

The Last Beyond

*Reflections on Life the Universe and
Everything*

THOMAS BUCKLEY-HOUSTON

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For my family; Gavin, Delia and Robin

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P R E F A C E

This book is about a discovery. Although foremost it is an attempt, through the act of writing, to personally come to a better understanding of this discovery, I hope that it may also be of interest and benefit to others. It is difficult to succinctly express this discovery, after all this is what the numerous words in the book are concerned with, but very simply it could be expressed as – the discovery of life.

The structure takes the form of a collection of meditative essays. Their respective themes are intended to relate to actual experiences in my own life, and are expressed as single poetic images at the beginning of each chapter. In this way they act as seeds from which the succeeding prose can flower. Also, this flowering process itself is intended to act as a medium of communication parallel to the words themselves. Although it should be possible to read the individual essays on their own, without need for reference to the others, there is, I hope, a discernible central theme. This theme is made most explicit in the second chapter, and

is therefore most concisely expressed in the poem that begins it.

Of all those that have helped make this book possible I must first thank my dear friend Alim, without whose warmth and inspiration I may never have been able to create such a thing. I would also like to heartily thank and acknowledge: Stephen Batchelor whose ideas form so much of the basis of my own and also for his encouragement to forge ahead with the book; Rosemary and Ian Millership and Sally and Phil Deacon for providing the time and space for much of the writing of the original manuscript and also for their feedback on the early prose; Michael Kewley for being a partner in crime for so much of my thinking and all the long, engaging and fascinating conversations that help tease my formless thoughts into tangible words; Julia Wallond for her day in, day out enthusiasm and encouragement; Lawrence Pettener for his most professional editing of the final manuscript.

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ALONE WITH OTHERS

I was what I am

I am what I am

I will always be what I am

Untitled by the Author

I wrote this little poem in an English lesson at secondary school when I was about 11 years old. I do not have the original copy of it; I remember it from memory because I associate it with a particularly unpleasant experience. My class was asked by the teacher to write a poem and I seem to remember her giving us some advice on what form it should take; I think she suggested using nature and similes, and that it need not rhyme. I thought about it for a while, but was not connecting with her suggestions. I just felt as though I was being pushed into writing a cliché. I wanted to write something original, something that could somehow express my individuality, so I wrote this little poem above. As I went up to her desk with all the others who had finished their poems I remember being a little nervous, though it did not seem to bother me much as I just assumed she was about to be impressed. I passed her my open notebook. She took a few moments to read it and think about it, then, rather scathingly, dismissed it as poor and meaningless work, and without any kind of constructive criticism asked me to write a better one. I did not write another one, I could not; I was devastated. I had opened myself up

only to be coldly and bluntly rejected. I was not to write another poem until my age had doubled.

When we have such experiences, the public context of the situation can often serve to distort the way in which we come to accept and rationalise them. Naturally we are intimidated by the authority of others, especially if they represent for us the embodiment of a larger group, such as an educational institution, the local community, our family, our circle of friends or even humanity as a whole. Rather than consider that it is the authoritative other that has failed to live up to their true potential, we all too easily blame ourselves. For it is without exception, I feel, and especially when we are new to this World, that we humans seek to be acknowledged and accepted by others in some way. This is because it is through the mirror of others more than anything else that we come to know ourselves. Having rather unceremoniously and without due consultation, been thrown into this World, being accepted and understood by *others* appears as the obvious and essential step in accepting and understanding our *own* existence.

Our first encounter with an other is most likely to be through our parents. In most cases the acceptance

we receive from them is near to unconditional; at the very least we receive the basic tools for living, a grounding from which to enter the World. Then it seems almost biological that at some point we discover an urge to mature and leave the familiarity of home. We may have come to understand our identity as part of our birth family but there is a deeper yearning to understand ourselves from the broader perspective of being an individual human. For those of us that live in these 'evolved' Western cultures, this latter process begins at school. Here we may begin to discover and nurture our talents, exercise our personal freedom through opinions and choice of friends, draw on our resources of self-reliance and altogether begin to find a path into society and the World.

Many people have a very difficult time at school and a far from insignificant minority find it utterly irrelevant and useless. There is not much sympathy for those who do not resonate with the education system. It seems that a rather too significant aspect of what we actually learn at school is not the truths and wisdom of an ancient culture but, rather crudely, the ability to conform. Of course there are, by the law of averages, those that, quite naturally and happily, fit into these

preassigned moulds. However, those that do not, and especially the ones on the extreme, feel as though they are anomalies; useless, stupid and socially worthless. As long as the immense pressures faced by the state education system remain they will constrict the openings in which individuality can be acknowledged and nurtured. Given such circumstances it is understandable that schools find themselves sleepwalking the lower and easier paths of the production line. As such, we tend to learn about the superficial *gestures* of those that appear to be accepted by society rather than experience the living *integrity* of those that understand that accepting societies can only be made up of accepting individuals. It seems as though the practicalities of being able to quantify the accumulation of gestures, as opposed to the unquantifiable qualities of integrity, are favoured simply due to the convenience of being able to demonstrate 'progress'.

Even though, at a glance, appearing to conform and feeling accepted may be superficially similar, they are in fact profoundly different things. No matter how good we may become at going through the motions of conformity, if it is not based in a genuine connection

between ourselves and others it will inevitably lead to disharmony and problems. The reason for this is that through mere conformity there will always remain a part of us that we have not shown to the outside World, and so we can never feel as though we have been seen, acknowledged and accepted in our entirety. We can try to cover this part of us up, even from ourselves, whilst still persisting in our search for acknowledgement and acceptance, but of course without success. The longing to be seen is so strong, yet the feeling, and thus consequential fear of rejection so awful. So we learn the gestures, the gestures of friendship, capitalism, religion, intimate relationships, counter-culture, therapy – yet still we feel isolated and bewildered. The journey of self-discovery becomes beset with wrong turns, false horizons and loss of direction.

Occasionally we might buck up the courage to share something of our intimate selves; we take a risk only to be disappointed, again. Our culture is simply not one that encourages sharing, in fact it is one that far more readily encourages selfishness. Rather than recollect and support the realities that unite us, our culture sooner promotes the affirmation of the

boundaries that isolate us. From this perspective individual freedom is somewhat crudely perceived as an absolute personal independence; whereby involvement with the unreliability of others can be completely avoided through the accumulation of financial security and the purchasing of commodities. Arguably this does work for many people, who may well lead relatively fulfilled and happy lives. However, it seems that for most of us, this way of life merely allows us to robotically survive rather than animatedly thrive. After encountering so many rejections and the bland security of materialistic accumulation, it is understandable that we might become at best passive and depressed, and at worst violent and destructive.

Originally I found my niche in science; looking back I can see how its relative absence of personal reflection endeared me to it. To achieve at it and thus gain a measure of praise and acceptance all I needed to do was follow a series of logical procedures and arrive at an indisputable answer, one that was beyond the realms of personal interpretation. It pleased me to please my parents with academic success; I felt accepted by them. But something was missing, though I just assumed that I would find it once I had a job and

was accepted by society. I went to university and left after six months. For the next four years I was mostly unemployed and unhappy; I took a lot of drugs and had a lot of arguments with my girlfriend. It was after many low and despairing episodes that I came to read a book by a Buddhist monk entitled *Mindfulness: The Path to the Deathless*. I now look upon this encounter as the seed that would eventually flower into a radical shift in the way I perceived myself and the World.

I was inspired to investigate my experience of life through the patience, resolve and discipline of meditative stillness. I began to attend to this thing that I had called a problem. I began to investigate it as it manifested in its entirety, as it manifested in my breathing, my posture, my thoughts, my bodily sensations, my habits, my ambitions and anywhere else it could be found. Most importantly of all, I began to attend to my life *as it unfolded*, not at the places it *had* been, nor at the places it *could* be. I found this very difficult at times, I still do, but something began to change – *I* began to see myself, *I* began to acknowledge myself and *I* began to accept myself.

Paradoxically, that which most unites us as human beings is that we, each and every one of us, is alone.

