

LONGING

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Can you remember something that you really longed for as a child? Contrast that with what you long for now.

Longing seems to find different outlets as we grow up and mature. It is a somewhat fickle feeling whose focus continues to change as we go into mid-life and old age - changing even until the moment of death, when, perhaps, the deepest longing of all may be felt, such as the longing to forgive, or to love, or for truth or perhaps for peace - presuming that we have overcome our fear of death and the unknown. For the moment I shall use the words longing / desire / wish interchangeably. Later I will discuss the term longing as that which begins as a bodily desire (particularly in early life) and later, as a child and adolescent, proliferates as wishes and desires, but which finally, when the mind gives way to the inner longing of the soul, resolves itself simply into a heart-felt longing for truth, meaning, love and peace.

Of course, you might have noticed that it is only when we have fulfilled our longing (each time) that we will truly know what it is we longed for - until that moment we can only

describe the feelings and intensity of that longing. However, it is at this point that we often stultify our longing to go further by becoming attached to that which we have fulfilled (the object has been achieved and is held onto - for fear that nothing better can take its place) or we can let go and experience a re-awakening of our longing for something greater, or of greater value to us.

As a child, bodily impulses and fascinating new objects awaken our desire both to have these bodily impulses expressed and to possess the new objects. But having fulfilled these impulses we hopefully let go of our longed-for objects and move on each time to something more valuable. Here one notices that, although bodily desires remain basic, our developing imagination awakens desires of the mind which are ever more tempting.

It is only when the illusory nature of those desirous images/objects are exposed to us that something deeper

begins to awaken within us - beyond mind, an inner, heartfelt longing for something more meaningful, permanent and uplifting.

In the Sufi tradition longing is regarded as a universal 'soul emotion'. This soul emotion encompasses the entire gamut of feelings, from primitive rage to sublime ecstasy. Its expressions are seen to be distinguished by the nature of the mind through which it moves. For instance, when longing passes through the mind of the materialist, it translates into the longing for wealth, for status, for property, to look sexy. When longing passes through the mind of an idealist such as Gandhi, it is translated into the longing for India's own sovereignty and for an end to physical conflict. In the mystic, longing becomes an all-consuming passion to be united with our Creator, to experience the oneness of being. Can there be a longing for something beyond which we perceive, beyond that which we can conceive? I would suggest that longing is the natural state of the soul. Before our physical birth, before we incarnated as souls, did we unconsciously experience a state of oneness, and following our birth into this world did we lose that feeling state? Perhaps from then onwards our lives became driven by a longing, searching unconsciously for something we don't even remember having lost.

And although longing may seem to be born in conjunction with certain outer conditions - as in the misery of unrequited love

or the longing to find some meaning in the midst of a painful life crisis - longing, I believe, is not subject to conditions; it often manifests without any material cause - as in the silence of meditation, being alone in nature, or when walking alone in the desert and just experiencing a strong sense of presence.

Yogananda (1983) always saw longing as that mysterious divine power of attraction in creation that harmonises, unites and binds the known and unknown. For instance, we often project onto the unknown that which is in our minds in order to fill a gap. Yet, perhaps behind our mind lies an inner presence that longs to be known - it is the same presence that we sense lying within the 'unknown' emptiness called the Void, or 'O' by Bion (Grotstein, 2007).

One of the most beautiful quotes from the Sayings (Hadith) of the prophet Mohammed begins as follows: 'I was a hidden treasure, longing to be known.'

The 'I' referred to in the above quote is not the personal I, but the Divine Oneness, or the Immanent God, which it is said 'first became conscious of Being'. Sufi cosmology states that whilst in this state it (God) felt alone, longing to discover its richness (treasure) and thus began the cycle of creation. Thus the universe was created out of longing.

Now, whether we view all this simply as a myth to fill a gap in our knowledge, or whether we believe it in a more literal sense

(as experienced by some Sufi mystics), is less important than recognising that we carry that same longing in each one of us - we are all a 'hidden treasure' waiting to be known (by ourselves). This, I believe, is the motivating factor behind all our drives (motives/desires). It leads many of us to seek to discover our authentic self, and it doesn't stop there, driving some of us to seek the ultimate, the hidden Divinity within (Corbin, 1999). In fact, from a Sufi perspective, the first major turning point is to discover our Divinity - to discover who we really are. However, greater still is the goal of final awakening, which is to discover that Divinity not only within, but all around us - to manifest it through our personality in life. Thus in the first instance our longing awakens us to the Divine within, but then there is the greater longing of the Divine to awaken in us, through us and as us. This completes the cyclic journey of

longing which first drew us into this world; caused us to seek our selves in the world; prompted us to look within (to find our Divine origins); and finally for us all to be known by ourselves in the world as the One Being.

To sum up, I think longing is a soul feeling that initially seeks its fulfilment in the life around us. Since this journey does end in fulfilment, we begin to seek out the origin of our longing by looking within our own hearts, and we realise it is a longing to experience perfection, a oneness of being. This is the God within all of us. It is the origin of Jung's transcendent function, and of Bion's big 'O' (Grotstein, 2007). The Sufi tradition gives this journey a final twist however. It suggests longing doesn't stop with finding God within! God seeks to know himself/herself through us, and as us, i.e. it is God that longs also to awaken as a human being.

References

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