

**THE GNOSTIC OF MOUNT WHITNEY:
A PERSONAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL MEMOIR OF FRANKLIN MERRELL-WOLFF**

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Part I: Introduction

A memoir is by definition a personal recollection, not to be confused with a biography. Nevertheless, I hope the reader will forgive the amount of time I spend discussing my own views and experiences. There are three reasons for this: (1) I hope that others can benefit from what has been one of the most important learning voyages of my life—perhaps more from its pitfalls than its peaks. (2) Instead of following the scholarly custom in philosophy of avoiding as many traces of the personal as possible, I hope that the reader, by knowing something about my views, will therefore be all the more able to filter my subjective accounts of Franklin Merrell-Wolff, so as to arrive at a more comprehensive idea of the significance of the man and his philosophy. (3) Finally, my aim in writing about a process whose inception took place many years ago is to emphasize the spiritual, philosophical, and psychological aspects of it that are relevant to the exceptional and critical times we live in now. I have tried to avoid nostalgia or reminiscence for its own sake.

In this essay, I will be relaying details of conversations I had with Dr. Wolff over thirty years ago.² In spite of the length of time, my recall of the details of these conversations is quite vivid, especially those with a strong philosophical content. I don't mean that I haven't done some reconstruction, still less that I recall every word verbatim (though that sometimes happens), but that I remember the subjects of the exchanges, and most often the choice of words, gestures, and the tone. When the subject is philosophical or spiritual, and I know I have forgotten the exact words, I feel that my re-writing of them, as it were, is faithful to the essence of Dr. Wolff's views and teachings as I perceive them. I tend to trust my memories of these encounters, if only because they were conversations of such enduring significance for me. Of course I cannot ask the same of the reader; hence it may be helpful to know something about my personal views and biases, or "where I'm coming from," in the language of my generation.

I begin with a confession: I fully sympathize with Joseph Campbell's reply to the following question from the audience after a learned lecture on yoga: "Sir, do you practice any form of yoga?" His answer: "Yes. My yoga is books." Naturally, people laughed, but I believe he was more serious than they realized.

Of course reading books cannot constitute a complete spiritual path. But there are some temperaments for which a book can have an alchemical kind of transformative power—provided one learns how to read in ways that are not taught in school.

As a university student of mathematics, science, philosophy, and literature, I was a devout scientific materialist whose hero was Bertrand Russell. Nonetheless, I gradually began to

¹For general information about Franklin Merrell-Wolff, please refer to the wealth of material on the Franklin Merrell-Wolff Fellowship's website at <http://www.merrell-wolff.org>; see also the Wikipedia entry on Wolff at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franklin_Merrell-Wolff.

²In this memoir, I mostly use "Franklin Merrell-Wolff" or "FMW" to refer to his writings and philosophy, and "Dr. Wolff" to refer to the man. When I was with him, over the winter of 1980-81, most of his students used the latter as a respectful term of address (although he did not have a doctorate, Wolff accepted—and later left—a professorship at Stanford University in the Department of Pure Mathematics); other students called him "Franklin," or more rarely, "Yogi."

sense that something about the scientific, modernist worldview was shallow, and somehow seriously mistaken. But its intellectual authority seemed irrefutable. Finally, a number of books and life-experiences (including psychoactive substances) caused cracks to appear in the shell of this worldview, and then to spread rapidly—a frightening, as well as a liberating process. Three authors played major roles in helping me through this passage: Aldous Huxley (*The Doors of Perception*, *Island*, and above all, *The Perennial Philosophy*); J. Krishnamurti (*Commentaries on Living* and *The Only Revolution*); and the few remaining intellectual shreds of my scientific materialism were blown away by J.B. Priestley's *Man and Time* (especially his discussion of J.W. Dunne's *An Experiment With Time*).

My first—and perhaps most decisive—meeting with the spirit of the man I would later call Dr. Wolff took place in 1976, when I discovered his books, *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object*, followed by *Pathways through to Space*, in an esoteric bookstore.³ My friend Rich Murray, who had studied with John Lilly, had told me of Lilly's praise of this author, and I knew I was interested. For some years, I'd been searching for a synthesis of East and West that would reconcile the insights from my education in Western science, mathematics, philosophy, and literature with the great wisdom-traditions of the East, and with mysticism in general.

But I found myself deeply dissatisfied with the teachings of Eastern (or, for that matter, Western) mystical traditions regarding the role of the *mind* in enlightenment. These teachings had plenty to say about something called *thought*, always treated as an obstacle to Self-realization, and about the importance of letting go of our attachment to it. Some of this was actually quite beneficial for a temperament like mine, which can rely excessively on the intellect. But none of the texts I encountered (with the exception of *The Philosophy of Freedom* by Rudolf Steiner) showed any awareness of the subtle, but useful distinction between *thought* and *thinking*. They had little if anything to say about contemplative thinking, and nothing whatsoever to say about creative thinking—it was as if such a notion were irrelevant, or illusory.

It was therefore a tremendously refreshing and encouraging experience for me to discover a book, written from the mystical perspective of the *Philosophia Perennis*, where illustrious names from our Western intellectual heritage such as Plato, Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel were no longer ignored, but brought into dialogue with the East, and with a perspective grounded in the supreme value of Awakening. More than this, Merrell-Wolff's writings were clearly grounded in his own awakening.⁴

³These books are now available from the State University of New York Press, which has published *Pathways Through to Space* along with Parts 1 and 2 of *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object* as: *Franklin Merrell-Wolff's Experience and Philosophy: A Personal Record of Transformation and a Discussion of Transcendental Consciousness* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994); Parts 3 and 4 of *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object* are published as: *Transformations in Consciousness: The Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).

⁴I don't even begin to use metaphysical capitals the way FMW does in his writings, but in this essay I shall use the capitalized word *Awakening* to speak of the timeless truth that cannot be comprehended by words nor by an experience in time, though it is the source of the noblest words and experiences; I use *awakening* to speak of an experience that takes place in time, with a beginning and an end. It is extremely important not to confuse the two. I don't believe Dr. Wolff himself did (certainly he at least he tried not to, because some of his writings clearly show that he understood the distinction), but the very power of his experiences, combined with the eloquence and inspiration of his writing, can encourage such confusion. In my case it did for years, which is why I never thought to speak to him directly about this subject.

For me, these books seemed surrounded by a palpable field of grace, and transmission. I drank both of them deeply, one after the other, like a thirsty traveler, reading for many hours each day. For almost two weeks, most of my time was spent in a state that the Sufis call *drunkenness*. I had previously experienced this from reading inspired literature, mostly in the form of great poetry, scripture, or fiction. This was the first time I'd gotten drunk on philosophy, and it was different from previous intoxications—more serene, more lucid, more profound, with fewer emotional distractions. It was also by far the most sustained such experience I had known. Thankfully, it was during a time in which I was unemployed and had minimal social obligations (too many of the latter would have been difficult, and probably ended the experience). Curiously, the most powerful epiphanies came during my reading of *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object* rather than *Pathways*, which is more poetic and accessible for most readers. The clarity, rigor, and elegance of the author's arguments and reflection reminded me of the kind of thinking I had learned to appreciate as a university student proving theorems in pure mathematics. Much later, I was glad, though not surprised, to learn that Dr. Wolff had taught mathematics at Stanford University.

No longer was there any doubt for me that a true synthesis between East and West was possible. No longer did I feel as if I had to devalue or apologize for my Western mind, formed by philosophical and scientific studies. And I realized that the ancient threefold Hindu system of *bhakti*, *karma*, and *jñāna* spiritual temperaments (with different paths to Realization corresponding to each temperament) had plenty of room for the deepest texts of Western philosophy, most of which could be categorized as jñanic, or gnostic.⁵

Part II: An Individual Learning Process

My encounter with Dr. Wolff was the beginning of an open-ended learning process of the greatest significance in my life. It has turned out to be a very challenging one, with surprises and shocks along the way. Early on, I began to suspect (and finally verify beyond any doubt) that it was closely related to a collective learning process happening simultaneously in the culture, and subculture, in which I lived. The post-WWII generations of Americans loosely referred to as the Boomers—or in a more global sense, the *Zeitgeist* characterized as the “postmodern condition”—represent perhaps the first generations in Western history to embark, in large numbers, on an individual spiritual quest that has many names.⁶ Herman Hesse, a precursor and literary Elder for these generations, called it the “Journey to the East.” We might roughly summarize it as the individual, mystical quest for something called “Enlightenment” (not to be confused with the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century). The peaks, valleys, and pitfalls of

⁵The Greek word *gnosis* is related, through its Indo-European root *gnô-*, to the Sanskrit word *jñāna*, the English word *knowledge*, the Latin word *cognoscere*, and so on. I follow Henry Corbin's usage of *gnosis* and *gnostic* as approximate equivalents to *jñāna*, and *jñāni*, thus avoiding the confusion of the capitalized words *Gnosticism*, *Gnostic*, etc., which refer to Mediterranean metaphysical and religious doctrines irrelevant to this essay, and to the work of FMW. In my interpretation (and I believe Corbin would have agreed), the essential meaning of the word *gnosis* is the same as Merrell-Wolff's striking formulation “knowledge through identity.” See Henry Corbin, *The Voyage and the Messenger* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1998).

⁶The origin of the term ‘postmodern’ is attributed to French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. I use it only to describe a fairly well-defined phenomenon that is social, psychological, and cultural in nature. In other words, I avoid the philosophical connotations of “postmodernism,” which are anything but well-defined, and irrelevant to this essay.

this voyage comprise a learning process with a personal and a collective dimension. This is why I have separated the central body of this essay into two parts (Parts II and III). Of course personal and collective aspects can never be entirely separated, especially in a memoir, thus the titles of Part II (“An Individual Learning Process”) and Part III (“A Collective Learning Process”) are approximations. Inside each of these parts are informal chapter descriptions in boldface. I hope this will be useful for the reader, bearing in mind that the sequence of this memoir will therefore not be an entirely chronological one.

First Meetings

Taking advantage of a public appearance by John Lilly, who had written the introduction to *Pathways Through to Space*, and was instrumental in bringing about its republication, I wrote a letter to Franklin Merrell-Wolff at the address Lilly gave me.⁷ I received a friendly answer from his wife Gertrude, inviting me to attend a *satsang* meeting whenever it was convenient for me, but to let them know in advance. I shelved all my other plans and arranged to drive to Lone Pine, California within a couple of months.

That first meeting was frustrating, partly because other people were occupying most of Dr. Wolff’s attention, and I had too little time to wait for another day. It was also tragically colored by the fact that it occurred shortly before Gertrude’s sudden, unexpected illness and death—as I learned only much later, though I remember her saying she wasn’t feeling well that evening. My first real encounter with Dr. Wolff took place a couple of years after her death, in the late summer of 1980.

The drive to his house from Lone Pine up the Eastern slope of Mount Whitney is unforgettable: a desert landscape of austere and majestic beauty, with enormous boulders scattered everywhere, often piled on top of each other like pebbles, as if casually tossed there by the hands of a giant. There are also surprising mini-oases of trees and reeds, and an occasional tiny, but gushing brook—signs of the sparse but lively snowmelt in the rain-shadow of the highest mountain in the United States for most of its history. Even though I’d made this trip a couple of years previously, I thought I was totally lost several times, but recalled warnings that the road seems excessively long to newcomers. When I finally arrived at his house, I realized I was quite a bit early—I had forgotten that Dr. Wolff refused to observe daylight savings time.

I got out of the car to stretch my legs, and took plenty of time to gaze upon the overpowering spectacle to the east. Just on the physical level, it is obvious why this place is called “The Great Space.” Looking down from high over Owens Valley toward the Inyo Mountains, and further away toward Death Valley, near the Nevada border, the Sierra and the Inyo ranges confront each other like two vast celestial armies. The overwhelming beauty of this nature I gazed upon was not a friendly, welcoming one. It was harsh, wild, grand, breathtaking—and very dry. The blending of the pastel colors were amazingly subtle, making the sharp contrasts between light and dark all the more violent. In all my travels, I have rarely seen such a dramatic landscape. I couldn’t help thinking that it was symbolic of something in Franklin Merrell-Wolff’s vision—perhaps related to the austerity implied by what he calls the “High Indifference”? Months later, when I ventured to ask him if there were a symbolic significance in his choice to live in this place, he smiled but would only say: “I like it high and dry.”

⁷Lilly wrote the introduction to the 1973 Julian Press (New York) edition of *Pathways Through to Space*, which was originally published in 1944 by Richard R. Smith (New York).

As we sat down in large, comfortable armchairs for our first substantial conversation, I was immediately struck by three things: his manner of dress, his physical appearance, and the quality of his voice. He wore a suit and tie (with a colored shirt), which seemed strangely formal in that wild, remote country; he appeared a couple of decades younger than his reported age of ninety-four; and his voice and manner of speaking had a resonant, slow, measured cadence, and an eloquence that was at times oratorical.

