

MINDFULNESS, NOW AND ZEN

The sceptics guide to Ultimate Reality

Wally Barr

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For more details about this book, please go online to:
www.mindfulnessnowandzen.com

Big bang expansion contraction gnab gib

I was wondering how to begin and the start of the universe seems like a good enough place. As I hope you'll come to see, the history of the universe in the six words above really says it all.

.....

This book has been writing itself in my head for over 40 years and now it's time for it to come out. I hope you find it Enlightening ...

WB

Feb 2017

The Story from A – Ztt

In 1954 Zen master Sokei-an Sasaki told us that:

One day I wiped out all the notions from my mind. I gave up all desire. I discarded all the words with which I thought and stayed in quietude ... I felt ... as if I were touching some power unknown to me ... and Ztt! I entered ...

“Entered what?” you may ask.

Mindfulness, Now and Zen illustrates how an indescribably simple, unified and transcendental reality outside of space, time and conceptualisation, could lie behind everything we know. It goes on to explain how each of us can make contact with this most ultimate of realities through the practice of mindfulness meditation.

Though essentially based on personal experience, the book ranges across the centuries to draw on the teachings of a wide variety of thinkers from vastly different cultural, philosophical and religious backgrounds. The message they each bring is distilled into one consistent story in which our everyday sense of reality can be thought of as a rather pale reflection of *what's really going on*. This is not necessarily to say that the world as we know it doesn't exist at all, just that our conventional, everyday, understanding of reality is not the whole story. And whilst our five senses can be seen to provide only very limited, misleading and sometimes quite erroneous information about the world, the really significant illusions arise from *the way we think*.

What mindfulness meditation offers is freedom from thinking. Though it is most strongly associated with Buddhism, you don't need to be a Buddhist to practise mindfulness meditation; in fact, it requires no religious belief at all - you don't even need to believe it will work. As with learning to juggle or ride a bicycle, it's a practical application of the human mind. And an atheist can practise mindfulness meditation just as well as a devoutly religious person.

So, all in all, this means YOU can do it!

Mindfulness meditation is based on a simple set of procedures that just about anyone can learn within a morning. It's in the daily practice of meditation that the difficulty arises, since regular and frequent repetition is called for - and this may become a habit that could take the rest of your life to develop.

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LIFE, THE UNIVERSE AND EVERYTHING

Foreword

*My goal is simple. It is a complete understanding of the universe, why it is as it is and why it exists at all.*¹

What's really going on behind everything we experience? How are we to deal with the fundamental questions in life: Who are we? Why are we here? Where are we going?

No doubt a great many people take solace in the answers offered by religious bodies and scientific authorities to this and many other questions - and that's fine. But many others find the same explanations baffling and frequently beyond belief. The world's religions propose a reality that just doesn't make sense to many people. The practice of ancient rituals and the alleged existence of a supreme being, devils, demons, angels, magic, miracles and salvation have a tendency to turn the secular mind away and towards logical or at least more 'rational' forms of reasoning. But even scientific explanations can appear contrary to common sense.

Take 'time' for instance. Scientists tell us that time really behaves quite differently from the regular, reliable, clock on the mantelpiece. For one thing, some atomic particles seem to travel backwards in time.² Even stranger perhaps, while we all know that time passes, how many of us know that the speed at which it passes varies from person to person? If two people hold identical clocks but one is moving whilst the other is stationary, science tells us that time will pass more slowly for the one who is moving.

¹ Hawking S (1985) The Final Question. Chapter 7. In Boslough J. *Beyond the Black Hole: Stephen Hawking's Universe*. HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, England. p.77.

² An idea first proposed by the eminent theoretical physicist Richard Phillips Feynman (1918-1988).

At least, we might expect scientific claims to be based on clear evidence - but yet again we might be surprised. Cosmologists say dark matter and dark energy account for most of the matter in the universe.³ Maybe that's fair enough, until you learn that the existence of neither of these materials can actually be proven and remains only a theoretical possibility. Once more we're left with the feeling that neither science nor religion seem to be able to demonstrate with any certainty what's *really* going on.

So, what do we really know?

What do we know beyond doubt? Whatever it is, we'll need to distinguish this from what we think are facts, and from those beliefs and inferences we are wittingly or unwittingly projecting onto the world.

This is what *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* is about. It's an attempt to answer some basic questions without first requiring the reader to commit to any specific beliefs or acts of faith: if you can't experience it for yourself, you're not expected to believe it. *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* aims to demonstrate some fundamental areas of agreement between a range of acknowledged experts in the field of 'deep-thinking'. This includes such famous luminaries as Plato, Socrates, Jesus and Buddha, but also many others, though they may be unacknowledged and perhaps less deep-thinking.⁴ One thing they all have in common is their belief that what we usually agree is 'real', is not the whole story. They have each in their own way said there is a far greater reality behind what we ordinarily think of as 'real'. But this is not simply to say there are different ways to interpret our experiences. Clearly, we can all disagree on the meaning of different aspects of life, but the 'reality' we're talking about here is far more profound. It's about the nitty-gritty of it all, 'Life, the Universe and

³ NASA (2012) What is the Universe made of? *Universe 101*. See: http://map.gsfc.nasa.gov/universe/uni_matter.html

⁴ Some of these are included in the list of [Original Sources](#).

Everything'.⁵ And it's about now, not something that happened 13.5 billion years, 2,000 years, or even a minute ago. It's about the present moment.



⁵ Thanks to Douglas Adams (1982) *Life, the Universe and Everything* (*Hitchhikers Guide 3*). Arthur Baker Ltd., London.

LIFE

Chapter 1.

Reality is only a word

Mindfulness, Now and Zen is about that which lies behind the appearance of differentiation. It is about something that has no beginning and no end and is itself totally self-referential, every aspect being related to every other aspect in a perfect Unity. The book reflects this unity because as you read, you can follow the chapters sequentially in the traditional order, or you can freestyle and jump around from chapter to chapter. If you're reading this on an electronic device, you may be able to use the hyperlinks - like the one above to Unity - to take you straight to the chapter indicated. There are 24 chapters in the section about everything, so over six hundred thousand million million million ways through the book. Many of the chapters can be accessed through these hyperlinked short-cuts and this means you can get more information quickly and easily if you want it.

Whichever approach you choose - jumping around at random or following the customary path from chapter to chapter - each can take you through the entire contents of *Mindfulness, Now and Zen*. Reading the book can be seen as a simile for our life's journey - you'll find that simile and metaphor figure widely in the book - because at each moment our lives diverge along one specific path or another, a path that is perhaps itself one of countless parallel universes diverging from each other by only one quantum event. As well as being a metaphor for life, this layout is a parallel for meditation. This is because in everyday life you travel through the days riding on your thoughts and sensory perceptions. And as you travel from thought to thought, wrapped in your own unique consciousness, you experience a sense of time, with thoughts blending together so comfortably that you barely notice you're travelling at all. It may be that meditation can slow your rate of travel or increase your rate of perception, allowing you to be progressively

more conscious of the process until you can ignore it and experience the unchanging, timeless state of being that is behind everything.

Well, that's the theory anyway. But what does *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* say is really 'behind everything'?

What's really going on?

You will read here something of what has been said by a range of great and authoritative thinkers insofar as they appear to agree with each other about the true nature of reality and how we can all go about knowing it for ourselves. The reality that we're talking about here is a sort of absolute, ultimate, reality. It lies behind everything we experience and there can be no greater reality than it because, whether any of us knows it or not, it's what really *is*. Put simply, if there's a reason for everything, this is it. It's what's behind the vibration of every single atom in the universe, it's behind every experience that you and I have ever had, as well as being that which lies behind the workings of the entire cosmos from moment to moment. Of course, each of us knows tiny bits and pieces of this reality or we could never survive. Indeed, it will be argued later that it's this very thing - this partial knowledge - that gives rise to our perception of time (when ultimately time doesn't actually exist at all). This book is about the whole thing - what this absolute, ultimate underlying reality is and how each of us might know it, all of it, all at once.

Many people hold quite definite beliefs about the causes, characteristics, meaning and final purpose of this underlying reality, ascribing their life-experiences to a specific set of religious doctrines. And many will have a name for absolute reality, indicating their belief that it is The Gods, a god or The God who created everything. But for such a small word, 'God' is a very big subject and means such very different things to different people. To some, especially perhaps those with a more literal turn of mind (atheists as well as believers) the word 'God' can come to denote a judgemental and omniscient 'being' not far removed from a super-charged, all-powerful and (sometimes) punitive warlord.

This book proposes a very different and very specific use of the word 'God'. The God of *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* is not a 'being' of any sort. In fact, He is not a 'He' nor a 'She' at all, nor is He somehow separate from us, 'up there' or 'out there'. The concept of God that is alluded to in *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* is simply the all-encompassing reality of whatever it is that is behind everything we experience on a daily, moment-by-moment, basis. This is not a 'being' or something in time, subject to the laws of cause and effect; in fact, as we shall see, there are good reasons not to refer to the underlying reality behind everything as a 'thing' in any sense. But it *is* whatever is going on behind every single thing in and beyond the universe - every thought, action, essence, object, event and so on, from the scale of the minute to the astronomically huge. It's what lies behind every idea and concept. All the time. Non-stop. Then, now and at each and every point in the future. However, *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* does not assume a final destiny for creation that would provide an ultimate justification for the existence of mankind. The book takes the view that we have no grounds on which to make any assumptions at all about the causation, characteristics, qualities, aims or intentions of underlying reality. As you will see, all such ideas are held to be projections firmly rooted in illusion.

But what should we call this final reality behind everything? Many names have been used: *Allah, Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi, Atman, Being, Brahman, Dharma, God, Heaven, Jehovah, Kensho, Nirvana, Prajapati, Satori, Suchness, Tathagata, Tathata, That Which Is, The Divine Ground, The Father, The Garden of Eden, The Happy Hunting Ground, The Holy, The Lord Yahweh, The Numinous, The Pure Land, The Self, The Tao, The Ultimate Ground of Being, The Undivided Unity, Tun Wu, Ultimate Truth, Universal Mind, Vishnu*, and no doubt many more. But none of these is acceptable to the atheist, the rationalist or the person rooted in a scientific understanding where only the existence of what is evidence-based can be considered to be acceptable. So *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* will rarely use any of these specific terms when it's talking about the possibility of there being an underlying reality behind our experiences.

But what words should we use?

Considering the significance of this to all of us it's somewhat surprising that there appears not to be a widely-used term in the English language for the underlying reality behind existence - whatever it may be. This being so, *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* will take the liberty of referring to this underlying reality as Ultimate Reality. This should help to distinguish it from the usual, everyday sense of reality that we all know, which itself will be referred to as our Everyday Reality. But don't be fooled by use of the word 'Reality' here - this everyday one might turn out to be an illusion or at best no more than a poor reflection of Ultimate Reality. As the image in a mirror is created by light from the object in front of it and as an echo is created by the sound that precedes it, *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* will argue that our Everyday Reality can be seen to be like a reflection or an echo of the true reality that creates it.

This distinction between what *seems* to be real and what is *truly* real is rather hard to swallow because in everyday life we feel as though we have a reasonably good grasp of reality, of what is real and what is imagined or illusory. Whilst we may differ from others about some details of the content, we generally share a sense of what's real and what's not. In fact, it's this consensus reality that allows us to function socially in a world that requires us to find food, shelter and sexual partners, and to be vigilant about possible sources of personal or communal threat or benefit. Some might see this Everyday Reality as a sort of highly simplified but very practical working model of Ultimate Reality. Indeed, the evolutionist might argue that Everyday Reality is *all* we need to know since this itself is entirely suited to favouring our survival. They may hold that evolutionary principles alone can account for the elaborate interconnectedness and complexity of the myriad life forms of the world. What's more, they may believe that evolutionary theory can do this very succinctly in the absence of any form of intelligent design.

And evolution through natural selection can be seen to be a process or pattern extending across countless millennia - *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* has no quibble with this. Indeed, it would be hard to argue

with such strong evidence as there is in favour of the theory. What the book is saying is that this pattern is not the deepest, most real, reality, because there is an Ultimate Reality behind and beyond it and evolutionary theory is completely unsuited to account for the issues this greater reality deals with. It's simply not designed to address some things: What happened on the Earth in the eight hundred million years before evolution could begin, before the existence of any known life form; why a universe came into being in the first place; why there is anything at all. And it does not tell us anything about the minutiae of life - those seemingly irrelevant thoughts, episodes and adventures we each experience minute-by-minute every day: why we dropped our glasses on getting out of the car, why we repeatedly encountered the person we were avoiding as we walked around the supermarket, why it rained consistently on the one day we had time to cut the grass. These innumerable experiences - indeed almost *all* experiences - are deeply irrelevant to the grand and ongoing pattern being played out through evolution. But they're important to each of us even if to no-one else; to each of us they are the stuff of life. We have a continuing sense that we're more than only that which is tangible - and especially that our mind, the seat of our consciousness, is somehow separate from but as real as our physical body.

And that is what this book is about: the micro and the macro of life. But it's not just about what happened in the past, it's about what's happening *now*, in this moment. Why does everything continue to be, and where on earth does it all go when it's been and gone?

Cosmic Consciousness

It's important to stress that here we're not arguing the case for - or against - intelligent design. Rather we're seeking the truth about Ultimate Reality wherever and whatever it may be, and we're searching for a way to experience it for ourselves. Indeed, there's nothing in *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* that the reader cannot experience for themselves. The personal encounter of uniting with Ultimate Reality - the immediate, awesome, world-shattering *internal explosion of awareness* that comes with a personal

encounter with Ultimate Reality - will be called Cosmic Consciousness to distinguish it from all other formulations and experiences of consciousness and (relative) reality.

It's recognised that this is fine for those who claim to have experienced Cosmic Consciousness: no doubt, for them, seeing was indeed believing. But what's so wrong with our Everyday Reality? Why isn't that enough? The thing is, over the centuries, a rather spectacular array of philosophers, religious leaders, mystics, scientists, writers and pundits of all shapes and creeds have claimed that our everyday sense of what is real is illusory, and that you and I are living in a sort of dream world that we quite erroneously assume to be the one and only true reality. These thinkers have, not surprisingly, expressed their teaching in a manner consistent with their own time. They will no doubt have used the culturally-specific linguistic conventions of their day, which would at some level have been comprehensible to their immediate audience. So, for example, when Jesus spoke of Ultimate Reality he alluded to 'God', whom he likened to a father caring for His children; Buddha talked not of God but of Nirvana as the transcendental Ultimate Reality behind all appearances. But they're also talking to us; regardless of the differences between these and many more teachers in terms of the times in which they lived and their languages, cultures and creeds, they have all gone on to describe an Ultimate Reality behind Everyday Reality. And if this mysterious 'reality behind all realities' was here then, it's probably still here now.

This book will address the two basic questions that arise from these ideas: Firstly, how feasible is it that these various thinkers were right - that there is a 'hidden' Ultimate Reality behind our everyday awareness of reality? Secondly, if Ultimate Reality is really here, there or somewhere else, how can each of us go about experiencing it for ourselves?

What is Ultimate Reality and where can I find it?

Words can be a problem. Is Ultimate Reality really *ultimate*? And what does 'ultimate' mean anyway in its application to Life, the

Universe and Everything? We routinely use grossly exaggerated terms to describe our experiences. We might, for example, talk about the musician or TV programme we saw last night as 'incredible' or a new hairstyle as 'amazing', and so it is with numerous elements of our common experience. Ordinarily this is fine, but there are times - such as when we really want to describe something as 'AWESOME!' - when this linguistic inflation means all attempts at description are inadequate: if his breakfast had been 'awesome' how would you expect St Paul to describe his blinding encounter with God on the road to Damascus?

When we're talking about 'The Reality Behind Everything' - Ultimate Reality - the word 'ultimate' is only a way of communicating the unconditional and unlimited nature of this - its essential differentness from any other understanding of reality that there could ever be. As St Augustine said, it is *that which is*.⁶ As we have already noted, it is the absolute, deepest, most *real* reality there could be, in whatever form it may take. It is whatever lies behind everything we experience. Which is not to say that Ultimate Reality is a 'something' in the usual sense of the word. This book does not presume a vast cosmic plan for you, me or the universe. Nor does it make assumptions about the nature of Ultimate Reality. The word 'ultimate' as used here refers to the utterly unqualified and supreme reality behind *everything that is*, as opposed to the variable, temporary and debateable reality we all know and more or less share most of the time and which, for our purposes here, we have called Everyday Reality.

Though some sense of the radical distinction between Everyday Reality and Ultimate Reality is conveyed through films like *The Matrix*⁷, the idea that we *really do* live within an illusion is rather

⁶ St Augustine: *Confessions (Book VII)*. Translated by Edward Bouverie Pusey. Available online at: <http://www.dsusd.k12.ca.us/users/christopherg/classic%20novels/augustine-theconfessions.pdf>

⁷ *The Matrix* (Warner Bros, 1999)

novel to the western mind; it is, however, deeply entrenched in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions. In Buddhist thought, for example, the term *saṃvṛti-satya* refers to the illusion of truth that is based on the common understanding of ordinary people (like us). Though it's very useful for day-to-day communication, this conception of reality is distinct, in Buddhist terms, from Ultimate Reality (*paramartha-satya*) which is at the heart of *everything that is*, including Everyday Reality. The complexities of language can present quite a formidable challenge to any discussion in this field and many terms have been used to denote, for example, the varying religious formulations of reality. From this point on we'll mostly stick to using the English terms Everyday Reality and Ultimate Reality, though at times we'll also use their respective Sanskrit equivalents: Samsara and Nirvana.⁸

At times *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* will make assertions that could be seen as strange, bizarre, sometimes contradictory and illogical. You will see, for example, that it claims that time doesn't exist, but at other points states that the present moment takes place just before we are aware of it, so consigning what we generally think of as 'the present' into the past. These claims are clearly in conflict with each other: does time exist or does it not exist? You can't have it both ways. Yet, *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* will argue that you can indeed have it both ways because some of these claims are not intended to be taken as literal truths. They are raised in order to illustrate a point or to assist the reader in straddling a particularly difficult obstacle posed by a mind-set that is based in an Everyday Reality that is real but can also be seen to be illusory.

All we really need to bear in mind is that *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* holds it possible to describe only what Ultimate Reality *is like* but not to describe *what it actually is*. This rather oblique approach has been necessary, both here and by writers and teachers across many cultures and times, because in the attempt to describe Ultimate

⁸ Both Samsara and Nirvana are ancient Sanskrit words, Samsara literally meaning 'he flows into himself' and Nirvana meaning ... well, if that could be said in a footnote there would be no need for this book, would there?

Reality, words reach their limit and cease to function at all. Hence the widespread use of parables, symbolism, metaphor, koans, haiku, mandalas and so on, in describing what Ultimate Reality is like. We'll return to this point again and again because it's so easy to forget. As a reminder, the words in the text box below are scattered, liberally and tediously, throughout *Mindfulness, Now and Zen*:

**Although we can say what Ultimate
Reality is like, we cannot say *what it
actually is.***

So, let's deal with the claims you've read about already: on what grounds can it be said that we're not experiencing 'reality'? The patent reality of our everyday experience seems unquestionable. Whilst evolutionary theory informs us that a personal commitment to the authenticity of Everyday Reality confers a selective advantage that has been essential to our survival as a species, this fervent belief in everyday experience is perhaps our greatest obstacle to discovering Ultimate Reality. When we're absolutely certain in what we believe to be true, we're very unlikely to seriously look beyond this. In the words of Kevin Spacey, *'The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist.'*⁹

What's not real?

The question is, when Jesus Christ tells us there is a single omnipotent God, when Hindu teaching talks of perhaps 330 million Gods, but of only one Supreme Cosmic Spirit beyond all gods (Brahman), and when Buddhist doctrine maintains there is no God

⁹ *The Usual Suspects* (1995) MGM Studios, USA: see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_cLDADxJ-E

but there is Nirvana, are they necessarily talking about different things? Is it possible that these various constructs are simply different ways of interpreting and describing the indescribable essence of the same Ultimate Reality?

Perhaps in our Everyday Reality we routinely only experience that which is (metaphorically-speaking) reflected or echoed, but fail to see the source of these experiences. How would we know if this were the case anyway? Moreover, this is not to say that our Everyday Reality is not in some way real. Is the reflection in a mirror real? It is of course, though only insofar as it's part of a bigger story. For the ancient Greek philosopher, mathematician and mystic, Plato (c.428-348 BCE), those imprisoned in his hypothetical cave see 'real' shadows, but there is more.¹⁰ With the mirror the whole story involves the reflection as well as the 'real' world that is being reflected. So it is with Everyday Reality; it is real to an extent but it is not the whole story. Many teachings indicate that to completely understand reality - to experience Cosmic Consciousness - involves understanding everything at once, outside of time, and it is this whole that is Ultimate Reality. What this could mean is discussed in depth in Chapter 14 (Unity). For now though, we need to look a little closer at what a state of timelessness could be like.

• • • • • •

¹⁰ If you have no idea what this is about, fear not. There is much more about Plato and the prisoners' analogy later in the book in the chapter on Illusions.

THE UNIVERSE

Chapter 2.

What it's all about

Over 100 years ago Albert Einstein proposed his theory of special relativity. This held that as a moving object accelerates, the passage of time *for the object* will progressively slow down. However, as it accelerates it also gains mass. Theoretically, if the object was travelling in a vacuum - like that in outer space - it would reach infinite mass at the speed of light (299,792,458 metres per second, or about 671 million miles per hour). Whilst infinite mass is not tenable, travel at the speed of light is possible for massless particles or associated fields (like light). So, a photon of light¹¹ is able to travel at the speed of light and at this speed *time* will have slowed to such an extent that, for the photon, time will cease to exist. From our perspective on Earth, light takes around eight minutes to travel from the Sun. But from the perspective of the photon of sunlight reaching us, the exact moment it left the Sun was the exact moment it arrived on the Earth.

In some ways this book is rooted in speculation about what happens when time has slowed to zero, to non-existence, as it does for the photon described above. At this point where nothing changes, everything simply *is*. What this could be like may seem to be beyond our imaginings, but there are those who claim they have known it and they have said it is no less than consciousness of Ultimate Reality. And though this may be a claim too far for the scientific mind, here, as you will see, we have divested ourselves of the shackles and self-imposed limitations of the scientific method, of logic and everyday reasoning, and we can indulge our wilder speculations. This particular indulgence is not, however, new. Einstein himself is credited with having:

¹¹ A photon is the fundamental particle of visible light, which is a sub-microscopic discrete packet of energy.

... repeatedly expressed suspicion of the restrictions of linear thought, concluding that propositions arrived at by purely logical means were completely empty of reality even if one could properly explain what "reality" means; it was intuition, he declared, that had been crucial to his thinking.¹²

.....

This book is unusual in that it will talk *around* its subject matter rather than addressing it directly. The reason for this is that Ultimate Reality is said to be both beyond description in words and beyond concepts and conceptualisation. It's not often a book begins by explaining that it will deal with everything except its own subject matter. But that's what Ultimate Reality is. It's everything. This book is about every question you can think of that deals with the essential nature of reality. Why are we here? Where did we come from? Where are we going? Indeed, why is there anything at all?

By and large, all human beings might be said to share a number of basic beliefs. These include the very reasonable convictions that we exist as individuals, that this existence takes place in a world with a unidirectional and consistent flow of time, and that conflicting opposites cannot both be true. These assumptions, and no doubt many more, are so close to us and so much a part of our being that we rarely know they are there. But their presumed truth affects everything we experience and, more importantly, *limits* what we will allow ourselves to believe to be true, or real, or possible. The result is that we tend to see what we expect to see and tend not to see what we do not expect to see. And so it is when we seek Ultimate Reality. In his tale of a travelling monk who is enlightened some years after meeting the Buddha, German poet and novelist Herman Hesse (1877-1962) points out the problem with actively searching for Ultimate Reality. Here the monk, Siddhartha, is speaking with his fellow monk, Govinda:

¹² Matthiessen P (1987) *Nine-Headed Dragon River*. Fontana Paperbacks, London, pp.76-7.

"When someone is seeking", said Siddhartha, "it happens quite easily that he only sees the thing he is seeking; that he is unable to find anything, unable to absorb anything, because he is only thinking of the thing he is seeking, because he has a goal, because he is obsessed with his goal. Seeking means: to have a goal; but finding means: to be free, to be receptive, to have no goal. You, O worthy one, are perhaps indeed a seeker, for in striving towards your goal, you do not see many things that are under your nose" ¹³

One problem with seeking Ultimate Reality is that this simple act contains the hidden implication that there is a 'something' to be found, and this brings its own set of questions and assumptions about the nature of Ultimate Reality. On the other hand, it is surely true that in order to seek, one must first have some idea of the characteristics of that which one is seeking. The irony is that this will inevitably limit what might be found. In the search for Ultimate Reality this is particularly important because we simply can't know, in advance of finding it, what it is that we are actually looking for. Eminent evolutionary biologist and acclaimed atheist, Richard Dawkins (b.1941), seems to make this error in thinking in his book *The God Delusion*, where he observes that:

... if the word God is not to become completely useless, it should be used in the way people have generally understood it: to denote a supernatural creator that is 'appropriate for us to worship'. ¹⁴

If we were to adopt Dawkins' criteria in this book we would have to rule both Buddhism and Confucianism out of the equation - as indeed he does.¹⁵ We would necessarily be looking for an Ultimate Reality that is a 'something' with characteristics and boundaries peculiar to itself and beyond which the term would no longer apply. We would also expect Ultimate Reality to be 'supernatural', 'creative'

¹³ Hesse H (1973) *Siddhartha*. Pan Books Ltd., London, p.110.

¹⁴ Dawkins R (2006) *The God Delusion*. Bantam Press, London, p.33.

¹⁵ *ibid*, p.59.

and 'appropriate for worship'. But why stop there? Why not add on a few other potential attributes of a deity: omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, and so on?

But this is not all. The limitations that are imposed by what we expect to find are rarely conscious, which means we frequently completely miss the point:

*Unconscious biases act like filters between our perceptions and our intellects. They enable us to screen out observations that do not fit in with our preconceived notions and to see causal relationships where none exist. Worst of all, they blind us to their own presence so that we are quick to defend our erroneous hypotheses with shouts of "I saw it with my own eyes!"*¹⁶

Whilst these unconscious beliefs, expectations and limitations are generally no problem for us in everyday life, they do mean we sometimes can't see the wood for the trees:

*There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys, how's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?"*¹⁷

So, how can we get around this? To use an old cliché, we really do need to 'think outside the box', much as the fish need to 'think outside the ocean'. We're talking about a paradigm shift here and need to look at things beyond our usual preconceptions of what reality is and what it *could* be. We each have a vast, largely unacknowledged, reservoir of these preconceptions, the majority of which are probably unconscious and deeply buried somewhere in our psyche. We need to suspend these beliefs and disbeliefs about what

¹⁶ Weil A (2004) *The Natural Mind*. Houghton Mifflin Co., New York. p.8.

¹⁷ An old Hindu tale retold by David Foster Wallace. See: <http://alanashley.wordpress.com/2011/07/28/this-is-water/>

can and cannot be real in order to consider what alternatives there may be. Many of the chapters in this book are followed by specific *Exercises in Cosmic Thinking* to help us to 'get outside the box', to enable our thinking to be more versatile and to identify and question whether the unquestioned assumptions we make are necessarily true.

What it's not all about

This book is not intended to be an exhaustive academic, or even objective, account of every (or, indeed, any) strand of philosophical or religious thought that's mentioned in it. Rather than debating all sides of the argument and taking the more conventional route of looking at their differences, the text focuses on the *similarities* between ideas. Thus Plato's thoughts on the illusory nature of our Everyday Reality are compared with similar expressions evident in Hinduism, Christian mysticism and particle physics. This distinctly unbalanced approach is quite unacceptable to western intellectual debate, where all the evidence - both that in favour and that against the argument - is expected to be considered before a balanced conclusion can be reached. This book contends that a serious problem with academic studies by philosophers and theologians is that they have a tendency, some might say a lifelong ambition, to get caught up in the detail of what (they think) makes their particular take on a subject different from, and better than, any other. They would not, and could not, have written this book, which skips over superficial differences to look at the *essence* of the various teachings that are mentioned. These creeds and beliefs have generally been brought into the book to illustrate a point and there will no doubt be plenty of occasions when the citations used could have been interpreted differently.

