

A RELUCTANT MYSTIC

God-Consciousness not Guru Worship

by John Wren-Lewis

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Some, if we believe what they tell us, are born with spiritual consciousness. Others appear to achieve it, by prolonged practice of meditation and other disciplines or by attachment to a guru. I had spiritual consciousness thrust upon me in my sixtieth year without working for it, desiring it or even believing in it. As a result, I have been presented, amongst many other things, with a somewhat original perspective on understanding spiritual movements, which is the occasion for this article.

The crucial event was a shattering, out-of-the-blue mystical experience in 1983 which, to the astonishment of everyone who knew me, and most of all myself, left me with a permanently changed consciousness, describable only in the kind of spiritual terms I had hitherto vehemently discounted as neurotic fantasy- language. Not that I would have called myself an atheist or materialist: indeed I had published extensively on the need for a religious world-view appropriate to this scientific age. But I was emphatic that such a faith would have to be essentially humanist in orientation, focused on creative action in the physical/social realm.

I regarded mystical experience and the whole idea of "spiritual search" as escape into unreality, fully justifying Freud's diagnosis of religion as humanity's universal neurosis. Even when I collaborated in extensive psychological research on mind-altering drugs in the late 1960s, and shared many of the strange experiences that turned a whole generation on to the mystics, I remained quite convinced that such things were more than temporary aberrations of the brain. Psychologically interesting though they undoubtedly were, I found nothing that seemed to justify mystical expressions like "God-consciousness" or "eternity" or "the pearl of great price," or for embarking on any kind of spiritual quest.

A Poisoned Sweet

What happened in 1983 would nowadays be called a "near-death experience", or NDE, though it differed in several notable ways from most of those I'd read about in the rapidly-growing literature on this topic (which I had, incidentally, dismissed as yet another manifestation of the mind's capacity for fantasy). In the first place, I

had none of the dramatic visions which have hit the headlines in popular journalism and occupy a prominent place even in serious scholarly studies like Raymond Moody's *Life after Life* and Kenneth Ring's *Life at Death*. As I lay in the hospital bed in Thailand after eating a poisoned sweet given me by a would-be-thief, I had no "out-of-body" awareness of the doctors wondering if I was beyond savings, no review of my life, no passage down a dark tunnel to emerge into a heavenly light or landscape, and no encounter with angelic beings or deceased relatives telling me to go back because my work on earth wasn't yet finished.

I simply entered - or, rather, *was* - a timeless, spaceless void which in some indescribable way was total aliveness - an almost palpable blackness that was yet somehow radiant. Trying to find words for it afterwards, I recalled the mysterious line of Henry Vaughan's poem *The Night*:

"There is in God (some say) a deep but dazzling darkness".

Re-reading the NDE reports collected by Moody, Ring and others many months later, I found some accounts with echoes of my experience, but in nearly all the near-death literature even the most blissful darkness-experience seems to be regarded as a preliminary stage before transition (with or without the famous tunnel) into light. The condition I entered, on the other hand, seemed so complete in itself that light would have been quite superfluous.

An even more marked difference from the general run of near-death experiences, however, was that I had absolutely no sense of regret or loss into physical life. In fact my experience as the hospital's ministrations restored the body's vital signs was nothing like a *return*. It was more like an act of creation whereby the timeless, spaceless Dark budded out into manifestation, and what manifested was simply not the same "me-experiencing-the-world" that I'd known before: it was "Everything-that-is, experiencing itself through the bodymind called John lying in a hospital bed". And the experience was indescribably wonderful. I now know exactly why the Book of Genesis says that God looked upon *all* that He had made - not just beautiful sunsets, but dreary hospital rooms and traumatised sixty-year-old bodies - and saw that it was very good.