We hit it off very well, with an unexpected affinity of common interests. Though I had a number of spiritual questions I intended to ask him, we somehow wound up in a long discussion about pure mathematics, which I hadn't planned or foreseen at all. Indeed, both of us seemed surprised at the mutual enthusiasm that was aroused, so that we wound up speaking far longer than scheduled, and I was invited to supper.

In this, as in most serious discussions with Dr. Wolff, I was struck by his rhetorical gift. His eloquence was not only reflected in his lucidity of expression, but in the measured, rhythmic cadences of his voice when he was stimulated. This downright theatrical gift was surprising in a seemingly introverted, contemplative intellectual, and became to me one of his most engaging traits.⁸ (Later, I learned that he preferred to tape his reflections first, rather than writing them directly.)

One subject we kept returning to was the genius of Georg Cantor, and the spiritual implications of his work.⁹ Cantor's mind-boggling discoveries relating to the nature of the infinite had opened a veritable Pandora's Box, engendering paradoxes and a heated controversy among mathematicians and philosophers that continues to this day. Cantor's work created (or revealed?) a deep and surprisingly emotional schism regarding the very foundations of mathematics. Both Dr. Wolff and I clearly sympathized with what I might summarize as the pro-infinity view.¹⁰ Nevertheless, we agreed that some finitists have a point when they warn about the danger of *hubris* in thinking that our finite minds can ever comprehend the infinite.

⁸Here, I mean *theater* in its original, sacred sense, derived from the ancient Greek verb *theorein*, which means to show or to demonstrate. Interestingly, it is also the root of the word *theorem*.

⁹Georg Cantor (1845-1918), a German mathematician from a Christianized family of Jewish origin. His life had a tragic aspect, due to the rejection and outright hostility he suffered from reactionary mathematicians—not so much because of anti-Semitism, as some have supposed, but because of the bold originality, and philosophical challenge of his work. Mathematics itself began to divide around pro-and anti-Cantor sentiments, though the latter have always been a minority. Extremists in this group included a few eminent figures, such as Poincaré, who described Cantor's work as “a sickness from which mathematics will one day recover.” Gregory Chaitin, an eminent contemporary mathematician, quipped in a BBC television interview that “Cantor is mathematics on LSD.” (But Chaitin also implies that he is neither anti-Cantor, nor anti-LSD.) See two excellent BBC Horizon programs: *To Infinity and Beyond* (Marcus du Sautoy, BBC Four, October 13, 2008); and, *Dangerous Knowledge* (David Malone, BBC Four, August 8, 2007), whose portrait of Cantor touches on the spiritual implications of his work. See also my essay, “A Mathematical Supplement to the Works of FMW” and Mael Melvin's essay, “Infinity and Consciousness,” both published in the “Other Works” section of the Wolff Archives on the Fellowship website. By far the best popular book ever written on this subject is Rudy Rucker's *Infinity and the Mind* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1982) Also, his book *The Fourth Dimension, A Guided Tour of the Higher Universes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) is, despite its playful and humorous tone, actually a philosophically deep, comprehensive, yet accessible exploration of the subject, and a good complement to the chapter of *Pathways* entitled “The Symbol of the Fourth Dimension.”

¹⁰The origin of this schism goes back to ancient Greek philosophers, most of whom were finitists, like Plato. Aristotle's dictum slightly modified Greek finitism: Infinity can only be a potentiality, never an actuality. Although we didn't discuss Aristotle, I am virtually certain that Dr. Wolff would have disagreed with this.

“An attitude of humility with regard to the Infinite is one thing,” he reflected. “But it is an entirely different matter to declare that infinite sets cannot exist. To me, this seems closer to arrogance than to humility. Who are we to say that, because our minds cannot fully grasp or calculate infinity, it therefore does not exist? Indeed, if numbers can be said to ‘exist’ in any sense, then infinite sets must also exist. The fact that these sets turn out to behave so strangely, unlike anything else in the previous mathematics of any culture, should evoke great wonder and a sense of beauty, not rejection.”

“I completely agree. It puzzles me that there have been some brilliant mathematicians and philosophers who oppose Cantor’s work. Sometimes it seems to me like a reaction of fear—perhaps it *is* a kind of fear.”

“That may well be. If so, it would appear to be a very ancient one. Perhaps you know of Pascal’s terror of the infinite spaces? But it goes back much further than that, to the ancient Greeks. I cannot but suspect that it is ultimately a form of the egocentric fear of one’s own insignificance as a finite appearance within an unfathomable Reality without limits. From what I gather of your familiarity with my work, I doubt that it will come as a surprise to you that I maintain that there is no escape from this fear, and no solution to it, until it finally dawns in the mind that *I Am this limitless Reality.*”

“Yes, indeed. What you’re saying reminds me of an account I read by a French writer named René Daumal. When he was an adolescent, he had a near-death experience that was tremendously visionary. He felt that a vast knowledge was pouring through him. But the only articulate thought he could retain after he regained ordinary consciousness was this statement: *The identity of the existence and the non-existence of the finite within the infinite.*”¹¹

“That’s remarkable. I would prefer to express it differently, but that’s a very interesting way of putting it. The reaction against Cantor and the mathematics of the transfinite may well be based on a fear of this truth.”

He also spoke of the unique contribution of the Greeks: their “noble dissatisfaction” with any mathematical principle that works in practice, but has not been proven to follow from more fundamental propositions, called axioms. For example, the famous Pythagorean Theorem was known long before Pythagoras as a practical principle in surveying and architecture by the Egyptians, the Chinese, and others. But the emergent Greek genius, as manifested in Pythagoras, could not be satisfied with a mathematical principle merely because it works in practice. It had to be demonstrated (*theorein*) to follow logically from a fundamental group of axioms and definitions, none of which are either derivable from the others, or contradict the others. The result of such a proof is called a theorem, which of course can then be used to prove more advanced theorems, without having to resort directly to the axioms. The origin and validity of the axioms themselves is in a sense mysterious, because they appeal to a kind of cognition and intuition whose truth (in Dr. Wolff’s view), though obviously related to sense-perception, is independent of it. He considered the Greek discovery of the axiomatic method to be a landmark in human history, not just for mathematics and science, but for philosophy and even for spirituality as well. He also felt that we have barely begun to appreciate the potential spiritual value of modern mathematics as a body of *symbols* to help us better translate between ordinary consciousness and transcendent consciousness, which is beyond words.

It was during this conversation that I first heard the word *psychosphere*, which it turned out he often used. I suspect that he may have coined it. Generally speaking, it means a kind of

¹¹This quote is from René Daumal’s essay, “Une Expérience fondamentale,” *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade*, no. 1 (April 1946), 166-73.

psychic field or atmosphere surrounding a geographical, cultural, or historical nexus. (For example: “The psychosphere of San Francisco favors social experimentation.”) This eminently useful word has long since become a part of my own vocabulary, and I try to ignore more recent and fatuous usages I’ve come across.

It was also during this first conversation that he explained why he refused to observe daylight savings time:

Since ancient times, human beings have adapted to the rhythm of the seasons, according to the latitude they live in, and other natural parameters. If people want more hours of daylight, why can’t they simply follow ancient custom, and change the times of their office hours, their work, their schools, and so forth, in accordance with this? Daylight savings time (a relatively recent innovation, as you may know) is, in effect, a refusal to adapt to nature. Furthermore, it distorts our awareness of natural cycles—it amounts to a kind of demand that the Earth follow our clocks, instead of the reverse. This, too, is a form of hubris.

On reflection, I decided that what I had regarded as a bizarre eccentricity was a most congenial view to me, as it still is today. It would help human beings (especially in cities) to live with at least a little more awareness of natural rhythms, if we abolished daylight savings time entirely.

We also spoke of the perplexing and lamentable scarcity of dialogue between luminaries of Western science and philosophy on the one hand, and those of Eastern philosophical, yogic, and religious traditions on the other. In the East, a sense of the sacred has never been lost in relation to philosophy, as it largely has with us. Yet the East has much to learn from the West as well—especially regarding the value of philosophical detachment. We both felt that humanity is in great need of such a dialogue. We also speculated about the possibility of a marriage of contemplative traditions that would engender a truly new culture. At one point he mentioned Aurobindo (with whose work I was unfamiliar at that time), but neither of us could envision anything very concrete, and I remember that there came a moment of pregnant silence between us. It was as if we were both perceiving a deep collective need and question, and also acknowledging our inability to answer it. We seemed to be in unknown territory, with no traditions or sages of the past to offer guidance. It marked the end of this first conversation. Only later would I realize how significant this silence was, at least for me.

Afterward I had a talk with Doroethy Leonard, Dr. Wolff’s adopted granddaughter, by his first marriage to Sherifa. She had noticed the affinity between us, and told me that he was currently in need of an assistant to live in the spare bedroom in his house, someone who was close to the teachings, who could function as a kind of secretary-handyman, and also cook meals and drive for him. Doroethy was responsible for finding someone, and asked me if I’d be interested. I took some time to think about it, because it meant leaving an enjoyable job as a classical music radio announcer in Austin. But I considered the offer as an honor and a privilege, and soon accepted. As for the manual part of it, I had plenty of experience from my youth in restaurant work, including cooking, so I seemed a good candidate to replace his current assistant, who was leaving.

Daily Life in the Great Space

In November of 1980, I met Dr. Wolff and his previous assistant at Doroethy's house in Phoenix, and we drove to Lone Pine. We drove all through the night, avoiding the desert heat, which was considerable even that late in the year. At one point, when we passed signs directing motorists to Las Vegas, Dr. Wolff made an amusing comment that I would later learn was a typical example of his dry humor: "If anyone should require a vivid illustration of the meaning of the word *sangsara*, I recommend a trip to Las Vegas. The very existence of that city in this desert environment is divorced from any natural need. Its only *raison d'être* is human greed, vanity, and illusion. And the roulette wheel itself provides an apt symbol of *sangsara*, which originally means 'going around in circles'."

We settled ourselves in the main house, which was the uppermost habitation on his property. Unless I'm mistaken, it was also the highest house on the entire eastern slope of Mount Whitney, and—for all I know—literally the highest full-time human habitation in all the "48 states." (I never thought to ask anyone about this at the time.) Down below, there was a very pleasant, but inconveniently small house where he had lived with Sherifa, and which was now used to accommodate overnight or longer-term visitors.

Life quickly settled into a tranquil routine. And routine is the word! Rarely have I met anyone as regular in his habits as was Dr. Wolff. Meals were at exactly the same time every day; shopping expeditions were always on the same days, the same hours, the same stores. And he watched the evening news on television at the same time every day, with which he would always have a glass of port, and a cigarette or two. He was a frequent smoker by today's standards, though he told me he inhaled as little as possible—apparently it had no effect at all on his health. I also smoked at that time, and he once told me he hoped my smoking had nothing to do with his influence. He expressed dismay at the suggestion that some of his students might be influenced by his smoking. I assured him that this wasn't the case with me, though now (from the viewpoint of someone who later found it very hard to give up smoking) I wonder if I was being entirely frank.

Whenever I drove him any distance from town, he insisted on studying the map thoroughly before leaving, estimating the time of the journey, and deciding every detail of it in advance, including pauses. Once, I went alone to a different store, where I was surprised to discover some high-quality Sumatra coffee, which he had never tasted before. He drank it with great relish, exclaiming that he had never tasted coffee so good. But when I proposed buying it regularly, he balked at the expense, though he could easily afford it. When I asked him why, he said: "When you open the door to one new indulgence like that, a crowd of others will soon be clamoring to be let in as well."

Speaking in archetypal psychological terms, I am (or at least was then) of a predominantly Uranian temperament; therefore, I naturally experienced an antipathy to this Saturnian structure and control. But I soon realized that in spite of his conviction about the virtues of his rigid routine, he was surprisingly unattached to it—at least not in the sense of becoming upset or angry if it was thwarted for some reason. On the contrary, he was most courteous and flexible when faced with any suggestion that it should be changed for some reason. But there had to be a reason. Once I boldly ventured to challenge him as to why he held to such an unvarying routine.

"Don't you think that improvisation and variety have any value in daily life?" I asked.

Unruffled, and mildly amused, he explained that he had discovered that—for himself at least—a regular and predictable routine helps to free oneself from giving too much importance to mundane life, with its tendency to chase after pleasure and avoid pain.

“If we want to have a better chance of seeing through the seductions of *sangsara*, then it helps to see its cyclical, mechanical nature without the distraction of what you call ‘improvisation and variety’. At least I find it to be so.”