It's acknowledged that this focus on similarities means *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* could be accused of cherry-picking. That is, of taking favoured excerpts from wherever and ignoring the bits that don't fit in with the premise being proposed. Reasonable as this criticism may be, we should not ignore the possibility that looking for similarities and ignoring differences can be productive. For example, it means we do not get embroiled in the detail of numerous academic debates,

whether secular or religious, theological or philosophical. And whilst balanced argument is fundamental to academic progress, in this sphere it does have the tendency to split opinion into an ever-increasing number of factions, each of which then has a 'position' to uphold. We see this in the debates between atheists and theists, and in all the major world religions, for example, in the Catholic/Protestant debate within Christianity; in Theravada/Mahayana Buddhism, and in Sunni/Shia Islam. In the emotional fervour resulting from the competition between differing schools of thought we run the serious risk of forgetting what we were looking for in the first place.

What's more, this one-sided search for similarities may allow us to pursue some lines of thinking that are outside our usual conceptual framework and are therefore frequently ignored or dismissed out of hand. There's a certain freedom in disconnecting from the requirement to follow a logical or rational course and so build up an argument in the usual form of a narrative work. Essentially it offers the opportunity to take part in a series of cognitive meanderings, such as the *Exercises in Cosmic Thinking* found scattered throughout the book. To this end what you will read is a shameless mix of selective aspects of different philosophies, writings and random rantings. It does not necessarily purport to represent any of these in their totality, but focuses on the aspects of each that are pertinent to Ultimate Reality and Cosmic Consciousness. There may be numerous more peripheral aspects of the teachings of Jesus, Buddha, Plato, Einstein and so on, that outrightly contradict each other, but these will be wilfully ignored. Instead, the focus will be on some of the core elements of their thought, and it will be seen that these frequently resonate with each other.

You'll also see that the text includes many examples where rationality is compromised. *Time* is a good example of this, for earlier we read that it may travel at differing speeds but then we went on to read that it may not exist at all. In its defence, it should be remembered that *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* is not intended to represent a single entity that is consistently rational or logical

throughout. What it is intended to do is to stimulate thinking about Ultimate Reality and the experience of it - what we're calling Cosmic Consciousness - and this does not restrict us to such artificial limitations as rationality and logic. Nor is this without precedent. Current thinking in particle physics is that there may be several acceptable 'overlapping' explanations for reality which need not necessarily 'match up' with one another.¹⁸ As Forrest Gump said: "*I do not know if we each have a destiny, or if we're all just floating around accidentally on a breeze, but I, I think maybe it's both at the same time*".¹⁹

And, in the end, don't forget:

**Although we can say what Ultimate
Reality *is like*, we cannot say *what it
actually is.***

Religion: the opium of the people ...²⁰

... or just man's attempt to communicate with the weather?²¹ This book is aimed at those for whom orthodox religion frequently seems

¹⁸ This idea, *model-dependent realism*, is described by Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow in their book *The Grand Design* (2010), Bantam Books, New York.

¹⁹ From the film *Forrest Gump* (1994) Paramount Pictures Corporation, Hollywood, USA.

²⁰ Thanks to Marx K and Ruge A (1844) *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, Paris.

²¹ Graffiti from Kingsbridge, Devon, England. Quoted in Rees N (1979) *Graffiti Lives OK*. Unwin, London.

to be either impenetrable jargon, weak-minded wishful thinking, fantasy or just plain nonsense. Its goal is to identify some of the things that we believe we know with certainty, to separate them from those that we do not know with certainty, and to disentangle both from speculation. This doesn't mean *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* will not take you deeply into the realms of uncertainty and speculation of course. It just means that you'll know that you're there and will be in a position to differentiate this from the world as you know it. And who knows? Speculation on the eternal mysteries of life may be useful. For centuries the impenetrability of many religious doctrines has been applauded for being 'how it should be'. This is the 'mystery of God' as expressed by the Christian faith, it's the obscure koans of Zen Buddhism, in Judaism the esoteric teachings of Kabbalah, the mandala patterns of Hinduism and maybe even the complex mathematical language of particle physics. The question is, 'what can we learn from all this mystery?'

But before addressing this, let's consider why there has to be such a mystery in the first place. Why is Ultimate Reality so elusive? In these pages we aim to shed some light on this and hopefully to state in simple terms that which *can* be stated in simple terms. However, we can only ever describe what Ultimate Reality is *like* and can never state *what it is*. In fact, nothing in *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* could purport to explain or describe what Ultimate Reality *is*, because a book can only use words to represent concepts, which themselves can only represent or otherwise indicate some essence of Ultimate Reality. Neither concepts nor words can ever *take you there*; they can never *be* that which they purport to describe. This is because both concepts and words function in a rather artificial sort of way. They take the world apart, categorising and classifying, bit by bit, so when they are used to communicate the essence of reality and reconstruct it as it is, they inevitably fail because Ultimate Reality may not be divisible in this, or any other, way.²² This is one reason

²² Of course, Ultimate Reality may not exist at all: the explanation for whatever is going on behind and beneath everything may be that there is no

why the entire book should be seen as an exercise in cosmic thinking rather than being taken as a literal text. And when logic appears to fly out of the window it's worth remembering the poet Keats' term 'negative capability', which indicates the value that can be found in holding conflicting opposites to be equally feasible. In any case, why should we assume *a priori* that Ultimate Reality is itself necessarily logical or rational?

Mindfulness, Now and Zen also aims to help us see some of the obstacles we've inadvertently fashioned that we may need to dismantle before Ultimate Reality can be personally experienced. Perhaps we should accept that anything is possible, no matter how astronomically improbable it may seem, unless we can know for certain that it is *absolutely* impossible. Chapter 25, on Impossibility, deals with this very issue in some detail, but for now it seems at least prudent to assume that our knowledge of what is and is not possible, may be deeply flawed. Given this, the safest route is to assume that any idea about the nature of reality should be ruled *in* if it can't be ruled *out* on the grounds of impossibility.²³ And remember, many of the ideas discussed in the text do not need to be literally true or even correctly understood by the author. It may seem strange that the interpretation of the scientific and philosophical points raised here need not be accurate and in fact could be entirely erroneous. But they are given because the interpretation allocated to them allows them to demonstrate a point. Even gibberish can play a role in helping us to find our way to the truth that we're calling Ultimate Reality.

explanation. Or it may be that there are multiple explanations (see Chapter 14 on Unity or Chapter 17 on Describing the Indescribable).

²³ Though there are some strong opponents of this - Bertrand Russell, for example, who asserted that it is the responsibility of religious dogmatists to prove their claims rather than that of sceptics to disprove them. Richard Dawkins has made a similar point, that the odds in favour of the existence of a deity are not equal to (and in fact are considerably lower than) the odds against.

When a pickpocket meets a saint, he sees only his pockets

Why can't we all see Ultimate Reality right here and right now? Why should Nirvana, or for that matter an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent God of Love, spend so much time eluding us?

"Well", you may say, "it's quite simply because He, She or It, is not there". This is, of course, quite a compelling explanation, though it does raise numerous questions of its own, like 'What started the Big Bang?', 'Is there anything outside the universe?', 'Does the universe even have an outside?', 'Why do the laws of the universe appear as they do?' and, crucially, 'Why is there anything at all?'

In any case, as we've seen, maybe our inability to 'find' Ultimate Reality has something to do with the way in which we're defining the term. For example, any form of 'search for Ultimate Reality' presupposes that it's inherently findable. On the other hand, the answer may have more to do with the way we - human beings - tend to look at things. In particular, our failure to know Ultimate Reality may have much more to do with *how* we're looking and much less to do with *where* we're looking. So, exactly how have we been looking and what's been wrong with it?

Finding Ultimate Reality: The search behind appearances

There is a theory which states that if ever anyone discovers exactly what the Universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable. There is another theory which states that this has already happened.

²⁴

It was the eminent polymath, evolutionary biologist and mathematician, JBS Haldane (1892-1964) who suspected the universe to be ... *not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than*

²⁴ From the preface to Adams D (1980) *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*. Pan Books, London.

*we can suppose.*²⁵ As human beings, the way we deal with the information we receive from the external world imposes distinct limitations on what we can know. We routinely perceive and reflect upon the world through a series of conceptualisations or concepts: tree, river, dog, paper, sky, love, wish, hope and so on. Clearly, everything we can conceive of, by definition, is manipulated and given meaning by the intellectual activity of our brains. But more than this, our cognitive processing works in such a way that every single concept has both positive and correspondingly oppositional, negative, characteristics. Some of these are obvious: up/down; black/white; love/hate etc. But what of those concepts with no obviously opposing features, like tree, dog, paper, sky?

In fact, each of these is not a single concept but is rather a collection of concepts. Each consists of qualities or characteristics that both identify its differences from all else in the world and highlight similarities and relationships with other concepts. So, with the idea of 'dog' for example, what are the characteristics that tell us something is a dog and not a tree or a vase? It's not too hard to identify the basic positive attributes of 'dogness': living organism, mammal, carnivorous, four-legged, furry etc. The negative aspects of dogness - what distinguishes a dog from anything else - are the negation of the positive characteristics: not non-organic, not blunt-toothed, not hairless and so on. It's because every concept has both positive and negative characteristics that we can identify whatever the concept relates to. This up/down, sharp/blunt, living/dead conceptualisation of the world works very efficiently when we simply wish to get on with our everyday lives. But this is in a sense artificial and takes us no nearer to whatever it is that lies behind these outward appearances. This, it is said, is Ultimate Reality, which itself is beyond these contradictory qualities. The simple but nevertheless profound dynamic that accounts for the fact that we do not tend to experience that which is 'beyond contradictory qualities' has been referred to in various ways over the centuries. In the East it

²⁵ Haldane JBS (1927) *Possible Worlds and Other Papers*, Chatto & Windus, London. p.286

is known as duality, as typified by the yin-yang relationship, and much will be said of it in the following pages. It is fundamental to the way we think and has been seen as lying at the root of what we are. If you would like to read more on this now, have a look at the relevant chapter by clicking on this hyperlink for Duality.

Finding Ultimate Reality: The search for the present moment

Another reason that we're not consciously basking in unity with Ultimate Reality may be that we're looking in the wrong direction: we need to stop looking 'out there' and re-focus on getting back to the only reality that each of us knows - our totally subjective and unique consciousness of the present moment. The issue is that we routinely look for explanations of reality 'out there' in the phenomenal world of things, places and people, when the immediate act of knowing takes place entirely within the cognitive structure of our brains. Not only that, but we routinely inhabit a remembered past and an anticipated future *as if they really exist*. Indeed, others might consider it most peculiar if we didn't continue to happily reside in this fantasy land on either side of *now*, despite the fact that we all know the present moment is all there is - the past has gone and the future is yet to be.

Maybe this seems acceptable because the world 'out there' appears to work as we expect it to most of the time and it's only when we come to think about it in detail that things get a little strange. After all, Sir Isaac Newton's ideas on gravity worked very well for nearly 230 years and it was only when Albert Einstein came along with some novel thinking that people had to re-evaluate their opinions. The supposed reality of the tangible world is especially confusing. We know the world through our five senses, but this particular data-gathering equipment is hardly reliable. The Christian apologist and scholar CS Lewis (1898-1963) has said as much:

Five senses; an incurably abstract intellect; a haphazardly selective memory; a set of preconceptions and assumptions so numerous that I can never examine more than a minority of them - never become

even conscious of them all. How much of total reality can such an apparatus let through? ²⁶

When we perceive an object or event through our senses it takes a tiny amount of time for our nervous system to transfer the sensory impression (as electrical and chemical signals) through our nerve fibres to the relevant neural networks within our brain. Until this process has happened we will not be consciously aware of the object or event that stimulated our awareness in the first place. For example, imagine there is a cup on the table in front of you. With a fingertip you gently touch the cup. The sensory information will travel along nerve fibres in your finger, along your arm and to your brain, where it will be processed and if it's substantial will reach your conscious awareness and you will know you have touched the cup.

But before we have had the opportunity to consciously process the information entering our brains and telling us that we have touched a cup, there is a delay. Even when we look at a cup, though the delay is exceedingly small, the light travelling from the cup will still have taken time to reach the sensory apparatus that has the function of responding to visual stimuli - the eyes.²⁷ And when the light entering the eyes hits the retina, we're not consciously aware of the existence of the object until the signal generated by the light has travelled along the brain pathway that processes visual information. This takes a further amount of time - about 70 milliseconds.²⁸

Clearly, this is not restricted to cups but relates to all manner of visible external phenomena. The nearest star to Earth is proxima centauri and it is more than four light years away, that is, its light takes over four years to reach the Earth. What we see when we look at proxima centauri is how it looked four years ago, not how it looks

²⁶ Lewis CS (1961) *A Grief Observed*. Faber and Faber Ltd, London.

²⁷ If the cup is one metre away it will take just under three hundred millionths of a second for the light to reach your eyes.

²⁸ Salk Institute for Biological Studies (2006) *We live in the past and our brain makes up for it*.

http://www.salk.edu/news/pressrelease_details.php?press_id=162

now. What we see when we look at the cup on the table is how it looked a split second ago, *not as it is now*.

So it is with any sensory impression arriving at our consciousness from an external stimulus. Our five senses - touch, taste, hearing, sight and smell - all work in the same way, though at differing speeds. So, for example, our eyes inform us of the existence of an object before our sense of hearing because light travels faster than sound waves. Nevertheless, each sense works in a similar way: all external stimuli must first travel to our bodies and then to our brains before being converted into unconscious and conscious awareness. Even the automatic reactions that protect the body, such as the reflex arc, must take time to function. This means the object of our awareness, say, the cup on the table in front of us, is 'being' the cup a moment before we're aware of it; what we're experiencing as a cup in the here-and-now is actually a cup in the there-and-then, how it was a moment ago, not how it is *now*.²⁹

So what are we experiencing? Usually, when we talk about something that has already happened, as in the case of the cup, we refer to it as being in the past. However, the cup was 'being the cup' before we experienced it, so its 'being' preceded us. In fact, it's us who are in the past since at the moment we perceived it the cup was, relatively speaking, in the future, and all we know of it is how it was in the past.

You may reasonably point out that there are certain things that we know to exist though we have not directly experienced them ourselves through our senses. For example, those entities that we know of only through the use of machinery or instruments that we have devised. X-rays, infra-red frequencies and Black Holes all fall

²⁹ What's more, the constantly changing molecular structure of the cup of our experience has been and gone anyway, having changed to being a new cup by the time we are aware of it. And as if that's not enough, we have the added problem that caused Heisenberg so much trouble - the light bouncing off any object that enables us to see it, itself disturbs the object. The cup we see is most definitely not the cup that *is*.

within this category. Whilst we do not have direct sensory experience of these phenomena, maybe we can infer their objective existence from the machinery concerned? But then again, how do we know what the machines are telling us? As Austrian-born physicist Fritjof Capra (b.1939) has pointed out:

*The delicate and complicated instruments of modern experimental physics penetrate deep into the submicroscopic world, into realms of nature far removed from our macroscopic environment, and make this world accessible to our senses. However, they can do so only through a chain of processes ending, for example, in the audible click of a Geiger counter, or in a dark spot on a photographic plate. What we see, or hear, are never the investigated phenomena themselves but always their consequences. The atomic and subatomic world itself lies beyond our sensory perception.*³⁰

And so it is with all modern scientific instruments. Their readings tell us nothing *directly* of the nature of the world they seem to measure, and furthermore we only know what they tell us through our sensory perception of their readings. Each one of us is still entirely reliant on direct sensory perception in order to know anything of the world of phenomena, whether it be X-rays or cups. And don't forget, machines can only tell us that otherwise undetectable phenomena *have existed in the very recent past*, and the very recent past is not *now*, which is the present moment. So it seems that for the time being the cup in the past, cup in the present, dilemma must remain.

And what of the 'knowledge' that is delivered to us not through the world of the senses but through the act of thinking? Mathematical knowledge was especially valued by the ancient Greek philosophers, some of whom saw it as possessing a reality above and beyond that of sensory perception. Plato, for example, held that the body is a hindrance to the perception of true knowledge. He extended this idea

³⁰ Capra F (1981) *The Tao of Physics*. The Chaucer Press Ltd., Bungay, England, pp.52-53.

to include all learning based on empirical knowledge, for this belongs to the 'world of appearance'. This line of thinking implies that scientific observation and experimentation should be excluded as methods to attain knowledge of reality. For Plato, the philosopher will look instead to the truths that may be grasped through mathematics and mystic insight.

Yet, even the perception of mathematical knowledge must take place within our consciousness if we are to know it at all. And the 'moment of consciousness' remains elusive; even our consciousness of mathematical knowledge involves our reflecting on intellectual activity that has been and gone, albeit only a moment ago. The point is that relative to our conscious understanding of what we routinely consider to be 'the present moment', the actual present moment is in the future. Light takes time to travel and our cognitive processing itself takes time to function. For all organisms, including human beings, cognitive mechanisms have to interpret whatever signals are received from the internal and external environments of the body and the world respectively, at any given point in time. Whatever we may believe to be reality, our understanding of it remains in the past relative to the point where change occurs in anything in the outside world of things and events - the phenomenal world - as well as anything in the internal world of intellectual activity.

The question is, does any of this matter in the least? Ordinarily we are able to get on with life without concerning ourselves too much with minuscule delays in perception. However, in this book we're searching for Ultimate Reality, and the discovery that our experiences are no more than an 'echo' or memory trace of what is really happening in the present moment is actually rather crucial. For one thing, it suggests we know absolutely nothing at all about what's *really* going on in the phenomenal world of tangible things, events and actions, and this has quite a few implications for seekers of Ultimate Reality - the next chapter, What we don't know, will go through this in some detail.

Finding Ultimate Reality: The search outside our egos

Quite apart from our failure to grasp the reality of the present moment, we also inhabit the distinctly subjective world created by our own ego. It is ego that gives us the sense that we're separate from everyone else and separate from the rest of existence. In fact, this sense of separateness may be *all* we know with any reasonable certainty - an idea explored in the philosophical concept of solipsism, which asserts that the existence of one's own mind is all of which one can be certain.

Of course, it may be true to say that to experience anything at all in the usual sense of the word you need an ego, and a healthy ego is seen as essential to good psychological wellbeing. But here we're using the word in a rather different way from the Freudian, or any other, psychological sense. Here the term 'ego' denotes our deeply-held conviction that we are separate from all other individuals, not only physically but also mentally. *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* will go on to look at the idea that ego is illusory and will also explore the possibility that rather than thinking about humans as independent entities which have an ego and experience the external world, we are experiencing *because we are ego*. To put this another way, we are not entities experiencing the world, *we are* that experience and *it is us*. The same could be said of time: we do not experience time, we are what the experience of time is (a point discussed in Chapters 7 and 20 - Ego and Do-it-yourself - in relation to Buddhist teachings on the illusion of 'self').

What's wrong with having an ego?

It's a bit of a digression but, while we're here, it's worth noting that there's nothing at all wrong with having an ego. In fact, there's no reason to suppose that the possession of an ego, like anything else in our Everyday Reality, is not exactly as it's 'supposed to be'. The point is that despite our immensely strong conviction that the things that happen to us and to the world in general could have been somehow different, it may be that there's no reason to believe anything should be other than what it is, what it has been and what it will be. In other words, there are no grounds to conclude that every thought we think,

every action we take and every experience we do or do not have, should have been anything other than what they were or were not. Perhaps everything you do, every tragedy you encounter, every wonder you perceive, is and always has been perfectly as it should be. Perhaps you are perfect right now. In fact, perhaps everything is absolutely perfect all the time. The whole idea that things could or should be other than as they are may be an illusion, despite the fact that every fibre of your being - as well as the teachings of many major religions - seems to contradict this. Indeed, an entire branch of philosophy has grown around the Freewill/Determinism debate and much can be said about the whole subject area - have a look at [Absolute Perfection](#) for more on this.

Finding Ultimate Reality: The search in the tangible world

We have already touched on the way we're absolutely fascinated by the tangible stuff we encounter every day of our lives. Almost all secular attempts to explain the nature of Ultimate Reality focus on some manifestation or other of the physical world. This is not surprising since we live in a universe where almost everything seems to be 'out there' in some way: planets, stars, and the Earth itself with its natural world of people, animals, insects, micro-organisms and so on. All lie somehow outside of 'us', outside whatever we each feel ourselves to be. This almost exclusive focus on what is 'out there' is most apparent in the acquisition of knowledge through the methods adopted by scientific enquiry. The entirety of the scientific approach to discovery has come to be known as the 'scientific method', defined as:

*... a method of procedure that has characterized natural science since the 17th century, consisting in systematic observation, measurement, and experiment, and the formulation, testing, and modification of hypotheses.*³¹

³¹ Oxford Dictionaries Online.

<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/scientific+method>

This approach is fundamental to numerous areas of human interest, ranging from particle physics to evolutionary theory, and all are focused on tangible matter. If something is detectable directly through our senses, if its existence can be indirectly inferred from the evidence of the machines we have invented, or even if tangible phenomena predict its existence, then we tacitly assume this must be where reality is to be found. So the question 'Does God exist?' is frequently approached by the more sceptical scientific enquirer as if the answer is to be found somewhere 'out there' in the tangible world. Furthermore, the rationalist is likely to believe the question can quite reasonably be tested by subjecting the hypothesis to examination by the scientific method.³² However, this belief in the validity of scientific discovery is itself open to question. What if the cosmos in its entirety is not subject to the same boundaries as those set by the scientific method? What if Ultimate Reality is not founded on logical reasoning, cause and effect, the passage of time and so on? To raise these questions is not to suggest that we should dispense with the scientific method altogether. Nor is it to claim that scientific theories are necessarily incorrect or to in some way to reject the vast repository of knowledge that scientific enquiry has generated over the years. It simply means that we should always remember that scientific findings are hypotheses or working models of reality rather than proven facts, and are based on a man-made set of principles specifying the boundaries to that which we will accept as being possible. In short, this means the principles of the scientific method have no validity beyond that which mankind allocates to them.

It's recognised that this is quite a claim, so the whole subject gets considerably more attention in Chapter 18, on the Scientific Method.

But this is not the end to it: it's worth having a brief look at what we mean when we talk about scientific discovery anyway. Long before

³² For example, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins has observed that: *'The presence or absence of a creative super-intelligence is unequivocally a scientific question, even if it is not in practice - or not yet - a decided one.'* Dawkins R (2006) *The God Delusion*. Bantam Press, London, p.82.

the steam engine was invented had it not always hypothetically been possible, in principle, to forge the iron, manufacture the components and assemble the relevant parts of the machine in the particular way that would result in a steam engine? Before the medicinal uses of antibiotics were discovered would they not have prevented the growth of bacteria? Use of phrases like 'scientific discovery' and 'scientific invention' has tended to be very loose and somehow leads to the implication that whatever is newly discovered or invented has only just come into being. This can easily mislead us in the quest for true knowledge. And we should remember that as we scientifically gather ever more information and detail about the natural world, we're not necessarily penetrating to the heart of Ultimate Reality. Rather, we're moving in a sort of spiral, perhaps getting closer and closer to the essence of reality but never actually reaching it. The bottom line is that science fails to go beyond this description of the universe and never actually reveals the specific mechanism at work behind phenomena. And as science tells us in greater and greater detail how things fit together, it still does not tell us *why*. But, as Richard Dawkins has pointed out, this does not necessarily mean that religion *will* be able to provide an answer.³³ And clearly there may be no answer to this 'Why?' question because *why* implies either an initial cause or a final goal and, as we shall see, neither of these may be meaningful in relation to Ultimate Reality. The point is that science cannot comment on this either way. Nor can it tell us why there is anything at all, though in fairness perhaps science was never established to address this question in the first place. There's more on this in Chapters 9 and 10, on Time and Duality.

Nevertheless, you may be thinking that in the search for Ultimate Reality the scientific method could have many benefits. How can we separate what is real from that which is misguided or erroneous belief, wishful thinking or blind prejudice? The scientific approach of repeatable experimentation with physical matter has been the common answer to these questions over the past few centuries and the scientific method has provided huge advances in medicine,

³³ Dawkins R (2006) *The God Delusion*. Bantam Press, London, p.80.

physics and technology, among other fields. But in the end, how do we know that tangible stuff - matter - is real? How do we know that what we encounter in everyday life is there at all and not simply the idea of itself? When you encounter a kitchen table you feel its presence as a tangible, hard, wooden object and see it in front of you, but how can you be sure your free-floating consciousness has not simply encountered the *idea* of a kitchen table somewhere within a universe consisting solely of the ideas of things? After all, such a 'world of ideas' would surely be a simpler way to account for our experiences than the notion of the so-called 'tangible world'?

These questions have spawned numerous debates within philosophy, most famously perhaps those relating to Subjective Idealism as advanced by Bishop George Berkeley (1685-1753). However, these will not be entered into here because the whole subject is dealt with more fully in Chapter 4, discussing What's *really* real? For now we must satisfy ourselves with the main question raised here: *How do we know anything at all?*

And the answer has already been mentioned of course: consciousness. It's through the action of the consciousness of each of us, humans, animals, insects, perhaps bacteria and all living organisms, that we know anything at all. But what is this consciousness made of? Where - if anywhere - was it before we were born? And where does it go when we die?

What is consciousness?

Interest in the nature of consciousness goes back many centuries, but whether we can really know and communicate the essence of *what consciousness is* remains debateable. The Austrian philosopher, biologist and founder of quantum mechanics Erwin Schrödinger (1887-1961) wrote:

The sensation of colour cannot be accounted for by the physicist's objective picture of light-waves. Could the physiologist account for it, if he had fuller knowledge than he has of the processes in the

*retina and the nervous processes set up by them in the optical nerve bundles and in the brain? I do not think so.*³⁴

When we're speaking of scientific enquiry it's clear that in recent decades we have made only limited progress in our explorations of the development of consciousness. Indeed, some would argue that research into consciousness continues to elude materialistic researchers in every discipline, from the physical sciences through psychology to philosophy.³⁵ This is not necessarily true of religious enquiry however. Though it rarely appears in a distinct form in Christian writings, consciousness has been a major focus within Buddhist teaching on meditation for 2,500 years. Within the scriptures of the oldest surviving branch of Buddhism, Theravada, the highly scholastic work, the Abhidhamma Pitaka, gives a sense of the value of meditation in allowing the adherent to experience consciousness of nothing other than consciousness itself:

The Buddha succeeded in reducing (the) 'immediate occasion' of an act of cognition to a single moment of consciousness, which, however, in its subtlety and evanescence, cannot be observed, directly and separately, by a mind untrained in introspective meditation. Just as the minute living beings in the microcosm of a drop of water become visible only through a microscope, so, too, the exceedingly short-lived processes in the world of mind become cognizable only with the help of a very subtle instrument of mental scrutiny, and that only obtains as a result of meditative training. None but the kind of introspective mindfulness or attention (sati) that has acquired, in meditative absorption, a high degree of inner equipoise, purity and firmness (upekkha-sati-parisuddhi), will

³⁴ Schrödinger, E (2001) *What is life? The physical aspects of the living cell*. (Reprinted). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

³⁵Thompson B and Harrub B (2013) *The Origin of Consciousness (Part 1)*. Reason and Revelation, Apologetics Press. 24 (4), 25-39; see http://apologeticspress.org/pub_rar/24_4/0404.pdf

possess the keenness, subtlety and quickness of cognitive response required for such delicate mental microscopy. ³⁶

The experience of focusing on a 'single moment of consciousness' is consciousness of nothing other than consciousness itself, consciousness devoid of content. And at any moment it is perhaps only another moment ahead of our everyday consciousness. But the ability to actually experience it at will in the way the Buddha did, is likely to be fairly sparsely distributed in the population at large. Its relation to Cosmic Consciousness therefore requires some clarification.

What is Cosmic Consciousness?

Cosmic Consciousness - whatever it is - is very popular at present: a general *Google* search on 6th June 2014 generated over two million results. But what is this nebulous entity that seems to be so popular? The late Sokei-an Sasaki, a modern Zen master, tells us that Cosmic Consciousness is Ztt, which he explains succinctly thus:

One day I wiped out all the notions from my mind. I gave up all desire. I discarded all the words with which I thought and stayed in quietude. I felt a little queer - as if I were being carried into something, or as if I were touching some power unknown to me ... and Ztt! I entered. I lost the boundary of my physical body. I had my skin, of course, but I felt I was standing in the centre of the cosmos. I spoke but my words had lost their meaning. I saw people coming towards me, but all were the same man. All were myself! I had never known this world. I had believed that I was created, but now I must change my opinion: I was never created; I was the cosmos; no individual Mr Sasaki existed. ³⁷

³⁶ Quoted from *buddhanet*, the online Buddhist Education and Information Network. See <http://www.buddhanet.net/abhidh05.htm>.

