

# Blick und Einblick

The 'look' of Being: Martin Heidegger

by: Douglas Lockhart

*It is, at heart, a question of the approach to the feeling of presence – the strange and yet so intimate sensation of closeness, always lost, always near – ‘eternal generation’, if one dare adopt the expression of Meister Eckhart. According to a holy hadith transmitted by the Prophet . . . this work of ‘becoming aware with all one’s presence’ needs always to be renewed.<sup>1</sup>*

Jacques Choisnel

*An Unfinished Creation*

## Two Christianities

In Christianity’s scheme of self-awareness, the individual has a moral role to play, but no actual say in the salvation process as promised by the Church – salvation is a gift, it is not something we achieve. Yes, there is a decision to be made in this regard, but it is one of abdication to a greater power, namely, Jesus in his role as propitious sacrifice. It is Jesus who saves us from ourselves, Jesus who helps us fend off evil, Jesus who stands between us and the God who would otherwise do us harm because of our daily sins *and* our inherited, sinful nature. The Church is adamant about this sinful nature and has been so for many centuries: we are powerless in ourselves to bring about intrinsic moral change, and that is what the puzzle of salvation through faith in Jesus is all about. Above all, it is about being good. Without Jesus we are doomed to fail because we are morally deficient by way of disposition. If you’re not “good”, God doesn’t want you.

But there are now two distinctly different versions of the Christian faith in operation, and I’m not referring to the difference between Catholic and Protestant theologies. I’m referring to the conservative and liberal camps on both sides of the theological divide, camps in deep disagreement with one another. The conservatives believe in the Jesus story as it has come down to us, the liberals in a greatly modified version of that story. The conservatives continue to view Jesus as the transcendent God’s son physically present in the 1st century, the liberals as an extraordinary human being who tried to radically modify the religious perceptions of his time. To the conservative mind Jesus is un-supersedable (there has never

been anyone like him on the planet); to the liberal mind he is an individual of great spiritual potency who made an indelible impression on those who encountered him.

This is of course a simplified version of what is actually the case; there are in fact numerous conservative and liberal camps, each with a view of Jesus that is subtly different from the others, but the above differentiation holds reasonably well when discussing the more extreme approaches to Jesus' life and intentions. In this light it is important to recognize why one might think being aware of one's own awareness is an act of little consequence. Accept the conservative viewpoint and there is little reason to think we have anything to do outside of being good and believing what we're told to believe. Accept the liberal viewpoint and things are not quite so straightforward.

And again we have two camps: the liberal Christian and the non-Christian. The difference this time is that unlike conservative Christians, liberal Christians and non-Christians of sensibility shoulder their moral responsibilities not for fear of God's wrath, but because they want to better relate to their societies, and to one another – the idea of a God capable of punishing an individual for all eternity is simply too absurd a notion for either party to take seriously. The idea of God being in some sense there probably persists for many liberal Christians, but he has undergone a transformation. He is no longer the ogre in the sky from whom Jesus has to protect us; he is that within which everything manifest moves and *has its being*. The old theistic conception of God as a someone who interferes in human history has evaporated for most liberals; he has been jettisoned along with the mythologies that have grown up around this problematical idea.

Some liberal Christians go so far as to question the idea of God altogether; they turn into Christian humanists for whom Christ's extraordinary humanity is the greater revelation. But a paradigm shift may not be enough in itself; advances of liberal thought over conservative thought may not be sufficient to save us from our wayward selves. Christianity has had its chance and failed, not because of evil forces overpowering the human mind, or because no one took its message seriously, but because it came to depend on inadequate historical conclusions about Jesus' life and intentions. This set of conclusions has inadvertently helped keep us consciously unconscious, and in doing so they have all but shorn us of the capacity to wake up to that uncomfortable fact.

What has to be admitted, however, is that secularism in the West (that which informs Christian liberalism) has also failed spectacularly on many fronts, and that in spite of the obvious gains had from a robust science and an equally robust democratic system. What we've done is taken the idea of personal freedom and all but tested it to destruction, our desire for equality and fairness creating a situation

where just about anything is permissible. And all in the name of rights for the individual, a worthy notion that has backfired to the extent that unscrupulous individuals have used it for dubious ends. The individual has rights and ought to have them, but when those rights inadvertently tear at the heart of a society and systematically disable its capacity for self-reflection, then something is surely amiss. And so we try to rectify the imbalance with an injection of conservative Christianity, or with theories of ethics, or with mild censorship, and when things get totally out of hand we bring in the police, the doctor or the psychiatrist. It's all a bit of a muddle, and it's becoming more and more muddled by the minute. As an integral part of this mix, Christian liberalism too finds itself headed for trouble, its critical stance with regards to long-accepted Christian doctrine often leading its exponents to express a form of Christian atheism, a late apology for theological excesses that also tend towards the extreme. In a homily, Origen addresses our deep-seated collective problem when he says: "One is not able to offer vows to the Most High without having in oneself, in one's substance, something to offer."<sup>2</sup>

This brings us full circle in terms of conservative Christianity's claim that we fail *because* our natures are oriented towards evil, not because of honestly made mistakes. And so we shuffle backwards and forwards between rejecting conservative Christianity's sillier notions and enlisting its services when threatened by social upheaval. It's a game we play, and it leaves people deeply confused and bemused. Add to this the possibility of terrorist attack, backgrounding wars that are draining the West's resources, and the erosion of our financial institutions through unbridled greed, and you have a recipe for potential psychic disaster on a massive scale.

