author of the path is greater than the path to the Author, and the most important thing is to be seeking *God* instead of getting too wrapped up in the particular culture of human institutions.

I have gone to a variety of Christian churches in my life and have benefitted greatly from them. I went to Catholic schools, attended many non-denominational churches, and I even spent an internship as the director of a Presbyterian ministry in my graduate year. As a Jew in a primarily Judeo-Christian nation, I feel strong ties to both the Bible and the Christian church, and am grateful for the experiences I've had in its many variations. Some of the most sincere God-seekers that have inspired me in my life have been Christians, and I can only conclude that Christianity is their path to God in this incarnation. My high regard for the teachings of Jesus, the

emphasis on God's unconditional love, the idea that God has a purpose for me, and the emphasis on having an actual *relationship* with the Personal God have, again and again, drawn me back to the Christian church.

However, as time went on I gradually distanced myself from the church. At a crucial period in my life I needed a supportive spiritual community to help me realize that the Personal God loved me and had a specific purpose for my life. I am also convinced that the Personal God used the Christian church and my multitude of experiences there to reveal things about Himself, and to equip me to do the work He has called me to do in this incarnation. I have sincere gratitude and love for my brothers and sisters in the Christian church, and I can testify that much good comes from many American churches, both denominational, Catholic, and non-denominational.

Nevertheless, I became increasingly jaded by the fact that most Christian churches have misinterpreted the original teachings of Jesus by claiming that Christianity is the only way to achieve spiritual salvation, and that Jesus was fundamentally metaphysically different from everyone else. Most of them have monopolized his teachings and irrationally refuted their essential harmony with other religions. The point of Jesus' glorious incarnation was not only to archetypally reveal an aspect of God, but to inspire us to experience the Divine in the same way he did. Jesus *is* the Son of God, but so am I, and every human being on Earth is also God's Son or Daughter – is even *God Itself!* Jesus did not come to earth to preach the absurd message, which I believe he never sanctioned, that he provided the only legitimate path to God for all human beings and for all time. If this is indeed the case – if there is only one correct religion – then I must say that God didn't do a very good job of making this sufficiently clear to His billions of "misguided" children who practice Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.!

I also felt somewhat ostracized in the Christian Church for my views about being one with God Itself. Like everyone else in the church, I worshipped the Personal God, knew He loved me, and was seeking His will for my life. Yet on a deeper level I also understood that He Himself *was* me, that my very life was in fact the life of God! This view was considered heretical, and this fact is one of the greatest ironies in the long history of religion. For mainstream Christianity considers it heretical for a regular human being to *be* God, even though this was one of the central teachings that Jesus – the founder of the religion – was himself crucified for. So while God used the Christian church to support me and to teach me invaluable lessons about Himself, it was with great sadness that I eventually distanced

myself from it. I will still probably attend Christian churches from time to time, and will continue to affirm the value of the Bible and the original teachings of the spiritual master Jesus. But I will never again become a member of an institution which falsely claims that that Christianity is the only legitimate religion.

As with everything shared in this book, my goal is not to tell the reader what to do, but merely to share what has worked for me as a potential source of inspiration for others. The Personal God may very well, like He did for me, lead you to participate in Christian churches, and He may not. You may feel drawn to the Muslim or Hindu way of relating to the Personal God, etc. The most important thing is not the path you take but that in your heart you are wholeheartedly seeking God, trusting that He is aware of your seeking, and trusting that He is actively guiding you to Himself with a boundless love and compassion you would smile about if you truly understood it.

The Personal God and Zen: Finding a synthesis

As time went on, I found myself in an increasingly confusing and sometimes even mentally agonizing spiritual situation. When I would return to the monastery in the summer, my Buddhist friends often thought of me as uncomfortably Christian. When I would go to churches my Christian friends often thought of me as uncomfortably Buddhist. And my agnostic and atheist friends, in reference to the hybrid theology I was constantly advocating, probably thought I was simply insane! I didn't seem to fit anywhere I went. The pastors I respected at my church simply didn't comprehend the non-dualistic way that Zen expresses the Divine, and my Zen teachers had little to offer me about following the Personal God, and even sometimes hinted that doing so was a distraction to my meditation.

I was faithfully practicing Zen meditation each day, but I also prayed frequently. As I was walking the path to non-dual enlightenment, I was simultaneously growing in my relationship with the Personal God and seeking to discern His will for my life. Yet how, asked my intellect, could I authentically practice Zen if I harbored a conceptual idea of a "personal" God? And how could I have a relationship with That which was one with me?

In my dreams the same hybrid problem reoccurred; in some of my dreams I dreamed of Buddhist imagery and received teachings about going deeper in meditation. Yet in other dreams the Personal God gave me fundamentally dualistic messages about obedience to His will and His

unconditional love. At first I reasoned that I should just choose one path or the other to simplify my life. Yet when I solely practiced non-dual meditation I missed my relationship with the Personal God and all the joyous benefits it contains. And when I merely related to God dualistically, I missed the boundless peace and bliss of actually perceiving that I was God Itself.

Eventually several key events occurred. After hearing the Personal God speak the word “Ramakrishna” to me, I discovered the teachings of Ramakrishna, which teach that the impersonal realization of God and devotion to the Personal God can both be practiced simultaneously, and both lead to the same goal of spiritual enlightenment. I also reasoned to myself that Buddhist practitioners maintain a whole variety of temporary relationships with friends, family, etc., even though in an ultimate sense these relationships are dreamlike and unreal. If this was the case with them, why could I not also sincerely practice meditation and simultaneously nourish a relationship with my Heavenly Father, Mother, and Friend?

I also had several key dreams that pointed to the fact that my personal path in this incarnation involved this harmony between the personal and the impersonal aspects of the spiritual path. Once, for instance, I had a dream where I beheld a piece of paper and watched something like these words arise on it in red ink: “Why do you think it’s odd that you practice Buddhism? I Myself led you to Buddhism to reveal Myself to you!” As time went on, I received more clarifying dreams and also began the process of formulating my own theological ideas. This process has culminated in this book, whose essential message is a balance between seeking realization through Buddhist meditation and simultaneously maintaining a temporary dualistic relationship with the Personal God.

Eventually, through years of trial and error, I realized that my path is a harmony between these two seeming opposites. I am partially writing this autobiographical section to express that, for better or worse, my views about the Personal God and Buddhism did not come from an idle intellectual interest in bringing the two together. Rather, my ideas arose from the living reality of my own path, and my sincere struggle to harmonize two equally strong sides of myself. The ideas of this book are the creative spark of a solution that arose from an inner conflict within me, an organic genesis whose culmination in a book like this not a neuron in my conscious brain could have predicted when I first sat down to practice meditation as a senior in high school. It is only through the unlimited grace of God that I have finally found a personal synthesis between the two approaches.

I am now 24 and recently graduated from college with my Masters in Social Work. It has been almost 6 years since the day I first reread the Dhammapada and determined in my heart to find spiritual knowledge. I am convinced that my struggle to harmonize the two sides of myself mentioned above, and the eventual book that arose from this struggle, are not mere coincidences. I sincerely hope other people will derive spiritual inspiration from my words, which, apart from obeying my Heavenly Master, is the sole reason why I am writing this book.

Chapter 3: My Macrocosmic Worldview: Karma, Reincarnation, and why God-Realization should be the Goal of Human Life

“You are what your deep, driving desire is.
As your desire is, so is your will.
As your will is, so is your deed.
As your deed is, so is your destiny.”
- The Upanishads

My motivation to practice meditation, and to follow the spiritual path in general, is largely derived from a worldview that includes several concepts that are often either unknown or misunderstood by most Westerners. For instance, I personally believe that we will continually reincarnate and suffer the inevitable hardships of human life until we fully realize God. I also believe that everything I do in this lifetime will have repercussions in future lives. The idea of karma is another major staple of my worldview that shapes my behavior and overall life direction.

Before getting into more technical aspects of the book I want to spend some time fleshing out my overall spiritual worldview that has led me to the overwhelming conclusion that God alone is worth seeking. Two seminal parts of this worldview are the ideas of karma and reincarnation, ideas that have motivated me to be a better person, to practice meditation with greater intensity, and to make the search for God my most important priority.

A basic understanding of karma and reincarnation

The concepts of karma and reincarnation are major inspirational factors in my spiritual practice. Both concepts are part of my comprehensive worldview, and understanding them has helped me see the futility of worldly aspirations. Because these concepts are often misunderstood in the West, I will spend some time elaborating on both. However, I must qualify that both karma and reincarnation are infinitely complex and mysterious phenomena that have been elaborated upon for thousands of years, and they operate in ways that no one fully understands. For the sake of brevity, this section will explain a very basic framework of the two concepts as I understand them and as they relate to spiritual practice. I have placed this section at the beginning of the book because I believe that understanding these concepts can help reveal the benefits of practicing meditation, living ethically, and leading a life of selfless service to humankind.

Although there is some growing evidence pointing to the phenomenon of reincarnation, at the end of the day reincarnation is a belief I hold that science has yet to verify with an adequate degree of empiricism. The sources of my views are scriptures I hold in high regard (the Buddhist sutras, The Bhagavad Gita, and the writings of Paramahansa Yogananda, for example), my own reasoning and intuitions, my own dreams about what I believe were past lives, and my own conversations with the Personal God. While I hope that reading this section will give you a greater desire to put spiritual things first in your life, it is not essential to have a grasp of this concept or to adhere to it. For this reason, feel free to skip this section and proceed to the more important chapters on meditation and prayer.

Before delving in, I want to share a version of one of Yogananda's parables that I think perfectly expresses how karma and reincarnation relate to Self-Realization:

There once was a man who was very poor, and on his deathbed he prayed, "Lord, all my life I have been in poverty. In my next life, I want to be rich!" The Lord granted the man's prayer. In his next life he attained a great fortune and got married, but shortly into his marriage his wife died a tragic death.

The man was terribly depressed for the rest of his life, and on his deathbed he asked the Lord, "In my next life, please grant me riches *and* a good marriage." He obtained both these desires in his next life. His wife bore him a son, but soon afterwards the son became diseased and died. Before he died, the man asked the Lord, "In my next life, please grant me a good marriage, health, wealth, *and* healthy children." The Lord granted this prayer, and the man was very wealthy and had a good family. In his next life, however, he was deeply unfulfilled by his his career, and felt he wasted his time in the pursuit of wealth. He prayed, "Lord in my next life please grant me work that makes me feel fulfilled." The parable goes on interminably. In each lifetime, the Lord gives the man what he asks for, but then, without fail, something unforeseen occurs to ruin his tranquility. After many difficult lives the man finally learns his lesson and says to the Lord, "Oh, Lord, I now see that true happiness can only be found in You alone! Whatever destiny I am granted in my next life, please grant me You Yourself so that I may be *eternally* satisfied!"

This parable teaches that we will eventually get whatever we are seeking over the course of many lifetimes according to our inmost desires. Yet even when we do get what we think we desire, we will be perpetually disappointed by lesser joys until we learn the difficult but blessed lesson that God alone can satisfy us.

The law of karma

“Be not deceived; God is not mocked:
For whatsoever a person sows,
That shall they also reap.”
- Galatians 6:7

Karma is probably the most misunderstood concept in Eastern religion. It is not a magical force exacting revenge on people who commit evil, but merely a way of describing the observable reality of cause and effect. The word karma is often simply translated as “action,” and it can be understood as the universe’s basic law of cause and effect.

Every action we perform, and every thought we think, has a corresponding effect. This cause and effect relationship is true on both the physical and mental planes of existence. On the physical plane, if you touch your hand to a stove it will get burned. Your personal beliefs about your hand or the stove do not change the lawful result of the action you performed, which is to cause burning of the skin. The law of karma produces the same impersonal effects in the mental world. Mentally, if someone lives with a constant stream of angry thoughts, these thoughts will probably manifest in angry actions, eventually attracting undesirable scenarios or manifesting in illness.

In a subtler way, I believe the law of karma governs the sphere of what we call morality. Like the planting of a seed, every immoral or moral action we commit has a natural effect we will re-experience either in this lifetime or another. If we cause harm, harm will inevitably come back to us, like “the wheel that follows the foot of the ox” (The Dhammapada). Conversely, if we do good, it will inevitably benefit us at some point in the future once the action’s seed bears its fruit.

Karma thus has two impersonal, reactionary aspects. Firstly, everything we do creates a tendency to do it again, and I believe these tendencies continue on into future lives. Secondly, everything we do attracts circumstances to us that are energetically compatible with the actions we commit. Simply put, if we intentionally harm others, harm will come to us at some point in the future. Conversely, when we do good, good will inevitably return to us. It is also important to note that the law of karma factors in intention as well as action. For instance, a poor child who is forced to steal to stay alive will not receive the same karmic effect as someone who steals for enjoyment with his or her own free will.

From this perspective, God never punishes anyone. “God is love,” as the Bible says, and everyone is equal in His omnipresent eyes. However, He created a universe with impartial moral laws; when we violate those laws by harming others, *we punish ourselves* with our own ignorant behavior. As Allah says in the Qur’an of a group of evil-doers, “And they did not wrong Us, but they wronged *themselves*,” meaning that their own behavior brought upon them the calamities they falsely blamed God for. To avoid this self-inflicted punishment, we must realize that every aspect of our life, both good and bad, is affected by our own past karma, and that our current actions will determine the content of our future lives.

I believe that the effects of bad karma can also be mitigated or even erased by sincere repentance and the grace of the Personal God, but we should never put God to the test by intentionally harming or cheating ourselves or others. We all make mistakes, though, and we all have certain faults that require immense efforts to rectify. Know that the Personal God loves you unconditionally, wants to guide you into a life of freedom from any karmic hindrance, and will aid you supernaturally if you turn to Him for help and are sincere in your desire to change. I also want to make it abundantly clear that your relationship with the Personal God is never affected by your behavior. God’s grace is infinite and He loves you unconditionally forever; you will *never* lose your identity as His beloved child, and should never be afraid to return to Him if you commit a bad action. However, even though God loves you beyond doubt, there are natural consequences to every bad behavior that we all should have a healthy respect for.

I also want to briefly mention that it is futile to attempt to understand your own or anyone else’s karmic history that only God knows (unless God specifically reveals it to you), or to worry about future consequences that are also impossible to foresee. At this point, it doesn’t matter what you have done in the past, for you have already done it and cannot change that. All that matters now is to recognize that all actions have consequences and to make a sincere effort to do only good. Doing this will insure a good future for you and eventually help you overcome the faults of your past. Realizing that all our actions have consequences forces us to take responsibility for our lives and stop blaming other forces for our destiny. A lot of people misinterpret this thought and develop a sense of coldness toward suffering people by thinking, “They deserve what they got...” This is far from the Way! Only God can read the script of a person’s past karma, and only He understands why certain people experience calamitous destinies.

Furthermore, we have all committed harm in our lives and so can never morally condemn others without being hypocrites. As human beings we are **never** in the position to be the arbiters of karmic justice, and should treat all people with equal kindness, regardless of their faults. We should never assume that we understand the mysterious law of karma, nor judge anyone based on appearances lest we bring judgment back upon ourselves. We should never condemn anyone for their behavior and firmly resolve to have unconditional love for all beings. In this way we imitate God's perfect love for all, for as Jesus said, "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45).

In fact, the only way to stop a negative karmic cycle involving other people is to completely embrace love and forgiveness. In the Dhammapada, the Buddha articulated this simple yet profound principal by saying, "Hatred cannot dispel hatred. Only love can dispel hatred. This law is ineradicable." This principal does not mean that we cannot use self-defense to protect ourselves, or that we should become the doormats of manipulative people. We must, however, forgive and love even the people who hurt us. For hatred only breeds more hatred, and the cycle of hurt and revenge, revenge and hurt, goes on interminably until we firmly resolve to act with love alone. When this attitude of unconditional forgiveness and love is embodied, it is the highest freedom and the pinnacle of the human experience.

From the perspective of karma it is worthless to hate other people, to seek vengeance, or to judge anyone. First of all, we should unconditionally love everyone because everyone is fundamentally our own Self, and because evil is ultimately committed in the ignorance of God's Nature. Secondly, even people who seem like they are getting away with evil will inevitably be confronted with the effects of their own actions at some point in the future, so we don't need to worry about cosmic injustice. People who seek vengeance and thus bring more ruin upon themselves, or bemoan the "success" of the wicked, neither understand the justice of God nor the impartial law of karma that governs the moral universe. In the Old Testament, the Personal God spoke that, "Vengeance is Mine; I will repay," implying that no human being should ever take vengeance, but rather should be confident in the inherent justice of the Divine order (Deuteronomy 32:35). In a world of multiple lifetimes nothing escapes God's sight. Everyone eventually receives what they deserve, and by God's mercy everyone eventually returns to the hidden Bliss whose astoundingly vivid dream of Itself we call the universe.

The importance of ethics on the spiritual path

Because our actions determine our future destiny, the first and most important aspect of the spiritual path is an unshakeable commitment to ethical behavior. When I recently went on a 10 day Vipassana meditation retreat (as taught by S.N. Goenka) each person committed to following the 10 Buddhist ethical precepts before engaging in meditation. Since ethics are the foundation of the spiritual path, Goenka understood that true meditation is impossible to achieve if the karmic laws of human decency are being habitually violated. The historical Buddha also insisted that his monks commit to a code of ethics before studying with him because he also understood, as the cliché but undoubtedly true maxim states, that “there is no rest for the wicked.”

Many of the world’s great spiritual teachers left behind a similar code of ethics for their followers. To men like the Buddha, these rules or precepts were not edicts commanded by an external deity, but expressions of their own mind-state. Through spiritual discipline they perceived the oneness of reality, and from this experience flowed the artwork of their lives. In the direct experience of Oneness, how *could* they kill another being? How *could* they steal? As many Old Testament prophets describe it, the law was “written on their hearts,” for they intuitively realized that to harm another being was to harm their own Self. Compassion for all living things is the surest sign that someone has experienced God.

With this is mind, good actions are what express and facilitate awakening. On the contrary, evil actions flow from the ignorance of thinking we are a separate ego, and thus lead us away from experiencing God. Because acts of selfless service to humanity undercut the false reality of the ego, these actions can be called “good.” And because harming others perpetuates the idea that we are separate, these actions can be called “bad.” Every action is a seed with either good or evil potential, and in due time we will all reap what we sow.

To conclude, in a relative sense karma is real and inescapable. Yet it is also important to understand that God Itself is changeless and beyond both good and evil karma. Simply being a good person is not enough to realize It because the idea that one is a “good person” further perpetuates the illusory ego. A street lamp can illuminate a group of church members handing out food for the homeless, and the same street lamp can also illuminate many less wholesome activities without its light being affected. Similarly, even though it is necessary to abstain from evil and cultivate goodness to engage in pure meditation, the Awareness, which right now is experiencing this moment, is fundamentally unaffected by anything. This fact is *not* an

excuse to commit evil, however; anyone who takes that regrettable view will soon discover the harsh reality of karma and again realize that to harm others is to harm our ourselves. These two viewpoints seem contradictory but in reality are two ways of looking at the same Truth: one in a relative way, one in an Absolute way.

The unchanging nature of the Absolute is one of the reasons why meditation practice, which constantly points us back to It, is so powerful. There is an old Hindu maxim which says that just as seeds cannot germinate in the middle of a fire, so all past karma, both good and evil, dissolves in the fire of the knowledge of Brahman. This is indeed a true statement but, as with most spiritual quotations, it is easier said than done. To actually perceive its wisdom we must continually still our minds, do our best to refrain from all unethical actions, cultivate the seeds of goodness, and dedicate our remaining life energy to developing spiritual awareness.

What about heaven and hell?

It's hard to discuss ethics, morality, and religion in the West without mentioning the ideas of heaven and hell. Growing up Christian gave any thoughts about the afterlife a reeking stench to me, for I have always been utterly sickened by the offensive and false idea that a loving God would create an eternal hell to punish the wicked. Yet as I got older, the study of Buddhism helped me to develop a more symbolic understanding of the ideas of heaven and hell. While I do personally believe in subtle planes we temporarily inhabit after death, and other realms of the cosmos where disembodied beings inhabit energy bodies, I primarily view heaven and hell as metaphorical states of being on Earth.

In Buddhist writings, the six realms of existence are sometimes spoken of. There are heavenly realms, hell realms, realms for the hungry ghosts (representing a state of insatiable desire), realms of the fighting gods, animal realms, and human realms. It is assumed in the teachings that these realms are not physical places but symbolic states of mind that everyone passes through depending on their quality of life at the time. We don't have to look far to see that this very earth contains both heaven and hell realms. In our world people undergo horrid circumstances: torture, paralysis, chronic pain, warfare, and the list goes on and on. And even if people are materially blessed, we can observe that some of them fall into hellish realms of depression and anxiety. Conversely, we can see that many people live in "heavenly" circumstances. There are many wealthy, healthy, talented, and generally fortunate people living in our midst. We can also observe that

some people who are not materially blessed experience long-lasting happy moods, a heavenly state.

The realms we inhabit are determined by our past karma, and are therefore impermanent and subject to change. From this point of view, even heavenly realms are undesirable because they only last for a short time and then abruptly come to an end. Like an arrow shot into the sky that finally returns to the Earth, all good karma must eventually run its own lawful course. Thus, the wealth that the rich man worked so hard for will probably, in another lifetime, revert back to poverty. The health of a healthy man will eventually revert to physical deterioration, and the great art of the artist will eventually be destroyed by the impersonal wrecking ball of time.

Seeing heaven and hell as metaphorical “realms” of existence can teach us several things. Firstly, it thankfully implies that the hellish situations people go through are only temporary. Eventually, everyone will find better circumstances and even gain total spiritual deliverance through the cosmic mercy of God. Secondly, it shows us that working hard for “heavenly” circumstances is ultimately futile since even good karma is impermanent. Lastly, it hopefully teaches us to seek happiness in God alone, the One who is beyond the constant fluctuations of duality. So whatever our part is in God’s dream-drama, we should all strive to experience He who is beyond duality and realize that God alone is worth seeking.

Experiencing and perpetually enjoying this changeless Source is the true “Kingdom of Heaven” that Jesus spoke of. Unlike lesser heavenly realms on Earth, It cannot be destroyed by inevitable changes in circumstance. To me, the real Heaven is an enlightened state of mind, present this moment, that can be realized on Earth through spiritual practice. Jesus metaphorically advised us to seek this enlightened state of consciousness above all else when he said, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal” (Matthew 6: 19-20).

The hard fact is that if you “store up,” or make your goal, anything other than God-Consciousness, it will be taken from you. You will be inevitably and insatiably disappointed if you seek happiness in any impermanent thing, and will be reminded yet again that nothing apart from God can satisfy you. But if you “store up treasures in heaven” by practicing daily meditation and doing good works with God as your goal, eventually

you will find all your desires fulfilled in the consummate Union with God that all beings are really seeking.

A few thoughts on reincarnation

“Death is inevitable for the living; birth is inevitable for the dead.
Since these are unavoidable,
You should not feel sorrow.”
-The Bhagavad Gita

The concept of reincarnation is simply that the stream of experience we think of as “me” continually re-embodies after death. I do not use the term to designate that a permanent ego incarnates through time, but merely to indicate that a stream of experience continues beyond the death of the body into future lives. In Buddhist thought, reincarnation is generally replaced with “rebirth” to undercut the notion that a fixed soul evolves through time. Nevertheless, the historical Buddha undeniably taught that people lived multiple lifetimes, and that impressions themselves continue to pass from life to life even if they have no ultimate experiencer. I use the term reincarnation not in philosophical opposition to rebirth, but because it is a more familiar term for most Westerners.

I believe we have all lived countless thousands of lifetimes, but that God, for His own purposes, most often puts a veil between us and our past lives. It is most important to focus on the here and now, and not get caught up in the quest for inapplicable knowledge of past lives. Yet sometimes God will reveal this knowledge if it is useful for us to know. I began asking the Personal God to show me past lives I’ve lived, and had several clear dreams that made me aware of two specific past lives that I won’t share here for reasons of privacy. If you become aware of a past life, it is usually because the effects of it have some special meaning or connection to your current life. There are also feelings in my life I find hard to explain apart from reincarnation. For instance, when I first began meditating it strangely seemed totally natural to me, as if I had done it before even though I hadn’t. When I went to the monastery, even though the conditions were totally new to me, I had the subtle intuition that I was *continuing* something I had begun in the past.

From a karmic perspective, reincarnation simply makes much more sense to me. How can people who intentionally do evil really experience justice if there is only one lifetime? Why is there so much discrepancy in people’s potential for success or spiritual development? Why do some

people seem so much more spiritually advanced than others? Why do good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people? These questions are naturally mysterious, but if people live many lifetimes, God's justice can work itself out over the course of countless generations in ways that would be impossible to do in a short span of 80 to 100 years. And this is good news! For in the space of many lifetimes every misery can be undone, every desire can be fulfilled, every tragedy is temporary, there's always a second chance, and nothing is permanent. Every action is supremely meaningful in light of reincarnation. Any good you do will come back to you even if you don't see the fruit of it in this lifetime, and every bad action will produce bad fruit in this or some future life. This knowledge should produce a healthy fear in rational people of harming or defrauding others, and also a greater eagerness to do good.

Reincarnation cannot only be thought of in reference to an individual person. In many ways, it informs my conception of the cosmos itself. In the Hindu scriptures, it is said that a "Day of Brahma the Creator," (when God appears as the manifested universe) lasts many billions of years until it dissolves into the "Night of Brahma" when God exists in the unmanifest state preceding the next cosmic cycle. As it says in the Upanishads, all things come from God and ultimately return to Him, like a spider that forms a web and then dissolves that web back into itself.

In this sense, God both evolves and does not evolve, for His Unmanifested Nature becomes more and more accurately represented in the evolutionary cycles of nature and yet, by definition, can never be expressed fully. This paradox is nicely expressed by a classic metaphor comparing a diamond to a piece of coal. The sunlight is more accurately reflected in a diamond even though the *same sun* is reflecting off of the coal from which the diamond evolved. Similarly, God is manifesting as everything in the cycle of reincarnation. What He actually is, though, is expressed more accurately in a Self-Realized master than in, say, a dog who does not even have the capacity to awaken to its own True Nature.

We can avoid a lot of suffering if we understand the implications of this evolutionary aspect of the cosmic cycle, for everything in the cycle culminates in God awakening to Itself through a Self-Realized person. In the "Day of Brahma," the One morphs Himself into the many through His illusory power the Hindu scriptures call "Maya." As time slowly unfolds, He evolves from the inanimate world, to the animate, to the plant, to the animal, to the human, and beyond, creating ever-new ingenious ways to express His glory. Considering this hierarchy, it is highly desirable to be human because on Earth only a human being has the psychophysical capacity to experience

enlightenment. The historical Buddha once expressed this symbolically by saying that attaining a human birth is as rare as a turtle sticking its nose in a ring that floats somewhere in all the world's oceans.