³⁷ Sasaki S (1954) *The Transcendental World, Zen Notes*, 1 (5), First Zen Institute of America, New York (quoted in Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p. 141).

Ultimately everything reduces down to consciousness - it's all each of us has and all we know. Always. Because here and now, yesterday and tomorrow,

*...psychic happenings constitute our only immediate experience. All that I experience is psychic. Even physical pain is a psychic event that belongs to my experience. My sense impressions – for all that they force upon me a world of impenetrable objects occupying space – are psychic images, and these alone are my immediate experience, for they alone are the immediate objects of my consciousness ... We are all in truth so enclosed by psychic images that we cannot penetrate to the essence of things external to ourselves.*³⁸

So all you know, all you *can* know of your feelings, thoughts and emotions, as well as the world outside your body, is known through your consciousness. What's more, it's yours alone. No-one is in there with you. Your entire knowledge of yourself as a human being, what you know of the world and the universe at this moment and at any time in your life, stems entirely from your own consciousness. Whilst psychology informs us that we have an *unconscious* mind at work beneath all that we experience, think and do, the mind we know, the one that tells us stuff in the here-and-now, is our *conscious* mind. Either way, consciousness - knowingly or unknowingly - seems to be at the root of everything we personally experience, so if we want to know what is meant by the term 'Ultimate Reality', consciousness should surely be one of the first places to start.

The term *Cosmic Consciousness* is a modern take on an old idea. It's not clear when it was first coined, though it has been made more widely known by Richard Maurice Bucke (1837-1902), a Canadian psychiatrist and doctor of medicine. When he was 35 years old, Bucke had what he clearly considered to be the defining moment of his life, because it was then that he experienced Cosmic Consciousness. His most famous work, published towards the end of

³⁸ Jung CG (1933) *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. Harvest Books, New York. pp.189-190.

his life, was *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* ³⁹ and it was in this book that he developed the theory that consciousness itself is gradually evolving amongst all living beings on the Earth. According to Bucke, a basic level of *Simple Consciousness* is possessed both by humans and the higher animals, and enables awareness of the immediate environment. However, only man has what Bucke referred to as *Self Consciousness*. This level of awareness is typified by a conscious awareness of self as an entity distinct from the environment and the universe. Self Consciousness confers the ability to reflect upon one's own mental states as objects of consciousness, that is, to know that one is thinking. Bucke's final alleged level of evolutionary development is *Cosmic Consciousness*. It is far beyond the other two levels, being consciousness of the cosmos itself, and with it comes a conscious grasp of the universe in its entirety. It's the experience of uniting with Ultimate Reality.

Whether we really are evolving towards some sort of higher plane as suggested by Bucke is a deeply unfashionable question at the present time, with its implied tones of a superior race - 'the chosen few' - and in view of some of the darker historical developments subsequent to the time in which he was writing. But, fortunately, hypotheses concerning the evolution of Cosmic Consciousness are not the concern of the present book and will not be discussed here. The aim of this book is simply to demonstrate the possibility that behind everything lies a greater reality that is said to be all a Christian might want in a God of Love and all a Buddhist might expect of Nirvana. *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* goes further in describing how the reader may find and experience consciousness of this for themselves. In *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* the term 'Cosmic Consciousness' is used as a form of shorthand for this immediate, world-shattering personal encounter with Ultimate Reality. The book is intended to be a celebration of all attempts to grasp reality in its entirety, beyond the everyday world that we routinely experience. But it's rather tricky to find terminology that doesn't offend someone's sensitivities, creed,

³⁹ Bucke RM (1901) *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*. EP Dutton and Co., Inc. New York.

belief system or personal take on the world. Even finding a word or phrase to identify what we're talking about can be fraught with problems. A host of attempts have been made in the past, some identifying Ultimate Reality and some the experience of it that we're calling Cosmic Consciousness. As mentioned earlier, these have included a whole range of terms - Allah, Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi, Atman, Being, Brahman, Dharma, God, Heaven, Jehovah, Kensho, Nirvana, Paradise, Prajapati, Satori, Suchness, Tathagata, Tathata, That Which Is, The Divine Ground, The Father, The Garden of Eden, The Happy Hunting Ground, The Holy, The Lord Yahweh, The Numinous, The Pure Land, The Self, The Tao, The Ultimate Ground of Being, The Undivided Unity, Tun Wu, Ultimate Truth, Universal Mind, Vishnu - and there are no doubt many more.

There will be, of course, no shortage of people telling you exactly which of these terms, phrases and ideas is not really Ultimate Reality. Or telling you that none of them is and that the whole thing is nonsensical. It's hoped that the ideas developed in these pages will throw some light on what's going on behind our everyday experiences and will help those who are interested to go about finding Ultimate Reality for themselves.

But just before we leave this brief introduction to the subject, it's important to make it clear that this book makes the assumption that if Cosmic Consciousness is indeed consciousness of the entire cosmos itself (being the experience of uniting with Ultimate Reality) then it must be the same for anyone who experiences it. In other words, if there is just one Ultimate Reality, then Ultimate Reality for you is also Ultimate Reality for me. Several of the chapters in *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* allude to this – especially Chapter 14, on Unity - and they should help to clarify the reasoning behind the assumption.

If it's there how do I experience it?

A whole range of approaches to experiencing Ultimate Reality have been proffered over the millennia, and some clearly dominate thinking on this - prayer, religious ritual, fasting, meditation, yoga

and psychoactive drugs - to name but a few. But here our focus will be on meditation, specifically the approach to meditation that is known as *mindfulness*. This requires no religious faith or other belief, and involves none of the rituals or rites commonly associated with religious practices across the world.

The thing about mindfulness is that we can all learn the technique. On our own; at home; for nothing. It does not rely on any mystical, magical, mysterious or miraculous 'God-given' or super-human abilities. It requires no faith in a single God or in many Gods, and no belief in demons, prophets, messiahs, particle physicists, evolutionary theorists or pundits offering salvation in any form. You can do it regardless of your religious faith or lack of faith, and whether you favour scientific, 'rational', approaches to understanding Ultimate Reality or prefer more intuitive, faith-based, approaches. For these reasons, meditation through the development of mindfulness seems to be no more likely to contravene even the harshest and most ascetic of religious belief-systems than is learning to juggle or to ride a bicycle. The only proviso is that no-one can do it for you: you have to Do-it-yourself. And if you would prefer to get straight into the bit on meditation you can jump there via this link: [Meditation](#).

If not, read on!

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EVERYTHING

Chapter 3.

What we don't know

*If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.*⁴⁰

So wrote the English painter, poet and mystic William Blake (1757-1827) in his book *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which describes his experiences in Hell and quest for mystical Unity. But what *are* the doors of perception to which Blake refers? How do we know what we know? And how do we know how much we don't know?

The Doors of Perception

Aristotle believed we obtain knowledge in two ways: firstly, through the five senses and secondly through reason, which allows us to understand and classify sensory data and then to directly grasp that which can be logically inferred. To these some would add a third source of knowledge: those experiences of an inner world that are encountered by the individual as being entirely real but outside the immediate perception of others, such as dreams, visions, intuitions, religious experiences and extra-sensory perceptions.⁴¹ The very existence of this third class of experiences, including their objective reality outside the imagination of the individual concerned, no doubt would be questioned by many and is the subject matter of much of this book. However, the reliability of each of these three sources of knowledge is very much open to debate. In this chapter we will focus

⁴⁰ Blake W (1790) *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Available electronically from

<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/work.xq?workid=mhh>

⁴¹ See, for example, Kelsey M (1974) *Encounter with God: A Theology of Christian Experience*. Hodder and Stoughton, London. pp.128ff.; also Watts AW (1965) *The Joyous Cosmology: Adventures in the Chemistry of Consciousness*. Vintage Books, New York. p.29.

on the discussion around the information we receive through our five senses. The limitations of our reason, rationality and ability to make sense of our experiences themselves will be discussed in Chapters 4, 18 and 20, What's Really Real?, Scientific Method and Do-it-yourself.

So let's start with our sensory perceptions; what's the problem there?

Limitations of the five senses

Adherents of the empiricist school of philosophy in the 17th and 18th centuries held that our five senses, sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch, are the only or at least the main route by which each of us gains information about the outside world. And we might well argue that the senses seem to have served us very well in staying alive in what at times might be a rather risky world, so what's the problem? What is it about our senses that causes anyone concern?

The next chapter, What's really real?, goes into some depth in discussing the limits of sensory perception because, clearly, the process through which each of us knows the external, phenomenal, world is restricted by the limitations imposed by our sensory equipment - our eyes, ears, nose, mouth and skin. As American novelist, one-time CIA agent and latterly Zen Buddhist monk, Peter Matthiessen (1927-2014), has pointed out, both physicists and mystics:

*... agree that human mechanisms of perception, stunted as they are by screens of social training that close out all but the practical elements in the sensory barrage, give a very limited picture of existence, which certainly transcends mere physical evidence.*⁴²

The screening out of incoming sensory data to which Matthiessen refers is known as 'sensory gating'. It's mostly unconscious and automatic and effectively blocks irrelevant information that would

⁴² Matthiessen P (1987) *Nine-Headed Dragon River*. Fontana Paperbacks, London, p.77.

otherwise overload the higher cortical centres of the brain. But the restrictions imposed by sensory gating, essential though they are to our ability to find meaning in anything, are not the only limitations to our perception: though most of the stimuli reaching our senses are filtered out by our unconscious minds, the act of sensory perception is far from passive. We continually exercise choice in deciding which elements of the external world we will allow ourselves to perceive. Some years ago the British psychiatrist Colin Murray Parkes (b.1928) described this in these words:

*There is an 'active' component in perception. A sensory impression of an object 'out there' is compared with previous impressions of similar objects 'in here' and predictions made about the behaviour and characteristics of the external object. Many motor acts (e.g. following a moving object with the eyes) are carried out in order to facilitate perception and others have, as their goal, the achievement of certain sensations which are intrinsically pleasant. In fact, sensory and motor phenomena, feeling and acting, are so intermingled that attempts to separate them do violence to the real situation. A person is not the passive recipient of sensations from his life space; he creates his assumptive world by reaching out to his environment and sampling it, he reacts to his life space by moving within it, to keep it the same or to change it.*⁴³

In discussing the way in which our brains filter the morass of incoming information, the English writer Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) has observed that the function of the brain, nervous system and sense organs is mainly eliminative rather than productive. In fact, this process is so successful that, in Huxley's view:

⁴³ Parkes CM (1971) Psycho-Social Transitions: A Field for Study. *Social Science and Medicine*, 5, 101-115. NB. The assumptive world is everything we know or think we know, including our interpretations of past experiences and our expectations of the future.

*What comes out at the other end is a measly trickle of the kind of consciousness which will help us to stay alive on the surface of this particular planet.*⁴⁴

But this is not all. The late professor Idris Parry (1916-2008), scholar, writer and broadcaster, has described the limitations imposed by our senses thus:

*What guarantee is there that the five senses, taken together, do cover the whole of possible experience? They cover simply our actual experience, our human knowledge of facts or events. There are gaps between the fingers; there are gaps between the senses. In these gaps is the darkness which hides the connection between things*⁴⁵

The eminent Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist, Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), has similarly pointed out that:

Man ... never perceives anything or comprehends anything completely. He can see, hear, touch, and taste; but how far he sees, how well he hears, what his touch tells him, and what he tastes depend upon the number and quality of his senses. These limit his perception of the world around him. By using scientific instruments he can partly compensate for the deficiencies of his senses. For example, he can extend the range of his vision by binoculars or of his hearing by electrical amplification. But the most elaborate apparatus cannot do more than bring distant or small objects within range of his eyes, or make faint sounds more audible. No matter what instruments he uses, at some point he reaches the edge of certainty beyond which conscious knowledge cannot pass.

There are, moreover, unconscious aspects of our perception of reality. The first is the fact that even when our senses react to real

⁴⁴ Huxley A (1973) *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England. p.21.

⁴⁵ Idris Parry (1965) Kafka, Rilke, and Rumpelstiltskin, *The Listener*, BBC, Dec. 2nd., p.895.

phenomena, sights, and sounds, they are somehow translated from the realm of reality into that of the mind. Within the mind they become psychic events, whose ultimate nature is unknowable (for the psyche cannot know its own psychical substance). Thus every experience contains an indefinite number of unknown factors, not to speak of the fact that every concrete object is always unknown in certain respects, because we cannot know the ultimate nature of matter itself.

*Then there are certain events of which we have not consciously taken note; they have remained, so to speak, below the threshold of consciousness. They have happened, but they have been absorbed subliminally, without our conscious knowledge.*⁴⁶

Such was the strength of feeling among the philosophers of ancient Greece that many considered the information delivered to us via our senses to be no more than opinion. They argued that only knowledge gained through the intellect could be considered to be infallibly correct, and it was within this frame of reference that Plato developed the analogy of the cave that is discussed in Chapter 5, on Illusions. As modern philosopher Bertrand Russell has pointed out:

*To the empiricist, the body is what brings us into touch with the world of external reality, but to Plato it is doubly evil, as a distorting medium, causing us to see as through a glass darkly, and as a source of lusts which distract us from the pursuit of knowledge and the vision of truth.*⁴⁷

We have already discussed the way in which external stimuli are converted into electrical impulses that our brains then interpret as material reality. In relation to this process the British astronomer, physicist, mathematician and philosopher of science Sir Arthur

⁴⁶ Jung CG (1964) (ed) *Man and his Symbols*. Aldus Books Ltd., London. pp.21-3.

⁴⁷ Russell B (1961) *The History of Western Philosophy*. George Allen and Unwin Ltd. UK, p.151.

Eddington (1882-1944) seems to be echoing the thoughts of Jung when he observes that:

*It is an astonishing feat of deciphering that we should have been able to infer an orderly scheme of natural knowledge from such indirect communication. But clearly there is one kind of knowledge which cannot pass through such channels, namely knowledge of the intrinsic nature of that which lies at the far end of the line of communication ... the chairs and tables around us which broadcast to us incessantly those signals which affect our sight and touch cannot in their nature be like unto the signals or to the sensations which the signals awake at the end of their journey ...*⁴⁸

What Eddington is getting at is the fact that despite appearances, our senses tell us nothing of the essence of the material world. It's worth just repeating that because it runs counter to everything we routinely take to be true: *our senses tell us nothing of what really lies at the heart of anything out there in the world.* Whatever you think you know, you don't. It's also worth remembering that this observation was made by a serious-minded philosopher of science. Remember the cup in an earlier chapter, the one on the table in front of you? Touching the cup provided you with information about how the cup was a split second ago, not how the cup is now, in the present moment. We really don't know anything about the cup *as it is*, and of course this applies to everything else perceived through our five senses.

But even if we put this particular limitation aside for a moment, we can still see that our senses are seriously limited in the breadth of information they can detect about the external world. This is not the limit of our knowledge because we have devised a host of electrical, mechanical and chemical instruments that can reveal phenomena beyond the senses. For example, we know that things that are visible to the naked eye are only found within a small part of the electromagnetic spectrum. Properties of electromagnetic waves differ

⁴⁸ Arthur Stanley Eddington (1929) *Science and the Unseen World*. Swarthmore Lectures, Macmillan, New York, p.33.

according to their wavelength but the development of scientific instrumentation has allowed us to discover that in the electromagnetic spectrum the shortest waves are gamma radiation, followed by X-ray radiation, ultra-violet, light visible to the naked eye, then infra-red, microwave and radio waves. Although we might think there will be strict boundaries between each band within the electromagnetic spectrum, this is not the case because - in theory at least - they merge imperceptibly into each other. Although the range of visible light lies only between red and violet we know the other wavelengths to exist because of the instruments that have been devised to detect non-visible radiation.

And, interestingly, it could be said that humans themselves share something in common with such instruments. What the instruments tell us of the external world is only what effect the world has on *them*. So, for example, an ammeter will measure the electrical current in a circuit. This procedure informs us of the consequence of passing electricity through the instrument but does not provide any information about the essential nature of electricity itself. Of this the late German painter, poet and Buddhist writer, Lama Govinda, (1898-1985) has said:

*Do we really know what electricity is? By knowing the laws according to which it acts and by making use of them, we still do not know the origin or the real nature of this force, which ultimately may be the very source of life and consciousness, the divine power and mover of all that exists.*⁴⁹

Whilst we now know it to be the movement of electrons that creates that which we call an electrical current, we remain ignorant of the essence of the particles involved. And it's rather sobering to think that, like the instruments that extend the reach of our senses and appear to provide definite information about the world but in fact tell us only

⁴⁹ Lama Govinda (1966) *The Way of the White Clouds*. Quoted in Matthiessen P (1987) *Nine-Headed Dragon River*. Fontana Paperbacks, London, p.78.

what effect the world has on *them*, we too know only this. Touch a piece of stone and you will apparently 'know' it to be hard or cold or rough. But in fact, these qualities are a measure of what the stone does to *you*; they are a quality of your response to contact with the stone - but tell you nothing of the intrinsic nature of the stone itself.

This notion is not a recent development and in fact has been around for millennia. Democritus (c.460-c.370 BCE) one of the founders of the Greek school of philosophy known as Atomism, observed that sensory perception can be deceptive. It's said that he held such attributes as warmth, taste and colour to arise from our sense organs themselves rather than being qualities of the objects we perceive.

The Sound of Silence

Before we leave this discussion of the ways in which the five senses can mislead us into thinking our knowledge is somehow certain, it's worth remembering the dualistic dynamic behind sensory information. Alan Watts has pointed out that the external physical world can be seen as either vibrations, waves or a series of on/off events. Of course, we are only aware of the 'on' events, so sounds, especially those with a high frequency, appear to be continuous when they are actually repetitions of sound/silence, sound/silence. We are not conscious of this alternation because it is too rapid. In the same way light is actually alternating light/darkness, light/darkness, pulsating in waves, and it's interesting to note that without the 'off' intervals between 'on' events we could not appreciate any pulse, another clear example of the principle of Duality in action. This duality does not end at sound and light: think of time itself. While you may imagine time to flow smoothly, any analogue clock (with moving hands) can be seen to jump from one second to another. Even a perfect mechanical clock would have to jump, say, every millionth of a second. So too with energy, which in the year 1900 Max Planck showed can only be absorbed or released in the minute, discrete packets he called 'energy elements'. Even solids themselves could not be experienced without their surrounding space:

For solids and spaces go together as inseparably as insides and outsides. Space is the relationship between bodies, and without it there can be neither energy or motion. ⁵⁰

And, of course, the fact that solids and space are utterly inseparable means they are effectively two aspects of the same thing.

The world we know is not the world that is

The limitations imposed by our senses create the world as we know it, what we're calling here our Everyday Reality. Indeed, this is so very everyday that we rarely reflect on it at all and so are sublimely unaware of the limitations on our understanding. This error in thinking is further compounded by words themselves. In discussing his own experiences with the psychoactive drug mescaline, a hallucinogen similar to LSD, Aldous Huxley points out the unanticipated effects of language. Whilst speech has enabled man to formulate and express the little that we do perceive through our senses, man is also in some ways the victim of language:

... in so far as it confirms him in the belief that reduced awareness is the only awareness and as it bedevils his sense of reality, so that he is all too apt to take his concepts for data, his words for actual things. ⁵¹

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If you're interested in reading more on the limitations imposed by language, see Chapter 17, entitled Describing the Indescribable. Otherwise read on - the next chapter looks at What's really real? and concerns the whole debate around what we know and what we don't.

⁵⁰ Watts A (1973) *The Book on the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*, Abacus, UK. p.31.

⁵¹ Huxley A (1973) *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England. p.22.

Chapter 4.

What's *really* real?

Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one ⁵²

How do we know what we know?

The earlier chapters have dwelt on some of the means by which we derive knowledge of the world and of ourselves. As we have read, sensory perception is clearly fundamental to this but the ancient Greek philosophers had serious doubts about the reliability of our five senses as a source of knowledge. They reasoned that a more accurate understanding of the universe may be gained by *reflecting* on our experiences of it, that is, from pure thought using only our sense of reason. The implication is that we can discover reality by using our reasoning powers alone. The ancient Greeks especially believed reality was to be found through the insights of mathematics and concepts like 'truth', 'beauty' and 'good', and had a real problem with knowledge derived from the senses.

In fact, philosophers over the ages have debated what might be our most reliable basis for acquiring knowledge of the world. Our five senses are perhaps the most obvious source, though, as we've seen, sensory perception has distinct limitations. Indeed, such was the strength of feeling among the philosophers of ancient Greece that many considered the information provided by our senses to be no better than personal opinion. Plato, for example, arrived at the conclusion:

... that opinion is of the world presented to the senses, whereas knowledge is of a super-sensible eternal world; for instance, opinion

⁵² Attributed to Albert Einstein. See, for example, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/science/science-news/9176616/Albert-Einstein-10-of-his-best-quotes.html>.

*is concerned with particular beautiful things, but knowledge is concerned with beauty in itself.*⁵³

The ancient Greeks argued that only knowledge gained through the intellect could be considered to be infallibly correct, and it was within this frame of reference that Plato developed his theory of *Forms*. These, he reasoned, had been created by God as single entities embodying the pure essence of everything that is - cats, hats, trees, chairs, love, beauty, and so on. His analogy of the cave (discussed in Chapter 5, on Illusions) clarifies his views on the illusory world of sensory perception that we normally inhabit. As we read earlier, Russell considered that:

*To the empiricist, the body is what brings us into touch with the world of external reality, but to Plato it is doubly evil, as a distorting medium, causing us to see as through a glass darkly, and as a source of lusts which distract us from the pursuit of knowledge and the vision of truth.*⁵⁴

Recent philosophical developments

In more recent centuries this debate has been dominated by the rationalist and empiricist approaches. Rationalism was most prevalent in the 17th and 18th centuries and was the predominant force in mainland Europe, whilst in England empiricism was the most significant trend. The adherents of rationalism believed in the rationality of the universe and the power of human reason to grasp it; they erected philosophical systems based on reason that was itself founded on allegedly self-evident truths. In contrast with this approach the empiricists argued that sensory experience is the only or most significant means by which we can know anything of the world. The most eminent exponents of empiricism were John Locke, George Berkeley and David Hume. The first of these, the English philosopher and physician, John Locke (1632-1704), advanced the

⁵³ Russell B (1961) *The History of Western Philosophy*. George Allen and Unwin Ltd. UK, p.136.

⁵⁴ *ibid*, p.151.

Representative Theory of Knowledge. This proposed that the mind itself has no direct knowledge of the outside world for it is unable to by-pass the senses and stand outside them. These ideas were extended by George Berkeley - later to become Bishop Berkeley - who concluded that things only exist insofar as they are perceived to exist, if not by some sentient being then by God.⁵⁵ The *Representative Theory of Knowledge* was taken further again by Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776), who arrived at the conclusion that it is not possible to prove the existence of either things outside oneself or even of oneself:

*For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.*⁵⁶

It seems reasonable to conclude that Hume is referring to what is discussed in this book as our apparent entrapment within dualistic thinking (for more details on which see Chapter 10, on Duality). Hume also denied the existence of causation, regarding that which we routinely call 'cause and effect' as a matter of chronological sequence. He questioned whether the occurrence of one object or action after the occurrence of another necessarily indicates a causal relationship, arguing that the assumption of a connection between the two objects or actions is a quality of perception rather than a quality of the objects/actions themselves. It's interesting to note that this takes us not only straight into the heart of Zen Buddhism, but also back to the idea expressed elsewhere in *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* that what we call 'time' may be no more than a misperception based on the partial experience of Ultimate Reality (which here we are calling Everyday Reality).

⁵⁵ So, if a tree falls in an empty forest, does it make a sound?

⁵⁶ David Hume (1739-1740) *Treatise of Human Nature*, 1(iv).6. Quoted by Brown C (1973) *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*. Inter-varsity Press, London. p.68.

Earlier in the book the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was mentioned. He was educated in the rationalist tradition but eventually came to reflect in his thoughts a mixture of both rationalism and empiricism. For Kant our knowledge of the world derives from sensory perception but it is then processed by our minds in a specific way. The result is that we have knowledge of *appearances* but can never actually know things *as they are in themselves*.

From these ideas it's not unreasonable to conclude that in a sense, if it exists at all, the true essence of cause and effect or time and space, is unknown to us, and, like the whole concept of Duality, what we think we know is actually more a function of the way in which we think than a reflection of what we actually know. Indeed, Kant observed that as soon as we attempt to know what lies behind the material world, we are faced with irreconcilable self-contradictions which he referred to as *antinomies*. The four antinomies are:

- (i) *that the world is both finite and infinite;*
- (ii) *that every substance is made up of simple parts and that nothing is made up of simple parts;*
- (iii) *that there is freedom and that there is no freedom, and*
- (iv) *that the world posits a necessary being and that no such being exists.*⁵⁷

In short, Kant was arguing that behind the world that we perceive through our senses (the phenomenal world) there lies a *real* world. This real world (what he called the *noumenal* world) is a Unity. However, it is a condition of our knowing anything through our senses that the noumenal world shall be experienced as one thing among many and simultaneously as a unity composed of parts. In other words, sensory perception provides us with the mistaken impression that reality consists of a multiplicity of things.

⁵⁷ From I Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, pp.396-421. Quoted in Brown C (1973) *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*. Inter-varsity Press, London. p.97.

Knowledge derived from pure thought

"Ah" you may say, "but even if the information we receive from our senses doesn't lead us to reality, surely objects of pure thought - like mathematics and concepts like 'truth' - do?"

But this too is debateable.

Austrian mathematician and philosopher Kurt Gödel (1906-1978) surmised that even mathematics and mathematical conclusions cannot be regarded as certain, because:

Even the most basic mathematical system ... assumes a set of metamathematical principles upon which the system can be understood, and each attempt to verify these principles involves another metamathematical assumption to be proved ... ad infinitum.

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What, then, of 'truth'? It could be argued that 'the truth' lasts forever, is invulnerable to change and occupies no space or time. A practical application of this might help: It is true that you are reading these words now. Tomorrow it will still be true that today you read these words. Next week, next year, in 10,000 years' time and even when the earth has been swallowed by the sun, it will remain true that today you read these words. This truth is indestructible, unchanging, and everlasting - or at least we might believe it to be so. But does it have, or does it not have, an objective reality outside our Belief? If so, *what is it* that lasts forever, is invulnerable to change and occupies no space or time? And *where is it*?

An alternative view might be that truth is simply another part of the illusion a Hindu might call Maya - described more fully in Chapter 5 (Illusions). From this perspective 'truth' is no more than a man-made concept projected onto the world, and the suggestion is that the concept of 'truth' is as much of a fantasy as is anything and

⁵⁸ Kelsey M (1974) *Encounter with God: A Theology of Christian Experience*. Hodder and Stoughton, London. p.99.

everything else you can think of. What we call 'truth' tells us nothing of the universe itself, or at least nothing beyond our subjective opinion. In fact, the idea of 'truth' is exactly that - *an idea*. And arguably, ideas exist only in our heads - when *we* die, so do they.

But do they?

*The real question is: Is there anything we can think of which, by the mere fact that we can think of it, is shown to exist outside our thought? Every philosopher would like to say yes, because a philosopher's job is to find out things about the world by thinking rather than observing. If yes is the right answer, there is a bridge from pure thought to things, if not, not.*⁵⁹

At several times in history the idea that *ideas* could have some sort of objective reality has emerged as a quite respectable belief. Plato, for example, held that the realm of ideas (known as Platonic *Forms*) has an objective existence, as did St Anselm (c.1033-1109) in his 'ontological argument' for the existence of God (described more fully in Chapter 6, dealing with Ultimate Reality).

Looking at 'ideas' from one perspective we can see that maybe they or the concepts they represent, have no objective existence at all. They might well be no more than shared ways of thinking about things so that you and I can converse in a meaningful way. Seen in this light, ideas are part of our categorisation of the world, though there's no reason to suppose that these categories actually exist beyond their 'virtual' existence in our imaginations. On the other hand, the speculations expressed by many ancient Greek philosophers like Plato have had an extraordinary impact, and all of us can still grasp some of their logic. As we read earlier, when you encounter a kitchen table you feel its presence as a tangible, hard, wooden object and see it in front of you. But how can you be sure you have not simply encountered the *idea* of a kitchen table

⁵⁹ Russell B (1961) *The History of Western Philosophy*. George Allen and Unwin Ltd. UK, p.411.

somewhere within a universe consisting solely of the idea of things? Your free-floating consciousness may simply have come across the idea of your kitchen table and all its myriad qualities. After all, a universe of ideas would surely be a simpler way to account for our experiences than the notion of the so-called 'tangible world'? For one thing, it cuts out the entire stage involving the creation of tangible things from their idea.

