

# Depending on no-thing

Robert Saltzman

edited by Elena Ascencio Ibáñez  
and Rose Youd

new sarum press  
united kingdom

## DEPENDING ON NO-THING

First edition published October 2019 by New Sarum Press  
Footnote material has been added by the editors.

© Robert Saltzman 2019  
© New Sarum Press 2019  
[www.facebook.com/4Tbookpage/](http://www.facebook.com/4Tbookpage/)

Robert Saltzman has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as author of this work.

All rights reserved.  
No part of this book may be reproduced or utilised in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, without prior permission in writing from the Publisher.

DISCLAIMER: The views and opinions expressed in this book are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of New Sarum Press.



NEW SARUM PRESS | 6 Folkestone Road | SALISBURY | SP2 8JP | United Kingdom  
ISBN: 978-1-9993535-9-9  
[www.newsarumpress.com](http://www.newsarumpress.com)

## *Epigraphs*

春有百花秋有月 Spring comes with its flowers, autumn with  
the moon,

夏有涼風冬有雪 summer with breezes, winter with snow;  
若無閑事挂心頭 when useless things don't stick in the mind,  
更是人間好時節 that is your best season.

—無門慧開 Wu-men Huai-kai

Fear not the pain. Let its weight fall back  
into the earth;  
for heavy are the mountains, heavy the seas.  
The trees you planted in childhood have grown  
too heavy. You cannot bring them along.  
Give yourselves to the air, to what you cannot hold.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

The adept gives himself up  
to whatever the moment brings.  
He knows that he is going to die,  
and he has nothing left to hold on to:  
no illusions in his mind,  
no resistances in his body.  
He doesn't think about his actions;  
they flow from the core of his being.  
He holds nothing back from life;  
therefore he is ready for death,  
as a man is ready for sleep  
after a good day's work.

—Lao Tze

## *Table of contents*

<i>Epigraphs</i> .....	iii
<i>About the title</i> .....	ix
<i>Foreword</i> .....	xiii
<i>Introduction</i> .....	xvii
1. A dive .....	1
2. No one has the answers.....	5
3. Liberation .....	7
4. No doer .....	16
5. A broken staff.....	18
6. An entity inside me .....	22
7. Do you feel an oceanic connection?.....	27
8. The wonderment of being at all .....	38
9. The Milky Way.....	41
10. What is truth?.....	59
11. Myth taken as fact bewilders .....	70
12. Compassion and self-compassion.....	72
13. Childhood conditioning .....	76
14. Speaking truthfully.....	95
15. Time.....	98
16. The abysses of vanity and meaninglessness .....	102
17. Psychotherapy versus spiritual teaching .....	110
18. Bombarded by thoughts.....	118
19. The contents of awareness.....	122
20. I don't want anyone following me.....	130
21. All the props are crumbling .....	147
22. A thank you note .....	152
23. Awake and aware .....	154
24. Freedom from bondage .....	157
25. A fresh look at what you need.....	163
26. Find your own mind.....	167

27. A block of stone .....	172
28. Psychotic break while awakening .....	175
29. In the midst of this aliveness .....	177
30. We are drawn to shiny things .....	180
31. Observing one's ego .....	186
32. Report from inside a Mooji retreat .....	188
33. "Actual experience" .....	193
34. My search is at a dead end .....	196
35. On meditation .....	199
36. Preconceptual awareness .....	205
37. Imagoes .....	210
38. I'm awake and I know it .....	212
39. What is a spiritual teacher? .....	218
40. Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater .....	220
41. Splitting .....	224
43. Existential suffering .....	229
42. A therapist's misconduct .....	235
43. Loosening the grip of ego .....	242
44. Are we only just flesh and blood? .....	249
45. A human life ends .....	255
46. I am afraid of non-existence .....	261
47. Faith, hope, and prayer .....	270
48. Patience .....	287
49. A light unto oneself .....	294
50. Loneliness .....	299
51. Native trust .....	320
52. Our deepest desire .....	323
53. No one can awaken you .....	332
54. Call off the search .....	335
55. Don't be a donkey .....	338
56. Can you induce your state in others? .....	341
57. Awareness and self-awareness .....	345
58. Knowing and choosing .....	350
59. Watching the movie of our lives .....	357
60. I still suffer .....	359

61. The story of Han-Shan .....	364
62. Enlightenment and awakening theories .....	366
63. Crystal healing .....	379
64. Things are as they are .....	386
65. Aware of your own enlightenment .....	389
66. Star gurus .....	391
67. The chatterbox mind .....	395
68. <i>The Power of Now</i> .....	397
69. "Be here now" .....	404
70. Source .....	406
71. Wash out your bowl .....	408
72. What is spiritual unfoldment? .....	410
73. Isn't a teacher irreplaceable? .....	418
74. The artist versus the art .....	426
75. Ring around the rosie .....	433
76. A teacher exploring his sexuality .....	437
77. Hypocrisy in India .....	441
78. The grammar of awakening .....	443
79. <i>A Course in Miracles</i> .....	449
80. Faith .....	455
81. The snipe hunt .....	461
82. I am afraid of death .....	465
83. Dementia .....	469
84. True human nature .....	476
85. On suffering .....	480
86. Existence precedes essence .....	487
87. Might as well enjoy the show .....	491
88. Spontaneity .....	493
89. Hopelessness .....	498
90. What about protest against oppression? .....	502
91. Alive and direct .....	505
92. This is not a test .....	511
93. <i>Tabula rasa</i> .....	518
94. Philosophical awareness .....	520
95. To see that you are awake right now .....	525

96. Nisargadatta and you.....	535
97. Does psychotherapy reinforce the ego? .....	537
98. No evidence for “universal consciousness” .....	539
99. Money and beauty .....	550
100. Are we just tourists in our little lives? .....	554
101. The denial of suffering .....	559
102. A teacher in disguise .....	564
103. The whirlpool .....	569
104. The price we pay .....	573
105. The sense of self .....	581
106. The myth of Sisypus.....	592

### *About the title*

In the 7th century, so the story goes, a humble, illiterate woodcutter, Hui Neng, was delivering a load of firewood when he overheard a man reciting a line from the Diamond Sutra and instantly experienced a powerful awakening.

The words that so moved Hui Neng were these:

*“Depending on no thing, you must find your own mind.”*

Those few words triggered a moment of insight so penetrating that Hui Neng left kith and kin forever to wander in search of his own mind.

Notice that, according to this account, Hui Neng’s awakening did not involve *finding* his own mind, but only the venture of *looking* for it *without dependence* on any “thing”—without, that is, reliance on conjectures and speculations about reality, “God,” or Brahman, without leaning on theories of so-called “nonduality,” without clinging to promises of eternal life, without paths and noble truths, without hanging on the words of so-called masters of the kind my friend John Troy calls “I-dolls,” and entirely independent of faith or belief of any kind. A completely open, unimpeded investigation of the kind few have the courage to pursue.

Several years later in his wanders, Hui Neng found himself at the monastery of Master Hongren, the “Fifth Patriarch of Zen.” Hongren asked Hui Neng where he was from and why he had come to the monastery. When Hui Neng replied that he had come from the south to study the dharma, Hongren asked how an illiterate southern barbarian like Hui Neng could ever presume to become a Buddha.

Ignoring the insult, as the story is told, Hui Neng replied, “My barbarian body may appear different, but is there a difference in our buddha-nature?” This reply so pleased Hongren that he accepted Hui Neng into the community, but not exactly as a student. Fearing that the well-educated monks would be disconcerted by this man so

clearly not of their class, Hongren sent Hui Neng to the kitchen, where he was tasked, as if a character in a fairy tale, with shucking grains of rice from their husks.

Many months passed without Hui Neng's receiving even a word of instruction. He was left to labor in the kitchen untutored. One day, Hongren, who was getting on in years, arranged the manner of his succession in the form of a poetry contest with the winner to receive the insignia of rank—the robe and the bowl—along with the title "Sixth Patriarch." Since one student, the head monk Shen Xiu, stood decidedly above the others, it was assumed he would win, so the other monks did not even try to write poems, but left the challenge to him alone.

Meanwhile, Shen Xiu himself felt uncertain and doubtful of his understanding. He produced a verse but waited until everyone was asleep so that he could write it on the wall surreptitiously.

*The body is the Bodhi tree,  
Holding heart-mind like a mirror bright.  
Never cease to polish it,  
And never let the dust alight.*

The next morning, Hongren burned some incense and read the verse to his students, directing them to commit it to memory, but later spoke privately with Shen Xiu. He told him that, although he had perhaps reached as far as the gates of wisdom, he had not yet entered, and that he must keep trying to produce a *gatha* worthy of being awarded the insignia of succession.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Hui Neng overheard one of the students reciting Shen Xiu's *gatha*. He twigged instantly that it fell short and within minutes produced a verse of his own. That night, illiterate himself, he got one of the students to write his *gatha*, an obvious refutation of Shen Xiu's, on the wall:

*The mind of Bodhi has no tree.  
There's no support for mirror bright.  
Buddha-nature is ever self-clearing.  
So where could dust alight?*

Hongren knew right away that none of his students could have written such a gem, so it could have come only from Hui Neng. But fearing to upset the order of the monastery by recognizing an uncultured "barbarian," Hongren publicly dismissed Hui Neng's poem as "an insufficient understanding," and instructed the other monks to keep trying.

Nevertheless, late that night, Hongren called Hui Neng into his chambers where he praised the verse, instructed Hui Neng further, bestowed upon him the insignia, and directed Hui Neng to flee forthwith to the mountains and await the proper time to transmit the teachings—otherwise, his life was at peril.

Hui Neng did flee but was followed by a band of dharma students intent on killing him and stealing the robe and bowl. The mountain was steep and harsh, so most of his pursuers gave up the chase. But one of them, a former military commander, Hui Ming, persisted and caught up with Hui Neng at the very summit where he had been hiding. However, instead of attacking and killing Hui Neng as he had planned, Hui Ming found himself bowing deeply. Then, Hui Ming received the teaching, and went on to speak publicly for many years, including this lovely line:

*"It's not the wind that's moving. It's not the flag that's moving. It's your mind that's moving."*

For me, the story of Hui Neng has a mythic resonance. The tale seems larger than life and replete with symbolism, but somehow, it feels factual too. What if the awakening one seeks is not particularly amenable to an effortful, rigorous process requiring years of training and constant vigilance aimed at "keeping the mirror clean?" What if, like Hui Neng, there are those who need only to hear a very few words, or no words at all, to find the gates of wisdom wide open and always unobstructed *right now*, requiring no *becoming* at all, but only *be-ing*?

That is what I want to discuss in this book you are holding in your hands.

## Foreword

Here's a classic Robert Saltzman: "How do you 'try out' 'universal consciousness?' Just *declare* yourself 'universally conscious' and assess how that makes you *feel*? Oh, *please*."<sup>1</sup>

I hope by the time you read this far, you've already read the above paragraph as part of the whole book. Fortunately for you, my reader-friends, a foreword is often one of the last things to be read in any good book; you might have turned to it as a last resort on a long plane journey, or sitting in Waterloo Station on a rainy Sunday evening when the streets glisten with the borrowings of gloomy Dickensian illuminations. Even more fortunately, you may have come to this after reading the book and being subjected to the spray of spiritual bubbles being burst, of pompous people complaining as they sit on whoopee cushions, and of flouted convention as a deluge of fragrant namastes is flushed into common sewers.

