

11TH HOUR AWAKENING

An evolutionary guide to a new humanity

ANAMIKOS

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An Evolutionary Guide to a New Humanity

Anamikos

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Contents

Dedication	8
Introduction	9
Chapter One	
The Reality	14
Chapter Two	
Understanding the Human Being.....	21
Chapter Three	
Choosing a Destination.....	30
Chapter Four	
Cause and Effect	38
Chapter Five	
Desire to Label	46
Chapter Six	
Desire to Be Right.....	55

Chapter Seven	
Desire to Win	67
Chapter Eight	
Desire for Power	76
Chapter Nine	
Desire to Feel Special	85
Chapter Ten	
Desire to Be Heard	94
Chapter Eleven	
Desire for Perfection	102
Chapter Twelve	
Desire to Resist Change	110
Chapter Thirteen	
Desire for Pleasure	117
Chapter Fourteen	
Desire to Multiply.....	127

Chapter Fifteen	
Desire to Be Accepted	133
Chapter Sixteen	
Desire to Be Helpful.....	141
Chapter Seventeen	
Desire for Enlightenment	150
Chapter Eighteen	
Desire to Take Shortcuts.....	161
Chapter Nineteen	
Desire to Complicate Life.....	171
Chapter Twenty	
Desire to Repent.....	179
Chapter Twenty-One	
Desire for Fulfillment.....	185
Chapter Twenty-Two	
Desire to Spread the Word	191

Chapter Twenty-Three	
Reincarnation	197
Chapter Twenty-Four	
Karmic Law	203
Chapter Twenty-Five	
Love.....	210
Chapter Twenty-Six	
Treating the Cause.....	217
Chapter Twenty-Seven	
Seeing the Big Picture.....	224
Chapter Twenty-Eight	
Mastering the Mind.....	230
Chapter Twenty-Nine	
Overcoming Fear	238
Chapter Thirty	
The Ten Enhancements	245

Chapter Thirty-One
Why Religion Will Not Save Us255

Chapter Thirty-Two
Stages of Unfoldment.....261

Chapter Thirty-Three
Personal Practices269

Chapter Thirty-Four
Collective Evolution.....285

Chapter Thirty-Five
How to Surrender299

Chapter Thirty-Six
Our Future.....305

Final Thought311

**This book is dedicated
to all humankind,
with a sincere wish
that we may awaken
to a new level of
consciousness and be
liberated, together.**



Introduction

Congratulations! You are the lucky owner of a human body.

So, what does that mean? Almost every type of machinery on the market today comes with an operator's manual, which explains its features, how to troubleshoot it if it does not work properly, how to care for it, and includes important safety warnings. The human body is far more intricate and challenging to operate than any machinery it ever created, and it seems like an oversight that we do not ourselves come with a manual. As a result, each owner is left to figure out how to operate it on their own, often copying other owners who are just as clueless.

This book is intended to serve as the long-awaited manual for humans, applicable to all years, makes, and models. Although many humans were responsible for putting the final product together, credit for the information belongs to a Higher Source. It is a heart gift to each and every human being. Therefore, please feel free to share it with as many fellow human body owners as possible. The more people who understand it, the more we can improve the world.

While the wisdom shared is nothing new, what is new is that it has been translated into modern language while using examples that modern

humans can relate to. Not all of us have the patience, time, or interest to study ancient wisdom texts, but we can spare time to read a book written in our own language, with examples that resonate with our experiences. Thus, this book is an attempt to summarize the wisdom teachings of our species in a way that is accessible to the maximum number of modern people.

Please be warned that there may be ideas that go against your belief system. If you come across any concepts that do not align with your own beliefs, please do not take offense or dismiss the book, but rather use it as an opportunity to reevaluate your perspective. After doing so, if you still feel that your beliefs are closer to the Truth, then at least you know they are based on valid deep reflection and not the result of having been misinformed.

This manual has manifested itself at this time for a reason. Its messages contain a sense of urgency, and it is crucial that you do your part to spread this higher knowledge. You are also called upon to put it into practice in your daily life. Knowledge not applied is knowledge wasted. Let your own experience and wisdom guide you as you read, and hopefully, re-read it over time as you find it helpful.

Let us start with the good news and bad news. The bad news is that our current civilization is approaching its end. The good news is we have a choice as to *how* it will end. We are at a critical time in our evolutionary cycle, and we do not have any time to waste. Higher knowledge is no longer a luxury reserved for the religious or the dying. In this age where millions of people can be wiped out by a single act of foolishness, there is an urgent calling for our species to individually and collectively make choices that will change our destiny.

We do not need reminders of the mistakes we continue to make as we live our daily lives or watch the news. What we need is a reminder of what we can do about it. We are returning to the origin of wisdom, before religion and culture, and political boundaries divided us. Our goal is to present these revelations in a simple and accessible manner, free from dogma, exotic language, or intellectual nitpicking. The knowledge is simple, its transmission in terms that the masses can appreciate and put into practice is what is difficult.

The reason a product comes with a manual is that the manufacturer wants users to use it correctly to gain maximum benefit from it. The reason this manual was created is the same. Remember, a manual is not intended to offer a magical solution to all of your problems. It is only a

guide that can help on your journey, so it is up to you to apply the knowledge to your own life. *That* is the hard part.

There are seemingly two parts to your success: the individual Self and the Collective. These two, as you will come to appreciate, are one and the same. Many people believe in heaven. Some people have been taught that heaven is a physical location. It is not. Heaven is a state one attains, not a place one travels to. This manual offers guidance to those seeking a state of peace, regardless of their beliefs. If you do not relate to the word “heaven,” then pick liberation, nirvana, moksha, paradise, or whatever word is more palatable to you.

You arrived on this planet, in the form of a human being, for a very specific reason. Your task is to discover what that reason is, and this manual is designed to assist you in doing so. The universe values you and wants you to live to your full potential. The only thing is, success is not automatically handed to you, so it is *you* who must do the work. There is no easy way around it. That is what makes the journey so treacherous and the reward evermore sweet.

In times of difficulty, please refer back to this manual. The sacred knowledge contained herein was put in writing for your benefit. When life

feels overwhelming and you are struggling to make progress, turn to this manual as a reminder of who you truly are and where you are headed. Even in your temporary failures, keep going. Giving up is not an option when the universe depends upon you.

The treasure you were born to seek is waiting to be discovered. Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find it; knock, and the door will be opened to you.

Nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come.

– Victor Hugo

Chapter One

The Reality



It is time for us to face a harsh reality. We are in serious trouble. We have allowed humanity to degrade to a level where we intentionally destroy our habitat, disrespect nature, and drive other Earth-dwellers to extinction as we pillage and slaughter members of our own species. Those who are in a position to solve the problems are unwilling, unmotivated, or unprepared to do so, while those who offer solutions are routinely ignored, criticized, mocked, threatened, or silenced. Most of the rest of us turn a blind eye and accept the status quo.

It only takes watching the daily news to realize where our priorities lie: who won a beauty pageant, which jobs pay the most money, which

celebrity held the most glamorous wedding, what the latest must-have gadget is, or which sports team won this year's championship. Amidst these headlines, we are inundated with advertisements for products that promise to make us look younger, thinner, or more attractive.

As the countdown to our self-destruction continues, it is both shocking and ironic that we boast about our intelligence, claiming that we are the smartest species on the planet. In fact, we even named ourselves "homo sapiens," or "wise man." That alone proves that there is nothing "sapiens" about us. It may be true that we have a larger brain than some species and perhaps a higher capacity for deductive reasoning, more complex verbal communication skills, or more manual dexterity, but to declare that we are the "smartest" or "wisest" is a foolish display of anthropocentrism.

What other species would intentionally promote greed among its kind and collectively destroy its environment and itself in an effort to satisfy that greed? What other species would derive pleasure in causing its own kind to suffer or devise ways to profit from its sister's or brother's misery? What other species would be so blind of its own foolishness to declare itself "the best?"

Throughout history, humanity has repeated the same mistakes over and over. We are no more wiser than we were thousands of years ago, except

that our interdependence has become stronger, our inequality larger, and our weapons more destructive. We are at an important crossroads. Unless we make quick and drastic changes, we are headed for catastrophe. This is neither a joke nor an over-exaggeration nor part of any doomsday conspiracy theory. It is the Reality. We witness the issues around us every day: pollution, corruption, over-consumption, industrial farming, war, violence, and various injustices committed against people and the planet. The question is, why are we all not moving together to correct them with a sense of urgency?

The answer, it seems, is that we have let the problem grow into such massive proportions that we do not know what to do. We have become so accustomed to our materialistic habits that we casually talk about the harmful effects of industrial pollution while eating a fast-food burger and drinking soda from a single-use container. We have become a species of hypocrites, complainers, and blamers. We blame the government for not regulating corporations, manufacturers for creating polluting products, or stores for selling such products. However, we conveniently overlook the fact that we are the ones who are actively consuming them and perpetuating the problem.

This is our final opportunity to reverse the catastrophic path that we

have set in motion. It is time to stop playing the blame game and to take responsibility. It is unfair to solely blame the industrial farmer for the mistreatment of animals, while we ourselves continue to reward them by purchasing their carcasses. Simply choosing a scapegoat, while convenient, will not excuse us for our own moral decay. We have created this situation together, now let us attempt to correct it together.

But, you may ask, what can we do as individuals? The answer is plenty. To find solutions, we must completely rethink our value system. We must awaken to the fact that there is something fundamentally wrong with a civilization that has come to value materialistic pursuits over human decency.

There is a fundamental flaw in a society that pays millions of dollars to professional fighters to watch them beat each other up, while teachers who instill moral values in children struggle to make ends meet. It is outrageous how those in public service, who are tasked with serving the citizens, instead exploit their authority to mistreat them, deceive them, and embezzle from them. It is unconscionable how countless people, who for the crime of having had a major illness, are losing their homes and being thrown out on the streets because of preposterous medical bills, while pharmaceutical and health care executives reward themselves with multi-

million dollar bonuses for a “job well done.”

It is discouraging when children are pushed to pick careers based solely on earning potential, rather than on how they can use their talents to contribute to society. It is disgraceful to hear people brag about how many hot dogs they were able to eat in an eating competition, as millions are starving in other countries. And it is deeply concerning when people passively accept the aforementioned issues simply because we have allowed a few unhealthy minds to contaminate our own. We can do better.

If a garden hose starts to leak, you can sometimes successfully wrap waterproof tape over the hole to patch it up. Soon thereafter, another hole may appear, and you may be able to wrap another piece of tape over it. This may work for a few minor holes, but what happens when more and more holes start to appear, and even the patched spots begin to leak again? Do we keep putting more tape over the holes, or do we take a step back and address the source of the problem?

In this analogy, the hose represents our civilization. Our predecessors and we have faced many challenges, and each time we have done our best to deal with those challenges by placing a patch over them. When those patches failed, we continued to place patches over them, hoping they would eventually fix the problem. But the hose still leaks, and it is now

leaking very badly. As we manage to patch up one hole, we increase pressure in the hose, which causes leaks in other areas.

There is a point where the hose is too far gone and can no longer be patched up. The only solution is to replace it with a new one. That is where we are today. We need to replace this irreparably broken civilization with a new one.

A civilization on the decline can meet its end in one of two ways: either by unconscious collapse or by conscious transformation. The former is the approach we currently are taking, through separatism, competition, and aggression. In this approach, the most selfish, immoral, ruthless, and violent among us will prevail, if they manage not to annihilate themselves in the process. But we as human beings have a second choice. We have the free will to make the transition happen consciously.

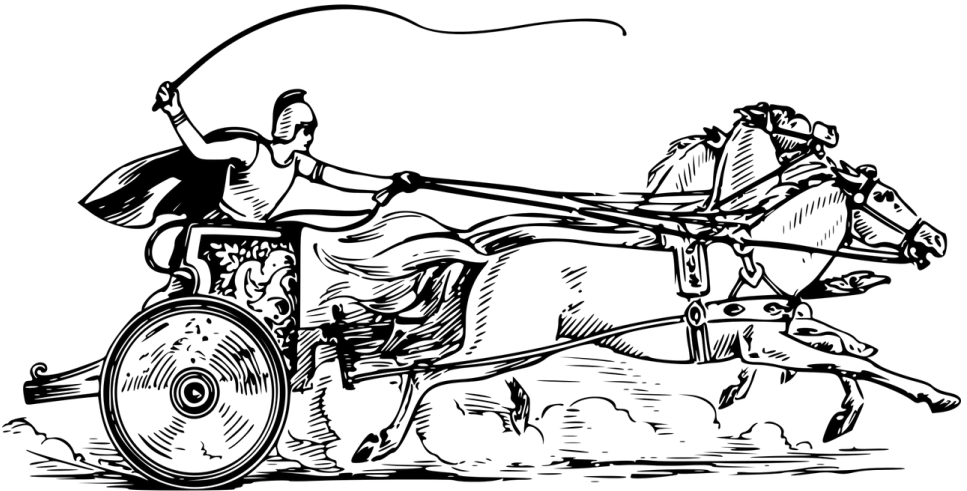
The second approach is through unity, cooperation, and love. It involves respecting our differences, working together towards a common goal, sharing our resources, learning from each other, and building a society that benefits all. The truth is, even the most selfish and destructive person would rather live in a civilization based on the second approach than the first. Every human being has a deeply ingrained desire to be loved and to live in peace. That is the nature of our species. The problem is that

many of us have never been taught how to do so.

What sets humans apart from other species is our remarkable ability to collaborate and shape our surroundings, whether for the greater good or for worse. In order to transform our civilization so that the maximum number of people can be happy and live in peace, it is important to first identify our weaknesses and then make a collective effort to minimize them. That is what we will try to do together. As we work to transform our future, we must not forget that we are one species, and that means our neighbor's shortcomings are also our own. With that in mind, let us begin this journey.

Wondering is the beginning of wisdom. – Socrates

Chapter Two
Understanding the Human Being



There is a well-known metaphor from ancient India that compares the human being to a chariot. In this metaphor, the chariot structure represents the physical body, the horses represent the senses, the reins represent the mind, and the charioteer represents the intellect. This metaphor explains that the human being is a combination of these aspects, and to reach our highest potential, it is important that we skillfully operate all of them together.

To modernize this metaphor, we can replace horses with an automobile and expand upon it. We will get to that in a moment. To fully appreciate the human experience, let us first and foremost realize that we are the operator of a body and not the body itself. This may seem like an odd concept, especially if you are hearing it for the first time.

One of our goals is to discover the true nature of the Self, or the soul. Many of us have a misconception as to what the soul is. We often hear people talk about “having” a soul. We have a body, and a mind, just as we have a house, car, spouse, clothes, job, or friends, but we do not “have” a soul. To say that we “have” one means that there is a separate “I” that possesses it. This then would raise the question, which is that “I” that possesses a soul? It certainly is not the ephemeral and ever-changing body. By definition, the soul is our essence. *We are* a soul.

You were bestowed with a body for a specific purpose: to transport you to your destination. Think of yourself as the driver of a car instead of the car. Your goal is not to make the car look nice, although it is your duty to take care of it so that it will get you around as long and as comfortably as possible. Remember, your body is simply a vehicle or tool, not your true Self. This understanding is fundamental to comprehending the knowledge that will be presented in this manual.

The human being is an animal. Like other animals, it has certain requirements, such as eating, sleeping, and procreating. Fulfilling these basic needs may be necessary for survival, but they are not the ultimate purpose of our existence. In the analogy of the automobile, adding gas, oil, or wiper fluid are things that need to be done, but we do not own the automobile for the purpose of adding gas, oil, or wiper fluid.

The human being has sensory organs to perceive sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. These senses are important to experiencing the world, but stimulating these senses is not the ultimate purpose of our existence. It is similar to the temperature gauge, speedometer, and gas-level sensor, being useful features of a car but not the primary purposes of owning a car.

Most of us wish to be happy, yet why do so many of us find ourselves miserable? Hospital emergency rooms are filled with patients from suicide

attempts, substance overdoses, mental breakdowns, and other forms of self-induced trauma. We preach about loving and respecting our neighbor, yet we hear about various hate-filled acts and injustices on a daily basis. Why is it that what we preach and what we practice are so out of sync?

To find answers, let us examine both our individual life and the state of society as a whole. Let us correctly define what happiness is and figure out whether there is a possibility that we can each be happy without it being at the expense of others. And if there were such a possibility, the possibility that a maximum number of us can be happy at the same time, that is what needs to be made each of our highest priority.

Many of us dedicate our lives to accumulating material possessions: a large house or houses, luxury vehicles, the latest gadgets, impressive outfits, custom-made furniture, collector's artwork, expensive jewelry, and so on. Others take great pleasure in watching the balance grow in our bank account each month. We make great efforts to attain and maintain our possessions, often sacrificing sleep, health, family, freedom, moral values, and even our own happiness in the process.

Many people confuse pleasure with happiness. The former is a positive sensory experience that relies on external stimulation. It will end when the stimulation ends, returning the subject to an unfulfilled condition. The

seeker of such pleasure will soon become bored with the amount or form of one pleasure and will seek to replace it with bigger and better forms of pleasure.

Happiness, on the other hand, is a state. True happiness is independent of external circumstances and sensory input. It cannot be quantified or compared, as there is no such thing as “bigger” or “better” happiness. Happiness cannot be attained by *doing*. Most of us know instinctively that money cannot buy happiness, but few are wise enough to quit trying. After all, the senses are very powerful persuaders.

Some people may argue that our purpose in life is not about acquiring possessions, but it is about acquiring knowledge. Those of us who take this approach may spend years in school collecting degrees, certificates, and titles. Some will proudly decorate the entrance of their home or office with various certificates, trophies, plaques, licenses, letters of recognition, and awards in the hopes of convincing themselves and others how successful they are.

In this category, you will find those of us who like to recite wise words from memory, who sing the loudest or a fraction ahead of everyone else in houses of worship, or who are quick to offer our expert opinion, no matter what the subject may be. We may have fancy titles, respected professions,

and plenty of admirers, and we may be able to perform impressive feats, but the downside is that we often become arrogant, judgmental, self-righteous, impatient, angry, and mean-spirited. Think about the religious leaders or scholars you know who fell into this trap.

Studies have shown that individuals with high levels of educational achievement may be more susceptible to suicidal behavior following public shame or personal failure. They put themselves on such a high pedestal that the most innocuous comment by someone can be taken as a sign of disrespect and send them into a mental crisis. It is obvious, then, that knowledge in itself does not bring us happiness.

Ancient saints and sages have taught us that the only way to attain happiness is through wisdom. Few people prioritize seeking wisdom because it is not seen as a lucrative career path. Many people would readily take on hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt and sacrifice years of their life to be trained as a doctor, lawyer, or engineer, but how many would do so to become wise?

And even if someone chooses to seek wisdom as their primary goal, they face the question of how to go about attaining it. Genuine teachers of wisdom do not engage in mass marketing of wisdom courses for profit, as such actions would go against the very essence of wisdom. You can be

certain that anyone who promises to make us wise if we pay a huge sum of money is someone who has yet to attain wisdom for him/herself.

Wisdom cannot be learned by taking courses and passing exams. It can only be acquired through conscious, long-term, dedicated practical effort. It is paradoxical in that those who recognize the value of wisdom are often those who have already acquired a good amount of it.

For the rest of us, while we may enjoy listening to occasional talks by wise people and like what they say, it is no more than a form of entertainment. When it is over, we forget about it and go back to our materialistic ways, telling ourselves, “Great teachings! I hope more people follow it,” or “I already know all of that, I just don’t have time (or patience, interest, desire, energy, etc.) to practice it.”

An intriguing human phenomenon is that many people who have received wisdom teachings tend to believe that they have already mastered them, even without having exerted any real effort. Sometimes they are so convinced of their own enlightenment that they give themselves impressive titles, adorn themselves in exotic outfits, and start offering spiritual guidance to others.

As relevant analogies, let us consider these questions: What if

someone called himself a cyclist and could tell you everything about bicycles but had never actually ridden one himself? What if a surgeon who went through years of medical school never actually held a scalpel? What if a chef memorized hundreds of recipes but had never actually prepared any of them?

You probably would not call such people experts in their fields, would you? Yet, many of today's wisdom teachers simply repeat words they have learned from books without actually devoting the necessary time and effort to fully comprehend and master them. That is why we continue to hear about spiritual leaders committing foolish, self-serving, and immoral acts.

Just as with learning any skill, simply memorizing texts is pointless unless one has a deep understanding of the teachings and then practices them diligently until they become ingrained in one's nature. A parrot can be taught to recite words, but that does not mean it understands them. A wise person is not someone who gives impressive talks about wisdom. It is someone who actually made efforts to put those teachings into practice and succeeded to a high degree.

The good news in this all is that everyone has a shot at acquiring wisdom. It is not reserved for the Ph.D. or someone who earned top grades

in school. One must not confuse wisdom and intelligence, as they are very different matters. Intelligent or educated people are known to do foolish things, while there are countless wise people around the globe who, because of their life circumstances, happen to be illiterate.

Before the Internet became widely available, wisdom-seekers often found it necessary to travel the world searching for a master to study under. Wisdom teachings were oftentimes not readily available and, in some cases, were imparted only under a shroud of secrecy. In today's age, that is no longer the case.

Nowadays, we all have access to pretty much the same resources. It is just a matter of doing our homework, finding the teachings that make sense to us, and, most importantly, diligently applying them to our lives. This book is only one of many that will help you along the way.

What you seek is seeking you. – Rumi

Chapter Three

Choosing a Destination



If you decide to go on vacation, one of the first things you do is to choose your destination. Let us say you decided on Greece. Once you've picked a location, it is important to start thinking about the logistics of your trip. You will most likely need to book a flight in advance and make sure you have all the necessary travel documents. You will also need to arrange transportation to and from the airport, as well as find a place to stay during your trip. Taking care of these details ahead of time will help ensure a smooth and enjoyable vacation.

You would not say on the first day of your vacation, "Gee, I think I will go to Greece today" and hop into your car in the hopes that you will somehow find your way there by following street signs. While it is

obvious that leaving for vacation without any plans is unwise, many of us approach life in a similar fashion, much like a driver pulling out of the driveway with no clear destination or route in mind. This often results in a journey with little sense of purpose or direction.

In planning their vacation, others may select a destination in advance and carefully plan every detail, only to learn after spending all the time and effort to get there that it was not what they had hoped for. Many people base their life's destination on factors such as earning potential, fame, respect, or power, without considering the most fundamental question: *Will it make me happy?* By neglecting to prioritize their own happiness, they risk pursuing a path that ultimately leaves them feeling unfulfilled.

A young person just starting out may say, "I want to attend a top-notch university and get a good education. Then I want to become a doctor to help people while being respected and making good money. I want to buy a huge house overlooking the ocean, a few sports cars, and custom-made furniture from Italy with that money. I want to wear tailored clothes, take yearly vacations abroad with my wonderful spouse and two kids, and I want to be able to afford whatever I want, because all that would make me happy."

While it may seem like a solid plan, is it really? We often hear about seemingly successful people who have faced challenges such as divorce, custody battles, being ousted from a prestigious position, endless legal troubles, criminal convictions, and substance abuse. Some end up taking their own life. These stories serve as a reminder that success and happiness are not always synonymous, and that a singular focus on achievement can lead to unforeseen consequences. We may ask, “Why would a person who seemed to have it all end up like that?” The underlying reason is that they often make the mistake of confusing pleasure with happiness.

They worked hard chasing their dreams and got what they worked for, only to discover that what they ended up with was not what they really wanted. They may still try to fool themselves and continue to seek more possessions, fame, respect, and power, thinking that perhaps the problem is that they do not yet have enough. Only, the more they try, the more unhappy they become until and unless they figure out they are on the wrong path. There is nothing wrong with wanting to be happy. We just need to go about it in the right way.

So, if money does not buy happiness, and education, career, fame, respect, and power will not make us happy, where does that leave us?

What *is* the secret to finding that elusive state of happiness? Saints and sages throughout human history agree that it is attained through a process of seeking that leads to spiritual enlightenment. This is our human destination, and our reason for being on this planet. All the other things that happen to us, like marriages, births, schooling, graduations, careers, relocations, sicknesses, deaths, etc., are but incidental details.

Returning to the automobile analogy, the primary purpose of our owning a car is to get us from Point A to Point B. When going from our house to the grocery store, for example, there are usually several routes we can take. Some roads may be smoother or get us there quicker than others, but as long as we get there safely and in a reasonable amount of time, there is no one “correct” way of getting there. Likewise, as long as we fulfill our life’s purpose, the multitude of physical paths that we may choose from are of minor importance.

Whom we marry or do not marry, how many children we have or do not have, what school or career we choose, what country we live in, what language we speak, or what religion we choose to follow can all be equated to the scenery along our journey. Yes, they are part of our experience, but the point is that we go to the grocery store to purchase groceries, not to enjoy the scenery. There is nothing wrong with enjoying

the scenery, so long as we do not get so caught up in it that we neglect to reach the grocery store.

This is a simple but profound revelation, so simple and so profound that some of us may miss it. Others may be curious or even agree with the idea but are not willing or ready to make the leap. For such persons, the material world has top priority. After all, the material world offers sensory gratification, no matter how superficial or short-lived it may be.

Enlightenment is the destiny of every soul. Each of us has the option to take the short or long path. The short path involves conscious and dedicated effort. Even though we may call it the “short” path, it consists of a lifetime of effort. The long path involves struggling through seemingly endless pain and suffering through countless lifetimes. Many of us are not willing or ready to make the conscious efforts required and consequently end up taking the unconscious path.

Picture a young mother who says she is very serious about becoming enlightened. One day, a well-meaning friend invites her to a potentially life-changing workshop taught by a spiritual master, but it happens to fall on the same day as the local street fair. She declines the invitation apologetically, saying she has already made other plans.

On the day of the street fair, if this mother got a call that her child was involved in an accident and had been taken to a hospital by ambulance, the street fair would suddenly mean nothing to her. She would drop everything and rush to the hospital. Such are priorities. We all have time to spend on conscious practices, and it is just a matter of prioritizing.

Some of us may be intrigued by the idea of enlightenment but nevertheless prefer to sit at home watching TV, attend sporting events, go out with friends, or work overtime rather than take advantage of opportunities for personal growth. If that is the case, we cannot really claim that we are serious about it. If we are waiting until our children grow up, or we retire, or our spouse dies before we start seeking, chances are we will never attain the goal in this lifetime. One must make time instead of excuses.

Aside from the rare individuals born with special insight, it takes a little convincing to get people to accept the material world as secondary. Often we must be driven to that point. Sometimes we hit that moment when a natural disaster destroys everything we own. Sometimes it is when we get fired from our dream job, our spouse walks out on us, or we nearly die of an accident or illness.

We reach a point where we are so sick and tired of our current life, so

disappointed and discouraged by what is happening in the world around us, or so disenchanted, perhaps even to the point of considering suicide. Unless we are driven to enlightenment, it may inevitably take a second seat to pleasure-seeking.

When something profoundly disturbs us, that is our inner wisdom screaming for change. Anyone who is satisfied with their materialistic existence will never have enough motivation or reason to seek something higher. We can use our disapproval of the materialistic world as a catalyst to drive us to seek a higher purpose.

Does this mean that we should withdraw completely from the materialistic world? For centuries, the wise have debated whether enlightenment is best achieved through a solitary life away from civilization or through living amongst fellow humans. Some have chosen the former while others have chosen the latter. Thus, this seems strictly a matter of personal choice, depending on our natural tendencies. Most of us choose to remain part of society for practical reasons.

Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, “A smooth sea never made a skilled sailor.” The material world is a great school where everyone we encounter is either there to support us or to teach us something. We get tons of hands-on training with life’s lessons, such as patience, acceptance,

restraint, compassion, forgiveness, and gratitude.

Some may ask, “If the material world is secondary, why should we care about improving civilization? Why not just concentrate on our own enlightenment and not bother trying to fix the world?” These are valid questions, and the answer depends on our level of consciousness. If we have reached a state where we are unaffected by events of the material world, which may include falling victim to a crime, being blamed for someone else’s mistake, or witnessing an injustice, then we may no longer need to focus on the material level. If that is not the case, then we still have work to do.

Becoming enlightened does not mean that we suddenly cease to feel pain. So long as we experience the effects of this illusory material world, it would make sense to improve it for ourself and for other sentient beings. Just because it is secondary does not mean it does not serve a purpose.

The goal is to remain detached from it as we experience it, much like an actor playing a role in a play. Jesus Christ must have meant this when he said, “Be in the world, but not of the world.” Note that even someone at his level of consciousness actively worked to improve the world. In fact, it is through efforts to improve the world that we end up improving ourself.

*Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance
and conscientious stupidity. – Martin Luther King Jr.*

Chapter Four Cause and Effect



If you were on a boat out at sea, and the boat started to slowly take in water, what would you do? Would you not first try to identify where the water was coming in from and then try to figure out how to stop it from coming in? It would be foolish to immediately grab a bucket and frantically start scooping the water out of the boat and returning it to sea without addressing the cause. You could be scooping forever, unless the water enters quicker than you can scoop it out, in which case your boat would sink.

This example illustrates how our civilization is dealing with its problems. We are treating effects without addressing causes. This is

primarily because we have “cause” and “effect” confused. We focus on reducing the symptoms of a problem without addressing the cause. As a result, the problem never gets resolved. Our society has many issues: violence, climate change, overpopulation, pollution, corruption, deforestation, discrimination, crime, etc. Surely you can think of a few more to add to the list. Chances are, whatever issues you can think of are effects and not causes of the problem.

When most of us think about doing a good deed (feeding the homeless, donating to our favorite charity, protesting against an injustice, etc.), we focus on the effect, not the cause. There is nothing wrong with it, as long as we are aware that we are working on the effect instead of the cause and are okay with it. As in the analogy of scooping water out of a sinking boat, working on an effect never leads to a solution. For example, we may feed hundreds of homeless people each week, which is a commendable act, but that effort will do nothing to eradicate homelessness.

Even to decide to be a good person, or a bad person for that matter, concerns an effect, not a cause. You can try all you want to “become a good person,” but it cannot be done. Why? Because, again, you cannot save the boat without first finding the leak. In this case, it is necessary to first find out what causes someone to be labeled “a good person,” and then

make efforts to do actions that would result in oneself being qualified as such. However, we may soon realize that even this label is highly subjective. For instance, when we help the homeless by offering them food on the streets, some people may see us as evil for blocking the street, attracting the homeless to their neighborhood, or doing it for self-serving reasons.

So, if all that we mentioned are effects of our problems, then what is the cause? The answer is *ignorance*. It is ignorance of the true purpose of our being on Earth and the fact that we are all interconnected fragments of the same reality.

To explain this point, ancient sages have compared the waves of the ocean with the ocean itself. In the beginning, each wave sees itself as a separate entity. One may be bigger than the other, longer than the other, or faster than the other. They are all separate.

When ignorance is removed, each wave is seen as part of the ocean. There is no need to compete with, impress, or criticize others, because they are one and the same. The idea that we are separate is the root of our problems, and to get people to realize this is to address the cause. Coming to terms with our ignorance is equivalent to discovering the leak in the boat, so we can begin the process of repairing it.

Our educational system focuses on teaching sciences, mathematics, languages, and other studies which require memorization of information, but how many classes are taught on self-mastery? How many courses are taught on the importance of being ethical, loving and respecting each other, cultivating patience, or appreciating our differences? These things may be introduced as passing commentaries of a good educator, but they are not part of the curriculum in most schools.

Some may say that sports plays this role. While it is true that sports teaches one to push oneself physically and mentally, it does little to create harmony within a society. In fact, it encourages competition, tribalism (my group is better than yours), aggressiveness, impatience, rudeness, violence, and egoism. All of these qualities lead to the degradation of a society. While a casual game of volleyball with friends can be an enjoyable pastime, things can quickly turn ugly when it becomes a competition against strangers with high stakes involved, such as a trophy, reward money, or personal recognition. Look at all the violence that happens at sporting events.

The same can be said about many activities, such as spelling bees, piano lessons, dancing classes, etc. A 6-year-old child may be interested in learning to play the piano. Her parents sign her up for lessons and notice

how quickly she improves. Now they want her to compete. They pressure her to practice harder and sign her up for competitions. For the child, it may no longer be a fun activity. She may no longer be playing for the pure joy of it, but to please her parents or to beat other children at it.

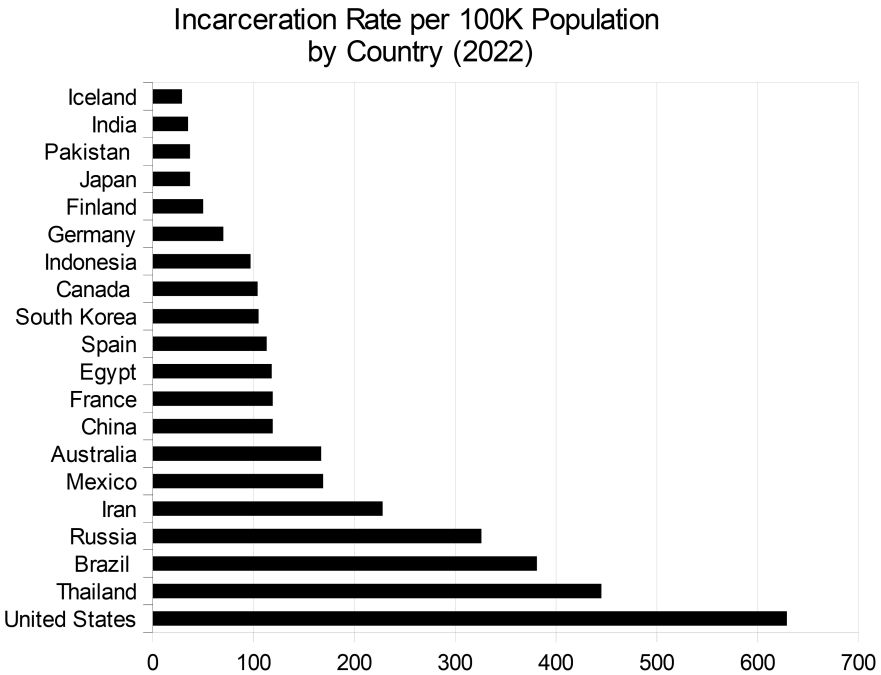
Competition usually has few winners and many losers. It can lead to disappointment for those who do not win. This disappointment can turn into depression, particularly if the loss was due to our own mistake or incompetence.

