

I LINGERED IN THE DEN OF CONFUSION

In the past, wrapped in clinging blindness,
I lingered in the den of confusion,
Deeming benevolent deities and malignant
Demons to be real and subsistent.
Now, through the Holy One's grace and blessing
I realize that both Samsara (this world of suffering)
and Nirvana (the attainment of enlightenment)
Are neither existent nor non-existent;
And I see all forms as Mahamudra
(the nature of the mind, clear light,
emptiness comprising all phenomena
of suffering and pure release).

Realizing the groundless nature of ignorance,
My former awareness, clouded and unstable
Like reflections of the moon in rippling water,
Becomes transparent, clear as shining crystal.
Its sun-like brilliance is free from obscuring clouds,
Its light transcends all forms of blindness,
Ignorance and confusion thus vanish without trace.
This is the truth I have experienced within.¹ - Milarepa,

THE REALITY OF ANNIHILATION

One time Bayazid said, "Allah the Most Just called me into His Presence and said to me, 'O Bayazid how did you arrive in My Presence?' I replied, 'Through zuhd, by renouncing the world.' He said, 'The value of the lower world is like the wing of a mosquito. What kind of renunciation have you come with?' I said, 'O Allah, forgive me.' Then I said, 'O Allah, I came to you through tawakkul, by dependence on You.' Then He said, 'Did I ever betray the trust which I promised you?' I said, 'O Allah forgive me.' Then I said, 'O Allah, I came to you through You.' At that time Allah said, 'Now We accept you.'"

He said, "I stood with the pious and I didn't find any progress with them. I stood with the warriors in the cause and I didn't find a single step of progress with them. I stood with those who pray excessively and those who fast excessively and I didn't make a footstep of progress. Then I said, 'O Allah, what is the way to You?' and Allah said, 'Leave yourself and come.'"ⁱⁱ

THE JOURNEY

Many of us struggle, bound in a strange collusion of body, mind and soul. We live a lifetime of reassembling the self from shattering after shattering. We blindly struggle to be healed or hidden, oscillating between despair, hope, often immersed in shame. We go out to the world or into our own broken hearts in an endless round of struggle for survival. We perceive the world and our lives through the lens of our own pain or our people's pain.

The eyes of the media that inform us of the larger world are often the eyes of bad news-war, violence, ecological crisis, inhumanity. The lens of the media is not commonly focused on unity, beauty, or what is common and joins us all, but on the dramas of conflict and separation, tribalism, and othering. Yet within us, sometimes hidden, sometimes known, is a vital force calling us to the good news, seeking to reclaim our vision of ourselves, our world, and of our relationship to the divine and to one another.

We are told by the ancients that life is a pilgrimage, a sacred journey, an encounter with the holy upon the road itself. The ancestral wisdom stories remind us that when we set out on a journey we will meet our wise guides revealing themselves through their many disguises. Frequently these guides warn us that we are trapped in trances, spells, and

states of being. They counsel us to become aware of the levels of reality. They come to tell us we are not truly who we think we are. They tell us we are children of union, not separation and isolation. This question of identity is a spiritual question. Its answer, however, cannot be 'spiritualized' or 'theologized'. It requires experience.

The Sufi, Abdal Ali Haidar, reminds us that genuine experience is deep, and requires the response of our whole being, not merely the mind or value systems. We need contact with the source of good. However he warns us that a donkey stabled in a library of wisdom may not become literate. Beware the intoxication of righteousness and doing the good. "Many people practice virtues or associate with wise and great people, believing that this is the pursuit of self-improvement. They are deluded. In the name of religion, some of the worst barbarities have been committed. Trying to do good, man has done some of his worst actions... Man must not only be in contact with good; he must be in contact with a form of it which is capable of transforming his function and making him good."ⁱⁱⁱ

Pilgrimage engages our inner journey on many levels. The great Buddhist saint, Milarepa, returning home after traveling, arrived to find his small cave full of demons. He did not flee. He did not pull out the spiritual sword. He simply lit the fire and invited all to tea. Now the pouring of that tea was a real pilgrimage! Milarepa was able to journey into his own condition of being and sit with it – be present to it. You may say, "What if these demons were not his?" Then he was able to sit with the condition of being of the world. How does one do that and survive?

