

## Suffering and Bliss in the Heart of God: Steps on the Spiritual Ladder

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### I. The Bliss of God

How are we to understand the reality of suffering from a spiritual perspective?

Let me first make this question clear. I am not now asking why God *allows* suffering. I am asking something more fundamental: How can there *be* suffering in a reality that is fundamentally blissful?

If the spiritual essence of God is bliss, as many religions teach, and everything else is somehow derived from God's blissful essence, then where does suffering *come from*? Suffering – as all things – must arise from what is ultimate in reality. If bliss is ultimate, then suffering must arise from bliss. Suffering must be, in some sense, a *mode* of bliss.

But how are we to understand this? What is bliss such that, under certain conditions, it can manifest as suffering? What is suffering such that, under certain conditions, it can resolve itself as bliss?

These are not idle questions. They are questions that lie at the heart of spiritual life, for spiritual life involves the endeavor to progress from states we experience as negative, states of suffering (*dukkha* in Buddhism), to a participation in, and enjoyment of, the bliss of God (nirvana; moksha; eternal life).

But how can such transmutation of suffering into bliss take place – how, unless suffering were already a mode of bliss? Or we might ask this question the other way around: How can a divine reality of bliss give rise to a creation rife with suffering – how, unless divine bliss has already

within it the potential to manifest as suffering under certain conditions? These are the questions we wish to explore.

Let us begin, then, by suggesting that bliss be thought of as analogous to white light. White light, separated from itself, breaks up into all the colors of the rainbow. Red is a fragment of white light, blue a fragment of white light, etc. All the diverse colors inhere within white light but appear as distinct when the light is divided from itself. When the fragments of light are joined together again, they combine as white.

Let us posit that something similar is true of the nature of divine bliss. All the affective modes, including the negative ones, are latent within bliss, fragments of it, so to speak – somewhat as the diverse colors of the spectrum are fragments of white. When separated, these fragments manifest as modes of relative dissatisfaction and suffering, when joined together they complement each other and satisfy one another. This satisfaction is bliss.

But if this is true, it opens us to another question: What is the relationship of the negative spiritual modes to one another, and to bliss itself?

The general answer would seem to be that the more positive, satisfied, modes correspond to more fully realized states of ontological wholeness; the more negative, suffering, modes to states of isolation and fragmentation. And this does appear to be what we see: loneliness, rejection, exclusion, sickness are states of relative isolation, states in which our ability to fully relate to the world beyond us is compromised or threatened. Love, vigor, joy, zest, on the other hand, are states of robust relationality.

This implies an immanent teleology within reality itself. Reality is driven to satisfy itself in unity, and finds fulfillment to the extent it experiences itself as united.

But reality as a whole is only fulfilled *in* itself to the extent that it knows itself *as* itself, i.e., in its wholeness. Hinduism expresses this idea in its characterization of ultimate reality as *Sat-chit-ananda*. *Sat* is eternal existence, *chit* is consummate awareness, *ananda* is bliss. Reality as a whole (in Hinduism: *Brahman*) is blissfully self-aware.

But reality is not a simple whole. It is a whole divided into elements each distinct from one another and distinct from the whole. These elements, when they achieve consciousness as separate elements (as in human beings), become aware of their isolation from the whole. A human being comes to see herself as an 'I' separated from the rest of reality, the 'not-I.' This awareness of separateness has its own affective modes, which may be understood as teleological fragments of bliss. They are 'teleological' in that they are modes of yearning for (re-)union with the whole. This yearning, when frustrated and unsatisfied, is suffering. Suffering is the frustrated desire for wholeness.

Thus, we approach the bliss of ultimate reality, of *sat-chit-ananda*, as we come more and more to experience ourselves as conscious participants in the unity, the wholeness, of being. We experience suffering (deficient modes of bliss) as we experience ourselves as isolated from this unity.

We may think of suffering, then, as fragmented bliss *desiring* completion. At the furthest extremes, however, these states of suffering are not experienced as desire, for they are ignorant of what would satisfy them. They are experienced merely as suffering.

With this in mind, we might sketch out a progression, or regression, from the fullness of bliss to its most deficient modes; a ladder, so to speak, of spiritual devolution and evolution, deprivation and attainment. Spiritual life may be thought of as the endeavor to climb this spiritual ladder.

The following is a suggestion for how we might envision this spiritual ladder. It is not intended as in any way definitive or complete. The spiritual realities we are trying to describe here are enormously complex; this schema necessarily oversimplifies them. Nevertheless, I offer it as a way of thinking about how the various modes of suffering and fulfillment relate to one another, and to the ultimate experience of unity to which they all aspire.

