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As you may deduce from the above, my joy derives from the act of creation. I write to inspire you, to move your heart, and hopefully to amuse you all the while. We live in a sea of energy and consciousness. This energy is like water: its best work is when it is moving, vibrant and cleansing, alive with possibility. When it is trapped, captured, unable to flow it becomes stagnant and even toxic, a breeding site for dis-ease. I best serve when I allow energy to flow through me, when I am but a channel for consciousness to evolve. Moving my energy into the Universe allows room for energy to flow into me, nourishing and supporting me.

I hope you are grateful for what I have created, that it has moved you in some way. You can thank me for my work in several ways:

- bringing it into the awareness of others spreads the energy
- using any inspiration to take your own action or to embellish this work before passing it along feeds the flow
- or if you are so moved, showing your appreciation by passing some of your energy in the form of money back to me via my website also continues the flow that nourishes everyone.

I welcome your comments and/or questions. Contact me at derek@derekjoetennant.net

About Breaking Trail.....	4
Introduction.....	6
Meditation and Prayer.....	8
Samsara.....	11
Change.....	13
Intention.....	15
What is Important in Your Life?.....	17
Mindfulness.....	18
Enlightenment.....	20
God Consciousness.....	21
What Makes God Smile?.....	23
Surrender.....	25
Step Into Witnessing.....	27
The Witness is Your Friend.....	29
Karma.....	31
What If I Lose My Connection?.....	32
We Are One.....	33
Love.....	34
Sangha.....	36
Partnership.....	38
Forgiveness.....	40
Defending Your Beliefs.....	42
Be Awake.....	44
Growth.....	46
Truth.....	48
Temptation.....	50
Defeating Temptation.....	52
Patience.....	54
Just a Step.....	56
Love What You Do.....	57
I Am Unique.....	59
Assessment.....	61
Roadblocks.....	63
Altruism.....	65
Pain.....	66
Gratitude.....	68
Share.....	69
Ethics.....	70
The Middle Way.....	72
Commitment.....	74
Generosity.....	76
Wisdom.....	78
The Golden Rule.....	80
Your Highest Self.....	81
Process: What comes next?.....	82

About Breaking Trail

Everyone wants inner peace and to feel love for, and from, family and friends. But if you ask everyone you know, you will find that most are far from feeling love and peace. What about you? Do you feel at peace with what you've accomplished in your life? Do you pause and bask in the love that pervades the Universe? Do you look forward to tomorrow because you know it will bring joy and equanimity? Or does the future beckon with bills you don't know how you will pay? Is it fraught with fear of the bad news the next email or phone call may bring? Is it an empty pit of loneliness, or a rut of unintended boredom? People who are truly happy know their purpose, are focused on their heart's goal, are fearless about pursuing justice for all, and relentlessly spread love among all they encounter. Does this sound like someone you'd like to be?

We all can use some guidance from time to time, a reminder of what's important and a nudge towards making the changes in attitude and action that will bring us closer to our goal of equanimity. We enjoy learning when the topic is pertinent to our lives. We welcome change when it brings us more peace and love. But too often, we wait for this growth to overtake us or fall into our laps. It's easier to watch one of the 500 satellite channels, or level up in World of Warcraft than to volunteer at the local food bank or donate blood at the Red Cross Blood Center. I hope this book can serve as a course that you commit to finishing, that you give your attention to on a minute-by-minute basis throughout your day. Promise yourself you'll work through these 43 concepts and questions. Take each chapter a day at a time, or spend as long as you need with the ideas of one before moving onto the next. Search your heart for answers that are true for you, not what you think others want to hear. It may be helpful to journal about the questions being posed, or you may find that having a trusted partner who is open and willing to discuss these questions with you will help you clarify your thinking and feelings.

Many sense a change in global consciousness approaching. Religion as we know it gave structure and meaning to life throughout the current paradigm. As our worldview changes, as our growth in consciousness brings new awareness that we are not separate from each other or our Universe, the old paradigm is being replaced by a new spirituality that recognizes this reality. Not a religion per se, this new spirituality will complement the consciousness that recognizes our connection with all that is. It will guide us to find our purpose, our heart's goal, and to grow into this new paradigm of consciousness.

Breaking Trail asks that you manifest the change you want to see, that you be a role model. New solutions to our problems are required, and that can only come from a new way of thinking and a new understanding of reality. In turn, this leads to a new spirituality, one that speaks to inclusion and awakening to Truth. We can all contribute our vision to see the birth of this new way of being, if we open our hearts and set our goal.

To set your heart's goal, to plan the actions that will accomplish that goal, and to sidestep the distractions and difficulties that will inevitably interrupt your path, the

goal must be one you truly desire. Craft the future you want to see not only for yourself but for loved ones and mankind as well. Change starts now, and change begins with us.

Introduction

“If we don’t get real, we will wake up one day and say, ‘Oh my, the world’s gone. Perhaps it wasn’t enough to just recycle. What a shame.’”

Andrew Harvey

Many people today are afraid. On some level, I believe we are all afraid. We spend most of our time dealing with fear, living lives shaped by fear, trying to hide from fears of what the future may bring.

Evolution happens in spurts, jumps made from one state of being to the next. Something in the environment is causing a problem, pushing the organism beyond its threshold of pain. In other words, something isn’t working anymore. Amidst the chaos of trouble, a new way of coping, a new view of the world, a new solution to the problem arises. A new, higher threshold is created. What seemed like an insurmountable problem before is now understood, or at least has been cut down to size and becomes manageable.

Anyone paying attention to the world situation today can be excused for feeling overwhelmed. It is easy to fall prey to fears that we are being confronted by an apocalyptic situation so immense that it is impossible to forecast how, or even if, mankind will survive past the next few centuries. Our environment, our economy, our violence, our greed and our addictions, all hold the ability to destroy civilization, as we know it. Who can we turn to for leadership? Who has the insight to lead us through this maze of calamity? And what vision would *you* hope humanity chooses as the next step in our evolution?

We are deeply afraid of mankind, (the other guy, of course) and for good reason. Looking back at our history, what do we find? In the face of horrible violence, Man lulls himself to sleep, unable to face reality, filling life with addictions to distract himself. He follows the animal instincts trying to control his life, he gathers material goods attempting to ease his burdens and demonstrate his prowess to the tribe. Man has polluted the environment, ripping resources from the earth worldwide with no regard for sustainable growth or clean air and water. There is constant war perpetrated somewhere in the world, usually dozens of conflicts at once. Man’s inhumanity towards other men continues to flourish, feeding both a weapons industry and concentration/refugee camps, and killing hundreds of thousands if not millions each year. We have nuclear weapons of mass destruction that can obliterate mankind thousands of times. We are outraged when someone is caught being greedy, when a scam is revealed that has taken billions of dollars from investors, and fail to recognize our own complicity in the scheme. We rejoice when we see an opportunity to get something for free.

We all know these things, even if we fail to let these issues guide our actions. If you believe these issues are real, what have you done about them? Why aren’t you using every tool at your disposal, your energy, your mind, your money and resources, to save your family? Are you afraid of what others will think? Are you

paralyzed with fear? Are you afraid you will be inadequate for the task? Is it just easier to channel-surf, to become intoxicated, or go shopping?

The 1968 Apollo 8 photo of the earthrise seen from the Moon was the beginning of the environmental movement. But 40 years later, we consider recycling to be an adequate precaution against environmental degradation. We ignore the fact that we live in a sealed environment, that when you throw something 'away' there is no 'away'. We fail to acknowledge that our consumption habits, developed primarily within the last 60 years, cannot continue. The Earth doesn't have the resources to support 7 billion people living like Americans. The Holocaust left many saying 'Never again!' and yet genocide continues today. You can't turn on the television for more than 30 minutes without seeing a commercial for some type of drug or alcohol. Greed corrupts our thinking; we make choices that harm our neighbors and our own families in order to have more stuff. 'Money can't buy happiness' is a truism we all know, and yet we don't demonstrate our understanding of this axiom very well.

Many have turned to religion for relief from these fears. Yet the main religions today have existed for a few thousand years. Dogma was established when the earth was still flat, when our understanding of electricity was confined to lightning, when food preservation meant salting or smoking and when reading was available to a handful of privileged men. Even today, we don't have an understanding of how gravity works! Is it any wonder that our relationship with the Universe, with God, needs to be updated?

All of the -isms, the political model, the economic model, the environmental model, the medical model, the religious model, all are breaking down. When these external factors are taken away, you can no longer use external evidence to reaffirm your inner perception and habits. You have to think differently, act differently, and you have to let go of what you have depended on for stability and security, you have to change your view of the world and how it works.

Any answer that allows Man to flourish on this planet must address all these concerns. A paradigm shift is required to overcome the violence, addiction and greed that rule our societies today. Just as we need new ways to solve problems without violence and new consciousness to overcome greed and hatred, we need a new awareness of our connection to the Universe. Religion must grow and adopt the new view of reality we create to see us out of these tangled problems. A new spirituality is arising that demonstrates our understanding of our connection with each other and the energy that pervades the Universe. We are beginning to acknowledge and utilize the very essence of our being, as a few enlightened souls have done for thousands of years. We are beginning to move beyond dogma and will face reality awake and alert; acting upon beliefs we have proven to ourselves to be true.

Breaking Trail challenges you to begin to sense your connection with all that is. It is filled with questions for you to explore, asking you to pay attention to your world and to awaken to your true nature. It is just a beginning, a baby step on the path to a new spirituality that will integrate well with our evolving understanding of God. Please open your heart and enjoy the journey!

Day One

Meditation and Prayer

“For a true spiritual transformation to flourish, we must see beyond [the] tendency to mental self-flagellation. Spirituality based on self-hatred becomes martyrdom. Morality born of self-hatred becomes rigid repression. Love for others without the foundation of love for our selves becomes a loss of boundaries, co-dependency, and a painful and fruitless search for intimacy. But when we contact, through meditation, our true nature, we can allow others to also find theirs.”

-Sharon Salzberg, *Lovingkindness*

If you begin to peel away the inner layers of ego and instinct, and to look deeper inside yourself, beyond body and mind you find Spirit. Everything in the Universe is energy, the body of God, and mankind has been privileged to have conscious awareness of the energy in and around us. When you touch that deepest part of yourself, when you sense your connection to God or Spirit, you are touching the *same part* as I touch within myself, not similar, but part of the One. It is not just semantics when enlightened souls say that 'We are One'. On the most fundamental level of existence, we are all just a manifestation of the eternal and perfect God.

At their core, every religion teaches a means to commune with God. Whether it is meditation, prayer or sacrifice, speaking with, and listening to, God is the crux of religious ritual. Ritual is primarily useful as a tool to focus one's awareness on the deep inner connection we share with Spirit. It serves as a way to move the ego aside, to quiet the 'monkey mind' that chatters incessantly and distracts us from what is important and true about our lives.

Without a daily practice, without consistent time spent building and cementing the contact between awareness and Spirit, the remainder of this book will be useless. Some form of quieting the ego and focusing on God will be necessary to fulfill the promise this Path offers. The method you choose depends on the framework within which your spiritual growth occurs. It may be that prayer comes easily and naturally to you, that prayer is how you have been taught to speak with God. You might find meditation allows you to quiet the inner cacophony and build a silent space for Spirit to speak to you. For some, the very act of service, of helping another, opens their heart and allows the truth carried within one's heart to be heard. It matters not what path to practice you choose, but practice is essential.

Ask yourself: What is my daily practice? Do I give it the attention it deserves? Do I pray before falling asleep each night, reviewing the days events, giving thanks for the abundance that manifested into my life today? Do I meditate upon

awaking each morning, slipping gently into the quiet interior space with a refreshed attitude towards the dawning day, listening to God as he speaks to me through my heart?

If a lack of time or understanding has not allowed you to develop a practice, resolve to begin one today. It's not necessary that you be perfect in your prayer or meditation the first time, only that you put in the effort and resolve to incorporate this vital exercise into your spiritual life.

Prayer and meditation is not about asking God to buy you a new car. It is about being thankful for what has been provided in your life, both in terms of sustenance; food and shelter, and in terms of relationships; family, friends and Spirit. It is about listening to what God wants from you today, hearing how he wants you to give of your love and your energy to help others. It is about learning to become quiet inside, in order to hear God's quiet voice.

If you are new to prayer or meditation, don't be afraid. Sit comfortably, and breathe slowly and deeply. You may choose to ponder a particular quote that you enjoy, to examine the truth of it within your heart, within your connection to God. You may focus on your breathing, the in and out of the energy within your body. You will find your mind is active, in many cases even more than is normal. This is not a sign of failure, only a sign that your ego is accustomed to being the loudest voice in your head and is reluctant to be quiet. As you notice that it has once again taken your hand and run off on some adventure, anticipating some future event or remembering something from the past, just bring your attention back to your breath. You may want to internally vocalize your thanks, your needs or your understanding to God. If you are faced with a particular issue and seek answers or direction, ask yourself the how questions: "How can I make this change in my perception? How can I find the energy to work through this issue? How can I find the strength to cope with this loss? How can I find the money I need for this month's bills?" Allow God to listen and to answer you, either through his quiet voice within your heart or by bringing you the answer later in the day. Be on the lookout for those coincidences that mask God's answer to your prayers. Try not to set an expectation as to what the answer will be; instead allow God to be creative in bringing you the relief you seek.

As you become more proficient in your practice, begin to notice what many refer to as "The Witness". The Witness is that part of your awareness that is always watching what you think, do and say. The Witness is really God watching the world through your eyes. You may think of the Witness as your conscience, because the Witness knows what is right action and speech, and it knows when you are not following the ethical path or living the Truth, as you understand it. But the Witness does not judge, it only observes. When you begin to connect with the Witness, the ego becomes just another part, another function, of your interior world, and it no longer controls or dominates your actions. Connecting with God through the Witness allows you to see your life as God sees it. It facilitates your future connection with Spirit and is a worthwhile goal to set as you begin to pray or meditate.

Ask yourself: How will I choose to begin to quiet my inner world today? How can I begin to listen throughout the day, not just when I am meditating or praying, but within each moment, focused on the task at hand, ensuring that my effort is right and good? Do I hear God today, right now? Would I like to?

Day Two

Samsara

“Pain is mandatory, suffering is optional.”

