

Notes on the Spiritual Path

Richard Oxenberg

I. Love

1. We desire love.
2. Love is the union of I and not-I.
3. To conceptually grasp the desire for love we must contrast it with the experience of the privation of love.
4. We experience love's privation in experiences of rejection, isolation, loneliness, exclusion. It is an experience of not being welcomed, included, embraced, secured.
5. Why do we desire love?
6. We desire love as a function of the relational nature of our being. Ontologically, we are not complete or sufficient unto ourselves. We do not and cannot provide the 'space' (both physical and emotional) we must occupy in order to be what and as we are.
7. Lack of love, then, is experienced as a threat to our being; a threat to our ability to be.
8. Thus, our desire for love is a desire for wholeness of being. To feel unloved is to feel imperiled in our being, cut off from the whole upon which we depend. This is why the feeling of being unloved approaches despair.
9. Our desire for love cannot be fully satisfied through our relations with other people. We need more love than others are able to bestow given their own self-involvement and ontological limitations.
10. Further, the material world we depend upon for our material well-being is also frequently (and perhaps essentially) unloving. This is most radically apparent in our subjection to illness and death.
11. Hence, we turn to God as a transcendent source of unlimited love.
12. John's proclamation that "God is love" (1Jn. 4:8), in this regard, may be read as not only testimony, but even more, as definition.
13. God is the ontological basis of I and not-I and, hence, that through which the union of I and not-I can be effected.

14. But God cannot be counted on to make other people more loving or the material world more hospitable. The deficit in love we experience due to the schism between I and not-I can only be fully resolved through spiritual realization.

15. The spiritually realized person experiences - 'knows' - divine love in a way that satisfies the basic longing for love, despite whatever lack of love we experience from others and the world.

16. True spiritual realization naturally leads to a desire to share this divine love with others, for love is, by its very nature, communal.

17. But such unadulterated spiritual realization is extremely difficult to achieve because the ego (in most of us) is so configured as to seek the satisfaction of its desire for love from the inconstant world of nature and other people. Very few have a direct or full experience of divine love.

18. So, a reconstitution of the ego is required for spiritual realization. This reconstituted state is pointed to by the various religions through such words as: 'eternal life,' 'beatitude,' 'moksha,' 'nirvana,' and others. Figures like Buddha and Christ represent the state of full realization.

19. Progress along the spiritual path requires a disciplining of our strictly egoic tendencies. To understand this we must understand something of the nature of egoic life.

II. Egoic Life

1. The world is a metaphysical whole composed of interrelated and interdependent parts.

2. In the human being, the part has become aware of itself as an individual. This self-awareness is the "ego."

3. The ego is an ontological structure through which individualized existence is made possible. Due to individualization, the ego experiences the world in terms of the duality of I and not-I. Nevertheless, despite its individualization, the I of the ego depends for its sustenance on the goods it can acquire from the not-I. This is because only the whole is self-sustaining; the ego remains an interdependent part of the greater whole.

4. This is the paradox of egoic existence: We are, at once, a part of the whole and apart from the whole.

5. Egoic goods, as such, are those goods required to sustain the ego's individualized existence. A great host of egoic desires clamor for satisfaction in this regard. These desires can be more or less healthy even from an egoic point of view, i.e., they can lead to greater or lesser individual well-being.

6. From a strictly empirical perspective, there is little evidence that the individualized person has an ontological standing or basis beyond egoic, bodily, existence. From this point of view, a

strictly egoistic ethic can be defended as rational. The ancient Sophists are an example of those who have put forth such egoistic ethical views.

7. But introspectively we can recognize that the ego also has a spiritual desire, which is the desire for love. The ego's desire for love is, in essence, a desire to bridge the gap between I and not-I. This desire for love must be satisfied if the ego is to avoid despair.

8. In ordinary life, the egoic and spiritual desires of the ego are frequently confused. The ego pursues the satisfaction of its spiritual desire for love through the satisfaction of its egoic desires, and supposes (and in some degree experiences) that the satisfaction of the latter provides the satisfaction of the former.

9. This confusion is called "attachment" in the East and "idolatry" in the West. It is not primarily an intellectual confusion, but a confusion of our basic emotive and psychic dispositions (our "samskaras" or psychic habits). We are born into this confusion.