In this framework, God enjoys Itself by dreaming the universe and pretending to be different forms; but ultimately It draws Itself back to Itself with the goad of dissatisfaction and the realization that superior bliss is found in enlightenment alone. A parable by Ramakrishna illustrates this point. He said that the cycle of reincarnation for the human being is like a child in a room full of toys. The child tries this toy, then that toy, and then another. When he/she becomes tired of playing with toys, the child cries out to its mother who swoops it into her arms with a passionate embrace. Similarly, when a person realizes that happiness cannot be found in fleeting pleasures or the thrill of impermanent destinies, it cries out to God and finally awakens to the reality of Its Bliss that alone satisfies all desires.

As this parable implies, inordinate *desire* fuels the cycle of reincarnation and is the cause of our suffering. As long as we inwardly crave something we don't yet have, we will continue reincarnating to satisfy these irrational, illusory desires. Since no worldly thing can satisfy us forever, this painful cycle will continue interminably until our own dissatisfaction causes us to seek permanent happiness in the spiritual path. This statement doesn't mean that desiring things is inherently harmful, but rather that we should not desire anything more than God. We must practically maintain desires to keep the body alive and fulfill our cosmic purpose. As the historical Buddha said, our body is the boat which takes us to the other shore of awakening. But if we wish to be internally free from the cycle (not literally to escape it but to realize the Truth that is beyond it) we must seek the One that alone can satisfy us eternally.

In the cycle of reincarnation suffering has its place; typically, it is suffering and dissatisfaction that lead people to the spiritual path. S.N. Goenka once said that if you could see the bones of all your loved ones from past incarnations they would stack to the clouds. We have all endlessly undergone violent deaths, painful separations, and all sorts of dissatisfactions again and again through seeking happiness in our personal desires. Furthermore, even so called "heavenly" lifetimes were actually negative because they created an insatiable attachment for impermanent things. But, thankfully, in the spiritual path we can find a refuge from this dissatisfying cycle and an invitation to an eternal life of unconditional joy. Then life becomes a win-win: in finding God we can also enjoy our remaining desires that accord with His will. We can also enjoy the natural beauty of life, but simultaneously have access to a Bliss that will not be lost

when the impermanence of the world once again takes from us all that can be taken.

What reincarnates?

Reincarnation can seem mysterious, but the idea of it is actually quite natural when compared to our everyday experience. When you wake up in the morning, you can observe a set of habit patterns you have developed in this lifetime. If you have spent the last few years doing addictive drugs, for instance, you probably will wake up with a desire to get high. You will be attracted to other people who get high, and you will naturally gravitate toward circumstances surrounding drugs. In this example, the law of karma is clearly happening *in this life*. Even in this life, we can clearly see that everything we habitually do creates a tendency to do it again, and eventually shapes the environment we inhabit.

Similarly, I believe that after the “sleep” of death all the impressions, desires, and habits we accumulated in this lifetime remain in existence and determine our next birth. When the conditions are correct, we will again become manifest in a physical form that is compatible with these impressions and desires. In a negative sense, someone who consciously committed evil in this life will probably be reborn with irrational desires to commit evil again. Luckily, though, this condition is impermanent, and any habit pattern can be overcome by the Lord’s grace and sincere effort. In a positive sense, someone who intensely sought God but died before awakening will most likely be born in a place where meditation is practiced so that they can continue their spiritual quest.

Yet while it is important to be mindful that our actions influence our future lives, we also should not be deluded into thinking that God is somehow outside the cycle of reincarnation. The Bhagavad Gita, a priceless scripture which comments extensively on the nature of reincarnation, provides a clearer metaphysical picture of *what* re-incarnates. It says that just as you put on cloths each day and take them off again, so the Self (or God) puts on bodies and discards them to have various experiences. Similarly, it says that just as we pass from childhood to youth, to adulthood, to old age without changing identity, so the Self passes from lifetime to lifetime, changing without actually changing. From this viewpoint, God is the one dreaming the cycle of reincarnation to enjoy Itself. “You” are Its dream.

From this perspective, there is no need to escape the cycle of reincarnation, since this very cycle is the manifestation of God; rather, we

are aiming to realize the Reality that is unaffected by change. Maya, or the manifested universe, is not harmful so long as it is seen as a dream. In fact, it is mind-bogglingly beautiful and should be wholeheartedly embraced as God's artwork.

The suffering the Buddha spoke of lies in our *false intensification* with Maya, with the body, the mind, and the entire dream-drama of creation. Additionally, as the Buddha brilliantly articulated in the Four Noble Truths, it is our *craving* for impermanent things that causes suffering, not the things themselves. This illusion of false identification, and our irrational craving for impermanence, are the source of all suffering and keep us trapped in endless cycles of pain, regret, and desire. Once we are free from the irrational desire to cling to impermanence, and once we realize the True Nature beyond Maya, we are free to fearlessly participate in Maya with an indescribable sense of freedom and an invigorated perception of astounding beauty. Then we see that this very world is itself Nirvana, is itself the manifestation of God.

Many people hear the teaching that life is a dream and feel that this thought demonstrates a sense of coldness toward things. This is simply not the case. Our human relationships and personal interests are indeed important and precious. Nevertheless, we must realize that they are impermanent and will inevitably be taken from us. The goal of the spiritual path is not to become indifferent to the world, but to be realistic about the nature of life. We should love people deeply, but not with an inordinate type of love that should be reserved for the Absolute alone. We will be constantly disappointed if we love anything more than God, for God alone will be ours eternally, even when the world itself ceases to be.

The implications of karma and reincarnation: why God-Realization should be the goal of human life

“Everything else can wait, but your search for God cannot wait.”

- Paramahansa Yogananda

If reincarnation and karma are actually real, what practical conclusions should we draw from them? Firstly, I hope having a basic understanding of karma and reincarnation will kindle in you the basic desire to do good and to abstain from evil. Even if you have only the slightest interest in spirituality, know that you can avoid hellish circumstances if you refrain from harming and defrauding others, and from indulging in behaviors that produce only misery as their natural byproduct. As the book of

Proverbs says in the Bible, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” meaning that the fear, or healthy respect, of karmic justice should inspire us to renounce all evil actions. This aspiration to do only good doesn’t mean you will be perfect. Falling short also doesn’t diminish fact that the Personal God unconditionally loves you and will continually forgive you. Like a loving Father, though, He often allows His children to be chastised so they can learn important karmic lessons.

As for good karma, we should help others simply because we love them and perceive them as our own Self. However, it is also good to see that selfless acts are in our own spiritual interest. Each action we commit is a seed, and every time we meditate we create the tendency to do it again. As in financial accounts, the more good acts and meditative concentration we accumulate, the more interest, or good results, will be produced by our efforts. From this perspective, even a little meditation per day will carry over into future lifetimes and is therefore an extremely significant activity. Similarly, every good deed we perform works to reduce the power of selfish desire based on the construct of the ego.

Secondly, and most importantly, understanding karma and reincarnation should help us arrange our priorities in life. We must realize that only God-Realization can satisfy our desires and thus save us from the insatiable compulsion to reincarnate for unspiritual reasons.⁵ This principal is best expressed by a simple, logical postulation: all worldly experiences are impermanent and therefore cannot truly satisfy us. Conversely, God alone is eternal, and realization of It alone can grant lasting happiness. For this reason, seeking the realization of God should become the number one priority of our lives. A lot of people hear this and tell me they are discouraged. They say, “I’m so busy, and I want to have a family and a career! What time will I have to pursue God-Realization?” Trust me, I know what this feeling is like. I myself have a busy professional life, have engrossing hobbies, and will probably be in a long term relationship.

We should put our spiritual practice first, even in the midst of a busy modern life, because this will produce the greatest happiness. If you commit to doing daily meditation, continually ask God to reveal Himself to you, and serve humanity selflessly with whatever gifts you have, you will make great strides in the God-Realization, the highest goal of human life. Even if you do not reach the goal in this lifetime, remember that the path potentially

⁵ After full realization is attained one may incarnate again by the will of God to fulfill a spiritual mission or return again by choice, but they will not be compelled to reincarnate by karmic law like regular mortals. A God-Conscious individual will be free wherever they end up in God’s immense dream creation because God, the ever-present elixir of Bliss, is their sole satisfaction.

takes many lifetimes, and everything adds up. Every moment of effort in meditation will sprout up in a future life, and nothing will go to waste. So never be discouraged! You will be surprised at what you can accomplish if you believe in yourself. People do amazing things when they set their minds to something and sincerely believe that their effort will pay off. With intense desire and dedication, people have created ridiculously complex spaceships, genius works of art, and massive construction jobs like the Hoover dam. While such things are good and contribute to human civilization, they are inferior to spiritual realization because they have only temporary benefits.

On the contrary, the reward of God is everlasting and unfathomably wondrous. Yogananda once compared Self-Realization to a person working all their lives for a thousand dollars and then, in an instant, becoming a billionaire. This illustration points to the fact that the ego cannot even rationally conceive of how much greater God is compared to the joys it is accustomed to enjoying, and that God is astronomically and incomparably more desirable than any worldly thing, person, or destiny. In the last analysis, experiencing God is worth any sacrifice.

Taking the middle path

Once God-Realization becomes your first priority, the next question naturally becomes how to structure your life around this ideal. Since it is literally impossible for most people to dedicate their entire lives to formal spiritual practice, we all need to take what the Buddha called “the middle path.” He said that walking the spiritual path is like playing a lute. If the lute is strung too tightly, it won’t play correctly. Similarly, it won’t play correctly if it is strung too loosely. Putting forth serious effort is necessary to realize God, but we will not succeed if we push ourselves too hard, neglect our worldly duties, and ignore our natural human limitations.

Part of embodying the middle path on Earth is that we all must actively serve humanity, genuinely love the people in our lives, and work hard to improve the world in some way. Spiritual practice is not an excuse to become indifferent about people. In fact, it should ideally inspire us to help others as much as we can. Yet if we completely neglect spiritual practice and exclusively pursue worldly activity – even charitable activity – we will stay bound to our karma and never awaken. The wise know that

both these aspects of the path are two sides of the same coin, and that both approaches have the same end goal of awakening.⁶

Everyone's middle path will look different, and we should never compare our practice to someone else's. Everyone has different degrees of worldly karma left to satisfy. For some people, spending too much time on meditation would be detrimental to their God-given destinies. No one can tell you what your middle path will look like; the only way to strike the perfect balance is to jump in, allow yourself to make mistakes, and be sensitive to God's guidance as you go. Another principal of the middle path is that *this very life is one with God*. If we seek It outside the present moment, we will never find It and waste time chasing our own ideas. In truth, there is no "Samsara" (the cycle of reincarnation) to escape, for Samsara is Nirvana. Ironically, we must work hard in meditation to experience this truth ourselves, and not remain satisfied with the possession of a lifeless intellectual concept.

However, while it is true that we must take the middle path, seeking God must clearly come first in our lives. Because attaining a human birth is so rare, and because being introduced to meditation is also extremely rare, it is healthy to have a sense of urgency about realization. Even though the path to total enlightenment often requires many lifetimes, we should realize that sickness and death come quickly in any human life. For this reason, we should take meditation, prayer, and all spiritual practices very seriously. On the doorpost of many Zen monasteries in Japan, a version of this saying is written: "Great is the matter of birth and death. Impermanence surrounds us. Be awake in every moment. Do not waste your life!"

If we renounce all other goals to explore this "Great Matter" we will ironically realize a Bliss that even the most materially blessed people cannot even fathom. One of my favorite scriptural promises, Matthew 6:33 in the Bible, expresses this concept beautifully. Jesus said, "Seek **first** the kingdom of God (or the "kingdom" of direct spiritual perception, as I interpret it), and all these things (or material desires necessary for daily living and the performance of your God-given destiny) will be added to you as well." This promise from God has brought tears to my eyes many times, and it is the principal I have chosen to found my life upon. This principal is truly a double blessing. If we wholeheartedly seek God, He has promised

⁶ In Buddhism, "the two wings of the bird" are wisdom and compassion, and both are necessary for the "bird" of the teachings to fly. Wisdom is the understanding that reality is One and that there is no reason to grieve about anything since all things are the deathless Buddha. Compassion is the understanding that this realization expresses itself *actively* by benefitting others and helping them awaken. It is impossible to embody this Truth if either "wing" of the spiritual life is neglected.

that we will not only realize Him, but that He will provide for our worldly needs and, in time, even give us the desires of our hearts.

Chapter 4: Zen Meditation

If we set God-Realization as the goal of our life, what next? This book is a series of recommendations in response to this question based on what I have found has worked for me. A big part of my answer is having a consistent meditation practice. In fact, everything else in this book is of little importance compared to the practice of meditation. Don't get me wrong, I love the Personal God and my sweet relationship with Him/Her is my favorite aspect of human life. That said, no matter how much we pray, we will never actually experience God Itself unless we dissolve all separation and illusory concepts through deep meditation. In meditation, even attachment to God Himself must be eventually be given up, and all ideas must be dropped away. If you proceed far enough you will realize that you yourself are the One you seek; in seeking Him, ultimately you become Him, for God is fundamentally your own Awareness.

It is said that even *hearing* about meditation is very fortunate karma. When practiced properly, meditation cuts through lifeless ideas and will speed you across the ocean of misery to the “shoreless shore” of immortality that, when realized, is manifesting as this exact moment. Even a few minutes of meditation a day will plant beneficial seeds in your consciousness that will sprout up like helpful genies in later years and future lifetimes. May all beings experience the boundless peace of a stilled mind, a tranquil heart, and the formless bliss of pure Awareness that deep meditation can reveal!

What meditation is and why it is important

The word “meditation” has different meanings for different people. In western philosophy, the word “meditate” is often used to describe meditating on or about an idea. For example, many Christians I know practice the art of meditating on a scripture from the Bible. While doing this, they dwell on a short scripture and wait for God to reveal its intuitive meaning to them. This type of meditation can be a fruitful practice, but it is not the type of meditation we are concerned about in this book. Meditation from the Zen Buddhist perspective has many facets, but this book is primary concerned with two: concentrating the mind with the tool of the body and inquiring directly into the nature of self. I believe that dogged persistence in this effort can eventually lead to the direct realization of God beyond all lifeless intellectual speculation.

However, it is important to realize that meditation is only a tool and that realization is, in the end, a process that cannot be forced. The path of awakening follows its own mysterious timing. It is simultaneously true that meditation is a *technology* that quickens the process of awakening. The traditional Hindu view is that the natural human evolution from embodied soul into God-conscious master takes potentially thousands upon thousands of difficult lifetimes. Thankfully, many spiritual masters claim that practicing a meditation technique can radically speed up this already occurring natural process.

For example, the historical Buddha says in *The Sutra on Mindfulness of Breathing* that one can experience enlightenment in this lifetime if they practice his technique (mindfulness of the breath) continually. This sounds easy, but if you have actually practiced meditation you know that practicing uninterrupted by distraction for even a few breaths is maddeningly difficult! Meditation master Paramahansa Yogananda similarly wrote that if one practices the meditation technique of Kryia Yoga sincerely and continuously, the process of God-Realization can be greatly facilitated. To illustrate this point, he gave his students the metaphor that seeking Self-Realization is like going to a distant place, let's say from California to New York, with a vehicle. To get to New York from California I can walk, drive, skateboard, or take an airplane. With his charming poetic touch, Yogananda called Kryia meditation the "airplane route" to God.

The reason why meditation is so powerful is because it works directly with the mind and more importantly with the body, which is the central nexus of the illusory idea that we are a separate ego. No matter how many scriptures we memorize or rituals we perform, I believe that we cannot free ourselves from the prison of body identification without continually practicing meditation and perceiving the actual mechanics of ego consciousness on the instinctual level.

Even if we have a clear concept of God, this knowledge will not actually benefit us unless we work with our own karma on a physical level in meditation. As S.N. Goenka recently put it, a parrot can learn to chant the name of Krishna and impress all the members of the household. It will go on chanting beautifully, but if a mouse happens to tickle its feathers it will instinctively react in anger, accumulating negative karma for itself and further perpetuating the false idea that it is the body. Similarly, our deep-rooted habit of body/mind identification can only be overcome by meditation, not simply by regurgitating scriptural ideas.

Since Zen is the only type of meditation I am familiar enough with to discuss experientially, I will not elaborate on any other types of meditation

in this book. The Zen style is obviously not the only type of meditation that can be utilized for realization, however. I do want to mention that I have recently begun practicing Vipassana meditation as taught by S.N. Goenka. I have been immensely benefitted by it, and I believe it is also a powerful technique that can result in awakening.

I practice Buddhist meditation and will continue to do so for the rest of my life. Yet there is no correct technique on the path to realization, and your question should be “Does it work?” rather than “Is it correct?” I do not consider myself a Zen Buddhist exclusively, but I have simply benefitted so much from the practice that I am motivated to continue based solely on the power of my own experience.

Whatever meditation style you choose to engage in, I recommend dedicating yourself to one for a significant amount of time. As the old sayings go, a person who puts their left leg on one horse and their right leg on another won't get very far without collapsing, and you can only harvest oil by digging one deep hole instead of many shallow ones. Similarly, two equally powerful types of meditation won't get you very far unless you commit to one for a long period of time. For this reason, you should ask the Personal God to reveal to you the method of meditation that will lead you most speedily to God-Realization. The type of meditation He led me to in this lifetime is primarily Zen Buddhist meditation, a technique I can authentically recommend for both religious and non-religious people alike.

The practice of Zen meditation: preliminary thoughts

Before discussing how to practice Zen meditation, I want to again emphasize that I am speaking from my own practice experience and not on behalf of the official Buddhist community. As a seeker of Truth, I utilize the practice and philosophy of Zen Buddhism, but do not adhere to it exclusively or claim to be one of its official representatives. For this reason, take these words as “Zen as understood by Jeffrey Rothman” rather than the official Zen method (if there is such a thing!). My desire is merely to introduce people to some simple practices that I have found to be immensely beneficial.

To introduce the essence of Zen meditation, I want to share a ridiculous Zen parable about a man hanging over a cliff by his teeth. This man looks above him and sees a roaring tiger ready to eat him. Then he looks below and sees another tiger ready to pitilessly digest him if he falls. When the man realizes there is no escape, he finally lets go. As he falls,

strawberries suddenly appear out of thin air and he eats them with wholehearted enjoyment.

This story wonderfully captures the essence of Zen meditation. In this parable, the bottom of the cliff is the future, which is an illusion, and the top of the cliff is the similarly illusory past. If all that exists are the “strawberries” of the present moment, what else is there to do but eat them with rapture? If nothing exists but the present moment, which is the manifestation of Buddha Nature, what else is there to do but completely merge with whatever we happen to be experiencing with a radical acceptance that can only be called love?

Zen meditation originated with the historical Buddha nearly 2,500 years ago, and has continued through a line of historically documented teachers up to the present day. Zen has a rich history and philosophy, but for the sake of being scrupulously practical I will get straight to how and why I practice Zen meditation. Since Zen meditation is a *practice* and not a belief system, members of all religions or no religion can practice Zen, which is essentially the practice of non-conceptual awareness of the present moment and direct inquiry into its nature. There are many complex practices and schools of approach within Zen Buddhism that will not be covered here. However, the basic practices of concentration on the breath and inquiry into the self are arguably common to them all.

The path of Zen is a lifelong endeavor, and I highly recommend working with a teacher. This will speed up your development and will also give you accountability in your practice. Also, since I am not an official Zen teacher, I recommend buying a book specifically about how to practice Zen meditation (I have recommended two good ones in the appendix) in order to cover nuances and more advanced methods not mentioned in this book. This book will give you a couple simple practices you can begin doing immediately that require no faith or complicated guidance. May God give me the grace to explain this practice with simplicity and accuracy!

The fundamental goal of Zen meditation

When I was living at Great Vow Zen Monastery, one of the teachers explained Zen practice to me in a simple way I will never forget. She said that there are two basic functions of our mind: thinking and awareness. The thinking mind thinks in images, words, and ideas. It is usually dwelling on the past or the future and is almost never in the present moment which, ironically, is all we can ever experience. Existing before thought, awareness simply experiences the present moment without adding a corresponding

mental story to it. Right now, It is seeing out of your eyes, hearing through your ears, and feeling your body. It is always present, but, being pure awareness, It lacks a graspable form. No one created this awareness. It was never born, will never die, and is always at peace. You can call it God, Christ, Buddha Nature, Absolute, Krishna, or even Frank. Whatever you want to call It, behold: It's always right here!

With this in mind, the preliminarily “goal” of Zen meditation is to simply *be present*, to shift our attention away from the limited thinking mind to the boundless Mind of awareness. We let go of thinking, and abide in the awareness that is present before thought. The goal is then simply to hold our awareness in the present moment without allowing it to separate into the illusory realms of thought. You might say, “That sounds like a good *idea*, but is it possible to actually implement?” Part of the Buddha's genius was this discovery: we can use the body and the breath as tools to *unite* our awareness with the present moment. The sensations of the body and the breath are always in the present moment (right now, see if this is true...), and uniting our awareness with these tangible sensations for extended periods of time is the key to calming the thinking mind and eventually seeing beyond it. Non-conceptually hearing sound, seeing sights, or merging with any aspect of the present moment can also be a “dharma gate,” or gateway into the truth of this moment. The breath, however, is the most universally recommended beginning tool for concentration in Zen.

Concentration on the breath and the subtle bliss it naturally produces is not the goal of the spiritual path, but true inquiry cannot be engaged in unless the mind is calmed through concentration. The ultimate “goal,” one could say, of Zen meditation is to realize that what we think of as “I” is actually an illusion. If we look closely, we cannot ascribe a self to the body, the mind, the feelings, or any other temporary phenomenon. Look as much as you want, and you'll never find your ego. This experience of self-lessness is, I believe, just a different way of expressing what it really means to experience God. For what remains before the idea of the body arises, before the mind thinks, before the “I” comes into being? You have lived your whole life in ignorance of It. It's time to look and see for yourself!

Posture

Zen meditation, because it is simply the exploration of *what is*, is exiting and endlessly engaging. But zazen, or seated meditation, is also a practical physical discipline, and generations of people have discovered through trial and error what generally works well when it comes to posture.

When you meditate, it is important to align your body with good posture. Having an understanding of posture is not an ultimate requirement, but it is a valuable tool that can enable you to deepen your concentration. Since the body and the mind are both one interrelated phenomenon, everything we do with our bodies affects the quality and depth of our meditation.

While classical postures are not absolutely essential to master, learning them can save you from a lot of unnecessary pain in the future. The technologies of the standard Zen meditation postures will help you meditate in a state of balance, harmony, and ease. While the postures are designed to eventually bring the maximum possible ease in meditation, you should expect to encounter some physical discomfort when you first attempt them. It may take some time for your body to get used to the postures, but learning to sit in them for long periods of time is worthwhile. I worked hard to become flexible enough to sit in the half lotus posture, and it took me nearly three years to finally feel comfortable in it. Most people in our culture are simply not flexible enough to do this, but it really doesn't matter. A straight back is the only universal prerequisite to having a sound posture, and meditation can also be done in a chair.

The most common meditation postures

For seated meditation I recommend purchasing a zafu, or seated meditation cushion, that is specifically designed for seated meditation (two places to purchase these are listed in the appendix). Many people also find it easier on their bodies to use what is called a seiza bench, which can also be purchased online. A regular pillow or blanket can also suffice if you cannot afford a zafu. You should sit on the forward third of the zafu when you meditate. I also recommend stretching before meditation since this makes it easier to relax into the posture and to fully concentrate on the breathing.

The five most common seated positions are the full lotus, the half lotus, the quarter lotus, the Burmese position, and the chair. In all of these positions, excluding the chair, you are aiming for what is called “the triune base” in which both knees are on the floor forming a triangular support system with the buttocks. I recommend searching the Internet to see pictures of these postures before trying them yourself to get a better idea of what I am talking about.

For the full lotus (which I personally cannot do for more than a few minutes), sit on the forward third of your zafu and place your right foot on your left thigh and your left foot on your right thigh (or *visa versa*). For the half lotus, place your right foot on your upper left thigh or your left foot on

your right thigh. The quarter lotus is like just the half lotus, but the foot rests on the calf instead of the thigh. In the Burmese, both feet are on the floor along with both knees. The half lotus and the full lotus give more stability to the spine and are therefore ideal. The quarter lotus and the Burmese position often require a higher zafu because they support the spine less. You can also meditate in a chair. When you do this, it is recommended to sit on the edge of the chair with a straight spine, preferably with a cushion beneath you.

More thoughts on posture

The most important things concerning posture are to keep your back straight and to move as little as possible while still remaining relaxed. A straight back helps the energy in the body to flow more freely and generally keeps the mind more alert. Once you have settled into your meditation posture, rock your spine from side to side like a metronome. Then allow the arcs to become smaller and smaller until you finally release all effort. You will find that when you stop rocking, your body will align itself at its natural center of gravity. After this, straighten your spine. It is helpful to imagine pushing your head up to the ceiling as if a string was lifting it along with your spine. It may also be helpful to push your buttocks slightly down and to push your chest slightly outwards. Once your back is straight in this way, you can let your body relax around it like a suit hanging on the stability of a hanger.

As in all things concerning meditation, you must find the middle path between skillful uprightness and unnecessary rigidity. An overly relaxed spine will revert to torpor, and a too-rigid spine will create unnecessary stiffness. Posture is an art that takes a long time to master, so don't be discouraged if it takes some time to get used to. Everyone's body is unique, and it will take time to discover through trial and error what posture has the maximum utility for you. Whatever posture you choose, you should strive to maintain stillness throughout the meditation session, for when the body moves, the mind moves. Staying as still as possible during meditation allows deeper and deeper levels of calmness to emerge.

When I describe the motionless aspect of formal meditation, people often say, "Meditation sounds nice, but I personally meditate while drawing, exercising, playing music etc." It is true that Zen meditation includes all activities, but silent and motionless seated meditation has special benefits that more active meditations do not. When the body is motionless, it is easier to still the mind at a sufficient level of depth to perceive the self-less-

ness of the body/mind on an *experiential* level. For this reason, I have found that the power of formal meditation cannot usually be reproduced by simply being mindful during other activities. The common denominator of all the activities we enjoy is that they get us outside of ourselves and immerse us in the present moment. Seated meditation also shifts our minds to merge with the present moment, yet does so with no external medium. Because the usual distractions are taken away, the mind is blocked from reverting to its usual habits of separation and forced to face itself. Zazen thus trains the mind on a deep level to abide in the present moment at all times, not just when we are doing something interesting.

It is generally recommended in Zen to meditate with your eyes semi-open. To do this, rest your gaze on a spot on the floor at about a 45-degree angle downwards. Then let your eyes rest half open/half closed for the whole meditation. Meditating with half open eyes makes it easier to remain in the present moment and not get carried away by stray thoughts. Doing this also further reinforces the teaching that meditation is not a special state attained in the “other world” behind closed eyes, but rather mere awareness of what is. Zen is not about attaining a special state of mind or about going somewhere else. The moment, which naturally contains both the visual and auditory fields, is itself the already present goal of the practice.