But where do ideas come from? Are they somehow created when we perceive their tangible, physical, representation, like tables, stars, chairs and cheese? Do they arise only when their physical counterpart comes into being? Or again, maybe ideas have been there all the time, lurking in some corner of the universe just waiting to become tangible? Do we create mathematics or are we discovering it? The same goes for 'truth', 'infinity' and perhaps much else. Take a simple tree for example. As we've seen with kitchen tables, there is arguably no difference between the thing itself and the idea (or concept) of the thing. So there's no difference between the tree in front of you and the idea of the tree in front of you. (And, for that matter, there's no difference between you reading these words and the *idea* of you reading these words). Here we're not talking about the single underlying concept of 'tree', what you might call 'tree-ness' (which is nearer to the Platonic Form of 'tree') but an actual, physical object - the tree that you can see at this moment from your window, or the computer screen or book in front of you right now. Surely by definition the *idea* of any of these objects is exactly the same as the thing-in-itself in every minute respect? In essence *the idea is the thing*. The question is, which has the greater claim to reality, the physical object/activity or the *idea* of the object/activity? If the idea of touching a cup is exactly the same as actually touching the cup, then one of these is redundant. If the *idea* of physical phenomena is enough to account for our entire experience of the world, then perhaps there's no need for tangible stuff at all?

Whilst this would have the benefit of dispensing with an entire layer of unnecessary material, it also means that everything - from the physical matter of the phenomenal world to the concepts we use to

construct our theories and models - *everything* consists of the same one substance: 'idea'. Quantum theory already tells us that all tangible stuff, matter, mass, is ultimately made entirely of the same one substance anyway - energy - which itself is not actually made of anything tangible at all. It seems that whether it be 'idea' or 'energy', everything ultimately reduces to one thing, which opens up some interesting parallels with the ideas discussed in Chapter 14, on Unity.

Nevertheless, this does not tell us a thing about the nature of ideas - what they are and where the 'realm of ideas' might be found if it really is outside our heads. Nor does it tell us whether ideas are immutable and everlasting. So it's quite reasonable to have a sneaking suspicion that maybe the whole thing is ridiculous and that in the end ideas are no more than useful but temporary devices to help us navigate a very tangible and distinctly physical world.

And does it matter anyway?

Well actually it does. All this speculation is rather more important than you might think because if the realm of ideas has an objective existence it's only a short step to concluding that anything any of us experiences – any thought, sensory experience or emotion - can be said to *create reality* in the sense that when this experience came alive for us at the point we experienced it, it also came into being as an entity with an objective existence. We literally *realised* the experience – we made it real by experiencing it. And it's not just us that do this; it must also be true of every sentient organism in the universe that experiences some form of consciousness. This means the real world must consist of an unimaginably vast repository of created experience, but then how big are ideas anyway? How much space do they need? And this question is as true for thoughts as it is for ideas; as psychotherapist Carl Jung has observed, '*Psychic contents in general are non-spatial ... What bulk can we ascribe to thoughts? Are they small, large, long, thin, heavy, fluid, straight, circular, or what?*'⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Jung CG (1933) *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. Harvest Books, New York. p.184.

Jung's discussion of the psyche included the possible existence of archetypes. In Jungian (analytical) psychology, archetypes are unconscious elements of the collective unconscious that are universal among mankind. They can be seen as archaic, almost instinctive, patterns and images that derive from the collective unconscious. They are not visible until they become apparent in individual human behaviour. Jung highlights the difficulty of knowing that anything exists other than our own experience, which is only ever a mental event and is never anything materially tangible in itself. He points out that:

... so far as perception and cognition are concerned, we cannot see beyond the psyche. Science is tacitly convinced that a non-psychic, transcendental object exists. But science also knows how difficult it is to grasp the real nature of the object, especially when the organ of perception fails or is lacking, and when the appropriate modes of thought do not exist or have still to be created. In cases where neither our sense organs nor their artificial aids can attest the presence of a real object, the difficulties mount enormously, so that one feels tempted to assert that there is simply no real object present.

⁶¹

Although he doesn't draw the conclusion himself, the point that Jung is expressing here clearly supports the notion that merely the *idea* of something might well be enough to account for our entire experience of it. No further being, essence or qualities are required, and what we consider to be tangible existence can be seen to be completely redundant. This would account for some of the continuing debates around the true nature of consciousness which, as mentioned earlier, continues to elude materialistic researchers in every discipline.⁶² The

⁶¹ Jung CG (1963) *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Random House, London. p.384.

⁶² Thompson B and Harrub B (2013) *The Origin of Consciousness (Part 1)*. Reason and Revelation, Apologetics Press. 24 (4), 25-39; see http://apologeticspress.org/pub_rar/24_4/0404.pdf

orthodox view of consciousness is that it is an organic experience existing in the physical world with moment-by-moment concomitant physiological and detectable changes in our brain chemistry. The idea (or concept) of consciousness on the other hand, has no physical being in any sense and as we have seen, could be said to have a greater reality about it and to exist at a deeper level than organic consciousness experienced at the physical level.

But does all this hypothesising really get us anywhere? Especially, does it get us any closer to reality? And even if it does, will we know we are there?

How do we know what is real?

It's clear from the above discussion that we must at least question the reliability of the knowledge we derive from either sensory perception or pure thought. Neither appears to offer infallible information concerning the universe, to the extent that neither seems to be able to get to the essence of anything we might consider to exist. Although they may differ in numerous ways, Jung, Kant and Hume among others, have gone to great lengths to explain how there are enormous difficulties in getting to the essence of any material object. Indeed, there is reason to argue that we only know what we know of reality by the image or trace that it leaves, much like a mirror gives an image of the reality it reflects. And if this is true of the physical world, then it's even more complicated when we consider less tangible objects such as consciousness or electricity.

.....

It's not entirely surprising that over the centuries the problems posed by the material world have led some thinkers to conclude that its reality should be rejected. But in the end even if we can't experience the true essence of the physical world or even know the true nature of constructs like ideas and concepts which have no tangible form, we are told we *can* know Ultimate Reality in its totality. We can't share this knowledge or give it to others but we can say *what it's like* and we can know it for ourselves. Have a look at Chapter 20, called

Do-it-yourself for more on this. However, if you're content to read on, the next chapter - Illusions - looks at some of the conclusions that have been drawn by those who doubt the most fundamental aspects of that which we might hold to be real.

Chapter 5.

Illusions

Man ... lives in the illusion of multiplicity; he does not see the world and himself as they truly are; he is deceived by maya ... (a term) used to indicate the tendency to identify ourselves with our apparent selves and an apparent universe, to be deceived by the appearance which conceals the reality. It does not mean that the empirical world and the selves in it are mere illusion or are not, in their way, real; it means that they are not seen as, in their essential nature, they really are. ⁶³

It has been said that our commonly accepted Everyday Reality is imbued with illusion. That our sense of self, our ego, simply does not exist; that the information we receive through our five senses in no way delivers an accurate picture of reality, and that neither time nor space are in the least as we perceive them to be. In this chapter we'll look at some of these ideas and make an attempt to understand how such seemingly bizarre notions could have been suggested by perfectly intelligent people. The illusion that we each have an Ego is dealt with elsewhere in the book so let's start with our five senses.

Do we really 'see but through a glass, darkly'?⁶⁴

Peter Matthiessen has pointed out that:

... human mechanisms of perception, stunted as they are by screens of social training that close out all but the practical elements in the

⁶³ Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, pp.107-8.

⁶⁴ 1 Corinthians Chapter 13, verse 12, from The Official King James Bible Online: <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/1-Corinthians-13-12/>

*sensory barrage, give a very limited picture of existence, which certainly transcends mere physical evidence.*⁶⁵

What do we really know beyond any shadow of a doubt? In his famous dictum 'cogito ergo sum' the French philosopher and mathematician Rene Descartes (1596-1650) concluded that because he was able to question the reality of existence, he himself - or at least something capable of thinking - must necessarily exist. What he really meant and whether he was correct in his assertion remains the subject of hot philosophical debate three and a half centuries later.⁶⁶ However, we can thank Descartes for making a serious attempt to question the nature of reality outside the ongoing conventions of the religious authorities of the day. And the question remains, 'How much of what we experience exists *out there* in the external world and how much is projected onto the world by our internal cognitive processing'?

You have read that, in the end, what each of us knows about the phenomenal world - the world of sensory reality - must reach us through our five senses. The question is, can we trust our senses? We've heard how light takes time to reach us from the objects we see in the external world and how everything we perceive through our senses has already 'happened' by the time we're aware of it. We are therefore experiencing not the 'thing in itself' but some sort of relic or trace of what it was: we *are* experiencing 'it' but not as it is *now*. Things nearer to us will be seen as they were, say, a moment ago; things further away, such as the Sun and planets we'll see as they were several minutes ago, and so on to the point where the most distant object visible to the naked eye - M31, the Andromeda Galaxy - is seen as it was over two million years ago.⁶⁷ So not only are we *not* seeing what is now, in the present moment, we're seeing a

⁶⁵ Matthiessen P (1987) *Nine-Headed Dragon River*. Fontana Paperbacks, London, pp.77.

⁶⁶ The concept of Unhappening also raises doubts about his assumption that *something is happening*.

⁶⁷ Windows to the Universe:

http://www.windows2universe.org/kids_space/farthest.html.

completely jumbled version of it with everything in its own unique 'time zone' relative to ourselves as the observers. The same is true of everything we perceive with our other senses because the perception of an object by touch, taste, sound or smell is communicated to us by nerves that are a distance from the sensory cortex of our brain, which in turn must interpret the incoming signal and contextualise it before passing the information to our conscious minds.

Sensory illusions are not restricted to these differences in time of course. We are accustomed to the idea that optical illusions can give us the impression that what seems to be real need not necessarily be so. Similarly, we know that colour blindness - the inability or decreased ability to see colour or perceive colour differences under normal lighting conditions - affects a significant percentage of the population.

This should be proof enough that we don't always all see the same thing and sometimes don't see what is there at all. But rather more subtle are the illusions that lurk inside the very structure of our thinking. The way our brains deal with information from the external world is crucial to the way we experience the world and build a sense of reality. And the way we deal with the world is to classify it, to allocate elements of it to the different categories of phenomena that we call people, cars, trees, ideas, events and so on. Each of these either does or does not have specific qualities: it is either large or small, black or white, up or down, in or out, pleasant or unpleasant and so on. It has been said that these attributes are not characteristics of the phenomena themselves but are something we are projecting upon them. They are qualities that we assign in order to understand and manipulate the world, both cognitively and physically. But whilst this approach appears to work for most aspects of everyday life, how can we know that it gives us an accurate picture of what's really going on? What if this manner of processing incoming data is flawed? What if this dualistic thinking does not tell us *how the world really is*?

The illusion of duality

The suggestion here is that our usual understanding of Everyday Reality is seriously misguided - an idea that appears in many forms throughout history and across many different cultures. Within the religions that originated in the Indian subcontinent - Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism and Buddhism - the concept of Maya is frequently used to refer to the illusory nature of the phenomenal world. It is the term used to denote the way we classify and categorise our experiences. In the words of Alan Watts:

*To say ... that the world of facts and events is maya is to say that facts and events are terms of measurement rather than realities of nature ... facts and events are as abstract as lines of latitude or as feet and inches. Consider for a moment that it is impossible to isolate a single fact, all by itself. Facts come in pairs at the very least, for a single body is inconceivable apart from a space in which it hangs. Definition, setting bounds, delineation - these are always acts of division and thus of duality, for as soon as a boundary is defined it has two sides.*⁶⁸

The German novelist Herman Hesse explains this in a similar way:

*... in every truth the opposite is equally true. For example, a truth can only be expressed and enveloped in words if it is one-sided. Everything that is thought and expressed in words is one-sided, only half the truth; it all lacks totality, completeness, unity. When the Illustrious Buddha taught about the world, he had to divide it into Samsara and Nirvana, into illusion and truth, into suffering and salvation. One cannot do otherwise, there is no other method for those who teach. But the world itself, being in and around us, is never one-sided.*⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.59.

⁶⁹ Hesse H (1973) *Siddhartha*. Pan Books Ltd., London, p.112.

Whilst in the west it's been traditional to refer to maya as illusory, this does not mean the world as we know it - our Everyday Reality - is not there or is not in some sense real. And this is where it gets difficult: how can something be both illusory and real at the same time? Surely by definition if something is illusory it is unreal? However, maya is illusory because it is a mistaken understanding rather than a completely false belief unrelated to reality, which is more correctly called a delusion. Maya is like the image reflected in a mirror: really there, but not 'the real thing', which is of course that which is being reflected.

But this is not an understanding confined to religious teaching. In fact, ideas that might be considered to be strikingly similar to the doctrine of maya are to be found well outside anything that we might recognise as religious sentiment. Some of the greatest philosophers the world has known have expressed, in some form, the opinion that our Everyday Reality is illusory and no more than appearance. Pythagoras (570-c.495 BCE) considered God to be a unity and the visible world to be false and illusory. Continuing in this tradition, Plato held the view that Ultimate Reality is eternal and timeless, and that all apparent change is illusory - an idea that can be traced to Parmenides. The belief that nothing in the phenomenal world of our Everyday Reality is permanent, originated in Heraclitus (c.500 BCE).

The analogy of the cave

Together these doctrines led Plato to conclude that knowledge should not be sought via the senses but through the intellect, and to clarify this he developed the analogy of the cave. He compared the human eye to the soul, and the Sun - the source of light - to truth and goodness. He likened those who are untrained in philosophy with prisoners who have spent their entire lives in a cave, able only to look deep within the cave because they are held in irons. Behind them is a fire and in front is a wall upon which they see only their own shadows cast by the fire and the shadows of any objects passing behind them in between themselves and the fire. They have no reason to think the shadows are not reality in its entirety and have no

notion that the objects whose shadows are cast on the wall have any reality other than what they can see. One day one of the prisoners escapes from the cave into the sunlight. For the first time he is able to see real objects and realises that hitherto he had been deceived by the shadows. When he attempts to explain this to the prisoners who remain bound and can only see the shadows, he seems to them to be more stupid than before his escape.

It might help to make sense of this if you picture yourself walking down a street holding up a small mirror. In it you see your own reflection, cars, people etc. Is what you see in the mirror real? The answer is 'yes' insofar as the reflection simply shows what's really happening (albeit in reverse), but 'no' insofar as what you actually see is only a *reflection* of the world. In the same way, our everyday understanding of the world is said to be like a reflection of Ultimate Reality, but because we only ever see the reflected world we're not (usually) alert to the possibility that there may be anything behind it. In the words of St Paul:

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, even as I was also fully known ⁷⁰

Whether Paul was literally talking about mirrors seems unlikely, but you get the idea. And later thinkers came to echo Plato's views about the essential nature of reality. Plotinus, for example, (205-270), a philosopher, mystic and Neo-Platonist, wrote that:

... all souls are together, not collected into a unity but springing from a unity and remaining in that from which they sprang; or rather they never did spring from it, but were always in this state, for nothing There comes into being, and so nothing is divided into parts; it is only the recipient who thinks that it is divided. ⁷¹

⁷⁰ Corinthians 1, Chapter 13, verse 12. From the *World English Bible* translation: <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/1-Corinthians-13-12/>

⁷¹ Plotinus, *The Enneads*. Quoted in Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.188.

The influence of the ancient Greek schools of philosophy has been substantial. Despite this their ideas have failed to percolate far into the lives of most of us living in the 21st century: how many can say the writings of Pythagoras, Plato and others have led them to seriously entertain the notion that the Everyday Reality we take so much for granted may be no more than an illusory appearance?

Clearly these now revered philosophers were neither Hindu nor Buddhist, so it is interesting to speculate from where their startlingly similar ideas may have arisen. Bertrand Russell has expressed the view that:

*Mathematics is, I believe, the chief source of the belief in eternal and exact truth, as well as in a super-sensible intelligible world. Geometry deals with exact circles, but no sensible object is exactly circular; however carefully we may use our compasses, there will be some imperfections and irregularities. This suggests the view that all exact reasoning applies to ideal as opposed to sensible objects; it is natural to go further, and to argue that thought is nobler than sense, and the objects of thought more real than those of sense-perception. Mystical doctrines as to the relation of time to eternity are also reinforced by pure mathematics, for mathematical objects, such as numbers, if real at all, are eternal and not in time.*⁷²

But of course, Russell was famously an atheist so his interpretation is likely to be filtered by this particular world-view. Those less persuaded by atheism on the other hand, might surely be more inclined to wonder whether the ideas of the ancient Greek philosophers arose not from mathematics but from their direct and personal experience of the oneness of Cosmic Consciousness, of escaping Plato's cave and uniting with Ultimate Reality? Russell may well have disputed the existence of such a thing as a personal Enlightenment experience, of course. He noted that it is 'natural' for the objects of thought to be considered more real than sensory

⁷² Russell B (1961) *The History of Western Philosophy*. George Allen and Unwin Ltd. UK, pp.55-6.

experience, but then others might well feel it more 'natural' to conclude otherwise. Your own underlying beliefs and prejudices will no doubt colour your opinions here, much as they might have coloured Russell's, and if you would like to read more on this go to Chapter 19, headed Seeing is Believing or, for a less subjective discussion, to Chapters 10 and 14, on Duality and Unity.

The illusion of time

It's extremely difficult to imagine a state of timelessness. Picture yourself waking up in an immense, pitch black palace the size of a city so vast that you don't even know it's a building. The ceiling is a mile high and all you can see is the very small area illuminated by your feeble flickering pocket torch with a dodgy battery. The palace is the universe; the torch is your consciousness. As you walk around the building through rooms and hallways, you become aware of tiny separate elements that make up the building, but its vastness is such that you do not build up an impression of its overall structure. In much the same way, the world appears to you as a series of events changing through time. Of course, like the building, Ultimate Reality is there all the time, in its timeless entirety, all at once. But you only become aware of it gradually, bit by bit, and so have the experience of change, which we call the passage of time. Our Everyday Reality is a partial awareness of the building, of the world and universe, and is what Buddhists call Samsara, the duality or multiplicity of everyday life. It contrasts with the timeless unity of Nirvana, which is what we mean here when we refer to Ultimate Reality.

So, does time exist?

In the transcendental state of whatever might be beyond the duality of Everyday Reality there is timelessness. That is, there is neither time nor no-time; time neither exists nor does it not exist. But because we think in terms of does/doesn't this makes no sense at all, so how are we to begin to get some sort of conceptual grasp on this? A start is to imagine something like a story in a book. Although we routinely perceive the world to be changing in the sense that we and everything else are passing through time, it's possible that nothing is

'happening' at all in the usual sense. As we read a novel our awareness moves through the story as if it's unfolding through time, but of course the book and its story are always present in their entirety throughout, from beginning to end. Our sense of change, of movement through the narrative, is entirely due to the fact that we are experiencing the story a bit at a time. So it is with life. And this perception of change may be a function of our cognitive processing rather than a reflection of anything in the external world.

Reading the introductory chapters to *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* will have familiarised you with the idea that everything we know arises from our personal cognitive processing. So, if we watch a film or cartoon our personal experience is the sensation that the images are moving and changing through time. But again, nothing is actually moving. A film is composed of a series of tens of thousands of still images displayed for us one after the other at the rate of 24 frames per second (or thereabouts). Again, nothing in any single image is changing and nothing is moving, though our impression is that the projected images *are* moving. Arguably our experience of life, our Everyday Reality, is similar to this. The still images of the cartoon parallel our moment-by-moment awareness, and who's to say that the gaps between still images are not echoed by gaps between our periods of conscious awareness (of which we would clearly be unaware) or by gaps between periods of existence and non-existence? Whilst this might all sound distinctly far-fetched, the point is that in reality there is no need for anything to be changing: there is no need for time at all. A photon of light travels at the speed of light, of course, and at this speed all time stops. To use the analogy of stills from a cartoon, this pause in time - this timelessness - is the essence of each still. Our selective perception may create our *sense of time* but it's not *causing* time to be created. It's all part and parcel of the same thing: cause and effect only function *within* time, and since time is an illusion of Everyday Reality (Samsara) - since in Ultimate Reality everything has its entire being *at the same time* - the concepts of cause and effect are meaningless. Time does not exist: the entirety of existence is here and now *all the time* - perhaps.

Clearly, this is rather a difficult thing to discuss without reference to time itself, which inevitably seems to imply the existence of time. Alan Watts puts it differently in describing why Zen calls itself ‘the way of instantaneous awakening’:

*... it seems that our life is all past and future, and that the present is nothing more than the infinitesimal hairline which divides them ... But through 'awakening to the instant' one sees that this is the reverse of the truth: it is rather the past and future which are the fleeting illusions, and the present which is eternally real. We discover that the linear succession of time is a convention of our single-track verbal thinking, of a consciousness which interprets the world by grasping little pieces of it, calling them things and events. But every such grasp of the mind excludes the rest of the world, so that this type of consciousness can get an approximate vision of the whole only through a series of grasps, one after another.*⁷³

The consciousness we know in Everyday Reality is filtered through our individual egos. We can only ever know a tiny part of everything that happens across the entire universe moment-by-moment, and it is through this exceedingly narrow window that we build a picture of the world. As we go through life day-by-day, the world we know is experienced in a bite-sized, bit by bit, second-by-second sort of way, just as the torch showed us only a very small part of the immense palace. The Japanese Zen Buddhist teacher Dogen (1200-1253), who founded the Soto school of Zen in Japan, wrote:

If we watch the shore while we are sailing in a boat, we feel that the shore is moving. But if we look nearer the boat itself, we know then that it is the boat which moves. When we regard the universe in confusion of body and mind, we often get the mistaken belief that our mind is constant. But if we actually practice (Zen) and come back to ourselves, we see that this was wrong.

⁷³ Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, pp.218-9.

When firewood becomes ashes, it never returns to being firewood. But we should not take the view that what is latterly ashes was formerly firewood. What we should understand is that, according to the doctrine of Buddhism, firewood stays at the position of firewood ... There are former and later stages, but these stages are clearly cut.

*It is the same with life and death. Thus we say in Buddhism that the Un-born is also the Un-dying. Life is a position of time. Death is a position of time. They are like winter and spring, and in Buddhism we do not consider that winter becomes spring, or that spring becomes summer.*⁷⁴

In other words, like the frames of a cine film or cartoon, each moment is still and unchanging in itself: the 'present moment' lasts for no time at all. In his novel *Siddhartha*, Herman Hesse has used the voice of a monk in discussion with his friend Govinda, to describe the Buddhist view on change. Siddhartha points out that:

"Never is a man or a deed wholly (Samsara) or wholly Nirvana; never is a man wholly a saint or a sinner. This only seems so because we suffer the illusion that time is something real. Time is not real, Govinda ... And if time is not real, then the dividing line that seems to lie between this world and eternity, between suffering and bliss, between good and evil, is also an illusion."

"How is that?" asked Govinda, puzzled.

"Listen, my friend! I am a sinner and you are a sinner, but some day the sinner will be Brahma again, will some day attain Nirvana, will some day become a Buddha. Now this 'some day' is illusion; it is only a comparison. The sinner is not on the way to a Buddha-like state; he is not evolving, although our thinking cannot conceive things otherwise. No, the potential Buddha already exists in the sinner; his future is already there. The potential hidden Buddha must be

⁷⁴ Dogen, quoted in Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, pp.142-3.

recognised in him, in you, in everybody. The world, Govinda, is not imperfect or slowly evolving along a long path to perfection. No, it is perfect at every moment ..."

and later

Siddhartha bent down, lifted a stone from the ground and held it in his hand.

"This", he said, handling it, "is a stone, and within a certain length of time it will perhaps be soil and from the soil it will become plant, animal or man ... I do not respect and love it because it was one thing and will become something else, but because it has already long been everything and always is everything." ⁷⁵

As Ma-tsu Tao-i (Japanese: Baso Doitsu), the abbot of the Chinese Ch'an School of Buddhism (b.709) points out, there is a Buddhist sutra that states:

'It is only a group of elements which come together to make this body.' When it arises, only these elements arise. When it ceases, only these elements cease. But when these elements arise, do not say, 'I am arising', and when they cease, do not say, 'I am ceasing'. So, too, with our former thoughts, later thoughts, and intervening thoughts (or, experiences): the thoughts follow one another without being linked together. Each one is absolutely tranquil. ⁷⁶

Another Buddhist tale puts this a different way:

One day two novice monks were standing in their monastery grounds looking at a prayer flag waving in the breeze from the top of a tower at the corner of the compound. They were arguing and a passing Zen master walked over and asked them what they were arguing about.

⁷⁵ Hesse H (1973) *Siddhartha*. Pan Books Ltd., London, pp.112-113.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, pp.143.

One novice said: “He says it is the wind that is moving, but I say it is the flag that is moving”. The master replied: “It is neither the wind nor the flag; it is your mind that is moving”.⁷⁷

• • •

You’ll soon be reading yet more about the illusions behind the ego, time and duality, but before going on it might be a good idea to clarify some of the terminology you’ve already encountered. Let’s start with Ultimate Reality.

⁷⁷ Anon

Chapter 6.

Ultimate Reality

Ultimate Reality: the kaleidoscopic playpen ... we may be just scintillating illusions, extrapolated from deeper realities. Akin to photographic holograms that encode three-dimensional pictures onto flat film, our universe may arise from interference patterns on a hyperspatial boundary, interpreted by its enraptured inhabitants as a solid entity. ⁷⁸

Or there again, maybe not.

What is Ultimate Reality?

In the introductory chapters we read that the term Ultimate Reality is synonymous with many others: Allah, Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi, Atman, Being, Brahman, Dharma, God, Heaven, Jehovah, Kensho, Nirvana, Prajapati, Satori, Suchness, Tathagata, Tathata, That Which Is, The Divine Ground, The Father, The Garden of Eden, The Happy Hunting Ground, The Holy, The Lord Yahweh, The Numinous, The Pure Land, The Self, The Tao, The Ultimate Ground of Being, The Undivided Unity, Tun Wu, Ultimate Truth, Universal Mind, Vishnu, and no doubt many more.

Basically, Ultimate Reality is what's really going on behind Life, the Universe and Everything, regardless of our hopes, fears, wishful thinking, beliefs and scientific hypotheses. Whether it turns out to be one reality or numerous realities, overlapping universes, separate universes or totally isolated parallel multi-meta-universes, Ultimate Reality is what this book is about. *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* starts with no particular idea of Ultimate Reality in mind, except that we can't begin to share ideas about it (in the form of a book) without some sort of terminology. But always remember, words are sounds,

⁷⁸ Tweed M (2006) *The Compact Cosmos*. Wooden Books Ltd., Glastonbury, England, p.52.

vibrations in the air; they are not the things they indicate. Whilst we can say what Ultimate Reality *is like*, we cannot say *what it actually is*.

The way *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* has been categorised into sections and chapters has enforced a pattern of classification onto something that is inherently unclassifiable. In order to communicate through the medium of words we simply can't escape the need to artificially categorise at some level, which is just one example of Samsara - the everyday illusion of our Everyday Reality.

The book alleges that, on the grander scale, behind what we routinely think of as 'reality', there is a greater reality of which our routine, everyday, reality is a part. The claim is that this greater, Ultimate Reality, is a Unity, one consistent, indivisible and undifferentiated whole that in no way consists of smaller parts. So the bottom line is that our Everyday Reality is a part of something that has no parts. This is clearly nonsense, at least in our everyday understanding of the words used. But imagine a railway train, say a steam engine, that has been completely taken apart so every nut and bolt is laid out on the ground in front of you. Is this the same as the train that thunders along the track belching out steam? It consists of exactly the same parts, but it's only when the parts are assembled that it all works together as one. Only then can we see that the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts.⁷⁹ The extension of this conceptualisation to Ultimate Reality is evident in the ancient Greek concept of 'nous'. Bertrand Russell tells us that the Neo-Platonist mystic Plotinus held that nous was:

... the image of the One; it is engendered because the One, in its self-quest, has vision; this seeing is nous. This is a difficult conception. A Being without parts, Plotinus says, may know itself; in this case, the seer and the seen are one. In God, who is conceived, as by Plato, on the analogy of the Sun, the light-giver and what is lit are the same.