Axiom

One of the pronouncements that the Buddha is well known for is saying that life is all about suffering. In his language, the word for suffering is *samsara*. In the Bible, there are dozens, if not hundreds, of examples of people in pain, how their will, faith and love are tested by their actions, perspective and desires. Most of them suffer, as well.

We become attached to objects and feelings in our lives. We come to believe that these emotions and things are necessary for us to be happy. We lose sight of the facts that it is our awareness that determines our state of mind, and when we lose something or someone, we feel pain.

Pain has many uses, and is not ‘bad’ in its nature. It is only when we resist pain that we suffer. We suffer when an event happens that we don't like. We suffer when we lose something we value, or someone we love. Pain is inevitable; when you are pleased with someone or something in your life, you will lose it, and that will cause pain. When you are unhappy with a situation, you are already in pain. Focusing your mind can allow you to work despite physical or emotional pain, blocking the signals that are meant to make you stop what you are doing. In the same way, many people who are unable to focus their energy on their own turn to outside sources to block the pain, to continue to function, albeit at a lower level of energy. Drugs, alcohol, sex and gambling are just some of the methods we use to dodge our pain. The key question is, “How are you dealing with the pain?” When you cope with it ineffectively, that is suffering.

Pain is a test, a test of your determination and your way of seeing what is around you. Do you change a belief, do you turn your back on a relationship, because it is causing you pain? Do you avoid a situation or an encounter with another person because of your fear that it will hurt you? Do you understand that experiences, both the joyful ones and the painful ones, are how we grow? What have you learned about life from being hurt? What pain remains in your heart that prevents you from connecting with someone today?

How has your heart healed after being hurt? When you lose a loved one, the hurt may never go away. But if you can remember the love you shared, remember the lessons you learned from their teaching, if you can hear their voice giving you guidance, you can move beyond suffering and honor their memory. Their light has blended with your own, and each and every moment, their energy lives on in you. It may take weeks, months or years to address all the varied aches you carry, but touching anew each pain of loss from your past honors the energy and memory of those you hold dear. It makes them more a part of your heart, and of the light you give to the world and to God.

Ask yourself: How can I view pain and suffering in a way that allows me to draw closer to God? How can I learn from painful experiences while honoring and respecting them?

Day Three

Change

“The soft-minded man always fears change. He feels security in the status quo, and he has an almost morbid fear of the new. For him, the greatest pain is the pain of a new idea.”

--Martin Luther King, Jr.

Everything changes. We grow, our energy is used up or dissipated and is replenished from new sources. Accidents happen, we learn something and change our opinion, our partner develops a new expectation and we adjust our behavior. It is easy to forget that everything changes, when so much of our environment appears static. If you were to ask a butterfly perched on a redwood branch (some redwoods live more than two thousand years) if the tree it is sitting on changes, it would answer, “No, I've been here my whole life and it has not changed one bit!” The concrete and steel highway interchange just down the road from your home has been there as long as you have lived in the neighborhood. It is hard to recognize that it too, will fall down one day. When the brain processes a thought a chemical reaction takes place. The same thought repeatedly creates a ‘habit’ in the body where the reaction occurs without the need for conscious awareness. We operate over 90% unconsciously, doing the same actions without awareness. You can think, “I want to lose weight”, yet two hours later you are on the couch, beer, potato chips and remote control in hand, oblivious to the world. What happened? The body is running the show on autopilot.

As long as you get up in the morning and perform the same routine, dress the same way, go to the same job, see the same people, and say the same words, secretly thinking “I want to change” isn’t going to make a difference; it won’t be successful. Pick an emotion, part of your personality, and sit and pay attention to how you think, act and feel when the chemicals are in control. Then you can decide to make a conscious change in how you react to a given emotion or situation. You gain control; how do I want to feel today? To act? To think? You can begin to ‘act as if’ something were already true, regardless of what the outside circumstances are telling you. We often hear our conscience telling us, “come on, you know you need to change” but we let the old habits rule. Remove the masks of: fear, anxiety, pain and suffering, anger, aggression, hatred and move beyond materialism and the sense that external factors can create happiness. These emotions endorse the ego and cause us to become selfish, self involved, self important, and self-indulgent, none of which are useful. How do you cope with change? What mechanisms do you have in place to protect you from the pain of change? Do you avoid situations where change is expected? Or do you, as some people do, embrace change? Many crave a new feeling, or become easily jaded with routine, repetitious experiences. Some

people are life-long learners, always curious and seeking new perspectives. For these folks, the possibility of painful change is outweighed by the perceived benefits of growth, and change is not only expected, but also welcomed. Fear of change is often merely fear of the unknown. Some fears are innate or hardwired, such as the fear of spiders or snakes. Other fears are the result of unpleasant or painful experience. Fear of public speaking is one of the most common fears, yet there is no reason that a gregarious child would become fearful of speaking to crowds without something having happened during or after an earlier 'on stage' event. An embarrassing attempt at public speaking at a young age, the laughter that followed a stumble or a stutter, the ridicule of taking an unpopular position or being the lone believer, all could condition the child to avoid this type of action in the future. It is possible to overcome these fears once you have identified their source. This frees you to pursue your goals unhindered by your past. What fears are holding back your progress towards establishing a consistent connection with Spirit? How did they develop? Are they useful to you today?

To welcome change, however, hints at dissatisfaction with the way things are today. Rather than seeking change just for the sake of change, it is helpful to examine your motives and to focus on a goal. What is missing from your life today? Do you desire *more* loving relationships, or relationships that are *more loving*? What are you holding in your life that is just taking up space, and is no longer useful? Is your home full of stuff that you no longer use, 'but might need someday'? Are you able to trust that if you eventually require a particular tool, the Universe will ensure you have it available in some manner? Is your heart full of blame or regret, emotions you hold onto because they are familiar and unquestioned? By releasing these hurtful feelings, you make room in your heart for more love to flow through your life.

Part of accepting that change is inevitable is accepting that eventually we all die.

Given the fact that your time is limited in this lifetime, ask yourself: what would I most regret not finishing if I were to die tomorrow? Is there a way I can still accomplish that goal, today? Can I take steps now to move towards that goal, hoping I have more than a day?

What do I want to change to add delight and joy to my life?

Day Four

Intention

“Watch your thoughts, they become words. Watch your words, they become actions. Watch your actions, they become habits. Watch your habits, they become character. Watch your character, it becomes your destiny.”

Frank Outlaw

In recent decades, many people have turned to ‘vision boards’, affirmations and/or visualization as a means to ‘create reality’ or to bring things into their lives they felt were lacking: money, fame, possessions or health. Does this technique work? Our subconscious is designed to provide us with what we want. Like a puppy lovingly protecting it’s master, joyfully bounding alongside, alert for danger and any opportunity to express it’s love with a kiss, our mind is always attuned to what our ego desires and seeks ways to bring those desires into our lives. Have you ever purchased a new car, only to discover that there were many cars just like yours on the road in the following days? Have you ever noticed ‘coincidences’, where you have thought of someone for the first time in months or years, only to have them call in the next hour or day? Were you psychic, or merely listening to the energy of the Universe around you in a subconscious way? Or were you attracting that particular energy pattern merely by thinking of it?

Our minds process billions of distinct bits of incoming data every moment, ranging from the five senses and beyond, even sensing energy fields we aren’t usually aware of. Most of what is available to us is filtered and ignored, as we can only be consciously aware of a fraction of what’s available in any given instant. Our mind, trying to be the good little helper to our ego, wants to show us the data that proves we are right about everything. It also gives priority to information that warns us of danger or situations that are similar to problems we’ve encountered before. If our ego tells us we don’t have enough money, and is constantly worried about where the next meal is coming from, our mind will sort the available information and make sure that what we focus on is the lack of abundance in our lives; that all we see is how poor we are. Psychologists have known for decades that the unconscious mind fails to grasp negatives, when you think “I don’t want to be poor” it hears ‘want’ and ‘poor’ and sets about providing what has been requested, by filtering the information it makes available to the conscious mind. In what seems to be a cosmic joke, people who see the glass as half-empty will find information that proves it’s empty, will make decisions that help the glass become empty, will make excuses when the glass is full that affirm it will soon be empty again. The whole time they will feel justified in their point of view, not realizing it is just an attitude that developed while they were young and the first few glasses they encountered were nearly empty. Their point of view is not the truth of the reality of glasses.

Put another way, where you place the focus of your attention determines what you are aware of in your life, how you feel about your past, what you expect (good or bad) from the future, and what details you pick out that make your expectations turn out to be correct. Your *intention* determines how you *perceive* what is happening to you, your thoughts appear to *create* reality because they define what you allow into your awareness about a particular situation.

To effectively use intention, clear your mind, focus on the change you want to see, and then move into an elevated mood as if your intention has already happened. Feel the *gratitude* for the outcome even before it has occurred! Change your mind and you change the world.

Work to become aware of your own patterns and tendencies, constructed through a lifetime of habits and experiences. Once you recognize them, you embody the freedom, energy, and wisdom to not be a pawn of the intentions of the past. Rather, you have a choice; you can choose instead to follow a new intention this time, one that better reflects your wisdom and compassion. At the very moment you make your choice, you strengthen both the intention and the related state; generosity or greed, love or hate, wisdom or delusion. When The Buddha says we are 'heirs of our actions', he is describing karma in just this manner. Working with your intentions this way is the foundation of personal and social change.

Vividly crystallize your dream or vision, your heart's song. Dare to boldly dream about who you are and what you can accomplish. Then act, take even a small step forward, to make your dream real.

Ask yourself: What do I believe about my own future? Do I focus on what I lack, what is missing in my life, what I desire but don't yet have? Or do I see the good that surrounds me already, the abundance that meets my needs and allows me to express and feel love with those around me? Each morning, as I awaken, do I define my intention of how the day will unfold, vow to focus on the goodness and love that surrounds me, affirm that today I will be open to the energy the Universe wants to send my way? Am I thankful for another day to spend alive and awake on Earth?

Day Five

What is Important in Your Life?

“Here I stand. I can do no other.”

Martin Luther

In the days following September 11, 2001, many people gave themselves over to feelings of hate, revenge and/or blame. Today, many years later, it seems that these feelings have led to little change of value in our world. Many more have died than died on that one day, in the name of ‘security’ or ‘justice’. Yet does anyone feel more secure? Does anyone feel that justice is complete?

Not everyone gave in to these feelings born of separation, however. Instead, they sensed a strong message emanating from the fall of the Twin Towers: No one is guaranteed another minute on this Earth, and we should all act accordingly.

Thousands of people just like you or I arose from bed that morning and left their loved ones for the last time, not realizing there would be no more good-byes, no more kisses to express one’s love, no more chance to forgive a slight or indiscretion, to grant peace where fear dominated. If you were able to speak with those who died so suddenly and unexpectedly, and you asked them what would they miss the most from their time on Earth, what do you feel they would say?

Would their regrets be about not buying more things? Would they rue not having a better car, more money, or a bigger house? Or rather, would they speak of wanting to give more love to their family and friends, and maybe even strangers?

Would they pine for one more chance to forgive some slight, to grant peace to one whom now carries some guilt forever?

If I were to ask you, on your deathbed, “Was your life a complete success?” how would you answer? What would you regret not doing, or having?

Ask yourself: Are there mistakes I continue to make over and over again? Is there a way I can forgive those close to me, for errors real or imagined, that have built the walls around my heart and prevent my love from flowing freely among us all? How would I like to be remembered; as one with lots of toys and material success, or as one who gave love to all, without restriction, unconditionally? What small act can I undertake today that will keep me on the path of loving those around me? What baby step can I take that will show I appreciate the abundance that is my life, that shares my bounty with others? What act can I perform right now, this very moment, which shows another that I love them?

Day Six

Mindfulness

“Be Here Now”

Ram Dass

I try to pay attention whenever and wherever I am. For many years, I ran each morning for exercise. I never took a Walkman along to relieve the tedium, the run was an opportunity to pay attention to the Now, to sense what my body was experiencing, to listen to the birds and the wind in the trees, to stay alert for my safety. It was ‘walking meditation’. When I do dishes I focus on each plate or spoon, ensuring the job is properly done. I try to be a good listener when others were speaking; I know from communications classes that most people are too busy formulating their response to truly listen to what the other person is saying. When you go deep enough inside yourself, you find a place that is the same in you as it is in me. Not identical, *but part of the same*. And that same part, many call it God, is eternal, is always there and always the same. Ultimate reality is eternal and unchanging, something referred to as ‘one taste’. That is, every taste of every experience is the same. If you are truly mindful, every taste will be the same, blissful and complete and true.

Meditation or prayer is the root of mindfulness, as it helps one awaken from the illusion of separateness, delusion and confusion. By focusing on the breath, one can’t help but step out of the ego. What becomes important then, is to watch the ego throw thoughts against the screen of the mind, trying to get attention. When meditation is successful, and you step out of the Ego, you watch the ego perform through the eye of God, what some call ‘The Witness’. The Witness is that which is always present, always paying attention, the true and perfect One that has always been and always will be.

According to Tibetan Buddhism, there are four levels of mindfulness:

- Pay attention: this is spontaneous, curious, and is what most people mean when they say, “Pay attention!”
- Cultivated: the attention one pays with intentional mindfulness, expanded to include observing *without judgment and reactivity*
- Abiding: the result of practicing cultivated mindfulness, the trained awareness that rests without wavering wherever it is placed
- Dharmakaya: awareness itself, remaining undistracted. There is no ‘I’ noticing awareness, this is The Witness, *always and already* present.

Some teachers describe a 6-step process to use mindfulness to choose action:

- Recognize: first, one must notice that a situation has again presented itself, when you have handled similar events poorly in the past. This creates an opportunity to use mindfulness to choose a better course of action.

- Recollecting: Pausing to remember what problems have been caused by poor choices, or unconscious actions, in the past. Also remembering positive actions and the resulting outcomes.
- Reframing: Seeing from different points of view, to include all stakeholders and determine an action that benefits all, not just some.
- Relinquishing: Giving up the automatic or unconscious behavior, clearing the way for conscious choices and intelligent decisions.
- Reconditioning: Engraining the new course so that it will eventually become the automatic action in similar situations.
- Responding: Perform the chosen action intelligently and compassionately.