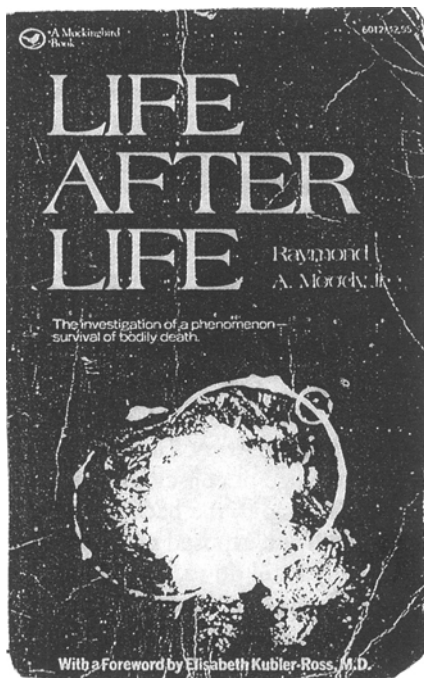
The infinite blackness of space

What I am trying to describe (and have attempted to describe in fuller detail elsewhere) is no vague feeling of "good to be alive". On the contrary, I no longer cared if John lived or ceased to be altogether, and the change of consciousness was so palpable that to begin with I repeatedly put my hand up to the back of my head, feeling exactly as if the doctors had removed the skull and exposed my brain somehow to the infinite blackness of space. Occasionally I still do so, for *the new consciousness has remained with me ever since* - which is the third and most significant difference from what happens in the general run of near-death experiences, and also from the "altered stages" experienced with psychedelics.

This is in no sense a high from which I can come down. The sense of awe-ful wonder has at the same time a feeling of utter obviousness and ordinariness, as if the

marvel of "everything-coming-into-being-continuously-from-the-Great-Dark" were no more and no less than "just the way things are." From this perspective, the term *altered* state of consciousness would be a complete misnomer, for the state is one of simple normality. It seems, rather, as if my earlier state, so-called "ordinary" human consciousness, represents the real alteration - a deviation from the plain norm, a kind of artificially blinkered or clouded condition wherein the bodymind has the absurd illusion that it is somehow a separate individual entity over against everything else.

In fact I now understand why mystics of all religions have likened the enlightenment-process to waking up from a dream - but even so I had no thought, to begin with, that the awakening could be other than a temporary glimpse of Reality, which would "all be gone by morning." So powerful was this expectation that next day I spent several hours packing up to leave the hospital and deciding where to go next in precisely the old way, as if I *were* an isolated individual coping with his environment (after a "very interesting experience" the night before). Only as I was walking in the hot sun to the police station to report the crime was I struck by the sense of loss that the Dark was missing, and my first thought then was: "Ah well, you've had the Vision - I suppose now you'll have to join the ranks of all those Seekers who



LIFE AFTER LIFE, *Raymond A Moody Jr.*, Mockingbird Books, Atlanta, 1975.

For five years, Dr Raymond Moody conducted a study involving more than one hundred subjects who have experienced "clinical death" and been revived. Their accounts of this experience were startlingly similar in detail. Dr Moody was convinced that this phenomenon had great significance for philosophy, medicine and the ministry as well as for the way in which we lead our daily lives.

spend their lives trying to attain Higher Consciousness." And then, to my amazement, I suddenly saw *it was all still there, just waiting, as it were, to be noticed* - the Dark behind my eyes and behind everything else, bringing again the perception that *of course* everything exists by emerging fresh-minted from the Dark now! and now! and now!, with a shout of joy yet also in absolute calm.

Drifting Off

And still I thought it must all fade away soon; only after the whole cycle of drifting off and snapping back again had been repeated several times a day for some weeks did my mind start getting round to the fact that I might not be going to revert to the old permanently-clouded condition. The NDE had evidently jerked me out of the so-called normal human state of chronic illusion-of-separateness, into a basic "wakefulness" interrupted by spells of "dozing off," simply forgetting the Dark until the sense of something missing from life brings about instant re-awakening with no effort at all. I apparently wasn't destined to become a seeker in any ordinary sense - I'd been handed the pearl of great price on a plate. But my awakening had brought no "instructions" of the kind reported by some mystics (and by some near-death experiencers), about what it was all going to mean for the future conduct of my life. I had an overwhelming wish to pass on the awakening to others somehow, but had received no "divine commission" to be a guru, and indeed hadn't a clue what to suggest, since I could scarcely recommend taking a potentially fatal dose of poison!