Robert is kind enough to call me "friend"—it's one of those friendships where you've never met, but always known each other. So, dear reader-friend, if you are occasionally law-abiding and you're reading this foreword before the actual book, it's a pleasure to meet you and count you in this select company. Robert is closely related, I believe, to a certain small boy who pointed out that the gorgeously arrayed emperor was actually being driven through the streets stark naked.

And yet, at the same time, while ripping apart the defenceless pretensions of a spiritual teacher, he's disarmingly honest and humble. If it's possible for a man to be arrogantly humble, then that man's initials are R.S.

Discussing that famous iconoclast Jiddu Krishnamurti, he points out: "If *4T* goes beyond Krishnamurti's level of discourse—which I think in some ways it may—remember that I had the benefit of his wisdom when I needed it. We are all standing on the shoulders of those who came before." *4T* refers to Robert's first book *The Ten Thousand*

---

1. See p.555.

*Things*. If you were lucky enough to see the edition of *4T* with photographs, then I congratulate you for your relationship with Tyche<sup>2</sup>.

Why bother to read this book, then, well-written though it is? Of course we can all put it in the bathroom for reading on certain er... occasions, but I would go further. Robert gives a good mental health clear-out to the spiritual "scene". He is attracted to written logic like a moth to a candle flame and glares at an untruth like Medusa uncovered.

He responds to questions with finely attuned intelligent compassion and discusses what really matters to people in real life. Not first-world, armchair, or zen-stool sitters (like myself) but first-world, third-world and all inbetween and around people (also like myself). Grief, dementia, addiction, abusive relationships and... being or even *be-ing*—all the sorts of things I would like to have asked once upon a time.

When it comes to theoretical matters, Robert eschews the god-like, from on-high position of some Victorian *paterfamilias*. Instead he points out the way things are with a compassionately irascible logic—just like you and I might.

This is what I like about Robert's approach—I hope you do too:

*"Honesty about not knowing is, in my experience, where equanimity is to be found. What we actually know is precious little, so many of us fill the apparent emptiness by pretending that believing is the same as knowing. When one believes without actually knowing, then there is always lingering doubt to deal with—even if only unconsciously—and there is never peace in the struggle between belief and doubt."*

At last! I haven't had to swallow an ocean and strain at a gnat. I don't have to believe in some unproven, unfeeling god-thing and spit out feelings of compassion and common decency like a hair caught at the back of the throat. I don't have to accept the sayings of unsuccessful shysters (or successful ones) because Consciousness has singled them out.

2. I put this in just to show off. *Tyche* is the Ancient Greek Goddess of Fate, Fortune and Luck.

Robert has the ability to hold my interest when he digs deep into what I had always found to be the strangely barren subsoil of the is-ness business, the location of consciousness, the subject and the object, and the self and the Self. I think he stands a good chance of holding your interest too. And if you don't like one chapter, there are plenty to choose from, all with very different focuses.

Please don't assume, though, that I "follow" Robert—we might even fall out one day—but I have seen enough, read enough and been worked on enough to know that this is a book that many of us need; not on the coffee table, not on the bookshelf, but deeply in what I have to call our "hearts."

My only fear is that even though Robert doesn't claim to have final answers to ultimate questions, he might be seen as an unquestioned authority. I hope that doesn't happen, because work such as this is a gift to all of us who are standing at a crossroads, or have trotted off down an unproductive highway and back up again in the hope of finding we know not what.

If a personal deity exists, I will beg Him or Her to bless our endeavours. As it is, I don't always agree with Robert, but I would sacrifice my soul to ensure that people like him write books like this.

Catherine Noyce

Salisbury, October 2019

## *Introduction*

**H**ere I sit, beginning a second book when I never imagined writing the first one. I find myself astounded by the unexpected nature of this aliveness, astonished by this apparently ceaseless bubbling up of phenomena as one moment flows into the next. To feel this aliveness directly puts the lie to any metaphysics that claims to separate real from unreal or otherwise to define *this*.

Before publishing *The Ten Thousand Things*, I'd been engaged for years in conversations with people of diverse backgrounds about freewill, self-determination, destiny, choice, and who are we anyway? Those conversations took place in the intimacy of my psychotherapy practice, on a public webpage devoted to such matters, and more recently on Facebook.

A friend, Catherine Noyce, suggested that I produce a book along the lines of those conversations and that work was published in 2017 as *The Ten Thousand Things*. The first reader of *4T*, as it has become known, was my friend, esteemed Buddhist teacher Dr. Robert K. Hall. Robert loved the book. He told me that it was “destined to become a spiritual classic, like Alan Watts or Krishnamurti.” Robert and I are old friends, so I took that appraisal with a grain of salt, but now, two years later, it seems that he had it right—as I said, unexpected and astounding.

Since the publication of *4T*, I have heard from numerous readers, many of whom have said in one way or another that the book had upended a search in which they had been involved for years—a search for what is commonly called spiritual awakening. One comment captures so well the spirit of that book, that I will quote it here:

*Robert's book... has literally blown away all remaining ideas and beliefs I held about what's true, about what it means to be "awake."*

*A readiness to be my own authority fully, versus following others or hanging onto others' ideas and concepts, arose while reading*

*the second chapter. A readiness to live in a state of not knowing. A readiness to be a clean slate in every moment and to see for myself what is.*

*This brought about a palpable sense of freedom. Robert's writing is unique on this topic, for instead of making himself the authority as most do, he prompts us to be our own authorities. Thank you, Robert!*

You are most welcome. Thanks for that lovely review. Yes, *a clean slate*. Set aside *all* teaching and be your *own* authority, I say. See what *you* see. Be a light unto yourself. Otherwise, I say, you are not yet even fully adult, much less “spiritually advanced.”

After replying to questions about *The Ten Thousand Things* in interviews, online meetings, and such, my perspective toward these matters has come into clearer focus, so parts of the present volume build upon the ideas in *4T*, but it's entirely possible to understand and enjoy *this* book without having read *The Ten Thousand Things*. Still, if things I say here seem vague, or indistinct, you can always take a look at *4T* first.

The words in both books aim in the direction of simplicity of vision and the end of hierarchy, but *not* at creating an aura of comfort. If we are honest with ourselves, most of us are stuck in one way or another and could use a bit of a shake-up. So this book is an invitation to let old articles of faith fade away, to eschew dogma, and to be liberated from self-proclaimed experts whose expertise may be more imagined than real anyway. Often, those in the role of teacher are only *self-hypnotized* believers themselves who were put into a trance long ago by *their* teachers.

But the point of this book is not primarily to smash idols, although I am prepared to do that if and when necessary. Here I want to put more emphasis on questions that arise in this form:

*OK, Robert. I get it. No one is in control. Choice, if it exists at all, pertains only to a little fenced-off area of mind that I call “me.” But, having understood that, what does one do?*

If, by “doing,” one means taking willful action, I used to say that no one could *do* anything at all—and that's not entirely wrong. In fact, to me, it seems closest to the psychobiological facts, and closest to what I see as “awake”—things are as they are, and cannot be different, including any apparent choosing and deciding. But questions and conversations about *The Ten Thousand Things* reminded me that I myself once regarded awakening as a kind of goal—this was back in the days of reading about Zen and such—and so that outlook shouldn't be ruled out entirely.

I'm not big on methods and practices and certainly don't aim to throw any new fuel atop the already blazing bonfire of becoming, but there are, I think, attitudes that can be useful. What I mean by “attitudes” is not easy to explain. As I mean that word, an attitude cannot be chosen or adopted, but only *recognized* within one's own mind as already part of the scenery. I am thinking now of a kind of attitude I value in myself that I call *intention*—not an intention one *creates*, but one that arises, is noticed, and somehow feels valuable or even essential, so that, whenever the intention makes itself known, it is welcomed, entertained, embraced, and honored.

Speaking personally, I keep finding in the writer of these words an *intention* towards complete candor and honesty, as if these words were a kind of report that should be as accurate as possible. Once an intention like that is recognized and honored, the candor and honesty pretty much take care of themselves. I don't find myself working at candor or trying to improve honesty. The intention, honored, seems sufficient to get the job done. As I said, the subtlety of this phenomenon makes it hard to evoke verbally.

As to whether someone, after hearing about an attitude like that, can notice it in his or her own mind, and then somehow value, honor, and work with it, maybe yes, maybe no. That remains to be seen.

Now some people will call this a book about spirituality—I guess that's where it's shelved in the bookshop—but spirituality is *not* my subject. In fact, the word “spirituality” strikes me strangely. I rarely use that word. If I am honest, I have no idea what that word really *means*, nor how it applies to the question of who and what are we anyway.

In the Biblical view, for example, Yahweh, a creator god, *manufactured* humans from clay or dirt as inanimate objects and then infused those lifeless sculptures with “spirit,” whatever *that* is. That is what Alan Watts called the *ceramic view* of the universe, which posits a *god* as the supposed ultimate source of all that exists—including the completely mysterious human intelligence that writes these words and reads them; a god that is the alleged *substrate* of reality, the purported final answer to any question.

But I know Sweet Fanny Adams about the substrate of human intelligence, and not a dicky bird more about the ultimate wellsprings of anything I see, feel, think either. I know *nothing* about that. Nada. Zilch. Zero.

If you try to *envision* such a substrate, your picture is sure to be a mental fabrication. How could it *not* be? If you then call that fabrication “God,” or “Universal Mind,” or “Source,” or “Brahman,” you accomplish nothing but self-deception. Naming is *not* knowing. And naming something does not bring it into factual existence. This is a crucial point. The process of naming and *reifying*—which means regarding something abstract as factual as long as there is a word for it—is a process of mind in which we humans engage constantly. It may seem harmless to utter a “positive” word like “Love” or “God” while automatically commodifying (thingifying) it as something *outside* of one’s own mind, but that, in my view, is a chief feature of what I call the hypnotic trance.

Humanity, unable to learn anything authentically *factual* about this aliveness, beyond what we see with our own eyes and discover through scientific investigation, has *fabricated* an entire world of superstitious belief to which most of us genuflect in one way or another, often without really noticing our obeisance, so beguiled are we by childhood conditioning, language, custom, and habit. I reject all such fabrications. They have no place in my world.

Accordingly, the subject of this book is neither spirituality nor religion, but ordinary wisdom derived from experience and self-observation—a fact-based approach to the human condition that operates without recourse to metaphysics, esoteric ideas and practices, physical

and mental purifications, years of meditation, or any other extraordinary means of “qualifying” to be awake. No *qualifying* is necessary, I say. Only clearing one’s mind and *noticing*.

Here is a story I remember once hearing, but I cannot recall where:

*Layman Pang approached a teacher asking to be shown his true self. The teacher said nothing but just sat silently. Finally, tired of waiting, Pang got up and walked towards the door. Just as he opened the door, the teacher called out, “Oh, Layman Pang.”*

*“Yes?” replied Pang.*

*“That’s it,” said the teacher.*

*The Ten Thousand Things* ruffled feathers. Some readers found it transgressive. Perhaps it is, but the resistance to authority of that book is *not* vandalism. *Neti, neti, neti*<sup>3</sup>—not this, not this, and not that either—is neither wanton destruction nor disrespect, but a means of cleansing the psychological palate of the stale flavors of other folks’ ideas so that the zest of one’s *own* mind—one’s *native* understanding—can be recognized and savored. That’s the idea behind this book too.

I recognize that exposing “Love,” “God,” and “teachings” as *commodities*—as the *material* of spiritual materialism—can appear unjustly dismissive or deliberately hurtful to those who cling to ideals and who fear being lost without them. That is not my intention, but it may be unavoidable if I speak my mind fully. Nor will I apologize.