I couldn’t really agree with this view, but I saw some truth in it, and respected his position. As with so many other things, this is mostly a question of temperament.

One day not long after my arrival, we had a major interruption in our routine: our drinking water suddenly stopped. All our pure water came from several snowmelt streams that had been skillfully channeled into an arrangement of small holding tanks, pools, pipes, and troughs made of bamboo, wood, fiberglass, and other materials, mostly on the surface of the ground. Several of these had become clogged or damaged. Dr. Wolff and I went out to undertake repairs. He mostly directed me as I did the physical labor, but he did pitch in once or twice, and I was impressed by his energy and strength, which was not that of a man of ninety-four. After a while, we went further uphill to replace a section of tubing. At this point, there was a Y-junction where two tubes that came from further up the mountain joined here into one larger one. But all we could manage was to repair it in such a way that only one arm of the Y really fed into the large lower tube destined for the house—the smaller arm of the Y was too damaged, so that we left a considerable amount of water spilling out uselessly onto the ground. He was content with this solution, saying we would still have enough water. Watching the abandoned pipeline discharge its pure, rushing water down the hard gravel slope, I objected: “Isn’t this a waste of good water?”

“That water is just on its way downhill, one way or another. Why divert it, if we don’t need it?”

I had to admit this was perfectly logical. But I confessed that, for someone whose grandparents were Texas farmers who made a religious principle of saving water, it came as a bit of a shock. He laughed, and quipped:

“Well, up here in the California mountains we get power from gravity, and it’s considerably cheaper than oil.”

Politics and Philosophy

One surprise was his political conservatism. I would roughly describe my own political views as libertarian socialist, though unaffiliated with any party or ideology. Therefore, his favorable opinion of Ronald Reagan was disconcerting to me. I resolved to find out whether our disagreement had any spiritual or philosophical implications. When the time seemed right, I initiated a long and frank discussion about Reagan and about politics in general. I was relieved to discover that our agreements were much more fundamental than our disagreements. We both felt that, even though it is our civic duty not to ignore it, the political level of reality is an extremely shallow, deceptive, and illusory one. (I remember making a joke that he liked: “If we take your formula $R = I/A$ and plug politics into it, then A becomes gigantic, and R shrinks to practically nothing.”¹²)

He characterized the essence of his conservative position with this aphorism: “If it is not *necessary* to change, then it is necessary *not* to change.” I realized that this was actually an

¹²Reality (R) is inversely proportional to Appearance (A).

authentic conservatism, quite different from the right-wing ideology that has been euphemistically called “conservatism” ever since Reagan. In fact, I wish there were more true conservatives like Dr. Wolff, though I don’t count myself as one of them. I was convinced then, as I am now, that he was naively misled by the Reagan phenomenon, as were so many other true conservatives.

Having “agreed to disagree” about Reagan and so forth, Dr. Wolff and I were able to find common ground regarding his keenly perceptive criticism of a tendency among political liberals to “throw money at a problem,” especially one of social justice. He felt that liberals rarely face up to the fact that people who have been oppressed (it matters little whether for reasons of race, class, or culture) often secretly desire to wield the same kind of power as their oppressors, which may even include a desire for revenge. As long as they are caught in this victim mentality, they will not achieve the justice and respect (especially self-respect) they need and deserve. Granted, one must find a way to help—we do have a responsibility to try to correct the wrongs of the past—but not in such a way as to cater to a vengeful victim mentality.

I told him of a public talk by Chögyam Trungpa I had attended in Boulder, Colorado, in which he had used a striking term: *idiot compassion*. I well remember how shocked Dr. Wolff was by the rather brutal conjunction of those two words.

“Well,” he said after a pause, “Trungpa Rinpoche certainly lives up to his reputation as a provocateur, doesn’t he? *Idiot compassion*, indeed! What a harsh term. But alas, an accurate one. There’s far too much of it in our world.”

Metaphysical Discussions

One of the best things about living with Dr. Wolff was his availability for discussion of metaphysical and spiritual questions that had long fascinated or perplexed me. In these discussions, he was remarkably accessible and lucid, and was sometimes able to shed significant new light on these questions. But I soon realized I had to be sensitive to his state of mind, and wait for the right time. There were times when I had a subject I was sure would interest him, but intuitively sensed that he was not in a mood for such discussion. Such moods had a kind of pattern, and they resembled each other so much that I quickly learned to detect them. At first I wondered if it might be because he was in some sort of contemplative or mystical state. But the more I got to know him, the less likely this seemed—they turned out to be mostly manifestations of fatigue, or a simple need for quiet. However, there were some occasions when I had the distinct impression that he was “in the Current”—but in every such instance, not only was he willing to talk, he was extremely articulate and inspired in his speech. Dr. Wolff was apparently not the sort of mystic who has a problem verbalizing while in an altered state.

In some of these metaphysical discussions, the result was a satisfying resolution of the problem on an intellectual level which, however, would require many years before I could fully integrate and embody this resolution. I do not mean to imply that there was anything superficial about the solution, or about Dr. Wolff’s insight into the question—I just mean that I (like so many humans with highly active minds) often experience a kind of gap between intellectual understanding and integration. This can of course become a source of illusion.

Nevertheless, such intellectual resolution is very often a *sine qua non* for a full and authentic understanding of a spiritual or philosophical issue. Indeed, I have encountered people who have something like the opposite problem: having achieved a kind of intuitive, emotional, or corporeal comprehension of a spiritual or metaphysical truth, they neglect (and sometimes even

disdain) the intellectual aspect of it. The result is that they sooner or later fall prey to a confusion that can undermine their intuitive understanding, and also be a source of illusion and self-deception.

Where is Home?

One such question I brought to him concerned two seemingly opposed Desires: To live a life oriented towards a return to Source? Or a life that leaves the Source in order to explore, perhaps very far away? (I capitalize the word Desire, because this order of “desire” arises from a primordial, often semi-conscious longing that is not in the same category as any ordinary desire, however powerful.) Another way of putting it might be: To return to Unity? Or to give oneself to the fascination of Multiplicity? In still other terms (the ones that spoke most directly to me): To return Home? Or to leave Home, and embark upon a great Adventure? The life of the Sage or the life of the Hero? In a nutshell: a Homeward-bound life, or an Outward-bound life?

This problem was resolved—at least theoretically—in an important discussion I had with Dr. Wolff about it. This was another example of an insight that would need many years for mature integration. Nevertheless, this preliminary theoretical resolution served as an invaluable compass for me during those years.

First, he challenged the implicit dualism of Homeward vs. Outward. He said that if we do not forget Home as Consciousness-without-an-object, then we see that the very notion of leaving Home is meaningless, because there is no “outside.” There is a powerful *appearance* of an outside, and of leaving, but it is only an appearance. Referring to his formula $R = I/A$ (where A is appearance and R is reality), he pointed out that different human lives can display greatly varying degrees of A , and yet be centered on the value of Awakening. And it does not necessarily follow that a simple and austere outer life, with a low A (and therefore a high R) is of greater value than an outer life with a high A and therefore a lower R . Of course, ancient wisdom-traditions had good reason to advocate a simple lifestyle with high R and low A . But in some cases it can be an act of great courage and service to others to engage in the world of appearances in a way that exacts a heavy price for the loss of simplicity and serenity.

Then—and here I am reconstructing—he added something like the following:

Furthermore, it is an error to suppose that dialectical pairs such as R and A —or subject and object, for that matter—are perfectly symmetrical. *They are fundamentally asymmetrical.*¹³ Subject is privileged over object, just as good is privileged over evil. Of course this all pertains to the relative realm, and is irrelevant to Consciousness-without-a-subject-or-object. My point is that in the relative realm, there are so many polarities that are symmetrical, especially physical ones such as left/right, up/down, north/south, and so on, that we must not be misled by this into concluding that symmetry is essential to all dialectical polarity.

I was happy to agree with all this. But then I was assailed by a somewhat nihilistic doubt:

¹³The word ‘assymetry’ is a reconstruction, and one of the few instances in which I have a serious doubt as to whether Dr. Wolff really used this word. I would welcome any corroboration—or the reverse—from anyone with evidence on the subject of *fundamental metaphysical assymetry* in the philosophy of FMW.

“In that case, what *difference* does it make whether I remember Home, which is Consciousness-without-an-object, or not? In either case, I never really leave Home, so what is the point of trying to remember?”

He replied that there are two very different ways of *apparently* leaving Home: the dualistic, forgetful one, where I believe I have really left Home (or worse, have lost it somehow); and the enlightened one, where the nature of Home is never forgotten, i.e., one *knows* that there is no leaving Home, however vivid the appearances. As for the value of remembering, it is simple: the forgetful, dualistic way of Adventure involves needless suffering and alienation, as well as needless complexity and confusion.

This was tremendously helpful. But it brought up yet another problem that had been troubling me for years. It concerned the venerable mystical tradition of advocating something called “non-duality,” and renouncing something called “duality,” or “dualism.” Isn’t this very way of speaking flagrantly dualistic itself? In other words, to discriminate between dualism and “enlightened” non-dualism is itself a form of dualism.

But Dr. Wolff pointed out the fallacy in this reasoning: being able to make distinctions, to discriminate, to perceive gross and subtle differences, is not the same thing as believing in their fundamental reality, and thereby setting these differences up against each other. True discrimination is not bound to *adversarial consciousness* (a term that I was to discover he often used). Appreciating the subtleties of duality, and therefore of multiplicity, is not the same thing as dualism. On the contrary, one must first embrace and deeply understand duality in order to transcend it. Only someone who has mastered the game of duality, so to speak, can authentically move to a higher level of thinking, and realize what is called “non-duality.”

It occurred to me that some mystics would object, saying that thinking itself is bound to be dualistic. But I felt no need to mention this to Dr. Wolff—in the light of his profound, yet simple explanation, such objections seemed obviously mistaken, coming from (at best) an excessively narrow definition of *thinking*. At the time, it all tended to make my head swim a bit, but I could find no flaw in it.¹⁴

Regarding the apparent duality of Homeward vs. Outward, many years later I discovered a musical analogy, which has turned out to be inspiring and helpful for my own process of integration: in tonal (i.e., traditional) music of all cultures, the *tonic* is the fundamental note that informs the entire development of a melody. Very often, a song will even begin and end on this tonic note. In Indian music it is played as a drone throughout the performance of the piece. If we liken this tonic drone to Home, and the notes of a sublime melody to episodes of Outward-bound adventure, then it is possible to leave Home, yet in a deeper sense, never leave Home. And the melody is all the more beautiful for its moments of divergence, even dissonance, provided that the tonic is not forgotten. (If it is really forgotten, then we get ugly music, analogous to needless suffering.¹⁵) Furthermore, many types of Adventure are possible: some melodic movements may explore very far away from the tonic, and others may stay very close to it.

¹⁴Nevertheless, many people nowadays commit the error of criticizing “dualism” in a dualistic and therefore self-contradictory way, without having attained full understanding of duality. Our language engenders this confusion. Years after this conversation, physicist and philosopher Basarab Nicolescu introduced me to the term ‘trans-duality’, which seems far preferable to the problematic term ‘non-duality’.

¹⁵I do not mean this as a criticism of so-called “atonal” music—a term that has no precise meaning in any case, and need not be taken into account for the purposes of this analogy.

Who Wants to Be Free?

Another discussion that I've never forgotten was about the meaning of freedom, evoking the ancient (and seemingly insoluble) problem of free will vs. determination. I put the question to him this way:

"What does it really mean when someone says 'I am free'? For example, suppose a prisoner exclaims this, after being released from physical confinement . . . and then falls back into the same old deterministic patterns that sent him to prison in the first place. When he was claiming to be free, he couldn't see those patterns. So *that* freedom is obviously an illusion—or more accurately, it is a mere *relative* freedom. It's similar to the freedom of what physicists call a 'free electron'. But now, suppose that the ex-convict really does change his patterns, and does not return to prison. How do we know that this so-called freedom isn't also a mere relative freedom, in relation to still other unseen determinations? Is all freedom relative? Is there any such thing as *non-relative* freedom?"

"Well," he replied after a substantial moment of reflection, "in order to even begin to tackle that question, I would suggest that we first ask a more fundamental one. Please consider this question, and take all the time you need to answer it: *Who* is claiming to be free?"

"A difficult question . . . I'm not sure." I finally said.

"Is this claimant to freedom an entity of subject-object consciousness, who exists among other entities of subject-object consciousness?"

"Yes, I suppose it has to be," I answered, though without conviction.

"Then, in that case we are speaking of relative freedom only, because we are speaking within the limits of relative consciousness. Hence, there is no freedom other than relative freedom." Then he paused, and with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, added: "Q.E.D. You see, this famous problem of free will turns out to be no enigma at all."