Just as friends, lovers, families, employees and students share a common bonding characteristic amongst their respective group, so too do we (every single one of us) belong to that group of beings who have a predisposition towards rejection, loneliness and isolation.

And so it is that when we can begin to touch, taste and accept these experiences of separateness and not cover them up, distort them, or pretend they are something else that we come closer to a whole, a common and universal bond. No matter how little nor how extreme, we can all in some way relate to feeling lonely or isolated, and so by the same token we can all, at a fundamental level, identify with each other.

SHEER UNCANNINESS

Aliveness.

The sheer uncanniness that there is anything at all.

But, a solid explanation please.

*Flu by the invisible virus,
electricity by the invisible electron,
these words by the invisible author.*

*This aliveness by the invisible –
well, somebody must know...*

*Please hear that
nobody knows.*

*Nor have we ever known
nor will we ever know.*

*And look,
no vanishing in a puff of smoke.*

But...

*being stricken by sheer uncanniness,
the anything-at-all most vividly awakens.*

Aliveness.

Testament by the Author

Having set about making a sincere and resolved commitment to investigating the truth of my predicament as a conscious being, I went on to learn a lot of very important lessons. I tried to express these lessons as I learnt them but it was not always easy, nor was there always an understanding ear there to hear them. However, an urgency grew within me that eventually culminated in the desire to create something like a 'last will and testament'. I wanted to leave something beyond the unpredictable impermanence of the flesh that somehow contained the distillation of everything that I had learnt from the unique experiences of my life. This is how the poem *Testament* came to be.

Like most poems this one points to an image, one that is meant to invoke an experience in the reader. However, whereas most images point to something that can be imagined, this one points directly to an experience that underlies all experiences, one that we can access in its entirety here and now. In some ways it seems obvious to the point of irrelevance – I'm alive, yes of course. Yet with a closer inspection it can transform into the most extraordinary and startling fact – I'm alive! How? What? Why?! Or just a simple – ? Of

course, it is incredibly difficult to concisely express this feeling, for it is in itself a taste of mystery. First and foremost it must be something that we, our own-most selves, direct our attention towards and experience first-hand. It cannot be described, it can only be pointed to.

However, we must be very careful not to confuse *ineffable* as a synonym for *esoteric*. So often, we mistake the absence of explicit description as the realm of specialised knowledge, the concern of 'them', whoever 'they' might be. Yet this feeling of being alive concerns the particular and unprecedented reality of that which is closer to us than anything else. Nothing could be further away from 'them' than that which we most fundamentally are. It is *this* very person that has been thrown into existence without choice, and has to face a certain yet unscheduled exit into death. While it may be impossible to succinctly describe this feeling of being acutely alive, it in *no way* means that any one of us does not have access to it.

We must also be careful not to brush aside such feelings as irrelevant. We will often do so because, not only are our glimpses of it ephemeral, but they can also be frustratingly elusive. By *elusive*, I refer to their

tendency to simultaneously reveal and conceal something; for an all too brief moment something opens up; and for all its tantalising promise of uncovering something sublime and awesome, it never seems to satisfyingly deliver. And so it is perfectly understandable that, like the story of the boy who cried wolf, we learn to dismiss such glimpses as impotent teases. However, there is a fundamental difference in the analogy, as it is not just that it is extraordinary that we can glimpse an *extraordinary* dimension to life, it is *equally* extraordinary that we can experience an *ordinary* dimension to life – how is it that existence exists at all? In our analogy, the wolf is *not just* our extraordinary experiences but our ordinary experiences too. In other words: the wolf is that we can experience at all. In the story the villagers fail to meet the wolf through repeated deception; in our analogy we fail to meet the wolf because it is *already here*.

It is simply extraordinary that we can have experiences, whether profane or profound; one might even say it is uncanny. I seem to remember that the first time I came across the word *uncanny* was in hearing someone's response to an artist's caricature. They probably said something like, "That's an uncanny

likeness.” When we see the same face every day for years, we get used to it rather than appreciate and notice the unique and individual features of the face; we automatically recognise the whole face as though it were a single feature. But then when we encounter a caricature of that same face with its exaggerated features, we are startled. The caricature is at once both grotesquely unrealistic and yet evocatively realistic; perhaps in some ways it might even appear to resemble the person’s face more than their *own* face does! This may well make us feel a little uncomfortable, as though we have been intruded upon; this is because the recognition is coming from a deeper place than our ordinary cognitive mind. In viewing a good caricature we do not respond to it in a measured academic manner, but rather in a spontaneous and emotive one. Most often we laugh, but more than anything we are intrigued; our attention bolts up, we are fascinated by something that our mind scoffs at as unreal yet our intuition upholds as real. We might say it is weird, eerie even, the uncanny audacity for something to so stubbornly and persistently occupy two contradictory states at the same time – and above all to do it *before our very eyes*.

Etymologically *uncanny* comes from *canny*, which is connected to *can*, which means 'to be able'. If someone is canny then they are skilful, they have ability, or luck depending on one's interpretation. They may even be a bit too skilful, someone to be suspicious of. If someone is uncanny then it is not that they are unskilful, but that they possess a level of skill which is not usual or natural for an ordinary person. There is certainly skill and ability present, but it would seem easier to explain that ability as coming from *beyond* the person, from an extra- (or with careful qualification super-) natural source. If canny describes ability then uncanny describes inability (i.e. non-ability) only in so far as it is supra-ability. The use of uncanny seems to have a corresponding similarity to the more modern and colloquial 'unreal', someone might say that the solar eclipse they saw was 'unreal'; not meaning that it was fake, but that it seemed out of the ordinary. These references to the 'extra-natural' (or the religiously-loaded 'supernatural') and supra-ability then raise the issue of the source of these extraordinary happenings, for their uses clearly indicate that it is neither nature nor human. Of course, we must be clear that to use *uncanny* as an adjective *does not* automatically

presuppose any religious or superstitious belief. There need not be anything holy or magical about the ability of a caricaturist. It is of paramount importance to understand that the source of uncanniness is by definition *unknown*, as it is only in the temporary suspension of our otherwise incessantly chattering, knowledge-addicted minds that its unmistakable taste arises.

Whereas the feeling of uncanniness we experience in looking at a caricature might be entertaining, the feeling of uncanniness which comes from looking at existence has to be of an altogether different order. We may find it uncanny that a drawing looks like someone we know, but to find it uncanny that existence exists, goes right to the heart of not only how we perceive the World but right to the heart of how we perceive ourselves. After all, if we find it uncanny being in the presence of the World with all its sounds and colours, then so too must we, the children of the World, find it uncanny being in the presence of ourselves. By whatever means the universe, planet, rivers and trees came into being then so too must that be the very same source that brought us into being. In perceiving the uncanniness that there is anything at all we are

experiencing a unique sensation, one that goes right to the heart of what it means to be an experiencer at all, and so it seems appropriate to designate this uncanniness with the further adjective *sheer*. Although we may feel slightly uncomfortable, maybe even intruded upon by the uncanniness of a caricature, we can at least get a little bit of distance on it, there can be some kind of objective detachment. Yet with the uncanniness of existence there can be no such distance, there can be no kind of objective detachment, because there is nothing left of ourselves that is not also saturated with uncanniness. The infusion is absolute, the uncanniness is sheer.

It is so tempting to try to explain such an experience, whether it is from a superstitious, religious, psychological or philosophical point of view. It is a feature of our culture that we are used to receiving explanations for things. There are so many occurrences and phenomena that appear profoundly weird, uncanny even, such as flight, brain surgery, mobile phones; yet we have perfectly logical explanations for them. So it is understandable that we may react to this visceral feeling of sheer uncanniness by trying to explain it. Yet time and time again these explanations

fall short, we end up in circles, cul-de-sacs, paradoxes and contradictions. What is more, and undoubtedly worse, is that we invest in these explanations; become possessive of them and, most insane of all, privilege them with a significance greater than that attributed to the original experience that inspired them.

