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Here we begin

Come, everyone who is
thirsty—
here is water!

Isaiah: 55

For an overwhelming number of people of our time around the world, adherence to a particular religious faith is an accident of birth and not a conscious and deliberate choice. For too many, their faith is neither ingrained in a solid foundation, nor enlivened with reasonable knowledge and understanding. As a result, it is mostly superficial. To serve some pretentious cause of their own religion, which they neither follow nor understand, too many, on slightest pretext, come out with impassioned fervor to slaughter people of other religious faiths.

Discussion of religion often brings out a sensitiveness in a person. Even nonchalant, casual followers quickly become serious and make resolute effort to prove the superiority of their particular faith by expounding their pet theories and explanations. The so-called religious conviction in many people is more a blind prejudice ingrained in their subconscious rather than a living, thriving, carefully examined belief. A seemingly logical person with an open mind and a balanced sense of judgment can suddenly assume a retrogressive posture and arm himself with defensive arsenals of pseudo-logic to support his personal faith.

In today's religious marketplace, many vendors peddle their wares under the same roof. Each claims his merchandise to be the best, never bothering to look at other offerings. If they only checked, they would see that all are trading in the same product, only clad in different raiment.

All known philosophical abstractions, including atheism, agnosticism, nihilism, existentialism and many other apparently ramified concepts are offshoots of religious deliberation. The reality is that when considered at their core, all diverging philosophies converge. Individual religions are like fragmented parts of a circle and at the center lies one God. All approaches lead toward that center, although from the circumference, the differences among individual religions appear substantial, as one advances toward the center, the divergence disappears. The point, furthest from the center of a rotating wheel is under tremendous stress, moving continuously. The center rests in absolute peace.

The purpose of this book is to look for a common ground among multitudes of diversities, to seek harmony amid disharmony, to find similarity among dissimilarity, and to inquire at that point where all philosophies, all religions converge.

Often I have searched myself, questioned my wisdom, and looked for support deep inside me to muster sufficient strength to take up the challenge of writing this book. But the task seemed colossal, and I could never convince myself that I was qualified. Repeatedly, therefore, I deferred my task to a future date when I would be more knowledgeable, wiser, and better prepared. During those intermediate years, I read many books, traveled to exotic places, listened to wise people, conversed with learned persons, concentrated, contemplated and meditated many hours, yet never felt confident enough to set to work.

Then, on a quiet sparkling morning, while I was ambling in the bounty of nature, away from my everyday city life, a new thought struck me.

It was a morning when the world was waking. The sun was shining on the dew laden leaves of small shrubs. Shafts of early sunlight added golden hues to the bright colors of fresh blossoms. The morning was so quiet, I could hear my own breathing. Once in a while, a breeze broke the silence, rustled the leaves of tall eucalyptus trees. As I watched the white clouds in an otherwise clear blue sky, a flock of migrating white birds drew my attention. Gliding, with wings outstretched, the birds appeared in the western sky, and then gracefully flew away from the view.

We are all like those birds in flight. We are always on the move through the shifting clouds of life. Our old selves die every minute of the day, giving birth to newer selves. We seek a better, wiser, stronger and more experienced personality to replace the weaker and inexperienced one. There is no end to this development. This is what life is. We need not wait the whole of our lifetimes expecting something dramatic to happen to make us discerning sages. In whatever stages of life we are, we can make a beginning. A modest beginning perhaps, a beginning nevertheless.

Myriad thoughts, with vivid colors and forms, dance in the air around us from time to time. Perhaps we, the living interacting entities of present time, have lived in other times. If not here, somewhere else, in some other level of consciousness. Like John the Elijah, perhaps we, too, have walked on the surface of this earth in other garb. Perhaps our immortal souls have already lived many lives, reincarnating time and again, learning new lessons through the diverse experiences of each life. Perhaps this pilgrimage is a never-ending journey toward a fate, predestined by a divine design. Perhaps this world is nothing but a proving ground for us, a place where we have been commissioned by someone who oversees us every moment of our lives. And one day the Master will adjudicate us for all the good and bad that we have done in our lives and send us either to heaven or to hell, to live eternally.