However, sometimes I prefer to meditate with closed eyes because this eliminates visual distractions and can make me more minutely aware of body sensations. Although both strategies have advantages I recommend generally meditating with your eyes either open or half open/half closed. Whatever method you choose, commit to one for at least the entire period so your practice won't become shallow due to indecision. It is also recommended to breathe through your nose only with a closed mouth, although it is fine to exhale through your mouth if you prefer.

Some people do nothing special with their hands and simply prefer to rest them either in their lap or on their legs. It is not so important what you do with your hands, but I have found that creating a “mudra” (a hand posture) can be helpful. Mudras are concentration tools that help direct the body's energy, and the most widely used mudra in Zen is often called “the cosmic mudra.” To create this mudra place one hand over the other so that the knuckles are aligned. Then let your thumbs lightly touch as if a piece of paper were between them, form an oval with the shape, and let it rest in your lap. If you lose concentration, you will find that the oval created by this mudra will break down, reminding you to return to the practice.

Where and when to practice and other practical tips

It is helpful to have a space set up in your house or apartment you specifically use for meditation. Just as we are likely to focus on work issues when we are in an office, we are more likely to practice regularly if we have a place specifically dedicated to meditation in the home. An entire room or a special corner in a room can work for this purpose. Also, using an alarm clock or any sort of timer for your practice is helpful, because you won't have to think about time during the period once you set the alarm. It is best to meditate in a place where sounds are at a minimum.

It also can be helpful to have "holy relics" in your meditation space, such as statues of the Buddha or images of other saints, which remind you of your highest spiritual intention. Since pictures often influence the mind on a more emotional level than words, pictures of inspiring saints or spiritual archetypes can have a very inspiring affect when placed in your meditation space. While they have no magical powers, they do have a seemingly magical way of reminding me of the importance of spiritual practice when I return home from a busy day.

Although it is good to meditate at any time, I find that the early morning and the hour before bed are ideally suited for meditation. In the morning, our mind has not had any sensory experiences from the day. For this reason, it is often easier to calm the mind than at other periods in the day. Morning meditation also sets a good tone for the rest of the day. Like a cell phone plugging into its charger, morning meditation plugs us into the Infinite Source, and then enables us to live out the challenges of the day from that place of changeless peace. It is also good to meditate before bed, even for a few minutes, because this will ground you in a spiritual state of mind before the chaos of the dream state. I also find that meditation before bed helps me sleep better.

The practice of concentrating on the breath

Once you are in a relaxed and upright posture, take a few deep breaths and focus your awareness on the breathing. Let your breath be natural. Whether your breath is naturally shallow or naturally deep, simply focus on the sensations without adding anything to them. Whenever you get lost in thought or lose awareness of the breath, simply notice this and then, without judgment, return your awareness to the breathing. You do not need to strain to focus on the breathing. Just as your eyes don't need to strain to see what you are already seeing, you don't need to strain to feel what it is already happening. Simply remain aware. Simply concentrate.

Since the breath can be explored in many ways, it is helpful to choose a specific area of the breath to focus on during each period. Five common examples are the nose, the belly, the chest, the entire breath, or the whole body. Since the nostrils produce vivid sensations during breathing, many people find that the area where air enters the nostrils is an ideal object of concentration. For belly breathing, soften your belly, and then hold your awareness on the belly as a whole or on the limited area below the navel.

I personally recommend using your lower belly as your object of concentration in the beginning of your practice. Since the part of the belly just below the navel (known as “the hara” in Japanese Zen) is physically far away from the brain (the hara is usually about two inches below the belly button), focusing on it undercuts the urge to think during meditation. Also, focusing on the hara can ground us in a state of energetic balance because the hara is at the literal center of the body, and is also thought to be an energy-packed center of the subtle body.⁷ If you choose to focus on the whole breath, follow the sensations from the nostrils down to the base of the belly on the in-breath, and then from the base of the belly back to the nostrils on the out-breath. To breathe with the whole body means the whole body itself is your object of concentration during the meditation.

It is not too important which type of breath work you choose, or which area of the body you focus on. Whatever method you choose, make an internal commitment to stick with it for the entire meditation period in order to deepen your concentration. Many people spend a few minutes at the nose, then a few minutes at the belly, then a few minutes working with sound, etc. When people constantly shift their practice in the middle of a single session, their meditation typically remains stuck at the surface level. We cannot get oil from the ground by digging many small holes. Similarly, we cannot harvest the oil of concentrative power in meditation if we constantly switch practices because of indecision.

Counting the breath and using simple mantras can also be helpful to facilitate concentration in the beginning. Even skilled meditators often count their breaths, and I personally find it very helpful to do so when my mind is particularly distracted. To count your breaths, simply inwardly note “one” for the out-breath, then two, then three, all the way up to ten on each out-breath. When you reach ten, or if you lose concentration before then,

⁷ The hara is a commonly known chakra. I personally have found it helpful to shift my general sense of awareness to my hara instead of my head during the day. I have found that doing this gives me more energy and keeps me rooted to the earth. Also, instead of regular napping I have learned to take small “hara naps” where I lie down and focus on my hara for 5-20 minutes between activities. I have found that this simple practice rejuvenates my energy in a wondrously efficient way.

return to one and then begin again. You can also use a simple mantra to keep the thinking mind engaged in the practice. An example of such a mantra is gently noting “in” on the in-breath and “out” on the out-breath. Once your mind reaches a more concentrated state, it is fine to drop these expedients and simply feel the natural breathing as it is. I recommend sitting at least 20 minutes each session.

The practice of concentrating on the breath is deceptively simple, for you will soon find that maintaining focus for even two breaths can be maddeningly difficult. But as Zen teacher Hogen Bays is fond of saying, “Have great faith, have great confidence!” Like building a muscle, your mind will soon develop the capacity to concentrate for longer and longer periods of time, and you will learn to settle into states of great peace.

A Buddhist metaphor illustrates this difficult process and speaks of a wild tiger chained to a pole. The tiger constantly tries to escape because it isn’t used to being tamed. Then, after a while, the tiger realizes it is futile to resist and lies down on the ground to sleep. In a similar way, your mind will initially resist your attempts to quiet it and focus it on a single point. If you persist in your effort, though, your mind will eventually become calm and cooperate with you in your meditative quest.

Working with thought in meditation

A common misconception about Zen meditation is that its goal is to eradicate the thinking mind, or to forcefully stop thoughts from arising. This idea is incorrect, for Zen meditation is simply a process of systematically observing what is. There is nothing wrong with thinking, which is a natural impulse of the mind. Without thinking, you would not be able to live a functional human life. Your thinking mind tells you how to get dressed in the morning, how to go places, and how to survive. The human mind can also be a source of great beauty; it has given rise to countless inventions, musical pieces, and glorious works of art.

The thinking mind is an impersonal tool, but it can be a major source of suffering if we never learn to calm it. The mind can become a bitter enemy if it remains untrained by meditation, irrationally thrusting us into a torrent of regrets about a past that is over and fears of a future that hasn’t occurred yet. Like the body, the thinking mind constantly torments people because they believe it is who they are, rather than a temporary manifestation of their own God-Nature.

So you should not try to stop thoughts in your meditation practice. As Shunryu Suzuki says in *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, in meditation we

should take the attitude of the sky. Sometimes the sky is sunny, sometimes it is cloudy, and sometimes big storms rolls through. No matter what the weather conditions are, the sky is always the sky. Similarly, in zazen, if the mind is full of thoughts, that is fine. It is also fine if the mind is clam and spacious. Either way, the awareness that is the silent witness of all these changes (the sky) remains unchanged. So do not try to suppress thought, and also do not feed any energy to thought. Simply put all your energy into concentrating on the breathing. If you continually and single-mindedly return your awareness to the breathing, thought will eventually disappear by itself.

From a deeper perspective, when the mind is calm, thought can even become a “dharma gate” (gateway into truth) when we ask the question, “What is thinking this?” When we observe thoughts as they arise, we can see that they seemingly come from nowhere and then dissolve; there is no basis of a self in them. In part of a famous koan a monk went to Bodhidharma, the first patriarch of Zen in China, and desperately begged him to “pacify my mind.” Bodhidharma then said, “Show me your mind and I will pacify it for you.” The monk said, “I cannot find it,” and then Bodhidharma said, “I have now pacified it for you!”

In his cryptic answer, Bodhidharma was pointing to the fact that thought is not the source of our misery, for thought is simply a natural occurrence. The source of our mortal imprisonment is that *we falsely identify with thoughts* and do not see that they are “not self.” In a wider sense, our problem is not that we experience difficult problems in life, but rather that we ignorantly attribute a sense of “me” to them, and we go through life with the illusory idea that we are identical with the body and mind. Yet when thoughts, the body, and the universe itself are finally seen as impermanent manifestations of Buddha Nature, the sickness becomes medicine and this very life becomes the Kingdom of Heaven, the activity of inconceivable Nirvana.

(Read the chapter on meditation retreats for thoughts on how to work with emotions, pain, and blissful states in zazen.)

Observing the mind and labeling thoughts in meditation

When a thought arises during meditation, we should generally let it go and continue to focus on the breath. However, it can also be helpful to practice observing your own thoughts systematically. A useful way to do this is a method called labeling. When a thought arises, you can simply note, “thinking.” More specifically, when a memory arises, for instance,

you can simply note, “past thought,” or when the pattern of worry arises, simply label it “worry.” This simple method can deflate very convincing negative thoughts, and can help familiarize you with the fascinating patterns of your own thinking mind.

This practice also re-enforces the idea that in meditation we are not trying to eradicate the natural process of thinking. Just as we cannot stop the blood flowing through our veins, we cannot forcefully stop thoughts from arising. Labeling also helps us see that negative mind states like worry are simply depressingly useless habits. When worry arises, we don’t need to judge it as good or bad; we simply can notice it is happening and then allow it to dissipate naturally. One Zen teacher advised asking the lighthearted question, “What is the mind up to?,” when unnecessary thinking arises during meditation. Even if the thinking mind is engaging in an unhealthy thought pattern, this objective curiosity can be very healing. Nonjudgmental observation of the mind not only reveals the existence of negative thought patterns; it also helps dissolve them by making their irrationality often humorously apparent.

If you observe your mind long enough, you’ll soon realize that it is probably pathologically addicted to thinking. Most of this thinking is completely useless, and this realization is both physically and psychologically healthy to have. Luckily, the practice of Zen can help cure this human malady. When you begin meditating, generally you’ll think most of the day and have moments of pure awareness, but as time goes on you can learn to dwell in awareness most of the day and think only when it is beneficial to.

Concentrating non-conceptually

Concentration on the breath is not a passive activity, and it often requires the totality of our focus and dedication. I cannot tell you how many times I’ve meditated without actually meditating. I sit there with a smug look on my face and think to myself, “How great am I, *I’m meditating!*” While I may be sitting in the correct posture and externally look like I’m meditating, in these moments I am not feeling the actual sensations of the breathing. In moments like this, I am practicing conceptually.

One of the things that distinguishes Zen from many other spiritual traditions is its strong emphasis on non-conceptual practice. To practice “non-conceptually” simply means actually feeling the sensations of the present moment as they arise. Observing moment by moment at this

sensational level is the key to deeply calming the mind, since it is nearly impossible to feel something fully while thinking about something else.

To practice non-conceptual awareness, it is helpful to seek subtler and subtler experiences of the breath. The breath, like the body, is an idea that the mind imposes upon an infinitude of constantly changing sensations. What is the breath? If you close your eyes and explore it, there is no breath in reality. On an experiential level, it is simply a collection of countless sensations, some subtle, some gross. An example of exploring subtlety with the breath can be seen with the nose. You can explore the exact moment the breath touches the nostrils, or explore the difference in temperature between the in-breath and the out-breath. You can explore the way the feeling outside the nostrils compares to the inside, notice slight itches, feel how your heartbeat barely affects the area, and the list goes on and on.

When your practice becomes subtler, the mind will calm on a deeper level. It is one thing to distractedly follow your breath, but it is quite another thing to focus on the breath with no gaps in awareness for long periods of time. To attain this level of concentration, a certain energetic intensity is often required, and rousing this type of intensity will make it easier to stay engaged with the practice for longer periods of time. Also, exploring subtlety makes it easier to stay interested in the practice. Instead of loosely labeling the grass “green,” we can see when we look up close that it is made of many different shades of green and non-green. With a microscope we can further see that there are billions of subatomic particles making up what our mind automatically labels as “grass.” In a similar way, as your meditation progresses, you will find that the body is an immeasurable ocean of sensations that can be explored in countless ways. And you will ultimately see that the body is a mere idea that does not hinder or change the ever-present miracle of your True Nature.

However, experiencing the body in this way is difficult because obstacles inevitably arise as you deepen your concentration. According to the historical Buddha, the “five hindrances” to meditation are sensory desire, ill will, torpor, restlessness, and doubt. Many people become discouraged when they discover that their own mind and body resists the process of meditation with these hindrances. Yet this resistance, mysteriously, is actually a sign that your meditation is deepening and activating deeper layers of your own karma. If you persist through the resistance it will eventually dissolve, and you will find yourself bearing the spiritual fruit of mind control and enlightened perception. From this perspective, you realize that even the resistance is part of God-Awareness and that, in reality, there has never been a barrier to your spotless Enlightened Mind.

The key to progressing through these stages is concentrating non-conceptually and not getting stuck in ideas. This may sound philosophical or complex, but it simply amounts to, again and again, *feeling* the breath on an experiential level. Non-conceptual concentration is powerful because it gets us used to seeking Truth in the context of the actual present moment, and it also trains us to appreciate the infinite variety of the Source. Each moment expresses God in a new way we have never before experienced. To experience God, though, we must learn to feel what It is *actually* arising as instead of experiencing It through the filter of our ingrained intellectual ideas. Shiva, “the Cosmic Dancer,” is waiting to unveil for us His most outrageous and splendid forms. To actually perceive Him, though, we must learn to work non-conceptually with a tangible object like the breath to destroy, once and for all, the notion that God is something other than *this*.

The benefits of concentration and its spiritual significance

Learning to concentrate the mind has both indispensable spiritual significance and many natural benefits. In a very practical way, a large part of our mental suffering can be eliminated if we can calm the thinking process. Mental stress is nothing but vibrations of thought, and daily concentration can greatly diminish this stress by making the thought stream significantly more quiescent. Calming the mind has also been shown to have healing effects on the body and its cells.

The concentration power developed in meditation can be universally applied to all aspects of life. I find that I am more effective in my daily activities when I meditate in the morning. I am more present in my relationships, more efficient at my work, and happier as a human being. Also, since concentration trains me to dwell more fully in the present moment, meditating daily increases my ability to perceive the stunning beauty of the world around me. Because of these many benefits, meditation can be helpful to people of all religions or of no religion, for it is a natural practice that requires no faith in any particular dogma.

Concentration clearly has worldly benefits, but it is also necessary for the development of spiritual perception. Just as we cannot see our reflection in a boiling pot of water, we probably won't be able to perceive our True Nature unless we learn to calm the thinking mind through meditation. To say it another way, just as unplowed soil will not be receptive to the seed of a flower, a mind unplowed by concentration will have great difficulty producing the priceless flower of God-Consciousness that alone can satisfy our deepest yearnings for peace and joy.

Practicing meditation in daily life

“What is true meditation? It is to make everything: coughing, swallowing, waving the arms, motion, stillness, words, action, the evil and the good, prosperity and shame, gain and loss, right and wrong, into one single koan.”
-Hakuin

One of the reasons I initially felt drawn to Zen was its emphasis that everything can be viewed as meditation. There is a famous Zen koan in which a student asks the master, “What is Buddha?” and the master replies, “Shit-stick,” which was what the monastics used to clean themselves after defecating. The wisdom of this koan shows that Zen practice is not limited to seated meditation and continues through even the most mundane activities, even using the bathroom. Another student once asked the master, “What is the Way?” and the master said, “Ordinary mind is the Way.” For every activity we perform is the sacred activity of the ever-present Buddha Mind; our daily life is itself the life of God.

One of the most wonderful things about Zen is that it transcends its own formal and cultural expressions by constantly pointing us back to the awareness that is present in all moments. In Japanese Zen, seated meditation is called zazen (za=seated), implying that any word can be placed before Zen and become a meditation. When I am writing this book I am practicing, “writing Zen.” When I walk I am practicing “walking Zen,” and so on for literally every activity of my life. To completely unify with the present moment as it naturally is, and to realize that the Buddha is your own natural awareness: that is the long and the short of Zen.

Since there are innumerable opportunities to practice meditation throughout the day, I will give just a few examples. One of my favorite meditations is washing the dishes. I place my awareness in my hands and feel the soap and the unique texture of each individual dish. Whenever my mind becomes caught by a thought, I simply return my awareness to my hands. If you’ll notice this is *exactly* the same method as the following the breath, except that the object of concentration is different. Another activity is simply walking. When walking, you can feel the breeze on your face, your feet on the ground, or listen attentively to the sounds of the moment instead of fruitlessly thinking about an illusory past or future.

Other non-dual meditations include brushing your teeth, cleaning the house, or simply getting dressed. Whatever you do, the main point is to somehow stay present without letting your mind pull you away into an

illusory past, future, or fantasy. The easiest way to remain present in activity is to remain in touch with actual sensations as they arise. It can also be helpful to focus on one thing at a time. For instance, if you are taking a long walk, you can focus on sounds for the entire walk, or when weeding in a garden you can be present in the hands the whole time.

One of the most enjoyable ways to practice Zen concentration is to approach eating as a non-dual meditation. When eating, place your awareness in the field of taste, and whenever your mind wanders bring it back to the taste of the food. If you practice in this way you will learn to experience the joy of eating with an increased vividness. And if you view your entire life as a non-dual meditation, even the most seemingly boring activities become sacred and miraculous expressions of the Divine. As one of my teachers at the monastery used to say, to truly practice Zen you should switch your attitude from, “How will I find time to meditate?” to, “When am I not meditating?”

Viewing all of life as a meditation creates what Buddhists call “equanimity” in the mind, so that when difficult situations arise we can view them as spiritual practice instead of unwanted hindrances. The dualism of the world that ceaselessly manifests as opposing forces (hot and cold, pleasure and pain, etc.) cannot be escaped through meditation. Rather, as one Zen teacher put it, “The way out is in,” meaning that difficult situations become easier when approached as meditation. By constantly experiencing our life as it is without desire or dualistic judgment, we can develop a spiritual strength and a stability that no situation, however overwhelming, can hinder.

Viewing life as a non-dual meditation also helps dissolve the useless phantoms of worry and regret. We waste so much of our lives endlessly thinking about the future and regretting a past that is completely over. Meditation helps eliminate this tendency by training us to rest in the present moment at all times. For where else can we find the miracle of life, the healing balm of beauty, the adventure of the journey, and the mystery of God Itself, but right here where we are in the Now?

The more I practice this type of concentrative awareness, the more my formerly boring life becomes an utterly outrageous pageant of God’s ridiculously beautiful enjoyment of Itself. For the great paradox of spiritual practice is that God is already our daily life as it is. There is nothing for God to escape, for as “The Enjoyer” of our life, It alone is participating in the great movie of the universe in which we all play a significant part. Yet to actually experience this glorious truth, we must set the intention to meditate

throughout the day so that the living reality of God does not become a lifeless intellectual idea.

Practicing inquiry

Concentration in meditation is indeed important and beneficial, but it takes more than concentration to awaken, and the blissful effects that concentration produces are not the goal of the spiritual path. Many activities (tight-rope walking, for example) take extreme concentration to be completed successfully, yet doing these things will not necessarily reveal God to you. For this reason, it can be very effective to add the practice of inquiry to your meditation as a tool to look directly into the nature of things. Inquiring continually into the Experiencer of the moment slowly undoes the glue of our illusory sense of self, and can help reveal the truth of our own immorality in this very body.

Inquiry, as I present it here, is the non-conceptual exploration of truth in the context of the present moment. It is based on the Zen koan but is less complex since koan study should be done with an experienced teacher. I personally learned to practice inquiry at the Zen monastery, and it has astronomically deepened my personal practice. The type of inquiry practice I present in this book is based on these Zen experiences but is not necessarily an official Zen practice.

Practicing inquiry may sound exotic and profound, but it is nothing more than becoming curious about the nature of your own awareness. It simply means becoming curious about who you really are and who God really is, and exploring these burning questions in the context of the present moment without thinking. To work with inquiry, I recommend choosing a simple question to explore. I recommend the question, “What is It?” since the words “God” and “Buddha” often have intellectual connotations and might perpetuate grandiose expectations. “It” is gender-neutral and does not imply a supernatural agency apart from the miracle of this moment. Depending on your personal karma, other words can be added that might make your inquiry practice more intriguing. For example, a Christian could work with the question “What is Christ?,” while a Hindu might work with “What is Krishna?”

Once you have selected your question, simply open yourself up to the present moment and allow it to answer you. Because reality expresses itself as constant change, you will find there is no actual “answer” to the question, only a continual enfoldment of creativity that never ends. Yet even that is just an idea. Right now, what is seeing out of your eyes and hearing with your ears? What is experiencing this moment? With is the source of all

things? Continue to practice this inquiry until you perceive that there is absolutely no separation between what is witnessing the moment and what It is witnessing, until you see that there is no separate “you” and that you yourself, and everything you perceive, is God.

The moment you cherish an idea of God you have destroyed Him. Once you select your question, you must pursue it to the very bottom by applying it to whatever you are experiencing. In doing so, you will eventually realize that every aspect of your “self” is merely an impermanent and impersonal sensation. God, or Awareness, is not sounds, for you can clearly observe that sounds come and go. It is not sensations in the body, for body sensations perpetually arise and disappear back into nothingness. It is not sights, for sights constantly change. It is not thoughts, nor the elements, nor the body, nor the fluctuating emotions. If you explore deeply, you will clearly see that all these aspects of reality are impermanent. Nevertheless, there seems to be an awareness of all these things. What is that? Where does this moment come from? What is “God” after all?

To practice inquiry throughout the day, simply “drop in” your question into any given moment. When you are shopping for groceries, “What is shopping?” When you are doing anything, “What is experiencing this? Seeing colors, hearing sounds, etc.?” I recommend pursuing this question without words for long periods of time, or until you feel satisfied with your understanding. Don’t allow yourself to become satisfied with an intellectual understanding of God/Buddha Nature without having actually experienced It for yourself. True realization takes time and diligent effort. The famous Zen master Mumon, for instance, was said to have concentrated on the koan “Mu” (similar to “what is It”) without a gap for something like five years before he finally experienced enlightenment.

If you practice with this type of intensity, you’ll eventually become intimate with God and see that you have never once been separate from It’s unsurpassable glory, which is in fact your True Nature. When you are talking to your friend and internally ask, “What is It?” you will see that It is talking to you in the form of your friend and also listening as you. When you are at a concert and ask, “What is God” you will see that God is manifesting Itself as the music and as the One who hears it. If you ask, “What is God” right now, you will find that God is speaking to you through this sentence and is also reading the sentence. In these situations, the question is really irrelevant. It is just a tool to smash through the illusion that It is something other than this very life.

Another practice you can explore is the question of “What am I?” In this practice, one deconstructs the “I” in meditation by systematically

exploring, “Am I the foot?”, “Am I thoughts?”, “Am I feelings?”, “Am I sounds?” etc. Like peeling an onion to the empty core, after realizing that no particular part is “I,” you will eventually realize that there truly is no separate self. Whichever question you chose, stick with one for long periods of time to avoid shallow practice.

Non-conceptual inquiry

While pursuing your question in meditation and throughout your day, you must practice non-conceptually and not allow the false security of an intellectual understanding to supplant actual experience. Unlike academic study, we are not trying to answer the question intellectually; instead, we are using the question as a gateway to simply experience reality with curiosity and without thought. So make sure that your inquiry practice is somehow involved with a sensation of the present moment. Make sure you are actually seeing, hearing, or feeling your body in the present moment. The question can then take the direct form of “What is seeing?”, “What is hearing?”, “What is thinking this?”, or “What is experiencing this pain right now?”

I also want to emphasize that you should not actually repeat the question vocally in your head. Simply be curious! And if practicing inquiry makes you separate from the reality of the present moment, it has become a hindrance and should be dropped. For this reason, I recommend to not practice inquiry until you have spent at least one zazen period concentrating on the breath alone, for concentration and inquiry are a double-edged sword. One cannot engage in true inquiry without a concentrated mind, and without the realization catalyzed by inquiry the purpose of concentration is not fulfilled.

With all this in mind, practice inquiry with no expectations of having a glorious experience. Even if such an experience does come by God’s grace, the moment you turn it into an idea it is already useless intellectual baggage. In Zen, “Jumping off the 100-foot pole” is a famous saying which expresses the fact that life is endless change. The moment you climb the heights of spirituality and have an experience of God, it is already over. Behold, even now there is a brand new moment to experience that we must “jump off” into again, and again, and again. Yet as we jump fearlessly into new experiences, we can also become more aware that there is Something that does not change, and that this Something is the basis of everything. Yet what is It?

Even though you shouldn’t have particular expectations, inquiry practice can add great zest and intensity to your practice. Don’t you want to

know who you really are? Isn't it frustrating that you cannot grasp the Experiencer of the moment? What is It, after all? Pursuing these questions should light a fire in the belly that rebels against the dogmatic complacency that has gutted the essence of modern day religion. If you passionately pursue your question to the end, you will realize the Source of all things and transcend any need for religion, ritual, or meaningless abstract speculation. As one teacher put it, if followed to the end, the question is like a time bomb that will inevitably explode your false views and reveal the boundless Reality that you yourself are and that all things express. And then you will laugh at your searching because you will realize that you have been It all along.

But don't let the expectation of an enlightenment experience lead you astray from simplicity. It is always right here, immediately present, "closer than your bones," who you really are, and naturally manifesting Itself as exactly what you are beholding. God is your own natural awareness, something you cannot gain or lose and that is originally your own True Nature. At a certain point, you will stop seeking to experience God and merely allow God to enjoy Itself *as you*. Then, even though you must live through all the same troubles you had before, you will possess a peace that no power in the universe can take from you. Then you will realize that you have always been one with God and proclaim with the Apostle Paul that, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ living in me" (Galatians 2:20).

This ridiculously immediate nature of God is what eludes so many people about It. It cannot be known in an intellectual sense, for this implies a knower and an object to be known. It can be *experienced*, though, or rather It can experience Itself. A classic metaphor allegorizes this immediate nature of the Divine as a man who leaves his father's household unaware that he has a supremely valuable jewel in his pocket. He wanders from city to city living a depressing and humiliating life as a beggar, never understanding that the fortune he longs for is so close to him. Similarly, even right now we are already God, but have forgotten our own True Nature by identifying for untold ages with the limited body and mind. So may all of us finally "look in our pockets" and awaken to the Jewel that has never once stopped shining, to the simple Awareness whose numberless aspects form the glittering universe and whose essence is Bliss Itself!