So what if we refrain from explanation? What then? It may seem like a reasonable next step, but would this not somehow deaden our lives, take away the wonder and mystery? I feel it would. Besides, I do not think it is something that could be practically achieved. There are, perhaps, frames of mind such as extreme apathy or depression in which attempts at explanations are given up because they are associated with, or rather white-washed as, dead ends. I think these attitudes are in actual fact still grounded in a subtle form of explanation – that existence is inexplicable. Does that not have the ring of a final answer, a dogmatic stance, a form of explanation?

So what options are left? Explaining leads nowhere and non-explanation leads nowhere. There is one other option: to live a way of life that attempts to cultivate a priority for the *original experience* over and above any explanation. In this way we are primarily attached to

that source of wonder and mystery that perpetually animates, invigorates and nourishes our lives, yet we are also free from the burden of supporting a single and fixed explanation. It is not that we drop all attempts at explanations, but rather we arrive at a way of life that is able to function without absolute investments in them. We can still play with explanations, but they no longer rule us. We might find that delving into various perspectives and hypotheses can enrich our understanding of life and help keep the original question alive. For as long as there is the question, there is also inquisitive, wide-eyed wonder.

It is no coincidence that there is an etymological link between wonderful and wonder. When we are flavoured by sheer uncanniness we peer into the experience and wonder. We wonder what it means, our senses are heightened trying to gather as much information about it as possible. It is as though we are witnessing something for the first time. The usual feeling of mundane, predictable, repetitiveness diminishes. What we took for granted is replaced by something unprecedented: we are intrigued and fascinated, we feel alive. By questioning again and again, *and again*, we may not find ourselves settling on

a sturdy explanation, but we do find our selves coming back to life. We see that life is about wonder, about looking; and we see that life most reveals itself when it is being looked at in wonder. We may not understand it but we can see it. We look in wonder and see wonder. Our mind may be bewildered but our senses are sharpened, our perception is clear, we are without question alive. And before we even begin to consider who it is that this aliveness belongs to, we know that something, that the anything-at-all, is awake.

AGNOSTICISM

Agnosticism, in fact, is not a creed, but a method, the essence of which lies in the rigorous application of a single principle. That principle is of great antiquity; it is as old as Socrates; as old as the writer who said, 'Try all things, hold fast by that which is good'; it is the foundation of the Reformation, which simply illustrated the axiom that every man should be able to give a reason for the faith that is in him, it is the great principle of Descartes; it is the fundamental axiom of modern science.

Positively the principle may be expressed: In matters of the intellect, follow your reason as far as it will take you, without regard to any other consideration.

And negatively: In matters of the intellect, do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable.

That I take to be the agnostic faith, which if a man keep whole and undefiled, he shall not be ashamed to look the universe in the face, whatever the future may have in store for him.

T.H Huxley

So *what is* this universe/existence thing then?

Well, for some time now we have been poking, dismantling, experimenting, surveying, cataloguing, philosophising and magnifying it. Through these processes we have discovered a lot of fascinating facts and our perception of the universe has been generously deepened and ceaselessly updated. We have discovered quarks, neurons, exotic species, equations, black holes and all kinds of other surprising details that lie just beyond the veil of our everyday World. The universe, like an ever playful child, unceasingly responds to our curiosities and queries. Without fail our interest in it is reciprocated; whenever and wherever we investigate we are unfailingly greeted with something uniquely original. It is as though the universe never gets bored of us. It is as though it is perpetually singing, *'Come, look at me, there's something I want to show you'*.

And the universe has not just been singing this melody during the modern technological era. It has always been singing it. Even before we began shaping rocks and using fire. Its coax and tease has been constant and undiminishing. With the discovery of the

flint's spark for example, it is easy to imagine that we felt the deepest awe to be granted such privileged access to the universe's carefully hidden mysteries. As with most great discoveries, like the wheel, the solar system or atoms, it is easy to think that the final layer has been removed and that the universe as it really is, is standing vividly before our very eyes. This is how it may seem, but, at the end of every revelation there is the beginning of another invite. After the flint, comes the pocket lighter; after the wheel, the engine; after the atom, the quark and so on, and so on. Through ever more sophisticated investigation the universe is *simultaneously* penetrable *and* impenetrable, it is both abundantly knowable *and* profoundly mysterious.

This disposition of the universe towards revealing itself in solid, factual, expressible ways could quite easily make us think that *all* its secrets, whilst simply given enough time and resources, can be revealed. It seems like a reasonable assumption. If we continue to discover details, as has been consistent throughout history, then surely this tendency lends itself to the conclusion that the universe is fundamentally knowable. If this assumption is then turned into a conclusion, we will then find ourselves in the mind of

the atheist. For if the universe is fundamentally knowable then everything that happens in it can be explained through the application of fundamental rational axioms. From this perspective there is no room for anything to supersede reason. Everything, from gods and love to supernovae and taxes, is born of logic and subordinate to logic.

The power of reasoning can be staggering; so much so that, somewhat ironically, we can be emotionally touched by it. For example the meticulous scrutiny of biological processes has improved, saved and even helped create countless lives; plant, animal and human alike. Or perhaps a better example would be the aftermath of a traumatic event where the careful measured reflection of reason can often bring us to our senses and help us filter out our fantastic fears from the sober reality. It is almost as though reason has a life of its own; in the World of form it can create and manipulate things that we cannot; in the formless realm of emotions, battered by the whirlwinds of suffering, it offers its stable and unbiased shoulder to lean on.

The ability to reason is essential; it is a skill that is profoundly useful. In the toolkit of life, its presence is

like flint to a caveman – admittedly not as important as air, but a blessing that improves living conditions and expands horizons. However, as powerful and seemingly magical as reason might appear, we must remember that it is just a tool; that it is a *specialised* implement useful in *particular* situations and like any tool can prove to be devastatingly detrimental if used in the wrong context. Just as a hammer should not be used for brushing one's teeth, nor should graphical analysis be used in a marriage proposal. Ironically, reason should be used reasonably.

It is also perhaps ironic that atheism nourishes itself more from the passionate evangelisation of reason rather than from its sober and reasonable use. The jump from the assumption that everything in the universe has a logical foundation to the conclusion of that same concept is by the tradition of reason, unreasonable. One cannot move from an assumption to a conclusion without their being some kind of demonstrable proof. Nor of course is this an argument for theism, just because atheism is 'unreasonable', it does not rationally demonstrate the certainty of theism. However, what does shed light onto this whole issue is the emotional effect reasoned proofs can have on us.

Why do atheists want to avoid the possibility that there may be some part of themselves that is beyond logic, that is mysterious, profound and beyond their control? Is this not just the very human desire to be master of one's destiny? Why do theists want to detract from the possibility that the universe moves in ways that are utterly inconsiderate of our personal ambitions and spiritual faith? Is this not just the very human desire to feel special? Given the powers of reason, it is not surprising that we try to manipulate and exploit it to favour our own selfish agendas.

Reason is that which allows us to separate those two great realms, the World as we fear or dream it and the World as it really is. It allows us to distinguish between the way we want things to be and the way things actually are. This is what T. H. Huxley had in mind when he coined the term *agnosticism*. For many this term is often associated with a kind of apathy, yet it is hard to correspond this to Huxley's assertion that it is none other than the central principle that has threaded its way through the great intellectual traditions of our Western culture. Agnosticism is not a lame retreat from opinion, it is a courageous engagement with the truth. It is what has allowed us to

discover so much over and over again, to dispense with ageing superstitions and discover the universe anew. It is a passionate and informed confrontation with every detail that can be gleaned. As Huxley starts from the very beginning it is not an intellectual *position* but a practical *method*, having more in common with a verb than a noun. It does not shelter and entrench itself, then expend the rest of its energy fortifying its stagnant abode in preparation for undisturbed retirement. Rather it is free, it expends its energy in travel and exploration, visiting new lands, tasting new fruits; it is a way of life, it is alive. It has more in common with a journey than an address.