But there is at the heart of Christianity a clear recognition of our dilemma. There was once a central doctrine dealing with the manner in which we relate to ourselves on the moral level. And not just in the sense of our being good because that's what God wants, but in the sense of a carefully constructed discipline of mind leading to a gradual transformation of the mind. Christianity's preoccupation with moral issues has therefore a different theoretical base from the one generally supposed; it is not about goodness, it is about *a raising of conscious awareness by way of acts that help sustain our level of awareness at a high level.*

An intriguing verse in the Epistle of James seems to touch on this issue: "For he (man) beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgeteth what manner of man he was."<sup>3</sup> Has any modern-day Christian preacher ever paused to ask him or herself what these words actually mean? A verse such as this would, I imagine, be made into a homily and interpreted as having something to do with our falling again and again into sin, but it could equally have to do with our habit of becoming lost to self as we go about our daily business. We are all in the same boat. Being Christian makes not one whit of difference to the situation we find

ourselves in. Whether Christian or atheist, we are caught in an identical conceptual/perceptual trap.

The fact that James was Jesus' flesh-and-blood brother is conveniently overlooked by most Christian scholars. His epistle is placed in the too-hard basket because of the theological problems it contains; it does not fit neatly into the New Testament canon. In fact it was rejected by many of the early Christian Fathers because of its strong Jewish overtones. James is seen as placing too great an emphasis on works; he sounds more like a law-bedraggled Pharisee than a follower of the Pauline Christ. Why is this so? It is so because James was not a follower of the Pauline Christ as he is now understood; he was a devout Jew and leader of the 1st century Nazoraean sect in Jerusalem called The Way, a desert-based offshoot of Judaism at loggerheads with St. Paul over the question of faith taking precedence over works. This historical fact is interpreted by Christian scholars as the Jerusalem Church of the Apostles falling back into Judaism's law-driven conception of the religious life, but the situation was much more complex than that. The Apostolic Church in Jerusalem led by James did not fall back into orthodox Judaism; it never at any time ceased in its close affiliation with Jewish orthodoxy. As a Jewish sect traveling parallel to Judaism, the Nazoraeans just happened to nominate someone as the Messiah of Israel that orthodox Judaism did not accept, and after the Roman invasion of Judea in 66 they found themselves hated by Jews, Romans and Paul's Christians alike. James would have had immense difficulty in perceiving his older brother as an aspect of Israel's transcendent God packed into a human body. The anointed, priestly Messiah of Israel, yes, that would have made perfect sense to this ascetic Jew, but not a being consubstantial with Israel's God as would be proposed by the 4th century Council of Nicea. That, as James' rejection of Paul's more adventurous theology of the "Christ" shows, would have been too much for this highly respected Nazoraean leader to swallow. It was James, after all, who tricked Paul into taking Nazarite vows in the temple, an act that saw Paul attacked by devout Jews for the dangerous literalisms he had allowed to accrue around the figure of Jesus.

What James believed about his brother Jesus was not at all the same as what Paul believed about the same man – they held what appear to have been divergent theologies. Or maybe it was just that Paul the maverick theologian developed a strain of theology in which there were two levels, one for the pagan mind familiar with the idea of men being gods, and one for the more discerning pagan mind capable of seeing his enigmatic Christ-consciousness as an advanced mental condition in the Platonic mold. He did after all speak of "milk" and "meat" in terms of his teachings, and that suggests exoteric and esoteric levels of instruction. This perhaps explains how James and Paul were able to put up with each other's company in the early days; they were experimenting with a teaching with astonishing ramifications, a discipline of mind that in their separate hands took on

different forms of expression. There was no secret teaching as such, but there were levels of sophistication within what James and Paul taught about Jesus that only later ceased to gel. The faith grounded in Jesus' teachings was, in essence, a progressive revelation in the sense that each individual traveled the route of *apatheia* ("works" as a discipline of mind); it was not, as it later became, a rote formula of beliefs *about* Jesus intoned prior to baptism. As Paul himself intimated, being a Christian could be equated with "the pains of childbirth" whereby a different order of self was born, *a new self with a new mind*. In these terms it is I think fair to suggest that the more demanding levels of *apatheia* were later mistakenly identified by the evolving Church as Gnostic-influenced extensions of Christian teaching and outlawed – the faith's original insights, dynamic and life-transforming, were transformed into a grocery list of beliefs that one either accepted or rejected. Christianity had turned into a language-driven religion, a religion of the word where a simple mistake in interpretation could rob you of your life, the idea of a progressive revelation changed into an excuse for the development of an elaborate theology around Jesus as vicarious sacrifice.

