



gnosis - goal or ground

John Wren-Lewis

Some, if we believe what they tell us, are born with God-consciousness. Some struggle to achieve it by strenuous spiritual practice, though by all accounts the success rate isn't (and never has been) encouraging. I had God-consciousness thrust upon me in 1983, my 60th year, without working for it, desiring it, or even believing in it, and this has understandably given me a somewhat unusual perspective on the whole matter. In particular, I wonder if discipline isn't altogether counter-productive in this context and the idea of spiritual growth totally mistaken.

Before I had my experience I was a Freud-style sceptic about all things mystical. I wouldn't have called myself an atheist or materialist; in fact I'd published extensively on the need for a religious world-view appropriate to a humanity that has 'come of age' in the scientific and technological area. But I emphasised that such a faith would have to be essentially positivistic, focussed on the human potential for creative change, which I believed could become as effective in the social realm as it had been in the physical realm. I even believed it possible that the creative human personality might eventually discover technologies for transcending mortality, but I saw mysticism as a neurotic escape into fantasy, due to failure of nerve in the creative struggle.

experience (NDE), though it lacked any of the dramatic visionary features that tend to dominate both journalistic and scholarly NDE accounts. As I lay in a hospital bed in Thailand, after eating a poisoned candy given me by a would-be thief on a long-distance bus, there were some hours when the medical staff thought I'd gone beyond recall. But I had no out-of-body vision of what was going on, no review of my life, no passage down a dark tunnel to a heavenly light or landscape, and no encounter with celestial beings or deceased relatives telling me to go back because my work on earth was not yet done. And although I'd lost all fear of death when eventually resuscitated, this had (and has) nothing to do with believing I have an immortal soul that will survive death.

What happened in 1983 could be classified technically as a near-death

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and now which makes the notion of separate survival a very secondary matter, in this world or any other. In fact it makes each present instant so utterly satisfying that even the success or failure of creative activity becomes relatively unimportant. In other words, I've been liberated from what William Blake called obsession with 'futurity', which until it happened I used to consider a psychological impossibility. And to my continual astonishment, for ten years now this liberation has made the conduct of practical life more rather than less efficient, precisely because time-consciousness isn't overshadowed by 'anxious thoughts for the morrow'.

I didn't even notice the change straightaway. My mind was too busy catching up on why I was in a hospital at night, with a policeman sitting at the foot of the bed, when the last thing I could remember was feeling drowsy on the bus in the early morning and settling down for a comfortable snooze on what was scheduled to be a seven-hour journey across the jungle-covered mountains. I'd suspected nothing, because the donor of the candy - a charming and well-dressed young man who'd been very helpful with our luggage - had left the bus some miles back. With hindsight, I guess he decided that retreat was the order of the day when he saw that my partner, dream psychologist, Dr. Ann Faraday, wasn't eating the candy he'd given her. Ann's heroic rescue, when I started turning blue and the bus driver insisted I was just drunk, is quite a story in its own right, but not the point here.

The fact that I'd undergone a radical consciousness-shift began to become apparent only after everyone had settled down for the night and I was left awake, feeling as if I'd had enough

sleep to last a lifetime. By stages I became aware that when I'd awakened a few hours earlier, it hadn't been from a state of ordinary unconsciousness at all. It was as if I'd emerged *freshly made*, complete with all the memories that constitute my personal identity, from a vast blackness that was somehow *radiant*, a kind of infinitely concentrated aliveness or 'pure consciousness' that had no separation within it, and therefore no space or time.

There was absolutely no sense of personal continuity. In fact the sense of a 'stop in time' was so absolute that I'm now convinced I really did die, if only for a few seconds or fractions of a second, and was literally 'resurrected' by the medical team, though there were no brain monitors to provide objective confirmation. And if my conviction is correct, it actually counts against rather than for the claim so often made by near-death researchers that personal consciousness was actually 'snuffed out' (the root meaning, according to some scholars, of the word 'nirvana') and then *recreated* by a kind of focusing-down from the infinite eternity of that radiant dark pure consciousness. An old nursery rhyme conveys it better than any high philosophy:

*Where did you come from, baby dear?
Out of Everywhere into here.*

Moreover that wonderful 'eternal life of everywhere' *was still there*, right behind my eyes - or more accurately, at the back of my head - continually recreating my whole personal body-mind consciousness afresh, instant by instant, now! and now! and now! that's no mere metaphor for a vague

sensation; it was so palpably real that I put my hand up to probe the back of my skull, half wondering if the doctors had sawn part of it away to open my head to infinity. Yet it wasn't in the least a feeling of being damaged; it was more like having had a cataract taken off my brain, letting me experience the world and myself properly for the first time - for that lovely dark radiance seemed to reveal the essence of everything as holy.