Startled by the clear and simple logic of it, I had to ponder this for some time. I could find no fallacy in it. Yet the deeper question of the meaning of freedom had not been addressed.

"OK, I see. But suppose we don't confine ourselves to the relative realm. In other words, I'd like to retract my first answer, and say instead that we are *not* speaking of an entity of subject-object consciousness, but are speaking from the view of Consciousness-without-an-object."

"In that case, the answer would be a resounding 'Yes': there is *Absolute Freedom*. But it can never be some sort of possession, some sort of quality belonging to, or achieved by a separate entity of subject-object consciousness."

"Very well. This is quite clear, Dr. Wolff, and actually a great relief to me. But is it possible for us, as individuals . . . to *participate* in this Absolute Freedom?"

"Of course. But we must beware of how we speak and think about this! For as soon as we begin to grasp at it, to think that freedom is something we can possess because of this participation, we are no longer participating in real Freedom. This is a mistake we all too easily make. But even then—it is to be hoped—we will release our grasp, open our hand, and see that the gold of personal freedom we thought to hold there is fool's gold."

"In other words, might we say that we only have true Freedom when we participate in God's Freedom? Which is the only Freedom there is?"

"First, I must ask you: do you find that the concept of God is necessary in order to speak of this?"

"Not really. It's more of a metaphor, for the sake of simplicity."

“In that case, I agree that it could be expressed that way, for simplicity’s sake. But of course this participation in God’s Freedom can turn out to be more problematic than it appears.”

I wondered what that meant, but he declined to elaborate, because he felt this was a good place to end the discussion—and I agreed.

The First Noble Truth

Though Dr. Wolff and I were alone together for much of the time in my three or four months there, we occasionally had interesting visitors. This had been going on for some years before Gertrude’s death. Since the republication of *Pathways*, some of these had included well-known figures in the field of spirituality, philosophy, science, psychology, and medicine: Fritzjof Capra, Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche, Peter Caddy, Robert Johnson, Brugh Joy, Richard Moss, and Charles Musès (a deep and original philosopher, author of *Consciousness and Reality*, now unfortunately out of print), among others. I did not meet most of these people during my time there. But I appreciated the diversity and quality of the other, unrenowned beings who took the trouble to make their way through that remote, dreamlike landscape up to our isolated ashram of two (no telephone service in that area then). Foremost among these visitors was Dorene Pratt (now Dorene White, one of the founders of the FMW Fellowship). Dorene was a solace and a wonderfully enlivening presence for Dr. Wolff, and became a dear friend of mine as well. Her visits there were greatly welcomed by both of us. Dr. Wolff had always experienced a deep and vital need for what he called “a complementary feminine polarity,” and this had become acute since the death of Gertrude. Dorene’s nurturing presence, combined with her understanding of his philosophy (including its mathematical aspects) were a balm to him.

This brings me to a central theme (and the most challenging to write about) of the learning process that began with my meeting Dr. Wolff.

I mean his suffering. Or do I mean his pain?

In those days, I did not yet realize the importance of the distinction between *pain* (an inescapable part of life, as elucidated by the Buddha’s First Noble Truth: aging, illness, death, impermanence, etc.) and *suffering* (which always has a narrative attached to it, however subtle and subconscious—very often a kind of victim-story.¹⁶ Chögyam Trungpa called it “the haunting quality that fundamentally you are in trouble.”)

For I soon realized that this man, whom for years I had been putting on a pedestal of exalted Sagehood, was in reality a human being who happened to be living in severe, prolonged, psychological pain and distress.

How could this be? In my view—which I later came to realize was shallow and immature—a Sage was supposed to transcend at least psychological (if not physical) suffering, pain, unhappiness, and so on. I was deeply disturbed by this encounter with the reality of his “suffering” (as I say, I did not yet realize the distinction between suffering and pain, and used the terms synonymously). Worse, I was disappointed that he did not seem to live up to my ideal. Nevertheless, I was deeply touched by his plight, and greatly desired to help him if I could, if only by listening.

¹⁶Robert Augustus Masters briefly addresses this distinction in his essay “Suffering Versus Pain,” which may found at http://www.robertmasters.com/Writing_Section/essays.htm. Also, his essay “That Too Is Us” is of particular significance to the following.

Even now, I cannot be sure to what extent Dr. Wolff was truly confronting his pain, and to what extent he was caught up in a story about it that created unnecessary suffering for him. I simply didn't have the insight and maturity to be able to get a sense of that.

What I do know is that his sharing of it with me was an act of great honesty, integrity, humility, and generosity. I only dimly realized it at the time, but this disturbing, totally unexpected gift of vulnerability was the beginning of my own long voyage towards authenticity regarding the problem of pain and suffering, especially in relation to what is called "awakening."

The main symptom was that he could not get over the loss of his wife, Gertrude, and its devastating effect on his work. The great age difference between them made her sudden and unexpected passing a terrible shock, with a sense of injustice added. But this was far more than a process of grieving. It was not simply that he missed her. The worst thing was that he could no longer do the work he felt he was here to do. Without the polarity of a female spiritual companion, the springs of his inspiration for writing, speaking, and recording his contemplations had all but dried up. This was the source of great frustration and sadness. Once he told me that he had been preoccupied by a famous image from the writings of Swift, where Gulliver lies bound and immobilized upon the ground, a helpless captive of the tiny Lilliputians. He saw himself as Gulliver, and the Lilliputians as the paltry, wretched, implacable forces that had brought about his present situation. This is the only evidence I can remember to suggest that he might have been under the powerful spell of narratives about pain, which are responsible for most (and arguably, for all) human suffering. But it may not have been that at all. As I say, I was unable at that time to ascertain (or to ask him the appropriate questions) as to what extent he was involved in such a victim-story, or whether —on the contrary—he may have been recounting (with his characteristic irony) the seduction and enthrallment of such a victim-story, so as to release it and be released by it.

A number of visitors and friends had tried to help him through this. I also expressed a desire to help if I could, if only by listening. We often sat for long periods together, listening to and discussing tapes of relevant conversations he had had with a number of visitors. They included eminent medical and psychological professionals, as well as friends who seemed to have wisdom and insight. Unfortunately, I've forgotten at least half of them, and the only names I recall now are Brugh Joy, Richard Moss (both medical doctors, and well-known figures in the California human potential movement); and Robert Johnson, a distinguished Jungian analyst and author. I was especially impressed by the latter's penetrating questions and insights. Many years later, I met him at a lecture in Portland, Oregon, and spoke with him briefly afterwards. He told me that he felt that Dr. Wolff could not decide whether he wanted to seriously commit himself to a process of therapy, or to find a feminine Significant Other whose presence and whose resonance with him would enable him to function as a spiritual teacher and writer in the same way he had before. Though I didn't question him directly about it, I inferred that he was working under the assumption that one cannot simultaneously "be a guru and be in therapy" (in Johnson's own words).

In any case, I question the validity of this assumption. Setting aside the pejorative associations that understandably cling to the word *guru*, I don't see why it is necessarily contradictory or illusory for a spiritual teacher such as Dr. Wolff to seek and find the feminine companion he needs so as to continue his work, while simultaneously undergoing a process of therapy that would shed more light on his process of "anima-projection." Why can't the teacher's own therapeutic process be shared with his or her students, to say nothing of his companion? It seems to me that this assumption is related to still another hidden assumption about the need for

discretion and privacy in psychotherapy. But a spiritual teacher does not necessarily have the same need for (nor perhaps even the same right to) psychological privacy as most people require. They may, on the contrary, need to share their own therapeutic learning process transparently and humbly with their students, so that the latter can benefit from it. (We have some interesting examples of this in recent years.) Yet it is significant that, previous to approximately the 1980s, it was virtually unthinkable for a spiritual teacher to be so open about such matters. In retrospect, I have come to believe that Dr. Wolff was (despite his old-fashioned, almost nineteenth-century personality) actually ahead of his time in this kind of naked transparency.

Reflecting on my conversation with Robert Johnson, I recalled my feeling of disagreement with a certain “received wisdom” that had been expressed repeatedly by several of Dr. Wolff’s well-meaning friends on the tapes we listened to. Their consensus was that what he really needed at this stage in his life was full communion with his own feminine nature, his *anima*, so as to achieve a kind of psychic androgyny, and thereby free himself from the need for a partner who would serve as his anima-projection.

I disagreed with this. For one thing, he himself said (not without humor) that he felt he was too old for such an adventure. Furthermore, judging from his relationships with Sherifa and with Gertrude—from what he told me about them, augmented later by written documents by and about them—I saw no evidence that either of these women was repressed, frustrated, or compelled to be incomplete, because of her role as Franklin Merrell-Wolff’s muse, as it were. Over a period of some weeks, I spent hours (sometimes alone, sometimes with him in his study) listening to tapes of conversations, and of occasional monologues by him, relating to this therapeutic aspect of his journey. As the weeks went by, my disagreement with this diagnosis/recommendation became clearer. I began to hope aloud to visitors that he would find a partner appropriate for him. I wished I could help him in this search—so much so, that if I had known any appropriate female candidates, I might well have tried to facilitate a match. But I lacked the necessary social connections, as well as enough self-confidence—I was naturally somewhat intimidated by the credentials of some who were claiming that he only needed to attain communion and mystical fusion with his anima, and abandon the quest for a physical partner. But I was even more intimidated by the power of that androgynous spiritual ideal itself, which is venerated in one form or another in most great mystical traditions. If I expressed my opposing view at all, it was in a mild and ineffectual “I wonder if it might be better . . .” kind of way. By this time I had listened to enough tapes, and had enough discussions with him about their meaning, so that I had a fairly comprehensive overview of his plight.

But it would take years for me to discover how the root of his plight was essentially the same as mine—and that of all human beings, whether “enlightened” or not. It is all too easy to think we understand the full implications of the First Noble Truth!

Part III: A Collective Learning Process

Is the Intellect the Devil?

From a transpersonal point of view, the most significant of all the subjects on the tapes we listened to was what he called the Mephisto dreams. There were two of them: the first took place in 1927, and the second a few years later. The latter was well before August 7, 1936—the pivotal date of his first great awakening experience. Apparently, over forty years passed before

he felt ready to publish an account of these dreams. This is interesting in itself—a demonstration of the subterranean, long-term power a truly archetypal dream can have in a person's life.

Also, it is an outstanding example of an archetypal dream that is preeminently transpersonal in its significance and importance. Of universal interest, it is well worth discussing at some length. Here, I shall focus on the second Mephisto dream, by far the most significant and complete of the two. It opens inside a theater:

There was the usual stage raised above the level of the orchestra seats, or the pit, and at least two aisles running back as is usual in a theater. There were means by which access with the aisles from the stage could be made. There were, also, at least one box on what would ordinarily be the balcony level; presumptively there were other boxes, but I was conscious of only this one. It was so placed that it was right over the right aisle leading to the stage and giving access to the theater seats in the orchestra. This point is important. The theater was empty except for those who played a part in the dream, or sleeping experience. On the stage there was a bed, and a young woman was lying in it, seemingly near the extreme of exhaustion. In the box, that had seats right over the right lane, there sat a figure that was bearded and represented the numinous principle, the Sage or the Master. I, myself, in my own proper person, seemed to be in some way fused with this figure that sat in the box. From that perspective I perceived the events of the dream, but was simply a passive witness. I did not know beforehand what moves the Sage would take. In the opening phase, I had the impression that the Sage had spoken to someone who sat near him and said that the events that were about to transpire were of importance to him and that he should go down to the stage. Apparently he had done so, but he was never at any time seen by me. In fact, I don't know whether the figure was masculine or feminine, for that matter. I don't know what particular archetype this figure would represent, as I did not even see it. I have assumed that it might be the shadow, but that is a speculation. The drama on the stage opened with the entrance of Mephisto, who began a dance of more than human possibility with a perfection of control that was also more than human.

The dance of Mephisto grew to a furious tempo and seemed to develop a kind of magnetism that virtually compelled the young woman to leave her bed and participate in the dance. It grew in fury until it could no longer be contained by the stage, and the young woman went down from the stage to the aisle that passed under the box in which the Sage sat, and it ran around the room and back to the stage on the opposite aisle, and then over the same course again. The Sage watched intently, and it soon became evident that the young woman was losing out in the contest; and then, and then only, he intervened.