In all candor, a casting away of other folks’ conceptions, most particularly the impedimenta imposed upon humanity by supposedly authoritative “spiritual” sources, is, I say, the *sine qua non*—the basic prerequisite—of an awakened understanding.

When I say “awake,” I do not mean the pronouncements proffered by pundits in the spiritual supermarket, who market their wares as the best way—or in cases of *extreme* idiocy, as the *only* way—to attain the grand consummation, the ultimate acquisition: transcendence, liberation, nonduality, ego-death, universal mind, etcetera. If

3. *Neti neti*: in Hinduism, and in particular Jnana Yoga and Advaita Vedanta, a Sanskrit expression, meaning “not this, not that,” or “neither this, nor that.”

a path learned from a source like that seems intriguing, or if climbing the stairway to Heaven appears a rewarding project, you won't want to hear much from me, nor would you be *able* to hear much even if you wanted to.

This book is not for everyone, but for those who are familiar already with the staples sold in the metaphysical supermarket and have found them lacking. This book is for those who have the courage to entertain the *Great Doubt*—a radical skepticism towards *all* teaching about ultimate matters and *all* definitions of “reality.” Without such basic agnosticism and rejection of dogma out of hand, all the “awakening” in the world may amount to nothing but a self-hypnotic fantasy, a recreation “inwardly” of experiences that one has heard about and now imagines are one's own.

Accordingly, the intention here is not to preach, and certainly not to offer the *next* “Truth”—which, even if I had it, would only deepen the damage already wreaked by years of prescriptions from teachers touting final answers—but to wipe the slate clean of all such pretensions.

Then, having set aside hackneyed preconceptions—like “Everything happens for a reason,” or “Only love is real,” or “The self in you is the self of God,” or “As above, so below,” or “Sri Joe Blowji attained the ultimate state”—we are free to participate in the *essence* of the matter, which, I say, has nothing to do with believing or becoming, but only with *be-ing* here and now—free to discard anything that interferes with that *be-ing*, including religion, spirituality, and all that stuff.

The human mind is orders of magnitude more powerful than most of us will admit. Imagination can fashion entire worlds from whole cloth. We can conceive almost anything, and make ourselves believe in it. Fantasy churns out rose-tinted scenarios of enlightenment and transcendence. We all have friends who seem spellbound by all that, but what has a grip on *your* mind?

Having been born in water, a fish never even *notices* water. Likewise, we may fail to notice the atmosphere of mental conditioning in which we are swimming—a conditioning that tells us to strive hard

for what we desire. Such efforts may pay dividends in the work-a-day world. We moderns survive in a money economy after all. The tribal days are all but gone on this planet, and one must put food on the table, and clothes on one's back. But the skills and drive needed for making a living—which often requires postponing gratification in the present in exchange for rewards to be enjoyed later—are not useful in discerning the peace of mind that, without striving, is *always* here in *this* moment, and never later. That peace does not need to be earned or deserved, only noticed.

Peace of mind, I am saying, does not have to be attained, nor can it be. Equanimity is a *feeling* that can be recognized *amidst* the chaos of thoughts and emotions, not separate from them, or only when they have been made to calm down or come to an end.

For many of us, a hunger for special states has displaced the natural processes of learning, maturing, and coming to full adulthood, leaving us with a senseless, often desperate chasing after the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. But one will never *reach* that pot of gold. The end of the rainbow recedes as quickly as we pursue it.

Better to be like the beggar in a different fable about gold—the one Tolstoy told about a panhandler who scrounged for pennies while sitting unknowingly on a box filled with gold coins. At least the mendicant in that story, as wretched as he is, might twig to what he's already sitting on. The fantasized, far-away pots of gold that the leprechauns stashed away can never *be* reached. That gold doesn't exist in the first place.

Once upon a once, without effort and completely exogenous to my usual train of thought, I found myself awake and free—not “happy,” but free. I saw that I was not *doing* anything or *creating* anything, but only *participating*, willy-nilly, in a continuous, entirely inexplicable arising—this *aliveness*. I have my ups and downs—we are all just human here, after all—but since then, this perspective that I call “awake,” for me, has never left.

Somehow, I had awakened in the manner one hears about. For a time that awakens was hard to take in. There were *fears* involved: “Who am I to be awake? What if this feeling is only narcissistic

delusion?" But gradually this awakesness came to feel natural and ordinary—as plain as day. I went for years without speaking much about this except with Catanya, my partner of more than forty years, and with my friend, Robert Hall, feeling that to speak in such a way might be seen as blowing one's own trumpet, which is *not* my intention.

I speak this way only because I see no other way to discuss these matters. Since I have no dogma to fall back on, whatever I say is personal confession. What else could it be?

OK, then. I've said it. The "A-word." Awake. I find myself *awake*.

Awake is not some "spiritual" attainment. All that hierarchical rubbish. From my perspective, awake is the *natural* state and awakening is not an *acquisition*, not a *commodity*, but a *recognition*.

"Oh, Layman Pang."

"Yes?" replied Pang.

"That's it," said the teacher.

I find myself *here*, fully aware that the suchness of this moment is inevitably just what it is. No one is *making* it be this way. It just *is*. Seen that way, there is nothing left but to get along with *however* it is, and walk on.

To be awake does not require answers to ultimate questions, but, on the contrary, to participate wholeheartedly *without* such answers; and when it sinks in that one really *is* awake, there won't be any questions either.

I've been asked a lot if one can *prepare* gradually to awaken like heating up a kettle until at last, it starts to steam. Maybe. Perhaps one can take in accounts of what others say in satsangs and such, or read old texts and find inspiration there. But I wonder if the analogy of the kettle truly applies. After all, if one keeps heating a kettle, eventually water *will* boil, but is working to boil oneself like heating a kettle?

If you try to bring *yourself* to a boil, and just keep "heating" long enough or with sufficient dedication to a recommended method, will *you* come to a boil inevitably and unavoidably like the water on a hot stove? I don't know. I see plenty of people *trying* to boil, and lots of

words about *how* to boil, but not all that much steam.

So I don't know about gradual versus sudden, or whether awakening can be self-initiated like putting water on to boil, or can happen only spontaneously, but that doesn't seem important. I see nothing to judge. Nothing to compare. I came out of the trance the way I did, and that awakening has never ceased. My way is nothing to imitate, nor *can* it be imitated. You get what you get when you get it. These matters can be discussed, but their deepest aspects are not, I say, transferable.

A gradualist might frame coming to awareness as a kind of journey or progressive unfoldment, and I can understand that. But, in my case, gradual and progressive describes better the few years of coming to terms over time with something—the sudden recognition of choiceless awareness—that had been abrupt and undeniable, not progressive or gradual in the least.

The actual first moment of seeing that "Robert" was not doing or choosing anything and never had, felt abrupt, radical, and shocking—a precipitous change of state like the moment when heated water actually boils, like the moment when Hui Neng heard a few words and "got it." The *rest* of Hui Neng's story was the *gradual* part—shucking rice, biding his time, writing his poem, fleeing to the hills.

This dropping away of "myself the agent" was *not* the outcome, I say, of a specific style of meditation, or certain words sufficiently repeated, or psychedelic medication, or special sexual practices, or listening to lectures on nonduality, or . . . This list could go on incessantly—fill in the blanks with the efforts *you* know about. To me now, such methods seem nothing but distractions—ways of *deferring* comprehension until later.

Later never comes. Now is all we have. So if not *now*, when? I love that question!

A *path* is a mishmash of memories projected onto an imagined future. But when the supposed "future" arrives—when an imagined moment suddenly is no longer imagined, but actual—that moment is not at all what one imagined nor could ever have imagined. No one can possibly imagine accurately beforehand the authentic aliveness of *this* moment, *this* actuality, *this* bird in the hand, *this* moment that is

all one must deal with and all one ever *can* deal with.

The story of spiritual attainment, of onward and upward, cast as a kind of *Pilgrim's Progress*, serves only to divert attention from the unrepeatable suchness of *this* moment—to paper over the facts of *this* moment with daydreams about the commodities one will acquire later after proper effort. That's the stuff of spiritual teaching: the commodified goal defined, and the path to it laid out. I understand that point of view, but it has nothing to do with awakening of the kind I mean. Nothing.

Keep precisely to paths and practices or wander where you will. Either way, wherever you go, there *you* are. There is just no avoiding being oneself. All you can ever *be* is what you are right now. Just see *that*, and feel free to be as you are.

Part of the material that follows consists of questions I've been asked along with my replies. My replies are truthful, but that does not mean they are "Truth" of the kind bandied about by pundits or propounded as the premises of religions—the kinds of final answers in which one is asked to have faith. I have no such final answers. I have no such faith. And if I spoke that way, I'd want my mouth washed out with soap.

Finally, I want to point to three terms of art from academic philosophy which are helpful to know because they can serve as shorthand for what otherwise would be laborious explanations. I will do the explaining now for those who need it, and then we will all have these three little words to count on later if we need them.

### Phenomenology

As its name suggests, phenomenology is the study of "phenomena"—the study of things as they *appear*. I use the word phenomenology broadly to mean the view from a first-person perspective of objects (including the body and the bodies of others), events, thoughts, feelings, the flow of time, and all other *qualia*<sup>4</sup>, without inquiring into causes and reasons, but focusing only on direct conscious experience, stripped to the extent possible of presuppositions, value judgments, explications, or interpretations.

4. *Qualia*: phenomenal experiences such as the redness or tartness of an apple.

So the phenomenology of my coffee cup might include its shape, heft, color, etcetera, but not whether it is a "good" cup, which is a value judgment. However, should the thought, "This is a good cup" arise, that thought itself would constitute a phenomenon, albeit of a category different from the category of a physical object like the cup. So that thought itself could be studied phenomenologically too—for example, what does it *feel* like when something is thought to be "good?"

Part of my approach to working with depression focused on exploring with the client the *phenomenology* of the ailment. For example: "What does this depression feel like? Is a cold, empty feeling, as if one barely existed, or more like being weighed down with a burden? Is it a slow, sluggish, heavy feeling, or more like being driven hard by intrusive thoughts?"

### Epistemology

This is the study of the origin, nature, and limits of human knowledge—the study of *what* can be known and *how* it can be known, along with a consideration of what gives validity to knowing. For example, if you say, "Jesus awaits you in Heaven," I might reply with an epistemological question: "And you know that *how* exactly?"

### Ontology

This is the study of the nature of being, the study of what exists, what it means to exist, and what reality is. The statement, "Everything is made of consciousness" is an *ontological* claim. "Everything is made of quarks" is another. "Dinosaurs walked the Earth along with humans 6,000 years ago" is another venture into ontology, offered inane by idiots hypnotized by dogma.

If I ask if there is any rice left for dinner, that is an ontological question. I am inquiring into the ontological classification of the rice. Does that rice exist only in *mind* as a hope—which is one ontological condition, or is there actually some rice in the pot—which is a completely different ontological category?

Ontology and epistemology work together. Ontology asks *what*

exists and how, and epistemology asks, “How do you *know* that?”

OK then. With those three linguistic arrows in the quiver, let us walk on. What follows is not a one-size-fits-all solution to the eternal mysteries, but only one human’s perspective on these matters.

I found myself awake, but that does not make me a spiritual teacher, guru, or guide of any sort. I do not aim at making myself an authority on anything other than my own mind, but at prompting you to be your *own* authority—a light unto yourself.

I speak only for myself, and just say what I see. Take it for what it’s worth or reject it out of hand. That’s not up to me.