So why are science and reason not just called agnosticism? Firstly it must be remembered that in terms of their extended remit to form absolute explanations, religion and science do actually have a lot in common. It also worth remembering that a lot of religions could be described as scientific, or at least, as observing rational principles; take academic theology for example. Rather agnosticism differs from pure science in the sense that it recognises reason as a *method*, or in other words as a *tool* – therefore not as an end in itself. The crux is that reason leads to a cold,

atheistic view of the universe only when use becomes addiction.

Bombarded by the ceaseless change and evolution of our lives, and the universe it inhabits, we jump at the chance for an all-encompassing explanation that will *not* change and evolve. In a situation that constantly demands our complete engagement, we understandably reach out and grasp tightly to those things that seem unchanging and dependable. However, the welcome relief, sobriety and sanity that reasoned thinking often brings, can easily turn into habit; as with anything that emotionally affects us, we turn towards what we like and away from what we dislike. Drunk with our love for reason we take the unreasonable step of assuming that reason is applicable in every situation. By the force of habit we lazily jump from self-reflexive mindfulness to the repetitive clichés of addiction. That which is perfectly capable of cooperatively *servicing* us, ends up monstrously *using* us. We think so much that we forget that it is at all possible to not think; in fact the very idea seems alien and utterly incomprehensible.

We find ourselves enslaved, we feel imprisoned; no matter what we do we perpetually fail to find the

freedom that imprisoned life so romantically emphasises. Nevertheless we continue to invest in thinking, in manipulating objects and circumstances to effect our release. The song of the universe continues, *“Come, look at me, there’s something I want to show you”*. The universe continues to reveal itself, and so our investment in our thinking-minds is reinforced. Yet the melody never stops. Like a donkey led by a dangling carrot, we never realise that the final release is not getting a single step closer. Our frustrations simply lead us to think differently (rather than escape from it completely), whereupon the singing universe is only too happy to oblige with the revelation of more of its infinite details.

Yet somewhere along the line the penny drops. We know that reason is what has made us civilised, is what allows us to be well-mannered and considerate of others. We know that it is our ability to step back, as it were, and carefully consider the situation without letting our animal instincts mindlessly react, that is the hallmark of a healthy-minded person. Yet despite all our efforts we too often find ourselves reduced to the level of something uncivilised – moody, resentful, spiteful, manipulative and altogether helplessly

unreasonable. No matter what the stuff of our addiction, be it heroin or thinking, the symptoms are always the same.

In themselves reason and thinking are not problems. The problem is our relationship to them. In order to begin to free ourselves from the prison of addictive habits we are unavoidably enjoined to confront that which is addicted, our own-most selves. Who are we? Exactly where is this person who loves happiness and runs away from suffering? What do we really want, deep down, from our lives? If I am myself, how can I, or rather, is it even possible, for me to confront myself? What can I control? What are the limits of my abilities? What are these feelings of pleasure, peace, anger and repulsion that I constantly feel and allow to sway my dreams and fears?

The path out of addiction is, in this material, postmodern, psychologically-aware World, not an unfamiliar one. As most would agree, it must begin with a basic acknowledgment – that the addiction is *out of our control*. That despite our best intentions there is an aspect to our being that is indifferent to our will. Without this basic acceptance, our attempts at trying to control something that is essentially out of our control

will end in a great deal of misspent energy, stress and failure. So it is only from this point that we can begin to investigate the character and the dynamics involved in the cravings and fulfillments of addiction. It is no good blindly removing ourselves from the object of addiction, as to do such a thing is really just the manifestation of another addiction – addiction to the state of non-addiction – but in 'courageous' clothing. Rather, we must penetrate to the very core and pull up our habits from their roots. And to do so our attention must be directed towards the feelings that underlie our relationship to the addiction.

With the craving or perhaps the complete withdrawal from the stuff of addiction there is suffering, with the partaking of the stuff of addiction there is peace and fulfilment. It is towards the suffering of craving and withdrawal that our focus most needs to be directed, as it is upon this feeling that we are least used to gazing. We need to cultivate a relationship with this suffering, we need some kind of supportive arena in which to touch, taste and investigate the reality of it. Within this arena methods can be tested, memories explored and rests taken; therefore all the activities involved in exploring something unfamiliar. Our

success with the suffering of addiction will not be measured by the efficiency of any particular method or technique, but in the ongoing stability of the *arena*. Certain things will help and others hinder, but above all our faith in the arena will effect a kind of stability, one that will crucially begin to diminish the most basic addiction of all – to turn away from suffering *as though it were impenetrable*. To the ending of suffering there is no fixed solution; there are only responses of maturity, integrity and wisdom.

It is only with the maturity of a self-knowledge that can recognise the utterly unique and personal indications of addiction, that reason can be used constructively. When we utilise the powers of reason to analyse something as fundamental as the nature of existence then there are many reasonable arguments for both atheism and theism. However, I know that in myself, whenever I hold a position as an absolute conclusion, above everything else, I am more *projecting* my desires onto reality rather than *perceiving* reality. An agnostic relationship to such fundamental matters recognises that both atheism *and* theism have valid positions which are applicable and relevant in *certain* situations and contexts. Agnosticism quite rightly asks

us to follow our reason as far as it will take us. For the atheist this means not discrediting reasonable evidence for theistic perspectives; and for the theist, it means similarly not discrediting reasonable evidence for atheistic viewpoints. And seeing as agnosticism is more of a method than a position, then it should be perfectly compatible with either camp. Agnosticism *also* asks us to not pretend conclusions are certain unless they are demonstrable. Huxley's use of 'pretend' is very interesting considering the context, for we consider 'pretending' to be more the realm of actors than intellectuals. Yet what Huxley is asking is very simple: do not make unreasonable assumptions in the name of reason, or in other words do not exploit the powers of reason. Huxley's manifesto is nothing other than an encouragement to use reason as a *tool*. He acknowledges the historical achievements of reason, yet he also warns of its limitations. As a tool reason is not impervious to exploitation and misuse.

What Huxley is saying can appear deceptively simple, as though he is saying nothing other than '*use your common sense, be reasonable*'. It is easy to feel that it is all a fuss over nothing; after all, we were told these things when we were children: '*use your common sense,*

be reasonable'. Yet for all its simplicity we need to be reminded of it. Is it not easy to be carried away with the idea that the rigorous application of reason leads only to a cold, atheistic universe? Is it not easy to be carried away with the idea that holding reason above all things leads to industrialisation, mass production, the idealisation of economic efficiency and so on? We need to remember that it is not reason that leads to the monstrosities that are becoming more and more prevalent in the 'modern' western world, but the fickle-mindedness of its users.

Perhaps the best way to express Huxley's single principle is thus: make every effort to distinguish between the way things are, and the way you *fear or dream* things to be. Paradoxically, by holding fast to reason we eventually discover that configured within its very soul is a recognition of its own limitations – and thus the injunction to let go of it. But here is the crux of it: we are not to let go of it out of the mindless and selfish agenda of pretence, but with the acute awareness of our actions. We are not to conveniently ignore it to satiate our desires and fears, we are to courageously let go of it to honour the fundamental freedom of being human. We do not let go of it to move

onto something better, but like the adolescent becoming adult we must leave and let go of our home so that we might discover its true value and power.

WHAT IS IT?



'What is it? Great doubt - then certainly great awakening.'

This calligraphic statement is called a koan. It is a device taken up by a student of Zen Buddhism in order that they might reach a specific goal called enlightenment. There are many koans; other well-known ones include, *“What is the sound of one hand clapping?”* and *“Does a dog have Buddha-nature?”* These are not uniquely obscure examples, they all have this nonsensical and paradoxical character to them. Considering this, we may wonder whether anyone has ever actually solved one of these stubborn little conundrums. Yet the Zen tradition maintains that koans are indeed solvable and have indeed been 'solved'.

Buddhism began with a man called Siddhartha Gautama who lived in India around the fifth to sixth century BCE. Although he was born over two and a half millennia ago we can, from historical and scriptural sources, build a fairly reliable and insightful picture of his life and the following he inspired. We know that he was born in the Gangetic Basin of northern India, the son of a wealthy family, that sometime during his early adulthood he had a deep religious experience and that he spent the rest of his approximately eighty-year life travelling and teaching.

