

## 1. LET'S GROW UP

Man is a shocking case of arrested development.

When not cut short, our life is a four-stage affair.

*First*, the new-born baby who has no boundaries.

*Second*, the child who some of the time agrees with grown-ups that the object in the mirror is himself, while the rest of the time he's still boundless.

*Third*, the adult who has lost his space and become his face. Almost all of us are stuck at this stage. We substitute the dying thing we look like over there for the deathless no-thing we are here, thereby condemning ourselves to death and fear, hate, greed, and delusion.

*Fourth*, to grow up we must turn our attention round 180° and *look at* What we're *looking out of*. Then we rediscover the clarity and immensity we enjoyed as infants, and find that we are, in all vital respects, the *opposite* of what we look like. In particular, we find that the face-to-face confrontation of Stage Three is a lie and that we all are disappearing in one-another's favour.

Our job is to live this way, and so help Man grow up.

I'm not suggesting that the third and desperately difficult stage of our life can be dispensed with, but it needs cutting down. The longer it drags on the harder it gets to stop. Seventeen is a good age for discovering you are still space for the world to happen in.

Few reach this Fourth Stage, and the ability of those who do so to change the world seems negligible. The individual seems powerless, but before giving up hope, let's face what our Fourth Stage amounts to. It's the realization that by grace you and I are One with our Source, identical at Centre with the Power that's giving rise to Itself, plus all things from quarks to galaxies, and that we aren't through to the One as human beings, but as the One, as the only Real Power.

There's an early Buddhist story that the Buddha's enlightenment ensured the enlightenment of all sentient beings. I'm saying that when you see into your boundless, immaculate, imperishable, all-inclusive, wide-awake Nature and Source and Centre, you do so as One with and empowered by the only Real and Ultimate Power that, having already achieved the "impossible" miracle of Self-origination, isn't easily baffled. Tell me, what's impossible for the One that creates Itself? And what's impossible for those who enjoy union with that One?

Man has survived ice-ages, ages of stagnation, every sort of nastiness and nonsense. It's up to us, who see that we are by grace One with the One, to see our brothers and sisters through to the love and the glory that shines here at the heart of All.

You can't grow up apart from them, for the simple reason that to get Home to the One as the One you must take with you, piggyback, all that comprise the One.

## 2. WHAT'S GONE WRONG?

Few people would agree with Robert Browning's rapturous cry that all's right with the world. Most of us, most of the time, feel that something's terribly amiss. The aim of this chapter is to find out what it is that has gone wrong, and what – if anything – you and I can do about it. An ambitious project! Yes indeed! But let's see how far we can get.

We need hardly bother to list the things about ourselves and the world that we don't like, that aren't as they should be. They are too many and too obvious. So let's move straight on to consider the various ways we can and do respond to the troubles that threaten to engulf us.

As I see it, we have four alternatives, the first of which is –

### **Resentment**

And a very natural reaction it is! We had no choice, no say at all, in the sex and temperament and appearance and social status and circumstances imposed upon us. We weren't consulted about when and where we were flung into the world and what kind of world it was and is. Our preferences and needs were – it seems – unfeelingly ignored. We were pitchforked into this blood-soaked arena which, apparently, is all set up to hurt and mangle and soon destroy us. What sort of Creator or Demiurge is it (we want to know) who gives us one nature, and along with it all sorts of frustrations and contradictions of that nature? Who gives us, so to speak, a nature and an anti-nature, who actually fixes it up that whereas we need love and security and success and joy and peace, most of the time we get their opposites? What have innocent babies done to deserve all the pain and disillusion, ending in sickness and senility and death itself, that is steadily coming to them? Surely the only appropriate reaction is anger.

But the trouble with anger is that it's unproductive. It's a dead end, and gets us nowhere at all. It only piles on the agony.

### **Resignation**

Is the second alternative and it is rather less negative. Thus we say to ourselves, wryly but sensibly, "Life is difficult." Or, with the Buddha, "Life is painful, life is suffering." So, let's stop pretending that it could be otherwise than tragic, terribly unfair, made up of anxiety upon anxiety, agony piled on agony. Let's nobly face the noble but dreadful truth that our world (including ourselves, of course) is a Divine Tragedy and by no means a Divine Comedy, even for the lucky ones. Lucky for how long? Or a very Black Comedy, if you prefer to put it like that.