Adulthood is no better for the child raised to believe that life is a series of competitions. Drivers on the streets cut each other off to “win” their imaginary competition. Shoppers speed up their pace when they see another person approaching the checkout line simultaneously so that they will get there first and “win” the race. People debate to “win” a discussion instead of for mutual enrichment. This “win-at-all-cost” attitude becomes a way of life.

When we try to solve the effect of a problem instead of addressing the cause, we introduce more laws, restrictions, law enforcement, penalties, arrests, and prisons. As a result, we increase the amount of fear and distrust among our neighbors. We increasingly try to restrict each other’s liberties and criticize each other’s actions, making life more inconvenient

and unpleasant for all of us. We also create more criminals.

According to the International Centre for Prison Studies, the United States has the highest per-capita incarceration rate in the world. And according to the U.S. Bureau of Justice statistics, during its peak year in 2008, one out of every 133 Americans was incarcerated! While Americans account for only 4 percent of the global population, we account for nearly



a quarter of the global incarcerated population.

Let us look at it another way. In the last one hundred years, the US population has grown by roughly 300 percent. During the same time, the US incarcerated population grew by an astonishing 2100 percent! Are Americans really that much more “evil” than citizens of other countries, and seven times more “evil” than our compatriots from 100 years ago?

Next, let us think of the mess we created with passwords. Once upon a time – early in the computer age – there was no such thing as passwords. Then perhaps a few people accessed someone’s account without permission. We thought we would make it more difficult for them by asking for a password. As time passed, we started wanting to increase security by asking for more complex passwords, then passwords with numbers mixed in, then with special characters mixed in. We not only need passwords for our bank accounts but also to sign onto our computers, check our e-mail, place on-line orders or pay bills.

Later we decided that, when choosing a password, we would not allow the user to include their name, spouse or child or pet’s name, birth dates, account numbers, social security numbers, or something easier to guess. For additional security, we have to change that password every few months, and we cannot use the same password twice, so we have to come

up with a new one that is equally impossible to remember. So we write down passwords on a piece of paper and stick them to our monitor to have them when needed. Sometimes we get locked out of our account even though we are using the correct password and have to contact the institution to reset it.

This “password paranoia” is a sign of modern madness. If we continue on this track, soon will come a day when passwords will be 30-digits long, with a minimum of 5 numbers, 3 special characters, and 3 to 5 capital letters, with no letter combination that forms any common word. If you mistype the password more than once, you will automatically be locked out and have to wait for 24-hours before trying again. If you mistype it the next time, you will have to report to the institution where you have the account in person and present two photo IDs before they will unlock it for you.

There comes a point when we collectively must ask ourselves, how much good is this doing us versus how much inconvenience is this causing us? Can we not come up with a better solution? We do not need any more laws, enforcers, or prisons to deal with our problems. In fact, we already have way too many of them. We have the right intentions, we just need to change our approach, because our current approach clearly does not work.

*How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before
starting to improve the world. – Anne Frank*

Chapter Five Desire to Label



Observing grocery store clerks as they bag their customers' purchases is a fascinating study of human behavior. If someone were to purchase 10 cans of soup and 2 loaves of bread, a majority of clerks would put the 10 heavy cans in one bag while placing the 2 light loaves of bread in another, even though it clearly creates a weight imbalance and makes the bags difficult to carry. Why do we do this? Why can we not think of balancing the load by placing half of the cans in each bag? The answer is, in simple terms, because of labeling.

Our highly developed language capacity is what differentiates us from most other species. It is said that the English language contains about

170,000 commonly used words. The count would be well over a million if you add anglicized foreign words, specialized words, slang, abbreviations, onomatopoeia, etc. Language is a handy tool and has helped build our civilization to where it is today, but like any tool, it has its dangers.

From the smallest nanoparticle to the vast solar system and beyond, we have a name for practically everything we are aware of in our environment. Our brain is overwhelmed by all that is going on around us at any given moment. We cannot possibly process all the information available, so our brain takes shortcuts. It turns its focus towards a few activities that it finds most pertinent, generalizes whenever it can, and does not process at all information that it deems unimportant.

Whenever our organs of perception send information to the brain, the brain tries to identify that information by labeling it, so that we can relate it to our subjective past experiences. People from different countries may use different labels, or their labels may represent different experiences and conjure different feelings than ours. In one country, a rabbit may bring rise to thoughts of a cute and cuddly pet, while in another, it may bring thoughts of an ingredient in a recipe.

On the upside, using labels can save time and make our brain function more efficiently by allowing us to avoid evaluating similar information

repeatedly. On the downside, it can cause us to generalize and operate on information that may not be true in a particular situation. This is how stereotyping and judgmentalism occur.

To consider this point further, let us look at a common societal problem and our solution to it. We feel that a particular intersection could be safer if drivers on the less-traveled road stopped to let traffic on the main street have the right-of-way (a sensible observation), so we put up a stop sign on the less-traveled road. It works fine when there is a certain amount of traffic on the main street, but there are times when there is no traffic, and at those moments, the stop sign serves no useful purpose. In fact, one could argue that the sign is actually causing more harm than good because it causes drivers to stop unnecessarily. And when they do, they will need to accelerate from that stop, which results in more environmental pollution and wear and tear on both the roads and the automobile.

Early one sunny weekend morning, a car approaches the stop sign. The driver has an unobstructed view of the intersection, and there is no traffic in sight in either direction. She is the only one on the road. She slows down to make the turn onto the main road without coming to a full stop.

Unfortunately for her, a police officer was stationed at the intersection, concealed from view, to catch any drivers who failed to stop at the stop

sign. He knew people often went through that sign without stopping, especially when no other traffic was in sight. Like a hungry hawk swooping down on its prey, he eagerly chases after her and gives her a ticket. If the officer were honest, he would admit she did nothing reckless or dangerous, but that did not matter. He feels a need to punish her for disregarding a label.

Did the driver do anything morally wrong or dangerous by not coming to a full stop? Did she deserve to be punished for not following a label that served no useful purpose at that moment? Could we not argue that the police officer was the unethical one who was out to harass a citizen, fully aware that she did nothing to put anyone in danger?

Whenever we rely too much on labels, we do not consider why they were put there in the first place. Some of us get so intent on following labels that we become mentally lazy and stop applying common sense. We end up following rules that make no sense, simply because someone wrote them down. Let us take a look at another example of labeling from a clause that was printed on a university's promotional material:

“(XXX) is an affirmative-action, equal-opportunity employer. Our programs and materials are open to all without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, gender identity, religion, age, height, weight,

disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, marital status, family status, or veteran status.”

Let us compare this to the anti-discrimination clause introduced in the Civil Rights Act of 1964:

“Title VII prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin.”

On first thought, it may seem like the first clause is much more inclusive and thus preferable to the second. Let us think again. Imagine someone with a large nose who feels that he could be discriminated against because of it. He may have a valid reason to feel that way. So, should we add a clause to protect against discrimination based on the size or shape of our body parts? Or perhaps persons who stutter, dress uniquely, or speak with an accent may feel that they could be discriminated against because of it. Should we continue adding all these factors that differentiate us so that each can become a “protected group?”

By comparing these two clauses, we can see how the bandage effect that was mentioned earlier works. We try to protect one group that can be discriminated against out of good intentions. Another group says, “Why protect them and not us?” Thinking we are doing the right thing (or

wishing to appear politically correct), we try to put more and more patches on the clause so that we cover every group to the point where the clause becomes absurd.

Why not simply state, “We do not discriminate against anyone?” Or better yet, why not remove the clause entirely? An organization does not become non-discriminatory by advertising that it is non-discriminatory, just as someone does not become a good person by telling everyone, “I am a good person.”

We can also discuss the contradiction in the university’s statement, where on the one hand, they say that they are an “equal opportunity” employer who does not discriminate while simultaneously claiming to be an “affirmative action” employer that gives preferential treatment to one group over another. By definition, you can either be an equal opportunity employer or an affirmative action employer, but not both.

This brings to mind the following story of a king who loved labels:

Once upon a time, there was a king who ruled his kingdom with an iron fist. He had a rule book covering every aspect of his subjects’ lives, from when they should get up and go to bed to what kinds of outfits they should wear for different occasions to how

they should greet the king.

The rule book was as thick as a phone book and continued to grow, with new rules being added from time to time as the king saw fit. The townspeople were expected to know all the rules, and those caught breaking them were publicly punished. The king's servants walked on thin ice each day, always in fear that they may inadvertently violate a rule and be subjected to punishment.

One day, the king went out for a walk with his entourage. They walked on an embankment along a river, enjoying the scenery, when suddenly, the king tripped on a tree root and tumbled into the river. "Help!" he yelled, "I can't swim!" Members of the entourage instinctively rushed toward the king to rescue him, but then all of them froze in place. "What is the correct protocol for saving the king?!" one asked. "I don't think we are allowed to touch him!" "What does the rule book say?"

One servant – who was responsible for carrying the king's rule book at all times – exclaimed, "Here's the rule book. Let's quickly look it up!" After frantically flipping pages, he yelled, "What chapter would it be under?!" One said, "Try 'walking with the king.'" Another said, "No, I think it would be under 'approaching

the king’.” As the entourage flipped pages searching for an answer, the king was washed down the river, never to be seen again.

The only way we will solve the problem of relying on labeling to the point of absurdity is to start putting our brain to use. Any type of judgment based on “All X are Y” needs to be questioned. Each situation should be evaluated on its own merit instead of relying on a rule book. In many cases, just a few seconds to think before acting is all that it takes.

We often hear about racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, religious intolerance, and various forms of label-based discrimination. The perpetrators are not only those who instigate discriminatory acts but in trying to defend themselves, the victims themselves often become perpetrators. It is essential to realize that racism cannot be resolved with racism. Sexism cannot be resolved with sexism. Hatred cannot be resolved with hatred. To truly overcome these issues, we need to make them non-issues. The way to overcome injustice is not to fight it. It is to refuse to participate in it.

Non-participation does not mean doing nothing. It means to refuse to assume the role of victim or perpetrator and to take responsibility for our part in changing the situation. This must be done through non-violent

means. After all, if we are to make the world a better place, it has to be better for everyone, including the perpetrators of injustice. It cannot be good for one person or group at the expense of others because then we will just be playing musical chairs with the problem.

The goal is to go beyond the “us-versus-them” mentality and see any issue as a joint problem. It does not matter whether we are the victim or perpetrator. The fact is that a problem exists, that we are both affected by it, and that we both can play a role in eradicating it. Only when we take a step back and see the problem without taking sides are we able to come up with real solutions.

It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society. – Jiddu Krishnamurti

Chapter Six

Desire to Be Right



Along with the desire to label comes the desire to be right. Feeling that we are right is good for our ego. And when we are right, that usually means someone else must be wrong. If we walk down a hallway without paying attention and trip over someone's bag, it is their fault for putting it there. If we cut someone off while driving and they honk at us, we get angry at them for being impatient. If someone points out a mistake that we made, we feel a need to downplay it, change the subject, make excuses, argue with them, point out their flaws, or blame it on someone else.

We humans have developed a taste for the blame game. Just take a look at our politicians. The reason is because blaming offers double

benefits. It takes the negative attention away from us while also allowing us to feel superior to the person whom we choose to blame. In our desire to be right, we often unjustly search for scapegoats, sometimes blaming those who had little or nothing to do with the situation.

Our desire to rectify what we deem as “inappropriate” conduct in others has led to the creation of numerous laws that now require the expertise of specialists to interpret. These specialists spend years in law school and must pass tough exams to be licensed. In addition to rules that our country, state, county, or city impose on us, different organizations that we belong to each have their own sets of rules, which may range anywhere from sensible to absurd.

Schools have dress codes that are often ambiguous and arbitrarily enforced. Teachers can send children home because they do not like the message printed on their T-shirt, for having a hole in their clothes, or for wearing a skirt that is an inch shorter than the rules allow, which some teachers actually measure with a ruler. It has come to the point where what a child is wearing often is more of a concern than her education.

When you buy a house nowadays, many are part of a homeowners’ association. Homeowners’ associations may impose restrictions on the colors that we may paint our house, the plants that we may grow in our

yard, and the hours that we may park in our own driveway. If we break any rules, we can be fined and/or ordered to spend time and expense correcting the infraction. Some rules are undoubtedly put in place for the safety or convenience of the community, while others only serve to impose one person's or group's personal preferences upon others.

Once, the president of a homeowners' association knocked on a homeowner's door to tell her that the color she had just painted her deck was unacceptable. She needed to repaint it with an approved color or she would be fined. The problem was, the homeowner had already taken the time and effort to color-match it to her neighbor's deck using paint swatches. The top of the neighbor's deck was faded from sun exposure, so she color-matched it to a non-faded area.

So, when told that the color she had chosen was unacceptable, she asked if the color of her neighbor's deck was. The president of the association said yes. The homeowner then explained that she matched the color to her neighbor's deck using paint swatches, so they were exactly the same color. The president responded, "No, they are not. Your paint looks too new."

Astounded by the response, the homeowner matter-of-factly told him, "Then please check again in another year or two, and it will be the right

color.” Perhaps the association realized the senselessness of their assertion and did not pursue the case, but she was one of the lucky ones. One can write an entire book on the irrationality of homeowners’ associations.

Let us consider the term “eyesore.” Many of us use this word to complain about our neighbors. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines an eyesore as “something offensive to view.” What a uniquely human concept! We do not like our neighbor’s tomato plant poking over their fence, the boat parked in their driveway, or the plastic flamingo they decorated their front yard with, so we feel a need to have them take corrective action or punish them for it. Some neighbors even call the police to address such “offenses.”

This “I-don’t-like-your-outfit-so-you-need-to-change” attitude is not only an infringement on another person’s business, when it becomes accepted practice in a society, people abandon their capacity to reason. The parable in the last chapter about the king who ended up drowning because of his fixation on rules is a good example.

Although the parable may have seemed like a lighthearted joke, it effectively captures where our society is headed with regulations. A truly ethical society would not force its citizens to live according to a rule book. There are too many variables in life for a one-size-fits-all solution. There

is clearly a difference between rebellious teenagers who steal for entertainment and struggling parents who steal to feed their hungry children. The act is the same, so should the two be punished equally? If not, how do you put that – and every other variation imaginable and unimaginable – into written law?

We hear about mandatory sentences for certain crimes and “zero-tolerance” policies against certain behavior. On the surface, they sound like good ideas, but are they really? Each infraction has different circumstances and thus merits its own consideration. But when everything must be done according to a published rule book, those in a position to decide on a punishment are denied the opportunity to exercise reason and show compassion. They must do everything “by the book,” even when their conscience tells them it is the wrong choice in that particular situation.

Dangerous is a society that relies on laws for moral guidance. In a highly evolved society (which we strive for), its members do not try to control or impose rules upon each other. We accept each other’s choices, even though they may not always agree with our own (provided of course, that nobody or nothing is harmed in the process). More rules mean more restrictions, fines, punishments, injustices, inconvenience, and

unpleasantness for all.

But isn't it necessary to have laws against various forms of crime or senseless acts that exist? In a highly evolved society, the answer would be no. Why? Because the fact that bringing harm to others is wrong would be so deeply ingrained in everyone's consciousness that a rule book explaining this would be pointless. If someone does wrong, everyone, including the perpetrator, would know it is wrong. The perpetrator would feel so ashamed that he would mete out his own punishment and voluntarily make amends. Society may guide the perpetrator in deciding what amends would be equitable, but there would be no need for an authority to impose punishment by referring to a rule book.

To elaborate on this point, let us take the example of murder. Even in our primitive society, most people know that taking another person's life is wrong. If the laws against murder were suddenly repealed today, most of us would not start going around killing people. Maybe a few of the more unconscious among us would, but for the average person, the laws against murder can be considered irrelevant.

Unfortunately, we still live in a primitive society. We are far from a point where we can suddenly eliminate all of our laws, but that is the ultimate goal. At some point, humanity must become conscious enough

that it no longer feels a need to rely on crutches called laws. Let us come to our senses and start reducing the number of rules that we impose upon each other, rather than increasing them. We already have way too many.

One of the biggest threats to humanity is war, so let us now think about the causes of war. In ancient times, it was usually about land disputes. One tribe decided to take over land occupied by another, perhaps with better climatic conditions or better access to water or food. Battles were fought with spears and rocks, and they were personal. With technological advancement, wars are fought nowadays with bombs, assault rifles, grenades, and missiles. Millions of people can potentially be wiped out by the pressing of a few buttons.

With our technology, we can also feed every person on the planet if we so desired. Not a single person needs to go hungry. So then, what are the reasons for modern warfare? The following may be a blunt oversimplification, but it will give an idea.

Highly unconscious people who invented ways to profit from warfare convince the rest of us that we need it. They influence our politicians and public opinion by spreading negative news about another country, religion, culture, race, or other label. They own the media, so this is easy for them to do. They continue this on a long-term basis so that the

negative image of that group becomes deeply ingrained in society. People end up hating groups of people that they never even met.

They recruit young men and women from the working class who need the means to support themselves, give them titles and uniforms, and get them to do their dirty work, not paying them out of their own pocket but using taxpayers' money with the aid of unconscious politicians. They convince everyone that the recruits are there to "protect and serve our country." Recruits are trained to obey orders. Rational thinking is highly discouraged.

These recruits are convinced that they are doing good, as they destroy innocent people in foreign lands who have done nothing wrong to them, or fight soldiers on the other side who were hired by their own leaders under similar pretenses. There is no other reason for them to fight a war – to kill strangers and destroy their homes – other than to receive a paycheck.

If anyone else were to commit the same acts, they would be imprisoned for a long time. Yet, because a government employed them, they are labeled heroes. The rest of us have been taught to thank them for their service. When we are able to see what is really happening, we would be comforting these soldiers for having been used as a pawn. Statistics show that the suicide rate among military personnel is a serious concern.

We can only deceive human beings for so long until their inner conflict becomes too much to bear.

Industrialized countries have a history of trying to “civilize” the rest of the world. We go into countries that are not as materially developed as our own, label their people as being “poor” or “uncivilized,” and spend time and resources to get them to adopt a lifestyle more like our own. We bring them running water, electricity, medicine, transportation, religion, and our materialistic values.

This is not always in the form of war. Sometimes it is in donating funds to or volunteering in these countries, often with a church group or other charitable organization. It would be interesting to know how many volunteers or donors seriously pondered questions such as, “Am I part of the problem or the solution?” “Am I doing this for them or myself?” or “What exactly does it mean to be ‘poor’ or ‘uncivilized’?”

These “poor” people in “uncivilized” countries soon adopt our materialistic values and want to earn tons of money so that they can buy televisions, cell phones, the latest gadgets, junk foods, and luxury items. Soon they will be chopping down forests to build factories, people will have to work harder to support their newly acquired “needs,” and more law enforcers will need to be hired to control the increased crime. The

most aggressive, unethical, and selfish persons will be rewarded, while the rest get trampled on ... just like in our society.

How do we put an end to this madness? For starters, each of us needs to be responsible for our own thinking. The media, majority opinion, or people in positions of authority are no substitutions for our own mind. When our conscience tells us that something is wrong, it is wrong, no matter how many people try to convince us otherwise. Turning humanity around requires effort, especially in a society that has degraded to the extent of ours. Such effort must begin in each of our minds and hearts.

One consideration in creating a better society is to allow others the freedom to do things differently than we do, accepting that we are all different. It is to allow homeowners to paint their house the color that they choose, to allow children to wear outfits they feel comfortable in, and to let others honor their beliefs and traditions. So long as nobody or nothing is harmed in the process, our neighbors' choices deserve as much respect as our own.

There are many ways of seeing things. Just because we believe we are right does not automatically make our neighbor wrong. It is possible that we are both right, that only one of us is right, or even both of us may be wrong. We may also be right in varying degrees.

The following is a well-known parable about six blind men and an elephant that illustrates this point:

A group of six blind men learn that an elephant is coming to their village. They were all born blind, so none of them know what an elephant looks like. They decide to go experience an elephant together.

When they arrive, their guide lines them up alongside the elephant so that they may each touch it. The first man touches its trunk and says, "Aha, an elephant is like a huge snake." The second man touches its tusk and says, "I'd say an elephant is smooth and sharp, like a spear." The third man touches its ears and says, "An elephant is like a big fan."

The fourth man touches its leg and says, "An elephant is round, like a tree trunk." The fifth man touches its stomach and says, "An elephant is solid, like a wall!" The sixth man touches its tail and says, "You are all wrong! An elephant is like a rope!" They begin to argue about who is right. Just then, a passerby notices the commotion and stops to ask, "What are you all arguing about?" Each blind man explains his impression of an elephant, and in the end, they ask the passerby which of them is correct.

He replies, “There is no need for you to argue. You are all correct. You just touched different parts of the elephant and got a different impression of the same animal.”

It is understandable for us to want to change others and get them to see things our way. This is often out of good intentions, however, let us resist that urge. We hear a lot about “tolerance.” We must go a step further since tolerance implies allowing something we do not really approve of. We must learn to *embrace* our differences.

A rose is as beautiful as a lily, iris, dahlia, marigold, or orchid. Which is the best? This is a foolish question, as they are all beautiful in their own way. The world is a much richer place because of variety. Imagine how less exciting life would be if everyone looked and thought the same way that we did.

Competition brings out the best in products and the worst in people.

– David Sarnoff

Chapter Seven

Desire to Win



Once there was a teenage boy who was admired by all. Not only was he exceptionally intelligent, but he was also polite and kind. He volunteered at every opportunity he could to help others, was quick to apologize, humble about his abilities, and was always eager to learn. The local media heard about him and wanted to know if he was born that way, if his parents raised him that way, or if it was a combination. They decided to interview the parents to find out.

The parents insisted that there was nothing extraordinary about the boy, but they had discussed in advance how they would raise him and stuck to their word. Mom decided that she would be a stay-at-home mom

and home-school him. She would nurture his curiosity by encouraging him to read and by taking him on field trips. She frequently suggested reading material, took him to the library, and allowed him to choose whatever books interested him. After finishing a book, she would discuss with him what he learned from it. Dad joined in on weekend field trips and invited the boy to work on projects together. This often included volunteering in the community.

The parents did not make him participate in sports or other types of competitive activity. He recently started playing the guitar, not because they made him, but because a neighbor gave him an old guitar and taught him a few chords, which got him interested. The parents never spanked the boy and tried not to raise their voices with him, saying that such behavior from an adult would teach him that it is acceptable to be short-tempered and violent. Whenever he did something wrong, they talked with him rationally. They asked him to explain why he did it and why it was wrong.

However, they said the most important thing they did was what they did not do. They did not allow him to watch television. In fact, to avoid the question from even arising, they did not have a television set in their household. When asked why, they said it was because television pollutes the mind.

Since this story predates the popularization of the Internet, we can now consider its influence and ask the question: can media such as television and the Internet pollute our minds? Surely there are educational programming and excellent films, so we cannot say it is all bad. At the same time, we cannot deny that it contributes to our society's moral decay.

A 5-year-old who has never used foul language before learns a curse word on TV and starts using it. A little boy who just watched a boxing match punches his baby sister. A little girl who just watched a beauty pageant puts on a big smile and starts prancing around like a contestant. Children are not the only ones affected.

There is a saying in the computer world: Garbage In, Garbage Out. In this sense, humans operate much like computers. If you feed it good information, it will produce positive results, whereas if you feed it bad information, it will produce negative results. Wise people have always warned to choose carefully whom we spend our time with. By hanging around saintly people, we have a good chance of becoming saintly ourselves. By hanging around evildoers, we begin thinking and acting like they do.

One important note in the story of the well-raised boy mentioned earlier is that he grew into an intelligent, courteous, kind, and generous human being without having participated in any competitive sports or

contests. In fact, one can even say that he became intelligent, courteous, kind, and generous precisely because he was not forced to participate in a culture of competition.

Children are naturally curious and love to learn. Left to their own means, they will soon find and excel in things that interest them. When a child does not like to learn, it is most likely because we took the fun out of it. We make learning all about memorizing facts, passing tests, and doing better than other children. We force children to learn according to an institution's written curriculum, not considering each child's interests and personality.

How much more enjoyable learning could be for a child if there were no tests or report cards to constantly judge them! Here is an example of what happens when the desire to win becomes deeply ingrained in the psyche of a society:

Early one morning at a public running track, a man began to jog. He appeared to be enjoying a leisurely run. A few minutes later, a woman started jogging on the same track. She was far behind him and running in the same direction, so he did not notice her as he continued going at his own pace. She was running at a considerably faster pace, so she soon caught up with and then overtook him.

A strange thing happened the moment she entered into his visual range. He suddenly and dramatically increased his speed in an effort to overtake her. Once he did, he kept looking over his shoulder to ensure she would not pass him again. He tried to maintain that pace but quickly found that his body was not going to cooperate. His facial expression was visibly strained, as if he were being chased by a monster. Instead of realizing he should just slow down and enjoy his run, he continued at that pace for another half a lap before dropping to the ground, completely exhausted. His morning run was ruined.

Let us consider why. If you were to ask him, he would likely blame the woman and claim something of the sort that she had challenged him. However, she was simply running at her own pace and continued doing so, even after he had dropped out. His run was ruined because he had created an imaginary race in his mind and was determined to win it.

The desire to win is what is making us all lose. For the adult who was raised believing that winning is the goal of life, life becomes a series of imaginary competitions. We speed up at 4-way stop signs and quickly tap on our brakes instead of coming to a full stop so that we will “beat” the other driver across the intersection. When exiting a commercial aircraft, we all stand up at once, crowding each other in an attempt to get off first

when we could all remain comfortably seated as we waited for the door to be opened. We disagree with people on unimportant issues just to win an argument. This is how we are taught to live our daily life. No wonder so many of us are stressed out all the time.

When both parties in any situation have winning as their goal, it leads to endless conflict. We have seen this throughout history. One group thinks they are right and tries to impose their views upon another. The other group fights back. Sometimes innocent people are harmed in the process. The blame game kicks in, each insisting that they are right and the other is wrong. Sometimes they may keep a list of incidences going back hundreds of years in history to prove that the other group was originally in the wrong.

Our desire to win intensifies when we hear of someone committing an act we disapprove of. Anger kicks in, and we feel the urge to punish that person or to “make them pay.” This is especially dangerous in a group situation, as it could trigger mob mentality. We lose our capacity to reason and do not bother to verify the facts, resulting in vigilante justice, sometimes committing acts that are worse than what the perpetrator was accused of.

We must learn to rise above this reaction, as punishment only

perpetuates more evil and does not provide a solution. Evil cannot be resolved with evil. An evil act committed with good intention is still evil. Police brutality is an excellent example of this.

People who do evil do not generally consider themselves “evil.” If another person committed the same act, they would recognize it as wrong. However, when they themselves commit the act, they perceive nothing wrong with their behavior because they believe they had a good reason. Revenge is an excuse that is commonly used, whether it is against an individual, a group, or society in general. Many wars have been started out of good intentions.

To overcome this endless cycle of evil, it is necessary to realize that “evil” is a symptom of unconsciousness. People do evil not because they are evil but because they are not yet spiritually mature enough to see the error in their ways. When we truly understand this, we see wrongdoers as sisters and brothers who can use guidance, not as enemies who need punishment.

A good analogy to explain this point is a mother whose baby slaps her in the face. Although she disapproves of the act, her thoughts are not to punish the baby for being “evil.” This is because she knows the baby does not yet know any better. Her job, thus, is to teach the baby not to slap her

by getting him to understand that it hurts her. It is not to seek revenge by also inflicting pain on him.

Since the cause of our myriad of problems stems from ignorance or unconsciousness, it is evident that the solution is to bring our species out of ignorance and into consciousness. The focus cannot be to fight evil. The moment one fights evil, one becomes evil. It cannot even be to fight unconsciousness, as this would only send us deeper into unconsciousness.

We all need to become conscious. This is what ancient saints and sages referred to as the process of enlightenment. For our planet's and species' survival, it is more critical than ever that the maximum number of us become enlightened, as quickly as possible.

One person's happiness does not have to be at the expense of another's. Someone does not have to "lose" for us to "win." The only way that we can truly "win" is if we all win together. It is time that we move from a punishment-oriented society to an education-oriented one. One can punish a criminal a hundred times, but unless he understands the wrongness of his actions, he will have no reason to correct them. Like the baby who slaps his mother, he must become conscious that his actions are wrong, which can only be done through education.

When we force our children to compete with each other on a daily basis, it is no surprise that some of them grow up into selfish adults who would step on anyone or do anything to get their way. Notice all the discourteous drivers, rude customer service clerks, or argumentative people we encounter daily. Perhaps you also play that role from time to time. Where does that behavior come from?

It comes from the desire to win an imaginary race that we have been conditioned to create in our own mind. Everyone we meet becomes a potential rival that we must defeat to validate our own worth. And like us, others have also been conditioned to see us as a potential rival. There is no love or harmony in our interactions. It is no wonder that our civilization is falling apart.

A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: We did it ourselves. – Lao Tzu

Chapter Eight

Desire for Power



Winning gives us a sense of power, and the ego's desire for power is insatiable. Not only do we want to win arguments, but many of us also take satisfaction in causing them. We have created a society where qualities such as politeness, humility, and honesty are considered weaknesses while traits such as aggressiveness, competitiveness, and deviousness are valued.

In some cases, those entrusted with the authority to administer justice have abused their power and become worse wrongdoers than those they were hired to judge. Time and time again, people have equated "having authority" to "being right." Many persons who attain a position of

authority assume that it automatically makes them right in all situations and use this belief to commit injustices.

They lose the ability to listen to or consider other points of view. They become mentally lazy and arrogant. Corruption starts from the top and trickles down into a society. For our society to become more just, it is critical that we address this issue.

Many of us equate money with power. The measure of human worth has become about how much money we have, and there is intense competition to gain money at all costs. No longer is money a means to reach our goal, money has *become* the goal. We are so preoccupied with making money that we hardly have the time to engage in meaningful conversations with our neighbors and family. Consequently, many of us lack a sense of belonging to a community.

Our goals are all about personal gain, with the most aggressive, self-centered, materialistic, manipulative, and unconscious persons coming out ahead in the game. Again, let us consider what causes us to become this way by looking at an example.

Once there was a school that placed great emphasis on leadership. It encouraged team sports, debates, spelling bees, and various other forms of competition among its students. In the school's main corridor hung an

over-sized banner with the school's motto, "Become a strong leader!" Each day, as children walked up and down the corridor, this message was burned into their impressionable young minds.

This school had endless problems with bullying and disruptive behavior. The teachers and staff could not understand why. One cannot help but wonder if the banner, combined with the school's attitude on pushing for leadership and competition, had anything to do with it.

As a society, we place great emphasis on leadership without considering the consequences. To see the mistake in this approach, one only needs to imagine a world in which every child was raised to become a "strong leader." It is inevitable that the unconscious bullies will end up in power, while the kindest, gentlest, most conscious souls who wish to get along with everyone and avoid conflict get trampled upon.

The truth is, not all people are meant to be a leader, and not all people are suited to become one either. This focus on leadership needs to be re-evaluated if we are to create a more just society. Would this school not have done better if it had chosen a more sensible motto, such as "Become a kind person?" Would it not have done better if it encouraged cooperative projects instead of pinning one student against another while encouraging them both to be "strong" simultaneously? This is a recipe for disaster.

When we start working on creating a society that values harmony rather than assertiveness, natural leaders will appear who will put their concern for others above their ego-driven desire to become “the boss.” A good leader is one who helps lift others up, not one who looks down upon them. Good leadership takes a very special quality. Not every child should be raised to become a leader, but every child should be raised to become kind.

Another issue with modern childhood education is the lack of discipline, or more precisely, the lack of an adult’s ability to discipline children. In the old days, children were taught to respect the elders in their community. Adults watched over each other’s children, and if someone’s child misbehaved, they corrected the child as they would their own. Parents often thanked one another for doing this on their behalf.

Nowadays, if you tried to discipline someone else’s child, you could end up in a physical confrontation, a lawsuit, or in jail. School teachers are walking on thin ice when it comes to disciplining children who misbehave. They can face disciplinary action themselves for any perceived offense, leaving them feeling powerless. Children know this and often use it as a free ticket to do as they please.

It is imperative that we teach younger people to respect the elders in a society. Teachers should be able to discipline children without fear of

repercussions. We will clarify that when we say discipline, it does not mean violence, either physical or verbal. In modern society, where both parents often work, the role of teachers as instillers of moral values becomes much more significant.

The wisdom of grandparents can be a valuable treasure. Sadly, nowadays many people live far away from their parents or grandparents. In many cases, they would be the perfect ones to teach the next generations right from wrong. It is an entire society's responsibility to raise its children into decent human beings. Education on morality is just as important – and arguably more important – than a curriculum of memorizing facts and figures.

The desire for power can most clearly be observed within our governments. Our predecessors found it necessary to form governing bodies for the convenience, safety, and welfare of its citizens. Nowadays, there are multiple branches, from the municipal level to county, state, and federal levels. Each forces us to contribute to them financially while submitting to their rules so that they may serve our collective interest. But is it working as intended?

Governments continue to grow in size. The compulsory payments in the form of taxes, as well as the number of rules and penalties that they impose on us, continue to increase. Whether we realize it or not, we are

already slaves to our governments to a large degree. If we do not pay them what they demand or obey their rules, they have the right to take away our homes and possessions, seize our bank accounts, and lock us up. We have given them that right because of our fear of each other.

There is a looming possibility that one day, personal freedom will become a thing of the past. The system we created will become so powerful that nobody dare challenge it, and a select few who were born in the right family will rule over the vast majority of us.