10. In Buddhism, this native confusion is expressed in the first two of the Four Noble Truths. In Christianity, it finds expression in the doctrine of original sin. In Judaism, it is associated with idolatry. All these traditions recognize that overcoming it requires a fundamental transformation of our psychic dispositions - such transformation is called "metanoia" in Christianity, 'enlightenment' in Buddhism.

11. The proper goal of spirituality is not the annihilation of the ego. The ego is a necessary structure and cannot be annihilated. Attempts to annihilate it are pernicious. Rather, the proper goal is the integration of our strictly egoic interests with our spiritual interests, which occurs through an opening of the individualized ego to an experience of divine love.

12. In Christianity, Christ is presented as a revelation of the human being whose egoic humanity is fully integrated with the divine.

III. Sin and Evil

1. Sin and evil are a function of what we might call the "self-enclosure" of the ego.

2. The self-enclosed ego is unaware of its ontological rootedness in the love of God and therefore takes the egoic distinction between I and not-I as ontologically fundamental.

3. This lack of awareness is called Ignorance (avidya) in Hinduism.

4. Given its Ignorance, the self-enclosed ego knows of no other way to satisfy its egoic and spiritual desires than through an expansion of its egoic domain; i.e., an expansion of its power over the not-I.

5. Since other people are also part of the not-I, the self-enclosed ego seeks power over others.

6. But this pursuit of egoic power is troubled, because such power does not truly satisfy the ego's spiritual desire. The self-enclosed ego pursues power as a substitute for love.

7. This pursuit of egoic expansion (as a substitute for love) leads to a distortion in the ego's desires and emotions. The ego comes to see worldly success as a token of ontological security and worldly failure as betokening the threat of annihilation. Thus, the ego's worldly desires become inflamed and engorged. In Christianity, such engorged worldly desire is called "concupiscence." In Buddhism, it is called "tanha." Plato speaks of it as "pleonexia."

8. Underlying the pursuit of egoic expansion is despair, as egoic expansion, even when successful, cannot ultimately satisfy the ego's spiritual needs.

9. The engorged and misdirected desires of the self-enclosed ego leads to its abuse of others. The fear that others will be abusive in turn leads the ego into even tighter self-enclosure. Thus, tragically and ironically, the ego's misdirected pursuit of love erodes the very possibility of love.

10. "Sin" might be defined as the misdirected ('disordered') dispositions and acts of the self-enclosed ego, resulting from Ignorance. Sin, in turn, leads to evil: acts and attitudes of self and other destruction.

11. We are not born into egoic self-enclosure. Rather, we are born with a spontaneous trustfulness of the world and others. This is the 'innocence' of the little child, of which Jesus speaks (Mt. 19:14). But the samsaric (inconstant, unreliable) world challenges, and frequently violates, this trust. Thus, the child grows increasingly defensive and 'self-enclosed'; self-enclosure is a function of egoic maldevelopment. The extent of this maldevelopment varies with individuals and cultures, and depends on native dispositions, life experiences, and societal influences.

12. Spiritual realization does not return us to the innocent naivete of the child, but it does return us to the trustfulness of the child, with this considerable difference: whereas the child trusts the world, the spiritually realized person knows that the world cannot ultimately be trusted. The spiritually realized person trusts the ontological basis of the world - "God." Christ in the West, and Buddha in the East, are the most prominent representations of spiritual realization.

IV. The Spiritual Aspirant

1. Few if any human beings achieve full spiritual realization in the course of a human lifetime. Spiritual life, thus, is expressed in the aspiration for spiritual realization.

2. Such spiritual aspiration finds concrete expression in the practices and disciplines prescribed by the various religions: Halakah in Judaism, the Eightfold Path in Buddhism, the various yogas in Hinduism, Sharia Law in Islam, Sacramental life in Christianity, etc.

3. All these practices have a twofold aim: to provide wholesome norms for the spiritual community, and to further the opening and reconstitution of the self-enclosed ego for the sake of spiritual realization.