Mindfulness allows you to step out of routine, knee-jerk reactions and to choose a different approach, to achieve a different result. Mindfulness requires that you listen to each moment, open and available to notice the whole of what is happening. Many people are finding that observing a Sabbath, a day when they disconnect from newspapers, television, phones, internet and email creates a space for listening to inner guidance. This space becomes much more available the other six days, having been practiced one day each week. Use the space to ask: 'what patterns in my life continue to recur? What lessons have I been slow to learn? How can paying deep attention to a person change my feelings towards them? How can asking someone a question about their point of view, and listening to the response, improve my sense of being connected to everyone and everything in the Universe?'

Mediation or prayer can help you to quiet the ego and stop the focus on events past or future, to concentrate on what is true and real *right now*, this very instant. Perhaps it helps if you view your body as your very own temple or monastery. As you go about your day and are aware of sensations in your body, use that awareness as a reminder to be mindful of the moment, to pay attention to the Now. Becoming aware of this moment and all it holds opens your heart to truth and love. Can you use more love in your life? More truth? Can you rest in this moment, aware and alive?

Day Seven

Enlightenment

“In our non-lucid dreams, we are mired down in the illusion that we are awake, and we suffer by grasping onto everything in the dream as being absolutely “out there”. In the same way, we are afflicted during the day by regarding ourselves, and everything around us, as being separate and disconnected. *Imagine the bliss of becoming lucid at all times, perceiving all things as luminous displays of the deepest dimension of our own awareness. **This is the truth that sets us free.***”

Most people think enlightenment is the ultimate goal of Buddhism, the end product of decades of meditation and deprivation, and a state of eternal bliss where the enlightened one is unaware of (or beyond needing to deal with) the day-to-day mundane issues the rest of us are left with.

A famous Buddhist saying depicts how wrong this perception is: “Before enlightenment, chop wood and carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood and carry water.”

Enlightenment really means waking up to the true nature of reality, the absolute nature of the oneness of the Universe. It is seeing what is without judgment, accepting what is with the love that is the energy of manifest form, connecting with the God that is everything, perfect and eternal. Understanding that everything is but a manifestation of the One and establishing a connection with the One by quieting the egoic mind, the enlightened person chooses the appropriate action that serves love and truth with ease. It’s not a matter of dualistic points of view; good vs. bad, want vs. need, or even destiny. It is sensing the subtle inclination towards Truth; it is listening to the tiny voice inside that knows the right action, the right thought, or the right love to apply.

Pain is inevitable, but how you handle it, whether it’s from the loss of a loved one or your own impending death, determines if you suffer. Similarly, every situation, every moment, offers you the opportunity to choose your thoughts, your response and your path. If you are awake, and not just passing through this life in a dream-like haze, your choices serve you, and by extension all of us, well.

How do you sense your connection to others? Have you had moments when you were very aware of the Oneness of everything, a ‘peak experience’ that quickly faded? Perhaps it came in nature, watching a sunset or strolling along a shoreline. Perhaps you felt the connection while expressing your love for another, or while creating something, or by finding yourself ‘in the zone’.

Ask yourself: Would it be nice to have that sense of connection become part of my toolkit, accessible anytime I wanted, anytime it would serve me to choose the path of heart? Can I find that inner space again by doing what I love to do?

Day Eight

God Consciousness

God made mud,
God got lonesome,
So God said to some of the mud, "Sit up!",
"See all I've made," said God, "the hills, the sea, the sky, the stars."
And I was some of the mud that got to sit up and look around.
Lucky me, lucky mud.
I, mud, sat up and saw what a nice job God had done.
Nice going, God!
Nobody but You could have done it, God! I certainly couldn't have.
I feel very unimportant compared to You.
The only way that I can feel the least bit important is to think
of all the mud that didn't even get to sit up and look around.
I got so much, and most mud got so little.
Thank you for the honour!

From *The Last Rites of the Bokononist Faith*
Excerpted from "Cat's Cradle" by Kurt Vonnegut

God is everything; we are but bits of God made manifest into this reality we call Earth and Life.

Different cultures and different ages in Man's history have led to different expressions of the awe and wonder every person feels when contemplating the source of our existence. The fact that I call it Spirit, you call it God and my friend calls it Allah is immaterial. The One is just that: Everything. God is the core of the chair you are sitting in as you read this; Spirit is in the table upon which this book rests. When you harm another person, it's not *like* harming yourself; it *is* harming yourself.

When you are at work, if your mother were to come in as a guest, customer or client, would you change how you performed your job because she is your Mother? Would you give her a higher level of service, a more choice selection from the inventory, a better price? If so, why?

Ask yourself: Is it right that I treat any one person differently than another, if they are truly another part of myself? Driving to work in the morning, I notice a tree along the roadside, branches waving gently in the breeze. Do I realize God is trying to get my attention, bringing me out of my thoughts of past hurts and future worries and into the present moment? Or rather, do I fail to notice and continue the inner dialogue planning how to respond in a witty yet superior manner to someone at work a half hour from now? Do I lavish more loving attention and praise on my dog or cat than on my child?

How can I remember to see God in everyone, in everything, that crosses my path today?

Day Nine

What Makes God Smile?

“We can’t all do great things, but we can do small things with great love.”
Mother Teresa

When are things right with your world? When you demonstrate right action, right speech and right attitude.

Right action is choosing the right path from the myriad possibilities that present themselves. Typically, we react to each situation on autopilot; out of habit and without awareness. Our subconscious may remember a bad outcome from a similar situation and lead us to respond with panic or dread. We may also recognize a similar situation and use the same strategy as always, even though this particular event may be different, demanding a new response. That previous, conditioned response may simply be a poor choice in any event. Through being present in the moment, connected with your inner Spirit, you can evaluate the needs of the situation and select a course that meets the demands of not only this moment, but of all involved parties as well. Seek creative outlets for expressing your love and compassion, in every encounter with another. Ask yourself; “How can I best serve this person?” Play on the edge, outside your comfort zone. This leads to actions that are authentic, real, and full of life. Be open to new ideas; listen to the quiet inner voice giving you exciting options. Right speech is a skill that must be cultivated at all times. It is easy to join the crowd around the water cooler, as they discuss the trials and tribulations of someone who is not present. It is easy to tell your mate, child or friend what they want to hear, instead of your Truth. It is easy to exaggerate any fascinating tale, to emphasize a point or to make yourself seem more than you feel you are. We often criticize others and ourselves, both with our mind’s chatter and in speech. Right speech, saying only what is true and necessary, is possibly the most difficult virtue to practice. Do you gossip about the troubles of others? Do you joke about others, as a way to express displeasure with their appearance or actions? Do you tell someone everything is great when in fact, you are struggling with a great problem? Even if you don’t vocalize your ideas, is your ego continually denigrating those around you?

Right attitude is easy when you display your Authentic Self. You display right attitude when you act or obey from love and compassion, rather than obligation, guilt, or fear of punishment. Right attitude involves being honest in all things; with your self, with others, and with Spirit.

Ask yourself: In what ways do I lie to myself? How do I lie to others around me? Think of the last time I felt guilt or shame for something I had done. How might I have acted differently, authentically, so that I could have felt proud of how I

acted? Use the same question about a recent time you acted from fear or anger, and for any other negative emotions that caused you to react from habit, without thought or awareness. This exercise is helpful to do on a regular basis, throughout your life. It is worth the effort to create habits and skills that embody right speech, right action, and right attitude.

Day Ten

Surrender

“Everything in life happened by synchronicity, evolving in perfect harmony, and the miraculous was commonplace. The origin of what the world would call *miracles* was the Presence, not a personal self. What remained of the personal 'me' was only a witness to these phenomena. The greater “I”, deeper than my self or its former thoughts, determined all that happened.”

David Hawkins, “Power vs. Force”

Many Western readers have a deep dislike of surrender. Without hardly a moment's thought, they dismiss 'surrender' as an act they are unwilling to perform. Within the American culture, with its emphasis on competition (and especially on *winning* at competition!) 'surrender' denotes failure and defeat. In a spiritual sense, 'surrender' describes the understanding that I (the ego within my mind) am not the Creator; I am not the boss. It points us towards joining the flow of energy that is the Universe, riding the currents and allowing our path to be shaped by forces we don't control.

A major benefit of meditation is the quieting of the ego's chatter that overwhelms the quieter voice of Spirit. Buddhist adepts and Masters are alleged to be able to perform feats of levitation, ESP and astral travel. Jesus performed many fabled 'miracles', including healing, walking on water and turning water into wine. How are these feats accomplished? Is there a manual that can instruct a novice on the techniques these Masters use?

The only technique is surrender. Approaching God with a heartfelt 'Thanks!' for all that has been and will be provided, Jesus surrendered to God's will and asked that 'Thy will be done'. Jesus didn't know how to walk on water; he merely opened his heart to God and allowed God to work through him. Anyone can be receptive to being a channel for the energy of the Universe to flow through them, to effect change in their surroundings, to influence perception. One only has to surrender the idea that control 'rests with me'. Our Western culture has convinced us that we are in control, or should strive to control every situation, when in fact we control only our own reactions to what happens around us. Slipping into the river of energy that is Universal Abundance, miracles are common.

When we have difficulties in our lives, we need to ask ourselves these questions: 'What is the truth that is emerging from this situation? Is it an individual belief? Is it a collective belief? What is the truth from this seeming lack, or from this darkness, from this lack of guidance?' Rather than ask these questions, we focus on what *we can do* to make a change. We are here to learn to see reality, not create our version of it. Our experience is perfect for us, even if it is uncomfortable. We don't have to *have* anything, in the moment.

Spirit provides whatever is required. No version of reality that we can create will ever be fulfilling. The only true fulfillment available to us is through allowing ourselves to be a channel of God, through surrender. This is far greater than anything we can conceive of in our minds; it's heaven on earth. When you are 'in the zone' and everything seems to flow by, time unnoticed, perfect in its unfolding, you have surrendered body and soul to the universal flow of energy. That's what surrender feels like!

Ask yourself: How can I develop trust that God knows better than I do what is needed in a particular situation? Can I practice listening for direction, for instructions that point the way to peace, love and justice in my every action, so that it becomes natural and easy to do in times of great activity or stress? Can I give up the idea that my ego knows best, and surrender to the power greater than myself? By surrendering, you relax into your true Self.

Day Eleven

Step Into Witnessing

“The foolish and the ignorant are bound to emotional choices that in turn attach them more fiercely to their ignorance. The wise person, on the other hand, walks through life unswayed and nonreactive, yet free to act compassionately and with equanimity.”

Mu Soeng

Most people have a difficult time accepting that God is everywhere, perfect and eternal. It is obvious that “I” am separate from you and everything around me, isn’t it? My skin is a barrier to the ‘outside’ world, for one thing. And I must compete with everyone else to overcome all of life’s problems and challenges, right? And the voice in my head is constantly reminding me of my own shortcomings, my own regrets of the past, and my own worries about things that might happen and might be bad in the future. None of that sounds perfect and timeless to ‘me’.

But science tells us that on the microscopic level, the atomic level, there is no ‘solid’ barrier between ‘me’ and the world. My skin is mostly empty space, as bits of energy whirl and coalesce and entangle with each other. Atoms are not solid, they are merely tiny energy charges that are currently associated with one another. It is impossible at this level to say where my body ends and the outside world begins. Also, my body is made up mostly of water, and water is constantly flowing into and out of my body in various ways: through my breath, through my skin, through my elimination tracts, for example. This flow of water is one aspect of how I am connected with everything else, and demonstrates one of the ways that “I” am just a manifestation of the universal energy field.

And what of the ego, that chattering mental construct that is what we think of as “I”? Our ego constantly reminds us that we are alone, separate from everything, and worried that we are not up to the task of dealing with all our myriad of problems. Yet there is a part of me that is, and always has been, the same. This part of me is where I watch the antics of the ego, where I sense the connection to God or Spirit, where I can reside without all of the ego’s worry and regret. The goal of meditation is to step back from the ego’s vain attempts to control the world from a place of separation and to place awareness in the calm, loving presence of the Witness. If God were to look out at the world through your eyes, what would God see? Your inner chatter wondering how to manipulate someone into doing what you want would not distract God, nor would God be critical of the color of the shirt you are wearing, or how it makes you look fat. God would see how everyone is connected, not how everyone is separate. God would see things as they are, not as how God wants them to be.

Ask yourself: How can I begin to step back for moments here and there, to watch the ego working without believing that the ego is all there is? How can I connect

with the Witness, that part of God present in my awareness, which watches without judgment or criticism? Is there a reminder I can create, to bring my attention into this state of Witnessing? Perhaps I can set a random alarm, or tie a string around a finger, or begin to associate a bracelet with this reminder so that all day, as I become aware of the bracelet jangling on my wrist, I remember to look at the world with witnessing awareness, not judgment, not critical thinking, not worry.

Day Twelve

The Witness is Your Friend

“If your only tool is a hammer, all your solutions look like nails.”

Axiom

Why does your ego have such a hold on your thinking? Ego seeks to control the world, and uses many tools in that attempt. It reminds you of how things have gone badly in the past, and criticizes your efforts to do things right. It limits your ability to try new ideas out of fear that something might go wrong. It imagines every conceivable danger, and then points out how inadequate you are to deal with something that probably will not happen. Ego uses worry, fear and criticism to reinforce the idea that it, and it alone, can protect you from danger.

There are times when the ego can be of use, just like any tool. The key is to use the ego for what it does best, when necessary, and to understand its limitations. Using the awareness of the Witness, seeing everything as connected and without judgment, will naturally lead to right action.

We must take responsibility for our thoughts and actions. But as a friend once said to me, “I will take responsibility for what I do, but not until the ramifications are known.” In other words, it does no good to worry about, or to try to solve, some problem that has yet to occur. Yet that is what our ego does, every moment of every day.