Milarepa was able to bring compassion, acceptance and a certain kind of triumph into this situation because he was not alone. He was accompanied. The lord of compassion dwelt in his own heart. This was also Milarepa's condition of being, the reason he was able to embrace everything. How did he come to know the actual presence of the lord of compassion dwelling in his own heart? How did he come to know his real identity, his real condition of being?

Pilgrimage is a journey into strange and foreign territory. Whether the pilgrimage is your ordinary daily round, an inner voyage, or an outer movement it requires courage, a leaving behind of old familiar landscapes, habits and patterns of understanding. It requires an openness of spirit, a trusting heart. As Roshi Joan Halifax says of the outer pilgrimage,

Begin a pilgrimage with a mind free of entanglements and regrets.
Abandon projects.
Let go of plans, hopes, and dreams.

Go forth as if you have settled your affairs, made your will,
disposed of your possessions, paid your debts, resolved your
differences with friends and acquaintances, provided for the care
of those who are dependent upon you, made peace with your
enemies, and bade
farewell to your loved ones.
Go forth as if you will never return.^{iv}

This guidance has metaphoric meaning on many levels from the outer journey to the inner journey and for the ordinary pilgrimage as we consciously traverse daily life seeking the sacred in the moment.

The very definition of pilgrimage is a focused journey toward the sacred. From the moment we set out, our foot upon the path, we are in divine territory. Each step is its own destination, where we greet angels and demons unaware. We are walking through a world charged with divine revelation. The story of the children of Israel led forth from captivity in Egypt is such a story. Their long journey was charged with divine guidance, yet they forgot who they were on occasion. Illusion and delusion accompanied them as well.

Two disciples of Jesus are traveling on the road to Emmaus shortly after his death. As they walk they are talking about their experience of the crucifixion. They have a certain understanding. They know the hell they participated in. They know what happened. They know what they saw. They are in fact fleeing when they come upon a stranger, inviting him to walk with them. Their hearts are burning, their insight quickened as they listen to his words. But still they do not truly understand. Not until later, not until the meal, not until the breaking of the bread and being truly present could they know the stranger as Jesus.

Far away from the obvious and the apparent, on an all too common road in fear and in trembling, in the territory of the heart, they knew him. One foot after the other as we walk through the pilgrimage of our lives with each true *Namasté*, "I see God in you", we become aware of how God greets us through many guises. We lean, as the saint says, humbly with naked intent on the cloud of unknowing that lies between us and the great mystery of life and love we call God. With the assistance of our spiritual practices, with the accompaniment of our spiritual community and lineage we arrive one day at the point of naked intent where everything is dropped and there is only God. Even within ourselves.

On one cold night a Jesuit priest who lived among the homeless heated a kernel of corn over a fire until it popped. He then gathered those near for a special meal. He blessed and broke that corn and passed it among the people. All broke off a piece. All partook. There was enough for everyone. And joy. He was a real troubadour of naked intent. This is a true story, told by the people who were there. It is not a belief. For those people it was an experience when the levels of reality shifted the limitations and constrictions of their known world. They bear witness to it even as the experience bears witness to a universe charged with communion.

The human heart hungers for the transformative moment, the intersection of soul and Spirit where we become real and alive. We come upon a land that is beautiful as if the Spirit chose to reveal itself here in this place; we come upon a person and the veil lifts, we glimpse for a moment the Spirit; we sit in inner darkness and a light begins to shine.

We who know nothing, do know that wisdom requires discernment, and that discernment requires the felt awareness of the territory of soul and the infilling presence of Spirit. We have spent many years lost in the land of the collective tribal soul unaware of where we were; carrying the collective losses, prejudices, and ego constructs of our person, people and time.

For true discernment we must seek wisdom, humble glorious wisdom. Thomas Merton, the Christian monk says, "In returning to God and to ourselves, we have to begin with what we actually are. We have to start from our alienated condition. We are prodigals in a distant country, 'the region of unlikeness,' and we travel far in that region before we seem to reach our own land (and yet secretly we are in our own land all the time!)."v

James Finley states, "The core of our being is drawn like a stone to the quiet depths of each moment where God waits for us with eternal longing. But to those depths the false self will not let us travel. Like stones skipped across the surface of the water we are kept skimming along the peripheral, one-dimensional fringes of life. To sink is to vanish. To sink into the unknown depths of God's call to union with himself is to lose all that the false self knows and cherishes."vi

We have many options as we greet the unknown in our lives. In the rush to get to our destination we may overlook, brush pass, push aside the revelation in front of us. In the journey into our own heart, or in the outward pilgrimage to nature, or the world of our neighbor, we may have preconceived notions, expectations, images of what is sacred. We know what we are looking to see, to hear, to feel, to taste. We know what we are seeking to experience. Without awareness, we may miss the main course – the actual presence. Without naked intent we may lose the focus of that awareness. Naked intent

presses against our own ignorance, our own clinging to known states of understanding, and against our petty self-identity.