There is a positive side to this hard-boiled realism. It makes a difference when at last we give up all our false optimism and wishful thinking, our pathetic pretence that tomorrow or next week or next year things will be back to normal, and happy days (well, happier days) will be here again. Suffering is the rule, relief from suffering the exception. Grant that tomorrow's trials may well be at least as severe as today's, and a certain peace does descend upon us now we are honest enough to acknowledge the grim facts, steadily and without bitterness. Life can become somewhat more bearable, less of a let-down – provided we are sufficiently stoical.

### **Submission**

Is our third alternative. Saying to God, and meaning what we say: "Not my will but thine be done."

Of course this alignment of our will with His will is pleasant and easy when all goes fairly well with us, very hard when things go badly, next to impossible (unless we are already saints) when disaster threatens and our very lives are at stake. Even Jesus was agonisingly torn between

his own will and his Father's in the end. And if even he found this ultimate surrender immensely difficult when it came to the crunch, what hope for us ordinary mortals? What hope for me, I should say. You may be a great saint, for all I know.

Yet most if not all of the world's great spiritual leaders tell us that here lies the answer to our troubles. If only we could be selfless, totally surrendered! There's the rub. Real saints are extremely rare. How many of us are able and willing to transcend and do violence to our deep-seated instinct for survival? To immolate ourselves, to play the part of the priest that sacrifices and of the sacrifice itself. And to do so not merely because in the end it's the best policy, but because it's the only right thing to do?

The answer, of course, is very, very few of us. And even that heroic few, who by virtue of Grace or extraordinary feats of discipline and self-abnegation, manage genuinely to will God's will as it impinges on their own lives – even they do not necessarily find that the Universe is, after all, a consistently happy and beautiful place. With some exceptions, they don't see it that way at all. No. The saints are apt to embrace the world in spite of what it is rather than because of what it is. Some of them haven't a good word to say for it.

And so, on the face of it, there's no feasible solution, for us unsaintly ones, to the problem of what's gone wrong with the world we are part of. We have seen that *raging* against things only makes matters worse, that *resignation*, though extremely difficult, may help us somewhat but does little to improve the situation, and that full *acceptance* or *surrender* is virtually impossible for us as we are now.

However, there is a fourth alternative, so let's take heart and go into it carefully and critically and with open minds. After all what have we – desperate characters that we are, in a desperate situation – to lose?

Here is a very different approach from the three we have outlined. I trust you will find that it does hold out hope – even certainty – for us rather ordinary people, provided we are willing to drop some of our precious opinions and dare to take a fresh look at ourselves and the world we find ourselves in.

The proposition we are going to examine is this: *In itself, the world is alright. It isn't the world that has gone wrong, or is unsatisfactory, but what you and I are all the time doing to it.*

Or let me put it like this. Apart from us the Universe would be alive and in great shape; it is we who are the trouble. We are inflicting a grievous wound upon it.



We have split it into two unequal fragments called ME and NOT-ME, or OURSELF and THE REST. The result is that we don't live in a Universe, but a Duoverse, which is a very uncomfortable place to find oneself stuck in. And it's hardly surprising that each of the two severed parts of the Whole should be sick for the lack of the other. Tragically and incurably sick, so long as that gaping wound isn't closed and healed.

Now look at the *shape* of the wound. It penetrates to the very Heart of the One. Why am I sure

of this? Because at Root all of us who say “I AM this or that or the other” do so by virtue of our basic identity with the One. Yes, strictly speaking, we are a gang of suicidal deicides!

The *Katha Upanishad* diagnoses the disease: “He who divides the One wanders from death to death.” And prescribes the remedy: “Tell the mind there is but One.” And the Third Patriarch of Zen speaks of the health which that remedy brings: “When the Ten Thousand things are viewed in their Oneness, we are returned to the Origin and remain where we have always been... One in All, All in One – if only this is realised, no more worry about not being perfect.”

But again, merely understanding and concurring with the Oneness doesn’t get us far along the difficult road to perfection. Sure enough, when times are fairly good and the sun’s shining and the birds are singing, it’s not too difficult to feel the Oneness of all things, with ourselves caught up in the Grand Design. Or maybe when meditating in the tranquillity of a holy place.

Thus we may occasionally sense that, however miserable the parts of the world may be as parts, the Whole is at this very moment all that our hearts could possibly wish for. Just as the most horrible slum, viewed from a weather satellite, becomes a thing of beauty, and our sad, war-torn planet, viewed from the Moon, becomes a shining monument to peace – so when we are in exalted mood, our ambiguous Universe may briefly be viewed in its wholeness as wholly good. When we are in the mood! How are we to live in that exalted and rarefied atmosphere for more than a few moments at a time? Someone has described life here on Earth as one of quiet desperation. I guess he was right except that I would call it noisy desperation. “Some day,” says Master K’ung Ku Chin-lung, “you will recognise that the Serene Land of Pure Light is none other than the Earth itself.” Meanwhile you may – if you are fortunate – enjoy that realisation in flashes. The rest of the time this Earth is with reason described by Mrs Gamp as “a wale of tears.”