The importance of daily meditation practice

"A Jug fills drop by drop."
-The Buddha in The Dhammapada

While there can be “quantum leaps” and sudden moments of profound realization, the spiritual path is primarily a gradual, effortful, and time-consuming process. With this in mind, daily practice is essential if you are meditating for the purpose of God-Realization. If you meditate everyday, you will accumulate what Japanese Buddhists call “joriki” (concentration power). Without this cumulative joriki, practice will mostly be surface level and deeper experiences will be mostly inaccessible. Furthermore, if you habitually practice inquiry you will develop a habit of spiritual awareness that will serve you well in this and future lifetimes. Fortunately, many people now have at least half an hour a day for daily meditation. You most likely have time for meditation; just think of all the meaningless movies, TV shows, and magazines you probably consume in your life. Many people don’t want to hear this undeniable truth, but if you really want to you can find the time to seek God-Realization. You will find time for daily meditation if it is a priority for you.

Practically, it is important to set realistic goals for yourself and choose an actual amount of time you want to spend meditating each day. I recommend what I like to call a “baseline number.” An easily attainable starting goal is 20-30 minutes per day at least five days per week. For several years, 25 minutes per day was my baseline number, and now it is typically 50 minutes per day with 2 days at half that amount. Some days, when I am very motivated and have the time, I am inspired to meditate for several hours. At other times, meditating seems like a tedious chore and it is the last thing I want to do. Days like this are when the baseline number reveals its wisdom. No matter how I am feeling that day, I will meditate for the amount of time I have committed to. I have personally seen great results from this approach as the days turned into months and the months turned into years.

From the perspective of karmic law, daily meditation will eventually become a deeply rooted habit in your subconscious mind that will manifest both in future lives and in difficult seasons during this incarnation. Jesus said to “build your house on the rock,” a saying I interpret as perceiving your life as “built upon” the eternally calm One Mind that is always present beneath our surface attachments. In difficult seasons you will find that your spiritual practice will be a “solid rock” to stand on, even if everything around you appears to be falling apart.

No matter how little you practice, nothing goes to waste. As Krishna tenderly confirms in the Bhagavad Gita, “On this path (of yogic meditation) effort never goes to waste and there is no failure. Even a little effort toward spiritual awareness will protect you from the greatest fear” (Easwaran

translation). If even *hearing* about meditation is unfathomably good karma, how much more fortunate is it to actually have a daily meditation practice, even if only for a few minutes a day? If you practice in this lifetime and do not experience enlightenment but retain the desire to experience God, I believe that in future lives your efforts will cause you to be reborn in an environment where meditation is introduced to you. Just as you go to sleep and wake up maintaining the same habits you had on the previous day, so after death you will maintain the karmic tendency to meditate if it becomes a habit in this lifetime.

I personally believe that I have practiced meditation in past lives, and that my interest in meditation in this lifetime did not arise randomly. When I was 18, I had the overwhelming thought that “I need to begin doing daily meditation,” even though I had only dabbled in it once or twice. The Personal God revealed to me in various dreams and intuitions that this seemingly random desire arose partly because I had practiced meditation in past lives, and am continuing in this life something I began in another incarnation. I am not saying this to aggrandize myself, but to demonstrate that my conviction that “no effort goes to waste” is not a purely intellectual speculation, but is partially based on my own life. As you delve deeper into the spiritual path, you will realize that nothing is random. God, who knows all things, has been silently guiding you to Himself since before you even had the conscious desire to seek Him.

The importance of group meditation practice

The Buddha’s cousin, Ananda, once said to him, “Lord, it has been said that keeping holy company is half the holy life.” The Buddha then famously replied, and I paraphrase, “You are wrong, Ananda! Keeping good company is not half of the holy life-it is the whole of the holy life.” The Buddha in this instance expressed the potent power of group effort in meditation, an idea that applies to worldly habits as well as spiritual practice. The power of group influence is a basic psychological principal in human life, and it can benefit your personal practice immeasurably. For this reason, I highly recommend finding a local meditation group, temple, or monastery that has public sitting sessions to attend. This creates accountability and will insure that you will practice at least on the days the group meets. There is nothing overly profound in this idea, for if you are involved with a local meditation group you will simply be much more likely to meditate.

I learned the great power of practicing with others during my time at the Zen monastery. Group *yoriki*, or concentration power, builds over time

and has a powerful influence on everyone's personal practice. Just as one person rowing with oars upstream is less effective than a group of five people rowing in the same boat, a solitary meditator is more likely to make progress in a like-minded group.

Don't worry if you cannot find a group where you live. I am from Oklahoma and Zen meditation groups there are quite rare. I couldn't find local meditation groups I felt comfortable with for the first year and a half of my spiritual journey, so I simply listened to online podcasts, read books, and maintained my own daily practice. If you cannot find a spiritual community, continue meditating on your own, never give up, and continually pray to the Personal God to connect you with like-minded practitioners and illumined teachers.

As the Buddha advises in the Dhammapada, if you cannot find anyone to walk the path with you, walk alone, "Like a royal elephant in the forest." It is truly better to be lonely and spend a single day seeking Truth than to spend many lifetimes in foolish company that will lead you away from the path to enlightenment.

Working with a teacher

Working with an authorized spiritual teacher is highly beneficial but not necessary for the continuance of a personal meditation practice. An authorized teacher in the Zen tradition is someone who has received "dharma transmission" from an accredited teacher in the official lineage. At its best, the tradition of dharma transmission provides the assurance that the teacher who has received it has dedicated a large amount of time to meditation. It is also a recognition of a teacher's spiritual understanding and ability to teach others. However, not all people with dharma transmission are good teachers, or even ethical people. You should be very cautious when choosing a teacher.

Working with a good Zen teacher is like having a guide in a foreign city. You may start walking down a back alley that has a bad reputation, and the guide will tell you, "I wouldn't go down that alley if I were you!" A good guide also knows the best spots in the city and can save you time you would have spent seeking them out yourself. In a similar way, a teacher who has been practicing for a long time can help a beginner know what to avoid and what to focus on improving in their practice. Another analogy is working with a music teacher. If someone has been playing music for 40 years and you have only been playing for 2, there's a strong chance you could learn something from them. Working with a seasoned Zen teacher

with many years of meditation experience is similarly beneficial, yet an awakened teacher of any tradition is extremely rare to find on Earth; indeed, it is an incalculable blessing.

After my first year in college I drove across the country to study with teachers at Great Vow Zen Monastery, and I can safely say working with them benefitted me immensely. I got to see first hand how great Zen practitioners lived their daily lives, and I also had the privilege to work with them one-on-one. An intuitive hunch tells me that working with them saved me significant time in my personal spiritual path, and I am sincerely grateful for their dedication to the tradition of Zen and their unique embodiment of the bodhisattva vow.⁸

I can safely say that working with teachers helped me see the truth more clearly. However, the benefit of working with a teacher does not mean they possess something I do not possess, or that they are anything other than human. Everybody is *equally* the Buddha (though there are differing degrees of realization), and a teacher who does not teach this defiles the spiritual path with charlatanry. Furthermore, a teacher has no power to grant awakening. Their primary offering is their own example and the wisdom they can share of their own practice experience. A good Zen teacher is simply a guide and a “finger pointing to the moon” of your own enlightened awareness. A good teacher is a mirror that accurately reflects the depth of your own personal practice back to you, and a shining example that shows what is possible to attain in your own spiritual life.

To find a teacher, you must use your rational judgment and intuition. As Jesus said, “you can know a tree by its fruit,” for a teacher can never help others with what they themselves do not possess. The “fruit” of a spiritual teacher is their own state of mind, which should look something like peace and genuine compassion for all people. Also, look at the “fruit” of their students to see if their lives are genuinely improving from contact with the teacher. Above all, choose a teacher who is scrupulously ethical in both practical and spiritual duties, and who lives a life of selfless service to humanity. Selfless service and universal compassion are the truest signs that someone has realized God, for anyone who knows God knows that it is pretending to be everyone, and views all beings as their own Self.

Nobody is perfect. But if you are looking for someone to help you experience enlightenment, the goal of life itself, the bar is a lot higher to say the least. False teachers exist, so be cautious. False teachers use their

⁸ A bodhisattva is an awakened person who helps others attain awakening, even if that means continually returning to Earth and forgoing their own final enlightenment.

perceived authority and charisma to get money, honor, control of other people, and other worldly boons. Be careful, for “like the blind leading the blind” they will lead you astray into their selfish world of greed and unethical manipulation if you get involved with them.

To save time and avoid mistakes, you can ask the Personal God to directly confirm for you the specific identity of a teacher if it is your karma to work with one. There was a woman at the monastery who dreamt she was studying with the teachers there before she had ever heard of them. Stories like this abound in spiritual literature, and you yourself might have a karmic relationship with a living teacher waiting to be accessed. Simply ask the Personal God, and if He wills, He will show you in the right time whether such a teacher exists for you or not.

Whether or not you find a teacher, remember that teachers are *temporary* and *imperfect* instruments of God pointing to your own True Nature. I recommend viewing God, or your own Higher Self, as your Eternal Teacher and all human teachers as impermanent manifestations of that One. This universe is God’s classroom, and we will spend eternity learning about the Great Teacher whose infinite creativity can never be exhausted by the magic tricks of time and space.

Other forms of Zen meditation

Zen meditation is a vast sphere of study not limited to the concentration and inquiry practices mentioned here. There are numerous, and perhaps unlimited, dharma gates that can be explored. Additionally, many Zen teachers assign their students unconventional forms of meditation not found in the traditional Zen literature. In this section, I’ll mention a few to give you a taste of Zen’s variety. However, I recommend sticking with basic breath meditation and simple inquiry until you meet a teacher who can guide you through subtler practices.

Listening to sounds can be an enjoyable and fruitful way to practice Zen meditation. At the monastery, some people spent whole weeklong retreats concentrating on sound alone and inquiring into the Hearer of sound. Body scans, in which the awareness proceeds slowly and methodically over the whole body, are also sometimes practiced, especially in Vipassana meditation. Although this is rarer, teachers may also recommend working with the subtle body, and this practice can be very interesting. I do practices like this every

now and then, but generally stay grounded in breath work and inquiry unless directed by the Personal God or a teacher to do otherwise.⁹

Another form of Zen practice is called “Shikantaza,” which is just sitting. In this practice there is no object of concentration and you simply sit in pure awareness. This practice is a more advanced form of meditation because beginners generally cannot dwell in pure awareness for more than a few seconds without getting lost in conceptual thought. Another fascinating form of Zen meditation is koan practice, in which a student works with a saying or story from the Zen canon and then demonstrates his/her experiential understanding of it to a teacher. Another fruitful form of Buddhist meditation is “metta” or the intentional practice of developing loving-kindness toward all beings.

⁹ I have found that concentrating on the “third eye,” or the energetic point between the eyebrows, can be a very fruitful practice. My own experiences, and especially my readings of Yogananda, have revealed to me that this point possesses great spiritual potency. Nevertheless, I am generally inexperienced with it and so cannot teach about it with anything that can be called confidence. I do want to say, however, that concentrating on the third eye does *not* mean actually crossing your eyes to see it. Rather, it means simply focusing your awareness on the energetic center. Apparently, and unfortunately, many practitioners in India have become confused about this distinction.

Chapter 5: Meditation Retreats and Other Thoughts on Meditation

The purpose of going on extended retreats

Maintaining a daily meditation practice is powerful but has certain limitations. Because we must make so many choices throughout the day, it is difficult to focus on spiritual practice to the exclusion of all else. Although it is true that everything is spiritual practice, it is also important to dedicate longer chunks of time to meditation alone. Daily practice, especially if it is only for 30 minutes or so, generally only stills the surface layers of the mind. This effect has obvious benefits, but it typically does not reveal subtler underlying karmic identifications. The seeds of the cycle of rebirth are rooted in the deepest layers of our subconscious psychophysical being, and it generally takes a few days of dedicated spiritual work to encounter these subtler manifestations of our doggedly persistent sense of self.

Because extended meditation is required to systematically and adequately explore the nature of the mind, I believe meditation retreats, which are generally 6-10 days long, are essential on the path of enlightenment. Whenever I talk to people about meditation, I always recommend that they go on a meditation retreat at least once in their life. If I were a prophet, this would be the non-optional pilgrimage I assigned to humanity. Instead of going to the physical Jerusalem, I would advise humanity to seek the everlasting Jerusalem within them in the deep stillness of prolonged meditation.

What actually happens at a meditation retreat

People often get intimidated when they hear about silent weeklong meditation retreats, but many of their fears arise from common misconceptions. I have only been to retreats at Zen centers and Vipassana centers, and so I can only speak of these. You do not literally meditate all day at a typical Zen or Vipassana retreat. Periods of meditation last one to two hours and occur throughout the day. These meditation sessions include stretch breaks and walking meditation in between typically 30 to 60 minute sitting sessions. In total there are usually about 8-10 hours of actual seated meditation done each day. In between meditation periods there are meals and rest periods that can be spent showering, walking, doing extra meditation, and resting. At Zen retreats, there are also often “work practice” periods where participants continue their meditation practice while weeding,

cooking, or doing simple construction. A retreat can actually be quite easy if you simply follow the schedule.

There is typically a talk given by the head teacher once per day. This talk is both an instructional and inspirational speech to keep the participants motivated. Typically, there is also one-on-one instruction with a seasoned teacher. This is the only time in the retreat that conversation is permitted, and the personalized instruction is another reason why retreats can be invaluable.

The practical value of the retreat, and of monastic life generally, is that there are no major choices you have to make. All the sitting periods, meal times, and resting times are tightly scheduled. And because all entertainment devices are removed, there is literally nothing to do but dive deeper into your meditation practice. With no choices to make and few external distractions, the thinking mind can be temporarily discarded so that a systematic exploration of its deeper reality can be undertaken.

There is typically no cell phone use, reading, writing, talking, bodily contact with others, or music listening during the retreat. These measures seem unnecessarily austere to some people, but they exist for very important reasons. Written words, music, and especially conversation stimulate the thinking mind and make it difficult to focus in non-conceptual concentration. You do not have to worry about impressing people or about any social matters at all during the retreat. Like all the other prohibitions, the lack of human contact makes it easier focus on meditation alone for prolonged periods of time.

All these measures create an ideal set of conditions to do deep spiritual work, and after a couple days you will begin to see the true potential of meditation. There are states of deep concentration, which are impossible to describe, that are usually exclusively accessible during retreat practice. States of Oneness can be experienced that destroy the very root of suffering itself. To get these diamonds, though, you must do some serious mining and dive into your practice with wholehearted zeal!

What to expect on a retreat: working with emotions, pain, and blissful states

When I went on my first meditation retreats, I expected to experience gloriously blissful states for days on end. I found, however, that what I encountered was the often harsh reality of my own body and psyche. It is highly probable that, depending on your karma, unexpected personal difficulties may arise for you during a retreat. In fact, according to the

Vipassana teacher S.N. Goenka, the appearance of difficult emotions and physical resistance shows that your practice is actually progressing successfully.¹⁰

Negative mental and emotional patterns from past lives and/or from this life are hidden in your subconscious mind. Like throwing water on hot coals, meditation causes the steam of deep-rooted karmic patterns to rise to consciousness by “cooling” the surface layer of the mind with concentration. I remember that some difficult emotions from my childhood bubbled up to my consciousness on my first retreats. I was unprepared for this, but it taught me a lot about how to work with personal karma in the context of meditation.

There is certainly a time for intellectually processing the past, but a meditation retreat, and meditation in general, is not that time. If a powerful emotion arises, *simply feel it without adding a mental story*, allow it to run its course, and then let it go. Typically, when a difficult emotion arises, we immediately respond by creating a personal mythology around it. For instance, I may feel angry at the way someone treated me. A thought arises, then a sensation of anger, and then a torrent of mental activity begins along the lines of, “It was his fault!” or “How could she do this to me?”

This type of negative thinking perpetuates itself indefinitely and leads to many compulsive and even destructive behaviors. Yet the root of all the thoughts is the emotion itself. So when a sensation arises in meditation, simply feel it without adding all that mental baggage. When you feel the emotion without reacting, you’ll eventually see the impermanence of feelings and realize that, like thoughts, they are not actually you. This sense of detachment from feelings will not only give you power over them but, ironically, give you the capacity to feel more deeply as a human being. I have found that non-conceptually feeling an emotion with compassionate love has a profoundly healing effect. If you have the courage to actually feel the emotion without adding thinking, you will find that your capacity to love that part of yourself will increase. And if you can learn to love the difficult parts of yourself, your ability to love others will greatly expand.

You can also view emotion as a gateway into inquiry. If anger arises, “What does anger actually feel like?” or “Where in the body is it arising?” or “What is experiencing this anger?” The truth is that although emotions feel very powerful and substantial, they are actually insubstantial dream-stuff

¹⁰ Carl Jung once said, “One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.” This thought is also mythologically expressed by the fact that Jesus had to go through the crucifixion before he was resurrected into Heaven.

lacking a self. If you explore them in meditation, you will see that they are merely impersonal sensations that have no intrinsic meaning and no real owner who is suffering their assaults.

Lastly, allowing the emotion to come and go without acting on it helps eliminate the seeds of future karma the negative pattern was creating. For instance, if you simply sit with anger or sadness in meditation and allow it to naturally dissipate, you will be less likely to act on it in real life because you will have trained your mind to view it with detachment. Ultimately, the fruit of this practice will make you a kinder, more tolerant, and more compassionate human being.

Blissful states and pain

It is common to encounter blissful states on meditation retreats. There is a difference between Bliss and a blissful state. God Itself is Bliss that is not dependent on anything and that exists in Itself, whereas a blissful state in meditation is an impermanent feeling-tone or subtle body experience that is temporarily pleasurable. Blissful states often arise during retreats once the mind is calmed on a deep subconscious level. These blessed states can manifest in many ways and can even be life-changing experiences. Intense feelings of joy, movements of subtle energy throughout the body, and an increased ability to perceive beauty may all be experienced during meditation. These states of mind are undeniably enjoyable, but they are not the goal of spiritual practice. Like an arrow shot into the sky, heavenly states like these are impermanent and cannot ultimately satisfy us. They are not the true Bliss of God that is beyond all conditioning and is not a feeling or a state.

S.N. Goenka once said in a talk that many practitioners attend his ten day retreats year after year simply to experience blissful states. Such practitioners ironically use meditation to satisfy the desire for pleasure that meditation is ideally utilized to transcend. In fact, most people never progress beyond the level of practicing for blissful states, and do not comprehend what the Buddha called “the Unconditioned.” The Unconditioned is beyond our dualistic conceptions of pleasant and unpleasant, containing both of these while simultaneously transcending them. The conditioned self is motivated by pleasure and repelled by pain, but the Unconditioned is beyond both pleasure and pain. Since It is not a state and has no definable qualities, seeking blissful states can actually become one of the most dangerous obstructions to experiencing God. The same God-Awareness that is aware of the blissful state is also aware when it is

over, and identifying this boundless Awareness with any particular state is the very basis of our suffering.

The way to work with blissful states is simply to enjoy them while they last and then let them go without forming an attachment to them. They are like the smell of salt when you near the ocean, a way of telling you that you are on the right track. But as Ramakrishna said, when you reach the copper mine you should continue until you get to the silver mine. And when you reach the silver mine you should continue until you reach the gold mine. In this case the “silver mine” is the impermanent experience of a blissful state, but not the real awakening that the word God signifies. The parable tells us to never be satisfied with anything short of full enlightenment. God-Realization will be worth it however long it takes, for the unconditioned “gold mine” of God is incomparably greater than any temporary state of humanly-defined happiness based upon desire.

This same approach of non-attached direct experience also applies to working with pain. For most people, some degree of physical pain is inevitable during a retreat and should be expected. I advise what the Buddha advised his students: to take “the middle path” concerning pain. Too much pain will make it impossible to practice, but constantly fidgeting to find a comfortable position both perpetuates the false ego and makes it impossible to truly calm the wandering mind. Only you yourself will know what is best for you when it comes to working with pain. And just like working with a difficult emotion, sometimes simply *feeling* the pain can be healing. We often have the idea that “I am in pain” when in reality we are not actually feeling the neutral sensation we have unconsciously labeled as “pain.” I have found many times that pain can miraculously dissolve when I simply accept it and feel it without creating a mental story about it.

Be compassionate with yourself and never meditate in a position that you feel will injure you. But if you choose to stay with the pain, there are three basic ways to work with it. Firstly, you can focus so intensely on your object of concentration that you become disinterested in the pain. Secondly, you can integrate the area of pain into your sphere of awareness while simultaneously focusing on the breathing. Lastly, you can make the pain itself your object of concentration and use it as a tool to stay in the present moment. If the pain becomes your object of concentration you can also deconstruct it by exploring questions like, “Where does this pain begin?” or “What does it really feel like?” You can also inquire, “What is feeling this pain?” as a way to understand that the pain is also “not self.”

Learning love through meditative detachment

The general advice in Buddhist meditation is to detach your sense of ego from pain, emotion, thoughts, etc. Many people think that this type of meditative detachment makes practitioners indifferent to human suffering, but this view is totally wrong. Unlike repression, meditative detachment *fully feels* and non-judgmentally acknowledges an emotion, but simultaneously does not act on it if doing so will lead to harm. You are not detaching yourself from the *experience*, but from the sense of “I” we usually unconsciously attach to our experiences. Learning to feel pain and experience difficult emotions without reacting instinctually is an incredible spiritual gift. If someone in the future insults you or even physically attacks you, your meditative detachment will help you to remain in a state of unconditional love during that difficult situation. While you may have to physically defend yourself, you won’t revert to internal hatred and accumulate the negative karma bred by hatred.

If you continue in the effort of meditative detachment from the objects of consciousness, you will ultimately understand that your own True Nature is immortal and indestructible. Perceiving the Oneness of all things is the basis of unconditional love, for from this perspective everything is your own Self. Realizing and embodying this all-powerful Love is the potential of all human beings, and was displayed to humanity by both the Buddha and Jesus. There is a story that a wild elephant once rushed at the historical Buddha intending to kill him. Because the Buddha had so trained his mind to in meditation, he simply gazed upon the elephant with nothing but pure compassion. The elephant was so moved that he stopped his rampage and lay before the Buddha to be pet! Jesus displayed a similar ability to detach his sense of self from physical pain and difficult emotions at his crucifixion. Because of his spiritual development, Jesus was unable to react with anything but compassion, even when people were physically torturing him. He even aided in the salvation of their souls in that horrid moment by praying the glorious and intensely stirring words, “Forgive them, Father, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

This experience of divine detachment, of being “in the world but not of it,” as Jesus said it, is real freedom because it can enable us to love others without fear or a sense of possession. However, we cannot attain the spiritual state of Jesus and the Buddha without working hard in our own spiritual practice. The effort is worth it, because if you can learn to face yourself in meditation; if you can learn to hold with compassion even the most frightening apparitions of your psyche; if you can feel pain without attaching a sense of ego to it; and if you can face your own darkness with

equanimity, think of the boundless love you will be able to show other people, even people who harm you in their ignorance! Unconditional love and compassion for all beings is truly the crown of human life, and when we fully embody this state we can, with all integrity, proclaim to the whole universe, “I myself am God in human form!”

Staying encouraged during a retreat

Learning to experience pain, blissful states, and emotional turmoil with meditative detachment, and also learning to deeply concentrate the mind at will, is very important spiritual work. Retreats are not vacations, but factories of accelerated spiritual development. They are difficult but highly rewarding. The world may cast a skeptical eye on the idea of taking a week to sit in silence, but anyone who has sat a retreat knows that its powerful effects on the mind and body ripple outward into the suffering world. If “a peaceful world is full of peaceful people,” meditation retreats are not trivial bouts of relaxation, but rather highly significant training grounds for creating a more harmonious planet Earth.

This significant spiritual work can seem intimidating to beginners. Meditating for many days at a time may seem unattainable to you, but the average person can certainly do it. I remember doing a silent retreat at Great Vow, and before beginning it I was very nervous. I asked one of the monks there how I should approach the situation. He simply told me, “Just take things one moment – one breath – at a time. Have no expectations. Just do the practice and see what happens!” This simple wisdom worked, and it showed me that completing a seemingly difficult retreat can be easy if I simply surrender to the practice moment by moment.

As in most endeavors, group support is invaluable during retreats, and it is one of the reasons why they are so powerful. During retreats, powerful group energy is created by mutual efforts and everyone is inspired to push beyond comfort zones. Chozen Bays, a prominent Zen teacher, calls this phenomenon “positive peer pressure,” and in addition to being practically helpful it is really a beautiful thing.

I also remember that the Personal God is ever-present to give me help. Always, without fail, if I ask the Lord to help me I receive some sort of inspiration to continue. That said, it is important to almost entirely forget about the Personal God during retreats and experience the living sensations of the present moment without ideas. Eventually, you will experience that you yourself, and all things, are God. After that you can enjoy the wondrous illusion of relationship with the Personal God if you wish.

So far I have done eight weeklong retreats, two ten-day retreats, and a couple two-day retreats. I can honestly say that they have been some of the most challenging and most rewarding experiences of my life. They have developed my spiritual practice in ways daily practice simply cannot, and have revealed spiritual wisdom to me that is difficult, if not impossible, to gain through other mediums in a similar time span. I am sharing this to show that an average Joe like me can delve deep into meditation at periodic retreats. It is important, however, never to compare yourself with me or any other spiritual practitioner.

I used to compare myself with monks at the monastery who had done over 100 retreats, and I felt like a puny practitioner. I soon realized that thinking that way was futile. Only I can walk my own unique path to God, and everyone has radically different karma. Maybe you will only desire to attend a single retreat in your life, and maybe you won't attend one at all. As with all spiritual paths, you should not get too wrapped up in logistics, for there is no cookie-cutter path to God. The most important thing is to set your heart on awakening. Everything else will naturally fall into place if your heart is truly set on the highest goal.

Shorter retreats and doing a private retreat in your own home

For many people, a weeklong meditation retreat is not possible to attend because work, school, and/or family duties won't allow them a week of leisure time. If this is the case with you, there are many meditation retreats that are one day, two days, or three days. Also, you yourself can have a personal one-day retreat in your own home. I have done this twice. It was difficult because of the lack of group support, but also very beneficial.