At this writing, the annual military budget in the United States has skyrocketed to over 800 billion dollars! Imagine how we could all benefit if we spent that much on health care, affordable housing, environmental issues, feeding the poor, or education.

Looking at our current system, it was a good idea that, unfortunately did not produce the intended results. One of the problems is that we created a system of political parties, with each party looking out for its own interests instead of those of their constituents. It has become an “I scratch your back and you scratch mine” buddy system, with public interest and the welfare of our planet taking second seats.

Court systems are out of control, with judges and police officers on one side and the public on the other. Traffic courts have become a

profitable business, where the system tries to collect as much money as possible out of drivers who may have done nothing more than go 5 miles over an excessively low speed limit or rolled through a stop sign when there was no traffic in sight.

The more money one has, the more “justice” one can buy, and if we are not rich, we may not be able to afford the justice we deserve. Politicians are openly allowed to pardon relatives and friends who committed a crime, and bribes seem to have become common business practice.

Let us next consider a dangerous power known as “executive order.” This power was granted in our Constitution so that leaders may bypass the normal legislative process and create laws during crisis situations. Looking back at history, the first five U.S. presidents issued an average of less than 1 executive order per year. In comparison, the past five presidents averaged nearly 40 per year. This is very concerning.

With a total of 3,721, Franklin D. Roosevelt holds the record for issuing the most executive orders among any U.S. president. One of the best known is Executive Order 9066, which ordered the forced evacuation and internment of U.S. residents with Japanese ancestry. Nearly 70,000 of those were U.S. citizens. Many lost their home, property, and business as a result. History has a way of repeating itself. Unless we awaken soon, we

may one day find ourselves prisoners of a totalitarian government.

These are just a small sampling of the issues we face, and resolving them may seem like an impossible undertaking, but we must overcome these challenges if we are to save our species and our planet. An important step in creating an honest and ethical society is to create an honest and ethical government.

Returning to the question of power, how can we control humanity's thirst for it? This question may leave some of us confused. We may think, "But isn't power a good thing?" or "We are not living in a utopian world. If we were to give up our power, would that not leave us open to being exploited by others?"

For answers, let us again turn to the teachings of the wise. Our desire for power is based on the incorrect understanding that we are all separate beings. This illusion of separateness is what causes us to see every stranger as an enemy and as someone whom we must defeat in order to be happy.

We continue to suffer because we believe that things belongs to us, whether they are objects, pets, land, ideas, or other human beings. When others do not behave in ways that we approve of, we want to control them and force them to do things our way. That causes them suffering, and their

suffering boomerangs back to us, sooner or later, directly or indirectly.

To get a tiny glimpse of reality, we need only look at a picture of our beautiful home: Earth. Whenever you see a satellite photo of the Earth, do you ever stop to think that you may be pictured in that photo? The camera was simply taken out so far that it is impossible to recognize each of us individually. Each of us, each species, and each piece of land or water are an integral part of this beautiful planet. As you can see, we are indeed, one. Imagine how much progress we could make if we all stopped trying to dominate each other and worked together as a team.



A wise woman refuses to be anyone's victim. – Maya Angelou

Chapter Nine

Desire to Feel Special



Many parents like to tell their children how special they are. It is most likely from a desire to express how much they love them or to help boost their self-confidence. What do we really mean when we say someone is “special?” Often there is a connotation that we are better than others. It goes back to the ego game that we play, in which we want “our kind” to be superior to “their kind.”

In our desire to make members of our group “special,” we often – consciously or unconsciously – put others down. This results in various forms of bigotry, such as sexism, racism, nationalism, homophobia, xenophobia, and religious intolerance, to name a few. It is incredible how many ways we can think of to draw a line between us.

Let us take a look at one of these divisions: sexism. How did our species come to view half of its members as inferior to the other half, and why does this behavior still continue? Women, by nature, are given the sacred duty of childbirth and caring for our young. Because this involves full-time responsibility, men took on the duty of bringing home food and necessities for their family. Each did their part as a team to see that their family unit had everything it needed to survive.

As society evolved, the picture began to change. We became increasingly focused on money, and since the female of the species still had the natural role of birthing and raising children, the male took on the role of “breadwinner.” In order to earn money to pay for goods for their family, men took on careers that often meant occupying various positions of authority in society.

This shift caused women to progressively become more dependent on men while forcing them to accept the laws and rules that men imposed. Without a father’s earnings, mothers would find it difficult to run their household or care for their children. It was mainly a combination of these two factors that pushed societies out of balance and forced women into a subservient role.

Humanity continues to evolve, and nowadays, a large percentage of women have entered the workforce. Women have proven to be as capable

as men in various professions, but why does sexism keep showing its foolish head? Part of the equation is that some men still want to feel more “special” than women. If we are to be honest, though, women must take some of the responsibility for allowing it to continue by participating in it.

One of the role-playing games that humans participate in is for the female to act naive and helpless so that the male can step in to “rescue” her. Let us call this the “damsel in distress” game. She pretends that she cannot do things that she actually can, or that she does not know something that she actually does know, or acts weaker or more emotionally fragile than she actually is. A male takes on the role of “knight-in-shining-armor” to rescue her, and then they live happily ever after.

While it is a classical story-book game, playing it is not helping women’s causes. Let us think about it. If we played dumb and helpless to gain someone’s attention and ended up in a relationship with that person, is it not expected that such a person would treat us as if we were *really* dumb and helpless?

Let us now examine the widely popular wedding ceremony. In this ceremony, a woman with her face covered walks down an aisle and is handed over from one man to another in a “giveaway” ritual. Upon the marriage, she usually changes her last name from that of one man’s to

another's, much like cattle changing ownership. It is surprising how women who say they want an equal status as men in society voluntarily participate in such a ceremony and change their name depending on which man possesses her at the time.

Voluntary submission is not limited to marriage. Why would anyone adhere to a religion that teaches that we must remain covered and/or silent, that we must remain subordinate to others, or that we are not allowed a leadership role simply because of the physical body we adorn? Why would we accept degrading movie roles, remain in abusive relationships, or participate in pageants that exploit us? When we offer to play the victim, we should not be surprised if someone steps in to play the predator.

Some may say that it is good to follow tradition. While many traditions are beneficial, tradition does not excuse sexism or any other form of bigotry. Just because unconscious behavior has been practiced for centuries does not make it right. Blindly clinging onto tradition is mental laziness. Traditions are to be evaluated each for their own merit. Holding on to good traditions while getting rid of bad ones, that is wisdom. That is progress.

The way to eradicate sexism is to not participate in it. Once, they said that women were not suited to become doctors, mathematicians, engineers,

scientists, priests, or a variety of other professionals. The women who changed those beliefs were not the ones who compliantly accepted them. They were not the ones who got into heated debates about whether they were true or not. They were the ones who actually became one of them. Any debate becomes pointless when the evidence speaks for itself.

In an enlightened society, women are honored and respected. Mothers endure great pains and sacrifices to bear, care for, and educate the next generation. In times of famine, a mother would instinctively give up her food ration to feed her children. She would stay up all night to care for them if they were sick. This self-sacrifice continues into modern days, where women routinely give up their careers, dreams, and conveniences for their families more frequently than men do.

Also, women are generally more spiritually attuned than men are. Of course, there are exceptions, but the gender that was assigned the primary responsibility of caring for our young necessarily has to be so. Many traditions have recognized this fact. In the Native American Hopi tribe, for example, a prophecy states that when grandmothers speak, the earth will be healed. Our planet is in great peril, and grandmothers are the ones who can bring it back into balance. They were given the innate wisdom on how to accomplish this. Grandmothers out there, you are being called to action!

This is not intended to minimize the role of grandfathers. It would be

highly beneficial to our society if elders of both genders took a larger role in educating our young by sharing their experiences and wisdom. We are in a dire situation. We need all the help that we can get to steer humanity in the right direction.

While we have begun the process of ridding our society of sexism, we still have a long way to go. For a large part, it is still men who are making laws and deciding matters that concern women: men who have never spent a day being pregnant, never had to endure the pains of childbirth, and for the most part, never had to face the choice of putting their career or dreams on hold for their children. Thus, we are making decisions mainly from the perspective of ignorance.

Indian spiritual teacher Swami Vivekananda put it beautifully when he said, “There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly with one wing.” It is essential to continue to educate and increase awareness. As we attempt to eradicate sexism, the tendency is to overcompensate by seeking to punish the perpetrators. Such an attempt will not solve the problem but will only result in more injustices.

Here we used the example of sexism. However, the need to educate and increase awareness applies to all forms of bigotry. Our natural instinct is to want to fight a wrong, but history has shown that fighting only results

in more injustices. The goal, thus, is not to fight an issue but to make it a non-issue.

Perhaps you have heard of the fable “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” If you haven’t, or to refresh your memory if you have, here is a summary:

Once upon a time, there was an emperor who was obsessed with clothes. He would spend a fortune buying new clothes and then proudly wear them to show off how great he looked in them.

A pair of swindlers who heard of the emperor’s obsession visited him, pretending to be accomplished weavers. They said they could weave a cloth so fine and intricate that fools could not see it. The emperor thought such a cloth would not only allow him to look good but also help him identify fools, so he paid a large sum of money to have a costume made with that cloth.

A couple of times, he sent trusted men to check on the weavers’ progress. Neither of them could see the cloth being weaved, but fearful of being labeled a fool, they pretended that they could. They each reported to the emperor how magnificent it was. Then the emperor himself went to look at it. He, too, saw nothing but, not wanting to admit that he was a fool, pretended to see it and love it.

He decided to wear the costume in a procession through town.

When the costume was ready, the swindlers helped fit the emperor while telling him how great he looked. When the emperor started his procession down the main street, one after another, townspeople exclaimed how beautiful the costume was. They had all been told about the special cloth, including the fact that fools were not able to see it.

After hearing enough adults comment on how wonderful the emperor's costume was, one child exclaimed, "But he has nothing on!" Suddenly, the townspeople realized the grand deception and started repeating, "He has nothing on!" The emperor who heard this felt humiliated, but too proud to admit that he was the butt of the joke, continued the procession in his underwear as if nothing was wrong.

This classic story contains several moral lessons. The most obvious is how our desire to be "special" can eventually lead to our downfall. Another is how false beliefs can originate and spread within a society. People will go along with an idea because it is socially accepted, even though they know deep inside that it is untrue.

Like these townspeople, many of us think that we are too smart to be fooled, yet look at how we allow governments to chip away at our rights, how we fight and die in wars to profit the rich, or how we participate in

irresponsible consumption to the point of destroying our habitat.

This story's third and perhaps most important lesson is that it takes only one voice to spread the flame of collective awakening. Each of us has the potential to play the role of the child in this story, who calls out a deception for what it is. Each of us also has the potential to play the role of the townspeople who have the sense to change their opinion after taking an honest look at the facts.

Going back to being "special," there is nothing wrong with feeling that way as long as we do not convince ourselves that we are more special than others. A good analogy would be to think of humanity as a long chain, with each of us representing a single link in that chain. Each link is there to serve a unique purpose. Each link is as important as another, although their roles may differ.

A garbage collector serves as essential a role as a doctor in society. What would we do without our store clerks, drivers, construction workers, farmers, mechanics, teachers, babysitters, and factory workers? Each of us has a minuscule yet unique role to play in the collective evolution of the human race and in the liberation of all souls. We are the sum of our actions; we will collectively reap what we have sown. Let us each do our part wholeheartedly, so that we may share in a great harvest.

Wise men speak because they have something to say; Fools because they have to say something. – Plato

Chapter Ten

Desire to Be Heard



What do a world-renowned scholar with 3 doctorate degrees and a high school dropout who waits tables for a living have in common? One answer is that they both want to be heard. Expressing our thoughts and exchanging information is an integral part of the human experience. In our desire to be heard, however, many of us do more than our share of the talking.

You probably have met people who ask you a question, then without giving you a chance to respond, answer their own question out loud, in effect assigning you the role of audience in their monologue. We all know people who routinely interrupt us, change the subject in the middle of a

discussion, challenge what we say, or try to one-up our stories and dominate a conversation.

Have you ever noticed that when two people disagree, we tend to raise our voices? It is as if the louder we speak, the more “right” we become. Both sides may continually increase our volume until either the wiser one brings an end to the discussion, or it degrades into a yelling match.

Humans have a tendency to believe the loudest person. Have you ever noticed that we like to elect loud politicians? Perhaps we assume that someone who speaks loud must be confident or know what they are talking about. Perhaps their message seems more important. Advertisers take advantage of this fact and boost the volume of their commercials. Think about those car salesmen who practically yell at us in their ads, or those televangelists as they try to convince us to send them a chunk of our hard-earned paycheck.

Have you ever watched public debates where two parties present opposing viewpoints on an issue? Usually, they are both equally passionate about their stance and sometimes end up in a verbal sparring match. Both sides are so intent on making their point that they neglect to listen to the other. They often talk simultaneously, and as a result, neither of them gets heard.

Debates could be meaningful if the goal were to find a resolution to an issue instead of to win an argument. Of course, they may then lack the entertainment value that many viewers seek. Like a boxing match, many of us find it more interesting to watch two humans beating each other up than being nice to each other. This must be why political debates are so popular.

Notice how we try to manipulate others and others try to manipulate us using volume. Politicians, salespeople, colleagues, and others will try to convince us – consciously or unconsciously – with their loudness. We can spare ourself from being pulled into this game by being conscious of how it happens.

We say to judge a book by its content and not by its cover. It is the message that is of primary importance, and not how it is presented. You will notice that an excessively loud person often tries to compensate for his lack of sense by volume. Maybe he is speaking loud to drown out the inconvenient facts that someone else is presenting so that it does not get heard. Yelling is a crude weapon of a weak mind.

Whenever we try to resolve a difference in opinion by increasing our volume, it no longer becomes about trying to find common ground. It becomes about winning. Again, this is how we have been taught to handle conflict. We routinely hear about classes offered on persuasive speaking

or debating, and it is disappointing that we do not hear more about classes in attentive listening or respectful communication.

Greek philosopher Epictetus said, “We have two ears and one mouth, so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.” How much more pleasant society would become if we all tried to listen twice as much as we spoke. Whenever we talk too much, not only do we deprive others of an opportunity to express themselves, we miss out on a potentially interesting story. We lose a chance to learn something new and to grow. We may even lose an opportunity to make a new friend.

Imagine all the disputes that could be avoided if we made an effort to listen to each other. This can range from disagreements between two people to two nations. Wisdom comes from being a good listener. Instead of trying to convince others that we are right, we must seek to find common ground. Instead of searching for someone to blame when a problem occurs, we should focus on finding a solution.

Saints and sages throughout the ages have placed great value on silence. The most treasured possession of an evolved human is a quiet mind. Idle gossip and meaningless debate only distract the mind and cause unnecessary disturbance. This is why those who seek wisdom practice meditation.

Let us now address the anger issue. Modern society is full of angry people. Have you ever noticed how easily some people are angered? Grown adults are routinely seen throwing tantrums in public like undisciplined 3-year-olds. You can send some people into a violent rage without even saying a word, for example, by simply raising your middle finger toward them. Have you ever stopped to think about the absurdity of that reaction?

Anger is a raw emotion that stems from our unfulfilled desire to be loved and appreciated. When we do not get our way or perceive that someone is looking down upon us or disrespecting us, we feel a need to validate ourself by fighting back. The threat does not even have to be real. In fact, as in the story of the competitive jogger told earlier, more often than not, it is imaginary.

A sage once asked an interesting question, comparing an angry person to an orange: “When someone squeezes an orange, and it releases juice, does the juice come from the person who squeezed it or from the orange?” Many of us, in an attempt to blame someone else for our anger, will say, “(so-and-so) made me angry!” The truth is, nobody can make us angry but ourself. If we become angry due to someone’s actions or words, that means we allowed them to trigger the anger within us, much like someone squeezing the juice out of an orange.

There is a famous quote that is often attributed to the Buddha: “You will not be punished *for* your anger, you will be punished *by* your anger.” An anger outburst is a symptom of an undisciplined mind. Aggression is a display of weakness, not of strength. As adults, we should feel shame in losing our temper. Only children, who do not know any better, should be excused for throwing tantrums.

As stated earlier, we should consider any human weakness as being all of our weaknesses. Correcting them is a task for all of us, whether we feel they apply to us personally or not. Chances are, they are also part of our character at some level. Jesus wisely pointed out that it is easier to see a speck of sawdust in our brother’s eye than the plank in our own.

Just as in every other emotion, anger has a purpose. Used foolishly, it can be destructive, but used wisely, it can become a catalyst for positive change. The goal is not to rid oneself of anger but to control it and use it constructively. Sadly, most of us have never been taught how to do so.

Anger is to be directed at problems, not at people. It is to be used as a driving force to improve a situation, not as an excuse to punish or harm individuals. It is to be controlled so that it is only expressed when there is a need for change, and it should never involve insults, threats, or violence.

Whenever we experience anger, it may help to take an hour, a day, or

even longer to contemplate any given issue before figuring out how to express it positively. It is important to keep the focus on the issue, not the person(s) who may have caused it. By giving it some time, we may be able to resolve the issue in a calm, rational manner.

The first step in learning to control our anger is to observe it. How many times a day, on average, do we get angry? What are some of the reasons? How do we currently express anger, and what usually happens when we do? Does expressing anger help the situation, or does it worsen it? By asking such questions, we may realize that most anger reactions are rash and senseless.

A majority of anger responses serve no useful purpose. They tend to create problems rather than solve them. Look at how many people end up in prison, divorced, or losing their job because of foolish things they did while angry. If not careful, a moment of anger can ruin our life.

Anger is not the appropriate response to someone forgetting our birthday. It is not the appropriate response to our child accidentally spilling milk, or to a distracted driver who drifts into our lane, or to being served cold coffee at a restaurant. And anger is certainly not the appropriate response to seeing someone's extended middle finger.

Practice the art of listening. Many of our own personal and society's

issues can be resolved simply by each side listening attentively to the other. Give the other side what they need; chances are, they would be more apt to give you what you need.

Perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away. – Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Chapter Eleven

Desire for Perfection



Perfectionism is a direct path to misery.

Humans have an innate desire to want things to be “perfect.” When not seeking our own perfection, we seek perfection around us. And when things are not what we deem as perfect, we try to fix them. This quest for perfection has led to countless innovations and has made life easier in many ways. At the same time, we have also paid a great price for it.

After millions of years of trying, we still have not attained perfection, and there is no chance that we ever will. To consider this point, let us first define the word “perfection.” The dictionaries define it as “a quality or state of flawlessness” or “a quality or state that is free from defects.” By

definition, perfection goes against nature.

Many of us spend a fortune on clothing, beauty products, diet pills, plastic surgeries, gym equipment, and such, to attain the “perfect” look. We strive to get perfect test scores, cook a perfect meal, or find a perfect mate. Some of us take our quest for perfection to the point of neurosis.

We will not go out unless our shoes matched our handbag, will not cook in our kitchen so that it remains spotless, or will avoid parking in public places to keep our car from being scratched. Our desire for perfection often focuses on superficial beauty and is the cause of constant self-imposed stress and anxiety.

The fruits and vegetables in our grocery stores reflect our desire for perfection. You will see perfectly straight cucumbers, perfectly formed carrots, and evenly sized and shaped tomatoes stacked up neatly in bins. Ask any farmer, and they will tell you that is not how they grow in nature. In nature, fruits and vegetables grow in many shapes and sizes. Some are discolored, some are lopsided, some have been nibbled by insects, and some end up bruised or damaged.



Imperfection is the law of nature.

In our desire to have “perfect” fruits and vegetables, we require farmers to deliver uniform, beautiful-looking produce. Ones that do not fit specific established criteria are rejected. Farmers use a variety of herbicides, pesticides, preservatives, ripening agents, and other artificial means to meet those high aesthetic standards. The result is that we get to purchase beautiful-looking produce covered in potentially harmful chemicals.

Another unfortunate by-product of a society that focuses on perfection is suicide. According to World Health Organization, each year, over 700,000 people around the world choose suicide as a means to escape their misery. Common reasons for suicide include being unable to attain what we want or losing something we once had, like our health, money, home, youth, family, social status, or dignity.

If anyone reading this is experiencing depression or is considering suicide, please know that such extreme dissatisfaction is a divine calling for change. It is the universe inviting you to give up your struggles and move on to a new chapter in your existence: a chapter of your transformation into a Sacred Human.

Mystics will tell us that we must first die before we can live. This is not referring to physical death, but death to our old ways of thinking that cause us to suffer. For a substance abuser, it is to bring death to our

identity as a hopeless addict. For a sufferer of domestic violence, it is to bring death to our identity as a powerless victim. And for a career criminal, it is to bring death to our identity as a marginalized member of society.

Being driven to the brink of suicide is sometimes what it takes to transform our life from one of chasing after worldly pleasures to seeking a higher purpose. We may call it a divine wake-up call. Our natural state is bliss. The more we drift away from this state, the more unhappy we become. The goal, thus, is to return to our natural state.

One may presume that we must acquire something new in order to do this – a new college degree, a new career, a new look, a new partner, a new religion, whatever. That is our outdated mode of thinking. Returning to our natural state does not require any of that. In fact, it requires that we “die” to all of that. It is to give up our old value system, which made us believe that all those things make us who we are. It is very simple. We shall clarify that it is simple, but not easy.

Many of us take ourselves too seriously. We are easily offended by the slightest remarks about our appearance or actions, regardless of whether they were meant to offend or not. We are quick to declare racism, sexism, homophobia, or whatever else we can to blame others for our insecurities. At other times, we become our worst critic. Perfectionists have a hard time

accepting situations or people who do not meet our high standards, including our own self. This is not a healthy way to live.

A sense of humor is a great gift we have been given to survive this harsh human existence. Look at nature. It has a great sense of humor. It made elephants with a long trunk, hippos with an enormous mouth, giraffes with a long neck, snakes with a slithering body, sloths that move extremely slowly... and who does not get the urge to smile when watching puppies at play?

Have you ever taken time to observe the odd shapes of trees? No two look exactly alike. Some grow crooked, some are twisted and misshapen, and some may even appear to have a human-like face or body part. Nowadays, humans have the technology to manufacture lifelike houseplants out of man-made materials. Some of them look so real that the only way to tell whether or not they are is to look for imperfections.

The ones that nature created are the imperfect ones, of course. Nature was meant to be imperfect. That is the beauty of it as well as the essence of it. To search for perfection in an imperfect world is madness. It is an attempt to go against nature. That is the reason why perfectionists can never be happy.

Perfectionism comes from our fixation on ideas we have convinced

ourselves to be true. To give up perfectionism means to re-examine our belief system. It is to cast aside any beliefs that do not serve a useful purpose or that result in us being unhappy.

Any situation can be a blessing or a curse, depending on how we view it. If our spouse leaves us, we may consider it an opportunity to meet someone better suited for us. If our house is destroyed in a natural disaster, it can be viewed as a chance to start a new life unencumbered by possessions. If we lose a leg in an accident or illness, it can be seen as a stroke of luck to speed up our spiritual growth by overcoming new challenges.

We must learn the art of laughing at ourselves. One quality of the wise is that they have developed sufficient inner strength to be able to laugh at their own failures. They realize they are imperfect beings in an imperfect world, and they are okay with it. They feel no need to deny their mistakes or make excuses for them. When you have mastered the art of laughing at your imperfections and even misfortunes, nothing in life can bring you down. Yes, it takes quite a bit of practice to attain that level, but it is a worthwhile endeavor.

The capacity to laugh at oneself comes from practicing non-attachment. It is learning to observe oneself as an actor in a play, playing a role with a particular physical body, in a specific language, and in a

certain environmental setting. When this role is over, there are many other roles yet to be played. We must not take our current role personally.

We possess all the necessary tools to achieve liberation. One such tool is our ability to learn from the mistakes of others. Rather than criticizing or condemning others for their errors, we can examine and reflect on them for our own potential growth. We can ask ourselves, “What would I have done if I were in that position?” Consider several options and decide which would have produced the best outcome for all involved. This can save us from making similar mistakes in the future.

In one study, hundreds of people on their death bed were asked what their biggest regrets in life were. Not a single one of them mentioned how much money they wished they had made, how famous they wished they had become, how much harder they should have worked, or what possessions they wished they had acquired. Instead, they mentioned things such as how much more they should have allowed themselves to be happy, things they would have liked to do, or how much more time they should have spent with friends and family. In fact, most of them regretted working as hard as they did.

If you were to die tomorrow, would you have any regrets? Would you regret not having allowed yourself to do things that you enjoy, not spending more time with loved ones, or of working too hard? By knowing

the regrets that others experienced on their death bed, we can ensure that we do not make the same mistakes as they did. Would it not be worth the effort to work out these issues now so that on our deathbed, we can transition with a smile, knowing we did everything we wanted to do and have no regrets?

Let go of your desire for perfection. Allow yourself and others to make mistakes. Just make sure to learn from them. Find the perfection in imperfection, including in yourself. Remember the old saying, “Laugh, and the world laughs with you; weep, and you weep alone.” Use your sense of humor to help you navigate through this treacherous game of evolution.

A wise man changes his mind. A fool never will. – Proverb

Chapter Twelve

Desire to Resist Change



Why do people stay in relationships that have gone sour? Why do we continue working jobs we hate, fail to address our self-destructive behavior, or turn down wonderful opportunities when they come our way?

The human being is a complex creature. On the one hand we may strive for perfection, but on the other, we are also prone to resisting change. We have a tendency to cling on to traditions, ideologies, habits, people, possessions, and situations, even when we know that they are not always in our best interest. In our quest to transition to a higher level of consciousness, this tendency becomes one of our greatest obstacles.

There is a somewhat grotesque analogy about a frog in boiling water. If you were to place a frog in a pot of boiling water, the frog would

immediately leap out of the pot in a desperate act of self-preservation, but if you were to put it in a pot of cool water and slowly heat the water to a boiling point, the frog would adapt to the gradually-increasing temperature and end up being cooked alive. There is no truth to this story. However, it is a good analogy for how we accept the unacceptable within a society: by gradually tightening the noose around each other's neck.

If our ancestors only knew how human society has evolved since their time, they would be utterly horrified. Modern inventions such as automobiles, air conditioning, plumbing, computers, televisions, and household appliances are impressive. So many inventions have made life much easier than previous generations had it. At the same time, they probably would not understand many of the foolish choices that we made and continue to make.

One good example of this is the concept of land ownership. In contemporary society, we are required to either buy or rent space and pay for the right to exist. A governing body requires landowners to pay property taxes, which may include a variety of services, regardless of whether we want or need them. If we are unwilling or unable to pay what they demand, we have given them the right to take our property away from us. Even if we rent, we are paying a landlord, who pays the governing body for the right to possess that land, and passes on those expenses to us.

For the most part, we can no longer occupy empty land as we see fit. Someone may call the authorities on us for trespassing, or worse. Some of us are so convinced that we own the land that we think nothing of chopping down trees, spraying harmful chemicals, or killing wildlife that exist within those boundaries because it is “our” (versus “their”) property. With humans claiming larger and larger chunks of their habitat, wildlife is increasingly left with nowhere to go.

A recent global study by the World Wildlife Fund reveals that within the last 50 years alone, humanity has eradicated 60% of mammals, birds, fish, amphibians, and reptiles. We have taken their land, destroyed their food and water sources, filled their environment with plastics and other toxic garbage, and intentionally killed off many of them for convenience or profit.

This same organization reports that the rapid loss of species that we are seeing today is estimated to be between 1,000 and 10,000 times higher than the natural extinction rate, that is, the rate if humans were not involved. It is hard to estimate how many species will be lost because the number of species itself is unknown, but scientists estimate the number to be between 200 and 10,000 species per year.

Can you imagine a world in which the only life forms remaining are those that we enslaved to feed, serve and entertain us? You may not have

to, as such a day is quickly approaching. Once a species is extinct, it is gone forever. There is no way to bring it back once that happens.

An increasing number of insurrections are arising all over the world. People are frustrated, angry, and fed up. Instead of working more seriously to resolve the issues, governments hire a group of bruisers – under the guise of “law enforcement” – and heavily arm them to try to silence citizens, paying for it all with funds that they forcibly collected from said citizens. Citizens, who are aware of this and left in a no-win situation become even more frustrated, angry, and fed up.

Those who were hired to protect the government’s interests are equally frustrated, angry, and fed up. They know that their actions will not contribute to the resolution of the problems at hand. In fact, they must remain blind to the cause. They are not paid to come up with solutions or ponder the ethical implications of their actions, but simply to quell any uprisings.

What happens when two groups of frustrated, angry, and fed-up people clash? What does *not* happen is the problem ever getting resolved. We end up with a group of frustrated, angry, and fed-up people, each thinking that they are in the right, feeding off of each other’s anger and hate.

We may think of democracy as the ideal. However, democracy does

not lead to the betterment of a society as long as its members remain ignorant. Greek philosopher Socrates was a staunch critic of democracy. He argued that those who end up leading a democratic society are often individuals who have deceived and flattered the public into granting them power.

In such a system, the most deceitful and manipulative people end up as leaders. They run a government not to serve the people, but to serve their own agenda. Sadly, the level of consciousness of the average citizen and politician has not evolved much since Socrates' time.

Democracy can only succeed in a society in which a majority of the population holds itself to high ethical standards. Thus, if we wish to base our society on democracy, it follows that we need to increase the ethical standards of our society. And it follows that we must require our leaders to adhere to even higher ethical standards than we expect from average citizens. Otherwise, as Socrates warned, we will eventually end up with a dictatorship. Do not be so certain that this cannot happen in your own country. It is happening all over the world.

Perhaps removing high salaries, perks, and glamour from political positions would discourage unethical people from seeking them. Perhaps such positions should even be without compensation, so only those sincerely interested in making the world a better place would consider

running for them. Luckily, there are many of us out there who would gladly work for the honor and privilege of saving our planet.

Because a leader's moral character is of utmost concern, politicians should be subjected to ongoing ethics training. They should be of a state of consciousness where they are not even tempted to host extravagant black-tie parties, chop down live trees each year for their impressive Christmas display, or travel around the world by private jet, for example. How can we expect someone to solve our problems, such as over-consumption, deforestation, and irresponsible use of fossil fuels, respectively, if the person we elect to resolve them is one of the worst offenders?

An ideal politician is a humble public servant who avoids the limelight. Being wealthy should not be a prerequisite to running for political office. In fact, perhaps we should have a cap on how wealthy a person can be. Mega-millionaires and billionaires are so out of touch with reality that they cannot relate to most of the problems that they would be entrusted to solve.

In bringing sweeping change to humanity, our political system is an area where we could use drastic change. History has proven time and time again that the more power we give to ignorant persons, the more likely they are to abuse it. A necessary clarification to make here is that by "ignorant" we do not mean stupid or uneducated. We mean someone who

does not walk in tune with Sacred Law.

We cannot afford to wait any longer for someone else to solve our problems. Time is running out. Like a frog jumping out of boiling water, we must act urgently to save our planet and ourselves. Making drastic societal changes is much like undergoing surgery in that hardship is involved. Surgery can be painful and may incapacitate the patient temporarily, but when the recovery period is over, the problem is corrected, and the patient feels much better.

We must use our frustration, anger, and feelings of being fed up as powerful catalysts to bring about change. We must rise above the narrow-minded mentality of pointing the finger at each other, and come together to address the issues. Let the most conscious, most ethical among us lead the way.

Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed. – Mohandas Gandhi

Chapter Thirteen

Desire for Pleasure



We contemplated the difference between pleasure and happiness – that pleasure is sensorial, action-oriented, and fleeting, while happiness is an inner state. Many of us may sense there is truth in it, yet why do so many of us continue to seek pleasure at the expense of happiness?

Before addressing this question, let us think about what makes us who we are. Some say that it is our mind or our capacity to think. Modern scientists have attempted to measure the number of thoughts that an average person has by observing brain waves, and came up with a figure of over 6,000 per day. What they probably did was measure bursts of thoughts. Seeing how one thought flows into another and cannot be

counted individually, the actual number is likely much higher.

Many of us are completely identified with our thoughts. A combination of what we think – our memories, opinions, beliefs, feelings, dreams, etc. – is who we are. This idea can be summarized in French philosopher René Descartes' famous quote, "I think, therefore I am." If Monsieur Descartes had had the fortune of studying under a great spiritual master, s/he would have likely told him with a knowing smile, "Hmmm. Nice try, but not quite so. Keep searching."

Thought waves are processed by the brain, which is part of our physical existence. Just as the winds affect the waves of the ocean, our environment continuously affects our thoughts. When stronger or certain types of waves flush our brain, they may trigger reactions such as emotions and urges.

Imagine sitting quietly in a park and enjoying the beautiful scenery while a gentle breeze blows, the birds chirp musically, and the sunshine pleasantly warms your skin. You are completely calm and relaxed. Out of nowhere, a stranger walks up to you and angrily starts threatening you without any provocation. In an instant, your peace of mind is shattered. Maybe you become angry and threaten him back, or perhaps you retreat in fear.

This is an example of how pleasure can be taken away from us in an instant. From time to time, there are people who claim that they have mastered their mind and/or that nothing anyone says or does can affect them. Some of them even sell seminars to teach others their “secrets.” While it is possible to master certain functions of one’s own mind to a high degree, even the most skilled masters do not control the mind of others (unless others allow them to; that is a story for another time).

There was once a Chinese qigong master. One day, an unknown young fighter challenges him to a match at a later date. Encouraged by his disciples, the master accepts the challenge, confident that he can blow away the young fighter with his qi (chi) energy. After all, he never had any trouble blowing away his disciples, some of who were as youthful, tough, and well-built as this fighter.

On the day of the match, the master and young fighter enter a ring, a referee on hand, with disciples cheering their master on the sidelines. Within seconds, the match is over. The young fighter kicks the master in the head, knocking him down and temporarily causing him to lose consciousness, with blood flowing from his nose. The fight is stopped, and the master suffers a humiliating defeat in front of his disciples.