## *1 - A dive*

On Little Cayman Island, the shore drops off so gradually from the beach that here, around half a mile from shore, the sandy bottom is still only around thirty feet below us, its natural whiteness shimmering pale blue through the limpid tropical water as we view it from the skiff. Then with unexpected precipitance, the luminosity of the sand ends suddenly right at the edge of a trench of profound depth with steep sides like an ancient river canyon. It is into that trench we are about to dive.

No one goes to Little Cayman Island to do anything *but* dive—that and a bit of catch and release bonefishing. It’s just a small scrap of land with a couple of rustic lodges dedicated to scuba diving and nothing else. My wife and I happen to be the only guests, not just at our lodgings, but perhaps the only guests on the entire island since the other lodge is empty at the moment.

The dive master—a teenage kid—and I had gone out on a few dives previously, and after he saw that I had the knack, he’d led me on a follow the leader chase through some caverns and passageways of the kind where you might get lost if you don’t know the way out. It was fairly demanding scuba diving, and the kid had twenty-five years on me, but I kept up. The fast-swimming was a bit out of the ordinary but still within the sport diving limits. The dive arranged for today will be something else entirely. We are about to break all the rules.

He’d proposed a descent into the trench, carrying battery illumination, to visit a black coral forest far below. Black corals are believed to have mystical powers and medicinal properties and nowadays are exploited also in the form of jewelry. This latter use, unfortunately, has led to a depletion of these amazing animals that are among the oldest living creatures on Earth. Individual living specimens of black coral more than 4,000 years old have been found, and living colonies like the forest we were going to see may have been around for thousands of years longer.

There is, however, a small problem. The depth limit for sport diving on regular air is 130 feet, but the coral forest only begins to come into view at twice that and extends perhaps hundreds of feet deeper. Going that deep will be risky—in fact, very risky—but I’m hot to do it. I was, in those days, a bit mad that way. I liked taking chances.

We agree on 280 feet maximum and make the calculations. We’ll have only two minutes at that depth. Staying longer would demand a decompression stop on the way up—half an hour hanging on a line fifteen feet down, breathing from extra tanks placed there in advance. Neither of us is up for that. And nitrogen narcosis—the rapture of the deep—will begin to set in at 130 feet or so, getting ever stronger as we descend, so there will be that to deal with as well as the darkness.

Over the side of the boat we go, descending until we are standing on the sand 30 feet down. We check the flashlights, give our gear and gauges one last gander, exchange a thumbs up, and drop into the trench. I face the canyon wall. There’s plenty of light here near the surface, and lots to see. The idea is to manage your buoyancy so as to drift slowly downwards while taking it all in. Soon it will be very dark, and the flashlights are all we’ll have for seeing.

As we descend, I become aware that the canyon wall contains countless separate niches, large and small, and each of those niches comprises a world of its own—a system of living creatures unique from every other niche. The wall is very close to me—just beyond arm’s reach. As I pass one of the larger openings, perhaps the mouth of a cave, a world-class barracuda, maybe five feet long or even more, swims out, seemingly without effort, and stops directly facing the glass covering my eyes, just a foot or so away. He studies me. His stare is emotionless. His rows of fang-like teeth shine in the sunlight still penetrating from above. I feel a momentary frisson, a quick dose of dread. I am larger than his usual prey and don’t really expect to be attacked, but he is big and fierce, and I am out of my element here. We drift downwards like that together for a few long seconds. Then in an instant, he is gone.

I become fascinated with the details of each niche. The more I look, the more I see. Every niche is different, and each one constitutes

a little interdependent world of its own filled with life. The nitrogen high, just beginning to come on, sparks the feeling that all this *means* something. I don’t think I’d ever heard the word “nonduality” back then. That term took off only later, in the 1990s. But all I see seems to fit together seamlessly. Every niche is filled with aliveness—a multitude of individual animate creatures each doing its thing.

Some people like to imagine that no individuals “really” exist. What an idea! Of course we exist. That’s what fills the niches—individuals, like that barracuda, all ultimately connected to lives everywhere on Earth, because even the flapping of a flipper half-way ‘round the world can affect the environment here in the trench, however impalpably.

Nor do I imagine, as some people seem eager to believe, that the existence of these living creatures depends upon human awareness of them, as if those niches, teeming with life, did not exist until a couple of scuba divers happened upon the scene. Contrary to popular belief, stoked by the foolish declarations of self-described teachers such as Deepak Chopra and his ilk, quantum uncertainty does not speak to this question. Quantum mathematics deals with an infinitesimally tiny level of being, not large objects like corals and barracuda.

Nor are those creatures necessarily an expression of what some people like to call “Universal Mind,” which is a concept entertained by *human* minds, not a fact—not by my epistemological lights. Do you know what “Universal Mind” is, or even if such a thing exists? I don’t.

Sign on to such metaphysics if you like. I see that wall of life straight on, not through a screen of learned precepts and dogmas such as, “Nothing really exists but consciousness,” or, “Only ‘God’ is real,” or, “This is only a dream,” etcetera. Those words have nothing to do with the moray eel slithering out from its hidey-hole aiming to devour a tiny scuttling crab, also trying to make a living in his one and only little niche. This is *aliveness*—life and death. If you prefer to pretend otherwise, well, you have every right.

By now I am feeling quite psychedelized, and tell myself to be sure not to forget my air gauge, my depth gauge, and most of all, the clock. I look to my left, and my companion is there shooting me a

“How’s it going?” gesture. I flash him a thumbs up, and we continue drifting downwards.

At 200 feet, we turn on the lights. At 250, I am raging high. Every object revealed in the beam of the flashlight seems to radiate a significance beyond conception. The entire universe seems to be flowing and changing. The second hand on my watch appears to be advancing impossibly slowly, and my eyesight is getting slushy. I am hallucinating too. I feel myself on the verge of an entirely altered state in which there would be no remembering the gauges or the clock.

My companion points his torch down, and there they are, the black corals, extending to the limit of our feeble flashlights and beyond. I won’t even attempt to describe the mystery of that moment in the murkiness.

Two minutes later, we begin our ascent, which demands slowness, so the nitrogen dissolved under pressure into our blood can evaporate out little by little without bubbling into joints or the brain. Eventually, our heads break the surface into the tropical afternoon.

Back in the boat, I feel tired but exhilarated. The kid seems happy too. Then it dawns on me that he had made that dive before, perhaps countless times. In his rather empty life on that rather empty island, he’d just been waiting for another diver crazy enough to go down there with him so he could get high.

## 2 - *No one has the answers*

**Q**<sup>5</sup>: Ah, Robert, I have been having a good time working the internet trying to find your writings and interviews on the “I Am”—you are one of the few “realized” without a book! I guess there are more—we just do not know about them, eh?

**A**: I would never call myself or anyone else “realized.” I don’t see things that way at all. All of us here are just ordinary human beings. Some of us, it is true, have come to perspectives on the human situation that are not common enough or that are too radical to be called “ordinary,” but such views do not and cannot alter one whit the fact that each of us is a natural, standard-issue human being, subject to human psychology, human physiology, and human limitation like everyone else.

None of us knows who or what “I” am, how we got here, what is the source of consciousness, if life has any purpose, etcetera. Those questions may arise, but factual answers to them seem beyond the scope of the human intellect, so we humans have become addicted to inventing answers and addicted to having “faith” in made-up answers. To see this for the first time is to gaze into the face of the sublimity of human limitation, the source of a healthy and realistic humility without which all the knowledge in the world is worse than useless.

Certainly, there are people throughout the ages whose imagination has *created* supposed final answers to such questions as, “Who or what am I?”, but they are, I say, either self-deluded, or liars, or both. In my estimation, the wisest among us are those who live without answers to ultimate questions, understanding that each moment is sufficient unto itself.

In my early twenties, I became interested in the philosophy of being and began reading in the wisdom traditions, both Eastern and

5. In any Q&A, if there is more than one questioner, the first one is called “Q,” the second “Q2,” the third “Q3,” etcetera. Some questions have been edited, not for content but for clarity, and some replies have later additions.

Western. For years, my mind was filled with those ideas, but I was not at peace. Then, in my late thirties, I had a sudden awakening that showed me that much of the reading and seeking of my twenties and thirties had been misdirected because it had been done in the belief that there was something to gain by it. There is *nothing* to gain.

In this moment things are as they are and cannot be any different. No one is “doing” this. No one is in control. No one has the answers. Life and the world, including ourselves, arise in a way that is mysterious and unknowable to us humans, and we live and die as we do. The lucky ones find love, compassion, and understanding along the way, but that cannot be obtained by force. You get what you get when you get it.

The idea that there is someone to become “realized,” can prevent seeing the simplicity of this. In each moment you see what *you* see and you understand what *you* understand, and that’s it. Someone else’s understanding, no matter how convincing, cannot be substituted for that.

I am touched by your interest in my work, and I wish you well.

### 3 - Liberation

**Q**: Robert, I just listened to an interview you gave and it rubbed me wrong in a good way. It highlighted several precious beliefs that had gone under my radar. Your words were honest, no bullshit, edgy and refreshing. After a ridiculous amount of time spent seeking, I can no longer stomach spiritual teaching and yet the seeking energy rises up, looking for the next something to appease the acute feeling of limbo born by a sensation of freefall amidst the cacophony of experience. I’m wondering if you take questions? I am not interested in a teacher. I’m more inclined toward a clear mirror that allows me to see my bullshit and drop it. Please let me know.

**A**: Yes, I do take questions and post the better ones along with my replies. Feel free.

**Q**: Thank you. Four years ago I was in the shower, water raining down, when uneventfully everything shifted slightly and my body erupted with laughter. It was suddenly inexplicably clear that there is only *this* and that “Angelina” is not doing any of it, or responsible for it or choosing it, and neither are you, or you, or you, *ad infinitum*.

This clarity wasn’t a thought so much as a shift in view. There is no “God” to appeal to for favors and no enlightened state of perpetual bliss to arrive at after years of celebrated contortions on a pious *zafu* cushion. There is nowhere to go and no one to get there. No meaning to make of all of this and no story to unravel. There’s just this unknown arising that the body makes sense of as water trickling down skin in the warmth of a steamy bathroom.

The laughter continued but it wouldn’t be true to say that I was laughing. The laughter was a response to the idea that there could *be* an “I” that was laughing. It was a bit like seeing behind the wizard’s curtain in Oz but on steroids. It was clear that there was no one doing any of this, but doing still happened and so did trying and all of it. I

rumbled with laughter for days. Soon afterward, I became unbelievably sick for the next two and a half years with an obscure illness that resulted in debilitating pain, cognitive impairment, seizures, and exhaustion. It felt as though “I” were being stripped of every identity I had.

The doer was short-circuiting but the habit of trying continued, with hours spent googling solutions, diets, diagnosis, visiting doctor after doctor, refusing drugs, and more. I could no longer work. I tried hard to surrender, which is a laughable contradiction in terms and experience. I gave away my art supplies and coveted possessions. My precious identities crumbled while the habitual doer ran in wild circles trying to reestablish control. The intelligent one could no longer remember even the simplest words much of the time. The athlete stumbled like a drunkard and couldn’t exercise more than a bare minimum. When the writer tried to compose even the simplest sentences, the words were incoherent and resulted in a deafening migraine. The good mother had no energy to watch the children play or tuck them into bed or confidently go on a simple outing together. Even the doer was utterly ineffectual at anything more than running hither and yon yelling, “The sky is falling.”

In time I realized that I wasn’t afraid of death as it is typically conceived, but of the unknown. The unknown, unknowable, raw, razor-edge experience of life unfolding *now*, and the honest clarity that there is no way to move away from this “is-ness,” except in chasing illusionary material or spiritual Band-aids that mask this fundamental fear of the unknown mystery that I am, you are, and the whole bawdy cacophony simply is. What is it? No friggin’ clue.