⁷⁹ A train of thought first attributed to Aristotle (384-322 BCE).

*Pursuing the analogy, nous may be considered as the light by which the One sees itself.*⁸⁰

But all this talk of being part of something that has no parts, that sees itself but is also that which is seen, is apt to try the patience of even the most tolerant of readers. It demands a down-to-earth explanation that makes sense at a simple level. Yet this does not readily emerge, perhaps because we're talking about something that is characterised by a Transcendence beyond the common understanding of Everyday Reality. We are Describing the Indescribable so all attempts are doomed to failure from the start. Perhaps we'll have more luck with a more commonly used term ...

How about God?

It may have escaped your notice that in the first paragraph to this chapter, the word 'God' slipped quietly into the list of synonyms for the term 'Ultimate Reality'. As we saw in the introductory chapters, for such a small word, 'God' is a very big subject and seems to mean very different things to different people. Perhaps one of the more commonly accepted meanings runs along similar lines to that given by the Oxford English Dictionary, where 'God' is initially defined as:

*A superhuman person regarded as having power over nature and human fortunes; a deity (use in the singular usually refers to a being regarded as male ... but in the plural frequently used to refer to male and female beings collectively). Chiefly applied to the divinities of polytheistic systems; when applied to the Supreme Being of monotheistic belief, this sense becomes more or less modified.*⁸¹

⁸⁰ Russell B (1961) *The History of Western Philosophy*. George Allen and Unwin Ltd. UK. p.293.

⁸¹ Oxford English Dictionary (2014) Third Edition. See <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/79625?rskey=gBtR3H&result=1#eid>

Similar descriptions are available in numerous dictionaries, each displaying the difficulty of getting away from the idea of God as a 'being' - or at least a 'something' - albeit one with some spectacularly super-human abilities. And of course, if God is a 'something' then the existence of that 'something' will be open to debate. Hence the question arises ...

Does God exist?

The presence or absence of a creative super-intelligence is unequivocally a scientific question, even if it is not in practice - or not yet - a decided one. ⁸²

If Richard Dawkins is correct in his assertion that science will provide the most appropriate approach to the question of God's existence, then we must ask ourselves how such a test could be devised. Chapter 18 deals with the Scientific Method and explains in some detail why the approach is unsuitable for the examination of the question 'Does God exist?', so this will not be discussed further here. In fact, it remains debateable whether science has really ever attempted a serious study of the subject and many scientists would no doubt agree that the scientific method is not an appropriate approach to consider this question anyway. Traditionally, consideration of the existence of God has been the remit of philosophical and theological enquiry, and their proponents have alone faced the Big Questions. The results of their efforts, however, have been far from conclusive.

In western philosophical thought there have traditionally been three main arguments for the existence of God: the teleological argument, the cosmological argument and the ontological argument. The first, the teleological argument, deals with what has come to be known as 'intelligent design': everywhere we look in the natural universe we see such a huge diversity of plants and animals and such complexity in the inter-relationships between living organisms and their environments that we conclude there must have been a designer to

⁸² Dawkins R (2006) *The God Delusion*. Bantam Press, London, p.82.

plan and create this. The cosmological argument deals with our observation of the ubiquity of cause and effect: if everything has a cause and we trace this back, then ultimately we will arrive at a first cause, a prime mover, which is God. The final position, the ontological argument, essentially holds that God is perfect and must therefore exist, for not to exist would mean He is imperfect. Needless to say, though each of these philosophical arguments has had its proponents, each has been fairly solidly refuted and for many the jury remains decidedly undecided.

So, does God exist?

*There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys, how's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?"*⁸³

This little tale, which we first encountered in Chapter 2, may help to clarify what's being asked here. 'Does God exist?' is not really a question. It's more like a series of assumptions: assumptions about God, about existence and about our unwritten rules on what qualities something must have in order for it to exist. Perhaps the question could be phrased in a different way, something like: 'What is the smell of mathematics?' or maybe 'How long is the colour red?' Of course, it doesn't make sense to ask some questions. Just because you can phrase something as a question doesn't mean it will make sense.

One problem with the question 'Does God exist?' is the implicit assumption that God is a 'thing' with distinct characteristics and boundaries beyond which the 'thing' does not extend. Without characteristics and boundaries, the question makes no sense. So, what are these boundaries and who decides on them? Questioning the existence of entities like chairs, stars or ideas, makes some sort of sense, but what if God - Ultimate Reality - is *everything*? You can't

⁸³ An old tale retold by David Foster Wallace. See: <http://alanashley.wordpress.com/2011/07/28/this-is-water/>

even begin to use the same approach then. Like taking apart the steam engine, describing *everything*, even listing the contents of the entire cosmos, still doesn't tell you how they work together, as a Unity. And in the final analysis description is impossible because we are Describing the Indescribable.

An alternative approach

The biologist Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895) is attributed with commenting that seeking scientific proof of God's existence is as sensible as using musical notation to prove the Earth is round. Perhaps the most significant refutation from our perspective in this book is that the whole enterprise is misguided from the start: our seeking to prove or disprove the 'existence' of God through any form of intellectual debate is, like the young fish seeking to establish the meaning of the word 'water', doomed to failure.⁸⁴

Perhaps it's time we tried something else. It's been suggested that we may be able to establish the essence of Ultimate Reality in a third way, not by philosophical argument and not by scientific testing, but by personally uniting with it. This way, the way of *experience*, is found in Christian, Hindu and Buddhist thought. From the Hindu perspective - where the one Universal Principle, Brahman, is recognised above all else - the Mandukya-Upanishad states:

The Self is the lord of all; inhabitant of the hearts of all. He is the source of all; creator and dissolver of beings. There is nothing He does not know.

He is not knowable by perception, turned inward or outward, nor by both combined. He is neither that which is known, nor that which is not known, nor is He the sum of all that might be known. He cannot

⁸⁴ Use of the word 'existence' is distinctly problematic in this context of course, but since in this book we're committed to the use of words, and since these are necessarily part of the illusory world of *Samsara*, we must simply remember that whatever follows will be misleading.

be seen, grasped, bargained with. He is undefinable, unthinkable, indescribable.

The only proof of His existence is union with Him. The world disappears in Him. He is the peaceful, the good, the one without a second. ⁸⁵

And similarly:

Zen, especially Rinzai Zen, emphasizes the primary importance of religious experience which will satisfy the human spiritual yearning, and it maintains that the essence of religion lies in religious experience. ⁸⁶

.....

But exactly what is it that makes us think we're not already united with Ultimate Reality? In this book the term Ego is bandied about quite a bit so let's have a look at what exactly is meant here by this rather elusive term.

⁸⁵ From the Mandukya-Upanishad, quoted in Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England. pp.146-7.

⁸⁶ Shibayama Z (1977) *A Flower Does Not Talk: Zen Essays*. Charles E Tuttle Company, Tokyo, Japan. p.34.

Chapter 7.

Ego

We experience in different modes. We perceive external realities, we dream, imagine, have semi-conscious reveries. Some people have visions, hallucinations, experience faces transfigured, see auras, and so on. Most people most of the time experience themselves and others in one or other way that I shall call 'egoic'. That is, centrally or peripherally, they experience the world and themselves in terms of a consistent identity, a me-here over against a you-there, within a framework of certain ground structures of space and time, shared with other members of their society ...

*... all religions and all existential philosophies have argued that such 'egoic experience' is a preliminary illusion, a veil, a film of 'maya' - a dream to Heraclitus, and to Lao-Tzu, the fundamental illusion of all Buddhism, a state of sleep, of death, of socially accepted madness, a womb state to which one has to die, from which one has to be born.*⁸⁷

So wrote Scottish psychiatrist R.D Laing (1927-1989) in his discussion of 'transcendental experiences' wherein one loses one's sense of ego. Laing's description does not make easy reading, in no small part because the subject is rather vague and woolly from the perspective of Everyday Reality. And it is likely to leave many people none the wiser.

So, what is Ego?

The essence of what the term 'Ego' might mean will be described in Chapter 20, headed Do-it-yourself, where it's noted that Alan Watts recounts in some depth the universal habit of humans to create a symbolic reality of things they experience in addition to the material

⁸⁷ Laing RD (1967) *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England. pp.112-3.

reality of the things themselves. We even create a symbolic reality of ourselves as being somehow split or separate from our physical, bodily, selves. He goes on to say:

But the mind, or the true nature, of man cannot actually be split ... The illusion of the split comes from the mind's attempt to be both itself and its idea of itself, from a fatal confusion of fact with symbol. To make an end of the illusion, the mind must stop trying to act upon itself, upon its stream of experiences, from the standpoint of the idea of itself which we call the ego. ⁸⁸

This is a difficult concept to grasp but is fundamental to an understanding of Zen Buddhism. For Zen there is no duality of subject and object, no difference between the knower (you and I) and that which is known. Watts again:

Our problem is that the power of thought enables us to construct symbols of things apart from the things themselves. This includes the ability to make a symbol, an idea of ourselves apart from ourselves. Because the idea is so much more stable than the fact, we learn to identify ourselves with our idea of ourselves. Hence the subjective feeling of a 'self' which 'has' a mind, of an inwardly isolated subject to whom experiences involuntarily happen. With its characteristic emphasis on the concrete, Zen points out that our precious 'self' is just an idea, useful and legitimate enough if seen for what it is, but disastrous if identified with our real nature. ⁸⁹

Moment by moment every human being is the sum total of their entire experience: their actions, wishes, thoughts and so on. There is no other 'self' that is outside this or somehow separate from the individual's experience, despite the generally unquestioned assumption that this is so. This imagined self to whom 'things

⁸⁸ Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.154. N.B. How the mind might go about stopping 'trying to act upon itself' is discussed further in the chapter on Meditation.

⁸⁹ *ibid*, p.140.

happen' is the illusory symbolic self to which Watts is referring. It's simply the ego and it's an illusion. None of us is 'something to which experiences happen', rather, *we are each the experiences themselves*. And perhaps it's the non-existence of this illusory 'self' that lies behind the failure we've already read of in Chapter 4, whereby the 18th century philosopher David Hume was unable to find himself.

The implication is that we *are* our perceptions and emotions and have no existence outside of these experiences. To phrase this in a different way, actions, events, feelings and experiences are not something that happen to us. They are us; we are what 'happening' is. This is true of all our experiences: the moment by moment change in our perceptions of the world that we call consciousness is *what we are*; the classification and unquestioned perception of everything in our Everyday Reality as possessing qualities and characteristics that fall into the opposing dualities of yin-yang is *what we are*; the sense of change that we all know and call 'time', this too is *what we are*. We do not simply and passively pass through time as we commonly assume. *We are time*. There is no separate entity called 'time' and no separate entity called 'me'. So it is with all our experiences: we are no more than these and they are no more than us. As Richard Hittleman has observed, it is as if we are simply *a vessel through which these events are flowing*.⁹⁰ There is no separate 'me' and no separate 'you' to whom things happen. Indeed, things do not happen to you at all; you *are* happening. What you are doing at this moment - including your psychological make-up and the conscious and unconscious predilections and preferences that make you *you*, these are all that is. The apparent past and future, what you were yesterday and may be tomorrow, are neither here nor there. They do not exist.

But if this is so, why do we have such a strong sense that we are separate from the world of things and events? Why do we feel that we are independent entities, detached from the environment around us? The well-established Buddhist image of the Moon reflected in a

⁹⁰ Hittleman RL (1976) *Yoga: The 8 Steps to Health and Peace*. Hamlyn, London, p.54.

large pool of water, allows us to think about these questions in a different way. One interpretation of this image is in describing the duality of subject and object, of the experiencer and that which they experience. These apparent opposites are in reality a unity, as inseparable from each other as yin and yang. The water is the subject and without it there can be no reflection of the Moon in the water. The Moon is the object without which there can be no reflection of the Moon in the water. The image of the Moon in the water then is as reliant on the water as much as it is on the Moon. They are part and parcel of the same thing and to see either as subject or object is erroneous. In the same way we are not 'something to which things happen', we *are* that which happens. In one stroke we can see that our ego is an illusion.

Of course, it's a whole lot easier to say this than it is to experience it, which is where meditation comes in. Meditation is a vehicle by which we can experience not being within an individual ego-driven consciousness. That is, we can *be* without *being something*; what this could be like is described in some detail in Chapter 22, on Meditation.

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But for now we go on to explore one of the more common illusions of the ego – the projection of meaning onto the world that we call Belief.

Chapter 8.

Belief

*The real question is: Is there anything we can think of which, by the mere fact that we can think of it, is shown to exist outside our thought? Every philosopher would like to say yes, because a philosopher's job is to find out things about the world by thinking rather than observing. If yes is the right answer, there is a bridge from pure thought to things, if not, not.*⁹¹

So wrote the philosopher Bertrand Russell in 1946. Whilst there is perhaps a dearth of evidence in favour of such thought-creation in relation to concrete objects, there is still a lingering suspicion that a belief in something automatically creates its truth independently of the person who's doing the believing. The suggestion is that belief in something gives it an independent existence. This existence is not in the form of physical phenomena but in the form of ideas and concepts, still possessing a reality independent of and outside our thinking processes. And it's worth remembering that, as Chapter 4 (What's really real?) points out, the realm of ideas *may* turn out to have a greater reality about it than anything in the phenomenal world.

But, you may ask, how could simple thought lead to the creation of something beyond itself? Is it possible that something that exists at the level of ideas could have an eternal presence in a sort of transcendental realm, where it is unchanging, omnipresent and everlasting? Think, for example, of a tree, a mouse or a pair of shoes. These are particular combinations of molecules. If tomorrow in some massive cosmic calamity all human beings were to disappear along with all trees, mice and shoes, would the *concept* of each of these also disappear or do concepts have some inherent meaning beyond

⁹¹ Russell B (1961) *The History of Western Philosophy*. George Allen and Unwin Ltd. UK, p.411.

human existence? If they do, does anything else have inherent meaning and permanent existence? An example might demonstrate this point:

You are at present reading these words. If you are alone, no-one has witnessed the fact that you are reading and when you die all knowledge of the event may well die with you. However, it is true that on this particular day at this particular time you read these particular words. Moreover, it will remain true forever. This simple truth is composed of no material substance. It is not knowable through sight, smell, touch, taste or hearing, nor, so far as we know, can it be deduced from any external source (like some sort of vast cosmic repository of everything that has ever happened anywhere, to anyone). It is unchanging and unchangeable and yet is continually present insofar as it exists at every point of the universe. Go to the planet Mars in one million years' time and it will be true even there that on this particular day at this particular time you read these particular words on planet Earth.

Of course, if this is true of you reading these words right now, it's true of everything that has ever happened - every thought and sensory experience of every sentient being, every emotion, act and event there has ever been anywhere and everywhere in the universe. All are recorded in the cosmic truth library, wherever that may be, for as long as the universe exists - and maybe even longer. In this sense we would create reality because whatever we believe to be true, in a sense *becomes* real. We would literally *realise* the experience - make it real by simply experiencing it. As the Italian philosopher and novelist Umberto Eco (b.1932) has suggested, what we believe to be reality is thereby created as reality - belief is creative of unending truths.⁹²

So, do you believe this to be correct? Can the truth of some event like you reading a book really have an existence that is independent of your immediate consciousness of it? Chapter 6, on Ultimate

⁹² Eco U (2004) *The Name of the Rose*. Vintage, Random House, London.

Reality, noted the fact that over the centuries each of the three major arguments for the existence of God has been refuted. One of these, the ontological argument, is of particular relevance here, where we're discussing the creative power of thought. The argument was first proposed by philosopher and Benedictine monk, Anselm of Aosta, who lived between 1033-1109. He observed that God is perfect and must therefore exist, for not to exist would mean He is imperfect. At first sight this seems quite reasonable but it does require that *existence* is one of the defining characteristics of 'perfection', at least in relation to God. In the same way I can assert that one of the defining characteristics of a unicorn is that it has a long spiral horn on its head, but that doesn't make it exist. Similarly, I can define 'truth' as necessarily everlasting, but this does contain the implicit, albeit unwritten, assumption that the 'truth' of anything will be stored forever in some sort of vast cosmic repository of everything that has ever happened. This weakness in the argument, essentially defining something into existence, is hard to see at first because we are so very familiar with the concept of truth and because the everlasting part of its definition is unwritten.

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But still, what *is* true is that a little belief can go a long way - have a look at Chapter 24, which discusses Faith, to discover just how far. And, in the end, it's worth remembering that all this is entirely dependent on the existence of Time, which is rather more debateable than you might think and is where we're headed next.

Chapter 9.

Time

*In the present moment there is nothing which comes to be. In this moment there is nothing which ceases to be. Thus there is no birth-and-death to be brought to an end. Wherefore the absolute tranquillity (of Nirvana) is this present moment. Though it is at this moment there is no limit to this moment, and herein is eternal delight.*⁹³

So wrote the Sixth Patriarch of Zen, Dajian Hui-neng (638-713), and in these words we can grasp the idea that in Ultimate Reality there is only the present, timeless, moment. This conclusion appears to be fairly universal in mystical experience, regardless of the religious background of the individual concerned. As Happold has observed:

*Whatever time may be ... the experiences of the mystics are not understandable unless one is prepared to accept that there may be an entirely different dimension from that of clock time or indeed any other sort of time. For the mystic feels himself to be in a dimension where time is not, where 'all is always now'.*⁹⁴

But what could this mean? And what is time anyway?

Now and then

There are many ways to think about time, but here we do not need to consider the merits of differing cosmological models of spacetime. Here our concern is to simply stimulate thought around the possibility of timelessness and what this might mean. The novelist

⁹³ Dajian Hui-neng. Quoted in Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England. p.220.

⁹⁴ Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.48.

Audrey Niffenegger outlines some of the options for what time might be in her book *The Time Traveller's Wife*:

*The choices we're working with here are a block universe, where past, present and future all coexist simultaneously and everything has already happened; chaos, where anything can happen and nothing can be predicted because we can't know all the variables; and a Christian universe in which God made everything and it's here for a purpose but we have free will anyway ...*⁹⁵

Until recent years the theory that time came into being with the Big Bang had been very widely accepted, at least within the lay world. However, the whole concept of a Big Bang is hotly disputed in the world of theoretical physics. The idea behind the Big Bang is that at its start as a singularity, everything was the same thing – energy. From this pure energy both time and matter emerged, though they are not so separate as we may think and together constitute spacetime. One of several current theories about the Big Bang does not require the creation of time in this sense however, as the Big Bang may not have been a one-off event. The suggestion is that it is happening all the time as each moment unfolds (which links neatly with the completely non-scientific idea of Unhappening). Alternatively, as the eminent English mathematical physicist Sir Roger Penrose (b.1931) has suggested, perhaps the Big Bang arose from the expanding universe that we know. The universe is believed to be expanding at an increasing rate and ultimately all matter will be converted to energy in the form of photons. The universe at this point will be vastly larger than it is currently, though in the absence of matter the concept of size becomes meaningless. It is this universe that itself becomes the Big Bang for another universe - which is, perhaps, not so far removed from the six words you read at the start of *Mindfulness, Now and Zen*:

BIGBANGEXPANSIONCONTRACTIONGNABGIB ...

⁹⁵ Niffenegger A (2005) *The Time Traveller's Wife*. Vintage/Random House, London. p.77

But the jury remains out on much of this, and basic questions remain unanswered, including the old favourite, 'What was there before the Big Bang?' This is not likely to be answered any time soon however, because theoretical physicists make no assumptions about the state of the universe or anything else *before* the Big Bang, since at the point of a singularity all natural laws break down. The conditions 'before' the Big Bang are therefore not considered to be within the scope of scientific enquiry.

Just a moment

What physics does tell us is that time is far more flexible than we might think. For one thing, it moves more slowly when it's nearer to a source of gravity. The twins paradox, a thought experiment in special relativity, is an example of this: a pair of identical twins are (notionally) born at the same moment but one lives his life at the top of a mountain while the other lives at the foot of the mountain. Because of the greater pull of the Earth's gravity, time moves more slowly for the one living at the foot, who is therefore younger than his brother living at the top of the mountain. Similarly, if we put one of these twins into a high-speed space-ship which then accelerates to near the speed of light while the other twin remains on Earth, time will move more slowly for the one in the spacecraft. The result is that the twin in the rocket will age more slowly than his brother back on Earth.

Since Einstein first published his famous papers in the early 20th century, a dominant theme in particle physics has been that time comes to a complete standstill when a particle, such as a photon of light, travels at the speed of light. Photons are able to do this because they have no mass and can be thought of as pure energy. Imagine a photon of light traversing space from the Sun to the Earth. For the photon, time stands still because it's moving at the speed of light. It therefore leaves the Sun at exactly the same moment that it arrives on the Earth. This is worth saying again: if you were the photon you would step off the Sun and step onto the Earth *at the same time*. In the eight minutes we say it takes for light to travel the 93 million miles across space from the Sun to the Earth, you will not have aged

at all. Your journey has not taken eight minutes or even eight seconds. It has been instantaneous. Nothing has happened to you because, for you, no time has passed. As noted above, the photon has no mass so it is able to travel at the speed of light. It's difficult to imagine how anything, even an atomic particle, could not have mass but still exist as *something*. But picture a stone dropped into a still pond. The ripples caused on the surface of the water will radiate outwards in a circular pattern. What is it that is moving? In a transverse wave such as this, the particle displacement is perpendicular to the direction of wave propagation. That is, the only tangible material that moves is the individual particles of the matter through which the wave travels, and in water for instance, these particles move in small circles. The only thing that moves in the direction of the wave is energy as it is transferred through the water. In other words, it is the disturbance causing the wave that is transported along in the direction of the wave; the wave of energy that appears to move outwards in the circular ripples of the pond has no mass and yet we can see that it exists.

Time and Ultimate Reality

As we've seen, pure (mass-less) energy can travel at the speed of light, at which speed time stands still. But what has this got to do with Ultimate Reality? One benefit of these ideas is that they force us to consider how things might be if time were to simply stop. Without time there would be no change, but without change would there be such a thing as awareness? Does consciousness rely on time in the same way as everything else we know in the world of phenomena? Our experience of change, of time, is such an ingrained sense and so obvious to us (at a commonsense level) that we rarely question it. It's this profound sense of change that's so difficult for us to disbelieve, to un-explain. We never know 'what's going to happen next'. This sense of an unknown is an experience of time. But this sense is very much a part of what we are; the experience of time is fundamental to what it is to be human. And one of the most persuasive of our experiences, something that makes time seem to be so very real, is our tendency to regard events in the world as if they were repeated experiences. So we get up every morning and go to work, Monday

comes around every week, Tuesday comes around every week, and so on. While these apparent repetitions give us the sense that they - repeated events - are happening, of course every moment is new, there's no such thing as a repeated event.

Our experience of time means that we feel we are on the cusp of things as they happen, that the future stretches out in front of us like some eternal unknown just waiting for us to catch up with it. But is everything you experience really just waiting for you to experience it in order for it to *be*, or does it independently come into being the moment you experience it? It seems that questions abound once we open up the Pandora's Box of 'time', but the difficulties of answering them multiply exponentially. In his book *Yoga: The 8 Steps to Health and Peace* (1976), Richard Hittleman refers to our Everyday Reality as both 'ordinary mind' and as 'the mayic plane' (Maya). Because of the illusory nature of the mayic plane any attempt to communicate with each other from within our Everyday Reality is doomed to failure, a point discussed at length in Chapter 17 (Describing the Indescribable). And perhaps it's because of the need to function within such an apparently illogical environment that, as Hittleman has observed, discussion of 'time' must always be held at arms' length:

*The accomplished Karma Yogi is always aware of 'time' as an illusion, as a concept of ordinary mind that is used for convenience on the mayic plane.*⁹⁶

This necessity of using approaches to communication that we have identified from the outset as illusory is one of the ironies of any work aimed at clarifying what we mean by the term 'Ultimate Reality'. And maybe it's because of this that some of the great Zen Masters have refused to enter into any sort of debate on the subject, preferring to answer with what appears on the surface to be

⁹⁶ Hittleman RL (1976) *Yoga: The 8 Steps to Health and Peace*. Hamlyn, London, p.55.

impenetrable and nonsensical gibberish. With this in mind, we proceed to look a little closer at ...

... The brief mystery of time

Zen Buddhism has developed some novel ways to approach the whole subject of 'time'. The way we think of the present moment confers on it an 'outside' that is needed to separate it from the future and the past. On the basis of dualistic reasoning this would also imply the existence of an 'inside'. But of what would this 'inside' of *now* consist? We've already seen that the present moment lasts for no time at all. Look at the hands of a clock as they pass through noon: for how long is it 12 o'clock? Maybe Ultimate Reality is simply *being* in the moment whereas in human experience, in Everyday Reality, we project the past and the future onto our understanding of the world and live in the resulting sense of passing time. To this extent we're fuzzy, we're both sides of *now*, whereas Ultimate Reality is *forever now*.

The eminent Zen master Joshu, also known as Zhaozhou or Chao-chou Tsing-chen (778-897), taught that time in the sense that we usually conceive it - past, present and future - is an illusion:

*For Joshu true Zen is shining and alive at this very moment at this very place - "here-now." It exists neither in the story of the past, nor in the expectation of the future. More precisely speaking, "here-now" is eternity itself, in which both before and after, long and short are enveloped.*⁹⁷

The essence of Zen teaching is that time is a part of Everyday Reality, of Samsara, and so is illusory: it does not exist, at least not in the way we believe it to exist. Nor are we, human beings, separate entities to whom 'things happen'. At any given moment we are the sum total of our entire experience: our actions, our wishes, our thoughts and so on. There is no other 'self' that is outside this

⁹⁷ Shibayama Z (1977) *A Flower Does Not Talk: Zen Essays*. Charles E Tuttle Company, Tokyo, Japan, p.126.

moment and somehow separate from our immediate being, despite our generally unquestioned belief in this separate self. As you read in the chapter on the illusions of Ego, you are not something to which experiences happen, rather, *you are the experiences themselves* at the moment they occur. This is true of all our experiences: the moment by moment change in our perception of the world that we call consciousness is *what we are*; the classification and perception of everything in our Everyday Reality as possessing qualities and characteristics that fall into the opposing dualities of yin-yang is *what we are*; the sense of change that we all know and call 'time', this too is *what we are*. We do not simply pass through time as we commonly assume. *We are time*. There is no separate entity called 'time' and no separate entity called 'me'. So it is with all our experiences: we are no more than these and they are no more than us. There is no separate 'me' to which things happen. In the timeless state that is Ultimate Reality all that we perceive, every emotion we feel, every action we take at any given moment is all there is. So perceptions, emotions, actions, events, feelings and experiences are not something that happen to us. They *are* us; we are what 'happening' is.

Remember the cup that was mentioned in the introductory chapters, the one that was being the cup before we were aware of it? This little observation was based mainly on the fact that it takes time for the light from the cup to reach our eyes and then more time for the visual stimulus to reach our conscious awareness. This is true of everything we perceive with any of our senses and it suggests that we are a sort of memory trace of Ultimate Reality, which seems always to be just ahead of us and everlastingly, momentarily, always in our future. The time delay caused by the passage of light also means that objects that are nearer to us are seen sooner than objects that are further away because the light from them takes less time to travel the shorter distance. So, light from the Moon takes maybe one second to reach us on Earth whereas sunlight travels for eight minutes before reaching us. In these examples, though we might occasionally see both the Sun and the Moon at the same time, we see the Moon as it was one second ago and the Sun as it was eight minutes ago. This

same phenomenon is all around us. Sit in your kitchen: the cup you see on the table in front of you is ‘happening’ or ‘being’ more recently than the clock on the far wall because the cup is nearer to you. The cup that you see is in a different time zone from the clock. Another example is that of two exactly similar clocks set to exactly the same time. One you are holding out in front of you and the other you see on a church tower across the town. If you had a super-human sense of vision that could discern split second differences, though both clocks give exactly the same time, the nearer one will be seen as faster than the further one. The passage of time for moving objects is similar but different to this – time for moving objects is slowed relative to non-moving objects. Travel at the speed of light and time ceases to change at all. Just walking means time travels more slowly for the walker than for the bystander.