Saul of Tarsus embarked on a journey in the name of God to put to death the early Christians. He knew he knew who God was. He knew he knew who he was. His reality was firm. On the road to Damascus lightning struck, his eyes were blinded. A voice pieced his ears, "Saul. Saul, why do you persecute me?" In the months that followed that moment, Saul's preconceived identity was shattered. When his eyes opened, the apostle Paul emerged to bring the good news of Jesus to a weary world. The amazing thing is that Saul listened to the voice that shattered his defenses. He did not have a belief system now. He had experience.

The soul is so glorious. It longs for beauty and union. Without discernment the lamp of the soul is dimmed and union may be with the false constructs of addiction to substances, to our own ideas, to rigid laws and codes, to all types of highs found in a consumer world of power and control. There are so many illusions and delusions. Suffering and ignorance blind us. Experience demands that we respond. If we respond on the level of the problem we repeat the suffering on ourselves or project it on others. We make war punishing ourselves, the people around us, or other nations, tribes, sexes, religions, politics. The dance is endless. There is misery enough for all.

The stories within our own lives guide us. They pose the question, "Who am I? Who am I really?" These questions are not simply personal, but also express themselves collectively; like individuals, nation states and institutions have a calling to express something true and real, something life sustaining and creative. Institutions and nation states like individuals also fail in that expression of their integrity and wholeness. We see this failure in the history of South African apartheid; just as we see how South Africa leads us boldly and compassionately, confronting personal and collective demons through their example of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission - bearing witness to the power and capacity of forgiveness. The soul is so glorious it cannot be truly satisfied without union with the Spirit and with one another.

Again Thomas Merton encourages us, "The message of hope the contemplative offers you, then, is not that you need to find your way through the jungle of language and problems that today surround God: but that whether you understand or not, God loves you, is present in you, lives in you, [abides with] you, calls you, saves you, and offers you an understanding and light which are like nothing ever found in books or heard in sermons. The contemplative has nothing to tell you except to reassure you and say that, if you dare to penetrate your own silence and risk the sharing of that solitude with the lonely other who seeks God through you, then you will truly recover the light and the

capacity to understand what is beyond words and beyond explanations because it is too close to be explained: it is the intimate union, in the depths of your own heart, of God's spirit and your own secret inmost self, so that you and [God] are in all truth One Spirit."^{vii}

Once there was a rich young man who loved to party, who sought power and position. To attain it, he left his home and went to war. There he learned things about himself and others he would rather have not known. When he came home he lost the sense of himself. He just could not put it together anymore. His eyes were opened to the suffering and poverty within and around him. Afraid and repulsed he could not stop seeing the poor. He left a party early with a little bit of fine Italian wine in his gut. He came upon a leper, and yelled at the man, 'Get out of my way'. The leper stared back and blocked the road. The young man's fear fueled his anger. But a strange thing happened. His anger became not the will to strike, but an urge to embrace the leper with the fearsome sores, and he did. That is how Francis of Assisi reports the moment of his conversion. His mentor, that anonymous leper stood boldly allowing himself to be seen. How did he, the anonymous leper, see himself? Did he do more than identify with his disease? Or did he experience his true identity as a child of the Unseen Source?

The great holy fool, the lover of all creation, the beloved of Lady Wisdom was born in that embrace. Francis lived in the wilds among the lepers in extreme poverty. He displayed such joy and love that his influence has continued over these last eight hundred years. A grand master of the *heyoka* or backwards way, a troubadour of the Spirit, a madman ambassador of inner and outer peace; *Alter Christi* they called him. In his fidelity to his own life and the urges of the Spirit within, he lit a fire that still burns in the heart of the world.