### **Excavating Our Foundations**

Where does this leave us? It leaves us with "unconscious Christianity", a Christianity that often hinders even as it attempts to help. It is, as the French writer Alain Forget says in his incisive little book *How To Get Out of This World Alive*,<sup>4</sup> a game of cosmic hide and seek that has to be seen through for what it is – an illusion, a lantern show of the mind. Highly complex in structure and ever changing in what it generates, this mental show, or flow, is run not by some grand central self, but by elements of psyche congregated around an idea of self that sustains the illusion of there being a continuous self, a self that is always the same. Alas, that is not the case. This helpful illusion is created out of conditioned psychic tendencies reinforced by emotional energy released in the psyche in response to life events. These tendencies (complexes) are recognized by us as facets of the self, personality traits that we exhibit under certain circumstances, but they could also be psychic elements that take on a life of their own and become autonomous. Strutting their stuff before an audience of similarly autonomous self-bits named "friend" or "foe", they strive for dominance, and, depending on what underpins them, may succeed in collaring most of the psyche's available energy. At the mercy of such elements, we veer this way and that in our responses, our dominant mode of response governing how we are perceived by others.

In James Hillman's psychological scheme, our idea of 'complexes' mirror the ancient Greek gods, but do not fulfill their psychological purpose. Hillman's reasoning is that it is easier to relate to a "being" than it is to an abstract idea.<sup>5</sup> An aggression complex does not carry the same force as Mars, god of war; it robs our psychology of useful anthropomorphisms. If, when uncontrollably angry, we think

of ourselves as having turned into Mars, the god of war (or Mrs. Mars), awareness of our mental condition will be much more direct. Multiply this effect by way of the Greek pantheon's colorful inhabitants and our relationship to self (psyche) will take on a quality of awareness our 'complexes' fail to provide. Alain Forget picks up on this train of thought in the writings of Meister Eckhart:

Man has within him numerous skins which cover the Depths of his heart. Man knows so many things but does not know himself! Ah! Thirty or forty skins just like those of an ox or a bear cover the soul. You should therefore excavate your foundations and learn to know yourself.<sup>6</sup>

The idea of “excavating our foundations” is a challenge we cannot afford to ignore; it confronts us with how little we know about ourselves. Socrates' injunction “Know thy self” becomes a psychic imperative in this context, but not in the sense generally understood. Socrates (or Solon) may have had more than a psychological understanding of the conscious self in mind when he coined his famous phrase. Psychology has its place, as have all the disciplines that assist us to think clearly, relate sensitively and know our world objectively. But we also need to develop a capacity for empathic judgment (evaluative feeling), and that comes not through cerebral juggling but through an immediate and ongoing apprehension of our *being in existence*.<sup>7</sup> But “being in existence” is no easy thing to detect, it makes unusual demands on us. One such demand is to observe the constant parade of psychic bits that take to the stage and demand attention. We are not one grand, majestic self-ruling psyche, we are, as the ancient Greeks saw only too clearly and Meister Eckhart confirms, a conglomerate of psychic bits (skins) each with its own distinct attributes (ox or bear), each with its own emotional and intellectual agenda. Hence Eckhart's notion of “eternal generation”; staying awake is an “intimate sensation of closeness” that constantly slips away from us and has to be renewed. What we need is the will to will ourselves awake, but that seems to be beyond our reach due to the nature of perception and our reliance on conceptual frameworks. We simply don't realize that there is a problem. Our time is taken up with defending our personality bits as they flare in and out of existence in response to circumstances, the deeper needs of our nature being neglected due to the frenzy of activity we're engaged in.

### **Three Progressive Levels of Interaction with Self**

Waking up into the presence of one's self as a psychophysical being is an achievement of profound significance. That is level one. Waking up into the presence of one's self as a psychophysical being and attempting to sustain the experience is an achievement the consequences of which only slowly begin to dawn on us. That is level two. Waking up into the presence of self as a

psychophysical being and sustaining that experience for longish periods over a course of weeks, months or years, is an achievement of such profound significance it changes forever how we perceive self, other and world. That is level three. Curiosity sets level one in motion. Deepening curiosity sets level two in motion. Curiosity blended with a growing sense of wonder sets level three in motion. Why wonder? Because by the time we get to level three we know that self, other and world as experienced when awake are radically different from the experience of self when mentally submerged and engaged. We are much more than we seem, much less that we hoped we were.