Now, I seemed to know this: that the power of Mephisto almost equaled the power of the Sage; he had only one edge of superior exertion of power. He directed at Mephisto a rapid succession of the two forces, or principles, or modes, known as love and hate. It seemed to be known that Mephisto was immune to the action of either of these qualities upon himself if exerted alone, but the rapid oscillation of these two undermined his self-control. As he passed under the Sage the final time, he looked up and I saw anger in his eyes and in his demeanor; and he shot a force at the Sage that came in the appearance of a number of bullets. These, the Sage caught in his mouth and spewed back

at him. And I woke up with a sense of victory. This sense of victory lasted for several days—a sense that the issue had been won and that it was of supreme importance.¹⁷

By the time I discussed this dream with him, a portion (though certainly not the essence) of Dr. Wolff's sense of victory seemed to have eroded. Naturally, he was perplexed and disturbed by this. He wondered if it might even signify that there was something in his own male intellectual intensity that had exhausted Gertrude to the point of illness and finally death. After talking with him at length about this, I told him I felt that such an interpretation was totally unwarranted. If it were true, then surely there would have been warning signs and important psychological manifestations long before her sudden death? But apparently this was not the case. He then told me that "the Jungian consensus" (by which I think he meant mainly Robert Johnson, but also other interlocutors with a Jungian point of view) was that Mephisto represented the intellect—both his own intellect, and Intellect in a universal sense—and that the feminine figure represented Psyche, or the Soul.¹⁸ While granting some validity to this interpretation, Dr. Wolff nevertheless had grave reservations, and very mixed feelings about it.

He had studied the works of C.G. Jung in great depth—in his library he had an impressive collection of Jung's works, as well as many other books on psychology, philosophy, religion, and mysticism. After Gertrude's death, he delved into them again, in an effort to deepen his understanding of this Jungian interpretation; yet also to justify his long-standing criticism of this aspect of Jung's thought. What especially disturbed, and in fact angered him, was summed up in this declaration by Jung: "Clearly, the Intellect is the Devil." He felt that Jung had gone outrageously far with this remark, and described it as "one of the most shocking and improbable statements that I have ever heard."¹⁹

It never failed to make an impression on visitors when Dr. Wolff, in his dry, understated, yet oratorical style, cited that phrase of Jung's (as he always did if the subject of Jung came up), with a tone of irony and derision, so that you could always hear the quotation marks.

In fact, it caused him to question Jung's own intellect. I remember one discussion when he was particularly critical, homing in on Jung's own confession that the basic axiom of logic and mathematics: If $A = B$, and $B = C$, then $A = C$ made no sense at all to him, and that it seemed like an absurd, abstract game that had nothing to do with truth.

¹⁷For this account, I am grateful for the FMW Fellowship's excellent archives. This is from the audio recording *Jungian Psychology and Personal Correlations* Part 7 of 7 (November 1977).

¹⁸In ancient Greek tradition (and many other ancient religious traditions, including Judaism and Islam, which have essentially the same tripartite system, even when they refine it greatly, as in India), there are three major aspects to a human incarnation, in ascending order: *soma* (body, *corpus*); *psyche* (soul, *anima*); and *pneuma* (spirit, *spiritus*). I find myself among a growing number of contemporary writers who are striving to reanimate this ancient and more authentic meaning of *soul*, which differs significantly from current usage. For example, *soul* is not immortal in the same sense that *spirit* is. Most importantly, the soul is not the highest aspect of our nature, but an intermediary one, essentially belonging to the "in-between realm," or the *imaginal* (as Henry Corbin calls it), between body and spirit. In its lower regions, the soul is mortal, though perhaps not to the same degree as the body. In its highest region, the *nous*, which overlaps with *pneuma*, it partakes of the immortality of spirit (potentially at least—some Sufi teachings say that the soul is actually an obstacle to this type of immortality, without work on oneself in this life). However that may be, soul is not the same as spirit. The two have become lamentably confused because of one of those notorious Church Councils that impoverished early Christianity in so many ways—in this case by collapsing soul and spirit into one.

¹⁹From the FMW audio recording *Is the Intellect the Devil?* Part 1 of 4 (June 18, 1980).

“If Jung couldn’t see the simple meaning of a basic logical proposition like that, then it certainly casts doubt on his views of the intellect in general.” He shook his head, in real puzzlement. “How can a man who is so profound a thinker in other respects be so obtuse? What do you think?”

I had to admit I was bewildered (and still am to this day) that a thinker of Jung’s depth and brilliance could be so willfully stubborn about logic (and also about mathematics in general, as it turned out). But it certainly wasn’t because he was stupid.

I can’t remember which of us then suggested that perhaps it was because Jung, like many people of a strongly intuitive temperament, had a problem with abstract reasoning, a kind of emotional aversion and rebellion against it. But in Dr. Wolff’s eyes, this brought all the more discredit to Jung’s declaration about the Intellect being the Devil.

By the time this conversation took place, some days had elapsed since he had first informed me about Jung’s equation of the Devil and the Intellect. It had also come as a shock to me, and I had been thinking a lot about it. Suddenly I realized that I somehow felt an inexplicable but persistent sympathy with Jung on this point—at the very least he was attempting, however awkwardly, to communicate an important truth. Little did I know that this was the beginning of a long, labyrinthine, open-ended voyage of confronting intellectual hubris in my own life, as well as in the Western culture that had formed me.

I told Dr. Wolff that I had come to the conclusion that there was a deep truth in the aphorism, but that Jung’s meaning of the word *Devil* was almost certainly not the same as his, and absolutely not the same as the Christian figure of Satan. Naturally, he wanted me to explain what this other meaning might be. As I recall, I said something like the following (though I have thought so much about this subject over the many years since this conversation, that some later insights may be filtering into it.)

“Jung’s Devil is a much subtler figure than the Christian stereotype we’ve inherited. He seems to be related to the trickster archetype in older mythologies. He’s a wily, devious character, and there are times in life when this is exactly what’s needed. So he’s not some sort of Prince of Evil. He’s very mixed.”

“Well, that’s admittedly more interesting than the Christian Satan, but it still won’t do. It is still the case that Jung is reducing one of our highest and most sublime faculties to a kind of *asura*, which, though of a divine order, belongs to a much lower level.²⁰ A supremely noble archetype is being dragged down to a level that is vulgar by comparison.”

²⁰He had to explain to me what he meant by this term. I had only a vague notion from my readings that *asura* means a kind of demon in Sanskrit. Fortunately, a much fuller version of this explanation has been preserved in the FMW archives (the audio recording *Report of Major Dreams*, June 16, 1978) as follows:

Now, what is the significance of the Mephisto figure? If we take Mephisto as understood in the Western sense, it does not seem to produce a meaning that I find satisfactory. This Mephisto, this bearded figure, does not have anything about it that is sordid, as there is something sordid in connection with the Mephisto of the Faust legend. He is an austere figure. He is an aspect of the negative principle, but connected with the mental level. There are other aspects of the negative principle connected with the vital level which is very muddy and irrational; but the Mephisto in this case is highly rational—intolerantly so—and very commanding, and essentially austere with an attitude of disgust with respect to the lower manifestations of the negative principle.

Here, again, we derive from the metaphysics of Aurobindo a meaning that clarifies this. The negative principle on the mental level, according to Aurobindo, is an *Asura*—a semi-Divine entity but highly intellectual. There are other aspects of the negative principle connected with the vital nature that are distinctly very muddy.

“Well, I see what you mean, and I agree. But might that not be exactly the point Jung is trying to make? Consider the vulgar and horrific things human beings do with their intellect. Remember what Einstein is supposed to have said—something to the effect that he would have become a plumber instead of a scientist, if it could have prevented people from using $E = mc^2$ to build atomic weapons?”

“But you can’t blame that on the intellect, any more than you can blame a surgeon’s scalpel for being used as a murder weapon. It’s as if Jung had said that the scalpel is murderous in itself.”

“I don’t know . . . it seems to me that Jung is trying to warn us that the intellect often detaches itself from feeling, intuition, and compassion to a disastrous degree. Perhaps it’s this tendency to detach that he was talking about. But there is a vast range of degrees that are possible—very large degrees of detachment can lead to downright evil actions. But some degrees of detachment are often necessary, and good. So this Devil has a good side also. That’s why I say that Jung’s Devil is a much richer figure than the Christian stereotype of Satan.”

“You’re giving him a lot of credit. How can you reconcile your opinion of Jung’s subtlety regarding the nature of the intellect with his own confession of aversion and willful blindness to the fundamental truths of mathematics?”

I had to admit, he had a point. Nevertheless, I could not help but feel (as I still do today) that even though I agree with Dr. Wolff that Jung’s aversion to formal logic and mathematics surely discredits, or at least limits, his judgment of the nature of the intellect in some ways, it does not apply to this particular statement. On the contrary, Jung was trying to express a serious warning, not attempting to reduce the intellect to an asuric level.

But let us suppose for a moment that I’m wrong, and Jung actually did reduce the intellect to such a level. Even in that case, the warning would seem a valid and useful one, provided one can filter out the erroneous and irrelevant aspects. If someone warns you that it’s dangerous to leave your hunting rifle loaded in a house with children, then that warning should not be dismissed on the grounds that the person also happens to be an anti-firearms extremist.

I now believe that Dr. Wolff found it strangely difficult to simply regard this as a valid warning, aside from whatever other limitations Jung might have had, and let it drop. In his writings on Jung in the FMW archives, there are passages where he seems to have clearly understood the value of the warning; yet at other times he seems to be balking at it, and rejecting it. This is significant to me, and may provide a clue as to the nature of his pathos, because there are occasions when he seems to really understand, such as when (in the audio recording cited in footnote 17) he states:

“This means in objective terms that the intellect was striving to become the supreme ruler, a position which it cannot authentically occupy. And that is true, I must confess, of my intellect as of those days.”

As I got the inside view of this *asuric* principle, it was completely intolerant of that muddy side of the negative principle; in fact, more intolerant of human weakness than was the Sage, who, though in this respect in agreement with the *Asura*, was much gentler and patient with human weakness, more inclined to be compassionate and willing to consider human weakness and treat it in a kindly though definitely reproofing way. The *asuric* element was intolerant. The element represented by the Sage, which I would like to call the “transcendental component,” for that seems to fit its meaning, had consideration and compassion though no less insisting upon purity, though willing to be gentle and guide towards purity rather than to intolerantly reject impurity. This is a description of the character of these two figures such as I know them from some sort of insight into their inner nature.

Those days only? It seems to me that the danger of hubris, (intellectual or otherwise) is not something that can be overcome once and for all. No awakening experience, however powerful, can place us forever out of the insidious reach of hubris, arrogance, and pride. At least that is my experience and observation. I find no exception to this rule in myself or in other human beings. I am highly skeptical of claims to the contrary, including those that allude to a higher stage of spiritual evolution where the Sage is in some sort of permanent *samadhi*, or state of Grace. To put it bluntly, to be human is to be fallible.

Nevertheless, having reflected upon what I have just written, I want to disavow the possible inference that I am taking a position that is in agreement with Jung, and in disagreement with Dr. Wolff (i.e., because his problem with Jung was a manifestation of his own intellectual hubris). On the contrary, I believe it is a mistake to take any sort of position in favor of either of these “sides.” The reason is that we are dealing with a vital dialectic here, in which the proper task is not to determine which pole is right, but to discover a dynamic balance between two polarities—a balance that can only be found in the stream of life, and that will differ according to different circumstances and contexts.

Is the Intellect the Devil? The answer could be *yes* in some situations (and many of them sink far below the *asuric* level); *no* in other situations; and very often *perhaps*. As with any deep and subtle dialectic, there is a fundamental dynamic that no static resolution can satisfy. I have come to believe that a deeper reason why Dr. Wolff was never able to settle his contention with Jung, and simply let it rest, was not just because of his personal issues, but because he sensed this dynamic dialectic. Certainly there are some great questions whose asking is of more value and significance than their answering—a prime example is the question: *Who am I?* Perhaps this question of the Intellect and the Devil is one of those.

Many years later, I discovered the teaching of the gnostic Sufis on this subject. It offers by far the deepest (though not the clearest) psychological insight into this problem that I have found. It comes to us in the form of a fascinating myth recounted briefly in the Koran, and then elaborated and interpreted into a much deeper myth by generations of Sufi tradition. There are varying accounts of the later story, but they agree in essence.²¹ I should first point out that in gnostic Sufi traditions, *Adam* is the original androgynous human, both male and female; and *Iblis* is one of several Arabic words for Devil-archetypes (perhaps also derived from the Greek *diaballo* = to divide). However, as we shall see, the nature of this Devil will come as a bit of a shock to those who are not familiar with Sufic theology. Here is a condensed version that draws on several Sufi sources:

God assembled all of His angels on the occasion of a great event: the creation of Adam, the first human being. The Most High, who is beyond all names, then commanded all the angels and all the heavenly hosts to bow down to Adam. They did so, and the immense panorama of all the heavenly hosts prostrated before Adam was a wondrous thing to behold. But the beauty of it was marred by one figure, who remained standing alone in the front rank of the divine multitude. This was Iblis himself, greatest of all mirrors of the Divine Light.