Seeing past the petty concerns of our ‘monkey mind’, we can let everything be ‘OK’. We can choose to react to each event in our lives in a way that brings us joy and love, peace and prosperity, rather than suffering and regret. Seeing through the eyes of the Witness merely means watching how your mind works, with curiosity. You may think, ‘There I go again, doing that. Isn’t that interesting?’ How many ways can you interpret an event? Do you normally see the glass as half full or half empty? What are the benefits of seeing the other point of view? How does God see the same event, through the eyes of the Witness? Pick an event that has left you feeling bitter or resentful. Ponder how many ways you could have seen the same event through lens of other emotions, such as happiness, peacefulness, eagerness or love. What else was happening that you were either unaware of, or chose to ignore due to your past conditioning? What other information was left out of the story you tell yourself about this event, information that leads you to interpret it in a different manner?

Like a mirror, that can reflect ugly without being tainted, behind every thought is pure awareness; it cannot be tainted with hatred or jealousy. This means all emotions are fleeting, and can be changed. This underlying awareness is the Witness.

Ask yourself: How can I remind myself to view each event, especially those that trouble me, in a different way before I act on my initial impression? How can I let

go of the ego as the only source of information about the world, and step into the Witness instead? How can I watch what unfolds around me with curiosity, watching as God does, without worry or frustration?

Day Thirteen

Karma

“It takes 20 years to build a reputation, and 5 minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you’ll do things differently.”

Warren Buffet

Karma is the Pali word for ‘doing’. It has been wrongly portrayed in western media as meaning that your past actions, possibly even in a previous lifetime, come back to haunt you. Actually, it is more accurate to say that karma is the energy you have put into the Universe being reflected back to you. As you move through life and make decisions, take action and speak, you establish behaviors and ways of seeing that ensure that where you place your attention determines how you react to the energy around you. Usually, your reactions are habitual, without consideration, and knee-jerk in character. Other typical phrasings of the concept of karma are: “As you sow, so shall you reap” or “What goes around, comes around”. Both of these sayings reveal that where you put your focus, how you create your intention, leads directly to what you perceive to be happening. In meditation or prayer, as you quiet your mind and begin to examine the thoughts your ego is creating out of thin air, you can see how you are falling prey to thoughts that do not serve you well. You can discard the thoughts or plans that you see will lead to outcomes that do not please you; that are not loving, compassionate or kind. You can listen for and encourage, thoughts that feed your soul, that bring light and love into the world.

You are what you do in the dark. If you do something knowing it is wrong but thinking you can get away with it, then that defines you and ‘creates karma’. The Universe is not blind, God is not inattentive, and energy released cares not if it has been observed, it fulfills its own essential nature. Once you are awake, and no longer subject to being buffeted throughout life by the habitual, reactive and unconscious habits built over a lifetime, you choose a path that acknowledges all beings as equal and all experience as useful. Connecting with our basic nature, your choices will serve the common good and the Universe, and be free of karmic implications.

Ask yourself: What choices of words, thoughts or actions do I make even though I know they perpetuate problems in my life? What do I do that I know is wrong, but I think I can get away with? What toxic habit or thought can I leave behind this minute? Can I begin a routine to identify, through meditation or prayer, actions or words that I will no longer use because they do not feed my Spirit?

Day Fourteen

What If I Lose My Connection?

“Practice Random Acts of Kindness”

Axiom

The Buddha was very clear about one thing: he was not establishing a faith-based religion. He specifically did not claim to be God; anymore than you or I. He did not require belief because he said it was so; he urged people to examine what information was available to them and make their own determination as to what is true. He taught that understanding was key, not belief.

This is critical to remember when you have a sense that you are no longer connected to Spirit. Understanding may elude you, but it doesn't make the Universe operate in a different way. If you continue to strive to understand, work to keep your awareness in Witness rather than ego, truth will once again become apparent and useful in your life. Don't get discouraged and 'lose faith'.

Become aware of everything you sense this very moment. Become 'present', or 'awake in the Now'. Remember, nothing stays the same, and what may have seemed like a fantastic sense of connection with God or Spirit just a few moments ago, may change without warning. This doesn't mean that it has gone away, or that it may never return. Often the fear that the feeling of connection will not come back gives the ego strength to command more of your attention, to divert your attention from what's happening right this moment. The ego puts on a great show of trying to regain connection, when truly it wants no part of it.

Ask yourself: How do I fall prey to fears that are ego-driven, based on future worry or past regret? How often do I feel isolated, separate from everyone, and doomed to struggle, tired and alone, against incomprehensible events? How can I remind myself that this is temporary, and the result of my active ego, and not based in truth? Can I meditate or pray, without having an agenda or a goal, but just to let what happens be what needs to happen?

How can I remind myself of what is truly important each day? Can I begin a practice of expressing my thanks for the abundance in my life, not just daily, but throughout the day? How can I remember to treat everyone as if they are family? How can I be quiet and manifest the energy that is mine to give to the world? How can I focus on my intention, keeping it deep and unswerving, and remembering that the difficult times also pass?

Day Fifteen

We Are One

“I am part of the whole, all of which is governed by nature.
....I am intimately related to all the parts, which are of the same kind as myself. If I remember these two things, I cannot be discontented with anything that arises out of the whole, because I am connected to the whole.”

The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius, written in the 1st century A.D.

You may be having a difficult time with the concept that ‘We Are One’. We were raised to believe that matter is solid, and that we have control over some portion of our environment. Some of us are groomed for leadership positions, at work or within society, further perpetuating the myth that we can control anything. Many of us were also taught to judge; to judge other people, to judge situations, and most of all, to judge ourselves. If matter is solid, and we have control over others and events, and we can judge someone to be wrong and ourselves to be right, then the phrase ‘We Are One’ does not make sense.

As science peels away the layers of the structure of matter, it is becoming clear that the Universe is ultimately an energy flux, and there are no distinct separations between one part and another. String theory and quantum physics both describe a Universe that is just a continuous flow of energy at its most fundamental level.

Does it serve us to ignore this ultimate reality? If we are separate beings, we are subject to feelings of pride and control, and we draw comparisons between other separate entities and then make judgments about what we see. We criticize ourselves needlessly if we don’t conform to certain standards, usually set by those who seek to control us. We assume that people or events are ‘good’ or ‘evil’ and suffer when ‘evil’ enters our lives. We fear being ‘alone’, because we fear the loss of love, or the loss of connection to those we cherish. We suffer when events happen that we believe are our fault, either by inaction or incorrect action. None of these outcomes engenders feelings of love and connection with the Universal energy.

Ask yourself: How would my perspective on life, and the goals I set, be different if I were able to act as if ‘We Are One’? Would I become vegetarian? Would I apologize to someone instead of angrily criticizing something they said about me that might be true? Would I make amends to someone I hurt years (or moments) ago? Would I forgive someone who hurt me, rather than carry a grudge that poisons my well-being? Would I make different decisions about my career if I felt closer to everyone I meet? Would I stop chasing ever-increasing consumption, and work for liberty, justice and equality for all beings instead?

Day Sixteen

Love

“And at this time in history, it is the awakening individual at the leading edge of cultural development who has to find the spiritual maturity to take responsibility for the evolution of the process itself at the level of consciousness. So once we become convinced beyond any doubt of who we are, beyond ego, at the level of consciousness, it is essential that we make the spiritual effort to develop so that we become an expression of that egoless freedom in action. That is when our own spiritual awakening becomes the limitless foundation that empowers us to take responsibility for creating the future.”

Andrew Cohen

Once you begin to see your connection to the Universe in everyone, your heart opens and love and relationship become the dominant force for change and growth in your life. Love clearly becomes the focus of your energy and action. You happily give and receive love, radiating joy and peace, seeing the universe through eyes that seek relationship, not control or judgment. This is what gives life purpose and meaning.

You don't need to tell anyone of the change in your perspective, just 'be' peace and love. Naturally it takes time to develop the equanimity that allows your love to drive your speech and actions. It demands that you be willing to listen to your heart, that you devote yourself to making ethical choices, that you offer your essence to others through your behavior. It also requires that you be willing to be genuine with all you meet, speaking the truth and from the heart at all times. You give up the false sense of security you maintain by keeping conversation superficial, but you find we all have a natural tendency to treat a vulnerable being with kindness. Opening your heart to others demonstrates that you care about them, and who can ignore compassion flowing in their direction?

Inevitably there will be times when differences arise, choices go wrong, or someone else is unable to respond to you in with this same sense of love and connection. Right action implies that you respond to these situations by dropping your differences and trying everything you can to make things right between you. Refrain from falling back into the old paradigm, and responding from anger or with deception and manipulation. Ask 'how can I respond with love?' or 'how can I respect their point of view and still reach agreement?' rather than argue or become violent.

Begin slowly; opening up to those already close. As you find you are successful in deepening your close relationships through loving attention to others, begin to have more meaningful and deep conversations with a widening circle of friends and acquaintances, and eventually, strangers.

Ask yourself: How can I remember to touch the feeling of love within my heart and allow this feeling to work through me in my daily interactions with others?

How can I learn to pause to consider what love would have me do, instead of reacting as I always have to trying situations? How can I build new relationships that are meaningful and fueled with love?

Day Seventeen

Sangha

As soon as we mention community, we are talking about a spiritual situation, because community is a way we transcend our personal lives, and transcendence is the heart of spirituality. We seek to transcend our limited knowledge, our self-centered values, and the limitations of our physical existence. It is no accident that community, whether the sangha of Buddhism, the *agape* of Christianity, or the ummah of Islam, lies central to the world's religions and spiritual traditions.

Thomas Moore

Sangha means community. It is essential that any effort to grow spiritually have a component of relationship to others. As a new spirituality dawns, so must a new community develop that serves the needs of the group.

The essence of community is to provide a chance for us to learn from each other. It is not necessary that we each have the same insights individually, nor do we have to endure the same hardships. In a group we support each other and by being open to discuss what we are experiencing, we teach each other as well. Within the group, we are responsible to everyone. The accountability we have towards the group may make it easier in the beginning to follow our new path. It also helps to motivate some to extend themselves beyond their comfort zone, as they feel comfort in knowing the group will be there to support them if they have difficulty.

Community celebrates our innate desire to merge with others. We know, deep within, that we are not separate. Joining with others in a cause or a celebration just 'feels right' because it recognizes this. You have gifts to share with others, and you have needs. The group supports both of these aspects of self.

Joining in community also reaps the benefits of resonance. As the various people come together, the group is greater than the sum of its parts. More is accomplished as 'many hands make light work'. When everyone pitches in and works a task together, more than 'just work' takes place. A bonding, camaraderie, develops that makes the activity more enjoyable than working alone. It's very difficult to manifest big projects by yourself!

Your Highest Self has no color and has no gender. We all crave seeing ourselves in each other. Sharing our journey in community brings us closer to recognizing our true nature.

In religions as practiced the last few millennia, community also means ritual and dogma. This new spirituality is not based on any writing, such as The Bible or The Koran, and indeed seems centered on the concept expressed by the Buddha, to test everything within oneself and to believe, not by faith, but by what you can see at work in your own life. There are no prescribed activities that all

must adhere to. Ritual will certainly develop in groups, as we have a seemingly innate desire for ceremony. But first, we must begin to come together in communities of like-minded people. Even as 'We Are One', we each have a unique part to play and must discover that purpose and align ourselves with the greater good.

Ask yourself: What have I done recently that left me excited and energized? How can I find like-minded people in my neighborhood? How might I form a group, to discuss the concepts outlined in this book, or just to enjoy each other's life experiences? What life experiences, such as marriage, death or coming of age, would I like to celebrate within my community? What celebrations can we create that are based on these values we hold dear?

Day Eighteen

Partnership

“No man is an island.”

I have spent some amount of time helping people recover from natural disasters, such as fire, hurricanes and tornados. Friends often ask me whether it is better to donate food, clothing and household goods, or money, following such an event. My answer is that the best thing to do, is get involved and lend your hands, your energy. Truly the best relief following a disaster is neighbor helping neighbor. That is also the essence of partnership, a key component of relationship. Partners, or neighbors, understand your situation and your history. They have seen what you have been through, and they know best how to respond. It is difficult to know if clothing or food is the best way to help someone you have never met who lives 1000 miles away. You may send something that is useless, or worse yet, a burden to the recipient. This points out a key facet of partnership, awareness. You can't be a partner if your thoughts are primarily about yourself. Why is partnership important? No one can do everything and do it well. We often need a nudge from someone we trust, someone who loves us, to extend ourselves outside our comfort zone and to try something new. It helps to have a partner in our journey who will point out when we are taking a wrong turn, and to cheer our successes when we make the right choice. A partner can deepen your understanding of how the Universe works, sharing their own experiences and commenting on yours. They may have an answer to a question you pose. What qualities are yours to provide in a partnership? Bring your Authentic Self. Speak from your heart, with love in every word. Be willing listen to what your partner has to say, without jumping immediately to your own defense. You may be blessed to be in a great partnership already. You may have a partner, but one with whom you've not had the kinds of deep conversations shared in this book. You may be struggling through your current life alone.

If you have a life partner, ask yourself: how can I introduce him or her to these ideas? How can I express, with as much love as I can muster, how important my growth is, and how much I want them to join me on this journey? How can I convey the compassion I feel towards them, and my desire that we share this path together? How can I structure our time together for the best benefit, limiting superficial conversations and distractions, and focusing on developing our spiritual connection?

And if you are currently alone, ask yourself: what kind of partner would help me grow in consciousness? Can I be watchful throughout my day for someone who is responding to me with compassion? Can I develop my own ability to be open and honest with those I interact with? How can I recognize my partner when I see them? Most of all, though, continue to work within, to strengthen your ability to

act with love. The more love you give, the sooner it will be reflected back into your life.

Day Nineteen

Forgiveness

“Forgiveness is the fragrance the violet leaves on the boot that just crushed it.”
Mark Twain

Some people live their lives full of anger and resentment. They hold grudges for months, years, sometimes for a lifetime. They feel abused, taken advantage of, manipulated or lied to. They allow thoughts of revenge to dominate their thinking; they often use violent speech or action as their primary response to others. These emotions are all based entirely in separation. Is your answer to life's tribulations retaliation or resolution?