I have organized the below schema in terms of increasing distance from the consummate state of bliss. As envisioned here, *joy* is one step from bliss, *awe* a further step, *reverence* one more step away, *dread* further still, *anxiety* even further, *despair* further again, and, at the furthest extreme from bliss is what I will call narcissistic *mendacity*, a state of egoic self-absorption and self-deception. The narcissist strives to satisfy her longing for wholeness through subsuming the whole of reality within the domain of the isolated ego. This is an impossible task, rooted in a failure to understand the true nature of reality. Hence mendacity must ultimately break down. This breakdown, when rightly understood, propels one up the spiritual ladder.

## II. The Spiritual Ladder (from top to bottom)

*Bliss → Joy → Awe → Reverence → Dread → Anxiety → Despair → Mendacity*

### 1. Bliss

Bliss is the essential spiritual experience of God (and therefore, also, of any who might experience a sense of union/communion with God). I use the word ‘God’ here to refer to ultimate reality, from which all else arises.

Bliss is an experience of wholeness, completeness, spiritual consummation. Its cognitive counterpart is the recognition that underlying and overarching the great diversity of the universe is an ultimate Unity with which one is, even in one's individuality, indissolubly connected.

This idea finds expression in all the great religions.

In Christianity it is expressed through the figure of the Christ, the 'God-Man.' Christ is, at once, fully individual, "fully man," and fully universal, "fully God." He is, thus, an individual fully aware of his unity with the whole. This awareness – and the compassion it entails - is the meaning of *agape* (divine love).

It is expressed in Hinduism in its notion that the individualized Atman is 'One' with the universal Brahman.

It is expressed in the central revelatory commandment of Judaism: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." To love God in this manner is to unite oneself with the Oneness of God.

All these are variations on the same theme.

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante expresses his vision of the divine Unity in this way:

O grace abounding, through which I presumed  
to set my eyes on the Eternal Light  
so long that I spent all my sight on it!

In its profundity I saw—ingathered  
and bound by *love* into one single volume—  
what, in the universe, seems separate, scattered.

Bliss is not a singular feeling; it includes within it all the other spiritual modes, and therefore involves an awareness of, and feeling for, all who fail to experience this bliss *as* bliss – who experience it deficiently, as suffering.

Thus, bliss includes *love, compassion, and inner peace*.

Bliss is *love* insofar as it is an experience of community with all things. To love God with all one's heart, soul, and might is not to love God to the *exclusion* of all else, but to love all else as *included* within God. Thus, Jesus tells us that the commandment to love God is "of a kind" (*homoousis*) with the command to love one's neighbor as oneself.

Bliss is *compassion* insofar as it entails an empathic participation with all who suffer states of disunity and fragmentation. In Christianity, this empathic participation of God in human suffering is figured in the Cross of Christ. In Buddhism, it finds expression in the Bodhisattva vow to work toward the elimination of suffering in all beings.

And yet, though bliss knows suffering and despair, it is not *in* despair, for at the level of bliss there is an understanding that even despair is but a deficient mode of bliss, and that all who despair will eventually be brought out of their despair; that – in the words revealed to Julian of Norwich – "All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of thing will be well."

And just for this reason, bliss is *peace*.

Such divine peace finds expression in the Jewish notion of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is the seventh day (seven being a symbol of wholeness) when God rests from all God's work. God's 'work' is the work of bringing the diversity of the creation into accord with the unity of the Creator. This work is ongoing. It does not come to an end at some point in time, but achieves its end, its *telos*, at a point beyond time. This point beyond time is the Sabbath. The Sabbath is not a moment in time, but a mode of spiritual awareness; an awareness of divine bliss overarching time itself, unifying the disparate moments of time into wholeness. From the perspective of the Sabbath, one sees the ultimate wholeness and fulfillment of the creation even in its diversity and relative unfulfillment.

St. Paul calls this “the peace that passes all understanding.” It passes understanding because it does not depend on any worldly state of affairs. It is not subject to the vicissitudes – the ups and downs, gains and losses – of worldly life. It is present even in the midst of worldly strife.

The Gospels give us an image of such peace in its depiction of Jesus sleeping through the storm.

Bliss is ‘pure actuality,’ to use an Aristotelian phrase. It does not seek to actualize anything beyond itself. It is satisfied in itself. As dynamic, however, it seeks something *within* itself. The dynamic *life* of bliss is joy.

## 2. Joy

If we think of bliss as an experience of ‘pure actuality,’ then joy might be thought of as the experience of *coming to actualization*. Joy is the experience of moving from potentiality to actuality, of *becoming* actualized. Bliss is the experience of fulfillment, joy the experience of becoming fulfilled. Bliss rests in itself, joy progresses beyond itself toward bliss.