If you were to look into the lives of any of the teachers of mind-mastery seminars, you would likely find a myriad of failures ranging from

anger issues, substance abuse, divorces, harassment lawsuits, and other personal scandals. It makes one wonder, if they could control their mind as they claim, then why were they unable to prevent themselves from experiencing such failures in their life?

Let us think about how mind control works by taking the example of a religious cult. It is hardly ever the leader alone who convinces people to join a cult. A team of followers usually tries to persuade others to join. Sometimes they use emotional testimonials of how joining changed their life. Sometimes they cheer and make gestures in agreement with the leader's points during a talk, or sometimes they flatter or even worship their leader.

Each human can be considered as one energy unit. It does not matter whether young or old, female or male, disabled or able-bodied. Theoretically, that same cult leader could recite the exact same talk in front of an audience full of strangers – with no groupies to support him and no promotional material to explain how great he is – and in the end, ask people to join his cult. There would probably be very few takers. The fact that cult leaders have people affirming what they say (or in other words, more energy units supporting them) convinces people to join.

The answer to our earlier question about why we continue to seek pleasure instead of happiness is related to this phenomenon of

synchronizing with the larger wave. We are bombarded with sensorial temptations each and every day. Our friends excitingly show us their newly-acquired gadget, and suddenly we want one too. We may go shopping for a couple of items, and dozens of other items are conspicuously displayed in front of us on our journey to the checkout counter. As a result, we buy additional items we do not really need.

Advertisements flood our daily lives, from television, radio, magazines, flyers, mailings, e-mail, billboards, sales calls, and Internet ads. Not a day goes by without us being subjected to an ad. Even organizations that used to prioritize helping people rather than turning a profit, such as medical facilities, educational institutions, and charitable and religious organizations, nowadays are actively soliciting money.

We have been brainwashed into wanting things. We see these ads and create artificial desires we believe we must fulfill to be happy. The means to attain those things is usually money. Thus we focus on making our whole life about chasing after money. Mystic poet Kabir eloquently expresses this point in the following poem:

*I don't think there is such a thing as
an intelligent mega-rich
person.*

*For who with a fine mind can look
out upon this world and
hoard*

*what can nourish
a thousand
souls.*

One of the symptoms of our overindulgence is the obesity epidemic. According to the World Health Organization, the worldwide obesity rate has more than tripled in the last 50 years. One out of every four adults is now said to be overweight. Food is no longer seen as a means of sustenance. We eat out of boredom, to forget our problems, to make us feel good, as part of socializing, and just because there is food in front of us. We even invented a sports category called “competitive eating.”

Customers get angry at restaurants when their food is not served quickly enough. In grocery stores, people can be spotted nibbling on foods that they have not yet paid for. Parents pick candy bars off the shelf and hand them to their children to eat while waiting in the checkout line. One cannot help but wonder what kind of gluttonous and impatient adults such children will grow up to become.

How will humanity ever attain a higher state of consciousness if we constantly feed each other's mind with garbage?! We all want to be happy, but we are just going about it in the wrong way. In order to bring any meaningful change, it is of primary importance to address our obsession with possessions.

Most of us have more possessions than we can ever use in our lifetime. One does not need a dozen pairs of shoes, a hundred outfits, or a room full of toys for our children. Look in your closet, garage, or drawers. Honestly, how many of those items do you really need? How many do you use regularly? It is imperative for our planet's survival to reduce our imaginary needs.

We must learn to distinguish need from want. When we haven't eaten all day and are hungry, we can say that we need to eat. But if we just had a full meal and someone tempted us with a slice of chocolate cake, that is a want. If we go out in cold temperatures, we can say we need a coat to stay warm. But if we already have several coats in the closet and see one on sale in the latest style, that is a want. Chances are, any interest in the latest gadgets, jewelry, home accessories, sporting goods, snacks, and video games will fall in the "want" category.

We can make it a habit to ask a simple question before making any purchase, "Do I really need this?" We can practice walking in a

supermarket or shopping mall resolving to only buy what we need. We can even make out a list. We may look at other items but consciously resist the temptation to buy any of them unless we really need them.

Instead of comparing ourselves with others, we can appreciate what we already have. We can consciously resist to be tempted by flashy ads. When possible, politely ask advertisers to stop sending promotional material. If an advertiser finds their ads are not producing positive results, they will quit sending them. A large number of us will have to participate in this effort for maximum impact.

It is not the energy with the highest vibration but the energy with the greatest wave that sets the standard. Foolishness is contagious. We all do foolish things from time to time, knowing that they are irrational, and when caught, often our excuse is that everyone else does it.

The good news is, wisdom is also contagious. All we have to do is get a massive wisdom wave going, so people will begin to listen to their higher Self instead of their foolish, egoistic mind. We have been brainwashed and our minds have been corrupted. We have a lot of dirty laundry to do in order to turn society around. We not only need to do our own dirty laundry, but we also need to work on our collective dirty laundry.

To experience the difference between pleasure and happiness, and to learn to appreciate the simple things in life, one can spend time in nature. Nature is our best teacher. You will notice that highly evolved souls spend much time in nature. They may sit for hours observing fish swim, ants carry their food, or trees sway in the breeze. Like a child, the simplest things will bring a smile to their face. That is a smile of happiness and not of pleasure.

A large ship takes time to change course. Humanity can be equated to a ship with billions of energy units. It would be unrealistic to expect so many souls in various stages of evolution to all be awakened entirely overnight. We live in a world where, if we were to teach love and respect, we would receive hate and contempt in return. Spiritual evolution must occur in stages. That being said, there is an urgent calling for humanity to speed up its evolutionary process.

The fundamental knowledge that will trigger the transformation of humanity is understanding the difference between pleasure and happiness. The understanding we herein refer to is not book knowledge. It is not to think about it, agree, or memorize any teaching word-for-word. It is to experience it. Nothing is more powerful and more life-changing than an experience. The more people we can get to experience this difference, the quicker our collective transformation will be triggered.

Let us all re-evaluate our needs and seek a more simple life. Let us return to nature and to our heart to discover the true meaning of our precious human life. Happiness is available to all, we just need to know how to find it. The secret to being happy is not to gain everything we want; it is to rid ourselves of our wants.

Democracy cannot survive overpopulation. – Isaac Asimov

Chapter Fourteen

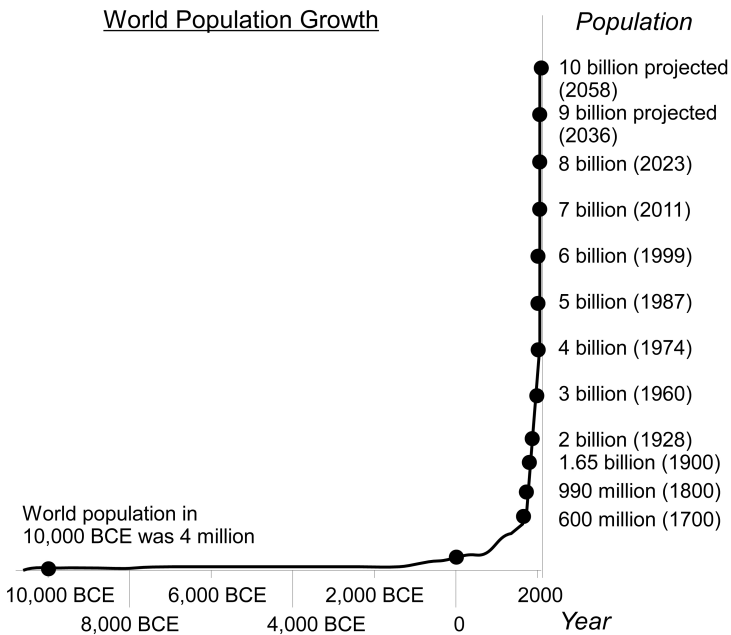
Desire to Multiply



If we are to be blunt, the most serious of all man-made disasters on Planet Earth is human overpopulation. We are experiencing an overpopulation crisis! This crisis is at the root of other secondary disasters, such as the destruction of wildlife habitat, loss of biodiversity, over-exploitation of natural resources, climate change, and more.

According to estimates published by the History Database of the Global Environment and the United Nations, the world population between 10,000 BCE and 1,700 CE grew at a relatively steady rate of 0.04% annually. The human population of this entire planet in 10,000 BCE was 4 million, roughly half the population of New York City today. Please take a moment to think about that.

Since hitting the billion mark in the early 1800s, the human population has exploded. In the last 200 years, the Earth's human population has increased eightfold! It is now at nearly eight billion, and the UN predicts it will reach eleven billion by 2100. That is a lot of extra humans for this planet to sustain. So, is there anything we can or should be doing about it? Should we be calling on the government to step in and take action?



We can learn from the example of China to answer this last question. In 1980, the Chinese government tried to address its overpopulation issue by initiating a one-child policy. It made free contraception available on a

wide scale and offered financial payouts, interest-free loans, extra housing and health care benefits, special educational opportunities for the child, and other perks to parents who complied. For those who did not, it offered stiff fines, denial of educational opportunities for their children, and in some cases, forced abortions and sterilizations.

There were unintended consequences to this government-sanctioned population control. One was that the gender ratio in China became imbalanced. Boys were considered more valuable because they would carry on the family name and earn an income to support the family. Female fetuses were often selectively aborted, and female infants were abandoned, surrendered to orphanages, or even murdered in the hopes of parents having another shot at a male child. The result of this is that there are currently 33 million more men than there are women in China. Millions of men live alone, not by choice, but because they are unable to find a spouse.

As its population aged and many taxpayers retired, there was a shortage of new, young people to pay into the system. Also, many parents who violated the one-child policy chose not to register their “illegal” children, resulting in millions of people with no legal identity. The government quickly noticed problems with the policy. It first tried to modify it by allowing exceptions for families who lived in rural areas or

allowing families whose firstborn was a girl to have a second child, for example, but it did not work. After easing to a two-child and then three-child policy, the policy itself was repealed.

Since 2021, the Chinese government officially allowed couples to have as many children as they chose. However, the question remains, is it really within a government's authority to dictate how many children its citizens can have? As in this example, history has proven that whenever a majority-male governing body creates laws regarding reproductive rights, a disproportionate amount of responsibilities, burdens, blame, and punishments inevitably fall upon women.

If involving the government in population control is not a good idea, another alternative is to let nature take its course. Nature has a way of resolving its problems. Mother Earth is a living entity. She is currently suffering because of a serious disease: unconscious humans who are trampling Sacred Law. She will fight this disease and try to restore equilibrium. It may be in the form of droughts or famines, earthquakes or volcanic eruptions, wildfires or floods, food-borne illnesses or pandemics, gene mutations or mass infertility. Who knows? Perhaps all of the above. She will do what it takes to eliminate the disease and return to balance. As is above, so is below.

Lucky for us, there is a third choice. It is to consciously live in tune

with Mother Nature and Sacred Law. We do not need or want a government regulating our reproductive rights. What we need is to individually and collectively become aware of this issue and do our part to correct it.

Have you ever thought about how many disposable diapers it takes to raise a baby? According to various estimates, a baby can require 2,000–3,000 diapers during the first year alone. That is a lot of diapers to add to a landfill. And do not forget the endless supplies of baby formula, baby wipes, baby clothes, baby shampoo, and baby toys, and that is only the beginning!

Imagine how many thousands upon thousands of animals will have to be slaughtered to feed them. Imagine how many trees would have to be sacrificed to supply their shelter or how much fossil fuels would have to be burned to pay for their decades of comfort.

When we choose to have children, it does not end there. Our children will then have children, and theirs will also have children, and so on, so we are responsible for all of the consumption that follows. It is surprising how some people who pride themselves in being environmentally conscious go on to have multiple children without really giving this any thought.

If we were genuinely mindful of the environment and the impact of our actions, we can only conclude that it would be irresponsible to have children when we already have a serious overpopulation problem.

That being said, we can also appreciate that procreation is a part of our animal nature. Some of us feel an ingrained need to procreate, and that is a choice that must be respected. We are not suggesting that having children is wrong. We are merely pointing out the fact that such important decisions need to be made carefully and after much reflection. As in any major life decision, it is important to weigh the benefits and drawbacks of our available options and choose responsibly.

If we got one hundred young people to reflect before having children, perhaps a few would choose not to populate this already-overpopulated planet, which may be enough to turn the scale. In reality, some of this is already happening. The birth rate is on a decline. We just need to move with a little more sense of urgency.

Whatever conscious efforts we may opt for to reduce the human population, they must not be based on a forced system using reward and punishment but on a voluntary one using education and reason.

Don't let people pull you into their storm. Pull them into your peace.

– Pema Chödrön

Chapter Fifteen

Desire to Be Accepted



One day, footage of a little Chinese boy appeared on the news. He could not have been more than 5 or 6 years old. One would imagine how cute a child would be at that age, but you would not say that about this boy. He had the most angry, mean, hateful expression on his face. The camera rolled as he repeatedly shouted, “I hate Americans!”

We can learn much about humanity by observing children because they are innocent little mirrors reflecting who we are. It would have been interesting to ask this little boy how many Americans he knew personally and what they did to him to make him hate them so much.

Sadly, it is often parents who teach their children to hate. Children are born innocent and are like sponges in their ability to absorb information.

Their parents are their primary role models and whom they depend on for survival. Children seek to earn the love and approval of their parents by adjusting their behavior in a way that is acceptable to them. This little boy had probably never known an American in his life. He only hated them because he was taught to hate them. The target of his hatred could have easily been some other group: Muslims, women, police officers, persons of color, redheads, ... or even kittens.

Indoctrination starts at a young age. Imagine what views such a child will hold as an adult. Like the culture we were raised in, what we are taught during our childhood becomes ingrained in our identity. It is much more difficult to correct our behavior when it is a part of who we are.

All across the globe, unconscious parents are teaching their children to hate. The chosen target may be any random characteristic that differentiates “them” from “us.” Children usually do not have the capacity to question whether the hatred is justified or not. They just want to please those who are caring for them. They learn to hate not because they are hateful but out of their desire to be loved and accepted.

It is human nature to want to be loved and accepted. Even the most selfish, angry, violent bully who hates everyone deep down inside wants to be loved and accepted. In fact, they are the ones most starved for love because nobody dares love them, not even themselves.

When we observe organized hate groups across the globe, we will note that they have much in common. Their members unite under a common belief, which gives them a sense of camaraderie. They feed off each other, using their shared belief as a means to create a bond between them.

Many of their members most likely never had a loving and supportive family. They grew up feeling alone, neglected, and unworthy of love, so they learned to seek love and acceptance wherever they could find it. When they are cheered on and supported for participating in hateful acts or speech, it brings them a feeling of love and acceptance. If their hate group gets public attention, it makes them feel important. Oftentimes, the cause does not matter as much as their need to belong. People will do anything for love, including hate.

There is a well-known principle – called the Golden Rule – that says to treat others the way we wish to be treated and to not do things to others that we would not want done to us. Versions of this exist in Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Taoism, Buddhism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, and many other religions and cultures. It is an excellent principle to live by, and it is no wonder that many traditions have it as part of their teachings. If we can recognize its value, why are more of us not putting it into practice?

Let us look at the Christian version of this teaching: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” It is not always easy to put concepts

into words, and sometimes we distort the good teachings to suit our purpose. Imagine being a young man whose brother was just killed by a rival street gang. He is burning with a desire for revenge. The Golden Rule can be twisted to justify his thirst for violence. “I will do unto you what you did unto me. You killed my brother and made my family suffer, so I will kill you and make your family suffer.”

This is pretty much our society’s way of handing out justice to those who are caught doing what we consider as wrong. Our immediate response is to want to punish them. If it is not to inflict pain upon them on the spot, we want to lock them up in a place where they are systematically mistreated, deprived, and humiliated so that they will have an even worse experience than the person they victimized.

They must pay for their evil by suffering, and the more they suffer, the more justice has been served. Victims are often angered and outraged when they do not feel like the punishment the courts handed out to a perpetrator is severe enough. The fact is, wrongdoers rarely become rehabilitated through punishment. If anything, it makes them more resentful and hateful, and more likely to display further anti-social (“them-against-me”) behavior.

If we tell wrongdoers that bringing harm to others is wrong and then turn around and bring harm to them as punishment, that is called

hypocrisy. We need to transcend that primitive level of thinking. This naturally brings us to the question, what should we do then?

The following ideas may seem outrageous to some because it goes against what we have been practicing for a long time, but it is a necessary step toward our transition into a new level of consciousness. We need to reevaluate our criminal justice system in which we lock up unconscious beings in cages as punishment for their misdeeds.

Prisons should not be a place of violence, deprivation, and suffering. They should be a place of healing, self-reflection, and personal growth. If incarceration is deemed necessary, it should be used as an opportunity to train those who never had a chance to learn good human qualities such as manners, kindness, respect, humility, love, and compassion. Instead of locking wrongdoers up in a cage, many would benefit from a monastic-type setting, where they are taught discipline, reflection, self-mastery, charity, and how to connect with the Divine.

When they are released, they should leave a better person than when they entered. To avoid falling back into their old patterns, they could be assigned a mentor or support group and be required to take classes on topics such as ethics and anger management. They can be encouraged and supported along the way instead of being permanently labeled “evil” and treated as undesirables of society.

Fortunately, some of this is already happening. There are more and more programs to help rehabilitate and aid our brothers and sisters who made mistakes. But we still have much more work to do. This “educate-rather-than-punish” principle can be applied to prisons and other segments of society, such as within families, schools, government institutions, and the corporate world.

Perhaps the difficulty we face with the “do unto others” teaching is the concept of “others.” By distinguishing oneself as an independent entity who suffers separate consequences from “others,” we deny the oneness of our experiences and enter a scapegoat mentality. If wrongdoers are released back into society without having been made conscious of their errors, all of us suffer. Thus, it is in all of our best interest that they are made conscious. Here is a touching story that illustrates this point:

There was a Zen master who had many disciples, some of whom lived with him at a temple. One day, a young, new disciple was caught stealing. The senior disciples that caught him went to the master and asked him to expel the culprit immediately. The master listened to their complaint with concern but did not expel the young disciple. A while later, the same disciple was caught stealing again. By then, the whole temple knew about the first incident, including the fact that the master seemed to have done

nothing when told about it.

Several senior disciples got together and angrily dragged the young disciple in front of the master. “Master, here is the thief. Please expel him immediately. If you do not, then we cannot stay with someone like him around, so we are all leaving!”

Master gently replied, “You are all wise enough to know right from wrong. You will do fine even if you decide to leave this temple and go elsewhere. But this poor brother, he does not know right from wrong. Who will teach him if I do not?”

Upon hearing that, the young disciple who had stolen broke down in a torrent of tears. He apologized to everyone and vowed to never steal again. He kept that vow for the rest of his life.

Our environment greatly affects the way we turn out. Each of us has the potential to become a saint or a scoundrel. Good relations are fundamental in the evolution of the soul. It helps to belong to a community of people who strive to become the best they can be, encouraging and setting good examples for each other. Finding such a community may be the first step for some of us in turning our life in a positive direction.

Our desire to be loved and accepted should never override our good judgment. If we are involved in a situation where we must sacrifice our

values to be accepted, we must consider if that is a situation that we really wish to remain in. There are always others who will love and respect us for who we are. We all have the free will to live wisely or foolishly. Why not, then, consciously choose to live wisely?

Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself. – Leo Tolstoy

Chapter Sixteen

Desire to Be Helpful



Most of us have good intentions, most of the time. We try to be kind and helpful when we can. This is a good quality, however, sometimes we can go overboard, and our good intentions can be misunderstood. We often try to help people even when they do not ask for help or want help. This can be a major cause of unnecessary conflict and ill feelings.

Has anyone ever gotten upset with you when you were just trying to be helpful? It happens all the time. Chances are, you may have unintentionally crossed the boundary between being helpful and being intrusive. Distinguishing between the two can be challenging, as the line is often blurred. Not everyone with an issue at hand needs or wants help.

One way to know is to ask. If someone refuses our help, then we should not insist.

There are well-meaning people who – no matter the subject – like to jump in with advice. This is especially common with parents towards their grown children. If this may describe you, you may have to train yourself to resist the urge. Just like you, most people do not appreciate unsolicited advice. This means that sometimes, we must let people make their own mistakes.

There was a woman whose husband was a heavy drinker and smoker. After years of abusing his body, he eventually ended up with cancer. The doctor told him he needed to quit the alcohol and tobacco if he wanted to live a long life, but the man would not listen. He had convinced himself that he needed alcohol and tobacco to be happy. As cancer ravaged his body, he became too weak to go out and buy alcohol and tobacco on his own, so he started asking his wife to go buy them for him.

She found herself torn. While she did not want to enable his self-destructive behavior, she genuinely desired his happiness. Each time she suggested he take the doctor's advice and give up alcohol and tobacco, it made him angry. Ultimately, she decided that the best way to keep peace between them was to buy his alcohol and tobacco without making any

comments. He continued smoking and drinking until he was too weak to do so and died shortly thereafter.

The lesson in this story is that we cannot change those who are not willing to change. It is their life to live however they please, and all we can do is offer to help if they are open to it. Sometimes the best help you can give someone is to leave them alone. It is not always easy, but we must learn to be at peace with this. We are not responsible for changing anyone except ourself.

Spiritual growth cannot be imposed. Each soul is at a unique stage of evolution, and certain truths will be revealed to them when the time has come. Some of us can only learn from making our own mistakes. There is no need to feel guilty for our inability to assist someone, as we are not accountable for their failures. The consequences of their poor choices rest solely on their shoulders.

This naturally raises the question, what if someone's bad choices resulted in them bringing harm to us, others, or our planet? There are times when we are compelled to take action, and when those times come, it is important to do so based on wisdom. Our goal is to resolve the situation in the most peaceful way possible, including for that person. It may take some deep contemplation to come up with a good solution.

Well-meaning people often make poor choices because they act rashly. They let their ego-centered, reactive mind control their behavior instead of analyzing the situation objectively using the filter of wisdom. Most of us have some degree of wisdom, but not all of us tune into it nearly enough. If we respond to someone's foolish behavior by engaging in similarly foolish behavior, we essentially allow that person to dictate our actions. Instead of one foolish act committed, now there are two. This is how "evil" manages to permeate society.

Often all it takes is a flash moment to snap out of an "evil" spell. We sometimes hear the advice, "When you get angry, take a deep breath before speaking or acting." If more of us learned to follow this advice, we would have a much more peaceful society. Imagine all the road rage incidents, arguments and fights, violent crimes, suicides, police brutality cases, and other destructive acts that could be prevented if people learned to control their reactive mind. This is not always easy or possible, especially in cases where one is physically threatened, at the same time, it is a necessary obstacle to overcome in our collective evolution.

People often wonder whether there is a way to speed up our evolutionary process. On a personal level, there are widely-used practices such as studying scriptures, self-inquiry, daily prayer, singing devotional

songs, performing austerities, and meditation, which we will go into a little later, but there are other highly effective methods.

One is to help someone or something, especially someone or something that cannot express an appreciation. While it can be a paid position, it is most effective when the position includes no financial compensation. This would make it a purely thankless role, where our only reward is in the work itself. We will start by thinking that we are doing the universe a service but will eventually realize that it is the universe doing us a service by aiding in our evolution.

We are each born with unique talents. Everyone has something to contribute to the collective evolution of humanity and the betterment of our planet. Use your talents and skills to do your part. Do not hesitate to be who you were meant to be. Our planet and humanity need you!

If you decide to help others, always remember to help from a position of humility and not from a place of superiority. Help others to accomplish what they need, not what you think they need. Be the one who lifts them up from below, not one who pulls them up from above. Know the difference. That is not our role.

People do charity work for various reasons. Some because their school

or court system required them to, some because they want to be respected in their church or community, some because someone asked them and they could not say “no,” and some to get a free meal or T-shirt. It is not always from the heart, but often the efforts still end up helping a cause. Why not go a step further, though?

When discussing actual charity, the word “compassion” comes to mind. What exactly is compassion, and why is it important? Compassion is the ability to imagine walking in someone else’s shoes. It is the ability to deeply understand the pain that someone is feeling and to feel a strong desire to help them. From a spiritual perspective, charity without compassion is nothing but selfish indulgence. Here is an example:

A woman complained that she once tried to help the homeless, but they were so rude and ungrateful that she would never try to help them again. Here is how her story went. Her two children needed a school project that involved doing charity work, so they decided it would be about helping the homeless. One afternoon, the children made some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and Mom drove them to the poor side of town known for its homeless encampments.

She parked her new minivan alongside the street and had her children carry a tote bag full of sandwiches. She told them to go tent to tent,

offering the inhabitants a sandwich. Whenever anyone came out to accept one, mom pointed her camera at them and told them to hold the position with their hand reaching out to receive a sandwich from her child. Then she said, “SMILE!” as she took photos, often two or three from different angles before the child would hand over a sandwich. She never asked permission to take their photo, how they were doing, or even said “hello” before taking their photos.

Imagine if you had just lost everything you owned, perhaps after a long illness, or after losing your job or business, or after barely escaping your home with your life after a domestic violence incident. You are living the worst moments of your life, not knowing where you will end up and having no one to turn to. As you are dealing with grief and uncertainty, someone decides to use you as a prop for their children’s school project. The mother tells you to smile so that her children will look like heroes, coming to rescue poor, pitiful you.

Having compassion, in this case, is to imagine being one of those unfortunate people. It is to imagine how you would feel if you were often hungry and cold, the aches you would feel from sleeping on a concrete sidewalk, the insecurity of not having a private shower or bathroom, living with a fear of being harassed or robbed, and how you would feel if some

seemingly-well-off family drove up and started taking snapshots of your misery as if you were their entertainment for the day. If the homeless people were “rude and ungrateful” as the woman claimed, they had good reason to be.

What we think of as our desire to do good is often only our desire to look good. During the early stages of our personal evolution, it is not uncommon for us to feel immense enthusiasm. We may envision ourselves as world-changers, expecting our name to one day make the headlines. We may anticipate admiration from the world and even entertain thoughts of winning prestigious accolades such as the Nobel Prize. There is nothing wrong with enthusiasm, we just must be careful to do our work out of a desire to serve and not out of ego gratification.

Many of us, let us admit it, are hypocrites. We offer advice that we ourselves are not willing to follow. We criticize the speck in our neighbor’s eye while ignoring the plank in our own. In order to transform humanity, we must start with the self. Indian sage Ramana Maharshi once said, “Your own Self-realization is the greatest service you can render the world.”

We are each only one out of eight billion (8,000,000,000) humans on this planet. Like a speck of sand on a beach, that is an infinitely small

number. None of us could change the planet alone, no matter how hard we tried. What we each can do, however, is live life in such a way as to ignite the flame of awakening in others around us.

Through our humble and selfless actions, we can motivate others to do their inner work, and they will then spark others to do their inner work, and that is how enlightenment can spread across the planet.

Do not be wise in words, be wise in deeds. – Jewish proverb

Chapter Seventeen

Desire for Enlightenment



Like a plant that grows towards a light source, humanity has an innate pull toward spiritual fulfillment. Cultures from around the world have independently discovered that there are higher states of consciousness attainable by humans. Different words are used to describe that state, and different methods have been used to attain it. Here we will refer to that state as “enlightenment.”

When engaging in discussions about enlightenment, it is natural for questions to arise regarding the existence of higher powers and a state that transcends physical manifestation. Some may refer to this state as the afterlife, in-between life, purgatory, or heaven/hell.

Does the soul continue its existence after physical death? What (or





who) is God? Must we believe in God to transcend to a higher state?

The concept of “God” is highly subjective. A 5-year-old may think of God as an old man resembling Santa Claus who lives in the clouds and monitors our every move. If we are caught being naughty, he is quick to punish us. Then, there are those of us who say we do not believe in God. Since everyone’s idea of God is personal, this chapter is not intended to get us to agree on a definition. Still, hopefully, it will allow us to think together, whatever our beliefs may or may not be.

It is impossible to prove the existence of God to everyone’s satisfaction, so we will not waste time debating that question. What we will do instead is to contemplate whether it is wiser to believe or not believe in a higher power (which some of us may refer to as God) and the continuance of the soul after physical death.

Concerning the belief in any unprovable phenomenon, there are four possibilities:

- 1) It is true, and I believe it
- 2) It is true, but I do not believe it
- 3) It is untrue, but I believe it
- 4) It is untrue, and I do not believe it

true	untrue	
 1	 3	believe
 2	 4	do not believe

Let us look at these four possibilities. If something is true and we believe it (Option 1), we are in good shape because we made the correct choice. If we believe in a higher Truth and try to live according to that Truth, then chances are, we are doing our best to live a good earthly life and will have a good existence after our physical death. We will have the best of both worlds.

We also made the correct choice if something is untrue and we do not believe it (Option 4). Nothing is lost because of our non-belief, except perhaps a sense of spiritual fulfillment during our physical life. We would have lived a purely materialistic life, and with any luck, it would have worked out for us. If not, life would have been a big disappointment, with no chance of anything better to come.

The other two possibilities are based on false beliefs. If something is not true, but we believe it (Option 3), and our belief in it causes us to live a happier, kinder, more fulfilling life, we can say that we selected the correct way of living, even though our belief may have been incorrect. We will not get a glorious afterlife, but at least we lived a good earthly life.

Now what about if it were true and we did not believe it (Option 2)? We would have led a purely materialistic life, which was most likely not in accordance with Sacred Law. In addition to having been spiritually unfulfilled in our earthly life, we would also face the consequences after

our physical death of not having lived in accordance with Sacred Law during our earthly existence. So out of the four choices, it is the worst-case scenario.

A surprising number of us do not take advantage of one of our most precious gifts: the ability to reason. Atheists may say they do not believe in God and the soul's eternal nature because they are using their capacity to reason. What they are actually doing is making such determinations based on their limited perception of reality. Using the analysis presented, we can see the risk of not believing. A certain degree of skepticism can be healthy, but being skeptical of everything is just as bad as being fanatical since it is a sign of a closed mind.

Believing is not enough, however. If we believe a storm is coming and leave home without an umbrella, we will get just as wet as someone who left without one because s/he did not believe a storm was coming. In other words, to make a belief produce positive results, there must be an effort that accompanies the belief.

Having an open mind is necessary for both our personal and collective growth. Sometimes we become trapped in our patterns of thinking and refuse to listen to ideas that may not agree with our own. Having an open mind does not mean accepting everything we are told. It is to analyze each idea on its merits rather than its popularity or source. If a popular and

well-respected figure preaches hate and bigotry by citing scriptures, for example, we must be able to apply our filter of wisdom instead of blindly accepting their interpretation as Truth.

Now that we have shown the rationality of believing, we will seemingly contradict ourselves and state that it is not necessary to believe in God to attain enlightenment. When someone says that they do not believe in God, it is often the form or name they do not believe in rather than the existence of a higher Truth.

Some traditions intentionally choose not to name that which they seek. For example, this is reflected in the Taoist quote, “The Tao that can be named is not the eternal Tao.” They understand that the moment we name something, we have already limited it. We then try to fit it into a perfect little box based on our insufficient understanding, and this prevents us from ever finding it.

A true spiritual seeker is not someone who seeks to find a predefined God. It is someone who perpetually aims to experience the unknown that we sometimes refer to as God. Such a search involves stepping beyond the boundaries of the five physical senses. We limit ourselves tremendously when we accept only what can be perceived through our senses.

The process of seeking enlightenment, we can thus say, is the process

of discovering the truth behind what some refer to as “God,” “Allah,” “Yahweh,” “Jehovah,” “Ishvara,” “Krishna,” “Wakan Tanka,” “Ahura Mazda,” etc. In other words, we do not have to start out by believing in any predefined concept. We just need to be open to truths that will be revealed to us when we are spiritually ripe to receive them. This is what is often referred to in the Judeo-Christian tradition as “divine grace.”

Incidentally, you will note that the spiritual path is full of paradoxes. There are many experiences that simply cannot be translated into words. They become awkward, senseless, and/or contradictory whenever we attempt to do so. This is because words are incredibly limiting.

To prove this point, try to describe a fascinating dream that you once had to someone you know. It would be impossible to find the words to describe it in a way that others would become as excited about it as you are, and you may find yourself giving up in frustration. Or, try to describe the difference in taste between an apple and an orange to someone who has tried neither of them. This is precisely why no one can give us step-by-step instructions on how to become enlightened.

So, how can we attain that elusive state? There is no consensus, even among those who have reached it. Some seek it by utilizing the body and mind as tools, while others pursue it through detachment from the body and mind. Some engage with the material world to find it, while others

withdraw from it. Some follow religious teachings or gurus, while others experiment with their own solitary practices.

There is no one correct way of going about it. We just need to find methods that work for our current level of evolution, belief system, background, and character. The methods may change from time to time as we continue to evolve.

Studying scriptures is a good start for the novice, as it helps to understand the purpose of human life. When studying, we can use our power of discernment to separate truths from falsehoods. The best scriptures are only as good as the humans interpreting them. A word of advice: Never rely on highly-educated scholars to interpret scriptures for you, as they often do not have the right qualifications.

Also, be aware that ancient scriptures are only interpretations of the original word, since they were first passed down orally and were later hand-copied for centuries before being put into print, all by imperfect humans with their own biases and agendas. Historians have found evidence that various scriptures have been altered numerous times over the centuries, both unintentionally and intentionally.

Some people spend a lifetime studying scriptures. They have memorized them by heart and can impress us by recalling what is written

in a chapter and verse of a particular book without opening it. Yet, they often remain as unenlightened as the rest of us. Scriptures are helpful in building foundational knowledge, but they only become meaningful when the knowledge is applied to real life. It takes only so long to build a foundation, and there comes a time when we must start building our castle upon it.

So far, we have used the term “enlightenment” loosely, but it is essential to clarify that there are different stages of enlightenment. The highest stage is often referred to in Eastern traditions as moksha, or liberation. Once one attains this stage, no further efforts are necessary. It is difficult to estimate how many humans currently living on this planet have achieved this stage, but it is a very small number. As to the number who have attained lower stages of enlightenment, it would most likely be in the millions.