No time like the present

It's easy enough to think of the future as not existing since by definition it hasn't (yet) happened. But what about the past? We *know* that happened because we were there and saw it with our own eyes. Perhaps the question then is, even if it really happened, where is it now? An example provided by probability might help. Imagine a perfect coin. If you toss the coin there is an equal chance that it will land on heads or tails - let's say it lands on heads. Toss it again. This time, is it more likely to land on tails since it has already landed on heads? Well, it lands on heads again. What if you toss it again and again it lands on heads. And again. And again. Surely a run of heads must mean the probability of the coin landing on a tails at the next throw is increased? Probability theory tells us the answer is "No" because probability, chance, has no memory. The coin stands as much chance of landing on heads as it does on tails every single time you toss it. In the same way, the past, what has been and gone whether it be a millisecond or an eon ago, has no continued bearing on the present moment. This is not to be confused with changes that 'happened' in the past resulting in different circumstances that influence 'now'. Indeed, this is what 'change' is. The point is, the past does not *still* influence the present, in the present, because it no longer exists.

There is a long tradition in Buddhism, especially Zen, of focusing on the timelessness of Nirvana, and this instant, spontaneous, quality is reflected in many aspects of its practice. It's seen in the mindfulness of Zen meditation, *zazen*; in the here-and-now nature of *sumi* paintings; in haiku poetry and in the martial art of *kendo*. Each of these traditions is rooted in a consciousness focused on the eternally present moment of *now*. But this focus is not achieved by consciously *making an effort* to concentrate on the present moment since this would imply the existence of other moments. The past and future are abstractions that have no concrete reality. The present moment is timeless: for how long is it 12 o'clock? For how long do the hands of your clock stop so that you can be informed that it is noon? A millionth of a second? A trillionth? Of course, the answer is 'no time at all'. Time is an illusion.

Exercise in Cosmic Thinking no.1

How to experience infinity

In a moment you'll need to close your eyes. As you read this, imagine a globe floating alone in outer space, like a simple round rubber ball. It has numerous spikes pointing outwards from its centre and these spikes go on and on, outwards, forever. Hold that image in your mind's eye. Now imagine the same ball with the spikes still pointing outwards forever, but now they're also pointing inwards and going on and on, inwards towards the centre of the ball, but never meeting, forever. Close your eyes.

Do it now!

At the moment you experienced the outwards-inwards movement, if you're lucky you might have grasped the slightly startling sense of the ball turning inside-out and almost becoming a tube. A tube that goes on forever.

And that's not all: those spikes are not *travelling* inwards and outwards forever. In fact, they're not moving at all. Because they're infinite they're already there. Nothing is moving. Nothing is changing. In a sense that's what Ultimate Reality is, it's there already *in the present moment*. It's timeless. We can see a similar pattern in the Hindu belief that we are all reincarnated repeatedly throughout endless world cycles. If this is so then each of us has already been incarnated as every other person and every living being on countless occasions. In other words, anything that is infinite *has already happened*. It's not an ongoing thing. A simple example: dividing 10 by 3 we get 3.3333 recurring. Our rootedness in time leads us to making the mistake of thinking that the recurring numbers are somehow 'still happening', as if they are continually being added at the end of a very long line of numbers that is by now somewhere near the edge of the universe. This error in our thinking lies in the cognitive mechanisms we use to examine concepts. That is, we understand 'infinity' to lie within our concept of time, whereas infinity, of course, is wholly outside of time. So within infinity all possible recurring numbers have already happened.

Just one more thing ... in case you didn't notice, the spikes outwards/spikes inwards analogy is another form of the idea expressed in the six words at the start of *Mindfulness, Now and Zen: BIGBANGEXPANSIONCONTRACTIONGNABGIB*. Have a look at Chapter 12, on Unhappening, for more on this.

Exercise in Cosmic Thinking no.2

How to experience the Present Moment

The *Dichotomy Paradox*, which derives from the Greek philosopher Zeno (circa 490-430 BCE) holds that all motion is impossible because whatever is in motion between two fixed points must arrive at the half-way stage before it arrives at its destination. Picture someone running to catch a bus that is waiting at a bus stop. Before they can get to the bus stop, they must run halfway there. But before they can get halfway there, they must get a quarter of the way there.

And before going a quarter way, they must travel one-eighth, and so on. This splitting of the distance left to travel continues breaking into half indefinitely. The result of this is that the individual concerned cannot ever move from their starting point since any distance whatsoever demands that they first complete half of it. Viewed in this way, the race to catch the bus is seen to consist of an infinite number of tasks and because of this it can never be completed or even begun. On this basis all motion can be seen to be illusory, and it is this conclusion that is paradoxical.

Apart from the *Dichotomy Paradox*, Zeno proposed several others to illustrate the illusory nature of our everyday sense of multiplicity and change through the passage of time. Whilst a number of arguments have been put forward in refutation of these ideas, they remain useful tools for us here because they enable us to think a little more imaginatively than our usual everyday sense of rationality and commonsense might allow.

And an imaginative use of thought is certainly valuable when considering how paradox might demonstrate the nature of *the present moment*. In an extension of Zeno's ideas, we might imagine the fixed length of time between this moment now and the end of the universe, which will also be the end of time of course. For the sake of argument let's imagine the universe might end in around 50 billion years. Let's also imagine, for the sake of argument, that before we reach the 50 billion-year point, we (or whatever remains of the universe) will have to reach the 25 billion-year point. But, clearly, before we reach the 25 billion-year point we'll have to reach the 12½ billion-year point. No problem so far. However, before we reach the 12½ billion-year point we'll have to reach the halfway point between now and then, and before we reach *that* point we'll have to reach the mid-point between now and ... Well, you get the idea. Did you notice that the nearer you get to 'now' the shorter the moments of time that must be halved become? Indeed, so short are they that the smallest possible moment of time must actually be infinitely small. This is *the present moment*, and the ironic thing is that it is infinite, just like the longest period of time you can imagine.

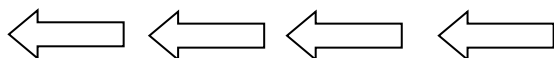
Exercise in Cosmic Thinking no.3

How to experience the Present Moment (again)

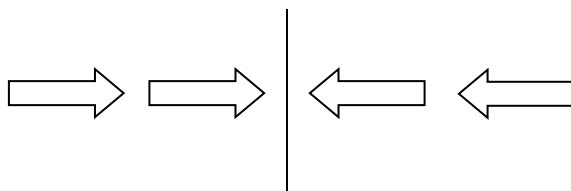
It's a tricky business imagining how time could be at once running forwards, like this ...



... and at the same time running backwards, like this ...



So perhaps it's easier to think of time as running in both directions together, the present moment being the point at which they meet, like this ...



present moment

To borrow a line from the Sandōkai, a poem by 8th century Zen master Sekito, *The absolute works together with the relative like two arrows meeting in mid-air.*

For more on the experience of the present moment have a look at Chapter 11, on the Big Bang, or Chapter 12, Unhappening.

Exercise in Cosmic Thinking no.4

How to experience no time

If you could remove all matter from the universe would time still exist? Because for time to have any meaning, *something* must change. If nothing is there to change then there can be no time. At this point you might well conclude that time must be dependent on matter for its being, and indeed this is the case for together they constitute spacetime. And all matter, which began in the Big Bang as pure energy, will at the end of the universe ultimately convert back to pure energy. This will be all there is: no planets, no stars, no time, just one thing - energy. With no time this energy will not change, it will be timeless.

Exercise in Cosmic Thinking no.5

How to experience no you

If you travel at the speed of light and hold a mirror up to your face, do you see yourself? ⁹⁸

.....

⁹⁸ Here's a clue: Imagine you're sitting on the top of a train carriage, steaming through the countryside. In your hand you hold a gun, which you point forwards in the direction in which the train is headed. You fire the gun. If the train is travelling at 100 mph and the bullet from the gun will normally travel at 200 mph, then the actual speed of the bullet will be the combined speeds. That is, it will leave the barrel of the gun at 300 mph relative to an unmoving observer standing by the side of the track. And so it is with everything. Everything except light, that is. Light has the rather special quality of always travelling at a fixed speed - the speed of light - so there is no combination of speeds. Hold a mirror to your face whilst you travel at the speed of light and the light will not leave your face, so you will not see your reflection.

The absolute conviction that time exists is entirely understandable given that it is what we are. Nevertheless, this is only one facet of being human. Another more-or-less universal illusion is perhaps even harder to grasp. Duality is not just what we see when we look at the world, it's a fundamental element of the thinking process itself.

Chapter 10.

Duality

*Nothing in the universe can stand by itself - no thing, no fact, no being, no event - and for this reason it is absurd to single anything out as the ideal to be grasped. For what is singled out exists only in relation to its own opposite, since what is is defined by what is not, pleasure is defined by pain, life by death, and motion is defined by stillness.*⁹⁹

At the heart of the illusion of Everyday Reality - Samsara - lies the constant interplay between the opposing elements of the world. This dynamic is known as 'duality' and is beautifully illustrated by the Chinese concept of yin-yang. Whilst yin-yang represents a hugely important relationship at play in the most fundamental essence of our Everyday Reality, the concept is able to convey this with unsurpassed simplicity and clarity.

Duality, the dynamic behind yin-yang, recurs in a number of forms in philosophical discourse, including discussions around dualism and binary opposition. However, the essence of the concept is easily lost in the density of debate around its exact meaning. Since we are not concerned here with philosophical purity but rather with stimulating our thinking on what Ultimate Reality might be, this book will adopt a pragmatically broad and distinctly non-philosophical understanding of duality and the concept of yin-yang.

What goes up must come down

We are rarely aware of the duality expressed in the concept of yin-yang, which permeates our consciousness like some sort of invisible energy field. The pattern of its interplay is seen everywhere in the universe itself, which physically surrounds us with its apparent

⁹⁹ Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.83.

diversity and differentiation. Ordinarily - in our Everyday Reality - we are never outside the experience of yin-yang, though to see beyond it and experience Cosmic Consciousness is all we need do to know Ultimate Reality. The interplay, interconnectedness, interdependence and interrelationship between yin and yang are apparent in the Taijitu symbol, as seen on the back cover of this book.

The Chinese word Taijitu loosely translates as 'diagram of ultimate power' and in Taoist philosophy as the 'diagram of the supreme ultimate'. The symbol has arisen within many cultures and times, perhaps going back millennia and, like so many things human, has no doubt meant many different things to many different people. Insofar as it relates to Ultimate Reality it's universally known to represent the Taoist religion. At the heart of the Taijitu symbol is the idea that everything is composed of duality. Yin and yang are apparently in opposition yet they are also complementary: they are always opposite and always equal. In classical traditions the black shape, yin, represents the slow, passive, soft and cold qualities that are associated with water, Earth and Moon. The white shape, yang, represents the fast, aggressive, hard and hot qualities that are associated with fire, sky and sun. Each contains the seed of the other and can exist only insofar as it relates to the other. So it is with all concepts: high/low; hot/cold; male/female, and so on. Although the appearance of the symbol is a swirling movement, yin and yang are in perfect harmony with each other.

Fair is foul and foul is fair

Up to this point it's not too difficult to comprehend what duality is about. Opposites logically imply one another - you can't have the concept of 'up' without also having a sense of 'down' - or as the follower of the Stoic school of Greek philosophy, Chrysippus (280-207 BCE), might have put it: *Good and evil being antithetical, both must needs subsist in opposition.*¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Russell B (1961) *The History of Western Philosophy*. George Allen and Unwin Ltd. UK. p.265.

The very simplicity of the logic behind the binary opposition of duality, upon which the structuralist philosophical movement is based, is perhaps one of the factors that make it so hard to refute. But the real problem arises in attempting to grasp the wholeness and unity that lies behind yin-yang. This unity is not simply a oneness as opposed to a multiplicity because these terms are themselves polar opposites and are therefore located *within* Duality. In the Vedanta school of Hindu philosophy the unity is referred to as 'non-duality' to mark it out, though non-duality is not simply the opposite of duality but refers to that which is transcendental - having the quality of Transcendence - and cannot be encapsulated in words. Clearly, you may be thinking that the alleged existence of something transcendental is mere fantasy - nothing - though of course this thinking is itself entrapped within duality since 'nothing' has to have the polar equivalent of 'something' if we are to make sense of it within Everyday Reality. (If you're finding this particular piece of convoluted thinking is asking too much, have a look at Chapter 17, Describing the Indescribable).

The specific difficulties that arise when we are attempting to describe the concept of duality in words can be visualised in the Taijitu symbol, where the two opposing qualities are enclosed in a circle. Surely our understanding of their unity is clearly indicated by the circle itself? Sadly, not. Whilst yin and yang both lie within the circle, the circle itself has an outside, as it must if it is to make sense in Everyday Reality. But in Ultimate Reality there is no outside or inside. The whole, the unity, is transcendent. It's beyond the duality of yin-yang and can neither be shown in a two-dimensional image nor conceived of in the concepts that become written words. Transcendence lies at the heart of Ultimate Reality and cannot be grasped by the logical mind. Does it follow then that that which *can* be grasped, the duality of experience, is somehow erroneous, that there is, in reality, no up, no down, no black, no white?

The suggestion made here is that what we call 'up' and 'down', 'black' and 'white', exist but, like the reflection in a mirror, these concepts are only part of the story. The whole story, expressed here in the

term Ultimate Reality, lies *behind* the physical, phenomenal, world of yin-yang. However, attempts to describe this transcendental state tend to be somewhat impenetrable to the western mind. There are good reasons for this of course since all attempts are necessarily doomed, being aimed at Describing the Indescribable. A fine example is provided by the Buddhist Saptasatika Sutra, which refers to Ultimate Reality as Tathata, often translated as 'suchness'. Tathata indicates the world as it is - undivided and uncategorised by human words, concepts, symbols, ideas and thoughts. This is the experience of all Buddhas, each of whom is referred to as Tathagata, being awakened to the non-duality of the world. The early Bodhisattva (Buddhist saint) Manjusri talks of the Tathagata thus:

Suchness (Tathata) neither becomes nor ceases to become; thus do I see the Tathagata.

Suchness does not stand at any point or place; thus do I see the Tathagata.

Suchness is neither past, future, nor present; thus do I see the Tathagata.

Suchness does not arise from the dual or the non-dual; thus do I see the Tathagata.

Suchness is neither impure nor pure; thus do I see the Tathagata.

*Suchness neither arises nor comes to an end; thus do I see the Tathagata.*¹⁰¹

However, it's worth noting that the term 'Tathata' is a 'nonsense word' insofar as it must necessarily be a part of the illusion of Everyday Reality, Samsara, as must all words. The function of nonsense words like this is, as Watts has pointed out:

... to draw our attention to the fact that logic and meaning, with its inherent duality, is a property of thought and language but not of the actual world. The non-verbal, concrete world contains no classes and no symbols which signify or mean anything other than

¹⁰¹ Saptasatika Sutra (195), quoted in Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.88.

*themselves. Consequently, it contains no duality. For duality arises only when we classify, when we sort our experiences into mental boxes, since a box is no box without an inside and an outside.*¹⁰²

Thinking inside the box

Sometimes you need to think inside-out. Picture a square-sided three-dimensional cube, the shape of dice: how many sides can you see at any one time?¹⁰³ The simple act of considering that which is beyond all duality - non-duality - necessarily brings us into a direct awareness of Samsara: the concept of 'the One' implies an opposite - that which is not one - which is of course dualistic thinking. An interesting way to think about this appears in Hindu mythology, where God is seen at play in all things. As Alan Watts has observed:

*The inmost Self of saint and sage is no less the veiled Godhead than the inmost Self of the debauchee, the coward, the lunatic, and the very demons. The opposites (dvandva) of light and darkness, good and evil, pleasure and pain, are the essential elements of the game, for although the Godhead is identified with Truth (sat), Consciousness (chit), and Bliss (ananda), the dark side of life has its integral part ... For Hindu thought there is no Problem of Evil. The conventional, relative world is necessarily a world of opposites. Light is inconceivable apart from darkness; order is meaningless without disorder; and, likewise, up without down, sound without silence, pleasure without pain.*¹⁰⁴

It was in this vein that Ceylonese metaphysician and philosopher of Indian Art, Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) wrote:

¹⁰² Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, pp.93-4.

¹⁰³ No, not three! Imagine the cube is the size of a room. Don't look at it from the outside, sit in one corner of the room - how many sides can you see now?

¹⁰⁴ Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, pp.54-5.

*For anyone who holds that 'God made the world', the question, Why did He permit the existence in it of any evil, or of that Evil One in whom all evil is personified, is altogether meaningless; one might as well enquire why He did not make the world without dimensions or one without temporal succession.*¹⁰⁵

In other words, in the way that the concept of 'up' is meaningless in the absence of the concept of 'down', the concept of 'evil' is a necessary part of any world that is to have a conception of 'good'. It is in this interplay between opposites that Watts compares to a game played by God.

Nirvana

In principle we can conceive of Samsara as the somewhat illusory condition of our Everyday Reality. On the other hand, we can conceive of Nirvana as the state of perfection behind Samsara. However, the two are neither opposites nor in conflict: whilst being wholly other than Samsara, Nirvana encompasses it in a way that words cannot convey. The difficulty arises in seeing the transcendence of Ultimate Reality behind the dualistic yin-yang relationship of Samsara-Nirvana, because Ultimate Reality is both yin and yang. From this point of view, life is indeed a game, the point of which might be to discover how to circumvent this dualistic dilemma. And this is not achieved through the straightforward pursuit of Nirvana. As Watts points out, adherents of Mahayana Buddhism take a particular stance towards the polar opposition found in the world of Samsara and the transcendent unity of the world as it really is in Nirvana. One might expect Nirvana to be sought directly since it is the one and only thing that is true or real. However, this is not the case because, as we noted at the start of this chapter, nothing in the universe can stand by itself.

¹⁰⁵ Coomaraswamy AK (1947) Who is Satan and where is hell? *The Review of Religion*, xii, (1), 76-87 (p.77), quoted in Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.55.

The point is that as soon as Nirvana is made an object of desire it becomes itself an object of Samsara. And as we saw in the introductory chapters to the book, one problem with seeking Nirvana is that it contains the hidden implication that 'something' can be found, and this brings its own set of assumptions and questions about the nature of Ultimate Reality. Nirvana cannot be desired because it is not a concept and so cannot be conceived of. The Lankavatara Sutra, the cornerstone of Zen Buddhism, deals with this as follows in relation to the question 'What is meant by non-duality?':

*... It means that light and shade, long and short, black and white, are relative terms ... and not independent of each other; as Nirvana and Samsara are, all things are not-two. There is no Nirvana except where is Samsara; there is no Samsara except where is Nirvana; for the condition of existence is not of a mutually exclusive character. Therefore it is said that all things are non-dual as are Nirvana and Samsara.*¹⁰⁶

The limitations on discussion that are imposed by what Watts has called 'nonsense terms' is clearly expressed by Evans-Wentz in his description of the Buddhist conception of the 'Void' to be expected following death. Here the latter describes the nature of Nirvana from the perspective of Buddhist Mahayana teaching:

*Nirvana, is, negatively speaking, release from ... the worlds of Birth and Death and their pains. The Void cannot even be strictly called Nirvana, for this is a term relative to the world, and the Void is beyond all relations. Positively, and concomitantly with such release, it is the Perfect Experience which is Buddhahood, which, again, from the cognitive aspect, is Consciousness unobscured by the darkness of Unconsciousness, that is to say, Consciousness freed of all limitation.*¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Lankavatara Sutra (11, 28). Quoted in Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.84.

¹⁰⁷ Evans-Wentz WY (1973) *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Open University Press, p.lxxii.

The issue for us here is that whenever we attempt to talk about Ultimate Reality (Nirvana) or to use any other word intended to express the transcendently inexpressible unity of yin-yang, we immediately confront a brick wall. Words can only go so far in denoting what they seek to indicate. They cannot take you there on their own and this is why this book can only describe what Ultimate Reality *is like* and can never say *what it is*. If you would like a more detailed look at this, see Chapter 17 ([Describing the Indescribable](#)).

Where did duality come from?

We might ask, 'If Ultimate Reality is really a transcendental unified oneness, why do we perceive it as a yin-yang duality? Is it part of God's cosmic plan? Is it a 'test' of some sort to select those humans who are worthy of 'salvation'? Is there some sort of logical necessity that deems the universe must function in this way?'

But perhaps we don't need to jump to any such conclusions. Maybe the oneness and the duality are not really any different from each other. These are again what Alan Watts refers to as 'nonsense' words since any mention or even conceptualisation of oneness necessarily brings it into the realm of Samsara and duality. Perhaps this is how Ultimate Reality works, but there again duality may be less about how the universe works and more about how *we* work. Maybe positive and negative conceptualisations are essential for us to grasp meaning in the everyday world we experience? As the Lankavatara Sutra says, '*There is no Nirvana except where is Samsara; there is no Samsara except where is Nirvana.*'¹⁰⁸ Perhaps duality is one mechanism by which we make sense of, and survive within, the world.

And much like several other concepts already discussed, if the structure of dualistic thinking is the only way in which we can conceive of the world, the universe and reality, it could be said that

¹⁰⁸ *Lankavatara Sutra* (11, 28). Quoted in Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.84.

this duality is *what we are*, rather than something separate from us. This would mean we *are* the idea of yin-yang. That is, we are the embodiment of this concept and it is us. As space and time were once erroneously thought to be separate entities, we are, like spacetime, no more than dualistic thinking and it is no more than us. Human beings do not have an existence that is independent of yin-yang. In a sense the Adam and Eve analogy reflects this same idea: in eating the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge the pair attained an understanding of the duality of good and evil. Until then they were unaware of duality. They were at oneness with God in the Garden of Eden and in that state of Ultimate Reality, were beyond yin-yang and beyond the illusion of everyday dualistic reality. After they ate the apple and were expelled from Eden, they knew only duality. As their descendants (virtual or actual, it matters not) we too know only duality, which is the human condition. Adam and Eve after The Fall represent the knowledge of duality, but without a sense of the underlying unity that is Ultimate Reality.

The very ancient legend of Adam and Eve - whether you believe it to be literally true or not - works well as an analogy in communicating the idea that there could be a deeper reality behind our everyday dualistic experience. And of course, the analogy is not just referring to something that happened thousands of years ago. It is pertinent today and at every moment of every minute of your life.

But does this mean that something is fundamentally wrong with us humans, with Everyday Reality and the way we see the world? Does the fact that we do not routinely experience Nirvana mean we are necessarily 'doing something wrong', along the lines that if we were *not* doing something wrong then we *would* see Nirvana. Certainly, this is the orthodox Christian position: in eating the forbidden fruit Man has sinned against God.

However, it's worth remembering that from the perspective of Ultimate Reality everything is always perfect *as it is*. What we are, what we do, what we think and feel are all absolutely perfect as they are. There's no reason to suppose that anything should be any

different from what it is. Despite this, the assumption that something has gone awry with humanity has frequently been held to be the case by many of the world's major religions: the doctrine of original sin is core to Christianity and the ideas of karma and multiple reincarnation are fundamental tenets of both Hinduism and Buddhism. Each of us also seems to have an almost in-built belief that things *should* be better in some way, whether it's our physical or mental health, happiness, relationships, work, diet or some other aspect of existence from the trivial to the momentous. Maybe this is down to our ability to imagine 'what is not the case'. Whatever, if the idea that 'everything is ok as it is' seems unreasonable to you, Chapter 15, dealing with Absolute Perfection, looks at this in some depth.

The duality of yin-yang is one way to look at any experience we have of non-oneness; any form of classification or categorisation used by humans to perceive the phenomenal world is also essentially a projection onto it. However, as we read earlier:

*The non-verbal, concrete world contains no classes and no symbols which signify or mean anything other than themselves. Consequently it contains no duality. For duality arises only when we classify, when we sort our experiences into mental boxes, since a box is no box without an inside and an outside.*¹⁰⁹

We see the world as a vast repository of innumerable facts and events. This division and diversity, the classification and categorisation of the world, involves setting boundaries on what is and what is not part of each fact or event that we experience. In a flash and with no effort at all we are able to create these boundaries, and this simultaneously creates duality because as soon as a boundary is defined it has two sides. Not only are we what duality is, but we continually create duality moment by moment as we proceed through life.

¹⁰⁹ Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England. pp.93-4.

Though for each of us this process happens unconsciously and perhaps thousands of times each day, it's surprisingly difficult to grasp. The Buddhist image of the Moon reflected in a pool of water might help. We've already seen that one interpretation of this image describes the duality of subject and object, the duality of the experiencer and that which they experience. These apparent opposites are in reality a unity as inseparable from each other as yin and yang. The water is the subject and without it there can be no reflection of the Moon in the water. The Moon is the object without which there can be no reflection of the Moon in the water. The image of the Moon in the water then, is as reliant on the water as much as it is on the Moon. They are part and parcel of the same thing and to see either as subject or object is erroneous.

When opposing concepts negate each other, such as +1 and -1, what does that leave? The first word that comes to mind is 'nothing'. But this is itself negated by the concept of 'something', so what does *that* leave? What it leaves is unimaginable because we can only think within dualistic parameters and it's within this that the illusion lies. We cannot envisage that which is transcendental. Perhaps it's the sound of one hand clapping? Perhaps it's where opposites collide, what Christian mystic Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) might have been referring to when he said of God:

The place wherein Thou art to be found unveiled is girt round with the coincidence of contradictories, and this is the wall of Paradise wherein Thou dost abide. The door whereof is guarded by the most proud spirit of Reason, and, unless he be vanquished, the way in will not lie open. ¹¹⁰

Our capacity to project meaning onto a world that is essentially unmeaningful (though not necessarily meaningless) is prodigious. But then this is not so surprising if it is indeed what we are. We do it all the time but rarely reflect on this for a moment. Take emotions for

¹¹⁰ Quoted by Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.61.

example. Emotions are a projection onto external (non-subjective) reality but because a lot of our emotional processing is unconscious we're hardly ever aware of this. Regardless of whether they are unconscious or not, emotions are a form of classification of the world in much the same way as is any other projection of meaning. The concept of 'time' is another fine example of this. As Chapter 9 (Time) has shown us, there is only *now* (i.e. there is no time in the linear sense of past, present and future). However, we experience what we call 'time' because we only know *now* partially or in part and do not grasp it as one entity. It's as if Ultimate Reality is the story in a book, which exists in its entirety within its covers from start to finish all at one time, but with our everyday experience being like the reader's understanding, moving through the book bit by bit. We have a sense of the past, present and future though all exist within the *now* - what the poet T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) called '*the infinity of the timeless moment*'. This is not necessarily to say that time literally does not exist. As with all words and concepts this is only one way of looking at things. What we're saying is that it's *like* this; this is one way in which it can be conceived by us who inhabit the everyday dualistic world. Although we can say what Ultimate Reality *is like*, we cannot say *what it actually is*.

The Unity of the One

Within the Buddhist tradition, Ultimate Reality is frequently referred to as the Tao, the eternally nameless reality behind appearances, and there are numerous tales that illustrate the transcendental nature of the Tao. One such tale relates to the 9th century Zen monk Chao-chou (Japanese: Joshu) who is reputed to have been enlightened after the following incident with a Zen master, Nan-ch'üan:

Chao-chou asked, "What is the Tao?"

The master replied, "Your ordinary mind is the Tao."

"How can one return into accord with it?"

"By intending to accord you immediately deviate."

"But without intention, how can one know the Tao?"

"The Tao," said the master, "belongs neither to knowing nor not knowing. Knowing is false understanding; not knowing is blind

*ignorance. If you really understand the Tao beyond doubt, it's like the empty sky. Why drag in right and wrong?"*¹¹¹

The Tao is a characteristic quality of numerous descriptions of mystical states, being a consciousness of the oneness of everything. In ancient Chinese philosophy the world of phenomena came - and continues to come - out of the Tao. The Tao is composed of polar opposites but remains a unity. These poles are yin-yang, respectively darkness and light, and they are found everywhere in the universe. The interplay between yin and yang is what we experience all the time. Yet it's not only *what* we experience but *how* we experience, and is all that we are. We cannot conceive of one of the poles without also conceiving it's opposite: night can only be known in relation to day; up to down; love to hate, and so on.