When I came across your work and read that you too had your physical ass handed to you with illness, I wondered if you would speak more about that experience? This body has regained much but not by any means all of its former health. It is odd to live with the pretense of “me,” all the while knowing that “me” is a social convenience and not a culpable entity endowed with doership from on high. Your perspective is welcome. Thank you.

A: Well, that is a coherent report. I seldom see the details of a sudden awakening put any more clearly than that. My own awakening from the trance of being the doer of my life was not as dramatic as yours, but not entirely dissimilar either, and it was followed, after a few years, by eighteen months of crushing illness, including fevers and chills, night sweats, and hallucinations. When I recovered from that, I felt completely cooked and had no more questions about anything at all.

I have heard from one other person about an awakening followed by serious illness, and there is the rather well-known report from U.G. Krishnamurti along the same lines. Although I had “awakened” a few years earlier, and had no doubts about it really, until the illness, I still struggled to make sense of what had occurred. After recovering—this was in 1991—that struggle was over, apparently for good. Since then, I have simply lived, doing whatever seems necessary, enjoying what I can and suffering what I must.

I feel a deep equanimity that others notice and sometimes comment on. But I do not know if the illness was related to awakening or not. I had been working for years with dangerous chemicals in my darkroom—chemicals from the old days of photography that are seldom used in modern work—and I failed to take the proper precautions, so my illness could have been triggered not in some metaphysical way, but as a result of poisoning. I just don’t know and never will.

As for interviews and my writing—what you called “edgy” and “no bullshit”—I just say what I see and never want or need to lie. Frankly, I consider that most of the recognized spiritual teachers are lying. They are lying either to themselves or to their students or both. I am using the word “lying” in a specific way, to mean claiming to be certain of things that one may believe but does not know and cannot know, such as what the “self” is or isn’t, or what is the source of human primate consciousness. I don’t know if this helps you or not.

Q: I have thought a great deal about your reply, Robert. Thank you for your words and for sharing some of your experience, particularly with regard to not knowing if the illness was metaphysical or a

byproduct of chemical poisoning or something else. If anything, the honesty you shared of not knowing is more helpful than all the imagined certainty. As for me, I have not emerged from the illness feeling “cooked.” Perhaps parboiled. The experience I described was one of many that have occurred since age twelve—the first lasted for over a month—but the sense of a culpable “me” has always resumed with convincing density. I’ve come to consider going to the bathroom or grocery shopping or commuting to work on equal par with any “spiritual” experience. All of it is fleeting and none defines the truth of what I am, which remains entirely unknown.

Some experiences are delicious, some bland and some rotten, but nothing lasts. The only difference I can see in the shower experience and subsequent illness from the preceding ones is that the desire for life or myself to be any different doesn’t find purchase anymore. I don’t believe in that desire for more than a fleeting moment or two, sometimes longer if emotions rev up, but it passes.

The daily grind, however, feels a bit more like limbo than any notion I had of liberation. Nowhere to go and no one to get there, and yet, the energy of “person-ing” remains along with a persistent longing for movement and resolution. It’s a bit bizarre and can be isolating within the human story. “Human-ing” feels a bit like watching a very repetitive movie and not being interested in it any longer. Alone in nature, by contrast, it feels like all the body’s cells release and it is simply a privilege to consciously appreciate the manifold beauty rising and falling as life.

In nature there doesn’t seem to be a “me” requirement—there’s no notion of separateness unless I bring it in. Rather, this “me” is a nexus of perception with which, from which, and as which to appreciate life: the bubble of a stream, the song of a bird, the vanilla orange scent of ponderosa pine bark warmed in the sun, the biting chill of an oncoming storm. There is only *this*, and the great privilege of conscious appreciation *of* this and *as* this. A question like “What is it?” doesn’t even matter. It *is*. There is no human pretense required to be anything *other* than this. The entire body relaxes. It will live. It will die. No need to be anyone, to impress anyone, or to do anything other than I effortlessly,

naturally and holistically “do.” Life is living itself. Does that make sense? This is not a belief but a felt release of the tension of human-ing.

A: You write beautifully. As I understand it, you have found yourself in an ongoing condition of non-attachment, which is what you imagined would constitute “liberation,” but you don’t *feel* liberated. You feel that this cannot be the end of the road that you had always imagined would constitute liberation because you still feel like an ordinary person, longing for movement and resolution.

I understand that. And this is a delicate matter, so I want to emphasize that all I have to offer is my own view based on personal experience. I do not claim that I speak conclusively, but rather honestly and earnestly, in reporting my own phenomenology as a sentient being—not a so-called “realized being,” but only *an ordinary human being*—who finds himself awake in the here and now.

That said, in my view those who tout “liberation” as some wondrous condition in which all the pain and uncertainty of human animal life has been “transcended”—leaving only the bliss and joy of endless, deathless existence—either are lying for motives of their own, or have been hypnotized and deluded by exposure to pie in the sky literature, the satsangs of supposed “masters,” and all that rigmarole, particularly these days the hocus-pocus called Advaita Vedanta, although that particular form of mumbo-jumbo is not the only culprit.

I do not deny that I find myself in an apparently less-than-usual condition of equanimity which is, in and of itself, a kind of contentment, even in conditions that many people might want to avoid. I don’t aim at avoidance, and that “not wanting to avoid” is a chief feature of equanimity.

I say this as one who has faced considerable pain and physical suffering, which is here in the background even now as I write. But this equanimity is not due to being “liberated” from pain and suffering, but rather to having been set free to feel what I feel when I feel it, with the understanding that nothing lasts, neither pain nor pleasure, so that one must and can live each moment as it arises, while watching the moment die away again, only to be replaced by the next moment.

This is like sitting on a beach watching the waves roll in, one after another, after another, after another, after another, after another, endlessly.

So “liberation,” if we are going to stick to that word, for me is not the *end* of anything, but just the freedom to participate in this aliveness fully and open-heartedly without expecting it to be one thing or another.

Those who speak of endless joy, pleasure, happiness, etcetera, are only, in my view, bliss-ninnies, whose “liberation” is of the same order as the Christian who is blissed out by the notion of Heaven with Jesus.

The true liberation, in my experience, is feet on the ground, and deal with each moment as it arises without resorting to such escape hatches as “I am not the body,” or other such life-denying tripe. This moment is all we must deal with and all we ever *can* deal with, and in that understanding is freedom.

In saying this, I do not mean that I have no feelings of joy. I do have feelings like that, but I don’t seek them or even yearn for them. Like the wind in the trees, such feelings are there when they are there, and absent when they are absent, and I am not producing them or controlling them in any way.

I don’t know if this helps.

Q: Thank you so much for your open, candid communication. I appreciate it immensely. Speaking from this pinpoint in eternity, there is still seeking here, or more clearly put, the *tendency* to seek, a habit, accompanied by a deep knowing—way deeper than understanding—that there is no one here to seek anything and nothing to attain and nowhere to go. So seeking comes and goes, seeking to be loved, seeking to be healthy, seeking to be loving, seeking to be attractive, yadayada. All that seems to be part of the arising that is Angelina. A habit of trying to be “other” or somehow “better” *within* a groundlessness of I-don’t-know, in which the whole idea of “better” or “other” is hilariously absurd.

This groundlessness, for lack of a better word, is the closest thing to a truth I know and there’s comfort in it. I don’t know what I’m

going to say, do, think or feel, and there’s no need to change that, even though the desire to change it also arises fairly regularly. I hope that makes sense.

Like you, I too find, after many, many years of reading and seeking, that most teachers are perpetuating a story that doesn’t hold true—namely, that there is something to do or fix or some spiritual height to attain, most of which seems to involve bypassing the immediacy of life in favor of some idealized state, however that golden carrot is conceived. You and others have spoken of a personal sense of equanimity. You’ve also mentioned that your mentor, for lack of a better word, said “That’s *not* it” at some point.

I was wondering if by “cooked” you mean that you no longer experience the seeking fluctuations that I do, and if by equanimity you mean that the personality doesn’t get revved up anymore? I don’t think I’ve arrived or not arrived. I think this is what *is*, whatever that is, and any effort to move away from this unknown ever-changing now is bullshit, even when that unknown shows up as seeking. Of course, the organism—the body—breathes a sigh of relief whenever that seeking energy drops, as it does when I walk in nature. But trying to *make* it drop is ridiculous. I don’t think in terms of awake or liberated anymore, since “I” don’t wake up any more than I beat my own heart, but I do wonder if this feeling of limbo settles or if that varies.

A: You are most welcome.

When I say I am not seeking, I do not mean that I won’t take an aspirin for a headache as a way of *seeking* to feel better, or that when really ill, I would not consult a physician *seeking* explanations and relief. I am saying that I am not seeking an escape hatch from ordinary mortality or seeking so-called “spiritual” answers to ultimate questions such as “How did this all get here?” or “What is the purpose of life?”

In my view, questions like that *have* no answers that a human primate animal, which is what I identify “*as*”—ha, ha—could possibly come to know. So, in the absence of actual information, weaker minds just make shit up, as they have for eons.

Those fantasies may have had some psychological utility before modern science first came on the scene in the 16th and 17th centuries. After all, we humans do seem to require *some* kind of explanation for phenomena. Wanting explanations is in the DNA. But nowadays, when the field of *natural* explanations keeps widening, to continue grasping at the supposed *supernatural* seems ignorant and superstitious. I have no use for any of it, and I regard the “teachers” of supernatural explanations—for example, “The brain cannot be the source of consciousness because the brain is an object *in* consciousness”—as most often well-intentioned but entirely self-deluded people who imagine that their *beliefs*, which they learned from traditional scriptures or from teachers promulgating those scriptures, constitute *knowledge*.

People have every right to their beliefs of course, no matter how far-fetched, but belief and knowledge are worlds apart, and those who blur the difference or don’t care to see it at all, are no better than fools, particularly if they imagine that their views are somehow spiritually advanced. To be clear, someone can be quite intelligent, but also an utter fool when it comes to religion and metaphysics. Think of Mitt Romney and his magic underwear<sup>6</sup>.

Since you ask for candor, I must say that I am not seeking the things on your list. I am not seeking to be loved or to be loving. I found love long ago, or it found me—lucky, lucky me—so I don’t *need* to seek it. To me, loving seems as natural as breathing, and probably will as long as this heart keeps on beating. To be attractive? Well, I am 74 years old now, and that kind of vanity is no longer entirely practical . . . but you should have seen me 40 years ago. Ha, ha. To be healthy? I do my best to treat this lovely old body respectfully, but most matters of health are beyond my control, so I don’t worry much about them. I have been gravely ill more than once, and sometimes for extended periods, which is no fun at all, but at the moment things are OK in that regard. Sooner or later, that entire house of cards must

6. We understand that “magic underwear”, also known among Mormons as “the garments” are a two-piece set of underwear, similar to a t-shirt and long johns. The purported magic comes from masonic symbols embroidered onto the chest, navel and knee area. Presidential candidate Romney, an Elder in Mormonism, would neither confirm nor deny that he wore them.

collapse, willy-nilly, and when it does, Sayonara, baby.

As for equanimity, I never chose it. And now I could not choose to be otherwise. I don’t try to be equanimous, but people do see it, and even ask me about it. That is a mystery I cannot explain.

If you want my opinion, you feel that you are in limbo, but I know many people who would envy your condition. Limbo, after all, is a lot better than the various rings of Hell, which is where a large portion of humanity seems to reside. You seem in great shape. Just lovely. If you can appreciate how free you already are, the rest—if anything further is even needed—may come to you while you are not even looking for it.