What often happens is that many of us who have had a mystical experience or attained a lower stage of enlightenment become convinced that we are fully enlightened. Some may have experienced it through hallucinogenic drugs, during a trance-inducing ritual, after a prophetic dream, or via the glance or touch of an allegedly enlightened person. After such an experience, we often go on to become pompous, arrogant, impatient, hypocritical, judgmental, and mean-spirited human beings. We

also cease further efforts because we believe we have already reached the goal.

As is the case with any evolutionary process, when no forward efforts are being made, the tendency is for one to regress. It is not that we simply stagnate or stop evolving. We actually lose ground on some of our progress, which will necessitate additional efforts just to return to the point where we once were at. Three steps forward and one step back. If you are still here on Earth, it is safe to say that there are more lessons for you to learn. Do not let your ego convince you otherwise.

Some rare people seemingly attain enlightenment with little or no effort. These are people who most likely made great efforts in past lives or out of the public eye. They made it look easy when there was undoubtedly a lot of effort involved. Not everyone who is enlightened becomes famous, and in fact, those who try to make a name for themselves by claiming that they are more than likely are not there yet. A truly enlightened person would not advertise that fact for profit or personal recognition. That is the human ego in action.

The intention of pointing this out is not to discourage anyone from studying with a teacher who is not fully enlightened. There are many great teachers who are seekers themselves. Everyone has something to teach us, even a child. Whatever path(s) we choose, it is not the theory but the

practice that counts. Study with whomever you wish, but know that your enlightenment does not depend on anyone but yourself. Anyone who tells you otherwise is doing you a disservice.

There is another common trap that we need to be aware of. Many people who say they are seeking enlightenment are actually seeking supernatural powers, such as the ability to predict the future, communicate with spirits, attain healing capabilities, or read other peoples' minds. While such abilities may surface during one's quest, attaining supernatural powers is not what enlightenment is about.

Some people may hope to attain a state where all of their problems disappear. Everyone around them will see the divinity within them and will start treating them with respect. This is not what happens. Your enlightenment will not change how others perceive you. A fool will always perceive others as being fools. There is a Zen Buddhist saying: "Before enlightenment; chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment; chop wood, carry water." You will still have to pay your bills, bad things will still happen, and you will still have to interact with unconscious people.

Most religions and spiritual practices seem to stress the importance of moral integrity. Yes, you can meditate, study scriptures, perform rituals or austerities, serve others, pray, sing, dance, whatever. However, your

practice will produce little fruit unless self-reflection is made a part of your daily practice.

Self-reflection is the key ingredient to enlightenment. This means that we must make conscious efforts to merge our personal will with Divine will. Or in more familiar terms, we can say it is to increase our vibrational frequency, expand our awareness, or develop our capacity to love. These are different ways of saying the same thing.

Discontent is the first necessity of progress. – Thomas Edison

Chapter Eighteen

Desire to Take Shortcuts



Modern life has become extremely convenient. Whenever we need items, we go to the local store or order them online. Whenever we want a quick meal, we drive up to a fast food restaurant, where the convenience extends to not even needing to leave our vehicle. When we get sick or injured, we go to doctors to have them fix us up. When we want to find information, we look it up on the Internet from the comfort of our home. Technological advances have made our lives easy, but at the same time, we must admit that they have made us lazy.

We already mentioned the obesity epidemic. With food so readily available and various modes of transportation to quickly take us wherever we want to go, we are overeating and under-exercising. This is the perfect

recipe for gaining weight. And what is our solution? For those who can afford it, it is often liposuction, weight loss pills, or bariatric surgery.

The evolution of human beings has led to our seeking instant gratification. This desire for immediate reward is often observed in behavior such as discourteous drivers zigzagging through traffic or impatient shoppers attempting to cut in line at the grocery store. In the news, we hear stories of customers assaulting servers because they were made to wait for their coffee. Be reminded that we are not talking about children. Grown adults routinely throw public tantrums for having been made to wait.

Look at the way we elect our politicians. How many of us carefully research how each candidate stands on important issues or learn about their moral character before casting a vote? We cannot deny that we choose them primarily based on outward appearance. Studies have shown that we have a preference for physically attractive, well-dressed, wealthy politicians who act confidently and say what people want to hear.

We would rather elect actors, comedians, and professional wrestlers to run our governments than unknown persons who may be of higher moral character, intelligence, and integrity. Perhaps the latter are not as interesting to watch and make fun of. We have come to treat the election process and political arena as entertainment. It is no wonder we end up

with politicians who are incapable of resolving our issues.

Do you see how we create our own problems? This is not to suggest that there is anything inherently problematic with having entertainers in politics. However, in a society where we entrust politicians to make decisions that affect our lives and the future of our planet, their moral character, intelligence, and integrity should be of primary importance – not how good they look or act on camera.

Let us next think about spectator sports, which has become a multi-billion-dollar industry. There is a reason why spectator sports are so popular in modern society. They allow us to conveniently share in a team's victory as if it were our own, without having made any effort ourselves, except perhaps to turn on the television, sit in our favorite chair, and open a can of beer.

We enjoy criticizing the players' mistakes and discussing how they should have handled a play as if we were the experts. We wear T-shirts with their team logo to make us feel like we are part of the team. Some of us spend a fortune and travel around the country to attend sporting events, hoping to experience the victory in person.

If our team wins, we go out and celebrate. And when our team is on a losing streak, all we have to do is abandon that team and choose a

different, stronger one to root for next time. It is no coincidence that the most winning teams are the most popular. The primary purpose of watching spectator sports is to experience the joy of victory. We invest emotional energy in supporting our team, hoping they will bring us a sense of triumph rather than disappointment.

This is how many of us treat our own evolution. We want enlightenment but are unwilling to put in the required efforts. We want it to be quick and easy. If we could pay someone to do it for us, we would. As a matter of fact, many spiritual teachers have gained a significant following by catering to this crowd.

They may tell seekers that no effort is necessary, that all we have to do is surrender to them – mentally, physically and/or financially – and they will take care of the rest. There are also teachers who claim to provide instant enlightenment, usually through a deep glance or a touch to the forehead. In Hinduism, it is referred to as “shaktipat.” In the Western world, it brings to mind energetic televangelists who slap ailing people on the forehead while yelling, “Hallelujah! You are healed!”

Some individuals invest significant amounts of money and endure long lines to receive what they perceive as enlightenment or blessings. They may experience a temporary state of self-induced hypnotic bliss, only to return to their ordinary lives, sometimes genuinely convinced that they

have attained enlightenment. If participating in such events helps someone feel better, that is great. However, if their goal is to achieve enlightenment, they must realize that enlightenment is earned and not given out freely, like candy.

There is a phrase that has become popular in modern spiritual circles: “Accept yourself just the way you are.” Variations of these words are uttered in yoga studios, churches, self-help seminars, spiritual retreats, and other gatherings. This is another misleading piece of advice that stems from our culture of laziness. When people are taught this concept, some start convincing themselves that they are perfect and, as a result, feel no need to make any effort.

The Christian version of this is the idea, “Jesus already died for my sins, so I can do whatever I want and am already assured a spot in heaven.” For people who hold such a belief, any issues that arise can never be their fault. Since they are fine the way they are, others must be the problem. Instead of reflecting on their shortcomings and trying to change, they get into the habit of blaming others.

We should accept the fact that we are all imperfect beings. At the same time, evolution requires us to make efforts to become something better. That is our life’s work. Otherwise, there is no progress, individually or collectively. Spiritual enlightenment is earned through long-term,

continuous, and sincere practical efforts. It has always been that way and will always be so.

As life becomes increasingly convenient due to technological advances, a prevailing sense of entitlement infiltrates the human psyche. This is not only among the more “privileged” class but equally among the poorer, less educated, and disadvantaged class. It applies to everyone, regardless of race, gender, religion, national origin, etc. We want special treatment. We want something for nothing. We want to take the easy way out. Unfortunately, spiritual evolution does not work that way.

Whether we choose the conscious path to speed up the process or remain unconscious and let nature take its course, effort is involved. Nobody can make those efforts for us. Unlike spectator sports, you cannot simply sit back and watch the game play out, hoping for a win. You are the athlete. You are the active participant. If you want the glory, then you must do the work.

It is important to understand that the efforts we are referring to here are not about acquiring. They are not about learning new techniques, finding a guru, earning honorary titles, or attaining supernatural powers. While studying can guide us and help us stay on the right path, ultimate spiritual enlightenment is realized through losing.

The Self-realization process is much like cultivating a garden. Early in the season, gardeners enthusiastically choose which plants to grow. They obtain seeds, plant them in the right conditions, and give them plenty of fertilizer and water throughout the season. This is all necessary, but there is another critical step: weeding. Unless gardeners diligently weed their garden, it will soon become overgrown with weeds, overshadowing all the beautiful plants they cultivated.

We can learn a lot from nature. Weeding is an essential aspect of spiritual evolution. Unless humans weed out their negative qualities, they will cultivate serious character flaws that overshadow all the wonderful accomplishments that they may have pursued.

Due to the fact that humans tend to focus on material success without working on our moral character, we end up with hordes of highly-educated professionals – doctors, lawyers, engineers, educators, scientists, and such – with serious character flaws. Because they fertilized and watered their garden so well, they may have grown more weeds than their less success-driven counterparts: weeds of such varieties as arrogance, greed, pride, impatience, close-mindedness, sarcasm, pretentiousness, and self-importance.

Most gardeners will say they enjoy planting but would rather not deal with weeding. Yet it is a task that needs to be done. Likewise, many

humans are eager to pursue their various interests but would rather not deal with correcting their character defects. That is why they end up with such a garden, where a few beautiful flowers can be seen poking through a jungle of weeds.

There are countless talented people on this planet in many domains. Humanity has no shortage of talent. However, when we consider the proportion of individuals who have engaged in profound inner work, they constitute a small minority. Our civilization can thus be equated to a community of flower gardens – gardens that have the potential to be beautiful if only gardeners conscientiously made an effort to get their weeds under control.

It is time for a parable about inner weeds.

Once upon a time, there was a little boy who had a habit of telling lies. He would constantly be caught in a lie, and despite his parents repeatedly asking him to stop, the boy continued the behavior. In desperation, the parents consulted an old village wise woman to see if she could help. The old woman invited them to bring their son to visit her.

She was an avid gardener and had a large garden in her backyard. When the boy arrived with his parents, he seemed

uptight, perhaps expecting to be lectured. The old woman asked the parents if they would relax in her home, as she wanted to give the little boy a tour of her garden. She then asked the boy if he would like to take a tour. Seizing the opportunity to escape being lectured, he gladly agreed.

As they started walking along, the old woman spotted a little weed on the walkway. She asked the boy, “Son, see that little weed on the walkway? Would you mind pulling it for me? I am getting old and have a bad back, so it is difficult for me to bend down.”

The boy grasped the weed with one hand and quickly pulled it out. “Thank you,” she said with a smile. As they continued walking, the old woman spotted another weed, this time much bigger than the last one. “Oh my, there’s another one! My dear, would you mind pulling that one also?” The boy walked up to the weed and started pulling. This time he needed to use both hands, and after a fair struggle, was able to pull the larger weed.

“Thank you. My, you are strong!” the old woman exclaimed. The boy shyly smiled. As they continued walking, there was a tree that divided the walkway into two. The old woman asked while pointing at the tree, “Since you are so strong, would you mind pulling that weed for me? It has been blocking my pathway like

that for years.” The boy looked at the tree and replied in shock, “I can’t pull that!”

“But why?” the old woman asked. “Because it’s too big!” the boy replied. “It’s been growing there for years, and the roots are too deep. You should have pulled it sooner!” The old woman smiled and said, “Yes, you are right. I should have... It is much like getting rid of a bad habit, isn’t it?...like lying, perhaps.”

“If you work on correcting it early on, it is much easier, but the more that you wait, the more it gets deeply rooted and difficult to correct until one day, it becomes impossible.” As if a light bulb had gone on in his head, the boy instantly understood the message. He quit lying from that day on.

Conscious evolution is the process of removing our inner weeds. It took a long time for them to grow as big as they have, so removing them will take time, effort, and patience. This goes for our personal evolution as well as our collective one. There is no VIP ticket available for purchase, and no one to do the work for us, except us. We have an enormous job ahead. Let us get to work.

The frog does not drink up the pond in which he lives. – Sioux Proverb

Chapter Nineteen

Desire to Complicate Life



As we have seen, humans like to take shortcuts when we can, but paradoxically, we also like to complicate life needlessly. Perhaps “like” is not the right word choice, but that is what we do. The following story about a Mexican fisherman and an American investment banker explains this point.

An American investment banker went to a small coastal village in Mexico and was taking a stroll late one morning. He spotted a small fishing boat returning from sea with one man aboard. Inside the boat were a couple of nice-sized fish. The banker went up to talk with the fisherman.

Banker: Buenos dias señor. Nice fish you have there. How long

did it take you to catch them?

Fisherman: Not long. Maybe an hour, or two at the most.

Banker: Just curious, why didn't you stay out longer?

Fisherman: This is plenty to feed my family for the day.

Banker: How do you usually spend your days?

Fisherman: I get up when I want, fish for a couple of hours, eat the fish that my wife prepares, we take a siesta together, and then we hang out with the kids. At night I invite my amigos over, and we eat, drink wine and play guitar until it gets late. It's a wonderful life!

Suddenly, a light bulb goes off in the banker's head.

Banker: That's great, but listen. I am an international investment banker and have an MBA from Harvard. I am an expert at this kind of thing, so I can tell you how you can do even better. First of all, you should spend more time fishing to catch more fish and then sell those extra fish. With the money you save up, you should buy a bigger boat.

Fisherman: Why?

Banker: So you can catch even more fish! That will allow you

to buy several more boats and hire people to help you. Once you grow your business, you can sell your fish directly to a processor instead of some intermediary and eventually build your own processing plant. That way, you will control the catching, processing, and distribution.

Fisherman: I see ... and then?

Banker: At that point, you will have to leave this village and move to Mexico City, then in a few years, to L.A., and eventually to New York to expand your enterprise.

Fisherman: Interesting ... and then?

Banker (enthusiastically): Listen, that is the best part! You announce an IPO and sell your company stock, and you become an instant mega-millionaire!

Fisherman: How long is this all going to take?

Banker: It all depends on how hard you are willing to work. If you work really hard and are prepared to put in nights and weekends, I'd say 15 to 20 years.

Fisherman: ... and then?

Banker: Then you retire. You move to a small coastal fishing

village like this one where you can get up when you want, fish for a couple of hours, eat the fish that your wife prepares, take a siesta together, and then hang out with the kids. At night you can invite your amigos over to eat, drink wine and play guitar until it gets late. Isn't that a great plan?!"

Many people chuckle the first time they hear this story, since it comically captures human nature. We tend to choose the most complicated, labor-intensive, stressful path when it comes to seeking happiness. Please reflect upon your own life. Like the investment banker, we believe we are doing the right thing by getting a good education, competing in the rat race during our most productive years, and then retiring when we are often not in the best of health to try to enjoy what is left of our life.

This is not to suggest that we should all immediately drop out of the rat race. There are many people who are satisfied with their material life and happy with their job. We are all in various stages of evolution; besides, we need workers to run a society and ways to earn a living. If we are not satisfied, however, it would be wise to objectively look at our life to figure out if there may not be a better way.

Many of us live in misery because we do not know any better. We cling to the belief that our facade defines who we are. We place value on

things such as the balance in our bank account, our paper degrees, our job titles, the brand of car that we drive, the greenness of our front lawn, and the opinion of others about us. Some of us have become so attached to our facade that we are even willing to sacrifice our happiness to attain or hang onto it.

We are not entirely at fault. Chances are, that is how our parents taught us to live and how their parents taught them. The path to living a peaceful, enjoyable, fulfilling life is simple, but most of us never “get it” because it goes against our ingrained value system. Like the investment banker in the story, we believe more is better. More education, a higher income, more possessions, more stress, and more time spent at work somehow make us a better person.

In fact, many of us go out of our way to be miserable. Have you ever met people who seem to create their own problems? They look for reasons to disagree with practically everyone they encounter. They would spend hours arguing over a penny if we allowed them to. Or they get overly fixated on insignificant details, such as what to eat, drink, or wear.

Or perhaps they may read too much into situations and blame others for intentionally sabotaging them. If you were to smile at them casually, they might take offense, assuming you are making fun of them. There are murders committed by people because they felt that someone looked at

them the wrong way. This could not be a pleasant way to live. Sadly, one of the by-products of our fast-paced society is an abundance of hyperactive, over-stimulated, and paranoid minds.

Boredom is a curious phenomenon. Have you ever thought about what causes anyone to become bored? Boredom is the uneasy feeling we get when we feel like we should be doing something but do not know what that is. In modern society, we are expected to be engaged in some activity during all waking hours, sometimes even performing multiple tasks simultaneously. The mind is always active and never has a chance to rest. In fact, relaxing the mind is often looked down upon. If you were to sit around and do nothing, you could be accused of being lazy, unmotivated, dull, uncaring, or worse.

Many people in modern society need to have some type of constant mental stimulation. While driving or at work, they listen to news or talk shows. When they are home, they leave the television on whether they are watching it or not. When they want to converse with someone in their household, they yell over the television noise instead of turning the volume down. Some people even sleep with their television or radio on all night.

Boredom is a symptom of a restless and undisciplined mind. Instead of making efforts to discipline the mind, however, we often seek external

activities to occupy the mind as a solution to boredom. Again, we attempt to treat the symptom instead of the cause. The true remedy to boredom is learning to quiet the mind, freeing it from the constant urge to be engaged in external stimulation.

Let us address the issue of self-mastery. Many of us go to the gym or have an exercise routine to train our physical body. Many of us take classes to gain book knowledge. Yet, how many of us train to master our mind? Aside from martial artists, meditators, self-hypnotists, and spiritual seekers perhaps, not enough of us.

To achieve an unwavering state of peace, we must learn to become like the lotus flower. The lotus flower is prized in Eastern cultures because it symbolizes purity and self-mastery. It grows in dark, murky waters yet manages to grow out of such darkness to bring a beautiful, pure, often white-colored flower to the surface. There will always be darkness around us, and the goal is to use that darkness as fertilizer to allow our inner flower to blossom.

The most prized reward of any spiritual practice is serenity. Some traditions refer to it as living in the moment or the present. The metaphor of a lake is often used to describe this state. On a windy day, when the waters on the lake's surface are disturbed, one cannot see anything inside the lake. However, on a calm day when the waters are undisturbed, one

can see clearly to the bottom of the lake. This is the mental state that is available to those who seek it.

There is no need to make a name for oneself. There is no need to complicate life with frivolous goals, meaningless efforts, unnecessary expenditures, and constant stress. And there is absolutely no need to let the opinion of others stand in the way of our happiness.

Every soul that was gifted a human life was also gifted the free will to choose how to live it. There is an easy way and a hard way to seek fulfillment. Do not overlook the obvious. Consider the possibility that what you may have been taught your entire life may not be the right way. Reflect deeply and choose wisely.

Great doubt will eventually lead to great awakening. – Rabia Basri

Chapter Twenty

Desire to Repent



So far, the picture we painted of our species does not sound very promising, but do not despair. In its infinite wisdom, nature, God, or the universe, if you prefer, is giving us an opportunity to redeem ourselves. That little inner voice that tells us we should not take what is not ours, should not throw garbage on the streets, or should not use violence to resolve conflict..., that little voice is what will ultimately redeem us, both individually and collectively.

In an earlier chapter, we looked at our tendency to label others. While we like to label others, we ourselves do not like to be labeled. Is it not curious how those who unjustly take the property of another feel insulted when someone calls them a “thief?” Is it not interesting how priests who

were caught abusing children in their care vehemently deny that they are a “pedophile?” They will blame the devil, the circumstances, the inquirer, their parents, or even the victim before accepting such negative labels about themselves.

How many of the guilty go around bragging that they are a thief, a pedophile, or some other form of evildoer? It is a good sign that they do not, because it indicates a guilty conscience. As long as there is a guilty conscience, there is hope for redemption. If someone does evil and brags about it, this is more serious since it indicates an extremely shallow level of conscience, mental illness, and/or a severe case of self-hatred.

There is an age-old question that many a spiritual seeker has asked: Can one attain spiritual enlightenment without diligently working on one’s moral character? Working on one’s character involves an internal battle, and since it is not a pleasant task, many seekers choose to avoid doing so. They would rather focus on developing psychic powers, perfecting complex rituals, climbing the hierarchy of a religious organization, mastering physical feats, and such, because these may seem more interesting or rewarding.

Let us admit that it is possible to advance to a certain degree while avoiding this task, but sooner or later, our moral deficiencies will catch up with us. The disharmony between our egoic self and Sacred Law will

become so evident that it will express itself in the form of severe feelings of guilt, remorse, or shame. Sometimes, this disharmony becomes so unbearable that it has the power to destroy the seeker.

There is a true story of a man known as Comrade Duch, who was arguably one of the most “evil” humans to walk on this planet. Duch was head of the Khmer Rouge regime’s security branch in Cambodia during the late 20th century. This regime, led by dictator Pol Pot, was responsible for nearly 1.7 million human deaths. Duch ran Phnom Penh’s notorious S-21 prison camp, also known as Tuol Sleng.

His job was to oversee the interrogation, torture, and execution of prisoners, which he also participated in. He allowed prisoners to be used in medical experiments. He ordered the draining of prisoners’ blood to their death so that it could be used in transfusions for wounded soldiers.

He extracted confessions from prisoners under torture, bludgeoned or slit their throats or stomachs, then dumped their bodies into mass graves. Under his order, the heads of babies and small children were smashed against trees. Whenever he ordered killings, he referred to them as “smashings.” Over twelve-thousand – and some say as many as twenty-thousand – people passed through the doors of S-21, and most never got out alive.

After the fall of the regime, Duch changed his name and started a new life. It was a chance invitation to a sermon at a Protestant church that got him to turn his life around. He started attending church regularly, got baptized, and soon was teaching others about the Bible.

He became conscious of the horrific mistakes that he had made in his life. When he was later captured and tried for his crimes, he openly admitted to his wrongdoings. He apologized to survivors and families of his victims and asked that they open their hearts to his “most excruciating remorse.”

The profound realization that one’s past actions were wrong signifies spiritual evolution. Still, once an act is committed, it is impossible to undo it. Apologies are a good step but do not erase the damage. There are inevitable consequences for the perpetrator.

Duch was convicted of his crimes and spent the rest of his life in prison. As far as spiritual consequences, he was made to pay in the form of shame, remorse, and guilt, which he considered “excruciating.” Images of the atrocities he committed would have been deeply ingrained in his mind and continued to haunt him. Imagine what heavy burden Duch must have carried for the rest of his life?

What often happens when we become conscious of our past

wrongdoings is that we feel a need to punish ourselves for it. This can be torture for the afflicted soul. It may result in feelings of unworthiness, self-destructive behavior, depression, and suicide.

The most constructive way to deal with this type of torment would be to do exactly what Duch did: to perform positive actions, perhaps to help victims who suffered the type of harm we once were responsible for inflicting. From the time he became conscious of his mistakes until his arrest years later, Duch devoted his life to spreading the message of love and performing missionary work.

Everyone is a candidate for redemption. Feelings such as shame, remorse, and guilt are a necessary part of the awakening process. Self-punishment, however, is not. Our responsibility is to learn from mistakes and use them as an opportunity to evolve into someone better.

The way to avoid the need for repentance is of course, to prevent the infraction from happening in the first place. One way to do this is by learning from the mistakes of others. Whenever we watch the news, hear personal stories from those around us, or read tales about someone's failure, we can make it a practice to imagine what they could have done differently to achieve a better outcome.

If we were to investigate the lives of saints, chances are we would find

that they all did evil at one time or another. Likewise, if we were to investigate the lives of evildoers, we would find that they also did good. This shows that there are no “good” or “evil” people. We just have tendencies to act in one way or another, depending on the circumstances and our level of evolution. With proper guidance or training, these tendencies can be modified.

Many Christians struggle with an enigmatic teaching in the Bible: “Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.”

To put this teaching into practice, we can train ourself to see evildoers as fellow sisters and brothers who are not yet conscious. Our goal should be to gently guide them into consciousness rather than punish them. Punishment can be considered “evil,” and it is not possible to resolve evil with evil. The same rule in dealing with others applies when dealing with oneself. Whenever we make mistakes, we must learn from them to avoid repeating them. Punishing ourself serves no useful purpose.

Be kind to others, and be kind to oneself.

If anything is worth doing, do it with all your heart. – The Buddha

Chapter Twenty-One

Desire for Fulfillment



Let us now take a look at one of the driving forces of human behavior. We all want to live a happy and fulfilling life. A thief may steal because it allows her to own something she could not afford otherwise. A soldier or police officer may convince himself that he is doing a good job as he brutalizes a stranger. A business owner may underpay workers and overcharge customers because the extra income allows him and his family to live in luxury. Our methods may vary, but our goal is the same. The reason we do “evil” is not so much out of a desire to harm others as it is about seeking fulfillment.

Many of us strive for fulfillment, investing significant effort into our pursuits. However, despite our best endeavors, we often end up feeling

that there is still something lacking. Regardless of our financial success, career accomplishments, comfortable living arrangements, or strong support networks, a sense of incompleteness may pervade our life.

Imagine that you went to work one morning without realizing you had a large ink stain on your nose. You engage in interactions throughout the day, conversing with clients, collaborating with co-workers, meeting with your boss, and crossing paths with people at a restaurant during your lunch break. You think a couple of them may have looked at you strangely but then brush it off as being your imagination.

After a long day, you finally get home. Immediately upon seeing you, your significant other says, “Oh my gosh, honey, what happened to your nose?!” You rush to the mirror and see a very obvious stain. Only then do you realize that when you used a leaky pen that morning to make out a “to-do” list, you inadvertently touched your nose and got ink on it.

It suddenly occurs to you that you went the entire day wearing that stain on your nose. You feel like a fool. You wonder why nobody had the decency to tell you. You remember that your boss did mention during your meeting that there was something on your nose, but you wiped it a few times and assumed that it was gone.

This scenario serves as a compelling analogy for the process of awakening. While many of us believe we are more aware than others, the reality is that we all have blind spots. It is just easier for us to identify the blind spots of others than our own. Similar to the boss in the aforementioned analogy, people may occasionally bring these blind spots to our attention, but we often fail to listen, or dismiss their concerns. Some of us take offense and even attack or criticize people who point out our defects.

The wise throughout history have suggested that spiritual enlightenment is the ultimate human accomplishment, and the polishing of our moral character is a critical requirement in attaining that state. We can think of ourself as an artist who spends a lifetime working on a single masterpiece. That masterpiece, of course, is the Self. The reward that awaits us upon successful completion of our masterpiece is liberation from suffering. That is the fulfillment we are here on Earth to seek.

By the way, how is *your* masterpiece coming along?

The Buddha is claimed to have said, “Lucky is the one who has someone to scold him.” Often it takes someone to point out our weaknesses for us to be made aware of them. It may not be pleasant to have them pointed out, but unless we are aware of them, we will continue

to go around with a stain on our character, much like the person who walks around unaware of the stain on their nose.

There was once a man who asked a spiritual master how he could learn to control his anger. The master advised him to carry around a pocket mirror wherever he went. Whenever he got angry, he was to pull out the mirror and look at his face. The man was sincere and eager to correct his character defect, so he followed the master's advice.

Initially, the act of retrieving the mirror during frequent bouts of anger proved challenging. And when he did succeed, he had to look at a scrunched-up, ugly face staring back at him. He soon became so disgusted with his angry face and felt embarrassed to display it in public for all to see. This helped him resolve his anger issues.

Observing oneself objectively is a very effective way to correct our shortcomings. This may be accomplished by observing in our mind or by a more direct method such as using a mirror, photographs, sound recordings, or videos. There have been cases of substance abusers who watched a video that was taken of them while under the influence. What they observed had such a powerful impact on them that it spontaneously caused them to give up their habit.

The spiritual awakening process consists of a series of “A-ha!” moments. Each one of these has the potential to cause us to realize our shortcomings and evolve into something better. Fulfillment is not about earning diplomas, winning competitions, marrying the perfect spouse, or becoming rich and famous. It is about evolving as a soul. Only when we realize this at a profound level can we make conscious evolution our number one priority.

This will not happen as long as we are content with our material pursuits. Tragedies have a way of shaking us up. When we experience the loss of our home, a loved one, job, mobility, health, wealth, youth, dignity, or anything else that we cherished in the past, we may face an existential crisis. We may feel as though life is crumbling apart, yet it is at these moments that many people spontaneously experience a shift in consciousness. It is not always easy to look at it that way, especially during a crisis. Nevertheless, misfortunes can end up being blessings in disguise. You never know.

There is a playful expression, “Embrace your inner loser.” Society often constructs an idealized image of what it means to be a “winner,” and many of us make great efforts to try to fit that image, or at least to avoid being stigmatized as a “loser.” Sacred Law dictates, however, that one

cannot attain fulfillment by making efforts to become a “winner.” In fact, the harder we try, the more we are destined to fail.

Let us imagine for a moment that our left and right hands both had different agendas and that they hated each other. Each time they came in close contact, they would try to outdo, undermine, or harm the other, each believing that it was superior and trying to impose its dominance. How could an entity with two such hands possibly function effectively?

This may seem like a strange analogy. However, it is only a question of scale and substance. What humanity is doing to each other, its habitat, and its fellow Earth-dwellers is devastatingly ludicrous. It is not a question of good and evil. It is not about who is right and who is wrong. It is about collective ignorance. The ink stain is on *all* of our faces.

Fulfillment involves perceiving oneself in the right scale – as an infinitesimally small speck amidst the boundless expanse of the universe. It is to see oneself as a particle belonging to a Higher Order and realizing that our fulfillment depends on our living in accordance with the Sacred Laws of that Higher Order. The more of these fellow specks that we can motivate to live in accordance with Sacred Law, the more fulfilled all of our lives will become. There can be no winners or losers when there is only one team.

He who would do great things should not attempt them all alone.

– Seneca

Chapter Twenty-Two

Desire to Spread the Word



Humans are social animals. We like to share knowledge. We influence each other's thoughts, feelings, and actions. We rely on each other for our survival and comfort. Almost everything we do – from the language we speak to the way we dress to the religion we follow – is based on what we learned from those around us.

In our cave-dwelling days, humans lived in small tribes. Most of our knowledge was shared by a small group of individuals within a limited geographic area. We shared the same traditions, lived in the same type of dwelling, wore the same kinds of clothing, ate the same foods, and worshipped the same gods.

Nowadays, our knowledge base is global. We are exposed to many customs, lifestyles, mannerisms, languages, and religions that are unfamiliar to us. This has opened a whole new world. If we wish to find a Chinese herbal cure for insect bites, learn to play an African drum beat, say a common expression in French, or cook a vegetarian Thai curry, all we need to do is search the Internet, and there are millions of information sources to choose from, posted by ordinary people from around the world who enjoy sharing their knowledge.

One of the consequences of having such freely available information is that there is a lot of useless, inaccurate, or even harmful information floating around. The Internet is a mishmash of human mental activity put into form. Just because a certain piece of information is put out by a seemingly-reliable source does not guarantee its accuracy.

In the cyber world, misinformation spreads quickly. One individual shares an incorrect piece of information online. Subsequently, others replicate this information on their own platforms without taking the necessary steps to verify its accuracy. Even reputable websites rely on the Internet as a source for their research, and when multiple sites align on a particular issue, they may publish this information without recognizing its potential inaccuracies. With the Internet, even those who carefully limit their search to reliable sources or compare multiple sources can still end

up with incorrect information.

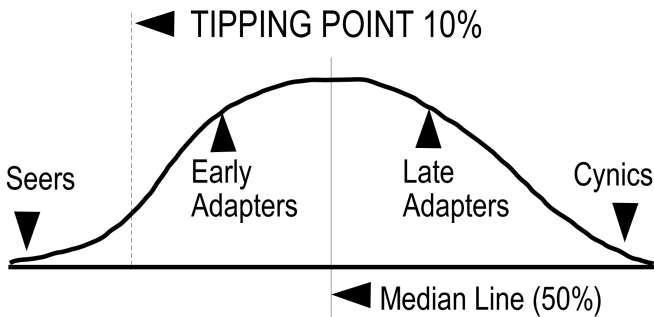
In this age where we are faced with an overload of information, sorting the wheat from the chaff becomes challenging. Often we do not know what to believe. Many of us have allowed mass media to hijack our mind. If we hear on the news today that inflation rose by half a percentage point, we worry. A month later, we hear that it has gone down half a percentage point and feel relieved.

We never bother to ask who came up with such figures, and how. With an infinite number of products and services out there, we never think of the impossibility of calculating such a figure down to half a percentage point accuracy. We never ask if such figures actually have an impact on our life. We never ask what the motive behind publishing such figures are to begin with.

There was an intriguing study done at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, a research university in New York. Scientists there used computational and analytical methods to try to find the tipping point where a minority opinion becomes accepted by the masses. According to the study, the magic number is ten percent. That is, it takes about one-tenth of the population to believe in an idea for it to spread like wildfire and become commonly accepted.

If true, consider the implications of this on our collective evolution. It means that only one out of ten of us needs to shift our opinion that spiritual evolution is our primary driving force in life, and the rest will follow. To convince everyone to seek a higher purpose would be impossible, but getting one-tenth of us to do so seems well within reach, especially since many of us are already there. Imagine that. One-tenth of us can become catalysts to the spontaneous spiritual awakening of the entire human race!

Human Transformation Curve



The phenomenon itself has been proven time and time again. We refer to it by many names, such as chain reaction, boiling point, domino theory, critical mass, or in more modern terms, going viral. If you are from the older generation, remember how quickly automobiles, cell phones, or the Internet spread across the globe? We just need to use that same powerful

force to transform human consciousness.

We have seen how mass media brainwashed us into becoming irresponsible consumers. It is crucial to recognize that we are not inherently gluttonous beings who are willing to trample over each other and destroy our environment in order to fulfill our insatiable desires. Instead, this behavior is a learned one. The human desire to belong to a flock is much more powerful than its desire to do the right thing. All we need to do now is readjust our compass, and all it takes is ten percent of us to lead the way.