4. Such realization is not an either/or - rather, most spiritual aspirants are somewhere on the continuum between Ignorance and Realization. And progress on this continuum is not steady; we move backward and forward in complex ways in response to life circumstances. One hopes, though, that one's overall trajectory is toward realization. Such hope is a feature of faith.

5. Faith, as trust in the love of God, finds expression as commitment to the spiritual path toward realization. The closer one is toward realization the firmer and deeper will be one's faith.

V. Faith and Despair

1. Faith is trust in the love of God. We trust that, in the words of Julian of Norwich, "All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of thing will be well." This is to say, we trust in our fundamental rootedness in the love of God.

2. Given that bodily life in the material world is inevitably subject to decay and dissolution, faith entails the belief that we are ontologically rooted in that which transcends the material world.

3. The justification for such belief is not empirical or evidential; it is that such belief is required for our spiritual well-being. As such, faith is not a conclusion, but a commitment. It has its roots in our native spiritual teleology, i.e., the aims inherent to our spiritual constitution.

4. Nevertheless, that faith is required for well-being may be regarded as some indication of its verity, in that ill-being is the privation of well-being, suggesting that ill-being arises only in relation to well-being and would not be possible without the possibility of well-being.

5. Further, for the spiritually realized, and those who approach realization, faith is self-validating: it bestows the spiritual wellness it points to.

6. As faith is needed for our ultimate well-being, the utter absence of faith is despair.

7. The despairing person experiences an absence of love and an absence of any hope of love. Unmitigated despair is unbearable. The unrealized psyche seeks to hide its despair from itself through a great assortment of psychological mechanisms. Much evil arises from the machinations of despair.

8. These machinations of despair are especially difficult to address because 1.) Despair is in hiding from itself and 2.) Such hiding is required to make the despair tolerable. Hence, the despairing person will often resist looking honestly at his/her despair.

9. Despair, at one extreme, and full spiritual realization, at the other, exist on a continuum. One can be more or less realized and more or less despairing. The average person lives on this

continuum, with a mixture of faith and despair. The spiritual life, when healthy, helps one progress toward faith and away from despair.

10. Religious creeds are best understood as articulations of faith. They are not factual assertions about the structure of the world to be taken literally. To properly understand them we must grasp the way they express the life of faith.

11. The life of faith is the life of the spiritual path. We might think of the goal of this path - spiritual realization - as the sanctification of the ego.

VI. The Sanctified Ego

1. The spiritually realized person does not cease to be egoic. The ego is a necessary structure without which individualized life would be impossible. But spiritual realization involves the overcoming of Ignorance (avidya) such that one experiences one's rootedness in the divine ground that transcends the distinction between I and not-I.

2. Such an experience resolves the despair consequent upon feeling oneself enclosed within the ego. The overcoming of such despair yields spiritual peace.

3. This, in turn, resolves the "engorgement" of worldly desires that leads to sin and evil. The realized person continues to have egoic desires, but is able to put them in their proper place, subordinate to the demands of the spirit.

4. The realized person experiences his/her ego as rooted in the divine ground that all else is rooted in as well, hence experiences a joyous ontological kinship with all others. This sense of joyous kinship expresses itself as love and compassion.

5. But beyond this, at the height of spiritual realization the ego takes upon itself the goals of the divine. The ego finds its own satisfaction in satisfying - "serving" - the demands of divine love. For the spiritually realized person, such service, again, is joyous.

6. Perhaps the foremost paradigm of such spiritual realization is the figure of Christ, who is said to be both "man" (ego) and God (trans-ego). Christ is one whose ego is fully united with the divine ground. Spiritual life is the endeavor to become "Christlike."

7. The height of spiritual realization is expressed in various terms in the different spiritual traditions: eternal life; nirvana; moksha; beatitude, etc. All these point to the state of spiritual realization - the sanctification of the ego - to which the spiritual aspirant aspires.

VII. Religion

1. Religions have, as their proper purpose, the role of guiding the spiritual aspirant toward spiritual realization as well as guiding the spiritual community in its communal relations.

2. The religions of the world have their origins in revelatory experiences - moments when divine truth penetrates the mind of the recipient of revelation. Such revelation (received divine truth) is then communicated and passed down through scripture and tradition.