Think often of Francis and that anonymous leper, both men ruthlessly dancing in luminous waters; and of Milarepa and his tea party. These men came to a crossroad and dropped their fear. They discerned the way. They turned and faced the beauty and terror of that fierce embrace and with that they discovered the way.

COMING INTO THE SILENCE

Begin with the simple prayer and humming or breathing, or with a repetitive phrase or chant from your tradition. As you enter and rest in the silence remember this sage counsel. Dogen's disciple, Koun Ejo, said, "Just sit as if you were the boundless, empty

sky or a ball of fire. Trusting everything to inhalation and exhalation. Even if eighty-four-thousand deluded thoughts arise, each and every one may become the Light of Wisdom if you do not pay attention to them and simply let them go."^{viii}

SOUND

There is no silence and no sound, only being.

CONTEMPLATION

Seek

Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the men of old, Seek what they sought. - attributed to Basho

Discover

We don't receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us. - attributed to Proust

Chose

The longest journey
Is the journey inwards
Of him who has chosen his destiny.^{ix} - Dag Hammarskjold

Imagine

When I began this pilgrimage I was often asked, "Why are you walking? What is your goal?" I said, "Well, walking just to walk." People would just go mad. You don't get a lot of press coverage walking just to walk, but that is really the essence of the practice as I understand it. Walking just to walk. Because if I have an agenda, if I have a goal, then the unknown cannot be my teacher, I cannot be in the present moment. I am so consumed with reaching my goal that I cannot see all the riches and wealth that life has to offer me in the present moment. I am not there. If I am walking for peace, what is peace? If I think I know what peace is, that is probably not peace. Peace is not an intellectual proposition. It is a way of life. It is a way of being. It is how I present myself

in the world. And in fact peace cannot be attained unless we embrace the First Noble Truth that is the acceptance that suffering exists. The Buddha taught that if we do not embrace and understand the First Noble Truth, then none of the other teachings mean anything. We cannot understand any of them. Because understanding does not exist in an intellectual framework. Understanding exists in a place beyond the intellect, this place of true knowing. It is like sitting meditation is not the end. It is a tool. In fact if we are living in mindfulness, then everything that we do is an act of meditation. We can become enlightened turning on the faucet in the kitchen sink if we are really just living in the moment. War can stop (snaps fingers) like that. War can end. Because where is war? War is not something that exists external to ourselves. The roots of war are here in the fabric of our own existence and from the fabric of our own existence they become manifested externally. If I am healing, if I am committed to the process of waking up to the nature of my suffering, healing the wars that exist within me, then wars end. Imagine if we were all just to wake up.^x - Claude Anshin Thomas

STORY

- Describe a time you experienced an encounter with the divine through someone else. Someone you knew or did not know? A long-term mentor? A casual one-time turning point event?
- Where are you on the road right now? Describe it. Who are the angels? What are the demons?

BLESSING

He gave me three things that grow
in the heart, which I now pass to you,
courage to exceed your small self,
the will toward love that I breathe,
the audacity to be free. - the voice of Francis in *Holy Madness*

ⁱ Farid al-Din Attar. Nashbandi translation. Tadhkiratul Awliya.

ⁱⁱ Milarepa, translated by Garma C. C. Chang. *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa: The Life-Story and Teachings of the Greatest Poet-Saint Ever to Appear in the History of Buddhism*, Shambhala. Boston 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ Shah, Idries. *The Way of the Sufi*. Octagon Press Ltd. London. 2004

^{iv} Halifax, Joan, Facebook post. September 2014

^v Merton, Thomas, *New Seeds of Contemplation*. New Directions Publishing Corporation; Revised edition. New York 1972.

^{vi} Finley, James. *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*. Ave Maria Press; Revised edition. Notre Dame, IN 2003.

^{vii} Merton, Thomas. *The Hidden Ground of Love*. Harcourt. New York 1993.

^{viii} Eihei Dogen; Recorded By Koun Ejo; Translated By Shohaku Okumura, Assisted By Tom Wright Zenji. *Shobogenzo-zuimonki*. Soto-shu Shumuchō 1995.

^{ix} Hammarskjöld, Dag. *Markings*. Vintage; Tra edition. New York 2006.

^x Thomas, Claude Anshin, *Talk at the Green Gulch Zen Center* in 1998. Reprinted with permission of the author.