Or, perhaps, the truth is that all there is in this earthly life of compendious impermanence is whatever we can discern and comprehend with our senses. Nothing existed prior to our birth. Nothing will exist after. Everything will culminate in naught with the demise of our physical body. Our bodies will disintegrate, from dust to dust, ashes to ashes. Perhaps all these hallelujah and romantic theories of afterlife are creations of our irresistible desire for immortality. Deep inside, we harbor the cherished hope of overcoming dreadful death and continuing to live.

We spend our whole lives striving to achieve success and power. It is cruel to think death snatches everything from us—all the hard-earned laurels achieved through a lifetime of struggles. We are compelled to go empty-handed into oblivion. We want to snatch some part of us back from death by creating a vision of immortality and restore some sort of sanity to this meaningless saga of life and death. Therefore, in a feeble attempt to defy the dark hands of death, we create elaborate descriptions of afterlife with that vivid imagination of ours. Perhaps this is the truth, the whole truth, and the only truth.

Human intelligence has researched, imagined, hypothesized, and postulated about heaven, nirvana, unison with God, and many other concepts of afterlife. The truth, nevertheless, has remained hidden in mystery—beyond the realm of ordinary persons. The reason is, realization of truth has to be direct, first hand and self-acquired. No one can transmit wisdom to another. Many

years of painstaking effort and strict adherence to a self-disciplined life can usher our realization of truth. At the end, only through Grace can the realization of truth be achieved.

Rationale

Man credits himself as a rational animal. It would perhaps be more appropriate to label him a rationalizing one. He never accepts truth simply on its merit. When he does not like a mandate, he finds a justification for rejecting it. On the other hand, if the dictum benefits him, he is happy to hold on to it regardless of its dubious implications. He rests his faith on those beliefs and principles that he thinks serve him well. All too often he strives to find support for his moral standing, irrespective of its ethical consequences. Only those philosophical bindings which endorse his own ideas receive his ready acceptance.

Our education, social conditioning, and personal experiences influence our philosophical stand on life. Experiences enrich memory, boost intellect, and prod one's mind continuously, compelling us to assume new positions in life. Wisdom diverts us from carnal desires to seek nobler purposes and urges us not to cleave to self-interest.

The interaction of our diverse emotions carves a niche in our reactive mind and influences our subconscious. Those influences, over a protracted period, gradually sink into consciousness.

Most men are amenable to their environment. It guides them, controls them, and regulates their lives. Only a rare few confront the unknown and make persistent efforts to explore the uncharted walkways of life.

Discovery of truth has been described as a sort of enlightenment, which can be experienced only by a pure heart, earnestly desiring and totally dedicated to the search, with complete honesty, and humility. The great philosopher sage J.Krishnamurti defined that experience of enlightenment as no experience at all. According to Krishnamurti, at that exalted moment of ecstasy, the individuality of our differentiated self is lost totally, and our integration with the Overself is complete. Krishnamurti explained the separate identity of individual existence as the invention of thought. When thought stops, the self is annihilated. There is nothing left to experience anything. That realization can come only in absolute silence, from quieting the mind through prolonged meditation and self-control of the highest order.

When the mind becomes akin to the surface of a glassy sea, when mundane desires no longer create storms on that surface, then comes realization. As the moment of ecstasy passes away, and the individual ego is restored in its seat of control, only the realization remains. That realization can never be described in words. Human language has not developed the vocabulary to capture that sublime grandeur.

In that state of union, the individual ego identifies itself with the super-ego, forgetting completely its separate existence. Once a *sufi* (Muslim saint) of Iraq, Mansur Hallaj cried out in his trance, "*Anal Haque, Anal Haque* (I am God, I am God)." However, on his return to a normal state, he expressed surprise on being told about his utterance. He asserted, he did not remember making any such pronouncement.