Then was heard the most beautiful of all voices, the soundless voice of the All-Aware:

“O Iblis, why do you not bow as I have commanded?”

²¹For a superb, though brief, discussion of this story, I recommend Joseph Campbell’s *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 452.

“O Source of All, You Without Partner, You have always commanded us to bow only to You. All of these angels, prostrate before this creature, are bowing to an image of You. They are caught up in idolatry.” And then Iblis attempted to bow before the Most High, but God stopped him:

“No! I command you, Iblis, to bow to Adam, My creation.”

“O Beloved, this can only be a test of my fidelity.” And he attempted once more to bow to the Most High, still refusing to bow to Adam.

But God interrupted him again, this time saying: “BEGONE!”

Thus was Iblis banished from the Presence of God. For how long? No one can say, for time is different in those realms. But we have received this report from Iblis himself:

“In the agony of my exile, the only thing that sustains me is the memory of the beauty of His voice, resounding in that last word: BEGONE!”

That this myth is relevant to our discussion is clear. But Iblis (or Lucifer, to use his most significant name) is a far more profound symbol of the Intellect than either Jung’s Devil, or Dr. Wolff’s asuric Mephisto. Here, the Devil/Intellect is not a mere usurper of power. He represents a far subtler level of intellectual hubris: the demand that God (one of whose 99 names is Truth) obey His own logic. And, inasmuch as we adhere to the logic we know and use in order to understand the world, it is true that Lucifer’s logic is superior to God’s. According to the Luciferic light of logic, God is being arbitrary, even capricious, in commanding his angels to do something that violates His own command. Worse, He is being cruel and despotic in banishing Lucifer, bearer of light, his most unswerving servant.

There are many implications to be found in this myth. Two that I find interesting in this context are: 1.) No matter what hallowed logic we are using, consciously or otherwise, it must be re-examined when a seemingly deeper Truth presents itself, and seems to violate that logic; 2.) Philosophers, mathematicians, and even physicists have long ago reached the point where many felt the need for a new kind of logic, and perhaps a new kind of language. I know that Dr. Wolff expressed a hope for a logic that is not imprisoned by subject-object consciousness, and that is trans-dualist.

Is such a logic even possible? Or, are we just banging our heads against the limits of all language? I, for one, certainly hope such a logic is possible, but the attempts I’ve seen do not convince me, though this may reflect my ignorance of the field. Hegel’s logic impressed me greatly, with its bold, trans-dualist principle: “The identity of identity and non-identity.” But I agree with FMW when he writes that Hegel did not achieve a logic that would compel spiritual realization by anyone capable of understanding it. Furthermore, it is doubtful that such a logic is even possible.²² Nevertheless, it may be possible to have a new, trans-dualist logic that can handle (as our current logic cannot) the extremely important developments in pure mathematics, logic, and quantum physics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—a logic that can handle multidimensional time, retrocausality, and the multiverse, for example. We need a logic that is not limited by the principle of the excluded middle; yet this principle seems essential to some of those very developments.²³

²²See *Pathways Through to Space*, Chapter 53.

²³For example, non-constructive theorems that depend on proof by contradiction. The elaboration of various systems of what later came to be called “fuzzy logic” began approximately with Gödel’s early work. These

To return to the most important question implied by the Sufi myth: How can Lucifer (the Intellect) learn to serve, to be reconciled, and thereby return to the Presence of God (Truth)?

To begin, Lucifer must learn to see God in His creation, or image. Lucifer must embrace Immanence (traditionally associated with the Yin, or Feminine aspect of Reality) as well as Transcendence (the Yang, or Masculine aspect of Reality). Hence God is not acting unjustly by banishing Lucifer. But is acknowledgement of Immanence enough to return Lucifer to his exalted and rightful place? It seems to me that it is not. Even if we embrace Immanence, it does not necessarily confer upon us full knowledge of *how to serve*. The powerful image of the immense celestial host, all of them physically prostrate before God's creation, suggests two things: the necessity of a link with *soma*, the incarnated human body; and the necessity of being part of a community. Lucifer, in his pride, overlooks both of them.

The Guru Apocalypse

In the spring of 1981, I resigned my position as Dr. Wolff's assistant after three months, and left when a replacement was found. I was becoming restless, and wanted to return to my previous life. But on a deeper level, I was trying to come to terms with the shattering of my illusion about the nature of the Sage. Essentially, I was unable to accept and integrate the reality of Dr. Wolff's psychological pain. From my present point of view, I would say that I was not yet able to face, feel, and investigate the deepest nature of pain (my own and that of others) without judgment, setting aside any desire to escape it or fix it, and especially without harboring any explanatory narrative (conscious or subconscious) about the pain. Instead, I persisted in the consoling belief that somewhere there *must* exist Sages who had transcended suffering (in the language I used then)—if not physical suffering, at least psychological suffering such as Dr. Wolff's. Was not Ramana Maharshi himself such a Sage? I devoured spiritual books of different traditions that spoke convincingly of such exemplars of human perfection; for example, I was enthralled by certain books of Idries Shah and his disciples, which alluded to the Sufi tradition of the *Insan-il-Kamil*, the Perfect Man. There was no lack of seductive stories about such Masters (and more than a hint that Shah himself was such a one). I prepared myself to travel far, if need be, in search of such Sages, and especially their spiritual communities, which interested me even more.

However, destiny decreed that I would not get far in this search. In the early, exploratory stages of these outer and inner journeys to the East, great cracks began to appear in the edifice of the psychic temple I was building (or rather, repairing), and the gusts of wind and rain that were coming through gradually extinguished the fire of my enthusiasm. These cracks appeared first in the form of magazine articles, documentaries, and books on the subject of what soon came to be called "guru-scandals." Of course there was nothing new about the genre—exposés of misbehavior and hypocrisy of famous religious leaders and their cults have long been a staple of journalism—but these had always seemed irrelevant to my concerns, though mildly interesting from a socio-psychological point of view. Such exposés always dealt with a level of spirituality and culture that never seemed very high. The majority were about Christian fundamentalists of one sort or another. And even when many articles began to appear about Eastern gurus for whose ancient traditions I had more respect, it was still of little or no concern to me. The proselytism, manipulation, and shallow discourse of these cults and their leaders was so evident from the

are interesting, but often excessively complex and diverse. For more information, see the Wikipedia entries on *fuzzy logic* and *multi-valued logic*.

outset, that I wondered how anyone with education and intelligence could be taken in by it. As a friend of mine put it, “It’s all about the Kentucky Fried Chicken of the soul. Who’s interested in a diet of that stuff anyway?”

But when exposés began to appear about communities led by figures such as Muktananda, Rajneesh, and many others, I could no longer remain aloof. At first I believed that this was mostly driven by sensationalist hearsay, half-truths, and a bias against mysticism and Eastern spirituality in general—and some of it certainly was. But careful reading of the best of these accounts posed serious questions.²⁴ How was it possible that a spiritual teacher who had experienced profound awakening, *samadhi*, *satori*, enlightenment, etc., and who had spoken and written so eloquently of spirituality, could behave in such an immoral way? Or allow their followers to exploit, manipulate and oppress others in their name? The most unexpected of all such shocks was a book exposing some very surprising behavior by Krishnamurti himself, written by a woman who had known him intimately since her childhood.²⁵ If any spiritual figure seemed above reproach to me, it was Krishnamurti. And as the turn of the century approached, book after book, article after article proliferated, unveiling everything from the lies (revealed in a book by his European mistress) of an eminent and venerated Tibetan Lama about his publicly proclaimed celibacy, to the apparently dishonest manipulations of Idries Shah, to say nothing of several devastating exposés of best-selling spiritual author Carlos Castaneda. It was of course a mixed bag.

However mixed, it sometimes felt as if this collective learning process going on in the culture at large was targeted directly at me and my illusions. For many of us spiritual seekers, this whole movement of exposé was the beginning of a kind of cultural apocalypse (in the original sense of the Greek *apokalypsis* = unveiling) about the pretensions of spiritual teachers of *all* kinds—no longer just those at the Kentucky-Fried-Chicken level.

I found little solace in the facile wisdom proposed by some of my philosophical friends: “What’s the big deal? There’s nothing new about this. It’s always been a mistake to confuse the teacher with the teaching, the artist with the art, the philosophy with the philosopher. Human beings aren’t perfect. Just stay with the teaching and never mind the foibles of the teacher.”

No doubt there is some truth to this, but the thought was hardly new to me. It is a well-established fact from biographies of certain gifted writers, artists, or innovators, that there can be a veritable chasm between the high level of consciousness and value of their work on the one hand, and the nature of their dominant persona on the other hand. The contrast and contradiction can be so extreme that the situation almost resembles that of a trance-medium who “channels” what seems to be a completely different consciousness.

²⁴For example, the scrupulous and balanced investigations conducted by *Co-Evolution Quarterly* (later called *Whole Earth Review*) and *Gnosis* magazine in the 1980s and 1990s by good journalists who had no such bias against mystical teachings.

²⁵*Lives in the Shadow with J. Krishnamurti* by Radha Rajagopal Sloss (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1991). The disconcerting revelation to me was not K’s love-affair with the author’s mother (while she was married to Rajagopal, K’s manager and editor), still less his other love-affairs—he had never claimed to be celibate, and the affair with her mother seemed to involve three consenting adults. What disturbed me was her claim that, long after the affair was over, when she challenged K about his role in a long, bitter, and complex litigation between her father and the Krishnamurti Foundation, he angrily retorted: “Who do you think you’re speaking to? I have no ego!” However, I am not convinced of the reliability of this book. Its veracity was vigorously and plausibly attacked by Krishnamurti’s major biographer, Mary Lutyens, in her book entitled *Krishnamurti and the Rajagopals* (Ojai, Calif.: Krishnamurti Foundation of America, 1996). (If you want a vivid experience of the “Rashomon Effect,” I recommend reading both of these books.)

The problem with applying this principle to a spiritual teacher (or to a true philosopher) is that such a person—unlike an artist, a scientist, or a medium—is supposed to be transformed for the better by the teachings they convey. When teachers behave *this* badly, we are compelled to ask: Could there be something wrong, or at the very least incomplete, about the teachings?

In the light of these revelations, Dr. Wolff's supposed shortcoming as a Sage appeared mild indeed by comparison. His character was morally impeccable, and he was also a kind, honest, unpretentious human being. Even more, his sharing of his pain with me and others was an act of rare transparency, humility, and generosity. In the context of the guru-apocalypse that was occurring in the culture at large, he would seem to be morally ahead of the game, if anything. A year or so before he died, I wrote him a letter in which I attempted, as best I could at the time, to express my belated gratitude for this.

But let us return to the twofold question: Is there something lacking in mystical traditions that produce teachers who behave so badly? Or is there something fallacious about our expectations of a spiritual teacher? In the light of the learning process I've been through, I would answer: Both. Inasmuch as we assume (as I once did) that transcendent experiences such as *samadhi*, Enlightenment, and so on, *entail or imply* such qualities as moral and psychological insight, compassion, and ethical behavior, we make a grave mistake. Any spiritual path that looks only to transcendent, mystical experience to guarantee these qualities is seriously incomplete.

On the other hand, when we expect a teacher to be beyond the reach of psychological pain, or of hubris, we also make a serious mistake. I believe that we would do well to abandon notions such as the existence of Supreme Masters and the like. This is not because such beings are necessarily impossible, but because—given the nature of our present collective knowledge (and ignorance)—the assumption that such Masters do exist is philosophically, morally, and psychologically far more risky and unsound than the assumption that they probably do not exist. Moreover, who among us is qualified to judge another human being, past or present, as an example of some sort of perfection such as *Insan-il-Kamil*, Messiah, Avatar, etc.?

Non-Attainment

This brings us to an ancient warning regarding any spiritual path oriented to Awakening: that of the illusion of *attainment*. Buddhist scriptures especially warn us repeatedly about the danger of this, yet we often fall into it—perhaps regarding how we see ourselves, but especially how we see others, especially those who are our spiritual teachers. This is an especially significant collective lesson about “Enlightenment” that recent generations of spiritual seekers have had to rediscover. Non-attainment is a deep and subtle principle, and many enlightenment-oriented spiritual teachers of (East and West) apparently have never understood it. Worse, they often encourage a misunderstanding of it.

A Zen proverb sums it up bluntly: “As soon as you harbor the thought *I have attained*—back to hell, straight as an arrow!” What is often overlooked is that the warning also applies, though in a different way, to *he (or she) who has attained*.

But what can this mean? When we think about it, this teaching of non-attainment may seem illogical or even nonsensical. How can it be that the *Buddha*—meaning the one who is Awakened—never attained anything?