Either way, you control your reaction. If you focus on revenge, and are unable to move past a perceived slight of some kind, you will continue to feel isolated, unable to enjoy love and relationship, and certainly not connected with Spirit. No matter which way we respond, we could all use more forgiveness in our lives. First, we can forgive ourselves. Today is a new day, and we are embarking on a new adventure. What happened in the past was shaped by thoughts and habits of which we were not aware. Now we are waking up, and we move forward with a new outlook and sense of purpose. Let go of the anger and resentment caused by events we can no longer change. Release self-pity; we are learning that our intention makes a difference in how we see the world, and from now on our intention is to show the world our Highest Self. Release victimhood; just as we were not awake, neither were our oppressors. They too, were reacting to programming and subconscious patterns. There is nothing to be gained by continuing to criticize our past behavior, when we had no control over it. Release attachment to negative emotions; see that anger and hate have no place in a world where we are connected to every other being. No good comes from hating yourself.

Problems, especially those that cause resentment or thoughts of revenge, are a creation of the mind and are not real. As you feel anger rising, ask yourself, 'What's the loving thing to do?' Listen to your heart, count to ten if need be, and surprise yourself by acting with compassion towards the other person. Try to see the event from their perspective, acknowledging their different point of view, forgiving them immediately. Are there steps you can take to restore balance and love to the situation? Would it be appropriate for you to make amends for something you have done that can help calm the troubles of this moment? Is there a different way you can act towards the other person that demonstrate your belief that there is an underlying connection between you that you wish to honor and respect?

Connect with Spirit and you can only respond to any situation with your Highest Self. The situation actually makes no difference; your actions will reflect the love and compassion that is God working through you. Forgiveness is not something

you do, it is not “I know you did wrong but I won’t punish you because I’m a good person”. It is about letting go of the resistance or anger inside your self. It is the result of relating to the Universe in a genuine, authentic way.

Forgiveness doesn’t mean you condone an action, it doesn’t mean that you befriend the person who did you wrong. It means that you recognize that when you carry a grudge, the emotional charge is within you; you’re the one with the pain and suffering. The other person may not even know you have felt pain. Forgiveness is letting go of that pain and suffering.

Ask yourself: Who has hurt me in the past? Who deserves to be forgiven? How can I release my anger towards them, and show them my love? As you work through the more obvious situations, you soon will find you can forgive even those whom you may believe don’t deserve it!

Day Twenty

Defending Your Beliefs

“There is no disgrace in honest failure, there is disgrace in fearing to fail.”
Henry Ford.

You may follow a particular religious faith, you may consider yourself spiritual but not religious, or you may have been raised within a faith that you now question. I do not doubt that your beliefs, whatever they may be, guide your actions. I do not seek to change your beliefs, nor will I ask you to defend them. I do not call for the abandonment of religion, instead I ask that every person connect with the values, principles and guidance offered by their chosen religious beliefs and put them into daily action.

All religions speak to these values:

Inclusion bespeaks love; love of self, of one another, and love of the world around us. We are not separate from God as God is everywhere. Grasping this on the most fundamental level leaves one feeling love towards all. The Golden Rule, ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you’, is how you would live if you embrace inclusion as your foundation.

Creativity bespeaks creation of that which you want, the outcomes you crave, and which you can bring into your life by opening your eyes around you. We recognize coincidences and synchronicity as we allow God, or the Universal Spirit, to speak to us through being creative, but if we listen closely we can hear God bring forth the future we desire.

Right action bespeaks energy and responsibility. We cannot receive manna from heaven, we have to put forth energy to receive love for others. We must take personal responsibility for our actions. How do you demonstrate love for your self? How do you love another human being? How do you express your love for animals and nature?

inclusion

creative

Ask yourself: How do I create my reaction to the feelings and events of my day? Am I aware of those times when I am reacting out of habit, rather than doing what serves me best? Do I see coincidences in my life? Do I act on new, creative ideas that seem to appear out of nowhere? Do I ask, “What can I do?” rather than “How can I avoid this?” Do I seek out ways to help others, rather than waiting to be asked to help?

Day Twenty-One

Be Awake

“When asked what he was, a man or a God, the Buddha replied simply ‘I am awake’.

I have always liked the concept of ‘Act As If’. When you act as if something is true, you take on the attitudes and beliefs of this new way of being. Do this long enough and soon it is no longer an act. Act as if you are confident frequently, and soon you *are* confident.

Whether you have chosen Jesus, Buddha or some other historical figure as your primary role model, it is useful to ask yourself, ‘What would Jesus (or Buddha) do?’ If you take on the attitudes, value and character Jesus portrayed in stories of the New Testament, you grow closer to expressing the Authentic Self that he modeled for us. If you understand the message conveyed by the Buddha and act as if you are awake, you will awaken.

What we expect, we evoke from others. We already slip into different roles with different people. It may be because we have a history of act a certain way together. It is easier to continue to act as the child when around your parents, than to learn a new role as friend or caregiver. Sometimes we take on a role because of how we are labeled by others. Each role is a narrow perspective; it is not the whole self, it is not genuine or authentic and it is not the whole picture. It doesn’t allow you to act in the most beneficial way for all concerned; in fact, it makes it impossible to see beyond the small perspective the role allows. For any particular role you are having difficulty with, the first step out of the role is to ask yourself “How do I show up?” Ask this often, of your many varied roles, and soon it becomes a habit and you can relate to everyone in a more truthful and useful manner.

Oddly, the part of you that ‘wants’ to awaken is the ego. The ego, or ‘monkey mind’ is the very part of your consciousness that prevents you from being awake. The Witness, the part of your consciousness that can be awake, already is; you just aren’t allowed to be aware of this due to the shenanigans of your ego trying to keep control, trying to maintain a dream full of separation and illusion.

What’s the answer to this conundrum? Allow your Witness more time in your consciousness, through meditation or prayer. As you become more and more comfortable letting the ego’s games play out in your mind but not control your actions, it will be easy to step back from the ego, keeping it as a tool, to do the job it is designed for. Once you’ve let go of the ego, you will be awake. There is nothing to do, no action required but to let go.

Ask yourself: What roles do I play that I am happy with? Unhappy with? There are many; parent, worker, friend, team member, mate, child, the list we each play every day is huge. How can I show up for each of these encounters without the restrictions of a particular narrow viewpoint? How can I become more genuine?

Am I continuing my daily meditation or prayer practice? What have I noticed about my ego and its need to be the center of attention through my meditation? How can I increase my awareness of the Witness within, throughout the day?

Day Twenty-Two

Growth

“Our highest endeavor must be to develop free human beings who are able, of themselves, to impart purpose and direction to their lives.”

Rudolf Steiner

We all need to grow, to become better tomorrow than we are today. We all like surprises, we get bored doing the same thing every day, and every experience we have colors our view of life.

How can you grow? Every experience has something to teach you, if you look closely enough. Even something that you have done dozens of times before, contains some aspect that is different if you have the eyes to see or use a new frame of reference. It may be that you see for the first time, how your own history and habits contribute to the outcome. It might be that you finally see how someone else perceives the same event, differently than you. When you waken, you are available to take in all the aspects, not just what reaches your consciousness after passing through unconscious filters.

It helps to be curious, to seek knowledge and experience without a goal in mind, but only to learn. Some people love to journal their experiences, to document their thought processes and emotions, and they often find the recognize patterns of behavior easier because of their journal. Being open to new ideas makes it easier to grow.

Do you hold back from learning, from having new adventures? Why is that? Usually it is due to people becoming comfortable with their current situation, no matter how boring, painful or scary it may be. They fear change *may* make things worse. It is comfortable to remain in a situation you are at least familiar with, because you know what to expect. When you get outside your envelope of comfort, where anything can happen, something might be uncomfortable or expose flaws in your view of the world. Meaningful growth pushes you beyond this comfort zone, and causes your map of how the world works to change to account for the new information.

And once you've seen more than before, once the threshold is revealed to be only a step in your growth, not a permanent point of view, you may find that your perspective was less than you would like. Your ethics may have been violated, unconsciously, and now you must apologize, atone or at the very least, act differently in the future. Your intention, your goal, may change given the new perspective, the new information. And once you know something, you can't go back to the simpler way things used to be. Being forced to make this kind of change can be very uncomfortable. But growth carries this burden. If you expect it and work with it, you will be pleased with the results as you expand your envelope.

Ask yourself: How can I remind myself to look at routine situations closely, to ask what else is available for me to learn? Are there aspects of life I'd like to learn more about? Are there classes I can take, or someone I admire who might mentor me? What can I do to prepare for the upheaval that often follows growth? Are there lessons life is trying to teach me that I repeatedly ignore? How can I become more open to learning what life is teaching me?

Day Twenty-Three

Truth

“The dream of a society ruled by kindness, reason and justice is a dream as old as civilized man. Does it have to be an impossible dream?”

Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Peace Prize Recipient

We all want to be truthful. We claim to value truth as a fundamental virtue. And yet often, truth falls by the wayside, for a variety of reasons. We may fear hurting someone by speaking what we actually think, not what they want to hear. We may be living in a prison of denial, afraid to face the truth, constantly building walls in our defense and hiding from the light of reality. We ignore truth that proves our position in a matter is flawed. We lie to ourselves about how things are going for us, either to raise false hope or to increase our sense of being a victim of our circumstances. And not the least of the excuses; truth falls away to allow us to remain where we are, where we have become comfortable.

The ‘little white lies’ we tell each other seem harmless. Yet whether we tell them or hear them, we suffer and allow an illusion to continue when we participate in falsehood. Both parties are tainted by the lie; the speaker by being unable to deal with the truth impeccably and the listener, by insisting that the truth be ignored in order to placate their own emotions or worldview.

When you tell the truth, there is nothing to hide. You are transparent and fully available, available to your family, to your work, to the world. When you are authentic you are transparent and this allows Spirit to use you. Spirit can’t use you when you are out of integrity, not whole and complete.

We can adopt an attitude of not needing to be right, of seeing life and the universe with a sense of awe and wonder, rather than searching for hints that our position is right and discarding information that proves us wrong. We can foster a mindset that allows all aspects to be visible in a situation, that we might better understand and make our choice of a path to follow. We can release the need to be a victim, or to always be in control, and allow the Universe to work miracles through us. We can cherish our growth as fulfilling the plan of the Universe and learn ways to enjoy our progress and to encourage adventure and new ideas that move us forward.

We can search for meaningful work, work that supports our views and allows us to manifest our core values. We can speak at all times with integrity and care for others. We can investigate our own inner workings, discovering what makes us tick and where our interests lie. This allows us to explore the views of others and search for common goals and meaning, rather constantly having to defend a position that may no longer serve us well. We can ask questions so we understand, not to gain information in order to manipulate others.

Most importantly, we can start right where we are today. No one has a complete understanding of truth, and we can't wait until we do before we begin focusing on being truthful.

Ask yourself: How do I lie to others? And how do I lie to myself? I can pick one situation I expect to encounter in the next few days where I have habitually let truth fall away, and imagine how I can handle it differently this time. Can I continue to honor and care for my partner while answering that touchy question truthfully? How can I tell my supervisor I don't want to work overtime without making up some lame, and untrue, excuse? And how can I acknowledge that others may actually have a valid concern that I'm not factoring into my solution? Because there are so many possible viewpoints, there are also many possible solutions that serve everyone. Be fluid in your goals and desires, seeking answers that support all of God's manifestations. Care about and speak to others as if speaking to yourself.

Day Twenty-Four

Temptation

“Even if I were offered a Mercedes, I would keep the Panda. Big cars, mobile phones, watches, clothes. They are for people who want to fill their emptiness with nothing.”
Claudio Corallo

Ah, temptation. The desire to do something that you feel is wrong. Why do we so often succumb to temptation and hurt ourselves or those we love? Material things seduce us; the cars, watches and clothes of life and our ego tell us that these things are reality, what's important. Or we are seduced by an image; a sexy new acquaintance or an act that feeds our self-image (that is based more on 'want' rather than 'truth'). We know on some level, usually subconscious but sometimes very conscious, that we are treading a path that will only lead to trouble. And yet, we find ourselves unable to resist the siren's call, and we continue to support a narrow, incomplete and wholly inaccurate view of reality.

But temptation is the battle against illusion, not a limit on love. Too frequently, when we think of temptation, we think of love exceeding the boundaries of decent behavior or giving ourselves to an addiction, be it gambling, drugs or alcohol, or violence. Love in this context is a basic, animal-instinct type of act, more like lust than love; not the all-encompassing feeling of oneness as described in this book. To limit your all-encompassing feeling is to judge the value of that which you are willing love and to condemn that which you are not. We are not able to make that judgment from within our limited perspective.

When we are dissatisfied and unhappy, and prone to succumb to temptation, it's because we have identified with whatever we think is inadequate in our life and we think *that's* who we are. It isn't who we are, it's what we've created by thinking we are attached to our thoughts, and by thinking we are attached to what we create in the world. We don't create anything. The only thing that allows this attachment to continue is that we are anesthetized to it, through a kind of rational social living; trying to have the right job, have good health, and have the right relationship. This self-created version of reality that you live in actually medicates you, keeps you asleep. To awaken, you have to let go of ego; ego is what continues the thought pattern that keeps you unaware of the perfection of the universe. But we insist on affirming, 24X7, consciously and unconsciously, that our ego is right, that it knows who we are.

We are always weak, when we see ourselves as separate beings standing alone against the great currents of energy that surround us. Strength arises from our ability to tap into the flow of energy, to channel it in the way it wants to go. In other words, Power is from God. We can only open our hearts and minds, and allow the Universe to work its wonders and miracles through us.

Ask yourself: What tempts me to stray into ethically questionable territory? What addictions does my ego feed that continue my sense of separation? What habits or patterns do I find myself repeating, over and over, without satisfactory results? Am I placing too much value on the material things in my life? How can I begin to focus on my connection to Spirit? How can I move past thinking that the next relationship, the next car, the next drink will make anything better?

Day Twenty-Five

Defeating Temptation

"I expand in abundance, success and love every day, as I inspire those around me to do the same."

Gay Hendricks, writing in "*The Big Leap*"

Rather than ask, '***What is the truth of this moment?***', we ask, 'How can I heal this condition or make it go away?' Or, 'How can I bring more abundance into my life?' We place our focus on what we want, not on the perfect flow of universal energy at this particular moment. If we constantly pray to be shown the truth of the person or situation in front of us, we open ourselves to allow the energy to flow through us unimpeded. The energy will accomplish what is right and perfect for all, and we don't need to know the 'what', 'how', or 'why' behind it. We will not be led into temptation, into furthering our addiction and our lack of awareness, if we let go of our ego.