As humans slowly become more conscious, we feel a natural desire to help others. After all, what good would our own enlightenment be if we were leaving our sisters and brothers behind in the dark? An important thing to remind ourselves at this stage is that our job is not to fix others. Each of us has free will. We can only offer suggestions, and it is up to others to consider them or not. We can walk the journey *with* others, but we cannot walk the journey *for* them. We are each destined to sow our own seeds and reap our own harvest.

Whenever you fly by commercial airline, there is an announcement on how to put on your oxygen mask in case of loss of cabin pressure. They advise us to put on our own mask before assisting others. It is wise advice,

as we can do more good for others after first taking care of our own needs. Spreading the message works the same way. It is great to have the desire to help, but we must ensure that we are well on the way to working on our own inner demons before attempting to assist others.

Another tendency to watch out for is to let knowledge inflate our ego. While each of us serves an invaluable role, we must not overestimate our importance in the collective evolutionary process. Progress is not about ending up with a world full of self-righteous, arrogant, finger-pointing hypocrites. Many people who start with good intentions end up there, so a heartfelt warning is in order. Each of us must serve our miniscule role with humility and allow the evolutionary process to unfold as it may.

Each of us harbors an inner light waiting to shine. Even the most “evil” persons among us wish to be freed of their suffering. Sometimes, all they need is gentle guidance and encouragement. Morality cannot be imposed or legislated. It can only be awakened through correct understanding.

I'm not saying it's true. I'm just saying it happened. – Ian Stevenson

Chapter Twenty-Three

Reincarnation



Why do some of us have inexplicable phobias or obsessions? Why are some of us born with birthmarks, deformities, allergies, or illnesses that do not seem to have any logical cause? Why are humans born with distinct personalities? Why are certain people born a virtuoso, genius, or with exceptional abilities that would take others a lifetime to develop, if they are able to at all?

Reincarnation may offer answers to many such questions. Not all of us are convinced that reincarnation is real, and of those who are, there are many differing opinions as to what we can or cannot reincarnate into. For instance, there are those who say that humans are the highest form of embodied life, and once you attain humanhood, you can never reincarnate

as a “lower” form of life, such as an animal, plant, insect, or microorganism.

Then, there are those who propose that a soul exists in every life form, and that one’s existence may transition from being human to being a plant, then an animal, an insect, and eventually back to being human again, for example. When you observe the low level of consciousness of some fellow humans and compare it with that of members of some other species, does it not ever make you wonder? This would be an interesting question for science to provide an answer to one day.

We have all heard stories of dogs performing heroic acts to save the life of their human companion. Birds have been observed feeding and caring for chicks of other bird species. Cow herds have been known to gather around humans as soon as they started playing music. Trees have been recorded sending signals to neighboring trees to alert them of potential dangers. Such examples seem to indicate that other life forms may be much more conscious than we give them credit for.

Most believers in reincarnation seem to agree that human birth is an extremely precious gift. While we cannot always know the thoughts and hearts of other species, we do know that the human being is aware of its existence and is capable of making a conscious effort toward its own evolution. What a beautiful gift we have been given.

If you do not believe in reincarnation, chances are, you were taught early in life that it was not possible and accepted someone else's opinion as fact. Perhaps you thought it was a ridiculous idea and never bothered to research it. If you are one of these people, you may be surprised at what you learn by opening your mind to the question. Thanks to the efforts of many researchers who put their reputation on the line to seek the truth, the concept of reincarnation is increasingly becoming mainstream.

Let us take a look at one case of alleged reincarnation. It is a well-known case of a young Druze boy, which was documented by Dr. Eli Lasch, a prominent Israeli physician. The boy was born in the Golan Heights region, near Syria, with a distinctive linear birthmark on his head. As soon as he could speak, he started telling his parents stories about dying in his previous life by being struck on the head by an ax. The family decided to investigate the claim and enlisted the help of Dr. Lasch.

They took the boy to several nearby villages to see if he could recognize any of them. As soon as they got to one village, it seemed to spark the boy's memory, and he immediately recalled additional details of his past life, including his full name as well as the full name of his murderer. One of the villagers knew the man the boy claimed to have been in his previous life, and said the man suddenly vanished several years earlier. Everyone assumed he had been killed or taken prisoner, related to

the ongoing conflict in the area.

The boy was able to identify the house that he lived in during his past life, and when he saw a neighbor, he walked up to him and called him by name. After the man acknowledged him, the boy said, “We had a fight, and you killed me with an ax.” He then told the others, “I know where he buried my body.” The man’s face suddenly became pale, as if he had just seen a ghost.

The boy then led the group, including the accused murderer, into a nearby field. Pointing to a pile of stones, the boy said, “He buried my body under those stones,” and pointing in another direction, he said, “and he buried the ax over there.” When the group dug up the stones, they found the skeletal remains of an adult male, with a linear split in the skull, consistent with an ax wound. They also found an ax buried in the exact spot the boy said it would be. The accused murderer was visibly shaken and admitted to killing the man years ago.

Past life memories are usually recalled as children between 2 to 4 years of age and quickly fade as the children integrate into their new life. Many involve traumatic experiences or death, events that are more likely to become deeply ingrained into memory. There are countless such stories, too many to dismiss all of them as being hoaxes, coincidences, or children’s overactive imaginations.

Canada-born American psychiatrist Dr. Ian Stevenson spent nearly 40 years documenting thousands of cases of reincarnation and wrote several books on the subject. His books are a good source of information for those who want to learn more. According to his research, in 90% of the cases, people were born the same gender as they were in their previous life. If this were true, and if we assume that humans are often reincarnated back in human form, it seems to indicate that, on average, we go through a gender change once every ten lives.

Nowadays, we hear a lot about gender dysphoria, or people who feel like their physical gender does not match their gender identity. If someone spent the past nine lives as one gender and was suddenly born into this life as another gender, could that not possibly explain why that person may feel like their body does not match their gender identity?

A lot of judgmentalism and suffering is caused by our lack of understanding in this domain. The suicide rate in the LGBTQ+ community is four times higher than that of the rest of the population. Suppose science could offer an explanation for at least some cases of gender dysphoria. Could that not bring peace to those who suffer from it, as well as a higher degree of compassion by the general population?

That being said, the soul has no gender. It has no skin color, hair or eye color, height, weight, religion, nationality, or sexual orientation. The

soul is formless. The idea that one body type or set of opinions is better than another is an illusion created by humans with limited understanding. By deepening our understanding, we can free ourselves from the bond of our illusions.

Much more research needs to be done on reincarnation. If reincarnation moves from being considered part of a belief system of a small minority to a widely-accepted scientific fact, it could change the course of humanity. More of us would take our evolution more seriously. Until then, we must trust the words of ancient saints and sages who tell us that we are all here to seek enlightenment.

The awakening process is more than a personal journey. It is about transcending the debate over whose beliefs are correct and whose are not. It is about joining forces so that we can progress together. While the awakening of our individual Self is in itself remarkable, it is only a speck of dust compared to what incredible things could start happening if we all awakened simultaneously.

*To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the
heaven. – Bible*

Chapter Twenty-Four

Karmic Law



It is impossible to discuss reincarnation without touching upon karmic law. Karma is a Sanskrit word which means “action,” “deed,” or “work.” Karmic law – or karma – is similar to Newton’s law of motion, which states that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. In the case of karma, it usually refers to the quality of our deeds. If we do good, good things will happen to us, and evil will happen to us if we do evil. Of course, it is much more complex than that.

There is an old Japanese saying, “When the wind blows, the bucket shop profits.” The story goes like this: Whenever the wind blows, it blows up dust. People get dust in their eyes, and it causes an increased incidence

of blindness. This gets more people to learn to play the *shamisen* (a three-stringed Japanese instrument) so that they would be able to earn a living, even while blind.

In the old days, shamisens were principally made out of cat skin. As more people buy shamisens, more need to be produced to meet the demand, which causes neighborhood cats to disappear. With fewer cats around, the mice population increases. The mice go around chewing holes in buckets, rendering them useless. People now need to buy new buckets, which benefits the bucket shop.

As in this story, seemingly unrelated events can actually be related to one another at an imperceptible level. Karma is an extremely complex interplay of an infinite number of events, so complex that science may never be able to unravel it. Nevertheless, we can learn from the concept of karma to improve our life and the lives of those around us.

When speaking of karma, many of us tend to focus solely on personal karma. However, it would be unwise to ignore our collective karma, as doing so would limit our perspective and prevent us from taking the steps necessary to transform humanity as a whole.

One morning, a man spills coffee on himself and becomes angry. Just at that moment, his wife walks in while humming a cheerful tune. He gets

annoyed that she is happy while he is in distress, so he snaps at her. They exchange a few angry words, and she drives to work upset. While on the road, someone signals to merge into her lane. Normally she would be kind and let him in, but today she is in a bad mood. She blasts her horn and refuses to let him in.

A few minutes later, the driver, who feels he was cut off, arrives to work angry. He is the owner of a small company and is holding a staff meeting that morning. One staff member forgot to make copies of a document that he wanted to present during the meeting, so he berates her. Another staff member arrives late to the meeting, and he threatens to dock that person's pay. Now, they too are in a bad mood. They may interact with people while in a bad mood, and those on the receiving end may do the same to others. One man's anger from spilling coffee on himself created a ripple effect that may affect dozens of people by the end of the day.

Expanding our perspective to a global scale, we can envision billions of individuals entangled in a continuous exchange of reactive emotions. Much like a disease, these emotions travel across borders with the people who are afflicted with them. The anger outburst of your coworker this morning may well be related to an incident last week where a fruit vendor in Timbuktu lost his cool after stepping into camel excrement.

Karmic law is not necessarily an “eye-for-an-eye” proposition. For instance, just because someone stole a bicycle does not mean that he will, in turn, have his bicycle stolen one day. Karma is also not necessarily something that gets resolved within a single lifetime. The interwoven nature of our karmic actions results in their continuous impact, transcending time. The reverberations of karma set in motion ages ago still manifest in the present day.

Let us look at another example of how collective karma plays out using a modern-day tragedy: school shootings. Most school shootings are not perpetrated by random strangers but by someone who currently attends or previously attended the school in question. In the background, there is usually some unresolved issue.

It may be that the perpetrator was repeatedly bullied, and the school did nothing about it. It may be that he felt a teacher or school staff treated him unfairly, or he otherwise felt victimized in some way. His parents were too busy to sit down and have a conversation with him. There was pent-up anger and pain with no outlet for release. He reached a point of desperation where he resorted to an overt course of action, ensuring he would finally be heard.

If someone along the line had cared enough to intervene, tragedy might have been averted. Because no one did, he decided to resolve the

issue the only way he knew how: by seeking revenge. He most likely was feeling as he gunned down his victims, “You all hurt me, so now I will hurt you back.”

We can say that the bullies or teachers who triggered the suffering, the school officials who did not address the problem, or the parents who may have been too busy to address their child’s emotional needs all played a role in the tragedy. According to karmic law, responsibility does not end there. The producers of violent television programs or video games that the child may have been exposed to, the person who allowed a child access to a weapon, and the manufacturer of the weapon – to name only a few – all played a role in the outcome.

It would be shortsighted to attribute sole blame to the perpetrator, school, parents, weapon provider, or weapon manufacturer, which is our prevailing mindset. We are quick to point the finger and seek to punish those who we decide are responsible. Pointing the finger does not solve problems, and neither does punishing someone. It would be much more useful to begin a dialog on how we can each do our part to prevent such tragedies from happening again.

Humanity is becoming increasingly angry, greedy, selfish, lustful, and hateful. We are bouncing back and forth our negativity like a ping-pong ball and competing to see how we can outdo others with our foolishness.

In our collective lament, we often find ourselves assigning blame to specific individuals or groups for the degradation of our society. Instead of searching for scapegoats, what we really need to do is to find ways to work together to remedy the situation.

Millions upon millions of people are fleeing their homeland. Some simply move to a new town seeking better opportunities, while others risk their lives to escape the corruption and violence in their country. Some leave with little more than the shirt on their back, and many lose their life in the process. People continue to risk everything they have to find a utopia elsewhere. The sad truth is that no matter how far we run, we will not escape our problems. The reason is that, we *are* the problem.

With the ripple effect of negative karma circulating globally, there will soon be no safe haven to seek. The most morally corrupt among us will rule societies, and the rest will be forced to finance them to keep them in power. Law enforcement will not be about protecting and serving the public, but instead will be about protecting those in power while oppressing and silencing any of us whom they see as a threat.

It is of deep concern to envision where we are headed, especially since we already see signs of it happening all over the globe. Fortunately, we are born with free will. The only way this can happen is if we allow it to happen. By perceiving our neighbors as enemies that must be distrusted,

controlled, and punished, we encourage others to distrust, control, and punish us. We are tightening the noose around our own necks. No amount of increasingly-complex passwords, tighter security systems, or tougher laws and prisons will save us from ourselves.

The great karmic antidote is our heart. The way to end negative karma is not to unconsciously bounce it off to the next person but to consciously transform it into positive karma. It is to take a bad situation and make it good. If we are to change the course of humanity, that is the karma we all need to be thinking of.

Or, put simply, if we want to be happy, we must let others be happy.

We can only learn to love by loving. – Iris Murdoch

Chapter Twenty-Five

Love



Hardly any other concept is more misunderstood than love. Whenever we think of love, many of us think in terms of something that we would like to receive. Humans have an innate desire to be loved. Yet, a surprising number of us do not truly understand what love is.

Earlier, we recounted the story of Comrade Duch, a war criminal in Cambodia who tried to redeem himself after being introduced to Christianity. Duch later revealed that he was never loved as a child and did not know what love was. One cannot help but wonder whether the tragedy in Cambodia might have been averted had he and his comrades been nurtured in a loving environment. Consequently, one cannot help but ponder the possibility of preventing future tragedies by fostering an

increased experience of love among more individuals.

Many of us have love confused with attachment. We think of love as something we can gain or lose, and the object of our love as something we possess. If that object were to be taken away from us for whatever reason, we become angry, sad, or depressed.

There was once a man who married the woman of his dreams. They lived a joyous life together until their fifties, when a tragic accident abruptly took her away. The loss left him shattered, and he found himself adrift without a sense of purpose. At least once a week, he visited her grave with flowers and sat there for hours. He often cried while talking at her tombstone. He lived a long life, so this went on for decades. Whenever people would start a conversation with him, the subject often returned to memories of his wife, which brought him sadness.

Upon reading this story, some may say that the man must have really loved his wife. However, this is not love. This is attachment. He cried at her grave not because he loved her, but because he lost her. He was so attached to her physical form and could not cope with the fact that her form was taken away from him. The cause of his suffering was the loss of something he was attached to and not love, since true love can never be gained or lost.

Many couples get married believing they are in love. What they may not realize is that they are actually entering an arrangement of attachment or convenience. In fact, when you think about it, nobody really marries for love at all, simply because love stands for itself and does not require paperwork to validate it.

Prenuptial agreements are a popular trend nowadays. According to a recent poll by the global research firm Harris Poll, 42% of adults support prenuptial agreements, and 35% of unmarried people say they plan to have one when they get married.

Couples enter these agreements so that in case they separate, one partner will not end up with the other's assets. These agreements are based on the premise that they may one day separate. While planning for the possible end of a relationship beforehand may be practical, such an assumption proves that the relationship is not based on love. This is not to say that it is wrong to marry out of attachment or convenience, and such relationships often do last a lifetime, but the point is that relationships not based on love may end at any moment.

We hear reports of parents abusing or neglecting their children. How can parents not love their own children? It seems like a given, but it is surprising how many parents actually do not. They see their children as possessions, and not always as convenient ones.

They give positive attention to their children when they behave in an acceptable manner, but when they do not, they are quick to punish them. Parents can be harsh with children who fail to meet their expectations. One must recognize that such behavior does not align with the true nature of love.

Love has no beginning or end. It is not like a switch that can be turned on and off. Love, like happiness, is a state. It is our natural state. In fact, try this little experiment. Sit down, close your eyes, and take a few deep breaths to relax. First, try to create feelings of love towards someone or something you love, and then imagine the object of your love loving you back. Next, try to create feelings of happiness. You will notice that the two words pretty much describe the same state. When we feel loved, we feel happy. When we feel happy, we feel loved.

Ancient Greek philosophers spoke of different kinds of love. One type is romantic love, or *eros*, which involves passion, lust, and a euphoric experience toward another individual. Greek philosophers considered this a dangerous type of love because it may involve an instinctive urge to procreate, and like a drug, has its highs and lows. People do crazy things when they are “in love.” This type of love is quick to ignite and fade because it is physical. Eros is what many people imagine when thinking of love.

Greek philosophers also categorized other types of love. Among these are self-love, or love of oneself; a familial, protective love that a parent may feel for their children; a caring love between good friends; playful love, as one may experience when playing with a puppy; and a long-term love through thick and thin, such as what a committed couple may experience.

All of the described types of love are positive for the experiencer, but the love that will transform our civilization is the one that Greek philosophers called *agapé*. *Agapé* can be defined as universal, unconditional, or transcendental love. It is a love that is experienced equally for the known and unknown, for the wise and unwise, for one's own species and others, and for our Creator and all creation. It is a love that makes no demands, does not pick and choose, and has no expectation of being loved in return. It is a love that, when sufficiently developed, allows us to see the beauty in all.

If we love one person over another, we cannot say that we truly understand love yet. The goal of many spiritual practices is to experience this level of love. It may first come in passing glimpses, and eventually, after much inner work, may come on an increasingly continuous basis. Some of us may never experience this level of love in our lifetime, perhaps not even a glimpse. However, that is the ultimate goal, and we

must all start where we are.

The way we learn to love is through experience. As novices, we start by loving those who are easiest to love, like our parents, siblings, and people close to us. Then we increasingly expand this circle out to cover more of creation.

While there are meditative practices intended to cultivate loving feelings, one does not have to sit in meditation to practice this. For example, we can be in the checkout line at a supermarket, and an old lady may be moving slowly and holding up the line. We can superimpose our grandmother's image onto her, who is the kindest person but who suffers from dementia and moves slowly.

When we spot a teenaged boy dangerously zigzagging in and out of traffic and cutting people off on the freeway, we can superimpose the image of our son, brother, or grandson, who is usually a good kid but needs to work on his patience. The impositions of strangers become less offensive when we can recognize and connect with their shared humanity.

There is an old aphorism, "Fake it till you make it." In the beginning, we may not actually feel love for the subject we have chosen to try to love. Do not despair, as it will come slowly. The more we practice love, the better we become at it. As a matter of fact, we are not "faking it" at all,

because love is our natural state. That is why we feel happiest when we are experiencing love.

If we do not feel loved, it means we are not tuned in to love enough. By consciously practicing to place oneself in a state of love more often, we can expand our capacity to love, which in turn makes us feel more loved. American poet Edwin Markham articulates the evolution of love in the following short poem:

*He drew a circle that shut me out-
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him in!"*

Take away the cause, and the effect ceases. – Miguel de Cervantes

Chapter Twenty-Six

Treating the Cause



Some of us may be asking at this point, “This all sounds great in theory, but is it really possible to get humanity to change its course, just like that?”

Earlier, we discussed that the root of our problems is ignorance. Ignorance causes us to see each other as separate entities that we must constantly compete against to find our individual happiness. In this model, someone has to lose for us to win. It is equivalent to our right and left hands declaring war against each other, unaware that they are part of the same body and that their well-being is dependent on the well-being of the other.

Our goal is to bring as many of us out of ignorance as possible. How

we accomplish this is the big question. After all, we are all at various stages of spiritual evolution. Not all of us are willing to listen to others or are even interested in improving. Even those who sincerely wish to evolve may fail to prioritize their spiritual growth due to the overwhelming temptations of the material world.

The first step in treating the cause is to observe, and the first person to start with is oneself. Through self-awareness, one can cultivate a deeper understanding of others. This profound comprehension is achieved by courageously posing challenging questions, such as regarding our preoccupation with money, our tendency to feel superior to others, our resistance to accepting constructive criticism, or our disapproval of particular lifestyles.

Evolving consciously means being open to questioning everything. It is to seek answers persistently until we find them, however unbelievable or even disturbing those answers may be. The answers are not spelled out in scriptures or revealed in lectures. Others may steer us in the right direction, but answers can only come from personal experience. One cannot learn to ride a bicycle by merely reading about it.

There is an ancient Sanskrit expression, “neti neti,” which means, “not this, not that.” It is a method of discovering truth by peeling away layers of untruths. It is often used as a meditative practice, and the theory is that

by eliminating all that is unreal, we are eventually left with only that which is real. The human evolutionary process consists of removing false beliefs. We start with a basic understanding and gradually reach deeper levels. It is a process that unravels over countless life cycles.

There is our personal evolution, and then there is our collective evolution. Each is dependent on the other; thus, it is important to work on both simultaneously. But how can we, as infinitely nanoscopic beings, contribute to the evolution of an entire species? The successful outcome of this great challenge hinges on our skillful application of natural laws to support our endeavors.

One such law is that energy tends to synchronize. You may have witnessed hundreds of birds flying in murmuration, putting on an awe-inspiring show in the sky. Or perhaps you have seen schools of fish swimming together, each seeming to instinctively know which way to turn to hold their position in the group. The question may have crossed your mind: How do they manage to do that without constantly running into each other?

The phenomenon is not limited to animal behavior. You may have seen scientific experiments where dozens of metronomes were placed on a flexible platform, activated out of sync, and then watched in amazement as the metronomes slowly began to synchronize until they all ended up

ticking in unison.

Synchronization can also be observed in human behavior. Mob mentality is a good example. People who do not consider themselves violent may commit heinous acts while part of a group. If you were to ask them later why they did it, they would probably tell you they do not know, and follow with a comment such as that they “got caught up in the moment.” What they are trying to explain is that they inadvertently synchronized with the energies around them.

Humans are energetic beings. When our energies synchronize, the combined force can override an individual brain’s ability to think. Synchronization is a very real and powerful phenomenon that will aid us in transforming humanity.

Whenever a force is powerful, it also has its dangers. We already looked at how mass media can trigger artificial desires, opinions, or emotions within us. We also know how mob violence can quickly get out of control. We must understand this phenomenon and use it to our advantage.

Addressing the root cause of our problems involves cultivating a collective perception of Earth as a unified living entity, where every life form is recognized as a member of the family. Our common objective is to

seek happiness, although we may have varying perspectives as to what it means and how to achieve it.

Let's face it. We are neither good at finding our own happiness nor at allowing others to find theirs. Disagreements are a daily part of life. Instead of working out our differences respectfully and reaching a compromise, we have learned to see differences in opinion as reasons to resent one another.

When someone behaves foolishly toward us, we react by behaving foolishly toward them. Instead of holding meaningful discussions to address the issues at hand, we become defensive and try to prove how right we are and how wrong they are. We are quick to point out the mistakes of others and criticize them while we blame, lie, argue, downplay, or change the subject to cover our own mistakes.

Our biggest obstacle to working as a team is fear. We fear our neighbors who may have different beliefs, speak a different language, or look different than us. We fear that by being kind, we will be taken advantage of or be seen as "weak." We fear that we will be criticized or punished if we admit our mistakes, so we search for ways to avoid taking responsibility.

Is it not unfortunate that we have become so fearful of each other that

we feel a need to pay some authority to keep us in line? And when that authority that we pay to protect and serve us gets out of line, we feel victimized once again. We often complain about the government, but the governments that we put into place are only reflections of who we are.

We create increasingly restrictive rules to control our neighbors, then find ourselves subjected to restrictions, inconveniences, fees, fines, criticism, and punishment for any innocent thing we do. What is wrong with humanity is what is wrong with us. What is wrong with us is what is wrong with humanity. For us to transition to a higher level, we need to admit that *we* are the problem.

One day, if we manage to avoid destroying each other before then, a realization may dawn upon us: the fundamental principle guiding our interactions should be to treat one another with love and respect. If everyone made it their life's mission to live according to this principle, we can begin the healing process and build a new reality together.

True strength does not consist of our capacity to dominate, but to yield. Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu suggests becoming like water. Water is fluid and yielding, yet it has the power to erode the hardest substances. It nourishes all life without asking for anything in return, and humbly flows to the lowest places. It takes on whatever form it is called upon to take at any given moment, whether it be the ocean, rain, or a glass of

water.

Rigidity is a weakness. Adaptability is a strength. Treating the cause of our problems is to get more of us to understand and live in accordance with Sacred Law.

*One of the realities we're all called to go through is to move from
repulsion to compassion and from compassion to wonderment.*

– Saint Teresa of Calcutta

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Seeing the Big Picture



We, humans, can sometimes be amusingly shortsighted. Take the example of how we plant trees. Each year, homeowners enthusiastically plant trees near their house, hoping to make it look more attractive and perhaps believing they are doing good for the environment.

We select trees that are known to reach a height of 100 feet and



have an 80-foot spread, and then plant them three feet away from our house. While this may appear visually pleasing when the trees are three feet tall and pencil-thin, they will naturally grow over time. As they do, their proximity to the house causes several issues: their roots encroach upon the foundation, their branches overshadow windows, and their canopies begin to damage the edges of the roof. As a result, we ultimately find them to be a nuisance and cut them down. This pattern is repeated all over the world.

While traveling down our streets, we see trees that have been grotesquely mutilated to accommodate power lines running through them. The obvious question is, why do we plant trees under power lines – or place power lines over trees – in the first place? Sometimes trees grow under power lines naturally, but in many cases, it is because of someone’s oversight. This shortsightedness leaves us with problems that could have easily been avoided and causes us to destroy our habitat for future generations.

Humans, to a great degree, take a reactionary approach to our problems. Instead of thinking about the long-term consequences of our actions, we make haste decisions, and it is only after a problem arises that we attempt to take corrective measures. It would be less of a concern if we were simply discussing our neighbor’s landscaping choices, but when we

are talking about global matters such as nuclear disasters, industrial pollution, and mass extinction, this is an extremely unwise and destructive approach.

Modern society follows a prevalent pattern for dealing with situations. It begins with a lack of careful planning to avert future issues. Whether it is due to budget constraints, time pressures, or even a lack of diligence, we often fail to fully consider the impact of our actions before taking them. Consequently, when problems inevitably arise, the blame game ensues.

First, we search for someone to hold responsible and punish, even if that person may have had nothing to do with the problem. Then, we move to pass more laws and regulations, hoping to prevent similar incidents from recurring. The new laws and regulations that get passed often end up being awkward and cover people and situations that had nothing to do with the problem, inconveniencing everyone in the end. People are now restricted from doing things they have done safely for ages because of a new law.

There is an old saying, “A stitch in time saves nine.” What a better place our planet would become if we all focused on prevention! Often all it takes is a few days, minutes, or even seconds of contemplation to prevent a future problem from occurring.

When planting a tree, for example, we could simply find out how tall and wide it will grow to become, and decide if the space we want to plant it is appropriate. We can stand in that space, look up, down, and around, and imagine being that full-sized tree 30 years later. This stepping back to see the big picture is what can save us from a lot of grief and aid in the advancement of humanity.

While on an airplane, you may have had the experience of watching the earth below you rapidly shrink as you soared into the sky. Earlier that day, you may have argued with your spouse, were shocked to receive your latest electric bill, or almost missed the plane because of heavy traffic on the roads. You had all these worries on your mind, but as the earth shrank below you, perhaps you felt how miniscule your problems seemed in the grand scheme of things. This scenario gives a glimpse of what it is like to see the big picture.

Here is another example. There was once a woman who took great pride in the fact that she was environmentally conscious. She volunteered for an organization that tried to educate people about responsible consumption. She bought a sleek metallic water bottle and carried it to events to show people what a great alternative it was to purchasing water in disposable plastic bottles.

While attending an event at the organization where she volunteered,

she noticed a fellow volunteer drinking out of a plastic water bottle. She immediately approached the woman and said condescendingly, “I couldn’t help but notice that ... you are drinking water out of a *plastic bottle?!?*”

What she did not realize when making her comment was that the woman who was drinking out of the plastic bottle had owned that bottle for many years. She received it at an event and continued reusing it by filling it with water from her tap. She did not feel a need to go out and buy a fancy metallic bottle to store her water in, since she already owned that plastic one. It did not look great, but it did the job.

Expanding the picture further, the woman who made the comment had children. This meant she was responsible for tons of extra waste in landfills, the consumption of the flesh of thousands of animals, the destruction of countless trees, and an enormous amount of fossil fuel expenditure. Not only was she responsible for her and her children’s consumption, but that of all future generations to come. The second woman had no children. Early in life, she made a conscious decision to not stress the planet any further by populating it with her offspring.

At first glance, many would have assumed that the first woman was more environmentally conscious than the second. The truth is not always as it seems. We must be careful not to judge a book by its cover. To consider the essence behind superficial and incomplete evidence presented

to us at any given moment is what it means to “see the big picture.”

Mother Earth is currently in great distress. She has a disease that is destroying her, and that disease is what we call humans. She has been extremely tolerant of our attacks for quite some time, but it is increasingly becoming too great of a burden for her to bear. If she succumbs to her disease, all life that depends on her will perish.

To see the big picture is to think about the impact of our actions before performing them, for example, purchasing disposable products, releasing toxic chemicals into our lands or waters, or destroying the habitat of other life. We can imagine how long our planet would last if every human on Earth did what some of us are doing in our country.

Expanding our consciousness is much like taking a camera out further to see the big picture. It is to include all life forms, time and space, and all imaginable possibilities as well as unimaginable ones. Seeing the big picture is about placing things in their proper perspective.

Mother Earth does not belong to us; we belong to her. She does not depend on us; we depend on her. It is time we transcend our shortsighted, egocentric approach of taking as much as we want without regard to the consequences. Just because we can does not mean we should.

The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts.

– Marcus Aurelius

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Mastering the Mind



The mind is like a double-edged sword. When used effectively, it can help us realize our highest potential, and when used ineffectively, it can make our life a living hell.

According to a recent National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) study, one in five American adults suffers from mental illness each year. When it comes to youths aged 18-25, the rate is one out of every three. Imagine that. In terms of numbers, this means that nearly 60 million Americans suffer from some form of mental illness each year. What is causing such an alarming rate of mental illness?

What we feed our body affects our physical health. If we feed it

unhealthy foods regularly, it will eventually become diseased. Likewise, what we feed our mind affects our mental health. If we feed it unhealthy thoughts regularly, it will eventually become diseased. By “feeding it unhealthy thoughts,” we mean viewing violent or tasteless programming, hanging around people who influence us negatively, or overindulging in sensory gratification, as examples. It is also to repeat negative thoughts in our mind.

It is not so much the types of thoughts we have but our ability to control them that determines whether we are mentally “healthy” or “ill.” Mental illness, to a great extent, is a learned behavior. Maintaining a healthy mind works on the same principle as maintaining a healthy body: avoiding what is bad for it and feeding it what is good for it.

The importance of keeping good company cannot be overemphasized. By good company, we mean those who sincerely try to improve themselves and strive to become part of the solution rather than remain part of the problem. They may not be perfect, but they are willing to take responsibility for their actions, accept constructive criticism, and learn from their mistakes.

Anyone who has ever struggled with an addiction, eating disorder, or other type of compulsive behavior can tell us that the mind is not always looking out for our best interests. Even though we can distinguish right

from wrong, something within us causes us to make poor choices. Sometimes it is referred to as our “inner demon.” When we talk about mental mastery, we are concerned with this part of the mind.

Let us introduce a little Indian philosophy here. According to this school of thought, there are four functions to the human mind. The first is referred to as *manas*, the part of the mind that interacts with the external world. It takes in impressions through the five sensory organs (eyes, ears, tongue, nose, and skin) and processes that information, much like the processor of a computer.

The second is *chitta*, or the memory bank. It can be thought of as an enormous dictionary where we store everything we have ever learned, and which helps us make sense out of incoming new information. This is what allows us to identify a red, baseball-sized object with a stem on top as an “apple,” for example.

The third function is *ahamkara*, or the ego. This part of the mind tells us how we relate to the external world. It is what separates the “I” from everything else. It may not bother us to see someone eating an apple until we discover that they are eating “our” apple. The ego is what causes us to experience separateness from each other and what makes us believe that we are more important (or intelligent, sensible, righteous, attractive, talented, successful, etc.) than others. This part of the mind is responsible

for conflict, ranging from sibling squabbles to war.

Then, there is the fourth function: *buddhi*, or wisdom. It is the part of the mind that allows us to see things as they truly are without being clouded by the ego. It is that inner voice that tells us what is right or wrong. It is sometimes referred to as our intuition, inner guide, or higher self. Developing wisdom is an essential part of mastering the mind. Most of us have the potential to become wise if only we could figure out how to tame our ego.

We sometimes hear people in various spiritual traditions talk about the need to “get rid of” the ego. This expression is not entirely accurate. Getting rid of the ego is neither desired nor possible. The ego tells us to take care of our physical needs and fulfill our personal responsibilities. The ego is necessary for our physical survival. A more accurate word choice would be to “train” the ego, like you would train an unruly child. Anyone can learn to do this.

We, humans, have a highly reactive mind. We allow others to trigger our emotions and give them control over how we act and feel. If someone treats us kindly, we are kind to them; if someone treats us unkindly, we are unkind to them.

Living with a reactive mind leaves us vulnerable to the circumstances

surrounding us. We cannot be happy for long if we rely on others to make us happy. To find true happiness, or peace of mind, we must break this cycle of reactivity and learn to take control of our own mind. We must learn to stop causing drama in our life as well as resist being pulled into the drama of others.

Many of us are easily offended. We allow the slightest things that others say or do to upset us, even when they may have had no ill intentions. Just someone glancing at us the “wrong” way, or their phone ringing during a silent moment, or them calling us by the wrong gender pronoun can send some of us into a fit. Every adult – even those of us who may not be interested in spiritual evolution – should at a minimum learn to control our anger.