I say this with love.

Q: Oh this is absolutely beautiful. Thank you so much, Robert. I will lean into this and reach out later if more arises. All love and gratitude.

A: You are entirely welcome.

#### 4 - *No doer*

**Q:** Hello again, Robert. I have recently been subject to a situation which resulted in my being rid of someone who was toxic. This did not occur as a result of anything I said, did, or intended. It just happened that way and I'm all the better for it.

It is now apparent to me that everything that has ever happened in my life has just happened that way, regardless of my intentions, beliefs, etcetera. The illusion of my mental interpretation of these events has been more clearly seen. I'm now starting to feel more like a passenger in the car rather than the driver. It really is very amusing to see it! I'm like a child with a toy steering wheel in the back seat of a car!

I have listened to interviews with famous people who talk about the events of their lives that led to them being successful. They talk about how anger drove them, love, hate, or whatever driving emotion you could conjure, but it's all bullshit.

**A:** Hi. That's a useful insight, and I could say a lot about it, but I will confine myself to two points.

Number one: Fame has nothing to do with seeing oneself and the world with wisdom and understanding. Many famous people are simply fools who imagine that their fame constitutes evidence in favor of their world-view. I see this often in so-called spiritual teachers who seem to be ready with an answer to any question and rarely say, "I don't know much or anything about that." Deepak Chopra comes to mind immediately—a classic case of the Dunning-Kruger effect, which is a cognitive bias whereby people who are incompetent at something are totally unable to recognize their incompetence.

Number two: The idea that past experiences could somehow lead to "success" in life (quotes because what "success" means is an endlessly deep question) is not what I would call "bullshit." It is rather the ordinary consensual narrative—a common way of conceiving

what "myself" is, and that way may have legs. Cause and effect does seem to operate in some matters, doesn't it?

From my perspective, that kind of narrative—"Poor boy makes good," or whatever, which I have called in *The Ten Thousand Things*, "The story I tell myself"—is not exactly incorrect, but limited. In my view, your discovery that this aliveness unfolds in ways that *defy* narrative is a step forward, but I urge caution. This is difficult ground because "no-doer" can easily become part of a *new* story I tell myself.

If that should occur, then arises the danger of passivity, resignation, and the avoidance of involvement in ordinary matters as an ordinary human—"Ah, well. I'm not the doer, so why work at anything? Effort is pointless." That is not what I call "awake."

As I experience this aliveness, when efforts are needed, efforts take place. The ultimate *source* of such efforts is a mystery to me, but I have no problem saying things such as:

"I invited my friend Bernard Guy to a Zoom<sup>7</sup> *because* I thought hearing his ideas might be helpful to the kinds of people who follow my work."

Well, from the vantage of your new understanding, the "because" is a bit iffy, isn't it? But I still talk that way. And I might say also that I feel that my work in depth psychology has in some way prepared me for my present work, although by your lights—your very *new* lights—that would be "bullshit."

No blame. I have used the word "bullshit" myself, just much less frequently lately, although I might trot it out in the case of some grinning guru who charges fees to tell you that *you* don't actually exist, only "universal consciousness" *really* exists. Oh, *bullshit!*

In most cases, however, I'd rather not call bullshit. Let's just put it that people must say and do whatever they say and do, however narcissistic and ignorant . . . Deepak. Ha, ha.

7. Online group conversations, available on YouTube.

## 5 - A broken staff

**Q:** Dear Dr. Robert, you got to me with your idea of nothing to “fix” anymore. This is it, in all its terrifying reality. And this idea of not “getting to choose the movie” kind of dismembers the whole “co-creator” and “manifesting your reality” jargon of the New Age, which is also driving everyone crazy, especially if they want that new car! I have felt as if I have been free of all that for a long time, but the truth of “nothing to fix” is sometimes overwhelmed by the whole spiritual machine grinding out the *next* book, the *next* deck of Tarot Cards, the *next* weekend retreat.

There was a sadhu, I have heard, who was held in high esteem in his town. It was said that the staff he carried was an implement of great power that could heal people who were afflicted. Nevertheless, the sadhu felt that there was something missing in his own life, that his understanding was not complete. He had heard of a man in Poonja, called Papaji, who was said to have the final truth he desired to know, so he traveled to Poonja in hopes of complete enlightenment.

Papaji invited the sadhu into his humble home and asked what he wanted. The sadhu said, “Oh master, I want the final truth.” And just as he uttered the word “truth,” Papaji reached out, took the magic staff, and broke it in half. Handing the pieces back to the stupefied man, Papaji said, “Good. Now you can go back home and live like an ordinary person.”

I may have butchered the story, but I believe that is what you have been trying to do with me, “break my staff.”

**A:** Yes, it’s good to break the staff of belief in all that spirituality nonsense. Unsubstantiated beliefs are poison. If we are honest, we know *nothing* for certain, except that in this moment each of us seems to exist as a center of awareness.

There is only now—only ever now—and this experience of existence. As long as you imagine that something *else* must happen for

you to “get it,” you block yourself from full awareness of *this* present moment, which is all one ever really has. Lost in the trance of becoming, you miss out on *now*.

Nothing is *becoming* anything. The suchness of each moment is a never-to-be-repeated *sui generis*—a thing unto itself—that can become nothing but what it already is. What you are, you already are.

If you overlook *this* moment because you are imagining something better, something higher, something more advanced—perhaps something you imagine learning spiritually at the next retreat or in the pages of the next book—you miss out entirely. With your mind lost in fantasies of becoming, *this* moment is lost forever and can never come back again.

It may be possible to set oneself up as a “co-creator,” but only in a limited, make-believe play space. In that mode, one is like a child who imagines that the structure she built with plastic blocks is really a skyscraper. The conceptual co-creator *imagines* having the power to manifest changes in its own being. That is not possible. That *be-ing* already is what it is, and has no power to change itself.

To imagine changing oneself into something it is not now is an illusion that arises due to *splitting*. By “splitting,” I mean a psychological defense mechanism that operates by setting up a good, desirable, acceptable “myself” in opposition to a faulty, undesirable, unacceptable “myself.” Once that split is ginned up, everything “bad” can be assigned to the “under dog” while the “top dog” avoids scrutiny:

Top Dog: “You just don’t measure up. Other people have it much more together. You really need to work on yourself.”

Under Dog: “I know, I know. But it’s not my fault. I am doing the best I can.”

Top Dog: “You will have to do better. I hate watching you blundering your way through this life—and all that masturbation on top of it. Disgusting!”

Under Dog: “Well, I have to find some satisfaction in this misery. I am going to die! I can’t stand the idea. ‘Life is pain and misery, and it’s over much too soon’ [Woody Allen]. I’m missing out. Help!”

Your previous letters suggested to me that you had understood all that. I do not think I was mistaken, but perhaps there is still an element of confusion about this. At root, “awake” is simply silent knowing, moment by moment—a knowing without a separate knower. There is no *doer* in it. There never was a doer. Reality is what it is *without* any doing required or even possible, except in fantasy. The only freedom I know is to be what you already are—this *aliveness*—moment by moment. If you are always trying to “fix” that, to *improve* it, to *perfect* it, you are sure to end up disappointed or deluded.

No-doer does not mean that one ignores ordinary personal life, including wanting enjoyment or needing to make a living. It only means understanding that what seems to be occurring on that level, the level of ordinary life, is that an apparent person has needs and desires that arise automatically as part of being alive. That is probably what Papaji meant by living “like an ordinary person.”

One lives an ordinary life but is not deceived by it. In each moment *myself* dies, and a new myself is born. As foreign as this may seem to the conditioned mind, there is no continuation of myself, but only a projection of dead memories onto an imagined future. The fact of a living, breathing body and one’s attachment to that body is normal. It doesn’t *need* fixing. Just let it all be what it must be, moment by moment, and you will feel the freedom of awareness beyond attachment.

This is not about being special or attaining anything. It is about being ordinary and just noticing that a human life is transitory, and that in living there is no victory—nothing to gain but the grave. Then one lives freely, step by step, welcoming each moment without fixating on *myself* and what I want and don’t want, but rather allowing life to unfold as it must without resisting that unfoldment.

That kind of unattached freefall can seem scary, I know. The fear

of missing out if one does not try to be “spiritual” or try to become something special may feel troubling. But reacting to freefall by clinging to a fiction of self-improvement or “salvation” is pure suffering, and does no good anyway. You’ve been into that kind of suffering for years. Let it go.

Q: You were not mistaken. There is something that knows all that and has known it forever. I do believe I am nearly clear of believing that this spiritual seeking and always trying to be “happy” is real.

When you say that each moment is just what it is and cannot be improved, I believe you, and I can see that for myself. But there is still a little gremlin hiding somewhere that keeps telling me it can’t be that simple.

A: I am not saying that your seeking and desiring, including wanting happiness, are not “real.” It’s *all* real. That’s what happens when the magic staff is broken. You see that all you can ever be is yourself, just as you are, moment by moment. That is reality.

Despite the overblown fantasies of what you called “the spiritual machine,” there is nothing mystical going on here, nothing occult, nothing esoteric, and nothing to be figured out. Life is life. What else could it be? You live and breathe like any other animal, while thinking and feeling whatever you think and feel. None of that can be “fixed.” This aliveness is the playing out of energy, and you *are* that. You *are* this aliveness. If wanting and desiring are part of that, OK. What is, is. Just let it be. There is nothing further to “get.”

## 6 - *An entity inside me*

**Q:** Hello, Robert. I loved *The Ten Thousand Things*.

Do you no longer feel that there is an entity inside that has a will or makes decisions? Is it a constant experience for you that this aliveness is just a “bubbling up” of feelings, thoughts, and sensations, without an “I” inside here that makes this happen?

**A:** I have no sensation at all of anything “inside” me. Everything experienced—mental, physical, or emotional—feels part and parcel of the same entirely mysterious happening.

Are you really aware experientially, phenomenologically, of such an entity, or is the “entity inside you” more like an idea you have been trained to believe in, but cannot actually locate or feel if you try?

**Q:** So that means there isn’t even an inside—just a whole, unbroken experience that is completely transitory. Is that right?

**A:** Well, “completely” transitory might be going too far. For me, there is a kind of ongoing sense of being which, as I have detailed elsewhere, is confected of various separate elements, both mental and physiological, but that sense is not under anyone’s control. It just *is*. As I said, what I experience is a mystery to me and I have no basis for explaining it to myself, much less to anyone else.

**Q2:** So the experience of “deciding” when to finally get my butt out of bed on a Sunday morning is also just part of that same mysterious happening. Right?

**A:** Yes. Countless factors, most of them entirely unconscious, bear upon each moment of apparent decision. Ego-myself gets the news and constructs a story *after the fact* about itself being the decider who “made” a decision. The conscious mental dithering over a “decision” to move a

part of the body—keeping to your example, your butt—actually takes place *after* the brain has already prepared to carry out the movement. So, what is experienced as a conscious decision was never a *choice* at all in the ordinary meaning of that word, but a *report* of the resultant—the outcome—of countless negotiations among different parts of the brain and other parts of the body, all connected up on the neuronal level.

This means that while ego-you is still bargaining with itself, carrying out cost/benefit calculations, and thinking about pulling up the covers, your poor old tired butt is already halfway out of bed, all the prep work for that move having taken place already in the brain, unbeknownst to ego-you. There is robust evidence for this in neurology.