Gandhi is often quoted these days, saying, "Be the change you want to see." Indeed, role-modeling the appropriate behavior is effective in avoiding temptation. When you focus on ethical behavior, you find all your actions point in the direction of giving, of justice and fair play, and of cooperation. All of these qualities are inclusive rather than separate, and all tap into the flow rather than place obstacles in its path.

It is also helpful to turn to the sangha when you are feeling the pull of temptation. We fight temptation best when we fight it together. Sangha bolsters our feeling of connection with the Universe. When we are effectively joined with others, we listen more deeply to our inner wisdom. We find it easier to be receptive to the flow of energy around us. We naturally, subconsciously, attune ourselves to the energy of the group, bringing us closer the One.

Having been raised in modern Western culture, we all have to fight the imprint that our self worth is based on our net worth. Interestingly, someone used the term 'self-worth' when addressing the Dalai Lama, and the concept had to be explained to His Highness. Within the Tibetan culture there is no consideration that a person's belief about himself or herself could be anything other than whole, complete and perfect in this moment. The very idea that our material possessions reflect our value within the universe is the fundamental reason we remain asleep to reality. Temptation begins here, when the ego shouts that we 'need more' or that we 'need that instead'. Being asleep, we are easy prey for the ego's need to control, and we focus our attention on planning for the future rather than tapping the energy of Now.

Ask yourself: Do I worry that I don't have 'enough' stuff? How can I begin to identify the many ways Spirit provides the right amount of energy at the right time in my life? How can I let go of needing something to be different in order to be happy? How can I begin to see this moment as perfect and complete, without the

need for my intervention and control? What addictions do I turn to for distraction from the insecurity and fear that things are not as I would like? What feelings or fears get in my way, preventing the easy flow of universal energy through me, and sending me off on detours into temptation? How can I see past these distractions, and see my connection to all with love in my heart instead?

Day Twenty-Six

Patience

“When there is nothing to do, do nothing.”

Ajahn Brahmavamso

Napoleon’s troops had to travel from town to town, over roads that exposed them to the hot summer sun. He formulated a plan to plant trees along the roadsides, and so shade his troops. One of his ministers protested, “It will take twenty years for the trees to be of any use!” he cried. “Then we need to begin planting today,” Napoleon replied.

Many of us don’t remember that patience is the ability to do nothing when there is nothing to do. We cannot wait to act. We feel pressure to be ‘doing something’. This often leads to inappropriate action. Each situation calls for its own appropriate response.

Patience is about acting at the appropriate time. One can’t be patient and be distracted by transient events and emotions, yet most people live only *for* these emotions. To be truly patient, you have to see the whole picture. That picture may be distasteful and may not meet your expectations. What is key is the skill to make the right decision, at the right time; avoiding a knee-jerk reaction, which is often based on fear from ingrained patterns of behavior and not any reasoned response. Get off autopilot, and begin to see the reality in every situation and choose the path that benefits everyone.

Patience includes connection, perseverance and tolerance. It is the opposite of anger, which is really about separation of self from others. Anger is selfish and greedy, and ignores the reality of one’s Buddha nature, which is only love.

There is a Tibetan parable about patience, concerning a man who constantly turns a prayer wheel in his hand. He lives with a son and one horse on a small piece of land. One morning he wakes to find the horse has disappeared. His neighbors bemoan this fact, knowing it will be impossible for the man to work his land without a horse. He says, however, “We must give thanks for everything. Who can tell good or bad?”

The next morning, the horse returns, and 2 wild horses have come along with it. The neighbors cheer this bonanza, but again he only says, “I am grateful, but who knows what the world will bring? We must simply wait and see.”

The next day, his son is taming the wild horses, and falls and breaks his leg. Again the neighbors cry out in his misfortune, but the man only says, “I am grateful my son still lives. What has happened cannot be called good or bad.”

On the following morning a military recruiter shows up to take the man’s son away to join the army. Finding the son in bed with the broken leg, he leaves empty-handed. The neighbors cheer his good luck, but he only says, “Nothing is known for sure, we shall see.” As the tale shows, we must accept what is, without

projecting our own judgments of good or bad, and without feeling a rush to settle the future based on incomplete information.

It is easy to leave patience aside, and to act without contemplating. Remember, the biggest jobs still begin with one step.

Ask yourself: How can I remember to be patient? When do I act just to be doing something, not because what I am doing is the perfect step to take? How has impatience cost me in the past? Have there been times when I have been patient, not frozen in fear, and the result has also been less than satisfactory? How might I have acted differently? With patience, my heart opens and I am better able to sense my connection with the universal energy. How can I listen to your heart at these times, hearing the whisper of God?

Day Twenty-Seven

Just a Step

“You do not need to leave your room.
Remain sitting at your table and listen.
Do not even listen, simply wait.
Do not even wait, be quite still and solitary.
The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked.
It has no choice.
It will roll in ecstasy at your feet.”
Franz Kafka

Overcoming delusion, understanding reality in all its forms and levels, is the result of what we refer to as enlightenment. Enlightenment is not the end product; it is a shift in perception. It is awakening from the sleep of an ego-constructed fantasy, and carrying on with business on behalf of the One. Once we are enlightened, our path becomes one of unselfish love and service to all.

There's a fable about a monk who had sought enlightenment for many years. Finally, in exasperation, he prepared to find a mountain cave where he could meditate alone and uninterrupted, sure that this plan would lead to his goal. On his way, he met a fellow traveler who also had a large bag of belongings over one shoulder. The traveler asked where he was going, and he told the man of his enlightenment plan. Unbeknownst to him, he had met the Bodhisattva of wisdom, Manjushri. Manjushri suddenly dropped his large bag on the ground with a 'thud', and instantly the monk 'got it', and was enlightened. He dropped his own personal story, his identity, his ego and it was as if a large weight had just been lifted from his own shoulders. After a short reflection, he asked Manjushri "Now what?" Manjushri picked up his bag again, and continued peacefully down the path.

Enlightenment, like 'bliss' or 'nirvana', is just another state of consciousness, and not the goal. We see reality as it truly is, being of and among the world, but are also able to see the oneness, the endless ultimate self that lies within everything. Dipping into both aspects informs our actions with wisdom, allowing us to act with equanimity in the best way for all, not just ourselves. We trust flexibility and letting go. We lead by example, blessing others with our powerful, yet calm, energy.

Ask yourself: How can I stay present and focused, open to the flow of universal energy? How can I remain in the Witness, viewing the thoughts thrown against the screen of my mind by the ego, but not believing the fabricated world the thoughts create? How can I let go of needing to be in control, allowing energy to flow through me and into the world?

Day Twenty-Eight

Love What You Do

“Knowing others is knowledge, knowing oneself is wisdom.”
Lao Tzu, writing in ‘*Tao Te Ching*’

Even when we struggle under the control of our ego, we have experiences that let us feel truly blessed. It may be that we are feeling especially loved, or in love with someone. Or our work may be so exciting that we don't notice the time flying by, we need no breaks, we just enter the 'zone' and fulfill our heart's desires. I feel we would all like to have this experience more often.

This feeling comes about when we are fulfilling our own unique niche in life. Would you like to awaken each morning, full of energy and expecting fresh, exciting and loving experiences? Would you like to be excited about everything you experience? Once you find your passion, your purpose, this becomes the rule, rather than the occasional experience.

The key then, becomes finding what you love to do. One exercise you can do to help with this is to imagine, if money or relationship were no problem, what would you love to be doing right now? Take a few minutes, calm your mind, and put on some music you enjoy, music that inspires you. Ask yourself, 'What is my unique ability?' Not just something that you are good at, but an aspect of your persona that sets you apart from everyone else you know. You may fill in the blank: 'I am at my best when I am _____.' Once you have one (or many) answers to this, continue the thought: 'What I love about this activity is _____.' These questions help you to identify what you love about the things you already do. Then, imagining that money and partners are no limit and you can do whatever you want, spend 10 minutes writing anything that comes to mind that you might want to do. Just as in any brainstorming session, the rule here is not to judge any idea; instead, let each idea be a springboard to another, more outlandish one. Build from one to the next; trying to think of as many activities as you can that you fancy doing. Lastly, compare your list of activities you would love to do with the qualities you identified as being your special powers. There will be some activities on your list that will utilize your abilities to their maximum. If you pursue these activities, you will soon be doing only what you love to do. Your passion will provide a depth of energy resources that will fuel you beyond your wildest dreams!

Pick one of the ideas, make it a project, and take a baby step towards starting it. It isn't necessary to plan the whole endeavor beforehand, just take some kind of action. You may begin to research the local market, investigate certifications you may need to do what you want to do; you may want to hunt for a mentor who is already successful in the field. It isn't important at this stage what you do, what matters is beginning to focus your intention, to let your ego and subconscious know you intend to start something new, and to enlist their aid in filtering your

world to begin to include this activity. It is important to begin to dip your toes into the universal flow in a manner consistent with your new idea. Begin to think and act as if you are already deeply involved in the project. Open your eyes to what the Universe can bring you that will use your talents for the good of us all.

Ask yourself: What have I always loved? What comes naturally, easily to my heart? What have I always carried in my heart? What gives me the greatest joy and satisfaction? What makes me feel good about my life and myself? What calls me back, again and again, over the years?

Day Twenty-Nine

I Am Unique

“One cannot exist today as a person, one cannot exist in full consciousness, without having a showdown with one’s self, without having to define what it is that one lives by, without being clear in one’s mind what matters and what does not matter.”

Dorothy Thompson

You are unique. There is no one who has your skill set, your outlook, your perception and your attitude. Even so-called ‘identical twins’ are not identical. Science is uncovering a mechanism, epigenetics, which explains from the scientific perspective what we already know from our connection to Spirit: we each are manifestations of the One, but no manifestations are exactly alike. This gives your life on this planet a special meaning, because you are the only person capable of bringing your perspective to the rest of us. We each have special gifts, or abilities, that allow us to contribute a unique energy to the universal flow. Part of finding your life’s purpose is identifying what talents you have that make you special. When we are using our gifts, we are especially successful. We sing from our heart. Many of the experiences we have of being ‘in the zone’, many of our peak experiences, occur when we tap our special talents for others. As we awaken to our connection, we find that Spirit knows our talents and will move us to use them.

We are all good at a lot of activities. We are also very good at some others. But few of us have bothered to determine when we are acting using our unique gifts, let alone try to maximize our use of these blessings. It is useful to spend some time pondering our gifts, and trying to determine how to best use them. But we can also be available for Spirit to move us in the direction of using them without our planning ahead. We can be open to hear what we are to do, now, by tapping into the flow. We can work on being more transparent and available, on being spacious within our heart, making room for love to flow unimpeded through us to those we encounter.

Die to the smallness, to your sense of separation, so that your genius, your greatness, your champion, can live and shine through you. To do that, you have to go back to Source, back to the One. Adopt the attitude of ‘no matter what’, and accept nothing less than success. Don’t set a ‘goal’, create a vision that you will commit every effort to achieve. Don’t ‘try’, instead ‘be’. Let the Divine work through you.

Think of the word intimacy as meaning: ‘into me I see’. To be truly intimate with another, you must first at peace with yourself. You must accept your whole journey, all the great decisions that have brought happiness as well as the poor decisions that have brought lessons. All of your experiences had their purpose.

When you are at peace with all that, your authentic self gives others permission to be at peace too.

Ask yourself: Have I built walls around my heart to protect my gifts, to keep them special? Can I sense some of what makes me unique? Am I willing to let Spirit work through me, to spread love wherever I go? Can I find new ways to express my gifts so that others may enjoy my light?

Day Thirty

Assessment

“The universe will teach us our lessons with the tickle of a feather or the whomp of a sledgehammer, depending on how open we are to learning the particular lesson. Getting stubborn and defensive invites the sledgehammer, getting open and curious invites the feather.”

Gay Hendricks, writing in “*The Big Leap*”

Something will always challenge us, to force us to recognize the truth about life and reality, to wake us up. It can be as forceful as the death of a loved one, or as gentle as a leaf, shaking in the breeze, trying to catch our attention and bring our awareness into this moment.

If we stay at our present level where we are, we are doing nothing important. We understand this, on a deep level, or we would not be interested in waking up. As our sense of connection with the Universe expands, we become interested in helping those around us awaken, too. When we inform others of our own struggles, our own turmoil, we learn more about ourselves. The act of teaching can be a great way to learn. Where are you on your path today? What have you learned about yourself during the past month? Where would you like to go from here?

In order to maximize your ability to teach others, here are two exercises you can do to help identify your own current perspective and tools for change. First, fill in the blank: Life is like _____. Here's an example:

Life is like a rainbow. The rainbow is an archetypal symbol of two concepts, inclusion and perspective. It demonstrates inclusion because each color, while beautiful when seen alone, contributes to a beauty greater than the sum of the parts when blended with the other colors. Without the blending, this merging of the many different energies without distinct boundaries, the rainbow would not be as beautiful. It demonstrates perspective because the beauty of a rainbow is only visible when seen from a particular viewpoint; it can be seen as positive, wonderful and awe-inspiring, or it can be seen as a harbinger of misfortune, the warning sign that unwelcome rain will soon arrive. Whether you choose to see it as beautiful or dangerous depends on your expectations and your interpretations of its import. This demonstrates how 'choosing' to see the glass as half-full or half-empty affects the outcome.

Exercise #2 is more challenging. Find at least an hour when you can rest undisturbed by phone calls or other intrusions. Prepare to meditate or pray as you normally do. Spend the first 30 minutes opening your heart to the connection you have with the One. Feel the anguish of others, as they struggle with their own challenges. Feel the heartbreak of one who has lost their mate or their child. Feel the pain of animals being led to slaughter. Feel the earth cry out as strip mining scars its surface. Feel what all beings feel as they endure loss and

separation. Then gather all this heartbreak together and fuse it into a torch that illuminates your heart. What images were the most heartbreaking to you? Remember these, as they point to issues you may want to work on resolving as you grow into Spirit. You may decide to take on a project helping the particular beings you felt the most compassion for during this exercise. Lastly, taking the torch in hand, descend into your heart, taking a spiraling staircase into your deepest Self. Fearlessly enter the cave where you find Spirit, holding your torch high. Find a note on the floor, and read the note. The note will give you important information to help you grow.