We might think of the relation between bliss and joy by analogy with the twofold enjoyment we get from eating a satisfying meal. Bliss is the satisfaction we feel after having eaten the meal, joy the pleasure we feel *in* eating it.

But bliss should not be thought of as ontologically distinct from joy. Bliss has joy within it. God’s bliss is *living* bliss, *creative* bliss, and thus bears a dialectical relationship with joy. The creation is not a mistake, rather it is an expression of the creative joy of the divine, the creative joy implicit in bliss itself. Bliss, following its creative urge, separates itself out from itself and thereby experiences the joy of reuniting with itself in endless varied permutations. In the book of

*Job* we read that, upon God's creation, "the morning stars burst out singing and the angels shouted for joy!" (Job 38:7).

We are speaking, of course, in highly abstract terms. In the finite world, this joy of reunion is enormously varied, *as* varied as diversity itself. When a man falls in love with a woman, he feels the joy of reunion. When an actress reveals her inner feelings to an audience, she feels the joy of reunion. When a musician joins notes in a melody, he feels the joy of reunion. When a political activist works for a better world, she feels the joy of reunion.

Ideally, worldly life should be a life of joy *working toward* bliss. This notion finds symbolic expression in the first chapter of Genesis, where God (joyously) creates harmonious order out of primordial chaos and rests "from all His work" on the seventh day. The six days of creation are days of joy. The seventh day is the day of bliss.

But the week keeps repeating itself. Diversity seeks unity, and unity breaks up again into creative diversity. This is the dynamic nature of ultimate reality.

Thus, as *dynamic*, ultimate reality is best thought of as a dialectic of bliss-joy, where joy is the experience of advancing upon bliss, and bliss overflows into a potent disunity that then allows for joy in endless permutations of creative *re*-union.

Such spiritual joy, when fully actualized, contains within it *love* (community with others), compassion (feeling for the suffering of others), and *peace* (abiding contentment in self).

### **3. Awe**

Awe arises when we first glimpse the greatness and luminance of God – divine unity – from out of the smallness and darkness of our felt isolation. There is an element of joyous surprise in



awe, for awe bears a relationship to despair. Awe is the first experience of the real possibility that one's despair can be overcome.

Awe is the experience of coming out of the darkness into the light, coming aware of the Whole and one's inclusion within it. In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Arjuna experiences awe when Krishna provides him a vision of the divine Trimurti (Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva) generating and destroying countless worlds in endless creative activity. Moses experiences awe in his encounter with God at the burning bush. Jesus' disciples experience awe at his transfiguration.

There is always a touch of dread within awe, indeed a twofold dread. There is the dread that one may prove unworthy of the divine presence: "'Woe to me!' I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty'" (Is. 6:5).

And there is the related dread that one's own unity as a separate self may be overwhelmed by the Unity that is God: "You may not look directly at my face," says God to Moses, "for no one may see me and live" (Ex. 33:20).

Nevertheless, despite such dread, awe contains within it a great yearning and hope, the hope that one will be able to approach, more and more closely, the overarching love (and bliss) that is God. Rudolf Otto speaks of these elements of awe as '*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*': the terror and fascination of approaching the divine mystery.

So awe, though dreadful in part, is an opening to joy.

#### **4. Reverence**

As awe is an opening to joy, so reverence is an opening to awe; but reverence bears more of a relation to dread than does awe.

We feel reverence for God, or for tokens of God, that promise to bring us out of our isolation and into relation with wholeness. In reverence we humble ourselves in the face of what is greater than us, fuller than us, more complete in meaning and worth. Thus, the devout Jew bends the knee in reverent prayer, the Christian kneels at the alter to take communion, the Muslim prostrates himself in humble submission.

But such humility is not merely an expression of lowliness; it is, at the same time, an expression of grandeur, for it is just such humility that allows our awareness of the greatness beyond us. Through observing the terms of reverence, the devotee approaches more and more fully the Wholeness of God.

In the experience of reverence there is also the fear (the dread) that if we fail to meet the terms demanded by the revered ritual, law, or dogma, we may be thrust back into isolation. So, again, there is dread within reverence.

And for this reason, reverence can all too easily degenerate into superstition. Religious superstition is rooted in the dread that if we fail to do what is prescribed in the prescribed manner, God (or 'the gods') will injure us, reject us, cast us away, abandon us. So we often cling to this or that ritual, dogma, or practice, not for the way it opens us to the reality of God, but for fear of God's wrathful judgment. This, in turn, feeds fanaticism, oppressive dogmatism, bigotry, etc. This is how religion becomes perverted.