Despite their apparent opposition yin and yang remain united in the Tao, in Ultimate Reality; it's only in the world of phenomena that they appear to be separated. As Happold notes:

*In this realm of polar opposites man is imprisoned. He is conscious, therefore, of a division in his soul. His deepest spiritual instinct is to break through the polar opposites and find again the Primal Meaning, so that he may once again be restored to the Undivided Unity which he has lost.*¹¹²

This idea has not been restricted to eastern religious traditions of course for as we read earlier, the fifteenth-century Christian mystic Nicholas of Cusa held that normal perception is conditioned by the existence of polar opposites, and only beyond these is God to be found. In this sense the Tao - Ultimate Reality - is beyond all duality. It is again referred to in the Mahayana Buddhist text the Lankavatara Sutra, in which some of the Buddha's teachings are reported

¹¹¹ From Wu-men kuan (19) quoted in Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.118.

¹¹² Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.46.

concerning Mind (true Mind being that which is beyond duality and so beyond definition). In this context Mind is:

*... beyond all philosophical views, is apart from discrimination, it is not attainable, nor is it ever born: I say there is nothing but Mind. It is not an existence, nor is it a non-existence; it is indeed beyond both existence and non-existence ... Out of Mind spring innumerable things, conditioned by discrimination (i.e. classification) and habit-energy; these things people accept as an external world ... What appears to be external does not exist in reality; it is indeed Mind that is seen as multiplicity; the body, property, and abode - all these, I say, are nothing but Mind.*¹¹³

In the three major Abrahamic religious traditions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - the means by which humankind's loyalty to God was first tested was in the divine command that the first humans, Adam and Eve, were forbidden to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil. The Adam and Eve legend illustrates how the opposing qualities of good and evil are something of which human consciousness has not always been aware. Evolutionists with a religious bent might see this as a parallel to the adaptive growth of a moral sense in the early development of our species. But might it not also be an example of the sort of metaphor that seeks to describe the indescribable? To this extent the symbolism of Adam and Eve, with its focus on the duality of good and evil, can be seen to be a very pithy analogy for the yin-yang dynamic, behind which lies Ultimate Reality. The oldest Zen poem, the sixth century Hsin-hsin Ming, begins with this sentiment:

*The perfect Way (Tao) is without difficulty,
Save that it avoids picking and choosing.
Only when you stop liking and disliking
Will all be clearly understood.
A split hair's difference,*

¹¹³ From the *Lankavatara Sutra*, 154, 29-30, quoted in Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.95.

*And heaven and Earth are set apart!
If you want to get the plain truth,
Be not concerned with right and wrong.
The conflict between right and wrong
Is the sickness of the mind.* ¹¹⁴

This idea that good and evil are different sides of the same coin is also found in the writings of the ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, a peer of Pythagoras with deep mystical interests. One doctrine to which he held was the *Mingling of Opposites*, and Russell quotes him (with his own commentary in brackets) as follows:

'Mortals are immortals, and immortals are mortals, the one living the other's death and dying the other's life.' (There is unity in the world, but it is a unity formed by the combination of opposites)

'All things come out of the one, and the one out of all things' (But the many have less reality than the one, which is God) ¹¹⁵

Although many of his writings may not have survived, Heraclitus made a number of pronouncements on duality, among them that:

Good and ill are one.

To God all things are fair and good and right, but men hold some things wrong and some right.

The way up and the way down is one and the same. ¹¹⁶

The philosopher Parmenides lived at around the same time as Heraclitus and was a peer of both Socrates and Plato. In some ways

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.135.

¹¹⁵ Russell B (1961) *The History of Western Philosophy*. George Allen and Unwin Ltd. UK, p.59.

¹¹⁶ *ibid*, p.62.

his thoughts on dualism are similar to those of Heraclitus, though they differ in their interpretation of what an opposite can be. Parmenides' doctrine is described by Russell thus:

*He considered the senses deceptive, and condemned the multitude of sensible things (those that can be perceived through the senses) as mere illusion. The only true being is 'the One', which is infinite and indivisible. It is not, as in Heraclitus, a union of opposites, since there are no opposites. He apparently thought, for instance, that 'cold' means only 'not hot', and 'dark' means only 'not light'. 'The One' ... cannot be divided, because the whole of it is present everywhere.*¹¹⁷

It seems that this disagreement can be compared with the mathematical differences between +1 and -1 (Heraclitus) and +1 and 0 (Parmenides), each pair being composed of opposing elements. Perhaps the former is more like the opposing ends of a continuum whereas the latter more clearly deals with absolute qualities - a presence and an absence?

But maybe the niceties of such philosophical distinctions are irrelevant to our discussion of duality. The essential point is that as human beings we routinely, continually and almost always without reflection, perceive everything in the world as having characteristics, each of which necessarily has an opposing form.

You can't think your way out of dualistic thinking

So, are we always going to be imprisoned within dualistic thinking? It seems not. Some of those who allege they have known Cosmic Consciousness have reported having a direct experience of the unity behind duality. The American philosopher and psychologist William James (1842-1910) gives this example:

¹¹⁷ *ibid*, p.66.

I remember the night, and almost the very spot on the hill-top, where my soul opened out, as it were, into the Infinite, and there was a rushing together of the two worlds, the inner and the outer ... ¹¹⁸

The writer Warner Allen gives another:

Rapt in Beethoven's music, I closed my eyes and watched a silver glow which shaped itself into a circle with a central focus brighter than the rest. The circle became a tunnel of light proceeding from some distant sun in the heart of the Self. Swiftly and smoothly I was borne through the tunnel ... I came to a point where time and motion ceased ... I am absorbed by the Light of the Universe, in Reality glowing like fire with the knowledge of itself ... The peace that passes all understanding and the pulsating energy of creation are one in the centre in the midst of conditions where all opposites are reconciled. ¹¹⁹

So how are we to go about escaping from duality? Our usual modes of reasoning - like the logical and rational approach to analysis adopted by the scientific method - will not work because they are founded upon and steeped within a tradition of dualistic thinking, and you can't think your way out of dualistic thinking. We must see beyond this duality to the unity of Ultimate Reality, and Buddhism has offered some suggestions as to how this may be done.

In Zen teaching the term 'samadhi' was originally a Sanskrit word that has become accepted into the Japanese language. Samadhi is what the late Abbot of Nanzen-ji Zen Buddhist temple, master Zenkei Shibayama (1894-1974), refers to as the 'dynamic oneness' of

¹¹⁸ William James (1974) *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Collins, London, p.81.

¹¹⁹ Warner Allen, *The Timeless Moment*, Faber and Faber, quoted in Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.133.

the immaculate state of mind that is beyond duality.¹²⁰ He goes on to describe it thus:

*The world we usually live in is built on dualistic discriminations: subject is discriminated from object, I from you, the seer from the seen, etc. Zen tells us that there is another way of living, of a different dimension. It asks us to open our eyes to the realm where subject and object are not yet separated, and I and you are one; and then to live and work in this new dimension.*¹²¹

Whilst orthodox Christianity has rarely been very clear about the duality of the everyday world, the writings of the Apocrypha have said rather more. For example, the Gnostic Gospel of the Apostle Thomas relates the story of Jesus seeing infants being suckled. He tells his disciples that these infants are like those who enter Ultimate Reality, which he refers to as 'the Kingdom'. Jesus goes on to explain that:

*When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner as the outer, and the upper as the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male shall not be male, and the female shall not be female: ... then you will enter [the kingdom].*¹²²

The New Testament makes surprisingly few direct references to duality. Despite this, the life of Jesus could be said to reflect the unity behind the duality of which yin-yang speaks. This seems to be the case at least insofar as he can be seen to have both a divine and human nature (what theologians have referred to as the 'hypostatic union'). But then perhaps, like beauty, this duality is in the eye of the beholder.

¹²⁰ Shibayama Z (1977) *A Flower Does Not Talk: Zen Essays*. Charles E Tuttle Company, Tokyo, Japan, p.121.

¹²¹ *ibid*, p.122.

¹²² Gnostic Gospel of the Apostle Thomas, Chapter 24, Saying 22. Quoted from: <http://gnosis.org/thomasbook/ch24.html>

Duality in the natural world

Arguably, wherever you look in the natural world you'll see the interplay of yin-yang; in fact, you'll find it hard *not* to see it. And nothing escapes it: even infinity has its counterpoint in the concept of the absolute. The yin-yang dynamic is apparent in the diurnal cycle of day and night, in the changing seasons, in the growth of plants from seed to fruit which then produce seeds that grow to fruit and so on. The interaction of yin and yang means each transforms into the other. Sir Isaac Newton's Third Law of Motion is an excellent example of how the yin-yang principle can be seen in every single facet of the natural world that involves movement. Published in 1687 in his *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, the Third Law holds that *For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction*. This has been admirably described for the layman in numerous accounts, the following being taken from *The Physics Classroom* web pages. The statement that *For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction* means that:

... in every interaction, there is a pair of forces acting on the two interacting objects. The size of the forces on the first object equals the size of the force on the second object. The direction of the force on the first object is opposite to the direction of the force on the second object. Forces always come in pairs - equal and opposite action-reaction force pairs.

A variety of action-reaction force pairs are evident in nature. Consider the propulsion of a fish through the water. A fish uses its fins to push water backwards. But a push on the water will only serve to accelerate the water. Since forces result from mutual interactions, the water must also be pushing the fish forwards, propelling the fish through the water. The size of the force on the water equals the size of the force on the fish; the direction of the force on the water (backwards) is opposite the direction of the force on the fish (forwards). For every action, there is an equal (in size) and opposite

*(in direction) reaction force. Action-reaction force pairs make it possible for fish to swim.*¹²³

And this is true of any action, the flying motion of birds, the motion of a car on the road and so on, though at very small scales Newton's Third Law has now been superseded by more sophisticated physical theories like general relativity and quantum field theory. Nevertheless, we shouldn't think of the Third Law of Motion as some sort of quaint and arcane idea rooted in an age when very little was known of scientific enquiry. Despite the advent of particle physics, it continues to offer a good approximation for those objects and phenomena we can perceive under everyday conditions. Thus, if you drop an apple onto the ground, the Earth moves (though imperceptibly) towards the apple. If you press a computer key, the computer resists the downward pressure, providing an upward reaction to the force of your hand: just because we don't see the reaction that occurs in opposition to our action doesn't mean it doesn't happen.

Even in the realm of the microscopically small, the yin-yang dynamic can be seen all over the natural world, for instance in particle physics. Here particles are considered to be present as peaks and troughs rather than as an absolute sense of single pointedness. This peak and trough duality is an example of yin-yang, which is seen again at an atomic level where the strong nuclear force holds atoms together whilst an electromagnetic force pushes them apart. Inside the atomic nucleus all nuclear behaviour is due to a dynamic balance between these two forces. The former imposes an enormous influence but is felt only at a distance of a trillionth of a millimetre. This squashes the neutrons and protons together. The electromagnetic force is the electrical charge on the protons that drives them apart. Similarly, when an atomic particle carrying a positive charge comes into contact with its 'partner' particle carrying a negative charge, that is, when a positively charged proton meets a

¹²³ *The Physics Classroom*. See:

<http://www.physicsclassroom.com/class/newtlaws/u2l4a.cfm>

negatively charged proton, the result of contact will mean both will be annihilated. If, on the other hand, a particle should meet a *similarly* charged particle they will eventually join together and their gravity will grow so they will attract more and more particles and build into atoms and molecules.

Perhaps the yin-yang relationship is even reflected in the description of the universe in terms of two partial theories: *Quantum Mechanics* (being a dominant theme within particle physics at present) and the *General Theory of Relativity*. These partial theories were mainly developed in the first half of the 20th century, the first focusing on the extremely small - molecules, atoms and smaller - and the second, the General Theory of Relativity, describing the universe on the grand scale of planetary behaviour. The micro and the macro - the yin and the yang. This same dualistic dynamic can even be seen in the cosmos itself in that the (hypothetical) universe 'pre-Big Bang' can be construed of as being the yin to the yang of the universe we know post-Big Bang.

Is duality out there or is it in our heads?

The main message from these various examples is the clear pattern of duality that can be seen all around us in the natural world, in theoretical physics, in the Abrahamic religious symbolism of Adam and Eve and in the philosophical constructs of eastern religious traditions. Within this pattern, within the yin-yang interaction, each is seen to contain the seed of the other and it is said that each will gradually become the other. As a state of total yang is approached, yin will begin to grow and this itself is reflected in the world of Everyday Reality. For example, the point at which opposites meet has correlates in psychology, which the celebrated psychiatrist and psychotherapist Carl Jung referred to as 'enantiodromia'. This notion, that the superabundance of any force inevitably produces its opposite, is based on the principle that any extreme is opposed by the natural system, which will restore balance to the dynamic. Nevertheless, and attractive as the logic of this may be, it's important to remember that the whole idea of duality lies within the Everyday Reality that is Samsara - it is illusory. There is not and never has

been any imbalance in anything in the universe. The discussion of yin-yang that's presented in this book is intended to draw our attention to aspects of the way we routinely think in a dualistic manner. It's not intended to literally represent Ultimate Reality since this is always beyond description, discussion and analysis in words (a concept explored further in Chapters 15 and 17, on Absolute Perfection and Describing the Indescribable).

Perhaps we should not be surprised if we start seeing duality everywhere we look, especially if, as many people might argue, evolutionary processes have programmed us to perceive the world in this way. If the yin-yang dynamic is truly the structure upon which we hang our understanding of the world it would indeed be odd if we did *not* find it to be reflected throughout the universe in every way possible. In fact, what would limit this? Sometimes, from within the vantage point of Samsara, we are able to recognise these patterns in some places, such as in the natural world around us. Sometimes - perhaps most of the time - we are not. Maybe it's time to sit back in the corner of that cube and reflect upon how many sides we can see now?

Exercise in Cosmic Thinking no.6

How to experience non-duality

This book began with a brief phrase: 'A History of the World in Six Words'. That is,

BIGBANGEXPANSIONCONTRACTIONGNABGIBBIGBANGEXPANSIONCONTRACTIONGNABGIBBIGBANGEXPANSIONCONTRACTIONGNABGIBBIGBANGEXPANSIONCONTRACTIONGNABGIBBIGBANGEXPANSIONCONTRACTIONGNABGIBBIGBANGEXPANSIONCONTRACTIONGNABGIBBIGBANGEXPANSION and so on ...

The question is, 'How does this relate to the yin-yang dynamic?' The clue is to take your mind back to Chapter 9, on Time, and through the spiked ball mentioned in *Exercise in Cosmic Thinking no.1*. This

might give you a sense of the unity behind all apparent duality. An alternative parallel for non-duality is found in the way that gravity curves space, so that a truly straight line will always be curved because the space within which it exists is itself curved. Can you conceive of a curved straight line? Not if you're thinking dualistically you can't!

.....

In this chapter we've repeatedly and glibly talked of the Big Bang as if what we mean is universally understood. But is this correct? Do you understand the Big Bang in the same way in which I understand it? Let's have a look at this before going back to the time before it all happened.

Chapter 11.

Big Bang

The universe began with the Big Bang, which simply followed the inevitable law of physics ... Because there is a law such as gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing. Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist. The universe didn't need a God to begin; it was quite capable of launching its existence on its own ...

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So wrote Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow. And maybe it really did all start with a Big Bang. What was there before the Big Bang? Well, according to Hawking and Mlodinow in the extract above, there was the law of gravity which meant the universe could and would create itself from nothing, though quite where this law came from and where it actually was prior to coming into use in facilitating the Big Bang remains a mystery since, of course, there was no 'before the Big Bang'. Time came into being with the Big Bang, and the concept of 'before' only came into being with the concept of time. In fact, theoretical physics makes no assumptions about the state of the universe or anything else *before* the Big Bang, since at the point of a singularity all laws break down. Science therefore does not consider the conditions 'before' the Big Bang to be within its remit.

There is considerable debate within the scientific community as to the exact nature of the Big Bang, and serious doubt that it happened anyway. Several theories have been advanced that envisage the Big Bang as something other than a one-off event. For example, in

¹²⁴ Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*. See http://www.dailygalaxy.com/my_weblog/2010/09/the-universe-exists-because-of-spontaneous-creation-stephen-hawking.html

Chapter 9 (on Time) it was noted that Sir Roger Penrose has suggested the Big Bang may have arisen from the expanding universe. The universe is believed to be expanding at an increasing rate where ultimately all matter will be converted to energy in the form of photons and it may be that this universe itself will become the Big Bang for another universe.

Gnabgib

But an alternative to these theories is proposed in this book. This is the idea that the Big Bang is happening all the time, as each moment unfolds. This possibility very happily accommodates the concept of Unhappening, so that's where we go next.

.....

As we'll see, Unhappening implies that the Big Bang is continually 'happening' in reverse as well as in the usual way we think about it. This reverse Big Bang - Gnab Gib - where time goes backwards, exactly mirrors the usual Big Bang. If the two were to come together (as they do all the time) they would negate and annihilate each other (as they do all the time). And it's within this timeless moment of *now*, at the point where the yang of the usual creative Big Bang annihilates the yin of the reverse un-creative Big Bang, that we exist. Within this moment is not just everything we experience but *everything the universe is*.

Of course, the whole notion of Unhappening is mired in dualistic thinking, and as we know, Duality is part and parcel of the illusion of Samsara. But the concept of Unhappening described in the next chapter is not offered because it necessarily reflects a correct understanding of the universe. It's mentioned because it might help us to envisage how the present moment could look and how our experience of time might come about.

Chapter 12.

Unhappening

*For everything that happens there is an equal and opposite unhappening*¹²⁵

We've read that in 1687 Sir Isaac Newton published his Third Law of Motion. This Law states that: *For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction*, and it offers us a fine example of duality in practice. Newton supposed that the reaction to an occurrence that might happen at any point in the universe, from a single quantum event within an atom to the astronomical scale of stars and planetary systems, any reaction will take place at the same time as the action, rather than following it chronologically. This leads us to some speculations that he doesn't appear to have considered.

Science tells us that the two opposing action/reaction forces effectively cancel each other out: as one occurs, so the other reacts in reverse because energy can neither be created nor destroyed.¹²⁶ This occurs in the natural world at the level of every action: fish swimming, birds flying, apples falling and so on at the everyday visual level, but also at the astronomical scale. Whilst some might argue that as the primary 'event' the Big Bang is exempt from the constraints of yin-yang, others might offer the alternative speculation (since we have no reason to believe it to be impossible) that at the moment the Big Bang occurred, an equal and opposite Big Bang also occurred. This Big Bang, however, was 'in reverse' so maybe 'unoccurred' would be a better expression. In this 'reverse universe' time is travelling backwards and this unravelling means the universe

¹²⁵ Unhappening: The Law that Newton missed. *Mindfulness, Now and Zen*.

¹²⁶ According to the Law of Conservation of Energy first formulated in the nineteenth century and more recently taken to include mass (which can itself be considered to be a form of temporarily solidified energy).

is itself 'unhappening'. But not only did this occur at the time of the Big Bang, *it continues to occur as the universe with which we're familiar continues to unfold day by day and moment by moment*. That is, the universe in reverse also continues to unfold day by day and moment by moment - a fine example of the concept expressed in the six words BIGBANGEXPANSIONCONTRACTIONGNABGIB, and evident in the spikes inwards, spikes outwards dynamic described in *Exercise in Cosmic Thinking no.1*.

And who's to say that when we have a thought we don't also *at the same time* have an equal and opposing thought, though of course, we're aware of only one of these? The effect of all this on our lives would be exactly zero. The net result of a reverse Big Bang would be exactly the same as the Big Bang we're used to, but imploding inwards rather than exploding outwards and with time moving in reverse. We shouldn't think of this as just 'not happening' because it's more than this - it's our customary universe positively *unhappening*: the universe would be dis-assembling itself even as we experience events changing and moving forwards through time. Of course, the unhappening element of this - the reverse universe - could just as easily be considered to be the positive element - whether time moves in the direction we conventionally consider to be 'forwards' or what we conventionally consider to be 'backwards' will presumably make no difference at all if you're in it and it's all you know.

It may have crossed your mind that, at best, *unhappening* is not only hugely improbable but also conflicts with some of the claims made earlier in *Mindfulness, Now and Zen*. For example, the happening/unhappening dyad must be erroneous since it clearly falls within the illusory nature of dualistic thinking. That is, there is a suggestion that there must be a logical necessity for *unhappening* to exist if *happening* is to exist (on the grounds that there can be no 'happening' without its opposite). For now, we'll ignore the implication that this would mean the demands of logic or duality pre-existed the occurrence of the Big Bang. We can instead simply let the idea of *unhappening* roll around in our minds for a bit, and consider whether it could account for our everyday experience of the

world post-Big Bang. It would answer some of the more uncomfortable questions, like *'Why is anything happening at all?'* because if everything is cancelled out at exactly the same moment that it happens then nothing *is* happening: in short, there *is* nothing at all. The sum of +1 and -1 is exactly zero.

An *unhappening* universe running in parallel with our own would also answer those tricky questions about *'What happened before the Big Bang?'*. Whilst it could be said that time only came into being with the Big Bang (so the question of what happened *before then* is meaningless) an *unhappening* universe running backwards in sync with our own would render time non-existent anyway. Time running forwards and time running backwards cancel each other out in much the same way as anything else.

Before we leave this brief mention of the theory of *unhappening* completely, we should note that even modern particle physics can assist us in understanding how it might work. You have probably guessed that the activity of yin-yang interplay is by no means restricted to the familiar world we see before us. The giddy realms of theoretical physics also deal with opposing forces in some very imaginative ways, including some of the ideas offered by the eminent physicist Richard Feynman (1918-1988). The possibility that the Big Bang may be positively unravelling as it happens - that it is *unhappening* - is supported by the work of Feynman in his ideas known as the 'sum over histories'. This is the term Feynman applied when he suggested that an ordinary sub-atomic particle moving forwards in time could be seen as being equivalent to an anti-particle moving backwards in time. It is likely, he suggested, that a particle/anti-particle pair that are created together will annihilate each other on meeting, and in doing so can be seen to be a single particle moving in a closed loop in spacetime. That is, they could be seen to both be created, to move forwards in time and then be annihilated at a later time when they interact with each other. However, another way to look at this is to see them as one particle being created, moving forwards in time and then moving backwards in time. As it moves forward in time it is called a particle, but when

it moves backwards in time it appears as an anti-particle travelling forwards in time. Although Feynman may not have made the imaginative leap himself, is it feasible that since we're all composed of nothing more than sub-atomic particles, this sum over histories idea could apply to each of us and to everything else in the phenomenal world? Could we and everything else in the cosmos be unhappening? And would we know it if this were true anyway?

.....

But maybe we're over-thinking things. Let's try a little simplicity.

Chapter 13.

Simplicity

*... quite suddenly I feel my understanding dawning into a vast clarity, as if everything were opening up down to the roots of my being and of time and space themselves. The sense of the world becomes totally obvious. I am struck with amazement that I or anyone could have thought life a problem or being a mystery.*¹²⁷

So it was that British-born philosopher Alan Watts, himself once an Episcopal priest, described his experiences with the psychedelic drugs LSD and psilocybin. Watts believed that our true being resides with Ultimate Reality, and that this truth is so very, very, simple that it is '*startlingly obvious*'.¹²⁸ This rather unexpected claim turns out to be one of the most common factors in the experience of Cosmic Consciousness. It's discussed further in Chapter 19 (Seeing is Believing) and the quotation below gives a sense of how this experience of simplicity feels for the individual. The quote appears in the book *The Timeless Moment*, where the writer Warner Allen describes experiencing a flash of illumination during a performance of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. He states that:

Something has happened to me - I am utterly amazed - can this be that? [That being the answer to the riddle of life] - but it is too simple - I always knew it - it is remembering an old forgotten secret -

¹²⁷ Watts AW (1965) *The Joyous Cosmology: Adventures in the Chemistry of Consciousness*. Vintage Books, New York. p.76. This brief quotation raises the whole question of the use of drugs in assisting the individual to experience Cosmic Consciousness. It is discussed in more detail in the chapter on Psychoactive drugs.

¹²⁸ Watts AW (1973) *The Book on the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*, Abacus, UK. p.19.

like coming home - I am not 'I', not the 'I' I thought - there is no death - peace passing understanding - yet how unworthy I - ... ¹²⁹

Too simple for words

Not everyone would agree that something as seemingly complex as the sort of Ultimate Reality described here could ever be so simple. Richard Dawkins no doubt speaks for many when he points out that:

A God capable of continuously monitoring and controlling the individual status of every particle in the universe cannot be simple. His existence is going to need a mammoth explanation in its own right. Worse (from the point of view of simplicity), other corners of God's giant consciousness are simultaneously preoccupied with the doings and emotions and prayers of every single human being - and whatever intelligent aliens there might be on other planets in this and 100 billion other galaxies. ¹³⁰

On the face of it this sounds so reasonable that we can hardly imagine how anyone could question it. And yet they do. And of course, this raises the very reasonable point that if Ultimate Reality is really all so very simple, why is it so very hard for us to see?

Perhaps a clue lies, once again, in the way we think. Our brains are structured in such a way as to function within and along specific cognitive guidelines, and these guidelines operate upon a dualistic system (Duality was described in more detail in Chapter 10). As well as this, our everyday reasoning processes involve symbolically dividing up the world and our experiences into categories of actions and events, each of which has its own characteristics and qualities. Put simply, we approach the world with these neural routes already in place in our brains; we do not experience the world *as it is* because we are constantly, though unconsciously, seeking to divide it into interacting parts and to attribute meaning to each and every one of

¹²⁹ Warner Allen quoted in Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, pp.132-3.

¹³⁰ Dawkins R (2006) *The God Delusion*. Bantam Press, London. p.178.

these. And so it is that we create complexity. Wherever we look we see the convolutions created by our analytical approach to experience. Even if the world were infinitely simple we would still only see complexity. So when American novelist and pioneer poet of the Beat Generation, Jack Kerouac (1922-1969), talks about the illusion of maya, he very aptly sums up our difficulty in these few words spoken by his character Jack Duluoz:

*The simplest truth in the world is beyond our reach because of its complete simplicity...*¹³¹

Which means that any attempt to describe Ultimate Reality - like the attempt being made in this book - may be complicating things even more. This is why:

*The basic position of Zen is that it has nothing to say, nothing to teach. The truth of Buddhism is so self-evident, so obvious that it is, if anything, concealed by explaining it.*¹³²

The difficulty is to get beyond the constant clatter of our neural processing whereby we habitually reflect on past experiences and predict those to come. Zen meditation has long been one approach to achieving this, as Peter Matthiessen observes:

*To practice Zen means to realize one's existence moment after moment, rather than letting life unravel in regret of the past and daydreaming of the future. To 'rest in the present' is a state of magical simplicity, although attainment of this state is not as simple as it sounds.*¹³³

.....

¹³¹ Kerouac J (1966) *Desolation Angels*. Andre Deutsch Ltd., London. p.50.

¹³² Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.183.

¹³³ Matthiessen P (1987) *Nine-Headed Dragon River*. Fontana Paperbacks, London. p.xii (preface).

Much of the difficulty in this idea of absolute simplicity arises from the debate about what a Christian theologian might call 'the indivisibility of God', which to a Hindu would be 'non-differentiated Brahman'. This indivisibility and non-differentiation implies an unthinkable and unimaginable Unity, and it's this that we discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter 14.

Unity

... all souls are together, not collected into a unity but springing from a unity and remaining in that from which they sprang; or rather they never did spring from it, but were always in this state, for nothing There comes into being, and so nothing is divided into parts; it is only the recipient who thinks that it is divided. ¹³⁴

The concept of oneness

Monotheism lies at the heart of the great Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Each religious tradition has been very clear about 'the oneness of God'. In Christianity, for example, several Biblical verses allude to this. For example, '*... to us (there is but) one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him*'; ¹³⁵ the Jewish Torah states '*Listen Israel, Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is One*' ¹³⁶ and in Islam it is said both that '*There is no god but Allah*' ¹³⁷ and '*In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Say (O Muhammad) He is God the One God, the Everlasting Refuge, who has not begotten, nor has been begotten, and equal to Him is not anyone.*' ¹³⁸ Each of these religions also holds to a belief in divine simplicity, a creed that asserts that God is without parts.

Mirroring these references to the 'unity' or 'non-duality' of Ultimate Reality is a recurring theme in reports of Cosmic Consciousness: the

¹³⁴ Plotinus, *The Enneads* (c.204/5-270). Quoted in Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.188.