Both exercises may be done more than once. The second one is especially useful to do from time to time. Both give you insight into what is important to you and can help you grow to trust your inner voice.

Day Thirty-One

Roadblocks

“Fear is excitement without the breath.”

Fritz Perls

What are you afraid of? What prevents you from serving others? Are you paralyzed with worry, unsure what to do and so choosing to do nothing? Are you so afraid of the judgment of others that you can't get anything done? Most importantly, how can you begin to move from fear to exhilaration?

Often our excuse is we don't have the time. Love is based on time and focused attention. If we say we don't have time, we are essentially saying we don't have love to give. When you feel love to another, stop using 'no time' as an excuse and offer your mindful attention to that being. By listening to how Spirit wants you to give your love, you will serve in the appropriate manner.

Sometimes our service is withheld because we see serving others as a 'menial' task. Truly, how can love be 'menial'? No job is menial, all are required and the quality of the service is what matters, not the nature. The trash collector or sewer worker performs tasks as critical as your own. Neither person is less for the work they do. It is the same with helping and loving others.

When you worry about the future, it is easy to get stuck in inaction. Ask yourself, 'Is it even possible for my worry to occur?' If not, ignore it. If it is, then ask, 'Is there anything I can do right now to fix it?' If so, do it. If not, ignore the worry. I have a friend who told me once, "I take full responsibility for what I do. But I refuse to take it a moment before it arrives. When the consequences are here, I will deal with them. Till then, I won't spend my time or energy worrying."

People are also frozen in their life by fear of criticism. It may be they fear what others will say, or it may be they spend their time and energy criticizing others. As you grow in speaking and acting from the heart, you will not fear what others say. As you increase your trust in the inner voice, you will not go wrong. But criticizing others (and yourself!) is not as easy to overcome. A crucial aspect that must be understood is that criticizing others is really 'projection'. There are aspects of ourselves we are not proud of, or dislike. Our ego, not knowing any better, disowns these parts, assigning them no time on the stage of the mind. It relegates them to the unconscious where they continue to exist and work, but outside our awareness. When we recognize a part of ourselves that we don't like in others, we criticize them. When we see this aspect in ourselves manifesting, we criticize ourselves. A California bumper sticker says it all: "If you spot it, you got it". Of course, spending any energy at all criticizing is counterproductive. It increases our sense of separation, and spends our precious time and energy uselessly. As you catch yourself criticizing, make note and use the incident later to investigate that part of yourself you have judged to be inadequate. Work to reclaim that aspect, to bring it back into your awareness. Acknowledge that all of

our varied aspects are but manifestations of God and therefore are necessary and legitimate, and perfect even though our ego thinks differently.

Fear focuses on what could go wrong, exhilaration on what could go right. When you were excited to be going on your second roller coaster ride, you had moved past your fear and the energy you knew you were about to feast upon heightened your awareness. Wasn't that a great feeling? Just as we choose our filters, our attitudes and select our perspective, focus on seeing the exhilaration in life, not the fear.

Ask yourself: How can I catch myself using "I don't have time" as an excuse? How can I move past that, and take responsibility for the real reason I don't want to perform the requested task? How can I accept that all work is equal, that one job is no more important than any other? How can I catch myself becoming lost in worry, trapped by fear of potential problems? How can I learn to set these worries aside, and to either focus on actions I can take that solve the issue or leave it alone? How can I begin to catch myself criticizing myself or others? How can I silence the ego? How can I reintegrate those aspects of my being I have buried and denied? How can I move beyond fear, into exhilaration at all life has to offer?

Day Thirty-Two

Altruism

“Look what I have, and it’s all for you!”

Edna St. Vincent Millay

Few of us are ready, at this very moment, to take on a task like Mother Teresa did in Calcutta. Selfless service is not seen as a viable career path. Yet, once your basic needs of food, shelter and simple security are met, what exhilarates your heart as much as ‘helper’s high’?

For some the very thought of altruistic action, helping someone with no expectation of tangible reward, is senseless. They could no more ‘serve’ someone else than fly to the Moon. But once you sense your connection to all that is, helping others is helping yourself. Once you are awake and aware of the energy that surrounds you, your reward for serving others comes in the glee you feel when you sense the change in their energy your service has made.

Extending a helping hand to one in trouble alters their perception of their place in the Universe, often changing despair and resignation into hope and motivation. Witnessing this transformation is reward beyond any material gain.

Inherent in serving others is the need to admit weakness. Just as we project our own shadows, the parts of ourselves we dislike and try to renounce by suppressing our awareness of them, onto others with criticism, so we can project our compassion, our willingness to help another without tangible reward from within our sense of connection, onto others with love. We recognize we sometimes need the help of others because we are not separate, and we are not in control, and we are often weak. Acknowledging our own needs allows us to serve others in their time of weakness. In service, we find joy in the happiness of others.

As you step into service, just as yogis and activists do, you must stay committed to this process, always willing to let go of your limitations and open up to your purpose in the community. From the surrender comes a new idea for change. Get clear, get inspired, and then get active.

Ask yourself: How can I live and love unselfishly? Do I live to serve or be served? When have I felt great compassion for another? What did I do with that feeling? When have I helped someone I had never met before? How did it feel? How can I regain that feeling today?

Day Thirty-Three

Pain

“HIV is certainly character-building. It’s made me see all of the shallow things we cling to, like ego and vanity.”

Randy Shilts, author of *“And the Band Played On”*

Pain opens your soul to experience your deepest desire. While not necessary, most of us require a painful event to convince us that something needs to be changed in our view of the world. How we react to the pain makes all the difference in the outcome.

You may know a friend who has had a painful experience, such as divorcing a spouse. They may have reacted by vowing never to go through that again, becoming depressed and withdrawn, and withholding their love from family, friends and even potential partners. On the other hand, they may accept this new freedom as permission to grow, to change, to manifest new parts of themselves. They find new activities, meet new people, see new places, and years later, when you ask them about the first marriage, they smile and say, “Moving on was the best thing that ever happened to me.” Same situation, two entirely different results, but both outcomes were entirely dependant on choices made by the person about how to react.

How can you gain the most from the inevitable pain you experience? Trust the process. What is happening is happening for a reason, and we don’t always know what that is. The Universe is out to do us good. It helps if you can examine your life and identify areas that you want to improve. Pain is not required before change occurs, if you pay attention. Be true to yourself. Look for opportunities to say, “Yes! I will try that!” Either God will give you wings to fly or God will give you something really soft to land on!

Remember, even if we lose everyone we love and everything we own, we are still connected to God. Don’t fear death, fear not living.

Try this exercise: list the most significant events in your life, and rate them ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Often events (like a death in the family) may seem to be ‘bad’ at the time, but instead lead you to a greater understanding, or a change in your worldview, and that turns out ultimately to be good. You may find, like many people, that it is hard years later to decide to assign a particular event to the ‘good’ or ‘bad’ column. There is both good and bad in every situation, and your view of which is primary often changes over time.

Try to find a situation in your life when you can tell yourself: “My ego thinks this is bad, but thanks, I know something good will come of this.” See how your perception of the pain changes when you adopt this new attitude.

Ask yourself: How can I identify what a particular pain is trying to tell me about my view of the world? How can I accept that pain is a motivator, and quickly adapt to new situations without resisting and suffering from the pain?

Day Thirty-Four

Gratitude

“The whole idea is to allow ourselves to be used, to give ourselves away. To trust that God made us right, and if things don’t appear to match up in the world, then we have to let go of that, of our expectations. We’re here to be who we’ve come here to be.”

Rev. Warren Dale Blackford

“Thank you.” It is amazing how much power and wealth is expressed in these two words. Hearing these words, weariness falls away, worry steps aside, and commitment is renewed. Wars have been fought and relationships have been lost because these words were not spoken. Think back to the last time someone said these words to you. How did they make you feel?

It is only natural, that when Spirit provides for you, that you feel the gratitude expressed in ‘thank you’. When you are able to do what you love, feel gratitude. When you tap into your special gifts, express gratitude. When you have food to eat, or resources to pay your bills, rest in gratitude. When you receive the help of another, demonstrate gratitude. If you are able to return the favor, do it. If not, or if the favor must wait, at least express the thought, the wish, or your feelings so that the other person knows you are grateful.

It truly is the thought that counts. With other people, who can’t read your mind, you must be more explicit. But with Spirit, thought is sufficient. Again, where you place your attention determines how you view the world. Placing your attention on gratitude abets the flow of energy, and brings more energy into your life.

One way to express our gratitude that we often overlook, is saying to another, “You’re right.” Being willing to admit we have been wrong, and to grant the other person the knowledge that they were correct, is but another way to express your gratitude that the Universe is perfect after all. You demonstrate that you appreciate the other person being in your life, and that you value their companionship. What a great way to say ‘thank you!’.

But this is not to say that receiving gratitude is required for you to feel good about your actions. If you save a child’s life, do you need to receive someone’s gratitude? Isn’t it enough to know that you have done what is right, what was required in the moment? Of course it is, but admit it: hearing the words, ‘thank you’ is *always* special. Give them to those you love, today.

Ask yourself: How can I remember to express my gratitude throughout the day today? Besides saying the words, how else can I express gratitude for what I receive? What’s one act of service I receive regularly that I have been grateful for? How can I begin to honor all that I receive with my gratitude?

Day Thirty-Five

Share

“Boldness has its own power and magic.”

Goethe

You have a story to share. You are where you are today because you have followed a unique path through life. No one else has done all the things you have done, and we are curious about how you got to this point in your journey. Please share with us!

Telling us about your experiences teaches us about ourselves. We can imagine what you went through, the pains you endured, and we can change our own worldview to accommodate your teaching. It can be especially helpful, if you have had a similar experience as I am having now, for you to share how it affected you at the time. Storytelling empowers others to think outside the box. It is important to realize that much of what we talk about with others is trivial and inconsequential. We avoid ‘touchy’ subjects in the interest of avoiding conflict. Subjects such as religion and politics are usually left aside out of fear of offending someone. As we continue this journey to know ourselves and build our connection with others, we must become honest in our storytelling, as well as open to all subjects. Our time here is limited, and increasing our focus on what’s truly important leaves little room for conversation that dodges the important subjects.

Sharing your story also sends a message that you value relationship over material possessions. One troubling aspect of ourselves that our growth in consciousness must address is the materialism that has developed in the western world in recent decades. We have allowed our egos to construct a worldview that seeks happiness from outside, rather than through our connection to Spirit. We depend on our accumulation of stuff to keep us both secure and happy. This impossible demand is now being shown to be but a distraction from the understanding of reality. The fact that the planet cannot support the entire population living like Americans is just the trigger that will force us to grasp this concept, happily or not.

Ask yourself: How can I make a difference in someone’s life by sharing something I have experienced? How can I share more of myself with others? How can I be more transparent in my motives and desires, and communicate my perspective to those who are willing to listen? Can I discuss meaningful things, and spend less time with idle chatter? How can I encourage others to pay attention to what life is trying to teach them, and to act on what they learn? How can I be a role model for others?

Day Thirty-Six

Ethics

“The great person understands Yi (morality, duty to one’s neighbor, altruism and politeness). The small person understands only Li (profit and personal advantage).”
Confucius

Upon hearing the word ‘ethics’, many people think of their conscience. Their ego doesn’t always make decisions that support what the person feels is the ‘right’ action, and a small voice in the back of their head lets out a tiny protest. In some, this voice is louder, and usually wins the argument. In others, this voice hardly ever wins.

Ethics are the rules of behavior we follow. They lead us towards giving, to justice and fair play, to cooperation, to taking personal responsibility and to valuing relationship over material possessions. All of these behaviors arise from the reality of our connection to others, and support the group over the individual. Ethics includes the obvious; do not kill, steal, or deceive, as well as rules less clear; do not engage in sexual misconduct or use intoxicants. How we interpret these guidelines and demonstrate them in our actions defines the principles we stand for.

Our commitment to following these rules displays to all what we value in our interactions with the Universe. Frequently, we act a certain way, based on our current level of information. Then something happens, we learn more about the situation, and we discover we have been acting inappropriately. Once you know, you must act ethically, even if that means a change in your behavior. How can you adjust your actions to accommodate the new knowledge?

Often, we are led to act in unethical ways by conflict. We lie to avoid conflict, we steal to solve conflicting desires, and we kill to end conflict. The ethical response to conflict is non-violent resolution. In any conflict, we can find we share more with our opposition than we initially think. This provides common ground from which to negotiate. Every human wants the same future, one that is happy and secure. We all seek love, and the opportunity to give love to others. It sounds simplistic, but it is true: if we focus on what motivates us, on the needs of all parties, we can resolve any disagreement through a compromise that still supports our core values. How can we learn these techniques? Can we begin to teach our children non-violent conflict resolution?

In the West, mention ‘Buddhist monk’ and the image that comes to many people is the sight of monks walking the roads of Asia, begging bowl in hand. Monks are under an admonition, take only what is freely given, to prevent violation of the ethical standard against stealing. Within the context of allowing the universal flow of energy to pass through us unimpeded, this precept is a handy guide. Are there

situations where you find yourself trying to justify taking something you know you don't deserve?

Ask yourself: How do I act in ways that conflict with my own ethics? How can I remember to act in an ethical manner at all times? What is the loving action? What is just and true? Can I become aware of how my actions have impacted others, and begin to atone for the unintended damage caused through my ignorance?

What motivates me? What motivates others? Where can our motivations meet? How can we resolve our conflicts peacefully? Is it becoming easier to practice ethical speech?

Day Thirty-Seven

The Middle Way

“We are already like Buddhas, endowed with the Buddha qualities or perfections the moment we are born; this is the main message of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism. The only problem is that our wisdom is obscured like a sun behind the clouds.”

Tulku Thubren Rinpoche

The life you live must validate your message. Put another way, ‘walk your talk’. Every thought you have, every action you take, demonstrates your belief system, whether it is ordered or in complete disarray. As you grow in Spirit, you will choose to leave some actions behind and take up other, new and proper actions, instead. Making these types of good decisions feels right, and can lead to people feeling zealous; they go overboard with either communicating their new perspective to others, or with outward displays of their new beliefs.