If you do a private daylong retreat, I recommend creating a schedule for yourself the night before. You can plan to do 8-10 hours or so of meditation with stretch breaks and walking meditation in between sitting sessions. I recommend doing 1.5 to 2 hours of meditation at a time with wiggle breaks in between 25-minute sessions and walking meditation in between 50-minute sessions. In rest times you can go on walks or do simple tasks like cleaning that require little intellectual effort. I also encourage you to creatively tailor this hypothetical schedule to your own circumstances and physical capacity. Make sure you turn off your phone, computer, and do not read during the time you have set aside to seek God alone. Also, make a serious effort not to speak to other people unless it is absolutely necessary.

The paradox of realization and practice

I want to conclude this section of the book by saying a few words about the paradox of meditation itself. The path of meditation is not necessarily a path as we think of it, for it culminates in *realization* rather than attainment. All of humanity's great sages have simply realized the primordial truth that they, along with all things, have always been and always are the One Mind/God/Buddha. This is perhaps why a proverb exists in India that advises to give your payment to your guru *before* you understand his/her teachings, for if you pay him/her after you awaken you might feel gipped. Once you realize what the guru is trying to teach you, you will discover that you never gained anything, but merely perceived what has always been intimately yours.

The ancient paradox of Zen is that actually experiencing this Truth usually requires intense meditative efforts. This paradox is a logical contradiction, but it is true from the perspective of my actual experience. We may intellectually accept that we are the originally enlightened One Mind, but we will probably not actually perceive this without practicing meditation. Without meditation, we will continue to suffer unnecessarily when the vicissitudes of fate strike us even if, in our intellect, we “know” that our True Nature is unaffected. We will also find that to merge with the present moment in meditation is mysteriously and even outrageously difficult, like trying to pacify a fish out of water. Although the Buddha is our own True Nature, realizing this can be extraordinarily difficult and can take years, and perhaps even lifetimes, of single-minded dedication.

This exploration of the paradoxical relationship between practice and realization is far from new. One of the most eloquent expressions of this paradox is Ehei Dogen's essay, the *Fukanzazengi*. Dogen was a Zen master and prolific author who lived in 12th century Japan, and his essay is often translated as *Universally Recommended Instructions for Zazen*. His essay begins by saying, “The Way is originally perfect and all-pervading. How could it be contingent on practice and realization? The true vehicle is self-sufficient. What need is there for special effort? Indeed, the whole body is free from dust. Who could believe in a means to brush it clean? It is never apart from this very place; what is the use of traveling around to practice? *And yet, if there is a hairsbreadth deviation, it is like the gap between heaven and earth.*”

Dogen's emphasis that Truth “is never apart from this very place” is very important to understand. Many people believe they have to go around the world or into the mountains, change their name, perform unnecessary austerities, and go to many similar extremes to experience God. But the

truth is that you can realize God in the context of your life right now through practice. You can meditate everyday in your own home, practice mindfulness throughout your day, and realize that your very life, with all its seeming imperfection, is actually the Kingdom of Heaven, is actually the life of the deathless Buddha.

Yet... “If there is a hairbreadth deviation, it is like the gap between heaven and earth.” This “deviation” is the ancient habit of separating from the present moment our mind is addicted to, and also the sense of self we unconsciously attach to the impermanent body and its various experiences. We may intellectually understand that we are the Buddha, but if something happens that triggers our ingrained sense of self we will needlessly suffer and react like an ordinary being with no spiritual awareness.

This habit of separation, this sense of “I” that constantly imposes its likes and dislikes upon reality, literally creates hell upon our Earth. The unchecked, dualistic thinking mind can lead to an argument between neighbors over a fence, and it can lead to a devastating nuclear apocalypse. With this in mind, although everyone is already God Itself from one perspective, the vast majority of people do not actually *experience* this. Consequently, our Earth is plagued with ignorance and the constant fighting that occurs when the illusion of self and other is all we see. Only mass a spiritual awakening can truly end our perpetual conflicts.

So while the Buddha/God is “originally perfect” and “never apart from this very place,” as Dogen also later says, “We cannot dispense from wholehearted practice.” To Dogen, this practice (zazen) is enlightenment, because through the power of practice we realize that practice, and our life itself, is the living manifestation of Truth. Dogen goes on to mention how all known enlightened teachers in Zen had to practice intensely before experiencing enlightenment. He references the historical Buddha, who practiced meditation for six years in the forest before his famous enlightenment. Similarly, Bodhidharma, the 1st patriarch of Chinese Zen, practiced meditation for 9 years in a cave before considering himself ready to teach others. If these great men had to practice so intensely to see the truth, how can we escape such a fate and expect to reap a spiritual harvest without delving deeper into our own meditation practice? Do we really think we can skip this fundamental step and attain the awakening of Bodhidharma, the Buddha, and all the other great masters by simply reading books and quoting pithy anthologies?

This principal of the necessity for deep and prolonged spiritual practice extends far beyond the niche tradition Dogen referenced, and seems to include every major spiritual teacher or prophet that has ever walked the

Earth. Jesus fasted and meditated for 40 days in the desert before beginning his public ministry; in his spare time, the Prophet Muhammad contemplated God in solitary caves for years before he received his famous revelations; Paramahansa Yogananda spent many years refining his meditative abilities (and according to him at least one previous incarnation exclusively practicing yogic meditation in the Himalayan mountains) before he experienced total liberation. The list could go on and on, but I'm sure by now you get the point!

Concluding thought: meditation as a means to an end

Practicing regular meditation is indispensable if you sincerely desire to experience God and embody that experience in your daily life. That said, it is important to realize that meditation is a means to an end and that its goal is God-Realization alone. The path of meditation, as the Buddha said, is like a boat that takes us to the other shore, for once the boat has fulfilled its purpose it is no longer necessary. Or, as Ramakrishna points out, once the fruit has appeared the flower drops away. Be careful, though! Many people prematurely abandon or diminish the intensity of their meditation practice because of a few powerful experiences, and mistake these to be the final goal.

For this reason, it is important to keep practicing even after experiencing God. In a famous Zen koan related by Ehei Dogen, a master was fanning himself. The monk then approached the master and asked, "The nature of wind is eternal, so why do you fan yourself?" The Master answered, "Although you understand that the nature of the wind is eternal, you do not understand the meaning of its reaching everywhere." The monk asked, "How does it reach everywhere" and the mastery simply fanned himself. Then the monk bowed with deep respect.

This story illustrates to me that Buddha Nature is omnipresent like the wind. It *is* our life, but we will not experience It without practicing meditation (fanning ourselves). Since God is infinite and there is no end to the amount we can experience of It, we should never be satisfied with our current understanding and should always try to go deeper.

Another important reason to keep practicing is that obstructive karma from the past usually continues to be active even after God-Realization. For this reason, we won't be able to fully express our enlightenment as loving, compassionate, and disciplined people without continuing to practice spiritual disciplines. Here I am writing a book on God, but I still have great trouble controlling my limited ego much of the time. Anger, harmful

sensual desires, and greed still arise in me, reminding me of the necessity to keep “dusting my own mirror” with daily meditation, and of guarding myself with prayer and moral behavior.

Perhaps most importantly, we must keep practicing to set a good example for the world. Fully realized masters have no more need to meditate, but they typically continue to do so to set a high standard for humanity and to help other beings attain the realization they have attained. The Buddha himself was fully enlightened, but he practiced and taught meditation in the world for nearly forty years. Similarly, I believe that Jesus was already an enlightened master, but practiced difficult austerities and upheld vigorous moral precepts in the world to set a positive example for his disciples and future generations. Without such compassionate masters setting a good example in every generation, the spiritual path would be lost and humanity would lose all experiential knowledge of the Way.

Lastly, as the Bhagavad Gita peerlessly advises, we should practice meditation without expecting particular results, because desiring karmic results only perpetuates the dualistic ego. We are planting seeds in the infinite garden of our own consciousness every time we meditate. While we plant and water the seeds with our own effort, we do not cause the fruit of spiritual perception to grow, for this can only occur by the grace of God. Therefore, we should simply do our best without ideas about “good” or “bad” meditation. As they say in Zen, “Just sit!” In due time we will be rewarded with the fathomless peace of spiritual understanding if we faithfully, regularly, and ardently practice meditation.

Chapter 6: Thoughts on the Personal God

At this point in the book, I will transition from discussing God as an enlightenment experience to discussing the Personal God, which arises out of the Absolute as one of its infinite manifestations and functions in the temporary role of Creator. In this section, the words God and Personal God are sometimes used synonymously for the sake of readability, but the fact that I am referring to the Personal God should be obvious in the context of the sentence. It is important to remember the distinction between these two terms discussed in the chapter, “Definitions.” However, these sections almost exclusively refer to the Personal God, so there is no need to use the specific term each time.

It is important to realize that experiencing one’s self *as* God is ultimately more important than having a relationship with the Personal God. The end of the spiritual path is becoming God, or rather realizing that God is all that exists. Viewing the Divine in a personal way is an optional choice with many benefits, but it is not mandatory to become enlightened.

Yet I have found that no temporary relationship is more satisfying and practically helpful than my relationship with the Personal God, and I choose to maintain my relationship with the Personal God on my path to enlightenment for several reasons. The Personal God, I believe, loves me perfectly and unconditionally in a way that no human being can. He can also open doors of opportunity that are otherwise impossible to access. Regarding realization, He can lead me to specific practices, blessings, and teachers that without Him I could not find. It is not only deeply satisfying to have a relationship with the Personal God, but it is also in my own best interest because I will attain enlightenment more speedily and complete my life’s purpose on earth with greater ease.

My relationship with my heavenly Father and Mother is just as practically real, and actually far more real, than my relationship with other people. What I want to offer in this book are practical suggestions on where to begin, and the necessary attitude to take, when approaching the Personal God. I also want to discuss certain characteristics of the Personal God that have been revealed to me through dreams, scriptural study, and direct revelation. Most importantly, please seek the Personal God yourself and don’t be satisfied with another person’s suggestions and experiences. Since the Divine has potentially infinite characteristics, everyone will have a different view of the Personal God and will relate to Him in a unique way, and this should be encouraged.

A relationship with the Personal God is beautiful and practically beneficial. Nevertheless, it is ultimately illusory and there are times when it must be dropped away so we can experience ourselves *as* God. Jesus prayed sincerely to God as his Heavenly Father, but at times he dissolved this distinction and publicly proclaimed, “I and the Father are one.” So when I enter into meditation, I let go of my ideas about God and seek to experience It as my own Self; in reality, It is my own most intimate Awareness. Yet while it is true that you (the reader) and I are ultimately one, there are things about you as a unique person I cannot know unless I get to know you in a relationship. Also, there are certain mechanical things I can do for you that you cannot do for yourself. For example, if I had a jewel in my pocket and you asked me for it, only I would have the power to give it to you. Furthermore, if you read an entire book about the history of China, you would possess knowledge that I do not possess. I could then obtain this knowledge from you that, in a sense, is external to myself.

Understanding that the Personal God is a similarly real and “other” can open up new vistas in your spiritual adventure. Unlike human beings, God in the Creator aspect is omnipotent and operates exclusively with love. Unlike limited human relationships, God’s love is perfectly unconditional. As the Creator, He also knows all things and can reveal spiritual secrets to you that no human can. Furthermore, He is omnipresent beyond time and space and is therefore able to supernaturally answer your prayers depending on your level of faith. Because He is projecting the entire universe with His mind, He is the ultimate power, is secretly controlling every atom in the cosmos, and can bend the laws of space and time at will.

You may rightly ask, “Wait, if the Personal God is an impermanent being, how could He be simultaneously eternal and omnipotent?” I would answer that the Personal God is impermanent from the perspective of duality. Yet God is simultaneously everlasting and omnipotent since He is also the Absolute Itself. While He manifests within His own dream-drama as the dichotomy between Personal God and the devotee, He is simultaneously outside time as the ever-existent sole Reality and is not limited by any physical laws. To use the metaphor from earlier in the book, within creation He is Brahma the Creator and yet beyond creation He is the unlimited Vishnu. So when you pray, you should be aware that the One you pray to is capable of doing anything.

Mysteriously, the Personal God’s presence is omnipresent both within and outside of us. He permeates all things, and although He is everywhere, He is truly nearer than near. “Like two birds living in the same nest,” God and His devotee live in a state of intimacy that can barely be contemplated

without joy sometimes explosively destroying any rational attempt to look normal. This intimate Union allows us to live life with the unshakeable knowledge that the ultimate Power which begot the universe is dwelling within us, and silently guiding us into life lessons He personally fashioned for His beloved children to learn from.

This is my humble experience I can testify to: even though He is ultimately my own Higher Self, He simultaneously has limitless power over things I cannot control, and I therefore do not take my relationship with Him lightly. Because I have experienced His love and supernatural power in my life, I understand that He is invaluable to me on the path to awakening. As the Master of the universe, He alone holds the key to my salvation and can lead me exponentially faster to the enlightenment I seek. In a very literal way, the entirety of existence can be viewed as a hide and seek game that God is playing with Himself.

Because I understand that the Creator is the Master and goal of the entire universe, every day I bow down and ask Him to lead me to Himself, to reveal Himself to me. I know that He, by His unlimited grace, is answering this prayer and is everyday leading me closer to the experiential knowledge of enlightenment. Knowing this gives me a greater confidence in everything I do because I realize that without His grace I can do nothing, but that through Him anything is possible. When I observe my own limited capacity, constant failures, and past sins, I am often discouraged by my inability to give up lesser joys for everlasting joy. One of my favorite Bible passages gives solace to all people in my position who are sincerely seeking Truth but often feel unable to overcome their own weaknesses.

Jesus had just finished explaining to his followers the difficulty a “rich” man will have in experiencing the Kingdom of Heaven.¹¹ In that moment, his disciples asked, “Who then can be saved?,” expressing their fear that they didn’t have the capacity to attain Jesus’s exalted state of permanent God-Realization. Jesus then famously answered them, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26).

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve thought of this scripture in difficult times and received inspiration. Seeking God-Realization is the

¹¹ This whole scene takes place in Matthew 19:16-26. I interpret “rich” here as someone addicted to sensory pleasures and ambitious for worldly wealth. Just as someone can wear a glove and not be harmed by poison liquid while holding it, someone with their mind completely on God can have personal possessions but be unattached to them internally. Conversely, one can take an outward vow of poverty but inwardly crave wealth even more than a rich person. The ideal is total mental detachment from possessions that does not necessarily mean their literal renunciation.

most difficult path a human being can walk, and it potentially takes lifetimes of effort and devotion. Whenever I feel overwhelmed by this great task, I remember that all things are possible with God. The Power that manifested the boundless material universe has infinite capacity, and through that Power even the most twisted sinner will finally come to rest in the fathomless peace that is the priceless inheritance of all who make God their sole desire.

God is love: the personality of the Personal God

“Whoever does not love does not know God,
Because God is love.”

-1 John 4:8

Before discussing practical ways to commune with the Personal God, I want to say a few words about His/Her character as it has been revealed to me. The Personal God has countless characteristics, but in my view the most important two things to remember are God’s love and power. Firstly, God *is* love. Just as one plus one is always two, God is 100% love, without exception, at all times, forever. Just as the most horrendous and the most commendable activities on Earth have no meaningful impact on the awesome power of the Sun, neither our good or bad behavior diminishes or adds to the perfect love of the Creator.

Understanding this principal of Divine Love makes all the difference on the spiritual path. No matter how far you stray from Him, no matter what you have ever done, you can never be outside of His unconditional love. Wherever you are, in this world or any other, the instant you turn back to Him He is always ready and willing to guide you to the right path because He loves you. This inalterable principal is expressed in the famous Bible story of the prodigal son. In this story, the son of a rich man squanders his inheritance, engages in immorality for many years, and is finally forced to grovel in the mud for a few bits of pig food. When he finally realizes that his true home is with his father, he leaves his life of error and returns home. As he approaches home, he expects his father to be angry with him but is surprised to find his father waiting to meet him with open arms. To his further surprise, the father robes him, puts a ring on his finger, and then throws a massive party!

This story is an allegory for a person that has intentionally lived unmindful of God but desires to return to Him. It reveals that the Personal God never turns anyone away, however far they stray. And not only does He not turn anyone away; He actually celebrates with uncontainable joy

when His children repent and return to His loving embrace. I can't tell you how many times I've felt like the prodigal son. Whenever I struggle with failure, I always feel like God will reject me if I return to Him for guidance. Now I've realized that God will never reject me. In fact, He is wild with joy when I finally turn back to Him! When you realize that God is love, you will never be afraid to return to Him, even if you have committed serious harm. Even if you live your entire life unmindful of God, if you sincerely ask Him for mercy and repent of your bad behavior, He will hear your prayer and lead you to salvation in due time.¹²

The Prodigal Son story, as with all scriptural stories, must be translated into our own personal experience. When I say, "God is love," this is largely an abstraction that is difficult to grasp. On a more personal note, you should know that God loves *you* as a unique individual and cares for you as His own child. He knows more about you than you know about yourself, and He is aware of everything you have ever done and everything you will ever do. He imagined you before time began and loves you beyond your capacity to fathom. While you may desire to be closer to the Personal God, you should realize that He desires you far more than you could ever desire Him.

I believe this intense love relationship is the pinnacle of the Creator's creation and is what He most treasures. As God He is in need of nothing, but He creates the illusion of separate beings ultimately to lavish His endless abundance of love upon them. As Yogananda says, creation is a "hobby" of God's, and in this hobby God enjoys relational love more than anything else. The Divine romance between devotee and Beloved, which ultimately culminates in a glorious Union, is His most glorious creation. This cosmic purpose is fulfilled in the conscious free will of human beings, for we alone can choose to give our love to the Personal God or to withhold it. "God is a gentleman," so to speak, and although He is the key to our spiritual and material fulfillment, He will never force us to seek Him.

Because relational love is central to the cosmic plan, I believe that, second to enlightenment, our relationship with the Personal God should take precedence over all other aspects of life. Also, good works should naturally flow out of this relationship but never define the relationship. In one very busy period of my life I had a very blunt dream where I received the message from the Personal God, "I am more interested in **you** than what you

¹² This is what I believe Jesus meant when He told the man dying on a cross next to him who cried out to be saved, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Although that man still had to work out his past karma for perhaps many lifetimes, his petition to the Lord released a flood of mercy that I believe ultimately led him to total spiritual deliverance.

do!” The prophet Isaiah similarly and dramatically prophesied to Israel that their ritualistic sacrifices were like “filthy rags” to God, for how could the Lord of all creation need any of our works when He Himself can have or do anything He wants? This is not to say that works or the law of karma are not important, only that they should never make us think that they affect the reality of God’s unconditional love for us.

It says elsewhere in Isaiah, “Heaven is My throne, and Earth is My footstool; where is the house you will build for Me, and where is My place of rest?” (Isaiah 66:1). Many Jews in Isaiah’s time thought their physical temple rituals pleased the Personal God, but they failed to realize that these rituals only had merit to the extent they produced love and devotion in the heart of the devotee, which was what God ultimately desired. It took me years to realize that God loves me unconditionally simply because I exist. Like a mother nursing her infant which is incapable of doing anything rationally productive, I know that God loves my *being* more than anything I could possibly do for Him.

The second important thing to remember about the Personal God is His power. At the end of the day, He can do anything He wants to and is limited by nothing. As it says in the Qur’an, Allah merely says, “Be, and it is.” The knowledge of God’s power should give us a reverent fear of Him, just as a son should respect his father or a daughter should respect the mother that birthed her. It should also give us a boundless confidence in His ability to do whatever He wishes to do through us. Your thoughts about your life will be utterly revolutionized when you stop thinking, “What am I capable of doing?” and replace these thoughts with, “What is the limitless and almighty God capable of doing through me for His own glory?”

Final thoughts on God’s love

The knowledge of the Personal God’s love should influence everything we do, and especially revolutionize how we approach Him in prayer. When you pray, you should go to God conscious of your glorious spiritual identity. You should approach the throne of God aware that you are His beloved child and not a random stranger or a beggar. Many of my own spiritual heroes prayed this way, including the great masters Jesus and Ramakrishna. Although the Personal God has no gender, Jesus allegorically called God His Father and Ramakrishna expressed the same intimate feeling by calling God his Divine Mother. In both cases, they prayed as children of God claiming their Divine inheritances, not as foreign beggars pleading for what they felt they didn’t deserve.

You will always be God's beloved child, but it is also worth saying that this is not an excuse to commit evil. God loves you, but He is also just, and He created the universe with inalterable laws. When we commit evil actions, we violate the law of karma and *punish ourselves*. If you do commit evil during your search for Him, simply ask His forgiveness, make a sincere effort to change your behavior, and return with confidence to God knowing that His love and grace are changeless and boundless. I believe that God wants us to ask His forgiveness when we cause harm, but repentance should never make you think that you can lose His love.

Furthermore, we should not blame the Personal God for the evil in the human world that arises from the ignorance of people who do not know God. The Personal God is incapable of anything but love; for He is love, even though the way this love is expressed is often beyond our rational comprehension. The knowledge of His love does not negate the evil of the world. The Personal God has revealed to me His unconditional love by direct revelation, yet at times it takes great faith for me to maintain this view when tragic things happen. I have come to believe that the spiritual ignorance of human beings and their own karmic webs cause evil, not God. The universe is undoubtedly complex and unfathomable, but my final conclusion is this: God is simply love, all beings will eventually return to Him, and creation will have a happy ending. In its tangible actuality, this Divine Love is literally irresistible (for what is everyone seeking but pure love?), and in the last days even the most misguided sinner will be utterly consumed by God's shameless and never-ending bear hug.

This love is not only vertical, between us and God, but also horizontally extends to all humankind. When you realize how much God unconditionally loves you, you will be supernaturally empowered to love people in a way you probably never thought was possible. One of my favorite Bible passages in 1 John says, "We love, because He first loved us." When we receive the Personal God's supernatural love and begin to experience its inexpressible delight, we cannot help but become a channel by which God expresses His love to others. And if we do not make a sincere effort to love others, how can we hypocritically claim that God is love and that we serve Him?

Every human upon this Earth is seeking the love found in God alone. When you find this love, you will begin to see God's children as He sees them through His own eyes. As the layers of ego are gradually removed, you will begin to operate with God's own tender compassion, empathy, and forgiveness. You will begin to understand and consequently reflect your true identity as a precious and jealously adored child of the Beloved

Heavenly Father, becoming a blessing to this Earth and everyone you encounter. Then you will be able to understand the meaning of the Apostle Paul's cryptic utterance that, "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed" (Romans 8:19). All beings on this planet are waiting for the spiritual elite, empowered by Self-Realization and the understanding of God's love, to express this knowledge through good works that spread love in all directions and reveal God in beatific expressions of Heaven on Earth. Yet to give out this love to others we must first receive it as a free gift through God's everlasting grace.

To conclude where I began, the Personal God has countless aspects. For the sake of simplicity, though, the most essential thing to know about God's personality is that He is unconditional love for everyone and everything. His love is literally so uncontainable that the entire universe attempts to express it but doesn't even come close to revealing its majestic totality. Once you fully understand that you yourself are eternally one with this Divine Love you will never be the same, and you will awaken to the fact that everything you have ever wanted has been yours all along.

Other benefits of having a relationship with the Personal God

So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 6: 31-33

The primary reason to develop a relationship with the Personal God is for its own sake, for the priceless love of God can be found nowhere else in the dualistic world. Although I still deeply value my human relationships, I realize that no imperfect human can offer me the love that I find in the Personal God.

Learning this has literally changed my life. I used to always worry about what other people thought of me. I also often became depressed when I found out someone didn't like my personality. Nowadays, I don't base my self-esteem on what people think or say about me because I know that God created me the way I am for a Divine purpose. From an even deeper perspective, my life expresses a unique aspect of the Divine Love that I was born to express. Because I know this, I am learning to deeply value and love my own unique personality as an expression of God.

Furthermore, I used to primarily base my self-esteem on my worldly performance, but now I no longer feel the need to prove my own importance to other people. My career is certainly important, but I now base my self-esteem on the fact that I am God's precious and beloved child, not because I am a "productive" citizen. Ironically, my relationship with the Lord has made me a *more* productive person than I used to be. For me, good works are the only rational *response* to God's unconditional love, not a lifeless and futile pursuit to earn it. Living with this attitude is a win-win: when you have a relationship with the Personal God, you will actually do *more* for the world but have less stress while doing so because you will understand that God's love is not dependent on what you do.

The last benefit I will mention is beautifully promised in the Bhagavad Gita, the Bible, and other world scriptures: The Personal God will actually take care of your practical needs if you completely surrender your will to His. Furthermore, He will lovingly guide you into specific works that He predestined for you to do that will bring Him glory. As if the gift of He Himself were not enough, my relationship with the Personal God also gives me hope in a purely material sense because I know He has plans for me that far exceed my own expectations.

With this in mind, I now have far less anxiety about my career path and my daily survival because I have surrendered my will to the Lord. I realize that the Personal God is silently guiding my steps to complete a wondrous plan He fashioned eons ago. And whenever I come to a point where I don't know what to do, I simply ask Him to help me; in this I can testify that He has never once failed me. Even if His help does not manifest in the way I want it to, or if I have to go through a difficult trial, I can still have Divine peace knowing that He will never allow me to go through anything He has not given me the capacity to endure.

The importance of attitude

Having a relationship with the Personal God is less about what you do than why you do it. For this reason, I want to say a few things about attitude, which I believe is the most important ingredient to developing a relationship with the Personal God. Whole books could be written on this subject alone, but for our purposes a few general remarks will suffice.

Concerning attitude, "God looketh on the heart, and not on the outward appearance," as the Bible puts it (1 Samuel 16:7). In a famous instance at the Jerusalem temple, Jesus said that the woman who gave a few cents to the temple treasury out of love for God was more righteous than a

group of wealthy people who gave many times as much, but only to draw attention to their own goodness (Mark 12:43). If the wealthy citizens gave many times more than the old woman, why was she more righteous in the eyes of God? The answer is that the Personal God is ultimately pleased by our inmost attitude toward Him, or that he “looketh on the heart.” Although good works are important to Him because they help others and express the state of our inner being, they themselves cannot produce the change of heart that alone draws the Personal God near to us. In my opinion, this change of attitude should comprise four dimensions that are all interrelated: love, praise, faith, and obedience.

Concerning the attitude of love, “I am the Lord your God, and you shall have no gods before me” is the first Jewish commandment for a reason. It is important to mention that your relationship with the Personal God is not an idle hobby or a way to get the material outcomes you desire. Your relationship with Him should be motivated by *love for Him alone*. You should love the Creator more than any created thing, not because you are forced to, but through the wise realization that true happiness is found in the Source and not in manifestations of the Source which are naturally impermanent. If you truly knew how much joy and peace are found in God, this commandment would not be an external edict, but rather a natural expression of your own spiritual understanding.

As for praise, although the Personal God sometimes speaks to us as a friend, He should be approached with great reverence. His greatness should be actively extolled in word and deed, not as an enforced or mechanical action, but as a natural response to His awesome works and His supernatural existence. God will not share His glory with us or any created thing, and if anyone attempts to exalt themselves above Him they will swiftly be humbled.