The first thing to dawn on us as we wake up to our condition is that the difference between being awake and not being awake is so subtle that the two states are sometimes indistinguishable. Awake one minute, we are mentally engaged the next and oblivious to the fact that we are again submerged and *lost to self*. Particularly when thinking about being awake during our attempts to sustain the awake condition. In fact this is the mind's tricky response to the sensation of waking up – it is the mechanistic level of mind pulling us back into line. This is of course to raise the issue of our hardwired instinct for survival, an instinct closely aligned with ego in terms of self-preservation – we sense that to wake up in this fashion somehow threatens the self-orienting principle in psyche. We've survived extraordinarily well using the mind we've got, so why tamper with it? It's such a waste of time and energy trying to be awake in this extended sense; it disrupts mental coherence, produces unusual physical sensations and robs us of the ability to think. But that's not all. It also threatens the inner voice that helps hold our sense of personal identity in place. And so we give in, the pressure of our sensory systems and our cultural conditioning generally proving too strong to counteract.

There are of course compensations in failing in our attempts to stay awake and aware. As the mind moves towards the awake state, the state of our becoming more real to ourselves, the unconscious springs into action with what are often highly original insights into whatever had previously engaged the mind's attention. Out of nowhere they come, ideas pushing other ideas out of the way in a flurry we find difficult to ignore. If engaged in a project that requires fresh input, this freewheeling state of mind will prove very useful, but if intent on waking up as an act in itself, then it is no more than a distraction. This is the creative space where *flotillas of meaning come across the horizon of consciousness that should not be intercepted too soon*, but in this context it is a space superfluous to our needs. It does, however, reveal something important about the mind and its workings: a concerted effort to switch thought off can open us up to the experience of being intercepted by the sensation of *significant meaning*. Here then is the font of creativity sought by so many, the inspired space of a Coleridge or a Kekulé that with practice can be initiated at will. Disengagement, not engagement, is the secret of creative thought. We are at our creative best when mentally freewheeling.

Our unease with being ultra-aware of ourselves probably stems from the adolescent experience of becoming self-conscious – that is, ungainly and tongue-tied in our interactions with the world, and with the opposite sex. But this is to misunderstand what being fundamentally awake means as an experience. Awareness of one’s own awareness is only half of the proposition; the other half is that we are simultaneously aware of objects, thoughts, sensations or actions. It is not a matter of our being aware of ourselves in isolation; it is a matter of our being balanced on the knife’s edge between awareness of self and what is observed. It is a subtle mental balancing act where both self and world are registering, but neither has usurped the conscious field. That is not self-consciousness as it is normally understood; it is an entirely new condition of mind that can be systematically developed. And neither is it “consciousness *of*” in the usual sense of awareness; it is “consciousness *as*”, a form of awareness within which there is in fact no *content hook*. Thinking shudders to a halt in such a moment, as does identification with what is being observed. We are momentarily free of our submerged mental state and can, when we inadvertently slip out of it, re-establish it again when awake to what has happened.

### **The Generating of Mental Phenomena**

The above observations return us to a problem that plagues contemplative and/or meditative experience in the major religious traditions, namely, visions that seem to confirm and support doctrinal formulas. As the saying goes: “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.” That is sound advice. We should chase Christ out of our minds until we are willing to pursue Christ into the core of being. The contemplative/meditator’s job is to *penetrate the outward sheath to the core of the holy symbol*. Everything has to go, and that includes theological constructions attached to the living, breathing person that was Jesus.

Throughout Christianity’s long history the Church has been ultra-careful in the way it handled mystic pronouncements, for these formulations of religious reality often tended to exceed the bounds of what the faithful had been taught to expect. There was sometimes a disturbing level of ambiguity in how mystic consciousness conceived God, and, more importantly, how Jesus the flesh and blood man related to that God. In this vein Meister Eckhart found himself accused of heresy, as did many another, and in our own time the Carmelite nun Bernadette Roberts has found herself similarly judged.

But there are of course those who do not rock the doctrinal boat, those whose visions confirm the expected doctrinal elements in visual or auditory form, devout souls who report exactly what the Church expects to hear from its cosmic travelers. So the question is this: What, in the final analysis, is the difference between this set of travelers and those whose reports cause consternation to