We know that he encouraged a way of life based upon the prevailing ascetic spiritual practices of Brahmanism (what we would probably call Hinduism today) involving a monastic life with its concomitant vows.

For Gautama, the essence of his teaching was grounded in an intimacy with the nature of suffering. He taught that to know suffering is to be free of it. By this he did not mean that one *must* suffer excessively in order to be free of it, but rather that the suffering that we naturally encounter can be used as an opportunity for investigation. Significantly, he was concerned with the *taste* of suffering's ending rather than the *conceptualisation* of that process. But here there was a huge problem, for in order that he might communicate and therefore share his insight, he had to use concepts. It is this unavoidable reality that has led to the diversity and evolution of Buddhism over the centuries, because by the very nature of communication there are inevitably misunderstandings, interpretations and distortions that cause the original meaning to take on new and various manifestations.

Of those that heard his teachings, various degrees of significance would be given to the concepts, the

signposts that pointed to the experience. Some felt they could intuit what Gautama was saying and that the concepts were unnecessary if one could only get to the formless, ineffable experience. Others felt that concepts were more important because they were tangible and could be validated or refuted. This latter camp was especially significant after Gautama's death, when his presence could not supplement the concepts.

There is something of a pattern and a cycle that can be identified in the history of Buddhism; one that in fact seems to characterise most religion's histories. In the struggle to preserve the original potency and authenticity of Gautama's insight, priority was given to the conservation of the incontrovertible *concepts* rather than the subtle and ineffable *experience*. However, because of this, after some time there were those that began to feel that the living heart of Gautama's teachings was becoming lost through the rigidity of formulisation and systematisation. So the response to this was to try and return to the original experience which had inspired the concepts. Efforts were made toward the destruction of tradition, so that it could be replaced by the freshness of reinvention and renewal. Then when followers were content that a satisfactory

return to the primary experiential foundations had been achieved one part of the cycle was complete. From here the tendency was, and still is, to repeat the pattern; renewed and reinvigorated forms eventually succumb to unreflective formulation only to be railed against and dissolved.

Zen is one such response to the over-rationalisation part of the cycle. It began in China during the seventh century when it was known as *Ch'an*, later moving to Japan where it became known as Zen. Although there is much diversity within the Zen tradition, generally its character is seen to be somewhat simpler and more 'down to earth' than its antecedents. Its outward forms (such as its temples, for example) are notably minimalistic, possessing far less ornamentation, its core teachings are less complex and there tends to be less emphasis on the deification of Gautama. Whereas it is the tendency of traditional formulations to emphasise the difficulty and super-humanness of the original teachings, it is the tendency of reformed traditions to emphasise the simplicity and humanness of the original teachings. As the famous Zen anecdote demands, "*If you see the Buddha, kill him!*".

Central to Zen is the engagement with Gautama's teachings as an experience, over and above any conceptualised understanding of them. It is upon this emphasis that the koan primarily works, their paradoxical nature being perfectly tailored to the suspension of conceptual thinking. The word *koan* is an evolution of *kung 'an* which literally translates as *public case*. It comes from Chinese legal vocabulary and is essentially synonymous with our understanding of a landmark case. When law students are studying the many intricacies of their subject, they must look to those unprecedented incidents that have challenged established law and necessitated the creation or evolution of new articles. Not only does this give them a better understanding of existing law but it gives them an idea of the underlying values that govern the maintenance of law as a whole. In Zen, the public case refers to the moment at which a previous student came to realisation; it is a record of the conditions and context that triggered the experience. In the same way that a law student studies a landmark case to understand law, so too does the Zen student study a koan to understand Zen.

The public case that I am concerned with here took place around fifteen hundred years ago and concerns the sixth patriarch of Zen, Hui Neng and his disciple Huai Jang.

Some time around the eighth century Huai Jang, then a young monk in his twenties, journeyed on foot to Mt. Ts'ao Ch'i in southern China to see Hui Neng. Upon arriving at the monastery, the patriarch asked where he had just come from. Huai Jang replied that he had come from Mt. Sung, where he had visited another Zen teacher called Hui An.

Hui Neng then surprised him by asking,
"What is this thing and how did it get here?"

Huai Jang was speechless. Eight years later, though, he was suddenly awakened, and he said to the patriarch, *"I have experienced some awakening."*

The patriarch asked, *"What is it?"*

Huai Jang replied, *"To say it is like something is not to the point."*

"Can it still be cultivated and experienced?"
asked Hui Neng.

Huai Jang replied, *“Although its cultivation and experiencing are not uncalled for, it cannot be tainted.”*

The patriarch said, *“Just that which cannot be tainted is protected and thought of by all Buddhas. It is so for you and also for me.”*

To better understand this encounter it would be useful to have a little further background understanding of koans and Zen.

Traditionally koans are studied in a formal context, through the typically Buddhist meditative attitude. The core of the Buddhist way of life is the monastery, an environment specifically dedicated to awakening, to the experiencing and honouring of Gautama's realisation. Although the many monastic traditions within Buddhism can vary in their style, the heart of their way of life, and this is especially true for the Zen traditions, is meditation. Again, attitudes towards this practice vary and we must be careful not to assume that meditation can only occur in a cross-legged posture with closed eyes.

In the west we are most likely to encounter meditation as a breathing exercise. Typically we would

be encouraged to first find a comfortable and stable posture, preferably with an upright and unsupported back and then to direct our attention towards the tangible sensory experience of breathing. For anyone who has attempted this they will know that, as simple as it sounds, it is actually incredibly difficult to sustain. We are accosted by thoughts, which then proliferate into our favourite narratives and commentaries and then, completely unaware of the task at hand, we discover we are as though a million miles from the simplicity of breathing. The monastic environment is fundamentally organised to be as sympathetic and conducive as possible to this endeavour. There are regular periods of group meditation, relative silence, few distractions such as television and understanding companions who are unlikely to tap on your shoulder as you meditate in order to ask what on earth you might be doing.

With formal koan practice, it is the koan itself, like the tangible sensory experience of breathing, that becomes the object of meditation. When we find ourselves lost in worries or fantasies it is to the perplexity of the koan that we are encouraged to return. The general guidelines for koan practice are

generic to each individual question and are also fundamental tenets of the Zen tradition as a whole. The most important guideline to understand is that this particular practice involves the cultivation of doubt:

“Only doubt more and more deeply, gathering together in yourself all the strength that is in you, without aiming at anything or expecting anything in advance, without intending to be enlightened and without intending not to be enlightened.”

This, at first, seems utterly counter-intuitive; how can anything useful come out of outright 'don't-knowness'? But the kind of doubt that koans refer to is of a different order from indifference or blankness; it is the kind of unknowing that causes a visceral feeling in the body – in the words of Zen, *as though milk has curdled in your belly.*

I have heard it described that the attitude a koan should evoke is the same as that feeling experienced in the pregnant pause that awaits the response of a courting lover's first tentative, *"I love you."* We describe the ensuing atmosphere with words like, *“the air*

becomes thick". For there is so much contained within that silence that though it appears empty it is actually full, full with anticipation. That vibrant, still pause contains the potential to profoundly alter someone's life. It is precisely in moments like these that we feel most alive, as though the whole of our being stands before us in a vast panorama. The mind's chatter temporarily abates, allowing for an intimacy with our senses that will pick up every nuance of what is about to be revealed. It is this state of deep doubt, or we might say deep unknowing, deep perplexity, or deep wondering even, that leads to awakening – as this Zen maxim indicates:

*"No doubt - no awakening
Little doubt - little awakening
Great doubt - great awakening"*

Whereas the lover will inevitably give some kind of answer that we can receive and work with, the koan never does, yet the mind remains stubbornly convinced that the heightened sense of awareness that it triggers can be explained. Understandably the student can become obsessed with the koan, indeed this is even a

good sign; they might dream about it, get angry with it, see it in the shape of a tree, taste it in their food, hear it in the rain. The mind is convinced that it can find an answer, find a way of explaining it, just find some way of resolving the tension of the 'thick air of anticipation'. This can go on for days, weeks and even years. Then at fever point, with a mind finally surrendering its jurisdiction, there is a letting go and something deeply significant is realised. From deep within the bowels there is an intuitive understanding that there is no use in struggle; that the 'thick air of anticipation' and the concomitant heightened awareness remain even when the mind is not trying to run the show, that in fact the direct *tasting* of it is more illuminating than the direct explanation of it. There is the understanding that the human can exist in a perfectly relaxed manner in the presence of Great Doubt. It is possible, indeed preferable, nay optimal, to live with all the awe, wonder and aliveness of the still, vivid and vibrant space of the koan, yet without all the energy-consuming gymnastics and obsessions of the mind.