So I began feverishly researching the once-despised world of mystical literature and spiritual movements in quest of understanding and guidance, but while I now found much of interest, no system or movement had a sufficiently high record of awakenings amongst disciples to convince me that it possessed a definitive or even very reliable method. Indeed as my research progressed I became irritated and concerned by the way most systems protect themselves in advance against any expectation of substantial achievement requiring years or perhaps lifetimes of intense effort; the most articulate modern cartographer of the spiritual life, Ken Wilber, actually makes the comparison with becoming a master musician, scientist or athlete. Such a model is totally at odds with the key feature of God-consciousness as I know it in my own firsthand experience, namely its quintessential ordinariness and obviousness - a feature actually emphasised by many mystics from whom Wilber himself quotes. While I wouldn't go as far as J.Krishnamurti by totally denying that meditation and other disciplines could ever help towards realising God as "just the way things are", I know from my own case that such intensive training isn't necessary, and I see no evidence either from history or from modern movements that it's any kind of sure road to awakening.

Krishnamurti

In fact after four year's intensive research I've come to the conclusion that in ancient traditions and modern spiritual movements alike, theorising about God-consciousness and enlightenment has totally outrun firsthand experience, often to the point where the oystershell gets mistaken for the pearl (or the finger for the moon, in the famous Buddhist proverb). And I do agree with Krishnamurti that probably the most pernicious theory in this regard is that of the guru as a Master requiring obedience and submission.

Krishnamurti calls it pernicious because it enshrines what he believes to be a fundamental fallacy, namely that the act of submission is a way of transcending the illusion of separate selfhood, when in fact, he believes, it must inevitably confirm the illusion in an insidious way. On this point I wouldn't be quite so dogmatic; while I'm sure submission is indeed subtly ego-confirming in many cases ("I can surrender better than you can"), I'm prepared to believe that on occasion it really might move someone towards seeing through the illusion of separateness and hence awakening to "only God" as simply the way things are. My own reason for regarding the Master-concept as pernicious is that it imposes an almost irresistible temptation on guru and disciples alike to keep quiet about and/or rationalise away any experience that might detract from the guru's claim to infallible authority justifying surrender.

The classic illustration of this is the pathetic spectacle of spiritual movements insisting that reports of less-than-perfect behaviour on the Master's part are either wicked lies put about by enemies or, of the evidence cannot be denied, are explainable as the Master's deliberate attempts to shock followers out of uptightness with

outrageous behaviour, or test their capacity for total surrender. Before my NDE I used to seize eagerly upon such scandal-stories as evidence that gurus were either frauds or madmen or both. Now I know the explanation is more complicated; a few frauds and madmen there may be, but I'm quite sure now that some of the teachers who've been involved in scandals do have firsthand experience of God-consciousness. Things they say or write, often some of their little asides, carry the ring of a truth that couldn't have been culled from second-hand sources.

And for me as an outsider there is no conflict here. In the first place, I know from my own firsthand experience that God-consciousness doesn't abolish human appetites. When I'm in it I don't lose my taste for meat or wine or good company or humour or detective fiction - I actually enjoy them more than ever before. I don't cease to enjoy sexual feelings, nor do I see anything inherently dirty about money. What the consciousness does bring is the cheerful equanimity of knowing that satisfaction doesn't depend on any of these special preferences of John's bodymind being met; it is inherent simply in being, in the Great Dark which is (in G.K. Chesterton's marvellous phrase) "joy without a cause". This of course does have a profound ethical effect, since it means that "cravings" have no power to run my life - but since it's so easy to drift out of the consciousness from time to time, I can and do also lapse from such detachment. (In my particular case, the commonest and nastiest lapses are into impatience, bad temper and argumentation when I drift into the soap-opera called "they're trying to push me around".)

No permanent enlightenment

This was of course another issue on which I initially hoped for some help from mystical writings or a spiritual movement: was there anything I could do, like meditation or diet, to reduce the frequency of "drifting out"? I was extremely puzzled when my research turned up almost no reference to any possibility. Krishnamurti is the only spiritual teacher I know whose writings hint at experience similar to mine in this respect; everywhere else, it's taken for granted that one is either a disciple on the path, practising meditation or guru-darshan or whatever to reach God-consciousness, or else a Master who is supposed to be in it permanently. Now while I'm quite prepared to believe there may be Masters who enjoy the consciousness uninterruptedly, the total silence about the drifting-out which I experience daily seemed highly suspicious. I was therefore very interested to come upon Agshanda Bharati's important book *The Light at the Center*, in which he asserts quite categorically that "permanent enlightenment" is only a conventional fiction of the guru-system, possibly never actually realised, but maintained in order to foster the total surrender which is believed essential for the system to work.