Mastering our mind requires that we first understand it. We do so by observing how it operates and then by consciously making efforts to fine-tune it so that it behaves in a more desired manner. We may not be successful one-hundred percent of the time, but we gradually improve by making continued efforts.

In the realm of science, this phenomenon is known as neuroplasticity. To illustrate how it works using an analogy, consider the watering of a houseplant. If we were to water it consistently in one set spot within its pot instead of evenly distributing the water, it carves out a designated path

over time, causing uneven distribution within the pot. Our brain operates on a similar principle. When we repeatedly engage in the same thought patterns in response to similar situations, those patterns become reinforced and ingrained as habits. Incidentally, this is how addictions get started.

To correct this, we can change our thought patterns by repeatedly creating the desired thoughts until it becomes second nature. We can train our mind to resist getting pulled into negativity and take control of our mental well-being. Whenever we catch ourselves becoming negative, we can consciously turn it around to become positive. If something that we perceive as “bad” happens to us, we can try to see the “good” in that situation. The truth is, we can find “good” and “bad” in almost every situation, depending on how we look at it.

Say, for instance, that our house just burned down. A normal reaction would be to feel grief over all the items that were lost, not only furniture, clothing, and other miscellaneous items, but also irreplaceable old family photographs, important paperwork, childhood keepsakes, and the like. All those items that took a lifetime to accumulate literally just went up in flames. With it comes the sinking feeling of having to start all over.

We can dwell on the loss, thinking about each item that we no longer possess, and indulge in self-pity. Or, we can try to find the good in the situation. We can say to ourselves, “I had way too much stuff anyway. This

is a great opportunity to downsize.” Or maybe we can be thankful that nobody was in the house, including our pet, who normally took naps indoors during the time that the fire consumed our house. If you can train yourself to see the blessing in every situation, there is nothing that can keep you down for long.

Sadly, most schools place emphasis on teaching children to memorize information rather than self-mastery. As a consequence, we end up with a society full of untamed minds running amok, each competing to be the bigger fool, due to our paranoia and the hate that it often triggers. To progress into a more civilized humanity, we must learn and teach self-mastery on a global scale.

We are all at varying stages of spiritual evolution. Just as there are different levels of education in schools, there is a practice suited for every level of spiritual evolution. No one level is better than another, they are simply different. It is similar to attempting to explain how an airplane flies to different people. You would not give the same explanation to a 5-year-old as you would to a student of aeronautical engineering. Even though you may be saying the same thing, you would go about it very differently.

The first lesson in teaching someone how to love is to teach them how not to hate. In more advanced stages, we become capable of extending love even to those who hate us. This is what Jesus meant when he talked

about turning the other cheek to evildoers. This will require a lifetime of practice for most of us, and some may never attain that point. In any case, we must all start where we are and accept our failures, as we continue our journey on the evolutionary path.

If we have not yet reached a point where we can love our enemies or even tolerate them, the next best action would be to remain indifferent. People say and do foolish things. We must not continue the cycle of foolishness by reacting foolishly. This means that we may sometimes have to take undeserved blows. If that is the case, do it for the sake of humanity. All great souls throughout the ages have done so. That is how they made the world a better place.

Nothing in life is to be feared; it is only to be understood.

— *Marie Curie*

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Overcoming Fear



Humans are fearful little creatures. From fear of the unknown to fear of failure, rejection, being alone, death, insects, heights, and old age, the fears we may harbor are boundless. Fear sometimes compels us to behave irrationally, becoming a significant hurdle to overcome. So, it is time for another parable – a tale of a king who granted criminals the autonomy to select their own punishment.

Once upon a time, there was a king who allowed those caught committing an offense in his kingdom to choose their own punishment. One day, an evildoer was brought before the king. The king explained to him, “I will allow you to choose one of two

punishments for the serious offense that you have committed.

The first is to spend the rest of your life imprisoned in a dungeon. Be aware that it will be dark and musty, you will only be fed scraps, you will not be allowed any visitors, and it will be sweltering in the summer and freezing in the winter. I assure you, you will be miserable.”

Pointing at a nearby door along the gate, the king continued. “Or, your other choice would be to accept whatever is behind that closed door. Once you make a decision, you cannot change your mind, so choose carefully.” After thinking briefly, the evildoer sighed, and then dejectedly uttered, “I guess I will have to take the dungeon.”

“Very well,” the king replied, and called on a couple of guards to escort the man away. As the guards approached, the man said, “Before sending me off, would you please tell me what was behind the closed door? It is for my own peace of mind that I made the right choice.”

The king turned to one of the guards and commanded, “Guard, open that door and show him.” As the guard opened the door, a

bright path emerged, leading to the outside world. The king said, “The other choice was a passage to freedom and a second chance at life. ... Do not feel bad though, most others who were given these two choices have also chosen the dungeon.” The man repeatedly cursed himself as the guards led him away to live out his chosen fate.

Fear of the unknown can be debilitating. Because of this fear, some of us would rather remain in a toxic environment than explore new possibilities. It is easier to live with what is familiar, even if it is not what we want. Our fears are often what prevent us from living an authentic and fulfilling life.

Many of our fears have no rational foundation. We invent them in our mind and become attached to them. They become ingrained over time by our repeatedly playing them back in our head. The way to overcome our various fears is by noticing them, cross-examining them, and then making it a practice to dissolve them.

For instance, say that we dislike someone because of their religious, cultural, or political association. We can ask, “What is it about this individual that I do not like?” Whenever we find someone or something to be “offensive,” it indicates some kind of fear. But fear of what? Try to

come up with answers. Do not stop at a superficial level, such as criticizing their belief. To truly understand our fears, we must dig much deeper.

Among all human fears, the most destructive is our fear of each other. An overwhelming amount of hatred is consuming the human family, often rooted in the apprehension that others may inflict or have inflicted harm upon us. When someone confronts us with hate, our reflexive response is to hate that person back. This hatred is sometimes exploited to rationalize our negative behavior. A world of hate becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Let us consider how we currently try to resolve our social issues. A modern-day scenario that plays out all over the world is public protests. A group of people, fed up with an injustice, organize on the streets to express their frustration. In any such group, there are people at varying stages of evolution.

A majority of protests conclude peacefully, but occasionally, a few protesters may lose control and behave irrationally. Governments try to avert problems by deploying law enforcement personnel. In some cases, these officers may escalate matters by initiating the aggression. They may use their authority to abuse and arrest people at random, people who may have done nothing more than show up to support a cause they believe in.

On one side is a group of people seeking to address a valid social issue, and on the other is a group trying to do a job that they are paid to do. Both think they are in the right, and both are fearful of the other. What is often missing in this scenario is the presence of people with the ability to address the issue. Thus, while protests may be a good way of expressing our frustration or bringing attention to issues, they alone cannot resolve them.

When public protests turn violent, the demonstrators are no longer thinking about the cause, and the law enforcers are no longer thinking about their job. Both sides get engulfed in a giant flame of hatred, ignited by fear. They unwittingly end up on the same, losing side. Not only does nothing get resolved, but people also get injured, and property get damaged needlessly.

This is not intended to condemn public protests. In fact, activism is a method of awakening the collective consciousness and urging those responsible to take action. Countless people have lost their lives standing up for what they believed in, and the rest of society has benefitted from their courageous actions. What we need to figure out is how to resolve problems without it resulting in hatred or violence.

Since hatred is triggered by fear, we must make conscious efforts to

remove fear from our interactions. Achieving this objective necessitates engaging in open-hearted dialogue, a process rooted in mutual respect and a balanced exchange of listening and speaking. In such discourse, both parties must exhibit a readiness to make concessions and focus on the matter under consideration, refraining from blame, insults, or aggressive behavior. The aim must be to reach a mutually agreeable solution rather than to assert victory.

Humans have received a sacred gift of speech. It is a shame that many of us have not been trained to use it skillfully. With many of us in a constant hurry and so much on our mind at any given moment, we do not always think before speaking. This results in countless disagreements, misunderstandings, and ill feelings.

When people disagree, they often use that as a reason to hate each other and stop communicating rather than spend time trying to come to an understanding. Even long-time friends can suddenly refuse to speak to each other and end their friendship because of a single disagreement. This is because many of us were never taught how to communicate effectively.

There is an excellent book by American psychologist Marshall Rosenberg called *Non-Violent Communication*. The author points out that disagreements often arise because individuals perceive others' requests as

potential threats. He also asserts, “All violence is the result of people tricking themselves into believing that their pain derives from other people and that consequently those people deserve to be punished.” This prompts us to ponder: Can any of us ever be happy so long as we remain fixated on punishing one other?

There are kind ways and unkind ways to say the same thing. Every adult and child in a society can benefit from learning how to communicate effectively, sincerely, and non-violently. Suppose we can make courses such as those taught by Dr. Rosenberg’s organization a part of every school’s curriculum, every government and other organizations’ recurrent training, and a requirement for every worker in the service industry. If we did, we may notice our society turning in the right direction.

We can all learn to be kind and respectful; many of us just need to be taught how. Once we stop fearing each other, we can become truly authentic and appreciate each other at a deeper level. A beauty in our hearts will emerge that is blind to race, gender, nationality, religion, and any set of opinions. That is the birth of *agapé*, the most expansive form of love.

We cannot solve problems with the kind of thinking we employed when we came up with them. – Albert Einstein

Chapter Thirty

The Ten Enhancements



If you are from a Judeo-Christian background, chances are you are familiar with the Ten Commandments. They are fundamental moral teachings, which were intended to help humans live in accordance with Sacred Law. Their beauty is that they are as timeless and relevant today as when they were introduced thousands of years ago.

While they are not part of all religious traditions, and not everyone follows them, most of us can appreciate their wisdom. We know it is wrong to kill, steal, or disrespect our parents, for example, no matter what our religious background is.

The world has evolved tremendously since the time those Commandments first appeared. Humanity is in a much more precarious situation. We are faced with issues of global magnitude that our predecessors could not have possibly imagined.

As our intellects evolved, our hearts have not kept up with the pace. We gradually started valuing our independence, losing a sense of community in the process. In our globalized economy, we now rely on an increasing number of strangers, many of who reside in foreign countries, to satisfy our growing materialistic desires. This era is marked by the potential for immense harm caused by a few reckless individuals, resulting in widespread loss and devastation.

And now, higher forces are expressing the dire need to tweak these great teachings to suit modern society. These principles are by no means intended to replace the original Commandments. On the contrary, they are intended to enhance them. Hereinafter we shall refer to them as the Ten Enhancements.

Enhancement #1: Know thy Self

Know the Self as a soul, which dwells in a material body to participate in its own evolutionary process. We must transform our perspective from

that of countless isolated individuals engaged in competitive survival to that of a unified entity composed of interconnected organisms collaboratively striving for its collective progress and well-being.

Let us think not only in terms of souls embodied in human form but also include other life forms as well as our lands, waters, and skies. We each constitute a miniscule fragment of a living entity we call Earth, and Earth in turn is a living entity in the grand universe. This shift in perception is at the foundation of all other Enhancements and is critical for humanity's further evolution.

Enhancement #2: Be Humble

Know that the wisest among us are the most humble and modest. They realize that each moment is a precious gift and an opportunity for growth. Learn from their example. Instead of chasing after outer wealth, seek inner wealth. Be thankful for what we have or do not have, without comparing ourselves with others. Express gratitude at every possible opportunity, for gratitude is the highest expression of love.

Reduce consumption and waste. Let the footprints we leave be small. Become like water, which flows to lower places, is highly adaptable, nurtures all without judgment, and does not expect anything in return.

Discover the beauty in simplicity. Expand our perception so that we may notice the magnificence all around us. We are truly blessed!

Enhancement #3: Practice Self-Mastery

Work diligently to correct character flaws, such as anger, lust, jealousy, greed, pride, arrogance, self-pity, and hate. Listen twice as much as we speak, and welcome constructive criticism, knowing that it will help us grow. Stop being so easily offended. If we find it helpful, we may seek a good teacher and/or spiritual community to guide and support us.

Spend time each day in self-reflection, ensuring that our actions align with our words, words with our thoughts, and thoughts with Sacred Law. Nature is our greatest teacher; let us be her devout students. Prioritize our own evolution, and offer assistance to those who seek it without an intent to change them. Appreciate that each of us is at a different stage, and each of us is responsible for our own evolution. Learn from our own mistakes as well as the mistakes of others, striving each day to become better than we were the day before.

Enhancement #4: Honor All Life

Every living entity on this planet has a right to exist and live life to its

fullest. Honor and respect all lifeforms and be aware of our sacred interdependence on one another. Think thoroughly of the consequences of our actions before performing them. The human role is not to dominate and exploit but to protect and live in harmony with our land and fellow inhabitants.

When interacting with other humans, treat each with respect, regardless of their background, appearance, and beliefs. Show special reverence to the elders and teachers in the community, who are a great source of wisdom. Openheartedly accept their guidance, and strive to follow their good example. Cultivate a society in which children are taught to honor and respect their elders and teachers as well as all life.

Enhancement #5: Procreate Responsibly

Understand the seriousness of human overpopulation, and recognize that the current population explosion is unsustainable. Be aware that nature will resolve the problem in a way that would bring great sorrow to humanity if we do not urgently address it. This issue must be addressed by each individual and not through government intervention.

Strive to have as few children as possible. Educate oneself and others on the consequences of overpopulation. Do our part in changing the

outdated belief that having a large number of children is a blessing. Realize that each human child we bring into the world results in tons of additional waste, thousands of animal deaths, destruction of hundreds of trees, and other harm to our already-ailing planet.

Enhancement #6: Educate, Not Punish

Be compassionate with those who make mistakes or bad decisions. View them as imperfect sisters and brothers who may need guidance, not as evil people who must pay for their failures. Resist the urge to punish or seek revenge. Disapprove of actions, but never of people. Practice patience. Learn to forgive, remembering our own imperfections and past mistakes.

As a society, strive to educate wrongdoers. Detention centers for lawbreakers must become sanctuaries to foster moral values rather than camps where they are mistreated, deprived, or humiliated. Educate future generations. Make the teaching of moral values a required subject in children's education.

When we make a mistake, have the courage to accept responsibility instead of trying to cover it up, make excuses, or blame others. Remind ourselves that we are an imperfect being. Focus on correcting the mistake

and learning from it rather than tormenting ourselves over it.

Enhancement #7: Cooperate, Not Compete

Shift our focus from competition to cooperation. Give up the need to feel important or superior than others. Make conscious efforts to perceive others as teammates instead of rivals. Learn not to fear those who look or act differently than we do, understanding that we are one humanity.

Schools shall focus on nurturing a child's sense of being part of a team, not on grades or competitions that pin one child against another. Sports should focus on exercise and enjoyment, not on determining winners and losers. Activities like music, athletics, literature, and others shall serve as platforms to showcase talent, free from the pressure of competition where participants are compared and rated against one another.

Enhancement #8: Surrender

Surrender to a higher power. View life threads as ever-changing pieces in the infinite cosmic puzzle. Be in the world, but not of the world. One shall not take things personally, as the individual person is only an illusion, and nothing is ever personal.

Each soul has a divine mission. Once discovered, let not internal or external resistance prevent us from fulfilling it. Remain focused on each step of the journey without being concerned with the outcome. Do what we are called upon to do and let the cards fall where they may, neither taking pride in successes nor shame in failures. Find strength in numbers and truth. Always be reminded that the ultimate purpose to whatever we do is our collective evolution.

Enhancement #9: Be of Service

Play an active role in the collective evolutionary process. Think in terms of what we can give rather than take. Devote at least one day per week and commit to performing at least one act per day in service of Earth and its inhabitants. Know that every positive action, no matter how small, brings us one step closer to the enlightenment of humanity.

Apply our unique talents, expertise, and interests to benefit others. Whatever duties we may be given, however menial or insignificant they may seem, perform them joyfully and with all of our heart. Lose oneself in the service of others. Involve children to teach them the value of service from an early age.

Enhancement #10: Spread the Word

Countless souls currently suffer in darkness. As part of our contribution to human evolution, we shall all in time become divine messengers. Our sacred duty is to share love and light with as many souls as possible.

If we struggle finding the right words, we may borrow the words of others. One may share messages, make recordings or writings, share links, or use any creative method to spread the word. Support those who are close to us as well as strangers, and do so openly or anonymously. Especially focus on those who are filled with hate, for they are the ones who need us the most.

For anyone who may wish to have a single-page list of the Ten Enhancements to duplicate and post somewhere as a reminder, they are listed on the following page:

THE TEN ENHANCEMENTS

- I. Know thy Self**
- II. Be Humble**
- III. Practice Self-Mastery**
- IV. Honor All Life**
- V. Procreate Responsibly**
- VI. Educate, Not Punish**
- VII. Cooperate, Not Compete**
- VIII. Surrender**
- IX. Be of Service**
- X. Spread the Word**

I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use.

– Galileo Galilei

Chapter Thirty-One

Why Religion Will Not Save Us



Religion, by definition, is a belief system with rules, rituals, practices, and usually a higher entity such as God or deities. Religions originate from human discontent with the “evil” surrounding us and the suffering that we experience because of it. People join religions seeking a way out of their misery. Moral codes are often linked to religions, but even those who say they follow a religion do not always adhere to such codes.

There has been enormous bloodshed throughout history because one religious group saw itself as superior and tried to oppress, convert, or annihilate another. Such groups try to impose their version of morality on

others by committing immoral acts in the name of their God. Sometimes, victims retaliate by committing immoral acts in an act of revenge. This is how we get caught in a downward spiral. Just look at history.

Religion is not inherently bad. In fact, countless people throughout history have transformed their life positively by being part of a religion. They made sincere efforts to become a better person by adhering to the teachings, and some even attained spiritual enlightenment by using religion as their vehicle.

Then, there are those who use religion to perpetuate, cover up, or rationalize their immorality. They may preach a set of rules for others to follow while conveniently exempting themselves from such rules. A well-known example of this is the leadership of the Catholic Church; an organization with good teachings but never-ending scandals.

No one religion is better than another. Each is only as holy as the person practicing it. No matter what religion one may follow, studying its teachings or participating in its rituals is insufficient. A religion can only be considered valuable if it helps people evolve spiritually. It is not necessary to belong to a religion to do this; what *is* necessary for our higher evolution is to experience a shift in perception.

To explain this point, imagine a potter who makes vases, plates, cups,

spoons, and other items out of clay. To the potter, the essence of all of these items is the same. They come from the same source and will eventually return to the same source when their usefulness in their current form has ended. On the other hand, lay persons perceive the items as vases, plates, cups, and so on. They are accustomed to judging an object purely by its form.

For example, those who declare that all Christians are one way and all Muslims are another have yet to develop the capacity to perceive the essence of matter. If they were a spoon, they would only approve of other spoons. Incidentally, this is the cause of religious intolerance.

As we grasp the core of existence, we come to understand that all souls are at different stages of evolution, regardless of their religion. Some try harder, some reach higher, but we are all seeking the same Light. It is when we are no longer bound by the limits of our physical perceptions that a whole new world begins to unfold before us.

Even in the animal kingdom, souls are at different stages of evolution. If you interact often with animals, you can relate to this. You can readily observe which of them are more compassionate, loving, sensitive, calm, and so on. In fact, some of them may seem more evolved than the average human. We also encounter many immature souls in human form.

When we learn to see beyond the surface, we gain the power of discernment. We become less likely to judge people based on their religion, nationality, gender, race, or physical appearances. In his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. chose to express this idea with the words, “(to judge someone by) the content of (their) character.”

So, what is the problem with organized religion? Most religious organizations start out with good intentions. A group of like-minded people forms a community, agrees on rules and rituals, and rents or purchases a building to hold gatherings in. They may hire a preacher to lead them and perhaps staff to take care of maintenance, accounting, music, and other tasks.

They solicit donations from members to pay for it all, and the organization operates as a business. Partly out of necessity, the main focus shifts from its members’ spiritual growth to the organization’s financial growth.

Funds collected are often spent on operating expenses of the premises as well as picnics, parties, or other events to entertain members, with little going toward the evolution of its members or the betterment of our planet. The organization often becomes more of a social club than a forum to seek spiritual growth.

Charity events that the organization may sponsor end up as photo ops, where pictures of smiling members are posted in their publications to show what a great deed they did. When organizing fundraisers, they offer to post the names of the largest donors on their walls and benches, playing with members' egos to solicit the maximum amount of donations. Some members take great delight in seeing their name in the limelight. Instead of using religion to evolve, they use it as a venue to try to impress others.

Like oil and water, materialism and spirituality do not mix well. When a religious organization prioritizes materialistic pursuits, spiritual pursuits get set aside. What makes matters worse is that, when materialistic pursuits are made under the guise of a religion, this shift in purpose often goes unnoticed. Members feel they are serving God as they attend baseball games, potluck parties, or bingo night with their church group.

There is nothing wrong with attending social events. We are simply pointing out that it is not the most efficient path for those who seriously seek liberation. As the wise say, it is not possible to serve two masters at once, and materialistic pursuits usually end up taking priority.

Another factor to consider is that religions, if not careful, tend to make their followers mentally lazy. If all the rules are already spelled out, we may feel relieved of the responsibility to evaluate each situation on its own merit, and begin acting like robots. We come to rely on religious leaders

for answers, and they may abuse that power to exercise mind control over us, using God as their weapon. Any religion with one-size-fits-all answers that allow for no exceptions is probably more interested in controlling its members than in their spiritual growth.

All that being said, for those of us who find solace in belonging to a religious community, it can have its benefits. There are many worthy religious organizations. If we feel such an association helps us grow or brings us comfort, then it is probably right for us. One must always listen to one's heart.

When a soul evolves sufficiently, it no longer feels a need to rely on any book or authority to tell it what is right or wrong. One acquires a certain knowingness, and answers naturally arise from within. The soul just knows.

Until we reach that point, it may be useful to seek guidance, being careful to seek it from a source that has our best interest in mind. When choosing such a source, it is important to choose based on its content, and not by its cover. Be aware that a flashy cover may be an attempt to make up for lack of content.

Ultimately, what we believe in makes no difference, as Truth stands for itself.

Our natures are alike; our practices set us apart. – Confucius

Chapter Thirty-Two

Stages of Unfoldment



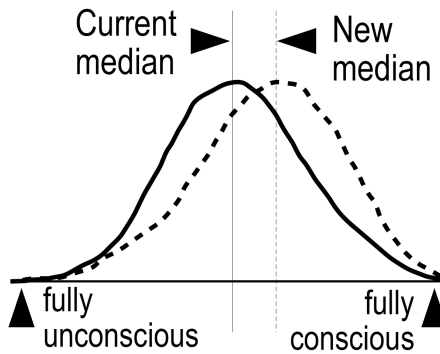
We frequently label people as “good” or “evil” based on a single act that they participated in. The reality is, each of us has the capacity to be either. Our degree of evolution makes us more likely to act in one way or another in any given situation.

People who routinely perform actions that are considered “evil” are most likely people who are unconscious. They have not yet developed the capacity to perceive beyond their physical boundaries; consequently, their primary focus in life is sensory gratification. To label someone as “evil” is to deny their potential. So-called “evil” persons can transform into “good” ones by expanding their consciousness.

Remember the bell curve? It is a graphical depiction of the normal distribution of a certain attribute. It has been used to map test scores, employee performance, and climate data, for example. The bell curve can also be applied to human evolutionary stages.

As represented by the following chart, only a very small percentage of the population is fully unconscious or conscious. A great majority of us fall somewhere in-between. Sometimes, it seems that evil may be more prevalent because evildoers get more media attention, and good deeds more often go unnoticed.

Shift in Human Consciousness



Unless we are at one of the extreme edges of the bell curve, our choices of action greatly depend on our environment. If we hang out with evildoers, we tend to do evil. If we hang out with the wise, we tend to act

wisely. This is why saints and sages have always stressed the importance of keeping good company.

If we were to attempt to speed up the human evolutionary process, we would have to shift the current curve (represented by a solid line) to the right-hand side (represented by a dotted line), at least to a point where the mostly-conscious outnumber the mostly-unconscious. We must go beyond a critical point, where those of a higher consciousness become a majority. Or, to put it another way, we need to reach a point where the average person would feel a moral resistance to acting foolishly.

Of course, it would be overly optimistic to expect this to happen overnight. Like the ripples created by a stone cast in calm waters, a change in global consciousness will most likely spread in waves. Incidentally, the bell curve depicted here serves as a visual reference but is not based on any scientific data. Currently, we lack the instruments to measure such an abstract concept.

So, what role can each of us play in evolving human consciousness?

To answer this question, let us consider the evolutionary process. The first part of our spiritual journey is about learning. It is about reading books, taking classes, practicing rituals, perhaps joining a religion, and

otherwise sifting through the vast knowledge base that those who walked the path before us gifted us.

Book knowledge is invaluable; however, the downside is that it inflates the ego, and some of us never go beyond that, falsely convinced that we have already attained the highest state. Spiritual stagnation and regression are real phenomena. It is ironic how the most foolish among us believe that they are the wisest, and the wisest are the ones who realize how foolish they are.

In reality, the learning stage is only the *beginning* of the process of unfoldment, and there is still a long journey ahead. The second part of our journey is about unlearning. It is about dissolving all the false beliefs we have accumulated. It is about dying to our material self and birthing into our spiritual self. It is about bringing to completion that shift in perception that we discussed earlier.

The first part of the journey can be traveled as part of a group, but the second part must be walked in solitude. This does not mean it must be done in isolation, although some people choose to do so. It means that we must not rely upon others to provide answers but must discover them through direct personal experience. Others may share experiences in the first segment of our journey, but experiences in the second segment differ

for everyone.

Chinese philosopher Confucius is said to have said, “By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; And third, by experience, which is harshest.” We can apply this teaching to facilitate our evolution, both individually and collectively.

The first method, reflection, involves understanding the cause-and-effect relationships of events through objective observation. It is considered the noblest, and is often favored by those who have already acquired a certain amount of wisdom. We understand that we do not need to make mistakes personally in order to learn from them. In addition to learning from our own experiences, we have acquired the ability to use the experiences of others as a springboard to reaching new heights.

We have the ability to determine the correctness of an action (by “correctness,” we mean whether or not it is in tune with Sacred Law) based on the act itself, not based on who performed it (me/us vs. someone else), for example. We make every attempt to ponder the consequences of our actions before acting. When we make a mistake, we are able to see it and correct it without letting our ego stand in the way. This is the way of those already on the right-hand side of the bell curve.

Next let us look at the third way of learning wisdom that Confucius speaks of: experience. In this method, we make mistakes and learn from them by suffering the consequences. If we do not learn from them, we will end up repeating the same mistakes over and over. As you may have guessed, this is how our society principally operates.

Instead of reflecting and making an effort to correct our mistakes, we try to sweep them under the carpet by denial, deception, and finger-pointing. This is a very inefficient way of learning. As Confucius points out, it is also the harshest way because we must continue to suffer the consequences until and unless we learn from them. How many more wars must we fight to realize it does not lead to peace?

In the quest to save our planet and ourselves, time is not on our side. We cannot afford to continue our current approach. In an ideal world, we would shift from learning from bitter experience (Confucius' Method 3) to learning by reflecting (Confucius' Method 1). As we can observe, however, not all of us are ready to make that jump. Fortunately, there is another option. That option is Confucius' Method 2, or learning by imitation.

By using imitation, we are in a sense working the enlightenment process in reverse. We attempt to speed up the soul's evolution by

pretending that we have already attained a certain level. Before laughing the idea off, we shall mention that countless average people, and even some who may be considered below average, have transformed themselves by first pretending. They thought about who they would like to become, perhaps found a role model or a mentor, and tried to become like that person.

As Confucius suggests, this is the easiest method to attain wisdom and to elevate human consciousness. This “fake it till you make it” idea was discussed in an earlier chapter. We can also refer to it by a more comical expression: “Monkey see, monkey do.” Any unconscious person can learn to act wisely by imitating the wise.

For this approach to work on a large scale, we need more good examples for society – especially young people – to use as role models. Our role models must shift from sports stars, billionaires, or celebrities to those who make sacrifices for the advancement of humanity. We must instill the value of wisdom in each heart – children and adults alike. Instead of encouraging children to idolize the rich and famous, we must ignite a burning desire within them to become wise.

We also need to openly talk about the futility of materialism. We must discuss the traps of fame and fortune and how they have led to many

“successful” people’s downfall. In this arena, we can offer examples of people who experienced failure because of their obsession with materialistic pursuits. Sharing real-life stories is much more powerful than simply stating, “Money does not buy happiness.”

Most importantly, we each must be prepared to set an example. It is meaningless to tell others to live simply as we ourselves continue to compete in the rat race and chase after material wealth. Thus, the best thing any of us can do to contribute to the global enlightenment movement is to wean ourself off materialism.

Lord, grant me the strength to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. – Reinhold Niebuhr

Chapter Thirty-Three

Personal Practices



Ah, the elusive state of enlightenment... Countless humans throughout the ages have sought it, yet few have attained it. Even serious lifelong seekers have not always succeeded in their quest. Thus, one may rightfully ask, is it possible for an average householder – with a full-time job and family responsibilities – to attain enlightenment?

It depends. It is not so much our circumstances but our efforts within the framework of those circumstances that will sway the pendulum one way or the other. A part-time effort will most likely produce part-time results. A half-hearted effort will most likely produce mediocre results.

That is how it is with any endeavor. And then, there is the difficulty in finding practices that will maximize our progress.

The following are some tried-and-tested practices that have been used by many traditions throughout the ages to help evolve the soul. They have stood the test of time because they have proven to be effective. There is no “one-size-fits-all” practice, so this list is simply intended to offer suggestions.

The list is neither complete nor intended to offer detailed step-by-step instructions. If a practice may interest you, you may wish to do some research on your own, keeping in mind that there are many variations to any practice. You are encouraged to customize your practice to suit your needs and preferences. If your heart leads you, you may choose one, several, or all of these practices, or even search for others, which are not listed here.

Self-Study

For those who find it difficult to relate to contents of this writing as well as spiritual debutants who wish to learn more about the mysteries of the universe, written knowledge is a good place to start. As for the seasoned Truth-seeker, there are always opportunities to discover hidden

treasures that will take us one step further on our journey.

Read as many wisdom texts as possible – both ancient and modern – without limiting yourself to texts of one tradition or religion. See if you can sift through the customs, opinions, and dogma to find similarities between traditions. Most importantly, put into practice the valuable knowledge that you gain. Try out different practices to see if they produce good results for you. Keep what is useful, and set aside what is not.

Spirituality requires the curiosity of a child. A curious mind will allow us to overcome fears or doubts and stick with our quest to the very end.

Mantra

The word *mantra* is a Sanskrit word that is often translated as “mind tool.” Mantras are sounds or words that are repeated out loud or in silence. While different traditions may refer to the practice by different names, it has been used around the globe to transform the human psyche. The key ingredients in chanting mantras are repetition and focused intent.

Mantras may be in an extinct language and/or originate from a religion. A very basic and popular one is the sound “Om.” We can also tap into the power of mantras by using modern language without it being part

of any religious practice. Mantras can be chanted while driving, showering, waiting in line, lying in bed, or at various times throughout the day. Although one may choose to, one does not necessarily have to set aside time for this practice.

We can use mantras to train our mind in general, or repeat a resolution to transform our psyche in a specific way. To recite aloud, take a deep breath in, and recite the words with deep conviction or feeling while exhaling. We can also practice silently, in which case we do not have to be too concerned with the breath. We may use traditional mantras or create our own, such as “I am kind,” “I am honest,” or “I am patient.” Use the present tense as if the goal has already been achieved.

One can have more than one mantra. Repeat your mantra(s) throughout the day and when someone or something triggers your negative response, such as when you get an urge to do something dishonest or feel anger brewing.

Prayer

Prayer has been used equally by the religious and non-religious. It can help nurture compassion, give us strength, and expand our awareness. There are many ways to pray – by sitting in silence, through song or

dance, using prayer beads, taking certain hand or body postures, etc. How one chooses to pray is personal; the importance is intention.

For some of us, prayer is about asking higher powers for special favors. We may ask to be given an object we desire, to help us out of a pinch, or to reveal the winning lottery number combination to us, etc. Such are superficial prayers. Superficial prayer is done at the ego level and contributes little to our spiritual evolution.

Then, there is deep prayer. Deep prayer is an attempt to connect with higher powers so that we may first understand our life's mission and then fulfill that mission. It is about becoming the cause in the play of cause and effect. We may ask for strength, wisdom, courage, guidance, and such to complete our mission successfully. This is the type of prayer that is transformative.

Silence

Modern-day humans have a lot on our mind. Not only are we constantly thinking, but often, we are thinking about more than one thing at a time. We call it multi-tasking and see it as a useful skill; however, it takes us away from experiencing each moment fully and often causes us to miss critical information, make mistakes, or become forgetful.

For this practice, find a quiet and comfortable spot – indoors or outdoors – where you will not be disturbed. Then sit in silence and empty the mind of all thought. This is much more difficult than it sounds. Meditation is a great practice, but most people would do best by trying to sit quietly for one or two minutes at a time, to start. When we try to sit in silence for too long, many of us will become so frustrated that we tend to give up.

With time, we can expand our practice to 3, 4, or 5 minutes. When we can sit for 5 minutes with very few thoughts, we can say that we are ready for meditation. Until then, we are simply learning to focus and be present.

Listening

A good way to expand our consciousness is to notice our bad habits, and one way to do this is to observe our communication style. Many a spiritual master has scolded a disciple for his inability to listen attentively. Often without realizing it, we may interrupt others, get distracted while they are talking to us, think of ways to one-up their stories, or change the subject without responding to questions or issues that they raised.

We can ask ourselves pertinent questions, such as: Do I have a tendency to dominate conversations? Do I often end up in arguments or

misunderstandings? Do people say they told me something, but I cannot remember them having told me?

If we have a hard time observing ourself, we can ask others close to us if they feel we are guilty of any of the above. If so, we can make it a practice to correct that behavior. When in a conversation, make it a practice to give the other person(s) our undivided attention. Allow them to express themselves, resisting the urge to make comments until they are finished. Listening is a skill that takes practice.