So what is our practical answer? I have already suggested that it is a very simple one – simple, if not exactly easy. *So long as I am anything whatever I have divided and so spoiled the One.*

The only remedy is to restore the property I stole, to re-graft the organ I had amputated, to claim Nothing – and so bring Everything to life, health, and wholeness. “Claim Nothing, enjoy. Do not covet His property,” says the *Isa Upanishad*. In ancient China, around the same time, the Taoist sage Chuang-tzu had this to say: “Your body is not your own. It is the delegated image of God. Your life is not your own. It is the delegated harmony of God. Your individuality is not your own. It is the delegated adaptability of God.” And, two millennia later, the French Jesuit Jean Pierre de Caussade (1675–1751) wrote: “The body and its senses, the soul and its energies, the modicum of good you have performed, are God’s portion. It so manifestly belongs to Him that you realize that you cannot claim one whit of it as yours, nor feel one grain of complacency, *without being guilty of theft and larceny from God.*” Another Jesuit, John Nicholas Grou, (1731–1803), having pointed out how God is All and the creature is Nothing, goes on to say, “I am nothing of myself and owe to God all that I am... If I appropriate these gifts to myself I steal from Him what is His own, I commit an injustice.” Karl Marx, too, attacking injustice, decided that all property is theft, but didn’t go far enough. He excluded such personal property as clothes and cooking utensils, and of course one’s body and mind. He had the right idea, but stopped short of the heart of the matter. No wonder Marxism doesn’t set our world to rights. It’s far from radical enough.

So I admit I’m a thief, a despoiler of the world. Thieves, however, are loath to part with their loot, specially when they have held onto it for so long that they have come to regard it as their very own, and a lot of people have agreed with them. Who of us is prepared to return his body-mind to the Universe, and be reduced to *absolute poverty*?

The only convincing reason that I can find for this restoration of stolen goods to their rightful

Owner – the only consideration that would induce me to hand them over willingly and without delay – would be the clear perception that I have no choice, seeing that they were never mine anyway, and my thieving was quite imaginary. In other words, if I were actually to see, and not just believe that right here there is No-thing whatever, and that where there is No-thing there is No-problem. Then this clear seeing into my non-existent self would certainly loosen my grip on that pseudo-self.

Well, in sharpest contrast to the achievement of sainthood, this clear seeing is available on demand, as easy as winking, a piece of cake, the gracious and wholly undeserved and indestructible gift of a merciful God and loving Saviour. In fact, the awesome truth is that this Central No-thing is not only the ineffable Source of all those peripheral things but far more brilliantly on display than any of them. Only This can be perfectly seen because only This is perfectly simple!

Still I ask myself: Is it *true* that I'm not the body and mind I thought I was? And everyone told me I was. Is it a hard fact that I am in reality No-thing whatever, and that I neither have nor am so much as a dust-grain? Or is this just holy talk, pious uplift, a good thing to believe because it makes me more comfortable? I must find out because only complete honesty with myself will work here. A trace of wishful thinking, and this promising recipe for trouble does me and my world no good at all.

Well, I can't speak for you of course, but I do indeed find that this Nothingness – this absence of body-mind right here – is the most obvious of all obvious truths. Whether I like it or not, I see, far more clearly than I see anything out there in the world, that right here is Emptiness, Space, Openness, Vacant Accommodation for the whole astonishing Set-up. Whenever I look back here at what's looking, look once more at this mysterious Spot I'm said to occupy, I find it unoccupied by me - I see that I am No-thing, and occupied instead by all sorts of things. Right here I'm just Capacity, Room at this moment for these two arms and hands, this busy pen, this half-filled sheet of paper, this littered desk-top, and beyond them the window and the view, grass and bare trees and racing clouds and cold sky. Plus all sorts of thoughts and feelings about these and other things. I am nowhere to be found, and everywhere. I have no body and the whole world is my Body, I'm at once Nothing and All things, and never, never am something. There's no compromise, no half-way house between these extremes. That great poet and saint St. John of the Cross tells me that to be all things I must be nothing, but I don't have to take his word for it. I can always check this astounding fact, whatever my mood or activity of the moment, just by taking a look at what I'm looking out of right here.