The Buddha spoke of ‘The Middle Way’. He taught that the path we must follow lies between the two extremes, nothing on the one side, and absolute on the other. Maintaining the Middle Way, he said, allows us to remain free of dogma, free of any attachment to a particular point of view. Attachment being the source of suffering, even the attachment to a structure of reality, when created by our mind, leads to suffering.

With anything, moderation is always best. Understanding the Middle Way leads directly to this conclusion. When you examine dieting methods you discover that people who deny themselves entire food groups are rarely successful in their weight loss goals, while those who merely cut back on portion sizes and continue to eat all foods show much higher rates of success. This is but one example of how going to the extreme, denial of some aspect of a situation, is unwise. Acting in an extreme manner involves exclusion. The way of Spirit involves inclusion. The Middle Way is the appropriate behavior, including all sides of any issue in the response.

The Middle Way is balanced. When we are balanced, we take into account all aspects and make better decisions. We act with integrity. The word ‘integrity’ actually means ‘whole and complete’. Our actions must be whole and complete to be effective. Again, we need only focus on the Now, this moment, and ensure that our actions are in alignment with who we really are. We want our behavior to match what we are trying to create. Want a non-violent world? Then you must act in a non-violent way at all times. Want a loving relationship? Then act in a loving manner.

Once in a while say, “You are right”. These words often are difficult to say. Our ego expects to always be right. After all, if it is sometimes wrong, we might ‘fire’ it and get another ego, correct more often, to take its place, right? This makes it difficult to admit to another that we are wrong about something. Yet, isn’t it nice when someone says this to you? As we take the Middle Way, we recognize that

we, too, fall in the Middle, sometimes right, sometimes wrong. Be generous and acknowledge when you are wrong.

Ask yourself: What is preventing me from feeling whole and complete? How do I confuse others by failing to act in alignment with my values? How can I become comfortable changing my habitual actions to more closely mirror my beliefs? How can I avoid extreme behaviors? What beliefs do I hold that are 'all or nothing'? Where is the Middle Way within those beliefs?

Day Thirty-Eight

Commitment

“To live the fully responsible life, one must have the courage to bear responsibility for the needs of others.... one must *want* to bear this responsibility. Concepts such as truth, justice and compassion cannot be dismissed as trite when these often are the only bulwarks which stand against ruthless power.”

Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Peace Prize Recipient

Weld the escape hatch shut. Commitment is about perseverance; sticking to the path no matter the difficulties, no matter the trials and tribulations. It's about sticking with your journey because you understand there is a reason that you have undertaken this trip. That reason is Truth. Despite the difficulties you must overcome, you feel in your heart that this is the right path and you have chosen to follow it. Stick with it!

Commitment is about no excuses. Watch for your ego, chattering away, saying things like, 'I would have but for _____' or 'It's not my fault'. In every difficulty we encounter, there is a contribution we are making that is part of the problem. When you commit to waking up, you commit to following the trail to wherever it may lead, including your own culpability in your troubles. When you discover you are making excuses, stop and take a deep breath, and ask yourself where your responsibility lies in this matter. Learn and grow from adversity, that's the cornerstone of commitment.

In the extreme, note the story of Thich Quang Duc, a Vietnamese monk, who in 1963 set himself on fire to protest the persecution of Buddhists. Others also performed this ultimate act of commitment and generosity. It required that they had realized their ultimate true nature, that they could see with absolute clarity and wisdom the results of their actions. Because of their understanding, they were no longer attached to the idea of the physical body being the Self, and therefore they were free to use their body to make a statement. They created the image of destruction to point to the destruction of spirit occurring around them. Thich Nhat Hanh saw it this way, "It was made not out of despair, but out of the wish to help, out of [their] great love of mankind." This is a level of commitment that is probably beyond all of us at this moment, but it clarifies what it means to be committed to seeing our union with all beings. It demonstrates also, how we can stay consistent with our values; how we can think and feel and love, all in the same way.

When we are present and awake, we do what we love to do to the best of our ability and it is the only act the Universe requires us to do. Commit to this and your road becomes a superhighway.

Ask yourself: Where do I doubt that this path is right for me? What is holding me back from committing 100% of my efforts to waking up and allowing Spirit to work

through me? How can I remember my commitment to help those around me, to spread my love among all I meet today? Who can I turn to today to help me increase my level of commitment to doing what is right?

Day Thirty-Nine

Generosity

“... the more he does for others, the greater his existence. The more he gives to others, the greater his abundance.”

Lao Tzu

Many hesitate to give out of insecurity, fearing the loss of something that can't be replaced. Yet giving to others is giving to yourself, as we are all part of The One, just more of God made manifest. Giving moves energy along; it taps into the universal 'flow' of energy and brings us closer to the 'flow' ourselves. The universe already provides for us, through the air we breathe, the ground we stand on, the food we eat. It's not a far stretch to trust that whatever we need to grow will also be provided if we work towards it and trust in it.

Giving releases one's feelings of attachment, and therefore serves as a complement to the mindfulness work we do to develop a closer understanding of reality. We quickly learn that when we exercise our bodies, we are left feeling more energized than we started. This counter-intuitive concept also plays out while being generous. The more we give, the more we receive to be able to give again.

We must be generous not just with food or money, material things, or with energy, helping others with our work. We must also be generous with our words, especially those concerning forgiveness and thanks. It is good to communicate our feelings, so others know we appreciate their gifts. What people remember is not the physical article they receive, but the feeling of love and acceptance that receiving the gift gave them.

The whole idea is to give *our selves* away, to allow our selves to be used, without a sense of superiority or power from being a giver or a helper. Typically we try to protect and save ourselves. Instead, dive in and experience your core values, and be vulnerable. Otherwise, ***you are contained, restrained, and the universe is not able to flow unimpeded through you.***

The core concept of generosity has been expressed through all major religions as tithing. Tithing is giving back to the source, feeding that which has already fed you. If a particular church has nourished your spirit, it is appropriate to give to that church. Tradition sets ten percent as an appropriate tithe, but you shouldn't feel constrained by such a small amount. You will find that the more you give, the more you add to the universal flow of energy, the deeper you find yourself immersed in that flow. Tithing brings your own inner world into alignment with the universe. It manifests in your life as increased efficiency and greater prosperity, and demonstrates you understand God's law and way of giving.

There has been much ado recently around the idea of 'creating abundance'. People are making 'vision boards' to help them visualize wealth flowing into their lives. They meditate on the ideal of having more money and stuff than they know

what to do with. The point that is missed in all of this is that we don't 'create' anything. We control our focus, and by focusing on abundance, we make the decisions and see the data that confirm our view. But the actual energy flow already exists, is already perfect for the moment, and is readily flowing through us if we are awake and aware.

Ask yourself: How can I find the confidence to give more of what I have to others? How can I grow past the fear of lacking the resources I need? How can I open my senses to the flow of universal energy through my being at every moment? What new ways can I discover that allow me to give my time and energy to everyone? How can I remember to be generous in my thoughts and speech?

Day Forty

Wisdom

“Good judgment comes from experience, and a lot of that comes from bad judgment.”
Will Rogers

Wisdom: the virtue that must be present in any other virtue for effectiveness. It is one thing to be generous, but giving without grasping true need, without understanding non-attachment, is pointless and potentially harmful. Patience without knowing when to act can lead to sloth or missed opportunities. Mindfulness, if focused on the gnat buzzing around one's ear while on the meditation cushion, may lead nowhere. How can one make ethical decisions without knowing truth and consequences? It is wisdom that informs and facilitates all the other virtues. Wisdom is knowing my true nature, being able to use both my understanding of cause and effect and deep awareness of the Now, the eternal, deathless One Taste to forge a Middle Path to grow enlightenment in myself as well as others. Wisdom can see beings in their radiant endless nature, while simultaneously seeing how they interrelate with other beings in the universe. Wisdom in action is compassion.

What does wisdom look like? It takes the shape of teaching, mentoring, parenting, volunteering, helping others, healing whenever possible. It is inspiring others to do the same.

What steps can you take to increase wisdom, to improve your communication with the Divine? Learn about your inner world and get off autopilot. Move beyond the reactive, subconscious roller coaster, and learn exactly what inspires and motivates you. Do more of these kinds of activities. Practice what you learn, put the ball in play and allow compassion to radiate through your every action. As you use these concepts, wisdom will flow throughout each action naturally. Wisdom knows you don't have to prove your worth. All beings are equal in the sight of God. Wisdom knows this life is temporary and material success is meaningless in this context. Wisdom knows its power. It acts with confidence and assurance.

The Buddha, teaching about wisdom, expressed these concepts:

- One who makes numerous offerings to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, helps sentient beings, and does many good deeds, and yet dedicates all the merit accumulated thereby to one's own interest such as making more money or enjoying a longer or better present or future life *produces limited effects*.
- One who does those same good deeds but dedicates all the merit to saving sentient beings from suffering in Samsara receives much greater merit than the one with selfish purposes.

- Finally, one who does the same good deeds with no specific purpose or desire at all receives infinitely greater merit than the two cases mentioned above.

Ask yourself: How can I continue to use wisdom in my decision-making? How can I remember to be a role model for others? Are there opportunities for me to teach more? Can I be a mentor for someone in my work or neighborhood? What volunteer opportunities interest me? How can I be more available to help my family and friends when they are ill or suffering? How can I focus to ensure I am working to benefit all beings and not expecting a particular 'reward' for my actions?

Day Forty-One

The Golden Rule

“The greatest good you can do for another is not just to share your riches, but to reveal to him his own.”

Benjamin Disraeli

Helping someone in need is the most gratifying act one can perform. It is actually being an instrument of God, an agent helping to provide what another person requires. What greater good can be served than to be a tool of The One? All major religions have at their core one thought, the Golden Rule. Possibly the most quoted saying ever, it is simply, “Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.” It acknowledges implicitly that We Are One, that what we do to others we do to ourselves. It encourages service to others. It asks that you pause and reflect on your actions before taking them, and this is one aspect of an awakened mind.

Once we awaken, we feel the truth of the Golden Rule even more than before. When we touch the Witness inside, when we are cognizant of our ‘Buddha-nature’ or live in ‘Christ-consciousness’, we not only act as a Buddha or Christ would, we live by this rule. We concentrate on others so completely that we forget ourselves. This is what love is all about.

The Golden Rule is simple in theory. But putting others first contradicts everything the ego has worked so hard for over the years. Don’t expect it to move aside quietly, to relinquish the reins of power without a fight. In the beginning, glimpses of the glory of the Divine may be all we can hope for. But if we continue to examine our actions using the Golden Rule as our guide, our love will shine through us more and more.

Ask yourself: Do I want others to help me, often without being asked? I can use this as a guide in my own interactions with those around me. Do I want a partner who is faithful and loving? How can I act this way myself? What aspect of my life troubles me today? How could the Golden Rule apply to that part of me, to resolve the issue? How can I continue, right now, to embody my own Christ-consciousness? How can my own Buddha-nature shine through to everyone?

Day Forty-Two

Your Highest Self

“If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”

The Dalai Lama

In the final analysis, life is only about embodying our Highest Self as we connect with Spirit and manifest It in this realm. There is no greater task than this. An integral part of the path that builds our ability to accomplish this is waking up to Truth. We must constantly focus our attention, and ask ourselves, ‘what important feelings am I keeping outside my awareness?’. It is critical that we become aware not only of the parts of ourselves that we have hidden away out of shame or fear, but that we also open our heart to hear the whispers of God directing our actions. It is not the work of the ego we are doing, rather it is our offering of service in support of our connection to all beings.

Our path involves letting go of ego, letting go of that which we are not. We identify habits and reactions that no longer serve us well, that shield us too much or in inappropriate ways, and we release ourselves from continuing to be dominated by these habits. We don’t need to worry or focus on making changes that will last forever, we only need to get through this moment with our new choices. We learn to take a breath and choose our reaction to what is happening *right now*. The famous twelve-step programs have built their success partly on this idea that we can only deal with what is happening now, taking life one moment at a time.

When you embody the Highest Self, your attitude as you set about your work says to the Universe, ‘I offer my service to the Divine. I give it freely and without need for recognition, for the Divine to do with it what it will.’ We don’t pray for relief or riches, instead we ask the Source to use us as its instrument, to increase the Universal flow of energy and love. In oft-quoted words, we ask that ‘Thy will be done.’

We become a conduit through which Spirit works. We begin living our life, not practicing at life, or waiting for a life to show itself to us, or planning to somehow live a better life months or years from now. We show up and live the life that is present in this moment, the one that is presenting itself to be lived through us. At every turn, we have the ability to choose to be aware. Plan your behavior, activities, thoughts and emotions: you can literally force your brain into new combinations, patterns and ways of viewing the world.

Ask yourself each morning: What’s the greatest ideal of myself that I can be today? How would a great person think? How would they feel? How would they not think? How would they not act? How would they not be? Who would they forgive, who would they love, what would they change in their life? What could I do differently to express my own greater self?

Day Forty-Three

Process: What comes next?

“Will you choose to dance?”

All religious traditions (and science, another system of belief) recognize a pattern in life; that systems are pushed beyond their threshold, collapse into chaos, and then reorganize with a new map that can handle the stress. Our life is about learning and growing and becoming aware of reality in all its glory. Our own map of reality will be rewritten hundreds of times as we pursue our goal of embodying our Highest Self. The attitudes and concepts you've pondered these last weeks are but the beginning steps along a path that stretches out before you.

You are always in touch with the Universe whether you are awake to that fact or not. There is no control; the universe is perfect and unfolding, as it should no matter how you feel about it. Trust that it is right, let go of the need to control things you think are outside you. Get out of the way. Let the universe work through you.

Like planting a new garden, you have a chance to plant your own seeds of intention, renewal and commitment. Now is the time to awaken and release the old habits that are keeping you from being your best. By doing so, you will live more on purpose, grow as a person and joyfully take part in the things that are most meaningful to you. Find a group that feels like you do, practice becoming aware, choose your actions and reactions, and remove your mask and let your Inner Light shine upon us all.

To come this far, you've shown you are committed to growth and to connecting to Spirit. Thank you for joining us. And now, together, let's dance!

Questions or Comments?

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Thank you, for our time together,
Catherine