The kicker is that these kinds of bargainings, ditherings, and other negotiations with oneself can serve a valuable function in the psychic economy, which is to provide a sense of self-unity and coherence. We *call* that imagined unitary bargainer, ditherer, and negotiator “me” or “myself.” But that is only *conscious-myself*, *conditioned-myself*, or *ego-myself*. And, although functioning smoothly in ordinary life may require at least a smidgeon of “ego-myselfness,” and, although the human being may require at least *some* illusion of unitary coherence to avoid feeling psychotic, that is not the *real* myself. Awakening, I am saying, involves less dependence on illusion, and more on seeing things as they are.

No one knows ultimately what “the *real* myself” is, but we do understand—*some* of us at least—that most thoughts are never fully conscious; that most sensations are only faintly felt; and that even further in the background, and usually not felt consciously or known at all, are the sensory reports to the brain from every area of the internal organs, bones, and other structures of the body. Unless there is unusual pain or discomfort, those unceasing reports, present even in sleep, go unnoticed by ego-myself, but are a large part of what provides the feeling of “me-ness”—the feeling of the ongoing sense of being that I mentioned before. The apparently coherent “me,” supported by the persistence of those reports along with countless other sensory data, both conscious and unconscious, has no *control* over anything. It just *is*, as a part of one’s biological constitution.

So, as usual, these questions boil down to what one imagines constitutes “myself.” If, like me, you do not fear psychosis and don’t worry about cohering psychologically, then you may understand that I feel not like one particular self at all, but more like a sometimes raucous, sometimes tranquil dinner party where the views and opinions flow freely along with the wine. Because in this gathering of “selves,” ego-Robert has a pretty good seat at the table, he feels high on the wine of being at all—which emanates from whence he knows not, cannot be explained in the least, but keeps flowing, and never dries up.

Q2: Is there a difference between “I am *be-ing*” and “I am experiencing?”

A: It’s best not to get lost in words. Each of us is aware of various objects, feelings, thoughts, emotions, etcetera. As I said, much of that awareness consists of bodily sensations of which we are only barely aware, and those unnamed, under-the-radar sensations give rise to the sense of a human body in space.

The little-known sense of *interoception*—a background awareness of internal organs—is highly influential in creating this sense of being. Normally, one does not consider that facet of “myselfness.” If, however, one’s attention is captured by a sense that something is amiss—an abnormality in my heartbeat becomes apparent, or a sharp pain in the abdomen—then one notices what was always there, but running in the background.

We call that flow of sensations “I.” For example, when certain sensations arising in the gut become pressing enough to come to conscious awareness, one might say, “I’m hungry. Let’s have lunch.” So it is the *sensations*, previously unnoticed, that are being called “I,” but it might be more accurate to call the faculty of conscious awareness “I,” and the bodily sensations a *feature* of that awareness, or the *material* of that awareness. This is difficult ground because the body is both an object in awareness and also the living system that gives rise to awareness. If you contemplate that deeply enough, you may find yourself without any more questions.

Q3: Robert, would you say that, due to your having no sensation of anything or anybody inside you, any sense of lack has fallen apart?

A: One might feel a sense of lack in the material world. For example, if I feel thirsty and lack clean water to drink, that would be felt as lacking a vital necessity.

But if you mean a sense of lack on the psychological level, yes, I feel no sense of lack in *be-ing*. I understand that, regardless of social arrangements, friendships, love affairs, etcetera, each of us is essentially alone, living in a vastness of perceptions, feelings, and thoughts that cannot be explained even to oneself, much less to a friend or lover.

If I see that “myself” cannot be explained to anyone, even to myself, that is a turning point. I notice that perceptions, thoughts, and feelings just keep arising as part of this aliveness, and that I am not making them. I become aware that I had been trapped in a self-referential process not of my design, constantly weighing and measuring, continually monitoring my own thoughts and evaluating them as if they were my moral responsibility and a measure of self-worth. When *that* sinks in, the weighing and measuring stops, and things just are *what* they are *when* they are.

This is the freedom of freefall, even if that seems difficult, lonely, or painful at times.

Q4: I would like to add my two cents on this subject. Robert often says something like “You get what you get when you get it.” But I have come to see that getting it is not the point. To me, having the sense or a feeling of being a “doer” is not a handicap or inferior, and in no way leads to a loss of quality of life or missing out on some grander or superior way of living.

Each of us is unique, and the way the brain is continuously being configured and conditioned and then reconfigured and reconditioned is, I say, well beyond my conscious understanding or willful control.

Any sense of having control is perhaps an illusion, but it might be worse if one has a sense of *being* controlled, which is more like delusion or hallucination. The sense of doership arises from biographical

memory, continuously fed by story-telling or the narrative character of thought.

As long as the illusion of control has not degenerated into a narcissistic, possessive, anxious, depressive or obsessive personality, one can live a very functional life. I mean that, as long as the sense of “I, the doer” remains in the periphery and is not the main focus of attention, we can, I believe, have a high quality of daily living.

Ultimately, the sense of being a doer can be placed somewhere on a spectrum, with total non-doership at one end and total doership at the other. Where we start, or where we dwell momentarily, or where we end on this spectrum, is a mystery not resolved.

For me, I do what I feel like doing, and think what I imagine I am thinking, without worrying about the existence or otherwise of the “ghost in the machine.” The same can also be said of the sense of having a free will, I say.

Robert’s admonishment that we cannot imitate or wish to live his kind of life was a key turning point in my understanding on this subject, and soon after that my seeking disease stopped there and then.

Robert can and will only do Robert. We have to find and live in our own unique inimitable minds. Every mind is a beauty.

A: Yes! Bravo!

## 7 - *Do you feel an oceanic connection?*

**Q**: Hi, Robert. I am reading *The Ten Thousand Things* for the second time, along with what you post currently and some older writing like the [www.dr-robert.com](http://www.dr-robert.com) website as well.

In listening to the last group dialogue on Zoom, I was fascinated by your account of the Swedish philosopher who said that human evolution has produced an ability to ask the “big questions” but not the ability to answer them. Could you give me his name again, and elaborate on what you got from reading him?

A: He is Norwegian. His name is Peter Zapfee. I did a rather poor job of discussing him at the meeting. I was feeling ill and about to be really ill. Zapfee and I essentially agree on this matter, although his vision seems a bit darker than mine—but on second thought, that is hard to compare. Neither of us is what you would call optimistic. Ha, ha.

Zapfee’s big idea was that we humans have brainpower enough to formulate and *ask* ultimate questions about life, death, God, the self, etcetera, but not enough to *answer* those questions adequately. So, in an attempt to justify the suffering and anxiety that seem part of this aliveness, we have devised modes of *masking* the issue of mortality, such as identifying with family or nationality, attaching ourselves to grand ideas or long-lived institutions, distracting ourselves with constant stimulation, or pursuing the arts in hopes of finding aesthetic justification:

*“Beauty is truth, truth beauty”—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*

—John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”

Q: I was moved as usual by your contributions to that meeting. And I appreciate your efforts to soldier on in the face of illness.

A: Thanks. Soldier on we must, eh?

Q: Have you seen Jill Bolte Taylor's TED talk? She is a neuroscientist who lost the language function during a stroke and found herself functioning totally from the "right hemisphere" in a state of what she termed "nirvana," an oceanic sense of connection with all that is. She says this sense of connection is our birthright as well, and that being able to move from cognitive mind to this state is perhaps the next stage of evolution that will provide a way for humans to move beyond our current state of division and fighting. What do you think of this? Is it similar to the awakening you have had?

A: I have not seen the talk, nor heard of Jill Bolte Taylor otherwise. All of this is so personal. Clearly, *you* do not feel such a connection—otherwise, you would not be asking me this question. So, suppose I told you, "Yes. I do feel an 'oceanic connection.'" What would that mean to you? Since you do not feel such a connection yourself, all you would have is an entirely second-hand, fantasized image based on a couple of words—and the word is *not* the thing. Whereas if you *did* feel such a connection, it would not matter what Jill Bolte Taylor or Robert Saltzman had to say about it.

I like to avoid that kind of language entirely. Let us, I say, move away from daydreams of transcendence and wishful fantasies of peace on Earth, including eschewing the language, opinions, and mental maps of others.

I don't mean that having heard the words, "oceanic connection," you can just throw them away. It's too late for that. And anyway, where would you put them? But you *can* ask yourself what those words mean to *you*. And if you see that words mean nothing except what one *imagines* they mean, and that imagination can run wild when applied to non-physical conceptions, you may lose a craving for the kind of speculation that underlies such discussions. This, Zapfe was saying, is really a craving for an *escape hatch* from the mortal realities of this human animal aliveness: watching oneself suffer and age, eventually to die, without having the foggiest idea of what the

meaning of *anything* is—even assuming there *is* a meaning.

*Once a man receives this fixed bodily form, he holds onto it, waiting for the end. Sometimes clashing with things, sometimes bending before them, he runs his course like a galloping steed, and nothing can stop him. Is he not pathetic? Sweating and laboring to the end of his days . . . never knowing where to look for rest—can you help but pity him? "I'm not dead yet," he says, but what good is that? His body decays, his mind follows it—can you deny that this is a great sorrow? Man's life has always been a muddle like this. How could I be the only muddled one, and other men not muddled?*

—Zhuangzi, also called Chuang Tzu,  
late 4th century B.C.

What I am calling "awakening" involves noticing that this aliveness—this awareness—is not amenable to explanations of any stripe. There is no one, I say, who is not, in one way or another, "muddled." And Zhuangzi's "great sorrow" is not reduced one iota by speculative futurism.

You do not *create* this aliveness. You do not *control* this aliveness. You *are* this aliveness, prior to and independent of ideas such as Jill Bolte Taylor's, who presumably had her personal damaged-brain experience and now wants to whip it up into "the next stage of evolution."

An idea like that may be entertaining, but once you have heard it, so what? How is one supposed to engage in that evolution—have a stroke? Or perhaps one could intentionally damage parts of the brain chemically or with surgery.

What the heart requires, I say, is not conjecture about future more "evolved" states, but breaking open entirely when seeing things as they are *right now*, like Zhuangzi.

This sense of full-on *aliveness* is what one really desires, I say, not ideas *about* it, and not even "salvation" *from* it—although that is precisely what many people seem to be chasing after. In my experience of awakening, all the brainpower consumed formerly in explanation and justification flows instead into *participation*—complete involvement in

this never-to-be-repeated moment, *whatever* that entails.

I am not a big fan of Joseph Campbell, who seemed a bit stuck on viewing human life always from a “mythic dimension,” but in my view, he got it right with this statement:

*People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of . . . the rapture of being alive.*

Yes. Being here at all is a gift too often considered a *problem* requiring finding meaning, explanations, or justifications in order to render it bearable. In that sad view, the *rapture* goes right out the window. Who or what we are, whether or not we are “evolving,” and whether this aliveness is only a pale reflection of something “higher,” can be discussed endlessly and fruitlessly. Meanwhile, simply *feeling* this aliveness—the unique suchness of each never-to-be-repeated, mysterious moment—outshines desires for power, or pleasure, or even the desire for *meaning*—outshines them in *my* world at least.

When actually engaged in this aliveness *without* trying to explain it, questions such as “Where is it all headed?” “What does it all mean?” or “Who am I?” never even arise. The aliveness *is* the meaning, for whatever that’s worth.

I am not at all sure that humans *are* evolving in the way Jill Bolte Taylor used that word. In my view, our current condition reflects accurately what a human primate animal is like and has been like for a long, long, long time. The level of technology in ancient Rome differed from ours, but the human passions that we see in their literature seem very much the same as ours.