Nevertheless, reverence, *rightly directed*, is a passageway to awe, joy, and bliss.

## **5. Dread**

Dread is the experience of what has been called the *wrath* of God. In dread we feel God's disapproval, which is to say, we feel our own failure to meet the terms demanded by God, for

communion with God. This is a terrible experience, insofar as communion with God is our ultimate *telos*.

For this reason, dread, like reverence, is manipulable. In general, the farther we move from the higher spiritual modes the more our experience of God is mediated by that which is *not* God, that which merely *represents* God, and, hence, the more our spirituality is subject to manipulation, exploitation, and distortion due to inadequate representations. This is why theology – good theology – is so important.

Still, dread, like reverence, is an authentic spiritual experience on the path toward wholeness. As a spiritual modality it is what John of the Cross calls ‘the dark night of the soul’: “The soul, because of its impurity, suffers immensely at the time [the] divine light truly assails it. When this pure light strikes in order to dispel all impurity, persons feel so unclean and wretched that it seems God is against them and they are against God” (John of the Cross, *Selected Writings*, Paulist Press, New York, 1987).

But this sense of God’s disapproval is a mode of transformative relation to God. In the dreadful experience one feels the *judgment* of God for one’s “impurities,” i.e., for those spiritual dispositions (‘sins’) that make one unable to commune with the whole. We feel unacceptable, unaccepted. But we experience this only because we are moving *toward* the whole, and, thus, feel our inadequacy in respect to it. Thus, dread makes us aware that we must undergo a ‘repentance,’ a *metanoia*, a ‘death and rebirth,’ to realize our spiritual destiny.

This, of course, is figured in the death and resurrection of Christ. Christ’s *dreadful* death on the Cross is, symbolically, his dying to sin (to that which cannot harmonize with the whole) so as to be resurrected in the Spirit (harmonious relation with the whole). The death is *for the sake of* the rebirth: we are condemned *in order* to be redeemed. Still, the experience of condemnation is

dreadful. In the words of the Christian spiritual *Amazing Grace*: “Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fear relieved.”

In Buddhism, such dread is represented by Buddha’s encounter with Mara on the eve of his enlightenment.

Such dread of God, rightly understood, is a blessing. It marks (for many) the beginning of their spiritual journey, their approach to God, hence the first step toward reverence, awe, joy, and bliss. In the words of the Hebrew Bible: “Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

## **6. Anxiety**

Existential anxiety is the experience of alienation from God. But unlike dread, anxiety does not know itself to be in relation to God at all. It is an experience of deep restlessness at the core of one’s being. But it has – often unacknowledged or misunderstood – elements of spiritual dread within it.

The person weighted down by existential anxiety will wonder about her ‘self-worth’ (a wondering that is a kind of amorphous dread), but will have little idea of what she would need to do to establish that self-worth. She will feel, deep within (but not necessarily acknowledged) a general sense of rejection, unworthiness, inferiority. As a result, she will turn to the things of the world to shore up her sense of self-worth, looking upon worldly goods, worldly success, even worldly luck, as tokens of ontological worth. Such anxiety, thus, leads to what in the East is called ‘attachment.’ Attachment is the association of finite powers, goods, and circumstances with one’s sense of fundamental, ontological, well-being. In the West such attachment is called ‘idolatry’; the worship of finite goods *as if* they were God.

Such worship of finite goods leads to intensive rivalry among human beings, as we violently compete with one another for access to, and control over, these goods – in what Thomas Hobbes calls “the war of all against all.” But such internecine war is not merely, or even principally, a war over material goods. Even more, it is a war for *standing, status*; for it is only through such standing and status that the anxious person comes to feel secure in her connection to the world. In effect, the anxious person, no longer in any authentic relation to God, and, thus, unable to trust in God, seeks command over the finite world in compensation. At its height, this struggle for worldly supremacy is the spiritual sin of Pride. In the context of Eastern religion, it is often spoken of as ‘egoism.’ In modern psychology, we speak of it as ‘narcissism.’

And, ironically, it is just such narcissistic Pride that prevents healthy, honest, communion with others, and, thus, blocks the love that would truly move us along the path to wholeness. It is one’s narcissistic pridefulness that one experiences as *condemned* when one’s anxiety *rises* to the level of dread. It is this pridefulness that must ‘die’ in order for authentic communion with God to advance.