Praise is not abstract, but a very powerful action that has real effects. In my life, I receive the greatest blessings and revelations not necessarily when I am working the hardest, but rather when I am intently focused on praising and magnifying the unsurpassable greatness of the Lord. No matter what you are going through, you should remember that God is perfect and **always** worthy of your utmost praise and devotion. I also want to mention that it is both powerful and fitting to vocally give God the credit for the works He chooses to accomplish through you.

Collective praise and worship is one of the main reasons I continued to participate in organized Christianity. Praise and worship lifts our focus from our problems and fixes it on God’s Almighty Power and Infinite Love, opening the door for revelatory wisdom that can help us overcome any

obstacle. Similar to how group meditation creates a powerful collective vibration, participation in collective worship creates a powerful positive current in the group. But you shouldn't overly worry about when and where to worship, for such things are matters of the heart. If your heart's attitude is set on glorifying God through your life, you possess an unshakeable attitude that will sustain you in times of difficulty and be a constant source of wholesome joy.

The attitude of faith is such a profound concept that it would be impossible to fully convey in a whole book, let alone this small section. To me, part of having faith as your attitude means that God should be worshipped even when things do not seem to be going your way, and even if God sends a Divine test to prove your level of your devotion. And let us never forget Paul's powerful statement, which speaks for itself, that "without faith it is *impossible* to please God" (Hebrews 11:6). Like Paul, I have found that God often calls me to do things that I simply could not accomplish on my own without faith. God is pleased by such faith, and until a childlike faith is developed within you before God, His intervention in your life will probably remain at a respectful distance. We are called to be in relationship with Him, but not to be His equals. Counterintuitively, the lower we bow before Him, and the more we humbly depend on Him in our human weakness, the more power, supernatural aid, knowledge, and victory He gives us directly from Himself. Whatever we accomplish in our walk of faith must end by us saying with complete sincerity, "To God be all the glory and the credit, for He is the one who did it through me!"

If you choose to enter a relationship with Him, you must be wholehearted and have faith that He is the all-compassionate Lord of your life even when things seem to be going poorly from your ego's perspective. We should serve Him with one hundred percent of our being even when we seemingly are getting nothing in return, and this often takes a very high level of faith. My faith is that the Personal God loves me unconditionally, is in control, and will never leave me regardless of what happens. I wish I could describe to you how much peace this faith gives me, but whole tomes of poetic verse could not even come close to doing the job!

Having faith in the Personal God also means that we will obey His will even if we do not want to, for obeying Him is always in our best interest. This attitude of obedience simply means that you will do what God wants you to do to the best of your ability. You may not always understand His requests, and you should ask God to confirm them if you are unsure if He spoke to you. But if the Personal God asks you to do something specific, and you know deep down that this is the case, He should be unconditionally

obeyed as a loving child obeys his or her wise parents. Also, the attitude of obedience means trying your best to refrain from committing any actions that harm yourself or others. To say we love God and then act in hatred or intentionally harm others is hypocrisy, the antithesis of obedience to Him.

Lastly, we should base our relationship with the Personal God on His grace and not on our own efforts at goodness. Reliance on His grace relieves so much stress because I realize I don't have to work to get the Personal God's favor. It is already mine! Through His grace, I realize that the Personal God will eventually guide me to the right path if I value my relationship with Him more than any worldly thing.

This doesn't mean that difficult things won't happen to us and that we will always be perfect. Whatever happens, the Personal God is faithful, and will always lead us back to the right path if we are sincere in our devotion. And if we are faithful, the Personal God not only corrects our mistakes but also uses them for our ultimate benefit. As Paul the Apostle proclaimed, "God works *all things* to the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose." (Romans 8:28)

More thoughts on having a relationship with the Personal God: "What do I actually do?"

The truth is that there is no set way to develop a relationship with God. The only necessary prerequisites are a burning love, a passionate desire to draw near to Him, and the knowledge that He desires you far more than you could possibly desire Him. For me, the way I develop my relationship with God is always changing. Sometimes I relate to God as my Father, my Mother, my Friend, or my Beloved. Sometimes I don't say anything to God and am simply aware that He is the omnipresent life force surrounding and infusing me. In these moments it seems ridiculous to present my personal needs to Him, for how could He who effortlessly keeps the galaxies afloat not know what I need?

At other times, the demands of life cause me to lay my needs at His gloriously compassionate feet. It's a sort of dance I've found...He already knows what I need, but He often withholds it so I will come to Him instead of the innumerable other people I could go to for advice. I often just talk to the Lord about my day or thank Him for the many gifts He has given me. Sometimes I sing love songs to Him, sometimes I silently listen to His gentle voice, sometimes I commune with Him through reading scriptures, and sometimes I simply think of Him with love in my heart. I also find that reading and listening to things that remind me of Him is very helpful. I

often listen to worship music, read daily devotionals, or listen to sermons that remind me that the Lord is my truest satisfaction and the sole reward of the wise.

However you seek intimacy with the Personal God, I encourage you to do so with no material motive in mind, even though His supernatural provision is a promised benefit for true devotees. If you seek Him in this way, He Himself will teach you how to get closer to Him in the context of your current life, something no book or temporary teacher could ever do for you. And how indescribably great it is to seek intimacy with the Creator of all things! Even if you succeed in drawing near to the Personal God, you will soon discover that the Divine Love is a limitless treasure chest; when entered it only leads to deeper and deeper layers, from infinity into infinity, beyond the grasp of the mortal mind – utterly ridiculous, endlessly creative, shockingly intimate, entirely yours alone!

The Personal God has a specific purpose for your life

At the end of the day, and whether we know it or not, our life is *for* God and His purposes. Our relationship with God should never delude us that He is the one making *our* material dreams come true. Part of surrendering your life to the Personal God involves realizing that He, as the infinitely intelligent Creator, has a *specific* purpose for your life. As I have said before, the ultimate purpose for human beings is to seek the realization of God, but while we have a human body we all must find our part and actively participate in God’s creative dream-drama.

While our relationship with Him is not based on works but on grace, specific works are clearly important to God for the proper functioning of His creation. One of my favorite metaphors in the Bible is when the Apostle Paul talks about “the body of Christ.” This, to me, is referring to the eternal Christ-Consciousness and not to the historical Jesus. In my opinion, the words Buddha, Reality, Krishna, etc. could be substituted for “Christ” and the meaning would remain the same. Paul metaphorically discusses how the human body is one but has many parts that carry out unique functions for the benefit of the whole. Put another way, each person has been endowed with special gifts from God to be used for the benefit of society. “The body of Christ” metaphor implies that serving humanity is synonymous with worshipping God since we ourselves are the temple He dwells in. Thus, finding creative ways to help other people can be said to be the plot, the purpose, and the overall theme of God’s dream-drama from the perspective of society.

From this perspective, you are not only infinitely loved by God but also infinitely *valued*. It is said that individual grains of sand are as loved by God as enlightened sages, because every particle of His creation has a specific purpose. In this framework no person is more important than another, and we are all God's equally valuable children. For example, I am writing a book on spirituality and hopefully providing a service to interested people, but I know nothing at all about cars. If my car breaks down, I am completely dependent on someone with a specialized knowledge of how car engines work. I am not better or worse than the person who fixes my car, and both of us are equally valuable to God and to humanity. Even if I spent lifetimes trying, I could not list the countless trillions of beings, both animal, human, and plant, who support our existence on a moment-by-moment basis. We all need each other, and we all have an essential role to play in the great story of the Earth and of human civilization.

Because I understand that I am part of the body of Christ, I realize that God has predestined specific things for me to do on the planet. It is no accident that I was born in this specific time and place in history, and it is also no accident that I have specific talents God wants to use to bless other people through me. With this in mind, I continually ask the Creator to reveal His will to me, and I am always surprised at how specific God can be when He reveals it. For example, God gave me the idea for this book in a dream, and He later confirmed through other dreams and signs that He wanted me to write it. I have always enjoyed writing and at one point in my life I even aspired to be a novelist. God had other plans, though, and I would never have known about them unless I actively sought His will through prayer, and took His unmistakable responses seriously. If you listen attentively to His voice, He will also give you dreams that you probably feel yourself incapable of achieving, and will guide you to specific works that will bring Him glory.

Some whispers from the Divine may seem unattainable to you, but you should never discount these God-given dreams or think that they are impossible to achieve. There is a simple maxim in the Christian world that is 100 percent true: "Where God guides, He provides." If the Personal God calls you to do something, you should know that He is able to open doors that no human can open or shut.

If you need money to complete your mission, God will provide it if you are faithful in doing your part. If you need the practical resources or the creative inspiration to complete your Divine task, He will provide it unfailingly if you keep doing your best and put Him first in all you do. It is a hard truth that if the resources for your dream don't appear, either your

heart is not right, you were not doing your part fully, or it was a dream from your ego and not from God. God is faithful, and He will *never* ask you to do something He has not already made provision for (your faith may, however, be tested by a *temporary* lack of provision).

Although God may give you grand prophetic visions of future things He wants you to do, in my experience God won't reveal His entire will for you all at once. He will only reveal what you need to know for that particular season of life or even for that particular day. Like the Israelites who received manna for each day in the desert, God usually gives guidance and inspiration one day at a time to make us reliant on Him and not our scheming egos. You might as well begin to consciously seek the Personal God's will, because it's going to be fulfilled whether you like it or not. Knowingly or unknowingly, everything we do is leading to the fulfillment of a plan that, when viewed as a whole, is something that only the ingenious Artist of the cosmos itself could have possibly envisioned.

I want to end this section by sharing one of my favorite Bible stories that beautifully expresses some of the points I am trying to make. The story is about a king named Jehoshaphat and his army. A massive army was coming against Judah that was many times the size of Jehoshaphat's forces, and Jehoshaphat called upon the Lord for help. The Lord told him through a prophet to show up on the battlefield without intending to fight, and to praise the Lord with singing and musical instruments. Jehoshaphat was understandably perplexed by this seemingly impractical command, but he nevertheless obeyed the Lord. The people began praising God with their instruments as the massive army began to attack them. The Lord then miraculously caused the enemies to turn on each other as soon as the worship began, and the battle was won by the Israelites.

The battle in this story is an archetypal metaphor for a challenge in life, and the outcome reveals a principal about how the Personal God operates concerning our worldly works. It shows that attitude moves God more than worldly works. If we simply show up to the battlefield and give God our best effort with an attitude of unconditional devotion, He will cause us to be victorious through His miraculous power. Win or lose, if we keep showing up and wholeheartedly worshipping the Lord, God will honor us by miraculously fulfilling His purposes, no matter how big the obstacle appears to our ego.

Lastly, while God's provision is assured, it should also be recognized that He answers prayers *in His own timing* and does not cater to our ego's impatience. God may lead you to a destination that will take you *years* to finally arrive at. While we can receive a material promise instantly in the

Spirit through faith, we sometimes need to spend years in preparation before the promise fully manifests. God's timing, while it can sometimes be very frustrating, yields far better results than anything we could devise on our own. I can only hope you will naturally grasp this principal, and not have to suffer like I did before I learned this difficult lesson that nothing can force God to act unless He Himself is ready.

The great Prophet Muhammad was absolutely correct by summing up that the greatest wisdom in following God is complete "Islam," or "submission," to whatever He wants to do and however He wants to do it. You can fight against God's timing all you want, but in the end, whether you like it or not, and however high you climb on your own, you'll end up back on your knees in the same position of utter dependence upon Him.

Yet in that moment of total surrender to God's will, there is an indescribable peace that cannot be gained any other way, and a strength from Him arises that no earthly power can defeat. As Isaiah metaphorically put it, "But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31). Praise be to Him who alone grants victory, and glory be to Him who alone is the source of our material and spiritual fulfillment!

Discerning the Personal God's will

The idea that God has a purpose for our life doesn't mean we will walk around with the constant knowledge of what we are supposed to do. Life is an adventure, and even if we did always know what to do this would actually be boring and undesirable. I have experienced, however, that the Personal God sometimes reveals specific things He wants me to do in tangible ways. Knowing how to discern His will could fill an entire book, but I will comment only briefly here since the primary focus of this book is on Self-Realization.

I first want to make a distinction between the specific and general will of God. The general will of God includes universal edicts that always lead to happiness. These include, for instance, the edict to love your neighbor as yourself or to refrain from murder, which is never the will of God. The specific will of God, however, contains actual works God wants to accomplish through your unique life. This guidance can manifest in perhaps limitless ways, but I will mention only four ways to discern it here.

Firstly, God can give literal guidance that will be unmistakably apparent to you. This guidance could come in many forms: through dreams,

signs, visions, or even direct communication with the Personal God's voice. I only began this book, for example, because God gave me the idea to write it in a dream and confirmed this request in other dreams and signs. I still didn't believe I was fully capable of doing it, so again asked if I should begin writing, and I subsequently began receiving more signs from Him to begin. I began finding pens *everywhere*, for instance, and other people began bringing up books and writing to me with a strange frequency. One time I was nervous about beginning, so I asked the Personal God to speak to me about the book and soon afterwards my Mom called. Out of the blue, and without my bringing it up, she began "coincidentally" telling me about a rabbi and author she just heard about on the radio.

"God wanted him to write a book," she said, "but he had no idea how to do it or how to get it published. But he simply obeyed the Lord, and everything worked out great and now his book has had a big impact." At this point God's will was obvious to me, but this type of specific request is, in my experience, a relatively rare blessing. In this case, I previously had no conscious desire to write a book until God gave me the idea. Although it has taken a lot of hard work and practical planning to write this book, I've had an indescribable peace during the process because I was 100 percent certain that God wanted me to do it.

I have directly experienced that God can give very specific guidance if you ask to know His will. An important caveat, however, is that God has given us free will, and we all have the capacity to reject His guidance or allow laziness, doubt, or fear to make us only partially obedient to it. We should never be complacent and forget to do our part. God indeed has a plan A for your life, but that doesn't mean that you are guaranteed to fulfill it. God will undoubtedly give us guidance and supernatural help, but it is also up to us to act in faith, work hard, maintain high ethical standards, and sometimes even take personal risks to see God's plan fully manifest.

There is a classic parable in the Christian world about a man who was drowning in the ocean. He cried out, "Lord, save me!" A few minutes later, the Coast Guard arrived in a boat and told the man to get on board. Then the man yelled, "I don't need your human help; the Lord Himself will save me!" The boat then left and the man ended up dying by drowning in the water. In the afterlife, he said to God, "Why didn't you save me? Doesn't it say in the scriptures that you will respond to the heartfelt prayers of your servants?" Then God said, "I did hear your prayer; I even sent the Coast Guard!" This allegory is spot on. God's supernatural help and response to prayer is a real thing, but it must be complimented by our own hard work and willingness respond to opportunities as they arise.

Secondly, the Personal God's will can manifest through a gut feeling. You may suddenly have a strange gut feeling to go do something, and God will have something waiting for you once you get there. In a subtly humorous example of this, one time after church I suddenly felt a strong desire to go eat a quesadilla at my college cafeteria that seemingly arose out of nowhere. I never went there on the weekend, and although the meal was my primary inspiration, I also had an irrational gut feeling to go that I couldn't explain. I sensed that God, for some unknown reason, wanted me to go.

When I got there I saw some friends and sat at their large table. I struck up a conversation with a girl who was going through a hard time. God gave her some guidance through me and I also prayed for her. She was crying by the time I left, and told me she had prayed for God to speak to her that day, and that He had done so through me. I felt that our meeting was by no means a random event, and that God had definitely led me there to answer her prayer for guidance. I also chuckled at the fact that God's knowledge of my love for Mexican food was used as a form of Divine guidance. This "Divine appointment" happened because God implanted a gut feeling in me to go somewhere, a feeling that we can grow sensitive to with practice.

Thirdly, God's will can manifest as your own inborn desires. It is never a coincidence if you have a passionate interest in something. Some people are passionate from a young age about certain social issues, writing, city planning, art, etc. This passion or intense interest can be anything that gets you excited about life. God instilled passions in you before you were born, and a big part of knowing God's will is discovering what you are passionate about, pursuing it, and allowing God to guide you as you go.

Fourthly, and paradoxically, God not speaking is a form of speaking. When you pray about something and receive no answer, there are two possibilities. Firstly, God may want you to wait for Him and have faith that He will answer you soon. Secondly, God may want you to make the choice yourself and have faith that He will guide you even if you don't understand how. In this situation we should pray: "Lord, I will use my reason, my imagination, and my willpower. But as I do, guide me by Thy Spirit so that your will is accomplished through me."

At the end of the day, following the Personal God is all about faith. He will probably lead you to do things you feel you cannot do on your own, and often He will want you to take a risk and act in faith before you receive an assuring confirmation from Him. But I encourage you not to become overly concerned about God's specific will. If you truly surrender to Him in

your heart with purity of intention, His will shall be revealed to you as you live your daily life. When it comes to God's will, *the attitude of your heart* is the most important thing of all. If you prostrate yourself before God and say to Him, "May Thy will alone be done in my life!" with complete sincerity, know assuredly that He will lead you by the hand into His perfect will. You will make mistakes like everybody else, but He will always lead you back the right path if your heart is set on pleasing Him.

From an even deeper perspective, remember that ultimately God is your own Higher Self. If you continue delving more deeply into meditation, you will realize that you are one with God. Out of this Oneness intelligent desires will then bubble to the surface that do not arise from your personal ego, and these can be thought of as God's will. Practically speaking, I find that when I meditate the right answer to a question often comes to me intuitively because my conscious mind is stilled, allowing my Higher Self to whisper its subtle wisdom to me.

The Bhagavad Gita's wisdom: viewing daily life as a vehicle for God-Realization

"Engage your mind always in remembering Me,
Become My devotee, and worship Me.
Being completely absorbed in Me,
Surely you will attain Me at last."

- Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita

It is indeed wonderful to realize that the Personal God has a concrete plan for your life, but the fulfillment of this material plan is not enough to satisfy us spiritually. Good works are only the expression of enlightenment and cannot actually cause enlightenment. Many people fulfill God's material purpose for their lives but do not attain the highest purpose of Self-Realization. Luckily, however, there is a way to use your inescapable karmic destiny as a vehicle to become enlightened. Doing this takes us beyond both good and evil karma, for even good karma is a fetter if we seek it in itself. This idea of non-attached service to humanity has been flawlessly expounded on in the Bhagavad Gita. I feel compelled to talk about the Gita here because it unites the idea that God has both a material purpose and a higher purpose (of realization) for us.

The Bhagavad Gita, or "Song of God," is part of one of India's greatest epics, the Mahabharata, which chronicles the warring clans of the

Pandavas and the Kurus. Both clans were related by blood, but one side (the Pandavas) was devoted to the path of dharma (truth) and the other side (the Kurus) was deluded by wickedness. In the Gita, Arjuna, a warrior on the side of the Pandavas, is about to fight with them against the Kurus, the evil members of his own family. He feels utterly depressed by his fate and calls upon Krishna, an incarnation of God and his cousin, to give him guidance. Krishna transports Arjuna to the center of the battlefield, stops time, and reveals to him one of the great scriptures of the ages. The image of Krishna teaching Arjuna is a classic metaphor for the Higher Self guiding the spiritually-inclined ego, and the universal wisdom contained in their dialogue is highly relevant today.

The Bhagavad Gita contains countless jewels of wisdom, but for our purposes I will briefly comment on only a few verses. To write about the Gita is, for me, a humbling experience. It speaks for itself, and I personally revere it as a priceless source of guidance for spiritual aspirants. I am only commenting on it here because the Gita so well expresses how to seek spiritual realization in the context of completing your life's purpose. There is no need for me to "reinvent the wheel" with purely original thoughts.

To connect the Gita with my thoughts about your life's purpose, I should mention that Arjuna's purpose in life was to be a warrior. Krishna advises Arjuna that he must fight in the physical battle, which is a warrior's destiny, while simultaneously realizing his eternal Self that never changes. The image of battle is a metaphorical way of telling us that we must fulfill our God-given material destiny, but while doing so we can be internally free through the practice of yoga, or internal union with God. Put another way, we should do our best to improve this hurting world, but simultaneously understand that the world is unreal and that our True Self is changeless.

Krishna goes on to reveal how it is possible to achieve enlightenment in the context of an active life of service to humanity. Even though the Gita explicitly and unambiguously claims that practicing meditation is the most effective way to realize God, in worldly life it reveals additional strategies to similarly overcome the illusory ego. Two of these approaches are often referred to as Karma Yoga (the yoga of service) and Bhakti Yoga (the yoga of love/devotion).

Yoga literally means "to yoke," or to unify the ego with the Divine. In Karma Yoga, devotees offer their actions as selfless service to humanity with the ultimate goal of unifying with God. In Bhakti Yoga, devotees offer all their actions as worship to God in a continuous act of devotional love with the same ultimate goal. Both these approaches are, in reality, the same path, but depending on your personal karma one may appeal to you more

than the other. In essence, they both describe the common denominator of destiny's nearly infinite numerators, which is to make *God Himself the goal of all action*. Whatever part you play in God's dream-drama, you will realize Him if He Himself is the goal of your work.¹³

The goal of all actions is this yogic Union, and the Gita is essentially God's advice about how to attain this blessed state. Krishna famously tells Arjuna that, "You own only your actions, but not the fruit of your actions" (Eknath Eashwaran translation). He further advises Arjuna to surrender all his actions as worship to God, and to stop seeking particular results from the fruits of action because "this brings immediate peace." Krishna then says that if you surrender your ego to Him through constant worship you will eventually reach the same goal as the solitary ascetic, even if you practice little meditation. This idea that the average person with little religious training could realize God through undivided love was a revolutionary statement. At that time, the public generally viewed enlightenment as the exclusive privilege of people who had outwardly renounced the world and were in the Brahmin caste.

The goal of our life is to eventually realize, as the Gita says, that God alone is the doer, and that we ourselves are one with Him. By using our lives solely as instruments to serve others and to worship God, which is same thing, the ego-principal can be eliminated and enlightenment can be attained. Furthermore, by acting wholeheartedly for the benefit of humanity but *ceasing to seek particular karmic results*, we can eventually eliminate desire, the sole cause of suffering. This is using the ego to go beyond the ego, and viewing the mundane activities of our life as gateways into God's unconditioned freedom.

These simple ideas in the Gita were revolutionary and have major implications for spiritual practitioners everywhere. Firstly, the Gita shows that you do not have to be a monk who meditates unceasingly to become enlightened. You can have a family, an interesting career, pursue hobbies, and still have time for a daily meditation practice. In all these things, though, you can take the view that you are worshipping the God within and that, in reality, God is living His life through you. When this God-Awareness is combined with wholehearted selfless service to humanity and the Gita's profound injunction to eliminate craving for the results of action, all aspects of our life become the means to attain the final goal of God-Realization.

¹³ The only exception to this is what the Buddha called "wrong livelihood" that includes inherently harmful jobs. Examples of this would include working at a nuclear weapons factory or for the mafia.

Lastly, the Gita reveals that we can face life's inevitable challenges, and our karmic destiny, with Divine peace. At the beginning of the book Krishna famously tells the grieving Arjuna, "You speak sincerely, but your sorrow has no cause. The wise grieve neither for the living nor for the dead. There has never been a time when you and I and the kings gathered here have not existed, nor will there be a time when we cease to exist..." He later advises Arjuna to fight in the battle for the good of the world, but to understand that the deathless Self *is his Self* and cannot be harmed. This same deathless Self was also dwelling in the evil kings whom Arjuna thought "he" was slaying.

This scene is not a celebration of warfare, but an archetypal demonstration of how we can view our own life and material purpose. While we all must fight to help the suffering world, we are invited by Krishna to do so from the peaceful perspective of God. We all must play some useful part in His movie, but as we do so we can know that we are the *Watcher* of the movie, and that neither we nor anyone else has ever or can ever actually die. Furthermore, we can eliminate ego-centered pride by knowing that whatever gifts we have exist solely through the power of God, and are to be used only for the purposes of selfless service, glorifying Him, and promoting the good in God's cosmic movie.

The Gita also powerfully demonstrates that, like Arjuna, we all have a specific purpose from God in any given incarnation, but this purpose should not distract us from the ultimate purpose of our life, which is Self-Realization. This lesser purpose is a means to an end and should serve the greater purpose of attaining awakening. I believe the Prophet Muhammad similarly expressed this idea by differentiating between the "lesser Jihad (or struggle)" and the "greater Jihad." The lesser Jihad refers to accomplishing the physical tasks God requires of you in this life, and the greater Jihad is finding refuge in God Himself.

Both struggles are important, but it should be recognized that your life's purpose and God-given dreams can become a dangerously seductive idol. This form of matter worship is all the more harmful when it is covered with the sanctimonious cloak of "spiritual" intentions, even though the heart is actually set upon a material reward. All beings will someday learn that God Himself, the supreme and incomparable eternal Bliss, is the greatest reward. Whatever inner dreams we have culminate in finding the Dream Giver who is infinitely greater than any dreams He gives.

To conclude, the Gita poetically offers a middle way between the extremes of total renunciation and its opposite of total materialism. It reveals that the spiritual life is not an escape from the world but an invitation

to fearlessly *participate* in it, to fight for goodness, and to serve humanity with the inexhaustible love of God Himself. With all this in mind, I encourage you to accomplish your God-given purpose with great zeal; yet know all the while that God alone is the true goal of life, and that your Eternal Self, present this moment, has never once changed.

Chapter 7: Practical Exercises for Working with the Personal God

Prayer as a tool for God-Realization

“If you take one step toward God, God takes 100 steps toward you.”

-Hindu Proverb

After my vision of the Divine Mother, I prayed to Her, taking a flower in my hands: "Mother, here is Thy knowledge and here is Thy ignorance.

Take them both, and give me only pure love (for Thee).

-Ramakrishna

Prayer, as a tool, is inferior to non-dual meditation, but it has many benefits. There are many types of prayer (contemplative prayer, for instance, is more similar to meditation) but in this section prayer refers to petitioning the Personal God for something using words. Praying for others is also a wonderful thing, but in this book I am limiting the discussion mainly to prayer involving oneself only.

Prayer is indeed a state of the heart, so any vocal expressions are necessarily inferior to the spiritual longing behind them. Additionally, prayer isn't actually necessary to attain realization from a non-dual perspective. Depending on their karma, many people don't relate to prayer; they prefer to experience God directly through non-dual meditation alone, for in an absolute sense we already are That which we pray to. I myself, however, have a devotional temperament and find prayer to be both spiritually vivifying and practically useful.

My philosophical foundations for prayer primarily come from Jesus of Nazareth and Ramakrishna, both of whom I consider to be Self-Illumined masters that temporarily enjoyed a dualistic relationship with the Personal God. One of Jesus' primary principals of prayer as taught in the Bible is simply, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). This Divine promise is deeply inspirational to me. If the ego continuously knocks at the door of the Higher Self through meditation and constant petition, eventually the Self will reveal Itself as It has promised to do through various scriptures and prophets. Jesus also pointed out that if a hungry son asks his father for bread, the good father will undoubtedly give it to him if he has it. Our Divine Father, who loves us infinitely more than our earthly parents ever could, is not only willing but obligated to respond to our prayers if we ask according to His will with sincere hearts.