Church authorities? Why the discrepancy? The answer isn't all that surprising; it depends on how, and in what, we invest the energy of attention. Thought, like everything else in existence, *is* energy. Thought drives the engine of the mind and helps sustain the illusion of personal identity through inner dialogue, rumination, memory replay and dominant methods of response. Direct one's thoughts in a particular direction and memory will respond with associations that correspond to our beliefs, hopes, needs and ambitions. If deeply religious in the Christian sense, we will reinforce our religious bent through reading and prayer, and if inclined towards contemplative prayer (inner silence) may even experience a vision or two. Conversely, to penetrate beyond the safety barrier of belief is to experience phenomena that systematically unravel previously held religious convictions, for when the silence thickens and the ego's interfering fingers can no longer move, a quite different set of possibilities form on the horizon of consciousness. And so we have an Eckhart and a Roberts, contemplatives who pursued their faith into the depths of being and returned with, well, not quite what they either hoped for or expected. Going beyond the conscious mind's preoccupations they touched, through a spiraling inwardness, the core of their own psychophysical reality. Not many make such a daring journey; it takes a degree of tenacity and courage few of us are able to muster. For according to authoritative reports it entails a systematic dismantling of the ego and its bits, and that, as it begins to unfold, is enough to drive most explorers back into the safety zone of doctrinal certainty.

### **The Route of Philosophy**

Given the obstacles lying between us and our psychophysical core, is it any wonder so few ever make the attempt? But reach it some do, and in doing so they help redefine whole areas of the mind presently under investigation. And no more so than the idea of consciousness itself, a concept now being carefully examined in both philosophy and psychology. Not so the word "conscious", however; we all seem to agree that when awake we are in fact conscious and not unconscious, for how else could we function? We talk and eat and do things and that signals that we are awake and not asleep. But of course it doesn't really; for as we discover through careful observation, our engagement with thought signals a self so busy in its submerged state that it loses all cognizance of its own immediate reality. It is, in a sense, asleep with its eyes wide open, and only occasional surfaces from its activity-filled slumber.

That philosophy is an alternative route to the contemplative's waking up to what waking up means would be refuted by some, but such a route does seem to exist. Philosophy, if it is fully engaged and has evolved a suitable language, cannot help but deal with the embeddedness of self in the world as an experience; but it seems to be only a certain kind of philosophical thinking that can function as a conduit for experiences generally considered to be religious in nature. We exist in time and

space. The question is, to what extent do we exist in time and space?

The literary critic George Steiner carefully defines our situation in his study of Martin Heidegger's philosophy, and the problem that arises in relation to philosophy when he says: "A philosophy that abstracts, that seeks to elevate itself above the everydayness of the everyday, is empty. It can tell us nothing of the meaning of being."<sup>8</sup> We have to excavate ourselves properly (Eckhart), and that requires a descent into being, an actualizing of what we are through an expansion of everyday awareness. Only a philosophy carrying a suitably developed language can assist us in this task, and that requires a language within which "being" as a question is made available to us beyond the sterilities of verbal abstraction. So in a sense we're back with poetry, to a form of language that transcends language, to a use of words so sensitively constructed they carry us into the very presence of ourselves as an experience. Sustain this question of questions over weeks, months or years, and the result will be a spiraling inwardness that gradually carries far beyond language.

But what of the religiously-minded person who prays ardently and allows him or herself to sink ecstatically towards the core of being? What of them? Why are their certainties, their intuitions, their visions and auditions thought by some to be problematical? Is it just a matter of the viewpoint held? Is the *via positiva* ultimately no different from the *via negativa*? The answer to this question carries us back to the manner in which we invest the energy of attention. Content-filled meditations are not just the other side of the contemplative coin as experienced by an Eckhart or a Roberts; they are often what allows the conscious mind *to continue in its submerged and engaged state* if the experience is a projection formed from religious need rather than an archetypal formation in its own right. Minds tethered emotionally and doctrinally to aspects of the fixed religious canon are apt to create their own experiences, the archetypal formations (images, sounds, etc) that preface *via negativa* experiences (over months and years) being experiences beyond the ego's ability to approach directly, or get hooked on. A kind of ritual circling is required, a non-looking looking that allows the looker to see without actually seeing. Attempt to look directly at an archetypal formation and it immediately vanishes – Hades (one's own limitless depth) cannot be looked at directly – the ego would disintegrate if that happened; it simply couldn't process the unimaginable volume of information available.

Archetypal formations are composed of energy belonging to the psychophysical system, an energy that either presents itself as an experience of one's own body in the sense of physiological processes *viewed from the inside*, or as encounters with psyche itself in terms of what drives the whole psychophysical vehicle. This is to say that what often passes for mystical experience is no more than a journeying into the body's networks that so astonishes the psychically anaesthetized ego that

it misinterprets the experience as spiritual enlightenment. Alas, it is not; it is merely the psyche's extraordinary ability to view physicality from the inside rather than from the outside. Such experiences are mentioned in the world's spiritual literatures, and include experiences of the psychophysical energy sources located in the solar plexus, and in the head. These highly unusual experiences can herald the approach of a final stage in meditative/contemplative experience, the approach of the "still point" at the center of the affective system, but that need not be the case. The "still point" is not something one penetrates in the sense of a holy symbol; it is something that approaches of its own volition if the psychic means can be found to allow such a thing to happen. The way, as the Scriptures attest, is narrow, and few there are who find it.