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I felt like exclaiming, 'Of course! That's absolutely right' and applauding every single thing with tears of gratitude - not just the now-sleeping Ann and the small jar of flowers the nurse had placed by the bedside, but also the ominous stains on the bedsheets, the ancient paint peeling off the walls, the far-from-hygienic smell of the toilet, the coughs and groans of other patients, and even the traumatized condition of my body. From the recesses of my memory emerged that statement at the beginning of the book of Genesis about god observing *everything* 'he' had made and finding it very good. In the past I'd treated these words as mere romantic poetry, referring only to conventionally grand things like sunsets and conveniently ignoring what ordinary human consciousness calls illness or ugliness.

Now all the judgements of goodness or badness which the human mind necessarily has to make in its activities along the line of time were contextualized in the perspective of that other dimension I can only call eternity, which loves *all* the productions of time regardless.

It was mind-blowing even then, when I was taking for granted that this had to be a jumbo-sized 'mystical experience' visited on me, of all people, as a kind of cosmic joke, from which I must quite soon 'return to normal.' I envisaged making public recantation of my antimystical views and joining the formerly-despised ranks of spiritual seekers. Because my sceptical bias had been recreated along with the rest of my memories, I toyed with the possibility that I might simply be suffering some after-effect of the poison, which the doctors had diagnosed as probably being a heavy dose of morphine laced with cocaine. I didn't really believe this, however, because there were no traces of the 'trippy' feeling that was always present when I took part in a long series of officially sponsored experiments with high dosage psychedelics back in the late 1960's.

Later, when the eternity-consciousness continued into the following days, weeks, months and years, any ordinary kind of drug explanation was obviously ruled out. Moreover my bewilderment was intensified as I discovered how all kinds of 'negative' human experience became marvels of creation when experienced by the Dazzling Dark. To convey even a fraction of what life is like with eternity-consciousness would take a whole book, and I'm currently in the last stages of writing one. It must suffice here to illustrate two features that have most impressed me and others who know me, notably Ann.

First, if there were a section in the *Guinness Book of Records* for cowardice about physical pain, I would be sure of a place there. But with eternity-consciousness, pain becomes merely a warning signal which, once heeded (irrespective of whether a physical remedy is available), becomes simply an interesting sensation, another of nature's wonders. The Buddha's distinction between pain and suffering, which I used to think was equivocation, is now a common experience for me. And, second, my erstwhile spectacular dream life has been replaced, on most nights, by a state which I can only call 'conscious sleep', where I'm fully asleep yet distantly aware of lying in bed. It is as if the Dark has withdrawn its game of 'John Wren-Lewis' to a nonactive level where the satisfaction of simply being is totally unrelated to doing.

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The main point I want to make here, however, is that perhaps the most extraordinary feature of eternity-consciousness is that it doesn't *feel* extraordinary at all. It feels quintessentially *natural* that personal consciousness should be aware of its own Ground, while my first 59-odd years of so-called 'normal' consciousness, in ignorance of that Ground, now seem like a kind of waking dream. It was as if I'd been entranced from birth into a collective nightmare of separate individuals struggling in an alien universe for survival, satisfaction and significance.

Even so, there have been plenty of problems in adjusting to awakened life, because the rest of the world is still taking the separation state for granted, and my own 'resurrected' mind still contains programmes based on the assumptions of that state. So in the early days I made every effort to assume the role of spiritual seeker in the hope of finding help. It came as a real disappointment to find that no one I consulted, either in person or through books, had a clue, because ancient traditions and modern movements alike take for granted that the kind of eternity-consciousness I'm living in is the preserve of spiritual Olympians, the mystical equivalent of Nobel Laureates. Fortunately the mystical state seems to have a growth pattern of its own which is gradually enabling me to deal with the adjustment problems - and a fascinating process it is. In the meantime, however, I'm very concerned that all the seekers I come across accept as a law of the spiritual universe that they have to be content with years - perhaps many reincarnational lifetimes - of hopeful travelling, rewarded at best with what T.S. Eliot called 'hints and guesses' of the eternity-conscious state, whereas I see that state as the natural human birthright.

My intensive investigation in this area over the past decade have left me in no doubt that proponents of the so-called Perennial Philosophy are correct in identifying a common 'deep structure' of experience underlying the widely different cultural expressions of mystics in all traditions. Nonetheless I find no evidence whatsoever for the often made claim that these traditions contain disciplines for *attaining* God-consciousness that have been empirically tested and verified. On the contrary, the assumption that God-

consciousness is a high and special state seems like the perfect defence mechanism for not asking whether spiritual paths are really leading there at all. Yet this is a very pertinent question, since many mystics whose utterances most clearly resonate as coming from life in the eternity-state have asserted that their awakening was 'an act of grace' (or words to that effect) rather than a reward for effort on their part.

Indeed the more I investigate, the more convinced I become that iconclastic mystics like Blake and Jiddu Krishnamurti were right in asserting that the very idea of a spiritual path is necessarily self-defeating, because it does the one thing that has to be undone if there is to be awakening to eternity: it concentrates attention firmly on 'futuraity'. Paths and disciplines

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make gnosis a goal, when in fact it is already the ground of all knowing, including 'sinful' timebound knowing. To me now, systems of spirituality seem like analogues of those dreams which prevent waking up (for example, to wet a thirsty throat or relieve the bladder) by creating a never ending nocturnal drama of moving towards the desired goal, encountering and overcoming obstacle after obstacle along the way, but never actually arriving.