We might think of anxiety, then, as *ignorant* dread. Anxiety is dread that is no longer aware of *what* it dreads or *why* it dreads. The anxious person comes to associate her anxiety with her uncertainty over her ability to acquire and maintain worldly goods, which she believes will relieve her of anxiety if only she can secure them. When the endeavor to secure herself through worldly goods breaks down, she despairs.

## **7. Despair**

We might think of despair as *congealed* anxiety, anxiety that can no longer rise above itself or escape itself. The person of despair has been conquered by her sense of alienation and

worthlessness. In our anxiety we turn to the goods of the world (material *and* social) to shore up our sense of worth. When these worldly goods fail us we fall into despair. Despair is a profound feeling of isolation and abandonment. It is the extreme of loneliness. The despairing person feels loved by no one (or, at least, no one of any *worth*), and feels no further hope that she ever will be.

At the portal of Dante's hell are the words: "Abandon all hope ye who enter here." But to understand this properly we must ask what kind of hope those who enter hell possess. It is not hope in God, for if they had true hope in God they would not enter hell. It is hope in worldly goods, hope that they can succeed in securing themselves through the acquisition of worldly goods. This is the hope they are forced to abandon. It is the very structure of finite life that forces this.

In John's first epistle we read: "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever" (1 Jn 2:15-17).

"The world is passing away," hence those who place all their hope in the world's goods are doomed to experience the loss of hope. This is hell.

Buddhism speaks, similarly, of the impermanence (*anicca*) of worldly things. Clinging (*tanha*) to these impermanent things leads to *dukkha*, spiritual suffering. Hinduism employs the word *samsara* to express the ephemeral nature of worldly life. Suffering results from one's attachment to *samsara*.

In general, then, hellish despair results from over-great attachment to finite goods, ‘idolatry.’ In the West, Satan represents the spirit that tempts us to such idolatrous attachments. In Buddhism, a similar role is played by Mara.

But at this point we must note an error on the part of the Christian tradition. It is an error – rooted in the spiritual experience of dread – to suppose that hell can be eternal. The moment hell is *experienced* as hell, i.e., as condemnation, it is no longer despair but dread, and dread is ultimately transformative. Dread conducts us (painfully) to reverence, which conducts us to awe, joy, and finally bliss. To feel oneself *condemned* to hell is already to be on the way out of hell.

An *eternal* hell would conflict with the possibility of bliss. Bliss, as an experience of wholeness, entails universal love, compassion, and inner peace. God cannot be blissful while knowing that some whom God loves are suffering eternally in hell. An awareness of this would lead God, and all united with God, to despair. But God would not be God if God were in despair. So, it is not possible that there is a blissful God *and* an eternal hell. Belief in one precludes belief in the other.

We see a recognition of this in the Bodhisattva vow of Buddhism. The Bodhisattva, aware of her unity with all beings, vows to postpone full entrance into the bliss of nirvana until all sentient beings have been freed from suffering. Implicit in this vow is the recognition that bliss cannot finally rest in itself so long as anyone suffers. The love entailed in bliss propels one to the (joyous) work of compassion.

Nevertheless, though hell is not eternal, it is real. The meaning of hell is despair. But we must remember that even despair is a mode of bliss, a fragment of bliss, a *desire* for bliss. As a mode of bliss, it does not abide in itself. Despair is a frustrated longing for wholeness – and this longing will finally break one out of despair.

Kierkegaard writes: "[I]f repentance is to arise, there must first be effective despair, radical despair, so that the life of the spirit can break through from the ground upward" (*The Sickness Unto Death*, 59).

For the spirit to break through one must be willing to encounter oneself honestly. Many are not willing to do so – at least not at first. The endeavor to flee despair, to deny despair, is what I dub ‘mendacity.’ I place mendacity at the farthest extreme from bliss because a prerequisite of authentic relation to God is authentic relation to self. The mendacious person avoids such honest relation to self – in order to avoid despair.

Mendacity is a management of despair made possible by the way the spiritual good is reflected in finite goods.

## 8. Mendacity

Thus far we have been speaking of the above modes in their relation to spiritual life. *Bliss* is the experience of union or communion with the ultimate, *joy* the experience of active approach to the ultimate. We feel *awe* upon first apprehending the magnificence of the ultimate, and *reverence* for the tokens of the ultimate. In *dread* we experience our inadequacy in relation to the ultimate, and in *anxiety* feel our alienation from the ultimate. *Despair*, finally, is the feeling of no longer being able to progress toward the ultimate.

Implicit in this scheme is the notion that all modes of distance from the ultimate are modes of *desire* for the ultimate. Bliss is the satisfaction of this desire, despair its utter frustration.