And now the student is able to 'answer' the koan. It is questioning itself that awakens us, not answers. It is questioning that opens us up, for it requires us to drop

our preconceptions and perceive reality directly, as it really is, before our interpretations and secondhand abstractions of it. So what is it that we finally perceive? The answer to this is that we perceive anything and everything: colours, smells, thoughts, the myriad of forms that grace our universe. The koan does not awaken us to any one particular thing or type of thing, it simply heightens our awareness, as Hui Jang explains, *"To say it is like something is beside the point."* There may not be a concrete conceptualised understanding of what it is that we are perceiving, but there is a very lucid sense of being awake, of being alive. We see, beyond any ambiguity, that *life* is the bedrock, that explanations can only ever be fleeting and relative compared to the fresh and unprecedented immediacy of perceiving. Though that is not to say that explanations are useless; they are of course the most practical way of communicating between two people. It is just that in most cases most of the time we fail to find a balance between perceiving and conceiving. As Huai Jang acknowledges: *"Its cultivation is not uncalled for."* We can see, therefore, that the essence of what Zen and the Buddha teach is not a privileged esoteric mystery; we have always been alive, we have always been able

to perceive, as Huai Jang is careful to point out: “*It cannot be tainted.*” It is not something we can ever gain or lose, because it is and was always with us; we can only cultivate a way of life that is more intimate with it.

We see that the 'answer' is *to question*. We see that all the koan is attempting to do is provide us with that spark of perplexity, and so the koan need not point to any one *thing* in particular. As long as we feel sufficiently 'hooked' by the question, its function as a tool is enough to cultivate an air of intrigue, to open us up, to bring us back to that which life most fundamentally is – the feeling of now. What is this thing and how did it get here? We can now see that this is simply a unique way of describing what a heightened sense of awareness is like. For the Buddhist and the seeker of awakening, it is *both* the question *and* the answer. What appeared at first to be the frustrating and unhelpfully ambiguous utterance of a crazy mystic is now revealed to be an uncompromising attempt to '*cut to the chase*'. Hui Neng was not purposefully trying to confuse Huai Jang, but unhesitatingly offer him precisely what he had travelled all that way to hear.

This particular *public case* is considered to be the foundation of the Korean lineage of Zen, and the koan

that it gives rise to is a central aspect of its teachings. Indeed, one may visit a Korean monastery today and undertake to answer this very koan. For the convenience of formal practice, the koan is reduced to the essential form, the heart of the question “*What is it?*” The student is encouraged to apply the question to everything that arises in their experience, and in accordance with basic Buddhist philosophy, especially that which appears to be suffering or the cause of suffering. It could be applied to an aching back, fear of the dark, the mystery of *Who am I?*, a flower, or the meaning of life. The trick is to keep asking the question over and over again so that it becomes second nature, so that the words becomes less and less necessary, so that the heart and mind become ever more wide-eyed and more and more at peace with the sheer uncanniness that there is anything at all.

THE CANADIAN BOAT SONG

*From the lone shieling of the misty island
Mountains divide us, and waste of seas –
Yet still the blood is strong, the heart is Highland,
And we in dreams behold the Hebrides.*

The Canadian Boat Song Anon.

Let us go back to the beginning, the very beginning, to that profound explosion that we call the Big Bang. Somehow, this event brought into existence all the matter and energy contained within the universe as we know it today. At first the matter that coalesced was simply in the form of basic building blocks, elementary particles and the like, but at some point it began to form into more complex units such as molecules and dust. Eventually this matter began to coagulate into stars, galaxies and even planets. Our solar system came into existence about four billion years ago, then some time later our planet. After many years orbiting around the sun, planet Earth gave birth to basic life forms, which ultimately evolved into the *homo sapiens* species we know and love. These particular beings are better known as humans and they began their adventures some 200,000 years ago on a part of the earth that we now call Africa.

From there these early people slowly began to inhabit areas further afield, and over the millennia developed and evolved ways of life and cultural idiosyncrasies unique to the areas they populated. Let us take the British Isles, where I was born, as an example. Evidence suggests that people have been

living on its soils for tens of thousands of years, perhaps settling whilst Britain was still geologically attached to the mainlands of the European continent. Northern Europe has always been colder than its equator-warmed relatives, and during human history has endured the extremes of what we call the ice age. The effects of vast mountains of frozen water scouring the lands has left unique and unmistakable marks on the land: wide, steep-sided valleys, lochs and carved, sharp-edged mountains. This particular climate and geography has favoured and evolved certain vegetation and also sustained and adapted unique wildlife. In response to these conditions the people who lived on this part of the planet enjoyed certain fortunes such as the abundance of water, endured unique difficulties such as long nights, developed regional tools such as warm clothing and evolved unique characteristics such as lighter skin. The unprecedented adventures of their lives were played out against the characteristic local scenery, housed by the landscape, nourished by the flora and fauna and influenced by the random vagaries of the seasons.

Research suggests that the first inhabitants of the British Isles that could be culturally distinguished from

the peoples of the European lands, were the Celtic race. They are a race whose legacy is still very much palpable in the more traditional currents of Irish, Scottish and Welsh life today. However, it is the history of England, a culture only partly influenced by the Celts, that has had the most significance on the life of the British Isles. Although English people can certainly trace their ancestry through Celtic origins, the rest of their roots lie deeply in other European cultures, namely French, Germanic and Scandinavian. The Angles were essentially from the lands we would now call Germany. They invaded a couple of thousand or so years ago and, as their name implies, this is the ultimate derivation of the word 'England'. It turned out that, through various circumstances, England was to become culturally very powerful, being one of the main centres for the growth of the Industrial Revolution and the European Enlightenment. This in turn helped fuel the expansion of a worldwide empire, which, alongside similar behaviour from other countries, entwined England's fortunes with the rest of the world's. Although this was the beginning of the apparently romantic emergence of a global village, it was also the seed for England's involvement in two World Wars,

which led to the torture and murder of many millions of people. The British Isles has eventually become home to an almost bewildering number of cultures, where, like many countries, the line between indigenous and global is markedly blurred. It is now part of, if not a cornerstone of, a culture, widely known as western civilisation, that has developed amongst other things, nuclear power, commercial global air travel, the internet, space flight and brain surgery.

On the 30th of August 1981 the author of these words was born in Bristol, England, the first of two sons to, by the laws of the birds and the bees, a mother and a father. At about the age of thirteen or fourteen (it was at the time of comet Hyakutake's visit), my mother took my brother and I with family friends on a holiday to the Ardnamurchan peninsula on the west coast of Scotland. This part of Britain is particularly remote and unpopulated; it is very mountainous and boasts spectacular scenery. We did a fair amount of walking on the holiday and one day my mother, brother and I decided to climb the peak of what appeared to be the highest mountain in the area, Ben Hiant. It was a blue-sky day, but very windy, and from the summit there was a grand panoramic view – of the Hebridean

Islands out to the west and Britain's tallest mountains towards the mainland of the east. My mother was very taken by this visual feast, and moved by it she turned westward, winds buffeting her arm-outstretched body and blustering her long, black curly hair; and recited at the top of her voice the lines from the first verse of *The Canadian Boat Song*.