The necessary escape velocity from belief-backed opinions is seldom reached. Why? Because a religiously conditioned mind in which questioning has been replaced with believing finds itself tethered to a mental stake where all it can do is mentally revolve around, rather than experientially resolve the contradictions confronting it. In the religiously convinced person's scheme all the major questions have already been dealt with, there is nothing left to do but say thanks to God and attempt to be good. And so this person travels, not into the question that being awake poses as an experience, but into ever more complex interactions with their already answered questions, projections of the ego that progressively strengthen the ego in its functioning. The reason for this is that the conscious mind abhors a vacuum; it panics when faced with too intense an internal silence. Shut off the noise of thought for even a few seconds and the mind will generate an endless stream of images and sensations attended by thought to counteract the situation – hence the difficulties faced early on in the meditative/contemplative state. It is a vicious circle. Silence is the ego's enemy; it robs it of the energy it requires to survive, and as we all know, survival of ourselves as a conscious being is our strongest instinct.

### **Feelings and Propositions**

The philosopher Don Cupitt's assertion is that mystical statements, by their very nature, lack propositional coherence, and that being the case the contemplative's descriptions of so-called transcendental states is without meaning or relevance. And he doesn't stop there. He also contends that feelings lack cognitive/propositional meaning, and that the early 20th century contention that they did was without substance.<sup>9</sup> In relation to feelings being used as propositional proofs to support doctrinal contentions, I fully agree with Cupitt. Such attempts are generally no more than affective delusions based on beliefs. They prove nothing except that the person involved is deeply convinced of certain religious ideas. In this sense what we're dealing with is aberrant emotion. The ecstasy experienced by the deeply religious personality has little to do with the contem-

plative space as it eventually forms; it has more to do with an ego intoxicated by religious ideas in which a huge emotional investment has been placed. As with empathy where feeling, and not emotion, dominates, delicacy of feeling adds coherence to our responses, whereas emotional reactions cause us to progressively lose coherence.

In relation to the contemplative state, feelings assist us to lock onto the still point at the center of our affective system, and can be likened to the maneuvering required by a space shuttle as it links up with a space station through the use of laser technology. Sensations of an extraordinarily delicate nature are in operation in such a moment, and without their delicacy the contemplative's journey into self could not take place, never mind develop in any coherent fashion. Nor would the tantalizing dimensions in any great work of art ever form. Without delicacy of feeling great poetry would not take shape, great fiction would never be written, or great paintings be painted. At our best, our deepest, our most telling, we are first and foremost creatures of feeling. Feelings are in themselves neither propositional nor coherent, but they do facilitate propositional coherence. To believe that propositional coherence arises as a result of language alone is to underestimate the complexity of our psychophysical system. It would be the equivalent of believing that language alone is writing this book and that my felt life has not in some sense contributed to the exercise. Robert Forman, a psychologist/philosopher and experienced meditator, adds a deep-space analogy to the mix: “. . . mysticism is more like a space capsule than like a horse-drawn cart: pushed by the rocket of language, the capsule of experience is ultimately loosened from that which has pushed it, and becomes, as it were, weightless and afloat. The experience on the space capsule is no longer conditioned by its vehicle. It now results from other, novel factors.”<sup>10</sup> Language is in this sense a computer program; strong subjectivity as feeling everything that we are brought to bear on the question of all questions. Or, as David Levin states in his essay ‘Mudra as Thinking’, “feeling is our most tactful way into the opening depth of things.”<sup>11</sup>

## **Further Methodology**

There are two approaches to the meditative, contemplative state: the open-eyed approach and the closed-eyed approach. In the closed-eyed approach the mind quickly causes problems for itself due to its compulsion to fill in every waking minute with thought, rumination, analysis and memory. So also the open-eyed approach if attention is connected exclusively to sense of self or sense of world as “other”. If it's an either/or situation, then we are at the mercy of the mind's tendency to automatically extrapolate through association. We are either “in here” and all wrapped up in self's needs, or “out there” and all wrapped up in the need to respond to event and happening. But not if we hold the mind at arm's length, so to speak. If we can balance ourselves on the knife's edge between the inner and the

outer, between the seer and what is seen, between sense of self and sense of “other”, then the mind’s evaluations and projections lessen, and finally cease. This is more easily accomplished with the eyes open than with them closed, and the reason for this is that with our eyes open we are more firmly grounded in ourselves. With eyes closed we run the risk of thoughts and visual projections that can, as in dream or reverie, grow associatively in response to the slightest hint of shape or meaning. With our eyes open there is less chance of being carried off into subtle forms of thought. It’s not that the open-eyed approach is superior to the closed-eyed approach; it’s just a better training ground. If you want to be a trapeze artist, you do not head immediately for the highest platform. It’s also easier to spot what’s going on – when you drift off into thought while walking, something will generally happen to make you aware of that fact. Monitor those moments of “coming to” over the course of an hour and you will quickly realize what I’m getting at.