3. Revelation, by its very nature, is imperfect for two primary reasons:

4. First, the human intellect is limited in its ability to grasp the ultimate nature of reality. Hence, revelation gets expressed in terms and categories not fully adequate to the truth.

5. Second, the original recipients of revelation, as well as those to whom revelation is communicated, are not themselves fully realized spiritually. Hence, revelation tends to be tainted with egoistic concerns. This is evident in all the world's religions, though in some more than others.

6. The imperfection of revelation creates the need for theological hermeneutic, through which revelation is interpreted. Such hermeneutic is also imperfect.

7. Beyond this, the conflation of egoistic and spiritual concerns common to ordinary human life presents a constant temptation for religious authorities to seek to expand their own egoistic domains (either as individuals or as institutions) through their religious teachings.

8. Hence, institutional religions are inherently subject to flaw, limitation, and corruption. This is not a reason to dispense with them. They serve a vital function. But it is a reason to subject them to critical scrutiny, and to resist any demand that they be accepted as absolute.

9. Ideally, though, religious institutions serve as guides toward spiritual realization and sanctified life.

VIII. Sanctified Life

1. Human life is lived communally. It is of the very nature of the human being that we require healthy relations with one another for our material, psychological, and spiritual well-being. This is as true for the spiritually realized person as for everyone else.

2. The difference between the spiritually realized person and others is not that the realized person does not need healthy relations with others to be fully well, but that his or her fundamental sense of self is not grounded in such relations. Thus, the realized person is not 'attached' to others' regard for him or her.

3. Nevertheless, the ideal life for all is the life of the loving community. We might call this "sanctified life."

4. Such a life is lived in accordance with principles of love and justice that express respect and care for all.

5. The spiritually realized person naturally shows such respect and care and happily abides by such principles. In others (most of us), some tension exists between the demands of the ego and the demands to live in accordance with principles of love and justice.

6. This tension gives rise to the idea of divine 'law.'

7. Divine law commands (in the name of God) that people subordinate their strictly egoic interests to the demands of love and justice.

8. Even the spiritually realized person must subordinate strictly egoic interests to the demands of divine law. The difference between the spiritually realized person and others in this regard, is that the realized person does so joyously, whereas the unrealized person does so with some resistance.

9. Given the imperfections of revelation, and the potential for corruption of religious institutions, all assertions of 'divine law' must be assessed with critical scrutiny. Reason and conscience must be employed in deciding what to accept as 'divine law,' and our susceptibility to error must be acknowledged.

10. Nevertheless, the sanctified life, for all, demands a subordination of strictly egoic interests to the demands of love and justice. Such subordination is the true meaning of 'sacrifice.' Hence, the sanctified life is in this sense "sacrificial." The more spiritually realized we are, the more such sacrifice is experienced as joyous.

11. The spiritually realized person, as an expression of such spiritual realization, will be concerned with the sanctity of society as a whole. We see such concern expressed in such figures as Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Thich Nhat Hanh, and others.

12. Different societies, different cultures, and different economic and political systems can be more or less 'enlightened' with respect to the requisites of sanctified life. The more enlightened the society, the more healthy will be the egoic development of the members of that society.

13. A primary task of Philosophy as a discipline is to reflect upon the character and requisites of sanctified life. To achieve an understanding of the character and requisites of sanctified life is wisdom.

IX. The Spiritual Path

1. Thus, we enter upon the spiritual path due to the deficit in love we experience as a result of our egoic, individualized, existence.

2. From the standpoint of faith, however, this deficit is not in itself an evil, any more than hunger is an evil for one to whom food is available.

3. On the contrary, it is just this deficit, when responded to healthily, that spurs us on into loving relation with one another and toward a creative, challenging, joyous, life.

4. Hence, Jesus says: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:3).

5. All of us are "poor in spirit," in that we do not contain, in our individualized selves, all we require for our spiritual well-being.

6. Nevertheless, at the height of spiritual realization we come to know ourselves as instances of the very love of God.

7. Thus, our poverty of spirit is "blessed" in that it opens us to loving engagement with the wide world beyond us, and inspires us to recognize ourselves as participant in the universal community of love that Jesus calls "the kingdom of heaven."