The important thing is, any personal experience of truth has only to be a direct self-realization. To achieve that end, everyone has to tread the bittersweet path of discipleship. It is a path without any landmark, or clear map. Volumes have been scrawled attempting to describe it. Infinite instructions with elaborate explanations have been furnished by religious institutions and authorities. Yet, each disciple has to find his own way. Each one has to chart his own route. All guidance, instructions, and suggestions are useless beyond a point in that journey. The endeavor is so personal and unique that one's coat does not fit another.

However proud we may be of our intelligence, our ability to learn and analyze intricate details of an extremely difficult phenomenon, our intelligence and knowledge can never take us to that land until we find our own way. Intelligence is our implement for acquiring knowledge, and we take immense pride in the sophistication of our knowledge! The limitation of knowledge is exposed to us time and again in life, but we seldom recognize that our knowledge of anything

can never be complete. Our knowledge is infinitesimal compared to our lack of knowledge. As horizon of our knowledge expands, we arrive at a plateau where we realize our ignorance is vast, and we can never surmount it. Like Sir Isaac Newton, we feel the desire to avow, we have picked up only a few pebbles on the shore of the sea of knowledge.

Intelligence, knowledge, and a disciplined quest can guide and prepare us for the final leap to enlightenment. Nevertheless, our final leap can be made only with the help of grace—a grace that comes through self-realization. As long as our fragmented consciousness flounders in the darkness without leaping in total surrender into the illumined, all enveloping, omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient super consciousness, no realization can be attained.

When realization is attained through our perception of truth, all desires come to an end; all sufferings cease, and the self is submerged in a sea of contentment. At that moment a transformation occurs. The egocentric self dies and a new awareness sets in, attuned with the Overself. Then knowledge transcends into wisdom. This state of mind has been described in the Upanishad in the following way:

When the sense organs excite no more desire, then is the culmination of dispassion. The extreme perfection of knowledge is the absence of any impulsion of the egoistic idea, and the limit of self-withdrawals is reached when the mind functions, that have been merged, appear no more.¹

The truth

Belief and faith in God, although prevalent from time immemorial, has remained and will forever remain merely a belief and faith. In as much as the Almighty is Omnipotent, Omniscient and Omnipresent, the Creator God will always remain beyond the realm of human comprehension. But is this the only truth? Must we accept it without question? The twentieth century knowledge explosion enjoined us not to accept anything without tangible proof.

While we see the world around us governed by laws by which even nature must abide, we may very well raise the question: Can religion afford to take leave of law and put down arbitrary hypothesis in the name of God? We accept that there is nothing like a last word in science, all theories and laws, on whatever solid foundations they may be established today, can be proved wrong tomorrow. Must we then accept the dictums of the holy books and the words of the prophets as the last words on God?

If understanding God is beyond the five senses of an ordinary mortal then the same is true of the latest developments in various faculties of science. Indeed, modern science may be called esoteric science instead of material science. We must stretch beyond the limitation of our five senses to understand it.

Recent discoveries in science are unveiling the mysterious eternal truth, which remained the prerogative of mystics for so long. For the first time, science is opening up the possibility that the enigma of God could be solved for ordinary mortals.

Man's newly acquired knowledge is urging us to take a point of view different from our traditional view as we increase our understanding of the nature of physical entities. We have arrived at a point where we find ourselves severely handicapped in trying to make rational explanation of what we are experiencing. We find ourselves at a loss to express novel physical phenomena in a language others understand. Likewise, as we cannot describe our metaphysical experiences in ordinary language, we fail to describe them with the facts presented by modern science.

The prospect of a grand unified theory in the field of science is becoming brighter than ever. This theory will combine the four fundamental forces of nature (the strong nuclear force, the weak nuclear force, the electromagnetic force, and the gravitational force) and describe the universe in terms of one theory. Although such a theory is still farfetched, it is within the precincts of theoretical probability.