Transference

There is a Buddhist meditation practice based on the principle of *maitri*, or loving-kindness. In this practice, we sit in a meditative position and first think of someone or something that we love dearly. After thoroughly indulging in that feeling, we think of someone neutral to us while trying to hold that loving feeling. This can be a cashier at a supermarket, a co-worker, or a stranger who lives down the street, for example. In advanced stages, we try to transfer those loving feelings to someone whom we may harbor animosity against.

Here, we will call the practice “transference,” and we do not have to be sitting in meditation to practice it. We can make this a daily practice by

trying to feel love and compassion for various strangers that cross our path. Try to put yourself in their shoes. Imagine what it would be like to be them. Try to imagine their pains and insecurities. Sympathize with their desire to be heard and to feel valued. Embrace their humanity, including their weaknesses.

Mindfulness

A Zen master once said, “Even when you are alone, act as if you are in the company of a highly-revered guest.” This “guest,” for some, may symbolize God. Or, if the idea of a divine presence does not click with you, you can imagine that security cameras are monitoring your every move throughout the day.

Many of us have an issue with objectivity. We can quickly spot the mistakes of others but become blind when it comes to our own mistakes. This exercise will train us to become an objective witness to our actions instead of a subjective participant. It helps us to see our actions as others see them. If we feel a resistance to being observed doing any action, then we can ask ourselves if it is because the action is morally wrong.

This type of practice is called mindfulness training. The objective is to be mindful continuously throughout the day. Breathe mindfully, walk

mindfully, eat mindfully, speak mindfully, and so forth. There is no need to become paranoid about it; just try to be fully present and fully aware at every moment, especially when no one is watching.

Fasting

Overindulgence is a serious concern in modern society. Fasting has been part of many spiritual traditions since ancient times, but now more than ever, humanity can benefit from this practice. By not taking in food for an extended period, we can cultivate patience and the ability to master our physical desires.

Fasting can be done in two manners: by allowing the consumption of water or herbal teas (wet fast) or not consuming any food or liquid at all (dry fast). Fasting is also known for its side benefits, such as weight loss, reducing inflammation and blood sugar levels, releasing toxins from the body, boosting cognitive performance, stabilizing blood pressure, and improving overall fitness. Some studies have shown that by putting the body in a food-starved state, it begins to destroy “bad” cells (such as cancer cells) to preserve energy.

A modern variation is intermittent fasting, where one fasts for 18 hours and eats during the remaining six-hour period in the day. For beginners, it

may be helpful to start with a less vigorous version such as this, then work up to where you can fast for 24 to 72 hours at a time. Be mindful not to go overboard, as more is not necessarily better with this practice.

An example of a regular practice may be to fast one day per week. Choose a day of the week where you do not plan on performing strenuous activity. Experiment with different methods to find a practice that fits your lifestyle and needs. If you have medical concerns, it is advisable to consult your doctor before beginning any fasting practice.

Retreat

Nature holds the answer to all questions, including those yet to be asked. This is perhaps why many highly-evolved souls frequently retreat into nature. Nature invites us to spend time with her whenever we have questions, seek solace, or need time to self-reflect. Once there, all we need to do is turn off our busy mind and put ourselves in “receive” mode.

We may observe an ant awkwardly carrying its prey, breathe in the scent of a musty pine forest, or feel a cool breeze gently brush against our skin. Be fully present, and try to experience a state that is beyond words. A seemingly-unrelated incident may spontaneously evoke the answer to an old question ... or give rise to new ones.

When going into retreat, it is best to go alone, as bringing familiar faces along will bring all of our attachments and take away from an opportunity to reflect upon things as they truly are. Turn off the phone and any electronic devices that may be distracting. At a minimum, spend one night, and preferably two, as it is important to experience at least one complete wake and sleep cycle for maximum benefit. If your busy schedule does not allow this, try to take time alone in nature whenever you can, even if only for a few minutes at a time.

Imitation

As mentioned earlier, imitation is the easiest way to attain wisdom and the most painless way to climb the soul's evolutionary ladder. In this practice, pick a highly evolved being as a role model. Jesus, Buddha, or any wise person whom you are familiar with and admire would work fine. We can also choose someone who did great work in a cause that we support or an average person, such as our mom, grandpa, a favorite school teacher, or a neighbor whom we respect.

Having a role model is useful no matter what our age. We can pretend living for a day, an hour, or even a few minutes at a time at their consciousness level and then gradually expand it over time. We can imagine handling life's challenges as wisely as that person would. When

faced with a difficult situation, we can ask, “What would (so-and-so) say or do if s/he were in my position?”

Giving oneself a real-life model to follow is like constantly having a guide by our side. We can imitate their positive qualities until they become part of our own nature. Also, one cannot overstress the importance of keeping good company while avoiding bad company. As we evolve, we feel a natural pull towards those who are more evolved and may experience a falling out with those who tend to pull us down.

This idea applies to television, radio, Internet, and other information sources as well. Exposing oneself to inferior-quality information tends to corrupt one’s character, while exposing oneself to superior-quality information tends to elevate it. We must carefully guard our mind and not allow lower forces to feed us foolish or harmful thoughts.

Service

We may “find our being in our doing” by taking up a cause that nurtures compassion and expands awareness. We may choose any type of service that we are called upon; however, the most effective type of service is one in which there is little or no financial reward and where those whom we serve do not have the means to express their gratitude.

It may consist of serving persons with mental illnesses, rescuing and caring for animals, or protecting our environment. The work may involve getting dirty, physical strain, repetitive tasks, or other labor that some may consider “menial.” Doing menial work helps tame our ego and nurtures a sense of humility.

We were all born with unique talents and interests. A noble way to express our appreciation for these talents and interests are to put them to use. We must joyfully do any such work from our heart, and not from a desire for compensation or personal recognition.

Self-Reflection

Self-reflection is a major component of the evolutionary process. One cannot improve without first admitting to one’s shortcomings, and then making efforts to correct them. To be most effective, self-reflection should be a long-term, continuous daily practice. Before going to bed each night, we can reflect on how we lived that day and whether we could have handled certain situations better.

There is a program called the Twelve-Step Program, originally introduced by Alcoholics Anonymous. Not only is it an excellent strategy to overcome various forms of addiction and compulsive behavior, it also

describes a path to wisdom and spiritual development. It is presented here as an example of a path of self-reflection.

The Twelve-Step Program

1. Admit that we are powerless over certain aspects of our character;
2. Realize that only a higher power (in whatever form makes sense to us) can help us;
3. Relinquish control over to that higher power;
4. Take an honest moral inventory of our strengths and weaknesses;
5. Admit to the higher power, oneself, and another person the wrongs we have done;
6. Be prepared to have the higher power correct any shortcomings in our character;
7. Humbly ask the higher power to remove our shortcomings;
8. Make a list of wrongs done to others and be willing to make

amends;

9. Make amends to those whom we hurt unless doing so would harm them;
10. Continue to take a moral inventory and admit when we are wrong;
11. Seek enlightenment and connection with the higher power via prayer and meditation;
12. Carry the message of what has been learned to others in need.

Note that this program can be used even by those who do not suffer from an addiction or do not follow any religion.

When starting any practice of self-reflection, it is helpful to keep a journal. Place a notebook and pen at your bedside or anywhere where you can easily access them. Write down self-reflective notes frequently and date them. Review those notes from time to time in order to follow your own progress.

For rapid evolution, the action itself must contain the fruit. Most of the practices mentioned above can be integrated into our daily life with

minimal disruption. Anyone can practice them, no matter how busy we believe we are.

Everyone has the same 24 hours in a day. Sacred Law grants each of us enough time to do what is important. Whether we spend our time unconsciously or consciously makes all the difference in the scheme of our evolution.

Enlightenment is a long and treacherous journey. Our goal should not be so much about attaining the highest state as it should be about making a daily effort. Remember that we are not shooting for perfection. Our human mission is only to *seek* enlightenment, not to attain it. We must play the game to the best of our ability and let the chips fall where they may.

Understanding means throwing away your knowledge.

– Thich Nhat Hanh

Chapter Thirty-Four

Collective Evolution



Two major schools of thought exist when it comes to the subject of evolution. One says to focus strictly on oneself and not waste time trying to change the world. It sees the physical world as a training ground where we are meant to suffer, and it is through suffering that we evolve. The other says that true evolution is about leaving no one behind, and it is our sacred duty to help others evolve along with us.

Both are valid schools. Which we choose will depend on our heart's calling. As the wise have always said, the world is a grand illusion. However, just because it is an illusion does not mean we do not experience its effects. To the experiencer, it is very real. If we are affected by

violence, injustice, or callous destruction of our planet, then it would make sense to work to create a kinder, gentler world in which to enjoy our existence, no matter how illusory it may be.

As we advance on our path, we become increasingly detached from the material world, but at the same time, we develop empathy for those who suffer because they lack the knowledge that we have been gifted with. What usually happens then is that we choose to help others, even if it means we must continue to play an active role in the material world.

Concerning spiritual evolution, the ancients used to say to let nature take her course; to not rush, since fruit will spontaneously fall from a tree when ripe. These would be encouraging words, if not for the fact that we are in the 11th hour. We do not have the luxury of waiting for each of us to stumble along the path of trial and error while blindfolded and to suffer the consequences of our increasingly destructive behavior in the meantime. Our challenge in this critical hour is to awaken as many souls as possible in the shortest amount of time.

Earth and its inhabitants are in imminent danger. To divert us from the trajectory of self-destruction, there are numerous obstacles we must overcome. The following is a list of a few of them. Please note that this list is a good place to start but is in no way complete. It also does not offer detailed instructions on how to proceed. Those are challenges we must

figure out together. Nevertheless, we must start somewhere, so with that in mind, let us contemplate together.

Reduce Dependence on Rules

We must resist the urge to blindly adhere to rules. While having guidelines for dealing with situations is useful, it is impossible to create written rules to cover every possible scenario. In our efforts to do so, we will impose so many rules upon each other that life will become increasingly unpleasant, and society will become so restrictive to a point where anything we do can become a punishable offense.

Humans tend to adopt an arrogant and mean-spirited demeanor when they see themselves as rule-makers or enforcers. This results in more violence, more incarcerations, more injustices, more fines, more inconveniences in the name of security or safety, and more restrictions in our everyday life. It also results in unnecessary distrust and hate among the human family. We must train ourselves to be kind and respectful to each other and get out of the habit of trying to police each other.

If we find it necessary to have guidelines, we must always allow for the possibility of deviating from them on a case-by-case basis, based on reason. We must do away with inflexible “zero tolerance” policies. We must train ourselves and our children to think independently instead of

relying on rule books for answers. “Common sense” must become more common.

To perceive objectively, free from the belief that we are always right, we must make efforts to purify our mind. This involves transcending words, avoiding labeling, refraining from making subjective judgments based on labels, and preventing impulsive reactions.

Rather than seeking to get others to do things our way, we must learn to stop being offended by things that others do. We must develop patience and the ability to let things go. As long as no harm is done, let others enjoy their earthly life, as we wish for them to allow us to enjoy ours. Or, to put it more bluntly, let us know when to mind our own business. We must focus on correcting our own shortcomings and stop being so quick to point out the perceived flaws of others.

Prioritize Ethical Education

Our educational system is due for a complete overhaul. It must switch its focus from competition to cooperation, conformance to respect, and materialism to altruism. Children must be made aware of our interconnectivity and interdependence from an early age. They must be taught to unite and work together, not to divide and compete against each other.

In order to understand this on a pragmatic level, they can be made part of a team to care for other humans, animals, or insects; grow shared crop in a community garden; attend events of different cultures or belief systems; or volunteer to clean up the environment; to give a few examples. Student exchange programs are a great way to get young people to understand and appreciate other cultures. Children should be allowed to learn at their own pace without being graded in relation to others.

We must train ourselves to listen to each other better, and to resolve disagreements with discussion based on mutual respect and not react rashly with hatred and aggression. Ethics, conflict resolution, etiquette, and anger management training should be part of every school's curriculum and be widely available to adults and children.

Practices such as meditation, self-reflection, and mindfulness can be made widely available to adults and children alike. Such educational opportunities can be extended to those who commit misdeeds, who work in the service industry, and public servants, to name a few. This training should not be a one-time event consisting solely of a lecture but should be part of a recurrent training program and include practical elements. Repetition is key to mastery.

Create a Balance of Powers

Earlier we mentioned an ideal society, where all of us work as a team. That is the ultimate goal, but until a grand majority of us operate at a higher level of consciousness, there is an urgent need to reform our governments. In ancient societies, leaders often had advisors to help them make decisions. These advisors were most often elders in the community who were considered experienced and wise, and they often had the authority to override the wishes of even the most powerful emperors and kings.

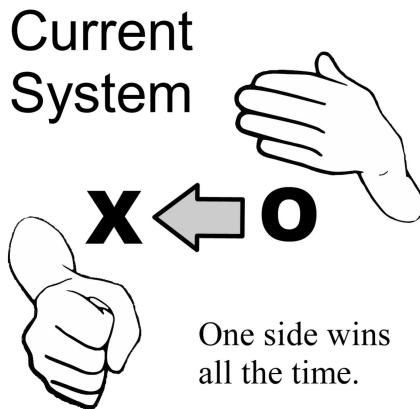
Modern-day governments have become increasingly powerful; consequently, there is an increased risk of abuse. Governments are run by people, and when unconscious people are placed in positions of power, they will inevitably abuse it. Our challenge is to reinvent governments that focus on the welfare of the general population rather than the interests and benefits of the employees who run it.

Three is a number of balance and harmony. There is a popular game called Rock-Paper-Scissors, which originated in China and eventually spread around the globe. In this game, two or more persons simultaneously make hand gestures at the count of three (or some other agreed-upon call). A closed fist represents Rock, an opened hand represents Paper, and a fist with the index and middle fingers extended

represents Scissors. The goal is to produce a symbol that would defeat those created by others.

Rock wins over Scissors since a rock can crush a pair of scissors. Paper wins over Rock since paper can cover a rock to hide it. Scissors win over Paper since scissors can cut paper. Each of the three possibilities has one symbol that will defeat it and one that it will defeat. If players produce the same symbol, it is considered a tie and is repeated for another round. This game is often used to impartially decide on an issue, similar to flipping a coin or drawing straws.

Applying this analogy to our society, we currently operate with only two options: Rock (representing citizens) and Paper (representing governments).



Governments have an unequivocal right to impose fees and restrictions upon us. If we feel that they treated us unfairly, we may sometimes be able to file grievances, but often it costs us a great amount of time, inconvenience, and expense, and we must file them with the government itself. That is the equivalent of a fox guarding the henhouse.

Even if we required ongoing ethics training for all government workers, it would be unrealistic to expect every one of them to become conscientious. There is too much temptation to put one's own interests above the interests of the community when one is given the authority to. To transform our society into a more equitable one, there must be a balancing force. We must introduce a pair of Scissors into the game.



Governments will still be responsible for managing society. The difference is, the additional entity will ensure they are doing an honest and efficient job. The entity will consist of a committee of individuals and organizations centered around the elders in communities.

This committee will assure that taxes are kept reasonable, funds are spent wisely, and grievances from the public are addressed promptly and fairly. They will have complete access to all government records as well as the right to veto or overturn decisions made by governments, if those decisions are deemed not to be in the public interest.

This committee will be run principally by concerned citizens who receive minimal or no compensation or public recognition for their contribution. The satisfaction they receive is to make the world a better place. This is the essence of the trinity. At this stage of evolution, this is how we can prevent the most unconscious among us from usurping power and using it to destroy our planet and civilization.

Such a system must be implemented through unceasing pressure from the public and by ethical politicians who see the absolute necessity for it. Note that we are not declaring war against our governments. Instead, we aim to work with them to create a better society for all.

Never Turn a Blind Eye

There is a saying, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” The reason unconscious people get away with unethical behavior is often because those around them turn a blind eye. Sometimes, it is out of fear of reprisal, being too preoccupied with our own life, not wanting to be involved, or not knowing what to do that causes us to knowingly allow unacceptable behavior by others to slip by.

Many evildoers in our society are able to get away with their actions precisely because the rest of us allow them to. To make this planet a better place, we must shift from seeing society’s problems as someone else’s to deal with to seeing them as our own. Stopping evil is not a choice; it is a duty. In this interconnected and interdependent existence, we shoulder part of the responsibility for every evil act that we turn a blind eye to.

Sometimes, it is not easy to judge when to act because we may feel it is better to mind our own business. Ask your heart, and you will know. When we feel an inner tug to take action, we must honor it. That usually is our higher wisdom calling us to duty.

If we cannot speak out publicly, we can do so anonymously. If we cannot spend the time, effort, or cost to resolve the problem alone, we can

voice our concern to those who can help. Average people committing to making the world a better place will change the course of humanity.

Organize

Many of the issues we face are so great in magnitude that one person's effort – while important – is only a drop in the bucket. There is immense power in joining forces. There are millions upon millions of humans from all walks of life who are discontented with our foolish, barbaric ways and are eager to do their part in evolving human consciousness. We must allow this process to unfold.

The Internet is a great tool. We can exchange information and collaborate with other humans, even if they live on the other side of the planet. Many people speak multiple languages nowadays, and excellent translation tools are also available. Global communication has become easier than ever. We may not know much about the persons we cross paths with, but we may know their hearts.

It may be encouraging to remind ourselves that we are not starting from scratch. There are already numerous movements across the globe to unite humanity and/or save our planet. We can enhance our efforts by organizing more efficiently, that is, by consolidating our efforts. Tiny

flames of a new consciousness are emerging everywhere. This is a good start, but for this flame to consume humanity, these countless flames must merge into one.

A word of caution is in order. In our frustration and eagerness to bring about change, we must be careful not to participate in the same evil we are hoping to overcome. This takes a significant amount of wisdom, restraint, and courage. That is because it requires us to return hate with love, evil with good, and aggression with kindness. Yes, it is not going to be easy, but that is the only way we can make true progress. Remember, our goal is not to harm those whom we perceive as evildoers; it is to awaken them.

If we are not yet prepared for that level of challenge – and many of us admittedly are not – we can do the next best thing: act with indifference. This does not mean not caring but rather not mirroring the hate, evil, or aggression that may be directed our way. Of course, we have the right to defend ourselves against violence, but we must act with restraint and not become the aggressor.

A sense of humor can sometimes be a powerful weapon. It can break the ice in tense situations or dissipate anger. If you attempt to use it, do so skillfully. Make sure you are laughing with others and not *at* them. And be careful not to overdo it, lest one may take you for a fool.

Evil forces are aware of the power of organization. That is why they try to divide us using the media and other means. By getting us preoccupied with hating one another, they are able to take the attention off of themselves and further their agenda. We must constantly keep this in the back of our minds.

Uniting people of different cultures, backgrounds, and viewpoints is not an easy task. Even those who have similar goals will inevitably have disagreements from time to time. This is where our power of discernment comes into play. If we can set aside our egoistic desire to be right, we will realize that our differences are meant to enrich us to make us stronger, rather than divide us to make us weaker.

Spread the Wave

Energy spreads in waves. We must create waves of higher consciousness that spread all across our planet. The bigger the waves, the more effective. We must create waves so enormous that they have the force to catapult even the worst evildoers into the Light.

As prophesied by ancient seers, we are now at a pivotal moment in human history. Our collective karma depends on the sum of our actions. Each of us must do our part to transform human consciousness. An

important part of this is becoming a messenger. Every soul who resonates with this calling is encouraged to share it.

An effective way to share information is to pass it on freely. To aid in the task, an electronic version of this book is available on the Internet for little or no cost. Please search for the title at your favorite online bookstore and gift it to as many people as possible. Print copies are also available. Proceeds from the printed version as well as donations are used to help make this global transformation a reality.

There are many unconscious humans among us, but there are also many highly conscious ones. Imagine the incredible things we can achieve if we combine our hearts and energies. Like major surgery, this transition will not be easy. It will involve pain, uncertainty, and a long recovery period. But, like surgery, we do it to restore health to our seriously diseased existence. Let us be courageous and steadfast in our mission to bring Light to humanity.

The greatest strength is gentleness. – Iroquois Proverb

Chapter Thirty-Five

How to Surrender



Let us go back to one of the Ten Enhancements mentioned earlier: surrender. For some of us, the word “surrender” may carry a negative connotation. It may imply a defeat or loss of control. Yet, the act of surrendering is a necessary step in our evolutionary process. What exactly does it mean to surrender?

Before answering this question, let us think about happiness. Happiness is our natural state. If we are not happy, it means there are obstacles preventing us from being happy. Thus, to experience happiness, we must remove those obstacles.

The process of attaining happiness is much like that of a sculptor

creating a statue. We start out with a nondescript block. Within the inherent limitations of that block – such as its shape, size, and color – we are to create our masterpiece. We achieve this not by adding more pieces to the block but by removing the right pieces.

Life is not about acquiring; it is about losing. The more we manage to lose in our lifetime, the more we gain. Understanding this paradox will eventually lead us to spiritual liberation. Rather than awkwardly attempting to explain what it is to surrender, we shall enjoy a heartwarming story of a woman who did just that:

Patty was a petite, bespectacled woman with graying hair who worked as a counter clerk at a post office. She was extremely popular with customers. While waiting in line, people would often allow the person behind to go ahead of them just so they could have Patty handle their business.

She would greet each customer with a big smile and ask in a friendly manner, “Hi, how can I help you today?” She made an effort to remember the names of regular customers and call them by their name. She would offer helpful suggestions on how they could save on postage, help them repack their shipping box when it wasn’t quite right, or go out of her way to resolve their concerns. She often joked or made small talk with

customers and tried to learn something new about them as she did her job. Nothing was too much trouble for Patty.

At the end of each transaction, she said with a warm smile, “Thank you. Have yourself a wonderful day” or “I hope to see you again soon.” During the holiday season, she wished people happy holidays. She smiled and waved at children and also tried to remember their names.

Her work ethic was impeccable. She always arrived at work at least 10 minutes early and rarely took time off. She tried to be pleasant and kind to co-workers as well. Once, a co-worker asked Patty how she was able to remain so cheerful and good-natured each day, even when faced with stressful situations. He asked if she had always been that positive. “No,” she replied, and went on to tell her story:

I started out complaining about the most trivial things, like many of our colleagues do now. I had this superiority complex for working in a government job and treated customers as a pain in the rear. When I was not in a good mood, I would be rude or intentionally make things difficult for them. And to be honest, I didn't enjoy my job.

Then one day, I learned that I had cancer. The emotional ups

and downs I went through during those times and facing the possibility of dying changed something in me. I discovered I had a choice to be happy, as well as a choice to make others happy.

During my darkest moments, I promised myself that I would put my heart into everything I did from that moment on, and if I were ever able to return to work, I would enjoy my job and be nice to customers. Fortunately, I was given a second chance. I realized that the problem was not the job, my colleagues, or customers; it was me.

It took a while to complete the transformation and become who I am today, but I succeeded. In the process, I have managed to become the happiest human on the planet!

A personal tragedy has a way of transforming us. It was a great accomplishment on Patty's part, however, there was nothing extraordinary about her. All she did was make a conscious decision to turn her life around and put that decision into action. Any of us can decide to do this, at any moment. We do not have to wait for tragedy to give us a wake-up call.

Some studies estimate that the average person spends 90,000 hours, or over ten full years of their life, at their job. That is a considerable chunk of

a person's life. Imagine what a difference it would make if we spent those hours doing something we truly loved and could pour our heart into. Imagine how much of a positive difference we could make in the lives of others ... and our own.

Saint Teresa of Calcutta wrote, "Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love." Imagine all the lives Patty touched in a small way by simply changing her attitude. She is the first to admit that the transition did not happen overnight. Habits take time to correct, especially as we become older and more set in our ways. But as in her example, anything is possible with determination and effort.

So, what did Patty surrender to in order to become happy? She was not a religious woman. She had never attended church or followed any particular spiritual tradition. When we talk about the object of our surrender, many of us think in terms of God, prophets, ancestral spirits, gurus, and such. However, it is not necessary to choose an entity or entities. What name we refer to "it" by makes no difference.

What keeps most of us from surrendering is what we mentioned earlier: the idea that surrendering is a weakness, and that it is about losing power and opening oneself to being taken advantage of. There is nothing further from the truth. The ego's illusions keep us in a state where we feel

we must remain in control and always have the upper hand. Understanding what true surrender is will allow us to transform with minimal resistance.

Surrender is a process of deliberately abandoning one state of consciousness to enter another, higher one. You will recognize it when you experience it. For Patty in the story just mentioned, it was a serious illness that triggered the spiritual “death” of her old self and “birth” of her new self. If we were to describe what she experienced, we may say that she surrendered to her divine or true nature.

For those who struggle with the concept of surrendering, we can try to be more like Patty. Humanity is in desperate need of more Pattys. It does not matter what we do to earn a living. It makes no difference whether we wait tables, clean offices, or dig ditches for a living or whether we are the CEO of a multi-billion dollar company, a world-renowned scientist, or a high-ranking politician. Imagine what change we can each bring to the table if we put our heart into whatever we did.

Surrender is the first gateway to spiritual enlightenment. The battle one must win is not against others; it is against oneself.

If we never try, we shall never succeed. – Abraham Lincoln

Chapter Thirty-Six

Our Future



We are living in an amazing time. We bear witness as science and spirituality begin to converge. We see spirituality become less dependent on blind faith, and science resign itself to the higher truth of the eternal soul. It is an amazing time but also a time full of challenges. To use an analogy, we are in a position much like a wild animal cornered by a predator and forced to make a do-or-die decision.

In this brief contemplative journey that we embarked on together, we candidly examined the human condition, evaluated our weaknesses, and thought of ways to overcome them. Some of us may have posed the question somewhere along the line: “As dire as the situation has become, is it still possible to save humanity and our planet?” Let us allow nature to

answer this question.

The material world operates in cycles. When spring arrives, nature awakens. Animals come out of hibernation, trees put on new leaves, and insects come to life. By summer, nature is in full bloom. Animals give birth and raise their young, trees put on flowers and fruit, and insects thrive and multiply.

When fall arrives, things begin to wind down. Animals prepare for the winter, trees drop their leaves, and insects slowly disappear. When winter comes, everything seems to go dormant. It may appear as if the game is over, but when the next spring arrives, the cycle begins all over again.

It is thus with the day-and-night cycle. A fresh new day begins with the rising of the sun. The sun reaches its peak at midday, slowly sets, and then disappears out of sight by the end of the day. Everything seems to come to an end, only to repeat with the rising of the sun the following day. This is one of the Sacred Laws of nature in motion.

The human being, and any material being for that matter, follows this cycle of birth, growth, maturity, decline, and death. Even rivers and mountains follow this cycle, albeit at a much slower pace. This cycle also applies to civilizations, as civilizations belong to the material world. When

asking if it is possible to save humanity and our planet, we need to clarify what part we hope to save and why.

Our shared reality – which we call “civilization” – is currently in the early stages of death, analogous to the onset of winter. Similar to civilizations of the past, it will eventually reach its conclusion. While we cannot prevent its inevitable end, we can influence *how* it will end.

We can continue with our unconscious ways until we destroy each other and other inhabitants of this beautiful planet, or we can consciously abandon the disaster we have created and build a new and improved civilization. At any moment, we have the free will to make that choice.

The term “abandon” is important here. Dead leaves will naturally fall from a tree to make room for new ones. A snake will naturally shed its old skin as its body grows. When the usefulness of something ends, nature has a way of releasing it. Our current civilization has served a purpose in our evolution. It is time to let it fall and let a new one take its place.

“Abandon” does not mean to toss out everything we have accomplished over the ages and start from scratch. That is neither possible nor desirable. There is an old German proverb, “Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater.” In our eagerness to make quick and drastic changes,

we must be careful not to haphazardly discard pieces of our current civilization that may serve a useful purpose.

Progress is about applying lessons from our past to create a better future. Our task is to figure out what works and what doesn't, utilizing this knowledge to construct something greater. In essence, we engage in "selective abandonment," discarding what is flawed while retaining what is beneficial.

A major challenge is to overhaul our governments. Governments run unconsciously can destroy the lives of millions of innocent people, as we have repeatedly seen throughout history. Instead of declaring war on our governments however, we must find ways to get their cooperation in resolving our issues.

For their part, government workers must fulfill their role as public servants. It is their duty to diligently listen and work to resolve issues instead of using threats or sending in law enforcers to forcibly silence people. An open dialog based on mutual respect is necessary to get governments and citizens to work together. The elders and wise in the community must be the bridge to mediate the two sides so that they do not regress into their unconscious habits.

It will take enormous effort to get enough of us to see the Light, accept the torch, and lead the way. Humans are creatures of habit. We are also creatures of skepticism and procrastination. We do not like to make drastic changes, even when we feel they may be for the better. We like to put off painful or difficult decisions, often until it becomes too late to act. Our future depends on us not succumbing to these weaknesses.

Even after recognizing the dire need for change, some of us will choose to do nothing. That is okay. It would be unrealistic to expect all of us to take action. The good news is, not everyone has to participate. It only takes ten percent of us to commit to doing our part to trigger a global shift in consciousness.

Our goal is not to win the battle between good and evil. Good and evil are two facets of the same coin and will forever coexist. Our aim, rather, is to elevate human consciousness enough to halt our self-destructive behavior and learn to love and respect one another, imperfections and all. Evolution is an ongoing process.

As mentioned earlier, heaven is not a place that we go to; it is a state that we manifest. We have the power to manifest that state here and now, while still occupying a physical body, if we so decide. Whether or not we succeed in transforming human consciousness depends on how well we

follow – and help others follow – the Ten Enhancements.

Humanity stands on the brink of its ultimate challenge. It is imperative that we do not fail for our own sake as well as for all entities that depend on us. There are no true adversaries, only perceived ones. Those whom we label as enemies are in fact, undiscovered sisters and brothers. Understanding this Divine Truth is pivotal for the survival of our species and planet.

The wheels of change are already turning. The fire is burning brighter with each passing moment. All across Earth, humans are awakening. Each of us has been given an opportunity to play a role in deciding our future. Higher forces are inviting you to join the team.

This is our moment. Sacred souls, arise!

*You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope someday
you'll join us, and the world will be as one. – John Lennon*

Final Thought

Life is a game. Games are only worth playing if we have a chance at winning. So, what should you do if you realized you were playing a game with no chance of winning? You quit playing, naturally.

At the moment, humanity is playing a losing game. We continue to play it because it is the only game we know. If you got anything out of this writing, hopefully it is the conviction that we have another choice available to us. And hopefully, it gave you the courage and determination to try out a new game: one in which everyone wins.

Whether you agree with every idea in this book or not is of no importance. The point was not to convince anyone of anything, but to encourage us to question our beliefs and see through our own self-deception. One must first identify a problem in order to solve it.

As you may have noticed, this writing incorporates a patchwork of wisdom – old and new – from around the world. The author simply served as a transcriber who tried to combine them in a way that a maximum number of people can relate to, independent of their cultural, religious or educational background. Illustrations were included for visual impact.

We may all have different opinions or beliefs, but our essence is the same. There is only one humanity. To change the consciousness of an entire species is no easy task. At the same time, we have seen how quickly a wildfire can spread with only a single spark when conditions are ideal.

At this moment, conditions are ideal for a shift in human consciousness. Let us seize this opportunity and make it happen. Your contribution is essential in our global transformation. Yes, *you* matter.

As difficult and painful as this endeavor will be, we must keep in mind the alternative. Making peace with perceived enemies is better than attempting to destroy them and them destroying us. Let this knowledge be our motivating force, as we move forward with this monumental challenge.

Early on in our contemplative journey, we considered the importance of setting a destination. As material beings, our destination is to find

fulfillment by adjusting the reality that we co-exist in, while our destination as spiritual beings is enlightenment, or to experience the Light. Our struggles in the material world serve as a tool to evolve our soul.

Enlightenment is a synonym for love. Individualized souls materialize on Earth in human form to learn how to love. Love is our natural state, and any deviation from that state is what causes us to suffer. If only ten percent of us can comprehend this Truth at a profound level and start living in accordance with Sacred Law, we can consciously transform our world.

Throughout this writing, parables and short stories have been used to stress a point. As fuel to propel us into this new challenge, let us conclude with a story by Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard called “A Little Town of Ducks”:

Once upon a time, there was a little town of ducks. Every Sunday morning, the ducks would waddle out of their houses and head down Main Street to church. They waddled into the sanctuary and sat in their pews. The duck choir waddled in and sang, and the duck minister waddled forward and shared a teaching from the duck Bible.

With great enthusiasm, he would preach: “Ducks! God has given you wings! With wings, you can fly! With wings, you can soar like eagles. No walls can confine you! No fences can hold you! You have wings. You can all fly like the birds you truly are!” All the ducks excitedly shouted, “Amen!”

...and when the sermon was over, they all waddled back home.

Let us not close this book thinking it was a good read, then put it out of our mind. Let us take the next step. If we are alive, it means that we still have work to do. Let us learn together, work together, laugh and cry together, love together, and grow together. We can do this. Let us begin this new era with a warm Gaelic salute, Céad míle fáilte (100 thousand welcomes).

The author and team welcome your comments and can be reached at anamikos@11rise.net. Or, visit www.11rise.net to connect with the movement and stay informed.

11TH HOUR AWAKENING

An Evolutionary Guide to a New Humanity

Planet Earth is in dire trouble. Somehow, somewhere along the way, humanity took a wrong turn, and now we are in a downward spiral of self-destruction. Are we doomed, or is there still hope for saving our planet and humanity?

11th Hour Awakening is a frank and profound look at humanity as a whole and ourselves as individuals who form a complex interdependent reality. It pinpoints what our issues are and how we must – individually and collectively – overcome the multitude of challenges that we are now facing, before we run out of time.

“What must we do so that a maximum number of us can be happy?”

The book attempts to answer this question by presenting a modernized version of the Ten Commandments. The reader will be entertained with light-hearted stories depicting human nature, be invited to re-evaluate their own ingrained beliefs, only to be shaken to the core in the end. The time for a wake-up call to humanity is now!