But these spiritual affective modes (bliss, joy, awe, etc.) also appear in ordinary life, in relation to finite things and circumstances. Indeed, this is their *first* and most *immediate* appearance for us. We fall in love and experience the joy, approaching bliss, of union with our



beloved. We stand atop a towering mountain and gaze in awe at the grandeur of the mountain range before us. We revere our family, our traditions, our nation. We dread the breakup of our romantic relationships, the loss of our jobs, the death of our loved ones. We are anxious in the face of the many uncertainties of life, and can be driven to despair when life no longer presents us with access to its basic goods.

How are we to understand the relationship of these affective modes, as modes pertaining to ultimate reality, to these same modes, as they pertain to worldly things?

My suggestion is that the things and circumstances of finite, worldly, life may best be understood as *reflections* and particularized *instantiations* of the modalities of the ultimate.

Imagine God as a painter with a palette of colors at God's disposal. These colors are, so to speak, the colors of bliss – they represent the various modalities of desire into which bliss breaks up when separated from the whole. God employs these colors to *paint* a finite world full of disparate things; some things are painted red (awe-inspiring), some green (dreadful), some blue (joyous), etc. These colors of the finite are not distributed randomly; they reflect the ways in which these finite realities mirror our relations with the ultimate.

For instance, the *joy* and *bliss* of sexual romance seems a finite reflection of the joy and bliss of communion with the divine. This mirroring is the basis for the Bible's *Song of Songs*. Likewise, the *dread* of romantic breakup seems a finite reflection of the dread of rupture with the divine, and can catapult the spurned lover into hell-like feelings of worthlessness and despair.

Indeed, it is because of this mirrored quality of finite life that we can employ symbol, metaphor, and myth as an avenue into spiritual understanding. The things of the finite world represent (*re-present*) the modalities of spiritual life.

Thus, the finite world in general reflects (and instantiates) the infinite life of the spirit. Plato suggests as much when he speaks of time as “the moving image of eternity.” In temporal life, we live amidst reflections and finite instantiations of the eternal reality. Plato elaborates on this in his famous Allegory of the Cave. Plato’s cave represents the finite, material world. Reflected on the wall of the cave (though often in distorted ways) are images that have their true meaning as tokens of the immaterial ‘Forms’ – forms of the spiritual good – outside the cave.

It is just because of this *reflective* or *mirrored* quality of finite life that *attachment* (as the East calls it) and *idolatry* (as the West calls it) are possible. *In idolatrous attachment we mistake a finite reflection of an eternal good for that eternal good itself*, and thus pursue it and cling to it – indeed worship it – *as if* our fundamental spiritual well-being depended upon it.

Such idolatrous attachment is the principal malady of finite life. In Buddhism it is called *tanha*, often translated simply as craving or clinging. It is the root of greed, lust, malice, and the other seven ‘deadly’ sins. It leads to intensive competition for material goods and for social status, which *represent* to us the eternal goods we truly seek. But precisely because they are *not* these eternal goods, and therefore do not finally satisfy, we cannot get enough of them. The problem is not that they do not satisfy at all (they do! – that’s why we crave them), it is that they do not satisfy for very long or very deeply; hence we forever crave more. In the Catholic tradition, this endless desire for more is called the sin of *concupiscence*.

Idolatrous attachment distorts our relationship to the goods of finite life and blocks our spiritual advance by diverting our attention from what is of true, fundamental, worth. It is not the most viscerally miserable spiritual condition, because as long as one is succeeding in acquiring the goods to which one is attached one’s misery is assuaged. Indeed, if one is very successful one

can feel great (if spiritually ersatz) joy. Nevertheless, idolatrous attachment is at the furthest extreme from true spiritual communion (bliss). Thus, Jesus says of the wealthy man attached to his riches: “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” The rich man is enthralled with the joy bestowed by his riches and comes to revere those riches above all else, above God.

Idolatrous attachment is a mode of falsity; it involves a false estimation of the meaning and value of finite goods. In Hinduism, this falsity is called *maya*, often translated ‘illusion.’ I have chosen to call this stage of idolatrous attachment ‘mendacity,’ because it entails a refusal, or inability, to honestly acknowledge the fundamental inadequacy of one’s finite condition. This failure and dishonesty can be more or less overt. Indeed, as one becomes more aware of oneself one is forced into more and more deliberate modes of mendacity in order to shield oneself from despair. In the philosophical tradition what I am here calling ‘mendacity’ has been called ‘inauthenticity.’

Moral evil has its basis here, as we exploit and abuse others in order to provide more (more stuff, more status) for ourselves.