The question can now be asked: Will the unified theory of the four fundamental forces of nature solve the issue of God once and for all? Will we ever be able to describe God in terms of language and mathematics? It is hardly probable.

Even though we do not have a unified theory, we have partial theories, for instance, the theories of relativity and quantum mechanics, sufficient to explain all but the most extreme situations. Moreover, the definition of God is such that it precludes definition. That is why there is the riddle—can God make a stone so heavy that He cannot lift it?

In a strange way, current discoveries in science have restored faith in the age-old human belief in God. Suddenly, it has become evident, the apparent conflict between religion and science existed only because of limitations, ignorance, and incompleteness within the sphere of our knowledge. And this is due to the inadequacy of our perception and communication tools. Knowledge is always accompanied by ignorance; hence, it is not the all-powerful tool that we presume it to be. Knowledge has its own limitations.

The time has come to enlighten ourselves with new understanding. We must look back at timeworn religions and ponder them anew. Our newly acquired scientific knowledge forces us; we can no longer neglect those antique books. Much of the esoteric knowledge of God that we are trying to discover today has already been discovered and is available to us. Those ancient gems were locked in a dark chest, and the key was lost for a long time. Science is now providing the key to that lock. Answers to many of the questions that our over-stressed modern minds ask, are available in the moth-eaten pages of ancient books.

By religious books, we do not mean only those books, which are arrogated from their divine source. The books authored by the great sages who undertake a sincere effort to study spiritual problems and attempt to arrive at honest solutions can be our guide. All these books are holy books and should be revered accordingly.

On the other hand, even the holy books should not be taken without questioning, because they all contain major flaws that make them more the handiworks of man than God. Vedas, Bible, or Quran— all great books of reverence are written or transcribed by man, and therefore, demonstrate human limitations.

Frequently, we find the ancient books are written in antiquated languages that we no longer understand. We try to interpret them by their word meaning, but merely translating the words will never decipher the exact message that those original texts were intended to convey. It is imperative that we have the complete cultural background of the period and knowledge of the distinctive idioms of expression of the time, if we really want to comprehend the intended meaning of those writings.

Ultimately, our own level of enlightenment determines how much benefit we can reap from those old scripts. Even when the message is expressed in a language familiar to us, we may not be able to conceive the original meaning if we do not tune ourselves to the same frequency as that of those authors. Ancient masters of religion understood the shortcomings inherent in human languages. They understood that the failure of the language, which is often encountered while expressing eternal truth, is not completely unexpected, because here one attempts to describe the infinite in finite terms. To overcome the shortcoming of language, the old masters often adopted techniques of riddle-makers, poets and story tellers.

Whenever the discussion became profound and entered a region where languages failed to communicate, the ancient masters turned to ambiguity. A fine example is found in the question thrown to an assembly by the Ch'an master I Hsuan of Lin Chi:

Someone says that there is a man who does not leave his house when he is on a journey, and there is another who does leave his home when he is not on a journey. Which of them is entitled to receive offerings from men and *devas*?²

The apparent equivocation in the question can be overcome by meditating on the subject matter. Such contemplation of the subject brings out its inner meaning, and only then, through the technique adopted by the master can we comprehend the subject. The inner message this master pointed toward was: the former man never strays from his self-nature or god-nature irrespective of his environment and situation, whereas the latter man does just the opposite. Now the answer seems simple and straightforward. The man who realizes his self-nature is entitled to receive offerings from men and *devas* (gods).