The trouble is that once such a system is swallowed, the guru cannot admit to "lapses" without completely discrediting his claim to have any enlightenment to pass on. So from the highest possible motive - a sincere desire to share his God-consciousness - he is tempted to rationalise, probably even to himself. Sexual advances towards attractive disciples become tantric exercises or studies of the *chakras*, a beer-belly is due to the descent of *shakti-power*, outbursts of temper are to weaken disciples' egos, or test their devotion, collection of money is needed for spreading the Word, gifts are accepted because the disciples wish to show their devotion, and so on through the whole hackneyed catalogue. Even worse, there is a tendency for the wish to spread the Word to pass over into the most insidious of all power-trips, with the Master thinking of himself as God rather than vice-versa - the phenomenon Jung called inflation. I know about this from personal experience; some of my worst lapses into impatience come when I'm wanting to get on with writing about God-consciousness! But because I'm not claiming to be a Master, no-one gets sucked in and I'm soon forced to come off it. When the Master-disciple relationship has been established, on the other hand, disciples have to go along with the Master's rationalisations or abandon the hope they've placed in him.

Maharishi

And from the wider human point of view, I believe the closed, self-confirming guru-system has an even more important defect, even with Masters who manage to avoid the grosser temptations, namely that there is little or no opportunity for theories and techniques to be evaluated against their experiential results and exchanged for better ones. For example, Maharishi Maresh Yogi has given his authority to a scheme of seven ascending stages of consciousness through which disciples are supposed to pass. In my experience the first of his stages, readily attained during meditation, has nothing much to do with God-consciousness at all, and I recognise no others except the two "highest" - the sixth, which is characterised by worshipful gratitude to the divine, and the seventh, the totally obvious recognition of Unity, of "I am That." Moreover for me these are not two stages in a process at all, but simply opposite sides of the God-consciousness coin (notwithstanding the paradox that, by conventional logic, gratitude would seem to require someone to be grateful to, and who is there, if I am That?) I have no idea what this discrepancy between my experience and Maharishi's theory means, since I've yet to find any of his disciples who've "gotten that far", and he himself remains hidden behind the Master-role, unavailable for discussion. Is he reporting firsthand experience in some way different from mine (maybe more "advanced"), or has he adapted his God-experience (which I'm pretty sure he's had) to fit traditional yogic theory? The Master-system prevents such questions from being investigated.

Da Free John

I have a similar, though different, problem with the system of DaFree John, who claims to experience *sahaj samadhi*, the simple consciousness of "only God" in everyday life, and then speaks of having "gone beyond it" into the ultimate mystery of *bhava samadhi*, the eternal Preluminous Void prior to all manifestation. In my experience these again are not stages on an ascending path, but simply the two sides of That. The world-process of manifestation is the continuous outpouring of the Great Dark in self-giving love, and the Great Dark is not the ultimate Home to which we aspire to return, for none of us ever left it; when we are prodigal sons or daughters we don't really go into any far country, because there can't be any such place - we just forget the Home we never left and can't possibly leave. Now is there some deep difference of experience involved here from which I could learn, or is Da Free John merely interpreting his experience into the traditional "upward path" framework as a way of talking to his disciples? Although he sometimes writes like Krishnamurti about the folly of seeking enlightenment (he says seeking merely confirms the self-sense, which he calls Narcissus), in practice his whole movement seems locked into climbing the rungs of a ladder, while his statements about his own experience are at times refreshingly frank, at others they show the same old reticence of the Master-role.

I believe the world desperately needs a new totally experimental mysticism that will set all the traditional theories on one side and try to find out, more in the spirit of science than of religion, what factors really bring about awakening - which can only happen if those who've experienced awakening eschew the Master-role and discuss their firsthand knowledge openly, lapses and all. That, at any rate, is the cause to which I've decided to devote whatever years remain to me before my FDE (Final Death Experience). If any readers of this article care to help, by writing honestly about their experiences (for instance, if anyone really has made it through Maharishi's seven stages), I'd be delighted to hear from them. For myself, I have to report that over the past four years the Consciousness seems in some strange way to have taken over more of my life quite of its own accord, so that I now drift out much less - and there have been some remarkable side-effects, which I've described elsewhere. Meanwhile, I believe an essential part of this whole exercise is the ruthless exposure of the fact that Masters have lotus-feet of clay.

Original references can be obtained from the Editor.

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