In other words, I've begun to realise that my former scepticism wasn't all bad. I think now that I was like the ignorant peasant boy in Hans Christian Andersen's famous story who simply wouldn't go along with the courtiers' wishful thinking about the emperor's glory in his new clothes. My mistake was to put down the impulse that causes spiritual seekers to want a greater glory than ordinary life affords and makes them hope it's there in the great traditions, even when they have no experiential evidence of it. Or to switch to an even older fable, I decided that heavenly grapes must be delusory when I could see that none of the ladders people were climbing in pursuit of them ever reached the goal.

Now I not only understand the urge to find something altogether beyond the shallow satisfactions and the blood, sweat, toil and tears of this petty pace, but I know from firsthand experience that the 'joy beyond joy' is greater than the wildest imaginations of a consciousness bogged down in time. But I can also see that the very impulse to seek the joy of eternity is a Catch-22, because seeking itself implies a preoccupation with time, which is precisely what drives eternity out of awareness. Even disciplines designed to prise attention away from doing are simply another form of doing, which is why they at best yield only occasional glimpses of the eternal Ground of consciousness in Being.

So what to do? One thing I learned in my former profession of science was that the right kind of lateral thinking can often bring liberation from Catch-22 situations, *provided the Catch-22 is faced in its full starkness, without evasions in the form of metaphysical speculations beyond experience.* This



is the exploration to which my life is now dedicated. It is a research project in which anyone who's interested can join, because the very fact of being

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interested means that somewhere at the back of your head you are already as aware of the Ground of consciousness as I am. So rather than take up my little remaining space with any of my own tentative conclusions, I'll end with a couple of cautionary hints.

First, beware of philosophies that put spiritual consciousness into a framework of growth or evolution, which I believe are the great modern idols. Both are important *phenomena* of eternity's time theatre, but as paradigms they're old hat, hangovers from the age of empire building and the work ethic. We should know better today, when astronomers have shown that the kind of planetary destruction that was once imagined as a possible divine judgement could in fact be brought about at any time by the perfectly natural wanderings of a stray asteroid.

The 'I want it now' attitude, so often deplored by spiritual pundits as a twentieth-century sin, is in my view a

very healthy sign that we are beginning to be disillusioned with time entrapment. A truly mystical paradigm has to be *post-evolutionary*, a paradigm of *lila*, divine play for its own sake, where any purposes along the line of time, great or small, are subordinate to the divine satisfaction that is always present in each eternal instant. Mystical gnosis is knowing the instant by instant delight of Infinite Aliveness in *all* manifestation, irrespective of whether, from the purely human standpoint, the manifestation is creative or destructive, growing or withering, evolving towards some noetic Omega or fading out.

My second warning is to mind your language, for the words we use are often hooks that catch us in time entrapment. For example, when we use the term 'self' with a small 's' to

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describe individual personhood, and 'Self' with a capital 'S' for the fullness of God-consciousness, the notion of the one gradually expanding into the other becomes almost inescapable, again concentrating attention along the time line. Mystical liberation, by contrast, is the sudden discovery that even the meanest self is already a focus of the Infinite Aliveness that is beyond any kind of selfhood.

Again, when the word 'home' is used to describe eternity, there is an almost irresistible temptation to think of life as a journey of return, whereas mystical awakening for me has been like Dorothy's in *The Wizard of Oz*: the realisation that I never really left home and never could. Here too T.S. Eliot has the word for it: 'Home is where one starts from'.¹⁰ Finite life is a continual instant by instant voyaging out from the 'eternal Home' into the time process to discover new 'productions of time' for eternity to love as they arise and pass away.

Against this background, the main positive advice I would give to spiritual seekers is to experiment with any practice or idea that seems interesting - which is what the Buddha urged a long time ago, though not too many of

his followers have ever taken that part of his teaching seriously. Ancient traditions and modern movements alike may be very valuable as databases for new adventures, but to treat them as authorities to be obeyed is not only 'unscientific' - it seems actually to go against the grain of the divine *lila* itself, since novelty is apparently the name of the time game.

I suspect gnosis comes as 'grace' because there are as many different forms of it as there are people. Yet because we're all in this together, sharing experience is integral to its fullness. Whatever experiments you make, share your 'failures', your hints and guesses, and your awakening too if it happens, with warts and all honesty, because 'everything that lives is holy'.

Further Reading

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Publication pending.

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John Wren-Lewis originally trained as a mathematical physicist in England during World War II. In the 1950s and 60s he became well-known for his writings urging a humanistic faith to transcend the limits of science and dogma. He has held several professorial appointments in the U.S. and presently lives in Australia. He is writing a book entitled 'The 9:15 to Nirvana', which deals with the subject of this article and which he expects to publish in the year 2000.