And, of course, there is a great tragic irony in such evil; for through it we rupture our relations with others and, hence, with the whole with which we (more fundamentally) desire to commune.

Idolatrous attachment, and the mendacity associated with it, are native to the human condition. We are born with a strong attachment to finite life and to the goods required to secure it. Our *bodies* are attached to the need to eat and breathe. We *naturally* dread physical death and all that threatens us with it. It is, thus, natural for us to be attached to finite life. This is the truth underlying the Christian doctrine of original sin. We see the same idea (although expressed in a

more sympathetic voice) in the Buddhist notion of *tanha* and the Hindu notion of *maya*. We are naturally prone to idolatrous attachments. In the words of the Hebrew Bible: “The inclinations of man’s heart are evil from youth” (Gen. 8:21).

Why?

The Eastern traditions tell us that at the root of idolatrous attachment is Ignorance, i.e., ignorance of our rootedness in the eternal. Due to such ignorance we take, *mis*-take, the goods of finite life for the ultimate good. This ignorance is *visceral*, it is an ignorance of our affective dispositions; it cannot be resolved through mere intellection. It is possible to be intellectually ‘enlightened’ and yet spiritually immature. This does not mean that intellectual understanding is unimportant, only that it is insufficient. It provides the roadmap for one’s spiritual journey, but a roadmap alone will not suffice. On the one hand, we need a good roadmap; if one follows an inaccurate roadmap one will never get to one’s destination. Thus, we need good theology and philosophy. On the other hand, a roadmap is not enough; if one stands still studying even an excellent roadmap one will also never get to one’s destination.

Why are we Ignorant?

Our Ignorance is ontological; it is the result of our individualization as finite, free, beings whose finite lives depend upon finite goods. Freedom itself – i.e., our power of self-determination – separates us from others and distances us from God. As *self*-determined we are, by that fact, *not* God-determined. Thus, freedom itself is the condition for what the East calls *Ignorance* (avidya).

Such *Ignorance* yields *Sin*. Sin and Ignorance may be subtly distinguished from one another. *Ignorance* is our failure to experience ourselves as rooted in God. *Sin* is our endeavor to root ourselves in the finite world in response. These two are mutually reinforcing. The more we

engage in acts and attitudes of sin, the more remote we feel from God; the more remote we feel from God, the more driven we are to acts and attitudes of sin.

In the Hebrew Bible it is said that human beings are created 'in the image of God.' This is generally read as a very positive thing and, in an ultimate sense, it is. But (ironically) it is our very status as 'images of God' that conditions our Ignorance of God, for it allows us and inclines us to become enclosed upon ourselves, as if we, in our separateness, were the ontological whole. Thus, we make an idol of our finite selves.

But because we are *only* an image of God and not in fact God, our making an idol of ourselves obscures and obstructs our relation to the true God beyond us. Now we are alone. Now we feel ontologically dependent on ourselves. But we cannot actually depend on ourselves. We haven't the ontological power, in ourselves, to sustain ourselves or fulfill ourselves. We look down at ourselves and find that we are naked (finite, vulnerable, insufficient in ourselves). This gives rise to anxiety. So, we rush to cover up our nakedness with worldly goods, and try to persuade ourselves that our ability to acquire these worldly goods means that we *can* depend on ourselves. This is mendacity.

All this is symbolically figured in the Garden of Eden myth. Adam and Eve eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in order to become like God, but only succeed in discovering that they are naked and bereft. In fleeing their nakedness, they alienate themselves from the true God.

The Eden story is not the story of an event that took place at the beginning of human history, nor is it a symbolic account of an event that takes place in each of our lives. It does not refer to an event at all. It is a symbolic account of the alienated human condition.

The mendacious person strives to find ultimate satisfaction through the acquisition of worldly goods, material and social, and deceives herself about the power of these worldly goods to provide ultimate satisfaction. Such mendacity does not generally rise to the level of full conscious awareness. It is habitual and largely unconscious; a mendacity of our bones, so to speak. Indeed, the moment we become fully aware of it we move beyond mendacity, toward despair.

Despair, though more painful, is a spiritual advance on mendacity. In despair we face our spiritual destitution. It is only through such honest self-encounter that we can begin to make progress up the spiritual ladder.

### **III. The Spiritual Path: Ascending the Spiritual Ladder**

*Mendacity → Despair → Anxiety → Dread → Reverence → Awe → Joy → Bliss*

For the sake of exposition, I have separated out the discussion of anxiety, despair, and mendacity as if they were distinct stages of spiritual life. But we should recognize that they actually function together as parts of the complex of human alienation from God, human “fallenness” (to use the Christian term). The anxious person is anxious to avoid despair, and anxiously engages in mendacious beliefs and practices in order to do so.