Among other things, it involves the paradox of the Quest itself: we are searching for what has never been lost, and cannot be lost, for it is what we ARE and always have been. What is

difficult to understand is why this does not thereby reduce every individual to the same spiritual level. There still exists a valid hierarchy of *stages* of individual spiritual evolution (not to be confused with *states* of consciousness).²⁶ And yet there is no attainment. How can this be?

It may help to consider that the notion of attainment presumes, and is limited by, a kind of subject-object language-game that posits a separate being who is attaining something. But this is exactly the level of seeing the world that must be progressively relinquished in a life that is in service to Awakening.²⁷ It might help to understand this if we push the language a bit, and say that there *is* a kind of “attainment” when we awaken to our true nature—but there is no “attainer” who is doing it. One might say that all Being “attains” higher consciousness through the vehicle of an individual human being. But even with this interpretation, there remains the danger of assuming some kind of stability, or mastery, in which the individual has evolved to a stage of having control over manifestations (or the lack thereof) of Awakening. Though I personally never heard him say it, I am aware that Dr. Wolff has spoken and written about his ability to call forth the Current whenever he needed to. But what does this mean? It is unclear to me. If it means control over Awakening—in effect, control over Grace—I would be skeptical of it. But I suspect that he meant something more subtle and practical than this. The next chapter, which explores the notion of *service*, suggests what that meaning might be.

Since our ordinary dualistic language presumes a subject who is conscious of objects, it has a problem with non-attainment. But for a mind that has not forgotten, and is oriented to Consciousness-without-an-object, it all becomes clear—if only during a flash of insight—and even then, the memory of that insight can serve at least as a kind of guide and protection against the hubris of attainment, whether in oneself or in another whom one presumes to consider as having *attained* Awakening, Enlightenment, Moksha, and so on. On the other hand, one might legitimately speak of someone as “enlightened” or “awakened,” in a sense of their high degree of service, and have full understanding of the teaching of non-attainment. Yet someone using exactly the same words might be completely caught up in the illusion of attainment.

Unfortunately, I was not at a stage of spiritual maturity that would enable me to discuss this subject with Dr. Wolff—I was too much in the thrall of the illusion of attainment myself. Therefore, I am in some doubt as to what extent he himself was—or was not—susceptible to this illusion. There are passages in *Pathways through to Space* that use metaphysical capitals such as “God-Realized Men” and even “Attainment” in a way that suggest that he was susceptible to it, during the early stages of his spiritual voyage.²⁸ Yet there are other remarks in both books where

²⁶I do not use the word ‘hierarchy’ its contemporary sense, which has become pejorative. Its original meaning has nothing to do with oppression, nor with pyramidal, top-down domination. It comes from Greek *hieros* = sacred and *archos* = ruling order. Perhaps the best example of an authentic hierarchy is the human body. The little finger does not complain of being less valued than the thumb, nor does the thumb complain of being less valued than the eye.

²⁷The term ‘language-game’ is borrowed from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. One of LW’s fundamental insights is that the words we use in language-games do not necessarily require *referents* of any sort in order to have meaning. Very often the most significant words have no referents. I have found this term eminently useful in talking about spirituality, and I believe FMW is saying essentially the same thing in *The Philosophy of Conscious Without an Object* when he speaks of the limitations of any language of reference that is disoriented from the primordial reality of Consciousness-without-an-object. I had not yet read LW when I knew Dr. Wolff, and I’ve often wondered whether he had studied the former’s work, since I have found no mention of LW in his written works.

²⁸Among others, see pp. 21, 111 and 142 in *Experience and Philosophy*.

he seems to clearly discern the limitations, and proper place, of the notion of attainment. For example, consider this remark from *Pathways*: “I was even prepared not to have the personal consciousness share in this Recognition in any way. But in this I was happily disappointed.”²⁹ To me, this powerful statement suggests two things: a sign of the selfless ardor and radical resolve of the author’s Quest; but also, an implicit warning against confusing *sharing in* Recognition with *attainment of* Recognition.

In the valleys, where integration of peak-experiences with the ordinary personality takes place (especially of the Shadow, in Jungian terms), individual attainment does have a valid meaning: it is an aspect of the hierarchy of developmental stages mentioned earlier. But in the heights of awakening, and always from the timeless view of Awakening, the notion of attainment is no longer valid, for we are no longer oriented to the relative realm. Here is a simple and useful description of the relationship between the peaks and the valleys by René Daumal:

You cannot always stay on the summits. You have to come down again . . . So what is the point? Just this: what is above knows what is below, but what is below does not know what is above. When you are climbing high, take note of all the difficulties along your path. During the descent, you will no longer see them, but you will know that they are there if you have observed carefully. There is an art to finding your way in the lower regions by the memory of what you have seen when you were higher up. When you can no longer see, you can at least still know.³⁰

What Use is Philosophy?

In order for the Mephisto (or Lucifer) in us to be readmitted to the Presence, and return to his original place at the right hand of God, must we regard metaphysical language-games as irrelevant to spirituality?³¹ At best a form of literature, a diversion, a pastime—at worst a source of illusion and vanity? Anyone who has been interested enough to read this far is likely to share my own inclination to answer this with a decisive *No*. Yet the question is not so easily dismissed. I will try to give a fair hearing to the other side.

It is true that philosophical activity alone (whether in the form of writing, thinking, discourse, or dialogue) cannot engender the same kind of experience that often accompanies meditation or other spiritual exercises. It may even become an obstacle to such experiences, if overdone. But the reverse is just as true. Criticizing philosophy for not being meditation is just as fallacious as criticizing a map because it is not the world. No amount of exploration of the world can tell us certain valuable things that can be known with tools such as maps; and no amount of meditation practice can accomplish the kind of integration of that practice into the thinking and feeling of daily life that can be accomplished with the help of philosophy. One of the major errors of my generation of spiritual seekers has been a kind of anti-intellectualism that exalts awakening experiences to the status of a fetish (and plenty of *seeming* support for this error can

²⁹*Experience and Philosophy*, 6.

³⁰René Daumal, *Mount Analogue: A Tale of Non-Euclidian and Symbolically Authentic Mountaineering Adventures*, trans. Carol Cosman (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 2004), 105–108.

³¹I use the word ‘metaphysics’ in its classical sense, considered as an integral part of philosophy. Many modern philosophers have aspired to reduce metaphysics to a minimum, which has given interesting results; but in my sense, there can be no philosophy without metaphysics.

be found in Indian tradition, with its elaborate doctrines of various categories and levels of *samadhi*). Some of this had its roots in an understandable reaction to the sterility and fragmentation of Western academic philosophy; but the results were a twofold misfortune for those who took the path of *samadhi*-fetishism. Not only did it mean cutting themselves off from the gift of philosophical discipline to deepen their thinking and discrimination, it reduced Awakening to awakening: to an experience in time, with a beginning, middle and end. Then followed the specious conclusion that one simply needs to increase the frequency of such experiences, with the implicit ideal of eventually living in a kind of perpetual *samadhi*. Hence the awakening experience became essentially a subtle *object* of desire (and occasionally, in a remarkable feat of mental acrobatics, an object of a supremely desirable state called “desirelessness”!) It is true that there are extraordinary human beings, especially in India, who *appear* to be living in a state of constant *samadhi*, or something of the sort—Ramana Maharshi himself was one such. But I would suggest that this is a mistaken interpretation. For one thing, some of these entranced beings (East and West) reveal themselves to be merely that: individuals living in a kind of mystagogic trance that is not a very high form of spirituality, and may even be the source of serious delusions. For another thing, even when they are true sages such as Ramana, I believe it would be far more truthful to say that they are living in an extraordinarily complete and authentic *service* to Awakening. This cannot be reduced to an experience, or state of mind, however transcendent.

Philosophical discipline provides the tools to help cut through this confusion. Granted, philosophical speculation does not have the power to command Grace, or certain kinds of transcendent experience. But it does have the power to help us integrate such experiences into our everyday thinking, feeling, and acting.

Furthermore, it also has the power to help us toward deeper and more effective communication and dialogue with others about spiritual experience. One of philosophy’s treasures in this regard (which requires meeting living philosophers, not just books) is the discipline of impersonal argument, and detachment from one’s own emotional bias in debate—a noble Western tradition that goes back to Socrates. When people who have authentic mastery of this discipline engage in dialogue, they are able to disagree strongly, yet never see the other as an adversary, because they are essentially collaborators in an effort to discover truth through argument. But this is not to be acquired by simply espousing it. For most (if not all) human beings, it requires a lifelong psychological work on oneself. Unfortunately, true detachment and equanimity in philosophical debate would appear to be very rare in any culture, spiritual or otherwise. But it is so often given lip-service, and simulated, that its rarity is overlooked.

Franklin Merrell-Wolff offers the most profound and far-reaching description of this virtue that I have encountered:

Thus, when a man learns to become detached with respect to his pet opinions or ideas, and is willing to accept conclusions quite counter to his preferences when either evidence or logic points that way, then he is practicing asceticism in a higher and nobler sense. This kind of asceticism does cut far deeper into the real vitals of a man than any restraint connected with the mere carnal nature, and if he can succeed in the higher discipline then anything remaining in the lesser nature requiring to be purified becomes a mere detail.³²

³²*Experience and Philosophy*, 161-162.

However, there exists a more plausible challenge to the value of intellectual, philosophical discourse in the service of Awakening. For many people, it seems to be implicit in the following words by Gangaji, a highly-respected contemporary American spiritual teacher. Though she is often described as belonging to the tradition of Advaita Vedanta, Gangaji herself rejects this label, pointing out that Ramana Maharshi (her teacher's teacher) never applied that label to himself, though others did. Born Antoinette Roberson, she received her spiritual name from her teacher, Sri Harilal Poonjaji, a close disciple of Ramana.³³

The *main* focus of the mind's power is to possess. Learning takes place by possessing knowledge in the mind. Learning is an awesome and wondrous power, which requires the possessing function of the mind. This power facilitates the great arts, the great scientific discoveries, and the capacity to design and build a house, a piece of clothing, or a meal. But where the mind cannot go, what it cannot possess, is the source of its own power.

Once the attention of an individual lifetime is turned mysteriously and sacredly toward its own source, toward reunion with God, the realm of the mind is of no use. Because we are so in love with the power of our minds, it may take lifetimes to discover this truth. We don't want to believe that there is somewhere our minds cannot go. We don't want to even consider that in order to realize the absolute truth of our existence, we may have to let go of everything.

To realize true freedom, this infatuation with the mind must be cut, and to be cut, it must first be seen. Each of us needs to investigate and then tell the truth. In telling the truth, the mind is used to expose and bust itself. In lying, the mind stays in power. When the mind is busted, a deep happiness is revealed. Then the intellectual and creative capacities of every individual, the life experiences of every individual, can all be joyfully used in service to the truth.

One of the dangers I have seen of the so-called 'spiritual life' is the ego's attempt to use spiritual life to escape heartbreak. . . . When you are willing to fully experience the hopelessness and horror of being human, the eternal potential for living life in truth is freed.

Whatever appears here can be borne here, regardless of what the mind imagines it can or cannot bear. The madness that is feared in the prospect of meeting whatever is here is actually fostered by continually trying to escape. . . . The more you stop struggling

³³In this context, it is worth recalling that Franklin Merrell-Wolff himself felt a deep affinity with the teachings of Ramana Maharshi. Long before meeting Dr. Wolff, I had suspected that the unnamed Sage referred to on p. 26 of *Pathways* (SUNY Press edition) was none other than Ramana Maharshi, and he confirmed this to me in conversation. The text referred to on this page is Paul Brunton's *A Search in Secret India* (London: Rider, 1934). This book, and its lesser-known companion, *A Search in Secret Egypt* (London: Rider, 1936), are widely regarded as classics of twentieth-century spiritual autobiography. In this same conversation, Dr. Wolff told me that on one occasion, while reading Brunton's account of how Sri Ramana often taught through silence, he felt a living Presence "between the lines" of the book. (For whatever it's worth, I believe this experience took place before Ramana Maharshi's death in 1950, though I'm not sure). In any case, it is in keeping with several passages of FMW's own writing, where he speaks of the possibility of direct communion with living Presence through the written word, regardless of whether the author happens to be in a physical body at the time.

to get out, the more pain you will experience, but also the more joy you will experience. This is the paradox that the mind cannot resolve, although there are many strategies to resolve it. We have all learned great powers of mind. These powers include techniques of denial and indulgence, all revolving around the central technique of lying. But the power of mind is only needed for protection and attack. If you are willing to bear it all, you have no need of anything but surrender, telling the truth, and being yourself.³⁴

As a defender of philosophy, I would agree with what the above essentially *means*—given this very limited, but widespread usage of the word “mind.” But there are several reasons I would disagree with the implication many people seem to draw from this kind of teaching: that, once the mind has—to borrow Gangaji’s irresistible term—“busted” itself, speculative philosophical thinking becomes thereafter an irrelevant distraction for spirituality, and is useful only for the purposes of science, art, building a house, making a piece of clothing, and so on.