Unfortunately, this principal is abused by people who exclusively ask God to fulfill their ego-centered desires but don't necessarily desire God Himself. Jesus taught in the famous "Our Father" prayer that we should pray firstly for *God's will* to be done before petitioning for our own needs. Jesus understood that the reason we pray is more important than how we actually pray. Ramakrishna also understood this, and taught a powerful practice that has changed my life forever. He advised his disciples to ask God for the pure love of God Himself, which is another way of asking for total spiritual realization. He taught them to ask God to reveal Himself directly, bypassing all dogma, ritual, and conceptual expectation. Like Jesus, Ramakrishna understood that the experience of God is the greatest happiness and therefore the final goal of all prayer. The combination of these two principals – (1) that the Personal God responds to the "knock" of prayer and, (2) that we should primarily ask for the realization of God Himself – is a powerful and transformative basis for daily prayer.

Prayer, meditation, and all spiritual practices culminate in Divine Union. Yet Ramakrishna advised his disciples to pray for pure love of God while what he called the 'ego of knowledge' remains. He taught that the ego was the root of all suffering, but that it is useful to maintain the "ego of knowledge" while on the path to God. The "ego of knowledge" temporarily maintains the distinction between God and the devotee, but it has only beneficial intentions. It seeks only to do God's will, to help others, and to develop meditative insight. In other words, while the sense of "I" remains we should pray that this "I" learns to love God more than anything else. As Yogananda taught his disciples to pray, we should ask God to "tempt us more than temptation," since God is the incomparable and superior bliss we are truly seeking.

In conclusion, in my opinion there are only three things really worth praying for that are all, of course, interrelated: knowledge of God's will, pure love for God alone, and, most importantly, the direct experience of God Himself. If you ask for the realization of God Himself there is really nothing else you need to ask for since all your desires will be satisfied by gaining Him.

The most important thing concerning prayer is to sincerely ask God to reveal Himself to you with longing in your heart—the Divine Mother won't be able to ignore the cries of Her poor infant for long! Yet while She will certainly answer this prayer if you are sincere, it should be said that this is the most difficult request for God to fulfill. To realize Him takes a total extinguishment of ego-centered desires, for as the Lord said to Moses in the Bible, "No man can see me and live," meaning, to me, that ego-

identification must totally dissolve, or “die,” before God can be perceived (Exodus 33:20). Anyone who has grasped how difficult full realization is to achieve understands that realization can only occur by God’s grace. Yet, in the end, “we” do not realize God. God realizes God.

I also recommend asking forgiveness for all the evil you have committed in the past, or performing a similar atonement ritual, at least once before beginning this type of prayer practice. This will clear your accounts, so to speak, and help relieve you of any guilt you are carrying that may be creating blockages. The Personal God only views us with love, but I have found that this type of atoning confession and repentance helps release knots in the heart that can hinder us from fully receiving Divine grace. And God always forgives you when you ask, so don’t unnecessarily dwell on your faults once you have sincerely atoned for them.

Creating your own daily prayer

I have a personal practice of creating a life prayer and then repeating it every morning and evening. This is the essence of the prayer that I created: “Spirit, I praise your perfection and thank you for all the blessings in my life. By Your grace, reveal Yourself to me (or “grant me spiritual enlightenment”), and while the ‘ego of knowledge’ remains, grant me pure love for You and a perfect knowledge of Your will. You alone are all that I desire.” In the first part of my prayer, I acknowledge that God is eternally perfect and that all the blessings of my life, and even my life itself, come solely from Him. Then I simply ask God for the only three things worth pursuing in this fleeting life: the realization of God Itself, love for God alone, and the knowledge of His will.

This prayer arose organically from my own experiences of God and my own karma. I am only sharing it here as a potential source of inspiration, but I encourage you to create your own prayer and say it daily. I also recommend praying a similar but shorter prayer before eating to remind yourself that the purpose of maintaining a physical body is God-Realization. Once you pray your daily prayer, simply return to your spiritual practice and have no expectations of a grand experience. Leave all that to God! All we have to do is ask and then do our best to delve deeply into meditation and selfless service. The results of our efforts are not up to us but are in the God’s hands.

This practice of creating and daily repeating a life prayer has two primary functions. Firstly, it invokes the inestimably valuable help of the Personal God on our path to enlightenment. Secondly, it constantly reminds

me of my life's goal. I have found that saying my life prayer sets the tone for my day and, most importantly, reminds me of my life's deepest purpose. No matter how I am feeling on a given day, when I pray my life prayer I remind myself that experiencing the bliss of God is my only true satisfaction and is the sole reason I exist. Daily asking God to reveal Himself also sets a karmic chain into motion that I believe will continue into future lifetimes. Every time you pray your life prayer, you will imprint upon your mind the tendency to look to God to satisfy your desires. I believe this tendency will cause you to gravitate toward fortunate spiritual circumstances (places where meditation is practiced, for instance), and ultimately your wish for God will be fulfilled at some future time that only the Lord knows.

Lastly, I firmly believe that God, in the most literal sense possible, actually answers my life prayer. Through perpetually asking the Lord to reveal Himself, I am convinced He has led me to teachers, practices, books, and intuitions I could never have encountered with my own intelligence, and I am confident that He will do the same for you. In the very moment God becomes your heart's desire, a chain of events is set into motion that will eventually lead you to the indescribable Joy you have always been seeking. The only thing required of us is the courage to continually knock on the door of the Unknown in meditation and prayer, to have patience, and to have deep faith in God's love and assured unseen response to our spiritual aspirations.

Praying for specific needs

Prayer is a serious matter, but it can also make life adventurous and more interesting. The center of our relationship with God should be a pure desire for God alone, but while we are on Earth an inevitable extension of this relationship involves specific needs. When we pray for something, it should be understood that the One we pray to is a greater reward than any thing He can grant. His boundless love satisfies me, and the rest is gravy... But while God already knows our needs and provides them even when we don't ask, I have found that praying for specific things, and seeing God answer my prayers, creates deeper intimacy with Him and a greater faith in His omnipresent power.

I have experienced many examples of God answering my prayers, but for the sake of brevity, and since this book is primarily concerned with Self-Realization, I'll share only a few examples. However, I cannot count how many times God has responded to many of my prayers concerning money, relationships, physical healing, and other practical living issues.

In this first example, God directly led me to a church He desired me to attend. A couple years ago in the summertime, I was hanging around in my hometown of Tulsa preparing to return to college for another semester. I had been experimenting with Christianity more and more and was attending a Christian church in Tulsa. I had not, however, found a church in my college town that resonated with me. One day while I was driving I prayed something like, “Lord, when I go back to college, please lead me to a church that will bring me closer to You, where the people are genuinely practicing love, and where I feel accepted.”

A few seconds later, like a flash of lightening, a thought that I did not intentionally think popped in my mind. This voice, which was the voice of the Personal God, told me to go to a certain coffee shop nearby. Now, I love hanging out in coffee shops, but for whatever reason I somewhat disliked the particular coffee shop I thought of and usually did not go there. I was confident that I heard God’s voice, so I drove there immediately despite my snobbish apprehension.

I saw a shiny penny on the ground a few minutes after I got there, which is one of the signs God often shows me when I am in the right place. Then I saw a girl I hadn’t seen in nearly two years who went to the same college. We chatted for a few minutes, and without provocation she began talking about the church she attended in my college town. While she was describing the church, she mentioned many of the requirements I had been praying about in the car. I literally felt chills running through me, testifying to the fact that God was directly answering my prayer. In a few weeks I went to the church she spoke of and immediately felt like I was where I was supposed to be. God confirmed through different dreams and signs that this was the church He wanted me to attend, and I am extremely grateful I was led there. It was an incredible season of my life, and I learned much about the Personal God through this church. Nor could I deny that God Himself directly led me to that coffee shop to tell me about it.

God does not always speak so directly, but He will sometimes answer a prayer by ordering our steps to someone with information we previously had no access to. Another time I was looking for an apartment, but couldn’t find one that I felt good about. I went from place to place, but no one seemed to be taking applicants in the price range I was looking for. Without praying about it, I signed a one-year lease at the place I was already staying at, but I felt unhappy about my decision. It was in an inconvenient location, and I didn’t really like the apartment itself. After signing the lease and feeling a bad gut feeling, I asked God, “Please lead me to a better apartment,

and get me out of this lease if it is Thy will. Or if it be Thy will, show me if you want me to stay in my current apartment.”

I went to a party that night, and as I was leaving to go home I overheard a friend saying in a strangely loud voice that he was moving out of his apartment. I struck up a conversation with him, and after mentioning I was that I was looking for a place, he told me he would recommend my name at his complex the next day. It turns out that this new place was perfect. It was the ideal size, a two-minute walk from campus, cheaper than my current apartment, and eventually would be only a one-minute walk from my full time job. I can't express how much I love this apartment, and I am writing this sentence from within it nearly three years later.

I got out of the lease I had signed and now am in the best apartment I've ever had. Although the Personal God could have led me to it without my asking, I am convinced that He waited for me to pray to Him about it before He did. I also am convinced He guided my footsteps to that party and made sure my friend was talking very loudly about moving out of his apartment. Praying about needs is not about getting a desire satisfied, but rather about living in a way that depends on God, and becoming more conscious of His direct intervention in our affairs.

A third example involves recording music. It taught me that the Personal God can help my personal desires manifest if I develop a pure intention. I had written some songs and intensely desired to record them, but I didn't have the money at the time and didn't know where to begin. I hustled around and tried to find a discount deal with the recording studios in my town, but the doors simply would not open. I was reaching a point of frustration I am now ashamed of because I had unwisely put my happiness in a material hope. Finally, I put the desire before God and prayed something like, “Lord, I am seeking You first. If it is Your will for me to record music, please guide me. If not, I will be content. You Yourself are my treasure and I will still seek You alone!”

Soon after this, I went to my weekly guitar lesson with a professor at the university. Toward the end of the session my teacher randomly said, “Why don't you play me one of the songs you told me you wrote?” This was something I had never done in front of him, nor something he had ever asked before. He very much enjoyed the song I played, and as we were walking out he said, “I have a home studio, you know, and I'll help you record this song there for free.” I was amazed, and felt beyond doubt that God Himself was answering my specific prayer. I was soon recording music for free at my teacher's state-of-the-art home studio that it took him ten years to build! I eventually went on to record about 1/3 of my first album at this studio

virtually for free. In this experience, God taught me that He can open doors of opportunity I have no access to, but that He will only manifest Himself when my heart is set on Him and not a material reward.

In all three of these cases the Personal God mysteriously answered a specific prayer in a way that I myself had not yet considered. Through these and hundreds of similar experiences He showed me that He has far greater knowledge than I do, and can do things for me that I cannot do for myself in my current spiritual state. Most of all, He showed me that He knows me better than I know myself, and lovingly guides me as my Divine Parent when I seek Him first. Each of the hairs on my head is numbered, and my entire future is spread out before the Lord as if it has already happened. That said, we must also *choose* to obey whenever we receive guidance from God, for although He already knows what is in our best interest, He will never force us to ask for His help or to respond to His directions.

He has also taught me that, although asking for help or guidance is powerful, it is really our *faith* that activates His help. When you pray for an answer, don't worry about how it will come but simply *know* that it will. The answer may come through a sudden inner knowing; it may come through another person; it may come through a sign or a dream; or God may not answer you, desiring you to use your own reason. Yet however it comes, the answer is far more likely to appear when your mind is at peace because it has deep faith. God's communications are like radio waves. If your mind is not tuned into God FM (which operates on the frequencies of peace, joy, and love) and you are manifesting inner thoughts of fear, doubt, and anxiety, then you probably won't receive the answer. As with everything concerning the Personal God, your attitude is much more important than any formulaic steps you take to hear from Him.

Lastly, another practical tip for praying is to end a prayer with something like "by Thy grace," "for Thy Name's sake," or "by Thy Mercy." It is also good to begin and end a prayer with statements like, "You are worthy of all praise forever." This reminds us that, whatever we are praying for, we only want it to happen if it is God's will. Additionally, anything He does for us is never to reward our efforts, but is always and only because of His grace (and even if he *is* rewarding the effort, is it not His grace that enabled us to make the effort?). To give Him praise at the beginning or end of a prayer reminds us that, whether God answers the prayer or not, He is always worthy of our full devotion.

Prayers for healing

I also want to mention briefly that the Personal God is capable of supernaturally healing both yourself and others. This does not mean that God will never allow you to be sick, but that He can and does heal through faith-filled prayer. I have personally witnessed God heal people through prayers, and I also believe He has healed me of some sickness through prayer.

There are many methods of healing, but I only briefly want to mention a general attitude to take toward sickness here. When I get sick, I don't worry. I've given my life to God, and I trust that He will never put me through anything I am incapable of enduring. Furthermore, my first response to sickness or pain is never to think negatively. Instead of cultivating fear, we should first pray, "By Thy grace, please manifest Your love and power to me by healing me. And if I must go through it, give me the strength to endure it while staying conscious of You and being fully obedient to Your will."

To pray for healing is not to exclude the wonderful gift of modern medicine. We should always take precautions and follow the remedies given by medical professionals, nor neglect to see a doctor if something is wrong. Yet we should be thinking of God the whole time. God can heal you by leading you to a skilled doctor, or cause the doctor to notice something or to have a subtle idea that can save you. God can inspire a doctor to give you guidance, or can also heal you directly through supernatural means. Whether God heals you or not, and whether God works through a doctor or supernaturally, you should turn to Him for healing power and not succumb to fear.

I also believe we should help others by, if God leads, laying hands on them and praying for them to be healed. God is capable and often willing to answer such prayers. It should also be noted that the potency of such prayers is affected mostly by one's measure of faith, but it is also affected by the power of concentration, and the summoning of cosmic energy brought about by that concentration. Lastly, while it is true that God can and does heal people supernaturally, the greatest healing comes from spiritual realization. Those who are healed will get sick again. Also, due to past karma or other unknowable conditions, sickness is sometimes unavoidable. Health is indeed a precious gift. Yet the purpose of a healthy body is not to enjoy frivolous pleasures, but rather to attain the ultimate spiritual healing of enlightenment. Absolute healing means realizing your changeless God-Nature that is never affected by sickness, change, or death.

Thoughts on hearing from the Personal God

My views about the Personal God arose from the fact that He has communicated with me various ways: through dreams, signs, His voice, etc. But before describing how to hear from Him more accurately, I want to offer a few principals that should inform your approach. The first can be summed up in the one of the Jewish Ten Commandments: “Do not take the Lord’s name in vain.” You should not ask God to speak to you just to see what happens or to provide entertainment for your ego. Rather, you should bow down before Him with sincere reverence and, with humility, ask for guidance.

You should also check your own attitude, and make sure your heart desires the Giver more than His gifts, and also that you desire *obedience* and not a personal reward which comes as a byproduct of obedience. Are you merely trying to coax God to grant your personal desires, or are you sincerely seeking His will whatever the cost? You can learn to hear God’s voice like the prophets of old did; you can have astonishingly specific and awe-inspiring dreams; you can see undeniable signs until your eyes wear out; but unless you obey the Lord in the things He shows you to do, it will profit you nothing.

Also, you should always be very careful not to mistake the desires of your ego, and the vibrations of your own mind, as the voice of God. In order to hear the Personal God’s voice accurately and perceive His manifested guidance, your heart must be pure. You must intensely desire to hear Him, even if what you hear is contrary to your ego’s desires. If this purity of intention is not present, you will inevitably mistake your own desire for His will and be led astray.

Many people mistake hearing from the Personal God as the goal instead of a tool. I will admit that learning to hear from the Personal God is awe-inspiring and even very fun. Yet hearing from the Personal God should be approached from the standpoint of relationship, and should be based on the bedrock of your private romance with Him. If your desire for achieving your dreams ever dominates your prayer life, you should stop praying! All prayers for guidance should be subservient to this one prayer: “Lead me, oh Lord, on the path to Thyself. Lead me to enlightenment! And by Thy grace give me a knowledge of Thy will so that I may please you!”

The prophetic gift

I believe that we can hear, in a literal way, whispers from the Personal God in our own mind. Most secular people think that prophets like Isaiah

and Moses were either schizophrenic or simply liars. Furthermore, most religious people think that they were special people who alone could hear the Personal God's voice with accuracy. This latter stance is only partially right. In my view, there is a difference between "the office of the prophet" and the "gift of prophecy." The office of the prophet is a specific role that I believe God assigns to certain human beings. Jesus and Muhammad, for instance, were chosen to be prophets that demonstrated and vocally channeled certain truths about God to humanity. No one can choose to be a prophet; that honor must be bestowed by God Himself.

However, I believe that everyone has the ability to hear directly from the Personal God through the prophetic gift. The prophetic gift is not confined to hearing about the future, although it may take this form; rather, it simply refers to receiving communications from the Personal God directly. Too long a discussion on this topic would distract from the purpose of this book, and my brief thoughts on this topic do not even come close to doing it justice. However, this practice has greatly blessed me, so I share it here as a potential introduction for people who are interested.

Hearing from the Personal God is a skill and an art like most other things. Through practice, anyone can learn to hear from God with great accuracy. The gift can also be used to give prophetic words to other people that can help them hear what the Personal God is saying to them. In this instance, you should be doubly cautious; only give someone else a prophetic word if you are certain it is from God. Also, God may not want you to give it to them at that moment, so be aware of His timing. Lastly, God may be showing you something about that person He may not necessarily want them to know.

Yet while giving prophetic words can be easily abused, they can also be very helpful to people. I can personally attest that God has used other people to give me prophetic words that have literally changed my life, and confirmed things that the person who gave the word was incapable of knowing had God not revealed it to them. As with all other gifts of the Spirit, the most important thing is your sincere desire to *obey and to seek* God. As Paul the Apostle said, "If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge...but do not have love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2). God does not give people the ability to hear His voice as a causal sideshow, and He does not give people prophetic words in vain. Prophetic hearing is merely a tool by which the Personal God ultimately intends to reveal His Reality and His wonderful love both to you and to others.

Hearing the Personal God's voice

“The LORD said (to Elijah), “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by. Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a still, small voice.”

1 Kings 19: 11-13

The Personal God can speak to us in innumerable ways including through dreams, signs, and through other people. Perhaps most importantly, the voice of God is our ethical conscience, the “gut feeling” that is the wordless voice of our own Higher Self. In a very literal way, though, I have experienced that the Personal God can speak directly in our mind through either an audible voice or symbolic imagery. This voice is worthwhile to become familiar with, and can offer incomparable guidance in times of confusion. I began learning how to hear the Personal God's voice when I attended a Christian church that emphasized this spiritual gift.

Before going more in depth, I want to emphasize that the voice of the Personal God which I am speaking of is not clairvoyance or psychic ability. The Personal God is a Being with a personality that creatively interacts with us. This Being may express itself as knowledge of the future, but His communications are not confined to expressions of knowledge alone. For instance, He might simply want to tell you that He loves you.

The only way to know if the Personal God is really speaking is to know His voice intimately, and this takes practice and time. I myself often have great difficulty discerning His voice from my own thoughts, but there are times when I am certain that He has spoken to me. His voice is not your thoughts, but it takes the form of something like a thought. There is a specific subtle energetic vibration to His voice, which I cannot really describe, that we can become attuned to.

I have found there are three aspects to His voice I always notice when God speaks: love, peace, and unmistakable authority. Since God is love, all things emanating from Him are love, even though this may take the form of constructive criticism. The voice is also always at peace and for this reason often takes a humorous tone when the context is proper. Lastly, the voice is rarely harsh but has an authoritative wisdom that is impossible to deny. The

voice is not necessarily a voice as we think of it (sometimes it can be audible, but that is rare). It is more like a gentle whisper that takes the form of a thought you did not think.

In the section on “praying for specific things” I discussed an example of a time that I heard the Personal God’s voice. In this case, the voice *sounded* like my own thoughts but was not my thoughts; it had an autonomous and authoritative feel to it. Many people expect the Personal God’s voice to be a hyper emotional experience. In reality, though, it is more like a gentle intuition that seems relatively normal. This is what the prophet Elijah meant by the still, small voice that was not “in” the dramatic inner storm of emotion (see the quote at the beginning of this section).

Through practice, it is possible to become familiar with this “still small voice” and hear it any time you like, even in chaotic places. One of my spiritual mentors once said that hearing the Personal God’s voice is similar to the way the FBI learns to discern counterfeit money. To learn whether the money is fake, the agents study the *real money* so intensely that they immediately know a false bill on sight. In a similar way, it is possible to know His voice so well that you can immediately discern whether He or your own ego-centered thoughts are speaking.

Knowing the Personal God’s voice has innumerable benefits. One benefit is that this voice can give you life guidance for the future you are currently not seeing. At the church I attended in college a friend of mine said that, while he was worshipping, the Lord spoke the word of a country in Asia and showed him a vision of himself living there. His girlfriend heard the same word in a separate instance and saw similar things in a vision. When they told each other about this, both of them felt they had been called by God to go work in this country, and God later confirmed in various ways that this was His will. If you ask the Personal God to speak to you, He may also give you life dreams you may have never before considered.

Knowing the Personal God’s voice can also help you serve Him more effectively in daily life. In another case, one of my friends was waiting on the Lord to speak and saw an image of Wal-Mart, a lady dressed in orange, and heard a word about healing in the knee. He went to this Wal-Mart, saw a lady dressed in orange, and asked if she needed prayer for anything. Sure enough, the woman needed prayer for her knee. My friend prayed for her and through her faith the Lord healed her! Knowing how to hear the Personal God’s voice can allow you to participate with Him in ways you could never have known about if you relied solely on your own knowledge.

Sometimes the voice of the Personal God comes in words. Once I was feeling like the opportunities I was seeking simply weren’t available to

me, and I felt like giving up. I listened to the Personal God in prayer and heard, “I have the last word,” and then to “see through the eyes of faith.” Essentially, He was telling me to stop looking at my life in a worldly way, and simply have faith that He would work things out. From my experience, I could discern that these were not merely thoughts, but direct communications from the Personal God that gave me renewed vigor and hope.

I also want to briefly mention that the Personal God’s voice often manifests itself in symbolic imagery. Once I was feeling overwhelmed by the sheer variety of things going on in my life. I was in college, working on this book, volunteering, composing an album, leading a Buddhist meditation group, attending a Christian church, and doing many other seemingly unrelated things I felt God wanted me to do. When I was worshipping God in church and listening to Him, like an unexpected flash of lightening, the image of a “Bop-It” arose in my mind. Now the “Bop-It” was a toy that was popular in my childhood that had many outrageous appendages emanating from the same object. Because I had developed a growing sensitivity to the Personal God’s voice, I knew immediately that this image was from Him and was not simply a passing thought.

I immediately laughed when the image popped in my mind, and realized that God was saying, “You can do all things through me!” Like the “Bop-It” which can be pulled, twisted, popped, etc., God was telling me to be more open-minded about the diverse ways he wanted to work through me. The unexpected ingeniousness of the answer is a characteristic of the voice that often adds a humorous touch to Its wise guidance. If you learn to listen to His voice, the Personal God will develop a way of speaking to you that will tickle you with the joy of knowing how deeply He understands you. You will find out that He knows you better than you know yourself, and will speak to you in a private language specially tailored for your unique soul. And with all “missions” aside, sometimes God, the Master of Simplicity, will simply tell you that He loves you.

Another time when I was praying, the Personal God showed me the picture of a handsaw, and I knew beyond doubt that He had spoken. It was the type of machine that woodworkers use to cut wood with a sharp rotating saw. I asked God what this meant, and then received the understanding: the handsaw was a picture of desire. We must work *with* desire to perform God’s will in the world, but if we get too close it can seriously harm us, and even destroy us. This picture was revealed to me at a time when I was very busy. God was reminding me not to get attached to my works, but simultaneously to take my works seriously.

This symbolic capacity of the voice may also manifest itself as something you already know. Memories from the past or applicable scriptures may arise to answer the question you are asking. Sometimes when I ask God a question, He reminds me of a relevant verse from the Bhagavad Gita or the Bible. He may also give you a prophetic word for someone else, or tell you about an event that has not occurred yet. There are really no rules to hearing the Personal God's voice, and practice is the only way to become sensitive to it.

Lastly, I have found that the Personal God generally only speaks to me when my attitude is correct. The Personal God will often refuse to speak if you are not approaching Him with love, because your *relationship* with Him must always come first. If this is not the reality of your heart, the Spirit will often withhold its practical guidance with the ultimate intention of leading you back to It's all consuming embrace. In my life, the most accurate words from Him I have received came when I was either resting in His love or praising Him. I learned through this that hearing from the Personal God, and every other practice concerning Him, is rooted in the foundation of *relationship*.

Be cautious!

It is important to be cautious when listening to the Personal God. Don't simply hear what you want to hear, and also be prepared to sometimes take constructive criticism. There are many people who hear their own desires when listening to the Lord and justify wrong actions by claiming, "God said so." So if you feel you heard from Him, always ask the Personal God to confirm His word and be cautious of your ego's trickery. It is a great sin to intentionally misspeak for God if He did not actually speak, and to play the part of "false prophet." It is also *never* a word from the Personal God if it directs you to harm yourself or others.

Also, the ability to hear the Personal God's voice is not an excuse to ignore your own common sense. You don't need a Divine command to know to what to wear today or, let's say, to put on deodorant before your job interview. Also, sometimes God chooses not to answer a question because He wants us to either act with pure faith and/or to make the decision based on reasoning. Lastly, I want to again emphasize that you are talking to the Lord and not an impersonal fortune-teller. There was a time in my life when I constantly asked God for specific things in a tone that can only be called needy. I often acted like I was talking to a Magic 8 ball instead of *the Creator of the universe* who already knows everything I need.

Lastly, from a deeper perspective, God's voice is really the voice of our own Higher Self. It is possible, yet immensely difficult, to be so fully awakened that our own desires become His desires. Our own thoughts *become* His thoughts and our own voice *becomes* His voice. In that state, hearing God's voice is as effortless as breathing. For in oneness, what stranger can lead us astray? In the infinite sea of God's omnipresent Bliss, how can we ever be separate from the water? In that state, all things reveal His glory and crystalline intuitions continuously flow from the depth of our being, leading us closer and closer to the understanding that our True Self has no beginning and no end. May all beings realize that, in truth, they and God are one!