Don't tell me you can't see at your own very Centre exactly What I'm telling you about. You are now looking at these lines of black printing on white paper. What, at this moment and on present evidence, is taking them in right where you are? No-one is in a position to say but you. You are the sole and final authority on what you are now looking out of, on what's going on at the very Centre of your world. Has it any colour? Has it any size or shape or texture? If so, what? Is it one of those things? If so, it must be getting in the way of this printing.

I ask you: isn't it precisely the *ABSENCE* of all things, a boundless and perfectly blank screen, so to say, which is in receipt of these printed words, and of whatever else happens to be on offer? A No-thing that's *awake* to its no-thingness? Now that, you may be tempted to say, is Quite Something!

Nevertheless you ask me: "How on Earth can I see an absence, something that isn't there to see?"

I reply: you can and you do so, with the greatest of ease, all the time. As I have already

pointed out, whereas *things* are more or less inscrutable because they are so complicated, their *absence* is vividly on show because it's so simple. For example, my absence from the room you are now sitting in is at once crystal-clear to you, but if I were present you would only be able to *glimpse* me. Why? Why because to take all of me in – every tint and line and hair and blemish and so forth, from hair-do to chin, and from chin to shoe-soles, would be impossible. What you actually *see* of me is a tiny fraction of what's there for the seeing – not to mention the view from above and the sides and the back and the innumerable details of my interior anatomy. Truly I'm the Invisible Man! You don't *smell* my absence (I hope). You see it, just as you see the absence of a misprint (I hope) from this page.

“All the same,” I hear you saying, “I *feel* I am this body that sits in this chair and talks to people and walks around the room.”

Then your feelings (I reply) are playing you up. What is this little body of yours without all its ingredients of every grade down to and beyond quark? You aren't human without the other humans, or alive without the other species, or existent without your planet and star. Indeed the whole strictly indivisible Cosmos is your true Body, and nothing less will do. In other words, you are the Nothing that's all the while exploding into the All, the One. And in yet other words you are, by the free Grace of that One, indissolubly united to that One. You appear to be human but are really No-thing and Every-thing. And your trouble is that you don't see that when you say, “After all, I'm only human,” you are talking the most arrant and damaging nonsense.

Speaking for myself again, this clear perception of my Nothingness, carrying with it utter conviction, is my best hope and indeed only hope of setting things to rights. Let me go on seeing what I am at Centre, how everything I had supposed I was, everything I had stolen, is already restored to its Owner, and see what happens as a result. Insofar as I do just this I do indeed find that all's healed and made whole.

And I see that, while I'm wholly unable to make myself into any kind of *saint* (and try to settle the world's problems that immensely difficult way), I'm also wholly unable to make myself into any sort of *person*, let alone a good one. And that will have to do. This in-seeing is easy, natural, refreshing, secular, not special at all. Not so easy to keep up all the while without a good deal of practice, no doubt, but renewable always and at will, whenever I choose to turn my attention round to the Absence of any attender right here.

So this, our fourth alternative, is certainly the one for me. What about you? If you tell me this No-thingness looks so boring, so dull and seemingly quite useless, I'll agree. But you and I have a precious secret reason for refusing to rubbish it like this. Let me explain. You are made of cells, which are creatures capable of exerting a lot of force, such as splitting rocks and lifting paving stones. And the cells are made of molecules which (as gun-powder, for instance) can exert much greater force. And the molecules in turn are made of atoms which (as in the atom bomb) are very much more powerful and of course much dirtier. And the atoms are made of particles which (as in the nuclear bomb) are still more powerful and dirty. And the particles are made of the No-thing that you and I find at our very Centre – the No-thing that gives rise to All things. And is hiddenly all-powerful and absolutely clean. In the last resort, nothing but This is trustworthy. It's also perfectly verifiable, actual-factual, not for taking on trust just because you read about It somewhere, or because somebody calling himself *reverend* told you so. You certainly shouldn't believe me when I say that you, too, are likely to find the world radically transformed once you clearly see for yourself that you can never steal so much as a needle from it. Just give your boundless Central Clarity a fighting chance to reveal itself and see what happens.

I say a needle because it brings me to this chapter's conclusion, which is a Muslim tradition

about Jesus. The Sufi poet Attar tells the story. “When you are reduced to ashes, including your baggage, you will have not the least feeling of existence. But if there remains to you, as to Jesus, only a simple needle, a hundred thieves will lie in wait for you along the road. Although Jesus had thrown down his baggage, the needle was still able to scratch his face.”

Let go! You have nothing to lose, everything to gain!

And, in case it will help to distil this complicated and wordy chapter down to its 100%-proof quintessence, it is this – *Where there's no thing there's no problem.*