That may be an abridged and select version of the universe's biography but no matter who we are, nor how we came to be, we are all somehow a part of it. Although it is strictly beyond the jurisdiction of genealogy, it is not incorrect to say that we are all descendants of those very first organisms that came into being on this planet. And from there it is not so difficult to see how we are even descendants of the Big Bang, that singular event, that seed and primordial trunk from which *everything* ultimately derives. When seen in this way it is possible to glimpse how each and every one of us is fundamentally paramount to the unfolding of the universe. That whatever we might be doing in this moment is a manifestation of the

universe's mysterious workings – a manifestation as significant as the Big Bang itself. Whether or not we feel, or even know this, it will not alter the truth of our relevance. For the reality is that most often we do not feel, or indeed even wish to recollect this perspective. Most often we feel part of a very much smaller and local significance. Yet the fact remains that regardless of any other thoughts or feelings on the matter we have deep roots, in fact profoundly interconnected ones. We could have only come about through an utterly unprecedented and certainly unrepeatable set of conditions. Whether we embrace it or deny it, we belong. Our bodies may not have shelter, nor a right to return to their homelands, but our souls are intimately and eternally connected to all that is.

It seems easier to associate those earlier cultures, such as the African Bushmen, Native Americans, or Australian Aboriginals with the kind of lives that were lived in accordance with a bigger picture, or even the *biggest* picture. Their humble and simple lives appear to be a reflection of, and sincere gesture towards, their deep, embracing connection with all that is; whereas for many of those living in modern cultures it is perfectly possible, in fact typical even, to feel

profoundly *disconnected* and isolated. It is perfectly common to feel as though one's self is utterly meaningless and that the universe that created this bewildered person has absolutely nothing to do with us. It is as though we were utterly incompatible, alien, foreign, communicating in a different language, the world offering us such little feedback that we conclude our existence is random and surplus. At what point did humanity go wrong? Or was it me? Did I make some fatal unconscious mistake when I was little?

Somehow we, as a culture, have forgotten what we are. We have forgotten that no matter where we are, it is the leading edge of the greatest story, journey and adventure that there could possibly be. We have forgotten that we are still, though outwardly it may not appear so, a tribe, that our fate still lies in the hands of nature, that each one of us has a particular talent to offer, that we still sing, dance, gather, worship, laugh and fall in love. As apparently unnatural as our urbanised planet is becoming, it is still, at this very moment (and as it always has been) silently spinning through its infinite and mysterious womb of space.

When my mother recited those lines on the top of Ben Hiant my brother and I were deeply embarrassed.

Even though there was probably not a single soul within a ten mile radius, we hid behind a nearby rock. In many ways the fact that I did such a thing was an indication of those typically isolating western worldviews that were to later lead to far bigger problems. Once I began to take my first adult steps into the big wide world, I found myself constantly and unavoidably coming up against what could be described as an existential 'rock'. I just could not see where I fitted into the bigger picture; my view was blocked, I felt myself to be an irrelevant bystander. How was I to emerge from behind my 'rock'? Would I have to discard my established western ways in order to find some roots connecting me to the World? But would this not also be discarding my identity and therefore also a part of myself? How could I change but also keep my roots intact?

I very tentatively began practising Buddhist meditation from books. At first I did not even tell anyone what I was up to; I did it on my own, covertly behind closed doors. I wanted to discover what it was first; I wanted to intellectually scrutinise it and stamp it with some kind of scientific verdict. I dared not tell anybody I was doing such a thing in case my

conclusions were negative. In a way though, what ended up happening was that I lost authority over the process – life began to make sense in a way that I could not completely explain. However, this was not the end of something but merely the beginning, as there was now a new problem: it appeared to me that there was a huge gulf between the meditative way of life and the western one. On the one hand, how could I translate the goals and aspirations of meditation into the necessities of bills, taxes and a roof over my head? And on the other hand, was it even possible to truly do justice to the meditative path as a westerner leading a typically western life?

Fortunately, however, it is not as black and white as this, because no matter what outward form it may take, the first hand experience of peace and happiness is ultimately irrefutable. No matter where you are from or whatever anyone might say, if you taste fulfilment deep in the bowels of your being then it is, quite simply, fulfilment. We don't need any external authority to validate the quality of our inner lives. Interestingly I find this truth movingly demonstrated by two gestures apparently separated by time and cultures; the first being my mother's recitation of *The*

Canadian Boat Song and the second being the Buddha's final act before his awakening.

As the traditional scriptures account, the Buddha, in his earlier years, when he was better known as Siddhartha Gautama, lived in wantless luxury, and was only drawn away from his worldly life after a deep recognition of the inevitability of sickness, old age and death. He saw that no amount of luxury could overcome these sufferings, and that another way must be found of calming the existential angst that such awareness brings. This struggle to find a satisfactory response to his dilemma is symbolised by his relationship to a nemesis: Mara. Mara continually challenges and discourages the Buddha throughout his whole life, even after his awakening. In the years before his life-changing realisation, so great is his longing for liberation that the Buddha undertakes great austerities, fasting himself into a coma and within inches of death. This extreme and sincere effort ultimately leads nowhere, and in fact apparently makes his dilemma even worse. He is trapped; he knows that neither the privileged luxuries of worldly life nor the hardships of austerity cannot effectively resolve anything for him.

It is at this point that he decides to sit under a Bodhi tree and not to move from there until he has found his solution. Predictably he is assailed by Mara and his armies, who try to scare him, tempt him and deter him. But the Buddha is not discouraged; he has come to know Mara's tricks too well. Simply and confidently, he rises above Mara with the response, *"I know you."* Having little left to attack the Buddha with, Mara resorts to interrogating him: *"What right do you have, a simple human, no different from any other mortal, to achieve awakening, the greatest of realisations?"* It is the Buddha's response to this question that never ceases to amaze and inspire me. To demonstrate his credentials for unsurpassable peace, and his birthright to it, the Buddha simply touches the ground beneath him with his fingers. It is a gesture that can be seen in many of the statues of the Buddha to this day.

The Buddha is not entitled to awakening because he has been privileged by some god, but because he is Siddhartha Gautama – a human, like all others, who can trace their ancestry back to the womb of the earth and ultimately to the source of the universe itself. Gautama found his way home by touching the earth, both literally and metaphorically, and so recalled his roots,

and through this rediscovery of himself he realised that he had always been home. The pali word *Bud* translates as nothing more spiritual than 'awake'; a *Buddha* is therefore an *awakened one*. To become aware, as though from a dream or behind a 'rock', of who and where we are, is what we call awakening. To touch or be touched by the earth – or, in other words, our undeniable roots – is to awaken, is to become a Buddha, an awakened one.

To become aware of who and what we are, can curiously, or perhaps obviously, be instigated by our *separation* from the same. This is the moving theme of the *Canadian Boat Song*, where '*who and what we are*' can be taken to mean our home. During the initial phases of European emigration to northern America some two to three hundred years ago, many Scots people found themselves a very long way from home. The remote and mountainous lands of Canada may in some places appear similar to those of Scotland, but to a Scot they are not home; their roots, their ancestry, the stories of their lives are not suffused within its soils. *The Canadian Boat Song* is a lament which longs for the Scottish homeland. It begins by telling us about a '*shieling*', a Scots word meaning cottage; and of course a

cottage means home, probably with a toasty open fire, soup simmering on the stove and a loving family chatting about their days. Its description as a 'lone' abode nestled on a '*misty isle*' is very suggestive of a deep bond to the land. It describes not just a sense of connection to a particular building, but a relationship to a particular piece of the *Earth* as well; the Earth, of course, being one of the most primordial roots, ancestors and '*homes*' of all. Yet as the next line expresses, the singer is distantly and achingly separated from it by a '*waste of seas and mountains*' – metaphorically speaking, a feeling which I am sure we can all associate with sometimes. But then we are reminded of the triumphant and insuppressible truth of our roots: '*Yet still the blood is strong and the heart is highland*'. It is as though no matter where we are, nor in what situation we find ourselves, there is some kind of 'soul-blood' that connects us to our ancestors, our roots and our homes, and nourishes our hearts. It is this ever-present and ever-abiding reality that animates our souls above all else, as the last line celebrates: '*As we in dreams behold the Hebrides*'. To be home. There is no greater desire, no greater wish, no greater place that can be imagined or dreamed.