But what does it feel like to be balanced between the outer and the inner? How does that work as an experience? What are the steps that have to be taken? Is the ability to *simultaneously hold presence of self and object of attention in one frame of mental reference* really as easy as blinking? Yes, it is, but it requires an intentional movement of attention between self and world until the gulf between them, and our constant movement across that gulf, is fully appreciated. We shuffle unconsciously between inner and outer all day long, but have to consciously enact the process to understand it fully. And so a little perceptual game is necessary, a game of “in here” versus “out there”, and through this game we awaken to what is going on in our unconscious conscious state. For that is what we are most of the time, unconscious while conscious.

## **Being in the World**

We are not a mind and a body, we are simultaneously both, and these integrated factors constitute our *being in the world*. The problem is, we are seldom aware of our being in the world, only aware of the result of our being in the world. Even when concerned with self rather than world, our interaction with what passes for self (a hurtful feeling or a pain in the leg) is generally at the consciously unconscious level, not the fully conscious level. We are, in other words, all wrapped up in the experience of pain to the exclusion of sense of self as presence. We are, hard as it may be to accept, missing from the equation of our own pain just as we are missing from the myriad events and happenings we engage in moment by moment. Yes, the pain is felt, but we have become all pain in such a moment, just as we can become all book or all anything through identification. Identification is the problem; we are forever embedded in our identifications to the exclusion of self as a living presence. To wake up is to wake up out of this interactive dream and take charge, and this requires us to consciously move

backwards and forwards between ourselves as subject, and the world as object, until the mechanism of exchange is thoroughly understood.

Another way of looking at this problem is to say that when we look at a car we become the car we're looking at. "Car" fills our mind to the exclusion of, say, the roast beef we had for lunch. Or we become all cat when fondling a cat. Or all mathematical problem when doing our income tax. Which confirms that thinking, too, can be identified with to the exclusion of sense of self. It's how we are, but it's not how we need constantly live. We can, and do, wake up out of this fog of identification at intervals, and if interested in making this happen, can, with a little practice, entice the awake state to form. But it takes patience, lots of patience.

Moving between ourselves as subject and the world as object requires us to momentarily withdraw attention from "out there" and place it "in here", and when "in here", do the opposite. And then do the opposite again and keep repeating the process until we become fully cognizant with how we slip from one mode to the other, how each experience eclipses the other. For you can't be both "out there" *and* "in here" simultaneously, can you? It's one thing or the other; at least that's how it seems. And when sense of the physical self has been separated out and understood, then comes the business of sustaining sense of the physical self alongside our daily affairs through the trick of looking in two directions simultaneously. Particularly when in company. Or when washing the dishes. Or when involved in an argument. Or when boasting. Or when walking along a street or staring aimlessly out of a window. We'll dance backwards and forwards between self and object for a while, ricochet between them in an at-first jolting fashion, then, suddenly, we'll sense ourselves closing on our double target and everything will change. *Self* in existence as we sense ourselves looking. *Self* not in existence as we identify with the object under scrutiny and lose track of ourselves. *Self* in existence again as we stutter back into being aware of our physical presence alongside other or world. Then the dawning realization that something else is happening, that in attempting to do this impossible thing we have set in motion something beyond self as a physical sensation, beyond body "bodying", more *an arising or resurrection of our sense of existence beyond the personal*. For presence of self *as* being, when it emerges, is not a submerged or engaged form of recognition (it has no object); it is a *pure consciousness event*, and as such is without conscious content *in both directions*. To be or not to be is, as Shakespeare suggests, the "question", but it is not a question requiring an answer; more a question of what we are, or are not, in our essence.<sup>12</sup>

Professor of cognitive psychology Benny Shanon neatly captures what is going on here when he describes consciousness as having a primordial dimension and a transcendent dimension *mistakenly believed to be identical*. Specifically, one end of consciousness is primitive and therefore not amenable to differentiation and

distinction between experience and selfhood, whereas at the other end *it transcends such distinctions.*" (my italics) And then comes the denouement: "Geometrically speaking," he says, searching his way into the experience where experience itself is transcended, "as one draws towards the two extremes, the distance between the lines marking the regions decreases and . . . converge to a point".<sup>13</sup> Shanon is unsure whether this geometrical point can ever finally be reached, whereas Bernadette Roberts attests to the fact that a remarkably similar sounding point (the still point at the center of the affective system) constitutes the entrance to an undifferentiated state beyond the reflexive mind and its wayward emotions. And so we double back to what was said about the still point approaching of its own volition, for this answers Shanon's astute question as to whether this geometrical balancing point in consciousness can be penetrated. It can't, but it can envelope the watcher if the watcher has discovered how to watch without watching.