Two practices for learning to hear the Personal God's voice

Hearing the voice of the Personal God is an art and not a science. Everything I suggest is based on my own experiences, and for this reason you will have a totally different way of hearing God than I do. The two ways that I use to hear the Personal God's voice are very simple. The first involves asking a question, stilling your mind, and then intently listening. This works best when the thinking mind is calmed, as it is after meditation. The question can be specific or broad. Sometimes, to empty my mind of any preconceived bias, I simply say, "What do you want to say, Lord?" After you ask your question, simply listen. At some point, if God wills, you will receive a thought that you did not intentionally think and, generally speaking, the first thought you receive is the one to pay attention to if it is not your own mind's backwash. Follow this thought and see where it leads using your own intuition. As much as possible, have absolutely no expectations about what the Personal God might say or show you.

I also recommend developing a conversation with God. For instance, you may ask, "God, what do you want to show me today?" God may then cause the image of a friend to arise in your mind. Then you can say, "Ah, what about this friend?" Then God will answer more specifically. Perhaps He wants you to be kinder to this person, or perhaps He wants you to give them a call. This back-and-forth conversation is an effective way to hear the Personal God, perhaps because it is more relational.

The second way involves writing. To do this, still your mind and ask the Personal God a question. When His voice arises in your mind, use it as a gateway into freestyle writing from the perspective of God writing a letter to you. This may feel awkward at first, but you will be surprised to find that incredible wisdom will flow through you as you write.

I have found that stopping to listen to God's voice is a helpful thing to do before making a big decision or starting a project. Before simply diving in, it can be quite helpful to ask, "Lord, what are you saying about this?", "Lord, how should I proceed?", or "Lord, what do you want to do here?" The Personal God may answer, or He may simply want you to do your best with the faith that He is guiding you. I am convinced that God gives more responsibility to people who habitually take the time to ask for His help in whatever they do. He is not looking to use self-proclaimed savants and people who rely on their own strength; rather, He promotes people that obey Him, that do not trust in their own talent, that humbly rely upon His help, and that give Him all the credit in the end.

However you hear from Him, I encourage you to use His voice primarily to seek the ultimate happiness of Spirit. Don't be unwise and only ask God to help you attain material desires that turn to dust in a snap of the cosmic finger. Sincerely ask the Lord to lead you to Himself, and then simply listen with silent rapture to the gentle voice of the One who created you!

Working with dreams

For the last five years I have paid serious attention to my dreams and often recorded them nightly. I have discovered that, more than any other medium, dreams are the way the Personal God communicates with me most clearly and directly. This will not be true for everyone, but in dreams I personally have found a very direct line to the Personal God that I now find indispensable for navigating the complexities of my life.

It is largely through paying attention to my dreams that I came to believe in an Intelligence beyond myself that observes and guides me. I have had shockingly accurate dreams concerning my own future that came true years after they occurred. I have dreamed of instructions God wants me to carry out, instructions so detailed and specific that to deny an intelligent intentionality behind the dream seemed absurd to me. I frequently receive direct communication from God Himself in dreams about things I specifically pray about. And even when the dream is not overtly specific or spiritually dynamic, thousands of dreams have come to me that seemed to be *commenting* on an aspect of my life or personality that I was only dimly aware of.

Dreams are complex physiological, psychic, and spiritual phenomenon that no one, even seasoned interpreters and research scientists, fully understands. To interpret dreams is a vast, complicated, and lifelong

field of study. My purpose here is not to provide an interpretive method, but to simply point out that the Personal God communicates to us through certain dreams, and to encourage interested readers to begin recording their dreams as a way to hear from Him. Yet I simply cannot iterate enough how complex and mysterious dream imagery can be. For this reason, dreams should be approached with utter humility and the sincere prayer that God Himself will help you interpret them. Nor should you assume that *all* dreams come from God, only that God frequently speaks through dreams.

Perhaps the reason I find dreams so fascinating is their multifaceted character. Most dreams are symbolic, while some (more rarely) are prophetic and concern actual events that will take place in the future. Some dreams concern your personality alone, while others concern the fate of other people or even of entire nations. Some dreams draw on imagery from the collective unconsciousness that your ego did not conceive of, while other dreams speak in imagery drawn exclusively from your personal subconscious mind. And as Carl Jung wrote, one of the primary functions of dreams is to be the Higher Self's way of communicating with the ego and compensating its one-sided attitudes. Dreams are so awesome and complex that, frankly, it pains me to talk about them so briefly in this section. Since this book is primarily concerned with God-Realization, my comments will be short.

Dreams are adventures into the fascinating spiritual world of the psyche where things like time, space, and self take on new and strange definitions. Practically speaking, and for the limited purposes of this book, I find that dreams powerfully enhance my ability to hear from the Personal God for several important reasons. Firstly, because the laws of time and space as we ordinarily experience them break down in dreams, God is enabled to speak very clearly about things he wants us to do. In other words, dreams can help us know His *specific* will about practical matters.

Last year, for instance, I finished recording my first musical album. Yet what I did not tell anyone while I was making it was that 2-3 years earlier I had a series of dreams in which I was making an album. I had only been playing guitar at this point for 6 months or so and had only written a few mediocre songs. I could barely write a decent song, let alone make an entire album, and creating an album wasn't even something I consciously desired to do. Yet through a series of unmistakable dreams I became increasingly aware that God wanted me to make an album. I even eventually even saw the final song list in a dream before I even created it.

I share this to reiterate the point that the Personal God is not merely an abstraction to me, but an active Intelligence that sometimes gives me

specific instructions. To create my album, I still had to work very hard to write songs and record them, and also had to wait patiently for God's timing. Yet while I was working hard, these dreams and other confirmations gave me the unshakeable conviction that God Himself desired me to move forward, even when I doubted myself. This knowledge that I was within God's will gave me a confidence that had nothing to do with me but rather with what God was capable of doing through me. Who was I to say to God, "I am incapable of this" if He himself created me and then made it very clear what He wanted me to do?

Secondly, dreams can give you a grand prototype of your life, or even life itself, that can alter your perception of reality. They can reveal how God sees you and can give you a confidence that can only come from that revelation. They can contain archetypal imagery so beautiful and powerful it would be hard to deny they arose from a creative intelligence beyond the conscious mind. These dreams are rare and often contain powerful imagery arising out of the collective psyche. In such dreams God does not merely speak about Himself, but reveals Himself.

Such dreams are, to me, precious jewels from the Creator that should not be taken lightly or shared with others for the petty purposes of either bragging or nourishing idle curiosity. Because dreams of this nature are among the most precious experiences of my life, I have no desire to share them publicly unless God specifically compels me to do so. I only mention their possibility here to point out that dreams can go beyond ways to hear from God and can become actual *revelations* from Him. I also want to reiterate that such dreams are rarer and should be approached without the prideful pretense that we can understand them without God's help.

Thirdly, excluding the archetypal imagery just discussed, the language of most dreams is primarily conditioned by your personal subconscious mind. This enables God to speak to you in a private language that is often delightfully subtle, and even sometimes hilarious. One time, for instance, I was overly worried about the future and was losing my peace. One night I had a vivid dream in which I was Marty McFly from the movie, *Back to the Future*. In the dream, I fell off a building because I was being chased by the movie's antagonist, Biff. As I fell, I was miraculously saved by Doc Brown's futuristic DeLorean car. Then, out of the DeLorean, a massive hand arose that held me in place as we flew away. To me, God was saying to me through this dream, "Don't worry. I've got your back. You are in My hands, and I won't let you fall. Trust me!" After the dream, I felt the wonderful peace of knowing that the Personal God loves me and will never leave me. I mention this dream here because *Back to the Future* is one of

my favorite movies from childhood, and God knows that. He could have sent the message in any number of ways, but in dreams He can speak in a very personalized way that often reveals to me how deeply He understands me.

Fourthly, dreams can be an actual teaching medium by which the Personal God and other God-sent intelligences can communicate with you about your spiritual practice. I have personally received specific instructions about my meditation practice and other advice from spiritual teachers in the dream state, and even directly from the Personal God. In this sense, paying attention to dreams can be a practical way to receive aid on your path to realization. Additionally, following your dreams can be a way to begin perceiving the dreamlike nature of reality. Many Tibetan Buddhist practices utilize lucid dreaming as a way to continue meditation beyond the waking hours. Practitioners in this school are taught to actively compare the dream state to the “real” one to ultimately arrive at the conclusion that all reality is like a dream.

Fifthly, dreams can help prepare you for big life changes and impending disasters. Sometimes dreams not only concern your own ego, but reveal the future of a nation or the world. In the book of Daniel, for instance, the Pharaoh dreamed about a famine that wouldn't occur for seven years. In the New Testament, Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, had a warning dream that king Herod would try to kill his son, and was told to go to Egypt. In a more modern context, Carl Jung had powerful dreams and visions of the destruction caused by WW1 before it occurred. I personally have had similar dreams about things to come that were not merely symbolic, and that did not merely concern my own personal wellbeing. This function of dreams is self-evidently practical, but it should be approached with great caution and prayer since it is very difficult to discern whether some imagery is symbolic or literal.

Lastly, dreams can help you see a specific life situation or a personal psychological attitude in a new way, or in the way that God sees it, by commenting on it with symbolic imagery. Many great books, especially books about the Jungian method of dream interpretation, explore this function of dreams in greater depth.

Signs

Another way to hear from the Personal God is through seeing outward signs. I have had many experiences where I felt that the Personal God was directly communicating with me through signs, and along with building my

faith in His reality they have often helped me discern His will. If you want God to speak to you in any way, you should ask Him first. It is a strange principal that, even though He already knows what we desire, asking Him somehow activates answers that wouldn't manifest otherwise. The Personal God wants us to be humbly dependent on Him, and part of producing this posture of humility is the physical act of asking.

Signs can help confirm things we already hear from the Personal God but may not be completely sure about. One thing you can be sure of: if God wants you to hear a message, he will repeat Himself. One time, for instance, I felt like God wanted me to call my friend, whose last name was Jackson (pseudonym), but I was busy and didn't feel like talking on the phone at that moment. I thought to myself this was probably just coming from my own mind, so I told myself I would do it later. I had a dream that night where I saw his name flash before me, but still did not call because I was very busy the next day. I later saw the name on a distant billboard out of the corner of my eye. A while after that I went on a walk, looked to my left, and beheld a car tag that said, "Jackson." I couldn't deny, at this point, that it was God Himself who wanted me to call him, and I finally obeyed. Sure enough, he told me that our conversation was a direct answer to a problem he had been dealing with, and I was also blessed by the exchange.

I have also experienced that God uses specific items to make a teaching point. God was recently continually communicating with me to be a "fisher of men." I was not fully obeying this command, and then started seeing fish signs everywhere. One day, I saw something like 5 fish signs independent of each other. I went to a restaurant with my friends, and we "coincidentally" sat next to a picture of two fish. Later, I was driving to an event and a massive fish truck pulled in front of me with the word "fish" very prominent in my field of vision. Later, I believe I saw another fish sign but can't quite remember what it was. At the event a boy walked in front of me wearing a shirt with a massive colorful fish on it. A few minutes later I was talking to my friend and, as he spoke, I suddenly noticed a special type of jewelry made from fishhooks in the jewelry store window behind him! At this point I almost inwardly screamed, "OK, God, I get the point!"

If you ask Him, God can also speak to you through specific signs that function more generally. God, for instance, sometimes shows me coins when I am in a significant place, something I learned from my Mom (it is literally astounding how many coins she finds wherever she goes!). Other people also use similar specific items that function as cues between them and God to confirm they are in a significant place.

I only shared a couple examples here to be brief, but I have had hundreds of experiences where I was convinced that God spoke to me through a sign. One could easily argue that all of these experiences were coincidences, but I am not convinced. Even secular psychology is beginning to write about the nature of such experiences. Carl Jung wrote about what he called “synchronicities,” which essentially function as outward signs centering on an inward theme. Jung did not directly attribute these to God, but argued that they are an undeniable psychic phenomenon worth paying attention to.

I go a step further and believe that God often directly communicates to His children through signs He intentionally places across their path. The only important thing, however, is to be inwardly set on doing the Personal God’s will and attaining God-Realization. Your path will be revealed to you as you go, some way or another!

Chapter 8: Other Miscellaneous Practices and My Final Soapbox

Scriptural study

“The Pitcher needs an empty cup.”

-Hafiz

Earlier in this book, I discussed the time I bragged to my first Zen teacher about all the Buddhist literature I had read. She simply smiled at me and said, “That’s nice, but the important thing is that you *practice*.” She later told me that scriptures, which she probably intuitively realized were inordinately appealing to me, are valuable but only exist to inspire us to find the Truth within ourselves.

The limitation of scriptural study is expressed in a famous Zen metaphor that compares the teachings to a finger pointing to the moon. The finger is the teaching and the moon is the direct experience of Truth. Once we have seen and followed the advice of the teachings we can discard them, for what they are pointing to is something we must all experience for ourselves. This practice oriented view was emphasized at the Zen monastery I lived at. During meditation retreats, reading was not allowed and certain monks were even prescribed reading “fasts” that lasted up to one year. This was not done to demonize reading, but to correct the notion that Truth can be experienced through words alone, and also to clear the mind of all preconceived ideas to prepare it for the Inconceivable.

Similarly, in the realm of the Personal God, worshipping Him from the heart is much more valuable than simply knowing scripture. It would be better to spend five minutes genuinely worshipping God through your actions or in heartfelt prayer than to memorize an entire scripture. You would also grow closer to God if you spent only a few moments weeping for Him to reveal Himself than if you could recite the entire Bible or the Bhagavad Gita by heart.

On the other hand, reading scriptures can be highly valuable, especially during difficult seasons of life. I personally believe there are five primary purposes to reading religious books, and I have benefitted from all of them at different periods in my life. Firstly, and most importantly, reading scripture is inspirational, and should inspire us to seek God through our own direct experience in meditation. Secondly, it can show us through the example of past masters what is possible to attain if we persevere. Thirdly, it can give us guidance on what moral actions to avoid and what

actions to pursue. Fourthly, reading world scriptures has a cultural value that is independent of spiritual practice.

Lastly, reading scriptures can build our faith by revealing the way that the Personal God thinks about things, for they often contain archetypal content about the nature of the Divine. I often read the Bible and the Bhagavad Gita when I feel hopeless or uninspired because I believe they express Divine thoughts that transcend my personal feelings. The promises of God, made to spiritual devotees of all historical ages, contained in both these holy scriptures have uplifted me many times. They have deeply nourished me spiritually, and have often given me the strength to continue my journey in difficult seasons of life.

I also believe that many scriptures contain archetypal imagery that symbolically expresses the nature of God. I believe, for instance, that the death and resurrection of Christ, whether or not you believe in it literally, is a powerful archetypal revelation of God's eternal nature and unconditional love for humanity. Similarly, in the Old Testament, images like the richly detailed design of the Tabernacle revealed to Moses contain powerful archetypal imagery that I believe symbolically reveals aspects of the Divine. To draw from a different tradition, I also find in the life of Krishna both priceless teachings and an archetypal demonstration of the Personal God's boundless love and irresistible charm. Similarly, in the often mythically expressed life of Buddha, I find an excellent archetypal example of the superiority of enlightenment over material desires. Many scriptures are rich with this sort of symbolic imagery that poetically expresses the nature the Divine, and to me such archetypal stories and images are often more deeply impacting than mere dry philosophy.

Additionally, it must be pointed out that many of humanity's great scriptures have some elements that are universal and some that address the social needs of their particular time period, sometimes in outdated ways we now consider backwards or even barbaric. However, in their historical context, many passages that now seem obsolete actually represent a *step forward* in humanity's collective evolution. Instead of judging such scriptures from a 21st century bias, we should interpret them in their historical contexts and realize that not all passages apply to all time periods. We must also realize that the spiritual essence of a scripture is far more important than its literal interpretation. This topic is very complex, and although I only briefly mention it here, I hope to engage with it more in other contexts.

For these reasons, I encourage you to find spiritual books you personally feel drawn to and read them in your spare time. Realize, though,

that all these symbolic images are merely describing and pointing to your own True Nature. From the perspective of awakening, scriptures can actually become harmful if they take the place of meditation. The Buddha was not reading scriptures when he spent over six years doing solitary meditation in the forest. Similarly, Jesus was not reading scriptures when he sought the experience of God in the desert for 40 days. Both these men realized that they themselves had to *experience* the truths spoken of in all world scriptures, and realized that this would require far more than book-learning alone.

I personally love reading scriptures, and for me they can be potent sources of inspiration that connect me to spiritual aspirants across time and space. Yet I have also learned through bitter experience that, ironically, they themselves can become idols that distract us from God. For no matter how eloquent or richly symbolic a scripture is, it can never replace your own personal realization through meditation, or your love-saturated relationship with the Personal God.

Making a life vow

The monastery I lived at is called “Great Vow Zen Monastery,” and making a spiritual life vow was something strongly emphasized there. I created a life vow a few years after I left my first residency there, and it has become an immensely powerful inspiration in my life. My vow is my ultimate goal and puts everything I do into perspective. Whenever I feel weak, discouraged, or afraid of life’s challenges, I look to my shining vow and am empowered to keep moving forward. Creating a personal vow has radically changed my life, but for the sake of privacy I have decided to refrain from sharing my personal vow in this book.

A vow can be used for both secular and spiritual purposes, but I recommend creating an all-encompassing vow that includes both. The important thing is to search yourself, and, in your own words, create a statement of any length that crystallizes the deepest aspiration of your life. Common vows include, “I vow to become enlightened,” “I vow to realize God,” “I vow to help others,” etc. Whatever you choose to say, make sure it is something coming from deep within yourself and not simply the “right” phrase. From a more practical perspective, a vow can also be about completing your specific life’s purpose. For example, someone who intends to build an orphanage may vow to someday complete one.

A vow is powerful and will actually shape your destiny if it comes from your heart. But beware! A spiritual vow also creates challenges that

did not previously exist, for the moment the vow comes into being, the opposition to it is simultaneously created. If you are walking through a wild field and admiring the scenery, everything will be beautiful. But the moment you vow to build a garden there, you will immediately begin to see that the wild beauty you previously enjoyed has, in a sense, become an obstacle to your goal. In a similar way, once you make a vow you will immediately begin to notice everything in your life holding you back from fulfilling it.

For this reason, it is important to understand the implications of making a vow, and only to do so if you are deeply serious about it and willing to follow through. A serious quest for God requires daily discipline in meditation, abstinence from many physical pleasures, and a difficult renunciation of personal ambition. With all this in mind, search your heart before making a vow to see if it is truly set on God or if your desire is merely a barrage of words. Remember, though, that all things are possible with God's grace, so don't be afraid to make your vow as spiritually ambitious as you can. Remember too that a vow cannot be forced. In my life, circumstances developed so that it arose naturally. A vow should only be undertaken if you intend to follow it, and if it comes from deep within yourself. It is not a self improvement project, an idle amusement, or something to merely "experiment" with.

I have two more thoughts on the nature of the vow. Firstly, a vow can only be truly genuine if it is made for the benefit of all beings. A great example of this are The Four Great Bodhisattva Vows that are chanted in Zen centers all over the world and express the essence of Mahayana Buddhism.¹⁴ There is only so much motivation that can come from the promise of ending your own suffering, and even from the promise of attaining enlightenment for yourself alone. Conversely, there is unlimited motivation to continue when we practice for the sake of all beings. Our enlightenment will benefit every person we will ever encounter, and this thought is a powerful motivation to persevere on the path. On a deeper level, we are literally all One, and for this reason a vow that does not include the intention to help all beings is only a sanctimonious illusion.

Lastly, unlike material vows, a spiritual a vow is infinite. There is, by definition, no way to finally complete it. It is only a guide leading us back to the nameless enlightened Awareness that each moment uniquely

¹⁴ The Four Great Bodhisattva Vows are: "Beings are numberless; I vow to free them. Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them. Dharma Gates are boundless; I vow to enter them. The Buddha Way is inexhaustible; I vow to embody it" (Great Vow Zen Monastery chant book translation).

embodies. Like an instrument that produces many variations of creative sound through itself, our vow will produce countless morphing variations of expression as time endlessly unfolds.

My final soapbox: love and the purpose of religion

“With sincerity and earnestness one can realize God through all religions. The Vaishnavas will realize God, and so will the Saktas the Vedantists, and the Brahmos. The Muslims and the Christians will realize Him too. All will certainly realize God if they are earnest and sincere.”

-Ramakrishna

It has been my explicit desire in this book to remain as practical as possible and to refrain from unnecessary philosophizing. As the admirable Christian activist Shane Claiborne has noted, everything worth saying about spirituality has already been said and now simply needs to be lived. I feel compelled, however, to share a few thoughts about issue of religious unity before concluding.

While they are both social and cultural systems, it is my opinion that religions are essentially symbolic paths whose purposes are fulfilled in the direct experience of God. This “God” is a nameless and indescribable experience, but since humanity has many cultures, this experience has been expressed in innumerable ways. While the root is One, the ways It expresses Itself (the branches) are infinite in their creative variety. Sadly, though, many people confuse this Source with one of Its particular manifestations. For example, I have heard many Christians absurdly say, “I worship God, not Allah!” Little do they know that Allah is simply the word for God in Arabic, so saying this is like saying, “I drink water, not agua (“water” in Spanish).”

My hope for humanity is that all religious people will learn to perceive unity in the midst of diversity, to participate fully in the religion of their choice but simultaneously understand that all religions arise from the One Source and are merely paths to the Divine. I often pray to God in the form of Jesus since I am strongly moved by this particular manifestation of God. I simultaneously realize, however, that when someone prays to Krishna they are praying to the same God in the way that moves them the most.

Ramakrishna once compared God’s relationship with religion to a woman cooking fish for her different children. The mother cooks pickled fish, boiled fish or fried fish depending on the nature of their stomachs, for

she knows the stomachs of her children. In a similar way, God inspires religions based on the peculiarities and spiritual development of different people with the ultimate intention of guiding all His children back to Himself. Thus, once we find God we can discard any formal religion, for religion is only a pathway whose function is fulfilled once the destination has been permanently attained.

My deep conviction is that love for all humankind is the essence of what it means to be religious. Yet it is obvious that much harm has been done by ignorant people in the name of our great religions. It is also obvious that there are many types of religions, and that they often have conflicting doctrines. It is simultaneously true, however, that there are probably far more similarities than differences in our major faith traditions. Additionally, as I mentioned earlier, we must learn to interpret scriptures in their historical contexts and separate their spiritual essence from their literal content. And as St. Augustine said, we should “never judge a philosophy by its abuse.”

To conclude, I believe that the core essence humanity’s great religious traditions is universal love. Humanity’s true prophets and sages, with different degrees of illumination, personally perceived the One Source that gave birth to the universe. They perceived that all beings are a part of this Source, and that to harm others unnecessarily is to act in the ignorance of God’s Nature. From this standpoint of unity, love is the only thing that expresses the universal God, and hatred is the very antithesis to all that He is.

With this in mind, I am ending my book by echoing same message that all true sages have spoken since the dawn of human culture: love, love, love! Love everyone as yourself and view all people as members of your own family! Love them even if they hurt you, even if they hate you, even if they *kill* you! For when you realize how infinitely loved you are by God, and that in an ultimate sense you and all things *are* God Itself, how could you refrain loving all people who are themselves merely God in disguise?

Love is the most powerful force in this universe; love is the Truth, and the Truth is only love. When all people realize this Truth within themselves, the hell of this Earth’s pain will transform into a Heaven that even the most splendid gods will view with burning envy, and all will see that everyone and everything they have ever known, without exception, was God Himself waiting to be revealed!

Final Dedication and Concluding Poem

I dedicate the merit of this book to the unsurpassable glory of the One True God, who alone is, and for the benefit all beings. May all of us speedily realize the Truth and attain the realization of God's universal love that alone can save this suffering world!

Let it also be known that any benefit you gained from this book was gained by the grace of God, for in the course of my struggles I constantly fall short of my ideals, again and again. Nevertheless, by God's incomparable grace, I believe that He chose to use me in all my weakness to write this book for the benefit of others. Though I do not always act on it, He has given me the unshakeable knowledge that He alone can satisfy my wandering heart. I deeply hope that you will realize this truth for yourself.

And now I'll finally conclude this book with a poem, because everything, no matter how rationally beneficial, is hopelessly boring without art:

MORE THAN LIFE ITSELF

All praise is due to God Almighty,
The Everlasting Source,
The Creator and Sustainer of all things!
All praise and glory belong to God forever!

There is no limit to His grace,
His boundless unconditional love,
And His pure compassion
For the wandering actors of creation
Who in time will all return to Him.

He is the prize and the path,
The wisdom of sages,
And the joyful simplicity of little children.

He is the Light of infinite galaxies,
And the creative genius who effortlessly fashions
Trillions of complex species
To express His unseen nature.

He is the calm of the still waters,

And the explosive ferocity of colorful supernovas.
He is the unconditional love radiating in billions of mothers,
And the sacred purity of wide-eyed infants.
He is the One who alone perceives all things,
And the awesome Power which causes all things to be!

O, Lord, You are the hope of all beings;
Even the wooden surfaces, even the “motion-less” concrete,
Cry out for Your incomparable embrace,
For the indescribable realization
That all beings are seeking.

Even those consumed by evil,
Even the most wicked of them,
Long inwardly for You,
For the everlasting joy that You alone can bestow.

Therefore, oh Lord, since no satisfaction compares to You,
And since happiness and peace
Are found in You alone,
Lead me to Yourself, and reveal Yourself to me
By Thy limitless mercy and grace,
For the sake of Thy Name!

For You alone have become my heart’s desire,
And You alone are the key
To the treasure I’ve been seeking
Since I first drew breath,

Since I first entered this mysterious world
You created to finally reveal the Truth
To those who love You

More than life itself.

Appendix: Zen Resource List and Reading Recommendations

Zen Meditation Supplies

- Great Vow Zen Monastery's Zen Works (this can be found on their website, www.zendust.org/greatvow).
- www.zafustore.com

Online Zen Talks

There are many Zen teachings available online. Here are two resources that I have found to be helpful:

- Great Vow Zen Monastery podcasts. These can be found at the monastery website.
- San Francisco Zen Center podcasts. These can be found at <http://www.sfzc.org/>.

Two Great Introductory Zen Books

- *Zen Meditation in Plain English*, by John Diashin Buksbazen
- *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, by Shunryu Suzuki

Other Reading Recommendations that have Inspired my Search for God

- The Bhagavad Gita
- Autobiography of a Yogi (by Yogananda)
- The Gospel of Ramakrishna
- The Dhammapada
- The poetry of Hafiz and Rumi
- The Tao Te Ching
- The Imitation of Christ (by Thomas Kempis)
- Memories, Dreams, and Reflections (by Carl Jung)
- The Bible, particularly the Gospels of Jesus
- The writings of Ehei Dogen
- Autobiography: The Story of my Experiments with Truth (by Mahatma Gandhi)
- The sutras of the Buddha (I recommend starting with shorter ones like the Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra.)
- The Upanishads
- Come Away My Beloved (one of my favorite Christian devotionals)