I have not heard my mother's mountain-top recital since, but after my own adventures of leaving home, growing up and travelling the hills, mountains and valleys of both my inner and outer worlds, the memory of the event is somewhat different. For me her Hebridean salute and Gautama's earth-touching gesture are both reminders of a profound and immutable belonging. Whether I am a westerner or a follower of the meditative path seems to matter little from the broader perspective of simply being a living, breathing person. I may be an explorer in foreign lands but I know that somewhere there is a shieling nestled on a misty isle with my name on it, because the path home, to the truest home of our hearts, is not one that leads away from where we are, but one that leads directly to it.

THE LAST BEYOND

*So long ago there was a birth
of human beings upon this earth.
Graced with stars but cursed to die
they lived with what was lying by.
How can we know when lost and cold
the depth of feeling they did hold
as new horizons for them came
when someone held aloft a flame!?*

*We've gone beyond, it seems with ease,
beyond the land to cross the seas,
beyond the ground to fly with grace,
beyond the earth to star-lit space.*

*And from my place of standing on
these giant's shoulders wise and strong,
I glimpsed a sight, a view upon,
the last beyond where few have gone.
For miles I walked to find this place,
it stayed a dream until with grace,
I looked within my own-most heart
and saw we'd never been apart.
And now I know when lost and cold
the depth of feeling they did hold
as new horizons for them came
when someone held aloft a flame.*

The Last Beyond by the Author

We have indeed come a long way since our early prehistoric days. What, in all that time and from all those adventures, successes and failures, have we learnt? Well, apart from the simple answer, 'an awful lot', it seems that the equally valid answer is, that there is still an awful lot *left* to learn. As *The Last Beyond* describes, we certainly have 'gone beyond', from fire to the moon, but when and where will we find that last one? Though it is unlikely that

there will ever come a time when there is nothing left to do, see or understand, there is a beyond, a final one, that all the others rest upon – simple contentment. In each of our own ways we are fuelled by peace and stillness; without it, we sometimes cannot even get out of bed in the morning, let alone explore outer space! In truth, the last beyond is also the first.

Words, philosophies, gestures, theories, stories and ideas mean nothing unless they can be transferred into the reality of our day-to-day lives. No matter how deep our insights, nor how inspiring our dreams, if they are not joined with the commitment to act, they literally amount to nothing. In the words of that old euphemism, *“If you want something then you go and get it.”* We can think about it for as long as we want, we can worry and mull over the reactions of others until the cows come home, but in the instant of doing, the world is changed forever. All action is a step into the unknown, a risk, a meeting with the beyond; there is no way around this, we need to be courageous, ready to change and willing to grow. The *last* beyond is not the one that we need only step into once, whereupon we can sit back and relax for the rest of our life. It is the beyond that, once we have passed into it, empowers us

to unhesitatingly step into other beyonds time and time again. The last beyond is a discovery of passion, of our heart's desire, of love, of that which sets our lives on fire.

Would humanity's discovery of the fire of *love* effect a paradigm shift comparable to humanity's prehistoric discovery of *actual* fire? It is an evocative and inspiring analogy. To begin with there is that dangerous, yet reverence-inspiring nature to fire, that it spreads, wildly and powerfully; starting from a mere spark, whole forests can burn down in roaring infernos. Yet although it possesses this awesome danger, we have learnt to tame it; we are the only animal that starts fire, because we are the only ones who can also put it out. It is a powerful symbol, as even the wild beasts of the night realise: the orange, glowing, flickering body of the torch-holding human. With the ability to make fire we can keep warmer and more comfortable; in fact so much so that it allows us to live in much more extreme conditions. With fire we can eat a wider variety of foods, explore the farther colder wildernesses of our planet and extract metals from rocks to make everything from weapons to jewellery.

The human bodies of our times may not be so in need of the warmth of fire but our living human souls certainly are. In terms of love and passion we are, metaphorically speaking, out in the cold. Whereas all those millennia ago it was the brave pioneers of fire that evolved humanity, today it is those brave pioneers of love that shall effect the changes. Perhaps we do not attach the same heroic significance to those who are moved to explore the limits of love as we do to those ancient fire-explorers. It is easy to think that nothing in our modern day and age could compare to the epic and primordial adventure of trying to tame fire. To give this a contemporary analogy, is it not more appropriate to symbolise the adventure of fire with *The Lord of the Rings* and the adventure of love with *Bridget Jones's Diary*, where one is played out in the foreboding hinterlands of Mordor and the other in the cosy cosmopolitan streets of London?

But let us not beat about the bush; let us be clear that what we are talking about here is nothing short of utter happiness, total contentment and unsurpassable peace – that which in *whatever* form it takes, is not something to be smirked at. Of course this is what we would like to think of as being in love, but, and mostly

due to our experiences of 'loving' relationships, we may get glimpses of it, but more often than not it seems to be associated with the opposite. And so, like the fatal dark side of fire, people naturally respond with trepidation and caution to that which causes destruction and suffering. To define love in such idealistic ways seems dangerous, as though one is bound to fall, is bound get one's fingers burnt, one might even say!

To tame love? There is *so* much to risk, yet there is *so* much to gain. We are indeed, if we choose so, the great pioneers of our time, of our era, no different from those early, cold, confused and searching peoples. We face precisely the same obstacles, with the same resources and same chances of success. We are enjoined to discover the same imagination, creativity, luck and courage. Yet there is one fundamental difference: the fire that we must ignite, is ourselves. This is the great quest of our time: if we can touch those deepest stirrings of our hearts and souls, then it will be as though we have discovered fire, with all its light, warmth and energy.

Whether we believe in gods or are utterly atheistic, there is something striking about this image of

conquering the wild forces of nature, as in when we hold a flaming torch above our heads, that strikes a deep human resonance. Faced with this bewildering thing called existence we are not helpless, passive victims; we can engage with it and it will respond. We can go beyond what is merely lying in front of us, we can make a difference; we can change ourselves and the world. And when we do, let us not measure nor compare our achievements, for, like fire, the *tiniest* spark will ignite the greatest inferno.

NOTES

p. 1 ... **Alone With Others** ... Title adapted from Stephen Batchelor. *Alone With Others: An Existential Approach to Buddhism*. New York: Grove, 1983.

p. 9 ... **The sheer uncanniness that there is anything at all** ... This notion also plays an important role in the writings of Stephen Batchelor.

p. 17 ... **Agnosticism, in fact, is not a creed, but a method** ... T.H. Huxley. *Agnosticism and Christianity*. 1889. Accessed from www.infidels.org/library/modern/mathew/sn-huxley.html on March 5th 2007.

p. 29 ... **What is it? Great doubt – then certainly great awakening** ... Kusan Sunim. Taken from Batchelor, Stephen *The Faith to Doubt* Parallax Press: California; 1990, p20.

p. 34 ... **Hui Neng then surprised him by asking** ... This encounter between Huai Jang and Hui Neng only appears in later versions of the *Platform Sutra*. See Philip Yampolsky. *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, p. 53. The version used here is taken from Stephen Batchelor. *The Faith to Doubt* Parallax Press: California; 1990, p27.

p. 35 ... **Only doubt more and more deeply**
... taken from Stephen Batchelor. *The Faith to Doubt*
Parallax Press: California; 1990, p27.

p. 41 ... **From the lone shieling of the misty
isle** ... This is a traditional verse, the whole thing can
be viewed at
http://www.rampantscotland.com/songslsongs_canadian.html

p. 48 ... **What right do you have** ... This is
paraphrased from various interpretations of the
Buddha's enlightenment. It seems that the 'touching the
earth' narrative is mainly found in the Jataka stories;
For one example see A. Ferdinand Herold *The Life of
Buddha* tr. by Paul C Blum: sacred-texts.com, 1922.

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