The old Chinese masters employed another method that had an analogous effect on understanding. They paired apparently contradictory words to frame sentences that sound like riddles. Notwithstanding, each riddle-like expression carried deep philosophical connotation. Only when examined intensely could the underlying meaning become intelligible. Here again, the intention of the master was to force the seeker to ponder, concentrate, contemplate, meditate and thereby arrive at his own awareness. The following beautiful triplet is from *Tao Teh Ching*, an ancient book written by Lau Tzu, the old master of China:

Be bent, and you will remain straight.
Be vacant, and you will remain full.
Be worn, and you will remain new.³

Jesus adopted a comparable technique. He used parables to convey the profound truths of life. We find explanations for using parables in his own words. When his disciples asked him, “Why do you use parables when you talk to the people?” The Christ answered:

“The knowledge about the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you but not to them. For the person who has something will be given more, so that he will have more than enough; but the person who has nothing will have taken away from him even the little he has. The reason I use parables in talking to them is that they look, but do not see, and they listen, but do not hear or understand.”

Matthew: 13.10

In relatively simpler terms, Hindu religious scripture, *Kena Upanishad*, expressed many centuries ago the inability of human expression to describe the indescribable.

There the eye goes not
Speech goes not, nor the mind
We know not, We understand not
How one would teach it.

Kena Upanishad: I.4

Many years later, when the Quran was revealed, support of these statements was found in it. The Quran testified to the limitations of human comprehension in strikingly similar wordings.

No vision can grasp him,
But his grasp is over all vision:
He is above all comprehension,
Yet is acquainted with all things.

Anam: 6.103

Ancient religious teachers believed true knowledge is largely unconscious learning and can neither be transmitted verbally with the help of language, nor communicated intellectually by any

other means. If any communication is possible, it takes place in the subconscious. The prerequisite of that kind of communication is to bring the mind of the seeker into harmony with the universal mind. Philosopher D.T.Suzuki summed up this concept in his book, *On Indian Mahayana Buddhism*,

The contradiction so puzzling to the ordinary way of thinking comes from the fact that we have to use language to communicate our inner experience which in its very nature transcends linguistics.⁴

Today, atomic physicists are facing similar problems in their efforts to describe the latest discoveries. Nobel prize winner W. Heisenberg wrote in his book, *Physics and philosophy*:

But the problems of language here are really serious. We wish to speak in some way about the structure of the atoms and not only about the “facts” ... But we cannot speak about atoms in ordinary language.⁵

Religions teach that we can make ourselves ready to comprehend knowledge that is incommunicable, but fully conceivable. We can make ourselves channels to perceive eternal universal wisdom, and it is in our own interest to make that effort. Whatever our position in society, level of intelligence, or achievement in other fields, it is our birthright to have knowledge of eternal truth. All of us can reach that center of the circle by making only a little resolute effort. No religious hierarchy or any other authority can prevent us from attaining it.

And when we attain that glory, our lives become richer, fuller, freer, more meaningful and content. Then the ever-illusory happiness, endlessly sought by all, can no longer escape our grasp. Then, at last, celestial happiness permeates our aching hearts.

The gradual cognizance that life's enlightenment and realizations are continuous and never-ending finally led me to begin this work with the conviction that in life, at whatever stage one is, there are always others who are far more advanced. More importantly, however, there are many more who may benefit from this effort.

Our life is burdened with awesome stress. We are bound by joyless rigors of daily routine. Sometimes, we try to get away from this horrendous ordeal by devising some kind of escape. A substantial number of people turn to drugs to create a simulated environment and find solace in it. But all escapes are fleeting. At the end of the day, hard reality returns and stares at us. Deep inside, we are all looking for meaning and purpose in life, some kind of justification for doing whatever we are doing.

Much of what we are seeking can be found around us. We have to pick up the precious fragments as divers pick up pearls from the seabed. This is where the study of contemporary religions, with a new understanding, can help us immensely. In this journey of ours, we must treat all religious convictions with equal reverence. None is too puny to be overlooked, and none is too lofty to demand awe. All are of equal importance in this sojourn. We must remember:

The stone which the builders rejected as worthless
turned out to be the most important of all.

Psalms: 118.22