### **A Smoking Gun?**

So is there a smoking gun behind all of this? Have we rediscovered an ancient teaching concerning the nature of the self safeguarded by early century Christian monks? Are we moving backwards rather than forwards in our explorations of what consciousness is, and is not? Or is it simply a matter of the human constitution being such that this kind of understanding is forever discoverable?

Given the information supplied by advanced Christian contemplatives such as Meister Eckhart, Bernadette Roberts and others, I think the latter rather than the former is the case. Having said that, however, there is no doubting that vital elements of this ancient teaching have been passed on by experimentalists in just about every age, and in every culture. The evidence for a whole new level of mind being attainable is to be found in all the major religions, Christianity being no exception. But that does not mean that religion in general can claim copyright to that teaching, or any particular religion lay sole claim to that revelation. It was perhaps no more than the way human society evolved that caused things to turn out the way they did, the discoveries of naturally gifted individuals initiating an attempt by others to understand the outer reaches of thought and experience through reason alone. In saying this, it is not my intention to rob religion of its place in human affairs, or deny thinkers their right to think; it is to suggest that alongside any religious notion of reality there ought also to be a healthy and informed respect for the body's natural forces, the physical forces that underlie, support and augment our most sophisticated systems of reasoning, insight and creativity. Any attempt to sequester the great experiential truths of the contemplative life in doctrinaire religious formulas is, to my way of thinking, a mistake of major proportions; the attempt by some secular thinkers to render them inconsequential similarly shortsighted. Hence the tenor of this essay with its

mixture of history, philosophy, psychology, science and religious inquiry. There is, as far as I can see, no smoking gun as such, just the marvel of what we are in ourselves surfacing in spite of what sometimes seems every conceivable human attempt to derail it at source.

### References and Notes:

1) Choisnel, Jacques, “An Unfinished Creation”, as quoted in *Gurdjieff* by Jacob Needleman and George Baker, Continuum, New York, 1996, p 203.

2) Origen, *Homelies sur les nombres*, XXIV.2. In relation to the question of systems of ethics mention in this paragraph, I should draw attention to one notable exception, that of Warwick Fox’s book *A Theory of General Ethics: Human Relationships, Nature, and the Built Environment*, MIT Press, USA, 2006. This is a sensitive evaluation of the ethical problems we face in relation to empathy that deserves close attention.

3) James, the Epistle of, 1: 24. Additional texts to consult on these important issues are Robert Eisenman’s *James the Brother of Jesus*, and Jeffrey Butz’s *The Brother of Jesus*. (See Select Bibliography)

4) Forget, Alain, *How To Get Out Of This World Alive*.

5) Hence the idea of God as an “entity” and Jesus the “man” as God. Useful as these anthropomorphic ideas were in the early centuries, however, they later became an impediment due to the literalist tendency to construct out of them highly elaborate theological schemes. Hillman’s suggestion that we *imaginatively* replace our psychological complexes with the Greek gods is of course an altogether different proposition – it may even be fun to perceive our psychic “bits” in this way.

6) Forget, Alain, *How To Get Out Of This World Alive*, p 61.(publisher required)

7) In terms of simple definitions, “empathy” and “sympathy” are closely related, but they are not identical. Sympathy involves an identification with feeling but empathy is a closer and more intimate process; it does not necessarily involve an emotional reaction, though it often does. What interests me about this definition is its recognition that empathy does not necessarily involve emotion. In this deeper sense empathy equals *evaluative feeling*; it may contain emotion, but that does not make it superficial in character. Nor does it empty it of feeling, for feeling need not have wayward emotional content. (*Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 5-7, 2001.)

- 8) Steiner, George, *Heidegger*, Fontana Press, London, 1992, p 83.
- 9) Cupitt, Don, *Mysticism after Modernity*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1998, p 36.
- 10) Forman, R.C., "Mysticism, Language & The Via Negativa", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1994.
- 11) Levin, David M., "Mudra as Thinking", as found in *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, edited by Graham Parkes, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1990, pp 252. See also Morris Berman's *Coming to Our Senses* Bantam Books, New York, 1990, p 59, where he suggests that the medieval practice of self-flagellation may represent not merely an attempt to degrade the body, but also a way of feeling the body that had been desensitized.
- 12) Martin Heidegger sometimes describes Being as a 'look' (Blick), and as an 'insight' (Einblick) into that which is. This is not intellectual insight in the sense of the mind lighting up with conscious understanding, it is more an intimation or hint of the Holy in the sense of our becoming open to what is – it is what the poet Rainer Maria Rilke means in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (Oxford University Press, 1984) when he speaks of *learning to see*.
- 13) Shanon, Benny, "A Psychological Theory of Consciousness", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 5, 2008, p 35.