Our present cultural arrangements are *not* aberrations from which we will evolve, I say, but expressions of human primate nature. Even assuming that the human mind *is* evolving, evolution occurs on a time-scale that none of us can visualize. Ideas may change, and technology will change rapidly, which may modify modes and styles of *outward* behavior; but if more deeply viewed, human behaviors, rooted in emotional needs, aggression, and sexuality, do not change quickly if at all.

I have no use for the daydream of an improved future, neither mine personally nor the so-called “future of humanity” which, frankly, from my present perspective, looks like a slow-motion train wreck. For me, progress, evolution, and all that jazz is just pie in the sky. We humans seem to be killing ourselves a lot quicker than we are “evolving.”

According to Elfatih Eltahir, Professor of Hydrology and Climate at MIT, even if the world succeeds in cutting carbon emissions, thus limiting the predicted rise in average global temperatures, large parts of India, where people already die routinely in summer heatwaves, will become so hot they will test the limits of human survivability.

We humans seem to lack any means of facing up to this problem. Our approach is all talk and nothing more. Back in 1992 at the Rio Climate Summit, the talk said that we only had ten years to get climate change under control. During the 27 years since then, that same formulation—“only ten years left”—has been repeated and repeated, and people are still talking that way.

For all our palaver about climate change, we humans cannot, it seems, refrain from blasting around in cars and airplanes just for amusement, just because we can, or ordering goods sent from halfway ‘round the world, although those habits are killing the very environment on which we depend for life itself. Most probably, the burning of coal and oil will end eventually not because humans have “evolved,” but when there’s no more petroleum left in the ground to extract. And the raising of cattle for food—which is also a prime cause of the climate change that is rampaging through this planet—is baked into our minds via countless generations of survival and reproduction, and justified by the self-justifying religious idea that humans were given god-like powers by decree:

*“God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air.”*

How does one “evolve” out of *that* stupidity?

I am not saying that humans cannot evolve ethically. Perhaps we can. Nor am I saying that we should ignore our bad habits and pernicious behaviors because “that’s just the way we are.” But the basic ethical principle remains unchanged: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. If you personally can live up to that, wonderful! *Mazel tov!* The human race in general has not and apparently cannot.

All discussion about the “evolution” of our species is a matter of speculation, conjecture, and opinion, not facts in evidence. There *are* no facts in evidence. That is what must be accepted if one is to see things as they are. There are no facts I know of to suggest that humans are going to survive a radical change in the climate. The human race is in serious trouble—just on that score alone—never mind all the *Sturm und Drang* of never-ending territorial wars or the sometimes murderous strife over social issues and matters of self-definition.

To be clear, my view is not one of monolithic pessimism. I am not saying that *everything* is going down the tubes. By some measures, life on Earth has improved for the average human. In my lifetime, poverty on this planet has decreased. There are still far too many people without access to sufficient food and adequate shelter—more than half of us humans live on less than three dollars per day—but this has slowly improved. Humans as a group have more access to medical care, to education, and to other basic necessities than ever before. Part of this is due to technological advances in production and distribution, and part, I think, to greater access to information.

But I and others see no “greater intelligence” managing the show here. As far as we know, we human primates *are* the intelligence calling the tune on this planet, I say, and our destiny, by my best guess—I could be wrong—is self-inflicted extinction.

This is a bit like Zapfee’s vision of the human predicament. We seem to possess—some of us at least—intelligence sufficient to make us aware of the problem: increasing population plus increased use of fossil fuel burning and meat eating per capita is a recipe for global climate destruction. We have known about this for a long while now. I was teaching the greenhouse effect to my high school science classes back in 1968, a generation before the Rio Summit. But we seem to lack

the intelligence sufficient to overcome our primate animal drives for power, novelty, and self-gratification.

The best intelligence may influence the behavior of some of us, but just as wars don’t end until *everyone’s* appetite for violence has been temporarily sated, natural drives for the pleasures of wanton consumption seem to win out every time. And so, burn, baby, burn.

Burn not *less* than last year, but more. This crisis worsens minute by minute while the lights burn brightly all night long and jets fill the skies. Carbon emissions in the world have been increasing for years, and are sure to set a new record this year, although we know quite well that it is already too late to stave off certain kinds of severe climate-driven disasters that are just now beginning to make themselves known; and that this will only get worse if we continue on in this way.

We have known for years that, for every day we go on as usual without sharply *decreasing* the burning, the young on this planet and their offspring will live in an increasingly apocalyptic world. Our vaunted intelligence is not coping with this—not one iota. À la Zapfee, we have enough awareness to *notice* the problem, and even to know possible solutions to it, but we do not have intelligence sufficient to *embrace* the solutions.

And this is just the state of human attitudes on the brighter end of the IQ spectrum. At the other end, a bunch of dullards who believe that these facts are somehow still in question, are being deceived by the clever entrepreneurs of energy bent on keeping them ignorant, just as the tobacco companies obfuscated for years about *their* poisonous products. But this issue is a lot more urgent than whether someone dies of self-inflicted cancer.

You may see this view as pessimistic, but I do not think it is. I have been aware of this issue for more than 60 years now, and matters have gotten worse, not better. I am not willing to be caught up in futurist fantasies like Jill Bolte Taylor’s. I consider such conjectures to be escapist delusions.

You may wonder how someone who says, “I find myself awake in the here and now” would *care* about what happens 50 years hence. After all, have I not said that the future is just a fantasy and that now is all we have? Yes, I have said that often, but the fanciful, far-away future to which I refer in that regard is not the physical world we call “the environment,” but promises about the eventual attainment of “nirvana.” I view those promises as escapism because, if nirvana exists, it is here now—so what are you waiting for?

The state of our *physical* environment in the near term—30, 40, 50 years—is a matter that can be approached scientifically, and about which I do care. Present climate models are not 100 percent reliable, but they are not chopped liver either. Predictions from those models will not be perfect, and some of them might even be off the mark, but the future to which they refer is likely to correspond at least roughly to scientific predictions. The power and accuracy of those models are substantiated by the success with which past climate models produced predictions that later proved true, and all the more by applying present models, which are improvements on earlier versions, to past years and comparing the results to actual historical records.

From what I understand, some models predict frequent catastrophic flooding of coastal cities worldwide by 2050, even if we humans do manage to cut back now on the amount of carbon we put into our atmosphere, which we show no signs of doing. Yes, I won’t be here personally to witness a world increasingly at odds with the environmental conditions under which we naked apes evolved to survive and upon which we depend, but I already see the beginnings of crunch time. We *all* do, except the numbskulls coached into ignorance by a bunch of depraved John D. Rockefeller clones. So that’s one advantage to mortality. I won’t be seeing the worst of it. But compassion extends timelessly in all directions, doesn’t it?

Right now *is* it for me. I have no life elsewhere in space or time. I find no value, no heart, no *be-ing* in a conjectured future of any kind—and certainly not in an “improved” one. My use of the word “awakening” is not centered on the “oneness” of humanity and the universe all leading to a happy ending, nor is awakening for me some

quantum leap into a supposedly higher energy state, or the solution to the human tragedy of which self-destructive overconsumption is one of the main tragic themes.

What I mean by “awake” is living each moment fresh. To see oneself and the world as simply occurring, simply happening, simply flowing, without some character called “I” separate from the flow producing, defining, judging, managing, or controlling it.

If you have the time on Saturday, please drop in on the Zoom meeting and raise these points for discussion by everyone.

Q: Will do. In asking these questions of you, I reveal a desire for a change of state, for the “awakening” you describe. And as a lifelong seeker, I am looking for a *means* to achieve it. I imagine that almost everyone who seeks you out is driven by this desire. But what I find in your work is not a bunch of prescriptions, instructions, methods, or paths, but simply *a description*, as best words can convey, of yourself and how you navigate, from which one can “get it” or not.

A: Yes, I am aware that questions such as yours are motivated by the desire for improvement—the attainment of a condition that one imagines will be “better.”

*Every day in every way I am getting better and better.*

(mantra used in the Émile Coué method  
of auto-hypnosis, c. 1900)

Countless people have branded themselves leaders, trainers, coaches, tutors, mentors, swamis, savants, gurus, guides, and mahatmas capable of showing the perplexed how to be better off than they are now, step by step. It’s not just spiritual teachers who make such claims, but self-improvement mavens of all schools. I have no use for that collection of experts, and certainly, I do not fit into that world.

I have no “wake up” magic to impart. I have attained *nothing*—nothing but ordinary sanity as I define that word for myself—nothing but *my own mind*. If someone asks about something *beyond* sanity,

something purportedly “transcendent,” I advise finding sanity first and *then* looking for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow if that is your hankering. If you go at it the other way ‘round—transcendence, “God,” and all that first—you are asking for a world of delusions in which no sanity will be found. People spend their entire lives in singing such “Loony Tunes,” as U.G. Krishnamurti called them.

I have been taken by surprise by how much bite *The Ten Thousand Things* seems to have. By now, two years since its publication, numerous people have written to me about how reading *4T* was “transformative,” or “capsized their boat,” but I do not know how to account for that. *4T* is not a book of spiritual teaching—not a how-to—but, as you say, only a phenomenological report on the capsizing of *my* boat, and the aftermath. If someone can learn from that, great, but teaching is not the intention. My photographs and writing, including the words I am typing right now, are, for me, only self-expression, not “teaching.” This is what I find myself doing, and I can’t help it. One must occupy the days somehow.

Enough “spiritual” teaching! Most of it is horseshit, not the imparting of actual information. If you want my advice, stop depending on other people, even the ones called “masters”—*especially* the ones called masters—to teach you anything. Find your *own* mind.

I never met Chögyam Trungpa. I know him only through reading and some reports from people who knew him, including salacious stories of orgies and drunken rampages. He may have been a loose cannon, but he managed to coin the best metaphor yet of what it is like to be awake and know it:

*It’s like you fell out of an airplane. The bad news is that you don’t have a parachute. But the good news is that there’s no ground.*

The point of words like that is not that someone hearing them should try to *jump* out of the airplane. I can’t see how you *could* jump even if you wanted to. The “airplane” is every belief in your mind. When the religious fantasies and all the second-hand self-definitions and self-identification have dried up, run their course, and

somehow—who knows how?—you no longer believe in them, you find yourself in freefall with nothing at all to grab onto. All that dogma *was* the airplane.

That’s the *bad* news—you have nothing left to believe in, nothing to cling to, no salvation, no escape hatch. But the *good* news is that you are on your own at last. At fucking last. No one telling you what to believe or what to do. And if someone should try to instruct you, it’s meaningless. It is one’s *own* mind that must be discovered.

Q: The “capsizing” for me was to see how attached I was to “belief,” in my case an alternative (to be entirely honest, “superior”) set of beliefs. I remember from the EST training, “Life is empty and meaningless, and it’s empty and meaningless that it’s empty and meaningless” and “You are a machine!” To truly confront these notions can be frightening. Of course, EST, after pulling the rug out from under us, offered us an alternative—which, of course, involved a continued connection to the program, including coming up with more money, in a desire to repeat the experience of “getting it.”

A: I have no more use for nihilism like EST than I do for the eternalism of religions. From my perspective, both miss by a mile, and the people who espouse them appear self-satisfied, robotic, and hypnotized by their own beliefs.

Zapfee’s vision was dark—perhaps even darker than mine, as I said—but not nihilistic. He raised a real issue: human limitation. The nihilists meet that idea with a foolish fatalism: “Isn’t this amusing? Life is a bitch and then you die.” That is *not* realism, but avoidance and denial. Meanwhile, the religious ones meet it with unwarranted certainty: “In my ‘soul’s journey,’ this animal aliveness is just a stepping stone.”

In the face of that Scylla and Charybdis, what do *you* want to do?