For many, the spiritual path begins in earnest when this complex of alienation finally breaks down; when one comes to see, finally, the ultimate inadequacy of finite goods.

The spiritual path involves movement up the spiritual ladder. It must be said in this context, though, that spiritual advance is not a simple matter of climbing from one mode to another in a steady progression. The human psyche and spirit are enormously complex. One’s spiritual state,

at any given time (especially the further one is from bliss), is a combination of many states, and the individual states themselves have elements of the others within them.

For instance, mendacity, despair, and anxiety form a complex. And this complex bears an ontological relation to the higher spiritual modes. Indeed, as modes of bliss, all the spiritual modes are related to one another: Mendacity is *denied* despair, despair is *congealed* anxiety, anxiety is *ignorant* dread, dread is *inadequate* reverence, reverence is the *threshold* of awe, awe is the *beginning* of joy, and joy is bliss in *dynamic actualization*.

The move up the spiritual ladder does not proceed in simple steps. One has the entire spectrum within oneself all at once, but with the weight of one's psyche-spirit dominated by one or another mode. And parts of the psyche can be at one level while other parts are at another. Parts can slip backward, or lurch forward only then to slip backward again. One can be largely in despair yet have intimations of bliss. One can have a joyous life on the whole, but with a lingering taste of despair in the background. Indeed, one can use one's access to joy as a way of *covering over* one's despair, such that one's capacity for joy serves, *at the same time*, as an enabler of mendacity.

Once the person in despair has *seen through* and acknowledged the mendacity of the life of attachment, she is finally in a position to understand her anxiety *as* spiritual dread. And this recognition of dread is "the beginning of wisdom," the beginning of the endeavor to overcome it through spiritual advance.

Thus, dread impels us toward reverence, reverence toward awe, awe toward joy, and joy toward bliss. But, again, this movement is not simple. There is backsliding, confusion, bewilderment, and struggle all along the way.

This is why the cognitive dimension (theology), which we have not discussed here, is so important. It provides orientation and direction as we make our way forward. But, of course, the cognitive dimension is also subject to distortion. Indeed, we often find theologies that seem rooted in one or another step on the spiritual ladder. There are theologies rooted in dread (Calvinism), theologies focused on reverence (halakic Judaism), theologies of awe and joy (Hassidism), and theologies of unitive bliss (Vedanta). But a true theology, a full theology, would need to take *all* these modes into account in their relation to one another. Thus, the *critical examination* of theology is crucial; a bad roadmap will lead us in the wrong direction.

#### **IV. The Spiritual *Telos***

The ultimate goal of spiritual life is full participation in the bliss of God.

This goal finds one of its fullest representations in the figure of Christ, the ‘God-Man.’

Christ is a revelation of the free, individual, human being who experiences (at the most profound level) unity/community with God. It is important to note that such unity does not obliterate freedom or individuality. Christ remains a free, self-determining, individual. But Christ’s self-determination is informed by a perfected apprehension of the Whole to which he belongs. Thus, Christ’s life is rooted in the bliss of God. Such bliss, of course, is not to be thought of as narcissistic self-satisfaction. Divine bliss is open to the whole of the creation in love and compassion – open, therefore, to the suffering in the creation. God’s empathic participation in suffering is especially apparent in the figure of Christ.

The Christ is one representation of what we are *all* to become. This gets obscured in Christian theologies that emphasize worship of Jesus as a god on earth. Christ is not a god, as in paganism,



nor an avatar, as in Hinduism. Christ represents the fulfillment of *human* potentiality as ‘image of God.’ Christ is the *form* of human perfection.

## **V. Suffering and the Bliss of God**

So, we have provided at least a preliminary answer to our initial question: *All* the modes of spirituality, *including suffering*, are *modes of bliss*. They are all inherent to the divine reality. Thus, God as God *knows* dread, *knows* anxiety, *knows* despair, but knows them as eternally resolved in the divine reality. God, or one united with God, looks down upon the suffering person as a mother might look upon a small child who has fallen, scraped its knee, and is now howling in shock and pain. The mother’s heart goes out to the child, suffers with the child, while, at the same time, knowing what the child does not: that “all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of thing will be well.” Thus, the mother both cries in pain with the child and laughs in joy within herself, both at the same time.

This, finally, is how we might envision the relationship of God to suffering. God’s love includes suffering without being defeated by it. This compassionate, joyous, *serious* love *is* divine bliss. To approach this bliss, to participate in it, to express it, to celebrate it in its infinitely many forms, is the aim of spiritual of life.