For one thing, my own experience, at least, shows that this *busting* needs to be repeated many times. And this can be vastly facilitated by the insights of renewed philosophical thinking. As mentioned earlier, the temptation to hubris is not something that we can become free of once and for all.

Even more important, creative thinking and creative imagination cannot be circumscribed by what Gangaji (along with Krishnamurti and many writers on spirituality) calls “the mind.” Their resources are invaluable in learning to live in fruitful service to That which is beyond the grasp of this thinking—but which is also beyond the grasp of feeling, the grasp of sensing, the grasp of intuition . . . or the grasp of anything. Another important aspect of our collective learning process, it seems to me, has been the discovery that *service* to Awakening is of far greater value than the quest for more and more experiences of awakening. I know of no more succinct expression of it than this line from the great mystic poet Kabir: “I saw the Truth for fifteen seconds, and became a servant for life.”³⁵ The resources of philosophy can be of supreme value in bringing this service into our life, and especially into our thinking.³⁶ As suggested earlier, the important work—at least from an integral point of view—takes place in the valleys of learning to serve, more than at the peaks of mystical experience.

However, as René Daumal pointed out, the relationship between the peaks and the valleys is subtler than it might seem. The “learning process” involved in such service will become formulaic and sterile if it is not renewed by “experiences” of awakening, whether long or short—in Franklin Merrell-Wolff’s expressive terms—by the *imperience* of knowledge-through-identity. Yet this (like Grace) cannot be “learned” in the sense of possession or attainment. Effort, though very relevant to learning how to serve imperience, cannot command or control imperience itself. In fact, it is often counter-productive. As Gangaji says, there must be a

³⁴(Italic emphasis as in the original.) From Gangaji, *The Diamond in Your Pocket: Discovering Your True Radiance* (Boulder, Colo.: Sounds True, 2005), Chps. 24 and 46. This book is perhaps the most eloquent and useful distillation of her teaching.

³⁵Paraphrased from Kabir’s poem “Between the Conscious and the Unconscious,” which has been translated into English by Robert Bly in *The Kabir Book: Forty-four of the Ecstatic Poems of Kabir* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977).

³⁶Heidegger goes so far as to claim that the that the Germanic root of the English verb to *think* (*denken* in German) is related to the verb to *thank* (*danken*). Hence the beginning and end of true philosophy is gratitude (and also—according to the Greeks—wonder).

surrender that is also vigilance. And, as she so lucidly and beautifully points out, the question of *how*, with regard to “accomplishing” this surrender/vigilance, is totally misplaced, for there is no *how* to surrender. It should instead be applied to asking ourselves (without judgment): *How* do I maintain, nurture, and reinforce the illusion of a separate self every day, in thousands of ways? Where is my attention? What is my real practice?³⁷

On the other hand, when she says (in the passage quoted above) that the power of the mind is needed only for protection and attack, then the narrowness of her usage of the word *mind* is exposed.

I consummate this defense of philosophical thinking—and in a sense, my homage to Franklin Merrell-Wolff— with a quotation from *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object*. Written over a half-century ago, the possibilities of which it speaks are only beginning to be explored in our time.

It is a misconception that conceptual thought is exclusively a child of the organic kind of thinking—something that is developed *solely* to serve the adaptation of a living organism to its environment as the difficulties become more complex. It has possibilities of detachment that could never have been born out of organic life. At its best, it is more than lightly colored with the dispassionate otherworldliness of the transcendental thought. Something of both the transcendental and the organic is in it, sometimes more of one, at other times more of the other.

It is in the realm of this kind of thought that the West has outdistanced the East. It is peculiarly a western power. Its potential office in the transformation process is not to be found in the oriental manuals. Here we face new possibilities.³⁸

Evolutionary Crisis

In several conversations with Dr. Wolff, we returned to a subject we had touched on in our first conversation, opening up a continuing dialogue about the state of the world, and the sense of the times we live in, as an *evolutionary crisis* of humanity. I doubt that either of us used that particular phrase at the time, but it accurately describes the theme of these conversations—both of us had been greatly concerned by recent revelations of the destructive effects of human activity on the biosphere. On one occasion, he told me that even though he was ninety-four years old, had gone “from the horse-and-buggy age to the space age,” and now found himself so unhappy at being a widower for the second time, that he was more than ready to “pass on to the Other Side,” he felt that he was supposed to stay in his body for a while longer, perhaps so as to help with the world situation, which was grave indeed.

“How do you feel you can help?” I asked.

“Certainly not on the outer levels we’ve discussed. If I have a role to play, it is in somehow furthering a fundamental awakening of human consciousness. But it’s a daunting situation, and I’m far from optimistic. The depth and tenacity of the forces of darkness and ignorance are great indeed. Not only do dominant powers of all types fail to help those who would free themselves from this state of sleep, they actively maintain and enforce it.”

³⁷Gangaji, *Freedom & Resolve: The Living Edge of Surrender* (Ashland, Ore.: Gangaji Foundation, 1999).

³⁸*Experience and Philosophy*, 308-309.

This seeming pessimism gave me pause. But I had been thinking a lot about this lately, and had a different view.

“But Dr. Wolff, it seems to me that we need to distinguish between two different things. Are we talking about (A) just the need to have a decent, sane, balanced, morally intelligent world of peace, justice, and compassion, and an end to ecological irresponsibility? Or are we talking about (B) the emergence of a radically new kind of human being, as Aurobindo envisioned, perhaps related to Teilhard de Chardin’s evolutionary vision? In both cases, I agree with you that a significant change in human consciousness is required, not just a better social system, and certainly not another ideology. Now, it seems to me that it would take only a relatively minor change in collective consciousness in order for (A) to happen. But if it’s (B) you’re talking about, then I agree, we’re very far indeed from that.”

“A *minor* change in collective consciousness, you say? How on Earth can you consider such a change to be minor?”

“Well, I should have explained that by ‘minor’, I mean *relatively small in relation to what is possible* for human consciousness. It is my belief that the ultimate possibilities of human consciousness are vaster than we dream of.”

“That may well be the case. But it doesn’t necessarily follow that such a change is minor with respect to its *difficulty*. I don’t see how we can ever attain what you call (A), except through access to the resources of (B). Anything less won’t do. History shows us over and over again, that even when great reforms work, they eventually gravitate back to something closer to the old situation. The forces of darkness and sleep are very powerful. When you speak of the vast and undreamed-of possibilities of human consciousness, I would tend to agree. But it is only through access to that very vastness, opened by Self-realization, that we have any hope of bringing about (A).”

Though I steadfastly maintained my optimistic stance in those days, I’ve come to appreciate Dr. Wolff’s position more with the passing years. Writing this in the autumn of 2012, a year long-reputed to be “apocalyptic” in pop esotericism, I can’t really say which position is more convincing to me. But at least this much is clear: the human species (and the biosphere it affects) is in the throes of an evolutionary crisis with no historical precedent. Denial, in the form of so-called “skepticism” as to the reality and gravity of this crisis is no longer tenable, nor is it intellectually respectable.³⁹

³⁹As a further development of this subject, I refer the interested reader to a dialogue with Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, which took place in Paris in 1991. It is very much related to this theme, and provides an interesting complement to Dr. Wolff’s and Sri Aurobindo’s views about the spiritual meaning of this evolutionary crisis. However, since it is not part of the events of this memoir, I have separated it, as Appendix A.

APPENDIX A

Thich Nhat Hanh on the Evolutionary Crisis⁴⁰

It was hard to believe that we were still in the middle of Paris, a ten-minute walk from the nearest metro station. Only the faintest sounds of traffic could occasionally be heard. Birds sang sharply in the courtyard, and lush spring foliage could be seen through the windows, moving in the breeze. We had become extraordinarily silent, even for a group of meditators. The tiniest movements of stirring and throat-clearing had vanished, as if we were under a spell.

Less than thirty of us remained for this final part of the weekend meditation retreat, late Sunday afternoon. It was hard for me, an American, to believe in this good fortune of being with Thich Nhat Hanh in such a small group. If this retreat were taking place in an American city, there would be hundreds of people.

The spring sunlight suddenly broke through the clouds and poured into the hall, casting shadows from the trees upon the walls. This sitting had been a very long one. I found myself far calmer than in previous sessions that weekend, even wishing it might last longer.

Thich Nhat Hanh (or “Thay,” as he is respectfully called by his students) reached slowly to his side with exquisite leisure, picked up a small mallet, and struck a single, perfect blow upon the little hand bell he uses to signal the end of a sitting. The sonorous reverberations of the ring seemed to go on forever.

Finally people began to stir. Since this was the end of the retreat, a question and answer session had been scheduled. At first no one seemed to have any questions. His profound stillness and gentle, all-pervading presence in front of us seemed a kind of answer to all questions.

Then a woman raised her hand rather abruptly, and launched into a monologue, more commentary than question. About forty, she had that sharply-etched look of some French intellectuals. Her tone of voice had a plaintive quality about it, with more than a hint of anger. It was clear that she needed to get something off her chest.

“Monsieur, you spoke earlier of unconditional love for all beings, love for the totality of all that is. But I find that I cannot accept this. It seems like a nice sentiment until you start to think about some of the terrible things in the world. . . . I had a close friend who recently died of AIDS. I cannot love that virus that killed him. As a matter of fact, I hate it. I hope it is eradicated from existence, and I wish it had never existed. How could I possibly love a thing like that?”

Thay was silent. In this silence, we all felt the weight of this question, in reality a very ancient one. And it was as if we basked in his unhurriedness to find an answer. After a long time, he spoke softly:

“You know, we human beings are like a virus. A deadly virus that is endangering this planet. And we — don’t *we* need love?”

It was a long time before anyone else asked a question. Finally a handsome, innocent-looking young man with shining eyes, dressed in white, with long blond hair and beard, wanted to know about the prophecy of the coming of Maitreya Buddha — for certain believers, a kind of Buddhist version of the Messiah — furthermore, he also wondered if this might not refer to the same event as the return of Christ, and perhaps all other messianic prophecies as well.

Thay was quiet for awhile, looking around the room, as if searching our faces for signs of the Maitreya.

⁴⁰Joseph Rowe, preface to *Thich Nhat Hanh: The Joy of Full Consciousness* by Jean-Pierre and Rachel Cartier, trans. Joseph Rowe (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2002).

“It is said that a very great Buddha will manifest in the future. But what does that mean? Do we really know what a Buddha is? Is the Buddha a man? A woman? A god? A historical figure? A mythical figure? And the Christ . . . do we really know what the Christ is?”

“You see, we have already had so many extraordinary beings, very great teachers who have come to help us. And just look at the dreadful mess we are in!

“Surely what we need most is enlightened *community*. We have had many enlightened individuals. But when have we ever seen an entire community that is enlightened? It may even seem impossible.

“But who says this cannot be? How do you know? Why not a family, a tribe, a village of awakened beings? And then a city, a region, even a whole country. And why not an awakened world? This is the only useful meaning I can find in such prophesies.”

For a long time, we were silent. At first I felt no need to ask a question. But then I realized that this was a good time to ask him about something that had been troubling me ever since I became involved with spiritual groups:

“I have frequented several Buddhist sanghas, as well as groups of spiritual seekers from other traditions. Much is said and written about surrender or transcendence of ego, and there are many practices relating to this. But nothing is ever said about collective ego, and the need to transcend that. What I often see is people surrendering their personal ego to a kind of group-ego, a sangha-ego. To me this seems even worse, because it can easily lead to conformist ideology and even tyranny. How can this be overcome?”

While I was speaking Thay was looking deeply and directly at me, but as I finished he lowered his eyes. When he began to talk quietly after about a minute of silence, his gaze remained downward, still not looking at me.

“*Sangha* means community in the Buddhist sense. However, the sangha, like any other kind of community, is no escape from having to deal with ego in all its forms. It is a big mistake to think of the sangha as an escape from any problem of being human. The practices are intended to help us see through the illusion of ego in all its forms. However,” and here he raised his eyes and looked directly at me, “perhaps we also need new practices.”

I was deeply moved, because it was as if he were reading my mind. One of my main interests (which I had not discussed with anyone in this group) is in collaborations with the aim of devising new spiritual exercises, music, and group practices, appropriate to our time and place. Yet virtually everyone in Buddhist (or any other traditional spiritual) circles I have tried to discuss this with, seems to consider me either naive or presumptuous to dare to propose such a thing. This was like a confirmation for me. I bowed deeply to him, we bowed deeply to each other in the classic Namaste gesture.