¹³⁵ 1 Corinthians, chapter 8, verse 6, The Official King James Bible Online. See http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/1-Corinthians-8-4_8-7/

¹³⁶ The Torah (Deuteronomy, 6:4). See <http://www.torahtruth.org/important-quotes/#3>

¹³⁷ These words are the first part of the *Shahadah*, the Islamic Creed that is one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

¹³⁸ The Quran, Chapter 112.

recollection of an extraordinary understanding that Ultimate Reality is a unified whole, a 'oneness'. This is not simply to say that the fundamental nature of Ultimate Reality is one, but that it is ONE taken to the extreme: Ultimate Reality is *nothing but* oneness. It's the embodiment of what 'one' means. In this unity, everything within Ultimate Reality is connected to everything else in every possible way, and so, of course, nothing - no 'thing' - is separate.

The inter-connectedness of everything

The concept of total connectedness is difficult to comprehend and to communicate because we don't have a word for it in the English language. It's easy to see why a description of something like this is quickly referred to as being mystical or nonsensical. But if the reality that underlies everything is composed of one and only one essence, why are we so sure we live in a world of innumerable people, objects, events and phenomena of all kinds that are self-evidently differentiated from each other?

The hugely influential German philosopher Immanuel Kant held that the world of phenomena logically implies the existence of another world. This other world he referred to as the 'noumenal world', the real world of the Thing-in-itself, and he argued that this real world is the realm of Being, rather than the realm of beings. Kant's view was that:

... it is the nature of our senses to regard the world as a multiplicity: that is to say, the senses are so constituted as to perceive the world as a number of separate things. For practical purposes this mode of apprehension is both necessary and desirable. Not merely do our bodies form part of the sensuous or material world, but our perceptive faculty is composed of at least five separate 'senses'. A condition of 'sensing' anything is that it shall be sensed as one thing among others, and simultaneously as a unity composed of 'parts'. It

*follows that the reality behind and inaccessible to the senses will be not Many but One: a Thing-in-itself.*¹³⁹

So Kant believed that we know only the phenomenal world because this is what is perceived through our senses, and knowledge of the real, *noumenal*, world is never directly experienced by us. For example, within the phenomenal world - the illusory state of our Everyday Reality, Samsara - we routinely categorise life into actions and events: sitting at a desk I pick up my glasses from the table top and put them onto my face. I consider this to be a specific event but actually this is a projection onto whatever reality underlies it. Where did the action start and where did it finish? The glasses were doing something before I touched them, the table was doing something before the glasses left it and my hand and face were doing something before the glasses came anywhere near them. A couple of hours ago, before they were on the table, the glasses were somewhere else. A million years ago the atomic particles within the material that makes up the glasses, the table, my hands and face, were all doing something else. In time I will remove the glasses from my face and they too will be doing something else, as they will be in another thousand, another million, years. What we call an action is part of a continuous uncategorised flow through time. Each single action that we identify as a separate and discrete act is a projection we are making onto this undifferentiated flow of oneness. It's simply convenient for us to conceive of these things as discrete and separate actions or events, but they are not.

Perhaps a few analogies might help at this point. Like the 'cartoon stills' idea described in Chapter 5 (Illusions) it's convenient for us to think of the notes on a piano as separate individual entities. A note is composed of sound waves which have been created by a vibration, in this case the vibration of a string within the piano. Each sound wave vibrates at a specific rate or wavelength, and the frequency of the

¹³⁹ Tomlin EWF (1969) *The Eastern Philosophers: An Introduction*. Hutchinson and Co., Ltd., London, England, p.242, referring to Kant's ideas as expressed in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (published in 1781).

note is the number of vibrating sound waves that reach your eardrum every second. It's the frequency that gives each separate note its particular pitch, but in essence all can also be seen to be one continuous flow, from the deepest base to the highest treble. Similarly, whilst each individual plant, insect or animal can be seen to be one discrete entity, each can also be seen as the current end point in an endless flow of organisms as they pass through numerous evolutionary changes, from the simplest single-celled organisms evolving 3.6 billion years ago to the complex living being we perceive now. And of course, this is true for each of us: we are no more individual than the current end point of a 3.6 billion-year event and no more a single organism than the 37 trillion (3.72×10^{13}) individual cells that make up the average human body.¹⁴⁰

A similar unifying pattern can be seen in a photon of light that we might conventionally observe at some point in its journey to the Earth from the Sun. From the perspective of Everyday Reality this human activity of observing phenomena as if the object of our enquiry were static in some way, seems perfectly reasonable. But in reality there is no point in the photon's journey at which it can be said to be anything at all. As we saw in Chapter 9 (Time) the photon arrives on the Earth *at exactly the same moment* as when it left the Sun and so, for the photon, the journey is timeless. Since, for the photon, there is no time, nothing happens and there is, in fact, nothing that can be called 'a journey'. From this perspective the idea of stopping the photon in its tracks and identifying its characteristics is meaningless. But this is not only true for those things travelling at the speed of light. We tend to treat all actions and events with similar

¹⁴⁰ Bianconi E, Piovesan A, Facchin E et al (2013) An estimation of the number of cells in the human body. *Annals of Human Biology*. 40(6):463-71. See: <http://informahealthcare.com/doi/abs/10.3109/03014460.2013.807878>

disdain when, in fact, every one of these is essentially a random selection of phenomena in what is really a unified flow of action through time. It is us who choose to identify specific elements of the phenomenal world as somehow separate from the rest of the flow. And who is to say this cannot also be true of our thoughts as they make their way to consciousness from their source deep in our unconscious? Perhaps each thought retains the same essential content as all other thoughts throughout its own 'journey' and becomes an 'event' - unique and separate from all other burgeoning thoughts - only when it is interrupted by our consciousness, that is, when we think it?

The concept of the *Butterfly Effect* is an idea allied to those mentioned so far. It arose from the mathematical study known as Chaos Theory, which was developed by the American mathematician Edward Lorenz (1917-2008). This idea essentially holds that everything that happens affects everything else in the universe. So even small differences in the initial conditions within a system will be associated with large differences in outcomes or end events. Prediction of weather conditions is a good example of this, because these can vary enormously from those that are anticipated by meteorologists at the outset. The term 'Butterfly Effect' indicates that a massive hurricane can theoretically be influenced by something as small as the flapping of the wings of a butterfly in the preceding weeks. The idea is that the insect's wings will affect the air immediately surrounding it, which affects more distant air and distant objects and so on in an increasingly complex interaction. The ideas underlying the Butterfly Effect very clearly reflect the flow throughout time that we habitually think of as specific actions and events, as described in the paragraphs above, when in reality all actions and events across space and time function as a single, unified, entity.

This inter-relationship between all facets of the universe has not escaped quantum physics. Fritjof Capra points out that:

*... subatomic particles have no meaning as isolated entities, but can only be understood as interconnections ... Quantum theory thus reveals a basic oneness of the universe. It shows that we cannot decompose the world into independently existing smallest units. As we penetrate into matter, nature does not show us any isolated 'basic building blocks', but rather appears as a complicated web of relations between the various parts of the whole.*¹⁴¹

And it has been argued that the phenomena described in these pages - physical actions, objects, photons and thoughts - do not simply appear similar because they share the same pattern. They appear similar because they *are* the same thing. And so it is with the wider world. Within the 'commonsense', consensus reasoning, of Everyday Reality we routinely consider complex systems, like cars, the human body and the economy, to be made up of numerous interconnected parts. It's therefore natural that we should seek to apply the same approach to Ultimate Reality. But if Ultimate Reality actually is one unchanging, undifferentiated whole within which everything is related, our commonsense reasoning should lead us to question the inter-relationships between any apparently unconnected phenomena in the world, such as apples and bicycles, cornflakes and crocodiles, diamonds and dormice, and so on. When the answers are not forthcoming it is tempting to dismiss the concept of the unity of Ultimate Reality as ridiculous. However, the idea that every single thing is completely linked with everything else is a metaphysical concept known as 'monism'. It has excited considerable debate among philosophers over the ages and is not so easily dismissed. Whilst it may seem to make little sense in Everyday Reality, it's the very indivisibility of Ultimate Reality that is repeatedly stressed in texts from varying sources and cultures, from the ancient Greeks, where it was known as 'Henosis', to Indian religious thinking. All monistic philosophies take the view '*... that reality is a unified whole*

¹⁴¹ Capra F (1981) *The Tao of Physics*. The Chaucer Press Ltd., Bungay, England, p.71.

*and that all existing things can be ascribed to or described by a single concept or system.'*¹⁴²

Whilst it can be exceedingly difficult to picture in your mind how this might be the case, the mathematical construct known as the *fractal* may help. Fractals can be seen as physical entities, such as the patterns created by the branches, stems and twigs of a fir tree or the inlets and promontories of a meandering coastline. These have similar patterns at every scale. They are patterns that endlessly repeat despite their very different magnitudes. Clearly, examples from within nature, like the fir tree and coastline, are limited, but theoretically fractals can be considered to be infinitely self-similar. Nor are fractals limited to geometric patterns for they can also describe processes in time. In this way we can imagine how the patterns behind everything we experience through time can be essentially 'the same thing', despite their apparent diversity

This hypothesis is apparent in the current search for a 'theory of everything' in particle physics, and though it remains strong in modern-day Buddhism, its roots lie deeply embedded in philosophical and religious thought stretching back many millennia. For example:

*... In ancient Chinese philosophy the creation of the phenomenal universe is envisaged as a coming out of Tao, the Primal Meaning and Undivided Unity behind everything, by the pulling asunder of polar opposites. Out of Tao sprang the principles of phenomenal reality, the two poles of yang (light) and yin (darkness), which are evident throughout the whole of the universe as it appears to us.*¹⁴³

This unity or oneness is not simply a loose affiliation of different bits and pieces with a common thread. Nor is it about things that are

¹⁴² According to *The Free Dictionary*:

<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Monistic>

¹⁴³ Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England. p.46.

simply *similar* in some way. It's beyond what you know the word 'one' to be; it's the total, absolute and unchanging unity of everything. So much is this so, that the term 'everything' loses its meaning: there is only *one* thing, and it is all there is. This oneness is so deeply entrenched within us that it almost feels like it's less in front of our noses and more *behind our eyes*, much like 'the present moment' continually has its being before you can even begin to conceive of it.

However, if this oneness is all there is we have a problem: since the concept of 'one' is only meaningful in relation to 'two' or at least some version of the concept of 'not one', and we are left in the rather unsatisfactory position of having not one, not two and not nothing. A major difficulty in conceiving this Duality is described by the American writer Robert M Pirsig:

*The One in India has got to be the same as the One in Greece. If it's not, you've got two. The only disagreements among the monists concern the attributes of the One, not the One itself. Since the One is the source of all things and includes all things in it, it cannot be defined in terms of those things, since no matter what thing you use to define it, the thing will always describe something less than the One itself. The One can only be described allegorically, through the use of analogy, of figures of imagination and speech.*¹⁴⁴

A parallel to this can be seen in the mathematical understanding of the number 1. In a way 1 is the foundation of all other numbers. It's clear that all numbers are either fractions or multiples of 1 and are logically dependent on the virtual pre-existence of 1 if they are to have any meaning. Nothing larger or smaller than 1 can have meaning without the concept of 1 itself, which stands alone as the source of all. But of course, within Everyday Reality, and therefore within the confines of dualistic thinking, 1 must have its own counterpoint (0 or -1) if it's to have any meaning at all. So any

¹⁴⁴ Pirsig RM (1976) *Zen and the Art of Motor Cycle Maintenance*. Corgi Books, London, p.381.

attempt to explain what indivisibility actually could be, inevitably runs into conflict with the consensus reasoning of our Everyday Reality. The argument is that behind the duality, behind all the apparent diversity and differentiation, the universe is infinitely mirroring itself. Behind the illusion of our Everyday Reality, Samsara, there's only the oneness of Nirvana. Behind all outward appearances every single part of the universe is related to every other part in every possible way.¹⁴⁵ It's because we conventionally think within the structures of dualism that we fail to see this, which clearly brings us back to our initial assertion: although we can say what Ultimate Reality *is like*, we cannot say *what it actually is*.

Cornflakes and Crocodiles

We now return to the question that was first posed earlier in this chapter: 'If everything is interconnected in every possible way, what is the relationship between, say, a cornflake and a crocodile?' The answer is that this can only be described in terms of the relationship between a cornflake or crocodile and every other part of the universe, since to know what either truly is, would be to also know what all things are. It's not possible to separate one object from another because there is in truth no such thing as 'one object'. Everything, anything, only has meaning in relation to those things it is not.

Of course, to the western mind this idea presents as being rather ludicrous. And this is entirely to be expected from the standpoint of the reasoning we apply from within Everyday Reality. Indeed, it would be surprising if the whole concept of universal unity did *not* seem ridiculous. It's not so easily dismissed however. As American physician and author Andrew Weil (b.1942) indicates in the following passage, the experience of universal unity is far from uncommon:

¹⁴⁵ To even begin to discuss this we must use the concepts and figures of speech that are part and parcel of communication within Everyday Reality and ignore for the moment the fact that if everything is interconnected in every way, there can be no such thing as a 'single part of the universe'.

... persons who forsake ego consciousness, even for a moment, often have an overwhelming sense of the essential similarity of all things; indeed, this direct perception of unity is the very heart of mystic experience ... All people who have this experience directly ... testify that it is accompanied by powerful feelings of joy. ¹⁴⁶

Personal reports from across the ages have frequently attested to the unity behind all apparent diversity and to the manner in which we can see this for ourselves. This is not in the bit by bit fashion that we ordinarily experience the world, but all at once through union with Ultimate Reality in the instantaneous and total understanding that here we're calling Cosmic Consciousness. To truly know anything is to know everything.

Nevertheless, Ultimate Reality is not something different or separate from the Everyday Reality we know already. What it is, is a different *understanding* of it, one that unites every aspect of it into one totally interconnected whole. This understanding can be experienced anywhere, after all, it's the same as our Everyday Reality but understood differently. It's not only to be found 'out there', in a church, temple or desert, in the ether or in some hypothetical, symbolic, virtual or parallel dimension (at least, if it's *out there* it's also *in here*). In other words, it's not that the world of our Everyday Reality is not real; the reflection in a mirror is real. The point is that there's a completely different way of understanding Everyday Reality. This other way of understanding views it as a single entity, as a whole, in which everything is connected to everything else and in fact *is* everything else. In other words, this is an understanding in which everything in the everyday world is one indivisible unity.

The personal experience of this unity has long been a goal of Buddhist monks. In the novel *Siddhartha* the German novelist Herman Hesse writes about a monk living in the time of the Buddha who sought the truth behind all appearances. This man, Siddhartha,

¹⁴⁶ Weil A (2004) *The Natural Mind*. Houghton Mifflin Co., New York. pp.114-115.

spends some time with a holy man named Vasudeva from whom he learns much:

*Within Siddhartha there slowly grew and ripened the knowledge of what wisdom really was and the goal of his long seeking. It was nothing but a preparation of the soul, a capacity, a secret art of thinking, feeling and breathing thoughts of unity at every moment of life. This thought matured in him slowly, and it was reflected in Vasudeva's old childlike face: harmony, knowledge of the eternal perfection of the world, and unity.*¹⁴⁷

This idea of indivisible unity is a particularly difficult concept to communicate and words are such a clumsy vehicle that sometimes images have been used to illustrate the point. The Taijitu symbol (shown on the back cover of the book) represents the duality behind yin-yang and is possibly the most easily grasped, though the concept of the Zen garden is seen to be a fine example of this in a physical form.

In the Taijitu symbol the two apparently opposing forces found throughout the universe are seen to exist in absolute harmony. Each contains within it an element of the other and neither has any meaning in the absence of the other. In fact, they are one. The Zen garden is like this symbol in that it is an example of unity. Here a single large stone is surrounded by countless tiny raked grains of sand; the stone is no more than the sum of innumerable grains of sand and the sand is no more than a stone made divisible. But together they symbolise the unchanging undivided oneness lying behind the perception of diversity, divisibility and constant change that is manifest in numerous forms and diverse ways in Everyday Reality.

¹⁴⁷ Hesse H (1973) *Siddhartha*. Pan Books Ltd., London, p.103.

The one and the many

A simple physical example of unity and how 'the many can be one' is seen in the behaviour of light, which manifests itself to us visually as a range of different colours but actually is only one colour - white. The familiar image of the prism demonstrates how white light is actually what lies behind the various colours we perceive.

We see the phenomenon of 'the many and the one' in many fields. It lies, for example, behind what we ordinarily consider to be separate musical notes, or indeed separate anything. This is especially evident in those natural or man-made phenomena that we consider may be multiple in some sense. In fact, anything that is tangible and is therefore made up of matter, can be converted through nuclear fusion back to one thing - pure energy - which was the source of all matter following the Big Bang. So, everything there is, every person, animal, object, planet and star, indeed all matter, is reducible to energy. And this energy can neither be created nor destroyed; the entire cosmos is composed of a very definite and fixed amount of energy. What began as energy with the Big Bang, though it may currently exist as matter, remains no more than a form of energy and will ultimately convert back to pure energy. In this sense, matter (mass) can be considered to be a form of temporarily 'frozen' or solidified energy, which very neatly conveys the essence of unity that is being discussed here.

If there can be more than one of something, if we can count multiples of it, then the meaning behind this is rooted in mathematics. The ancient Greek philosophers considered mathematics to have mystical qualities and vested much energy in examining its supposed transcendental nature. Although we use numbers on a daily basis, the metaphysics underlying this are complex. As we saw earlier, at the heart of mathematics is the number 1, which can be seen to be fundamental to all other numbers. Fractions, decimals or parts of a whole number are essentially parts of 1, which at a conceptual level must precede them. Similarly, multiples of 1, such as 2, 3, 4 and so on, must also be preceded by the concept of 1. The point is that the concept of 'one' is far more fundamental than appears at first sight -

we've already encountered some of the philosophical implications of this in Chapter10, which dealt with Duality.

Becoming the Cosmic Jigsaw Puzzle

The Christian priest and mystic, the Blessed John Ruysbroeck (c.1293-1381), said of Cosmic Consciousness:

*... no-one will thoroughly understand the meaning of it by any learning or subtle consideration of his own; for all words, and all that may be learnt and understood in a creaturely way, are foreign to, and far below, the truth which I mean. But he who is united with God, and is enlightened in this truth, he is able to understand the truth by itself. For to comprehend and to understand God above all similitudes, such as He is in Himself, is to be God with God, without intermediary, and without any otherness ...*¹⁴⁸

What is being said here is that if we wish to achieve total understanding of that which is an undivided unity, then we must *become* it. We must *be* it. It's not surprising that the indivisible unity of Ultimate Reality should have a direct bearing on the way we might experience it. The reality we experience in our everyday world is inherently composed of parts, each of which can be understood separately, bit by bit. But this is only one way of looking at things. If Ultimate Reality is not composed of parts, to know it, to experience Cosmic Consciousness, you must understand it in its entirety, all at once. It's all or nothing: Cosmic Consciousness or Everyday Reality; Nirvana or Samsara. This belief was taught by Chinese Zen Master Hui-neng, who held that:

¹⁴⁸ The Blessed John Ruysbroeck, quoted in Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England. p.259.

To be awakened at all is to be awakened completely, for having no parts or divisions, the Buddha nature is not to be realized bit by bit.

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When this is understood, we can see why the experience of Cosmic Consciousness is so frequently referred to as being instantaneous - an issue to be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 19 (Seeing is Believing).

An idea about ideas

In Chapter 4 (What's really real?) we saw that ideas themselves might be thought to have some sort of independent existence unrelated to the tangible world we're used to. And maybe we need to free ourselves of the conviction that we'll find Ultimate Reality 'somewhere out there' in the tangible world of physical matter. The ancient Greeks were enthused by the notion that the world of ideas is where reality lies, and perhaps they had a point. What, for example, is the difference between a tree and the idea (or concept) of a tree? Or, for that matter, what is the difference between you reading these words and the *idea* of you reading these words? Are they not the same thing? Here we're not talking about the single underlying concept of 'tree', what you might call 'tree-ness', but about a specific tree that you can see at this moment from your window, or the computer screen or book in front of you right now. Surely the *idea* of any of these is exactly the same as the thing-in-itself in every minute respect? In essence the idea *is the thing*. The question is, which has the greater claim to reality, the physical object/activity or the *idea* of the object/activity? And what is the nature of the reality behind ideas anyway? Are ideas somehow created when we become conscious of them or do they arise when their physical counterparts in the guise of chairs, stairs, stars and cars come into being? Or then again, as we discussed in Chapter 8 (Belief), perhaps ideas have been there all the time, lurking in some corner of the universe just waiting to become tangible?

¹⁴⁹ Master Hui-neng, paraphrased by Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England. p.114.

Those readers who are familiar with Ockham's Razor will recognise its immediate relevance here. If the *idea* of touching a cup is exactly the same as actually touching the cup, then one of these is redundant. If the *idea* of physical phenomena is enough to account for our entire experience of the world, then perhaps there's no need for tangible stuff at all. Whilst this would have the benefit of dispensing with an entire layer of unnecessary material, it also means that everything - from the physical matter of the phenomenal world to concepts and consciousness - all consist of the same one non-material substance - this being whatever ideas are made of. And this itself has some interesting associations with Unity.

Of course, all this debate may seem rather vacuous to the rationalist: we are clearly here and we clearly experience physical matter through our senses – where's the problem with that? Ordinarily this is fine but here we're not dealing with the world in an ordinary way. Here we're looking at the nature of reality in its absolute and ultimate essence. And that means we must look behind that which we would ordinarily accept as fact. If the idea of something is exactly the same as the thing-in-itself, then to experience its reality perhaps we should turn our search away from the physical and inwards to the world of ideas. To read more on this have another look at Chapter 4, entitled What's really real?.

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We've seen how the absolute Simplicity and complete Unity of Ultimate Reality might serve to confuse us. These can both be seen to be part and parcel of the same thing - the Absolute Perfection of Ultimate Reality, and it is to this that we now turn.

Chapter 15.

Absolute Perfection

*All that you touch, All that you see, All that you taste, All you feel.
All that you love, All that you hate, All you distrust, All you save ...*

*... All that is now, All that is gone, All that's to come and
everything under the Sun is in tune but the Sun is eclipsed by the
Moon.* ¹⁵⁰

As Pink Floyd suggest, everything is exactly, 100%, perfect as it is - we just don't see it that way. From the perfect harmony of the Big Bang onwards there has never been anything that could distort this total accord between all things at all levels. So, each molecule that vibrates is in perfect harmony with each leaf that falls in autumn, with each moment of every experience that you and I have and with every aspect of everything there is, has been and ever will be.

The concept of disharmony is a product of Ego: it's what ego is and what ego does, and can be summarised in these words:

Ordinary mind first conceives 'perfection-imperfection' and then proceeds to find imperfection wherever it pleases. In short, ordinary mind, ego, is itself the principle and instrument of imperfection and it knows this imperfection by virtue of its opposite, perfection. There is no imperfection apart from self. Man is NOW Complete and Perfect and could not be otherwise. ¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Waters R (1973) *Eclipse*. From the album *Dark Side of the Moon*, Pink Floyd: <http://www.pink-floyd-lyrics.com/html/eclipse-dark-lyrics.html>

¹⁵¹ Hittleman RL (1976) *Yoga: The 8 Steps to Health and Peace*. Hamlyn, London, p.61

An example: As the philosophers of ancient Greece observed, we can each conceive, hypothetically, of a perfect sphere. When a ball bearing manufacturer makes a ball bearing he seeks to create something that is perfectly spherical. However, we know that under a microscope we would see numerous imperfections in the surface of the object. Does this then mean the ball bearing is necessarily imperfect? After all, it's less perfectly spherical than it was intended to be. On the other hand, perhaps our particular definition of 'perfection' is erroneous. The fact is, though we can conceive of a perfect sphere, we all know that in the everyday world of real, tangible, ball bearings this absolute degree of perfection is impossible at a scale much smaller than that seen with the naked eye. So is the ball bearing imperfect or not?

The supposition here is that the surface smoothness of the ball bearing must meet some specific but hypothetical criteria in order for it to reach an exact standard. But it seems the universe, on the other hand, has different ideas. The standards of the universe are not the same as our own and allow for minute cavities and indentations in the surface of the ball bearing - in fact, the universe appears to insist on them. But this need not reflect an imperfection because it could be seen to be exactly as 'intended' from the perspective of the universe and anything outside the human mind. In this sense each minute cavity and indentation can still be perfect as it is, down to the vibration of every single electron in their make-up.

This principle can, of course, be applied to anything and everything - every act, every entity, every moment in the life of the entire universe. But this does not mean we can equate 'perfect' and 'imperfect' with 'good', 'desirable' or for that matter with 'bad' or 'undesirable'. There's no reason why we should seek to impute any value to it because this is simply *how it is*.¹⁵²

¹⁵² And of course, the principles of non-dualism show us that if *everything* is perfect then there is neither perfection nor imperfection, since each term is rendered obsolete in the absence of the other.

As soon as this principle of constant perfection is applied to human behaviour we begin to see, like Aldous Huxley under the influence of mescaline, that '*Our goal is to discover that we have always been where we ought to be.*'¹⁵³ It's just a matter of recognising the value judgements that we routinely make and project onto a neutral world. Perhaps the strangest thing is that we could ever have thought of the universe from the Big Bang to the present moment as having *not* been in a state of total and constant perfection.

So where did this idea of imperfection come from in the first place? At any level you can conceive of, everything is 100% in harmony with everything else. We have, *we are*, the mass illusion of disharmony, but this is exactly that - an illusion, Maya. We erroneously conceive of the existence of *time* and *change* and so conclude that things could have been different from that which they are. But outside our illusory assumptions, in practical terms, this absolute perfection means that nothing you do and nothing you experience is 'wrong' in any way. We are all exactly as we are 'meant to be'. As the American writer Max Ehrmann (1872–1945) said in his prose poem *Desiderata*:

*. . . Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself. You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.*¹⁵⁴

And of course, if the universe is truly unfolding exactly as it should, then it's always in perfect balance. Attempting to 're-balance' your diet, your health, lifestyle, house or universe, is meaningless. It is balanced, now and always. No amount of expensive re-balancing is needed. The underlying reality behind existence - that which we are calling Ultimate Reality - is now, always has been and always will

¹⁵³ Huxley A (1973) *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England. p.64.

¹⁵⁴ This poem is frequently cited - on this occasion it has been accessed from <http://mwkworks.com/desiderata.html>

be, in perfect balance and harmony. (Have a look at Chapters 10 and 14, on Duality and Unity, if you would like to read more on this).

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But for those who are continuing with the story, move on to read the next chapter, which looks at the absolute perfection of simply and effortlessly *being who you are* and *where you are*: Be Here Now.

Chapter 16.

Be Here Now

*Not knowing how near the Truth is
We seek it far away - what a pity! ...*

*We are like him who, in the midst of water,
Cries out in thirst so imploringly.
We are like the son of a rich man
Who wanders away among the poor ...*

*At this moment what more need we seek?
As the Truth eternally reveals itself,
This very place is the Lotus Land of purity,
This very body is the Body of the Buddha.* ¹⁵⁵

With these words Hakuin Ekaku (1686-1768), esteemed Japanese Zen Master and founder of the Ryutaku-ji Temple, elucidates what is meant by the three words *Be Here Now* - made famous most recently by the rock band Oasis¹⁵⁶ and the Hindu spiritual teacher and former University of California professor Baba Ram Dass.¹⁵⁷ The phrase denotes both a way of life and, maybe, a way to experience Ultimate Reality. The point is, there's no need to seek Nirvana - you're already there. Just be where you are, now, in this moment. And in light of the discussion given in Chapters 15, 16 and 22, entitled Absolute Perfection, Be here now and Meditation, this may now begin to make some sense.

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¹⁵⁵ Hakuin Ekaku, *Song of Zazen*. Quoted here in Mathiessen P (1986) *Nine-headed Dragon River*. Collins, UK. p.211.

¹⁵⁶ *Be Here Now*, released August 1997, Creation Records, London.

¹⁵⁷ Baba Ram Dass (1978) *Be Here Now*. Crown Publishing Group, New York.

But there again, maybe it won't. And there's a perfectly rational reason for this: simple words will never be of any use when you're Describing the Indescribable.

Chapter 17.

Describing the Indescribable

*Now, even what I recall will be exprest
More feebly than if I could wield no more
Than a babe's tongue, yet milky from the breast ...
... How weak are words, and how unfit to frame
My concept - which lags after what was shown
So far, 'twould flatter it to call it lame!*¹⁵⁸

So laments the poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) in relating his pilgrimage to paradise in the *Divine Comedy*. And many have made the same point: it's not possible to put the experience of Cosmic Consciousness into words.

It seems this difficulty in describing the indescribable was recognised some time ago. For example, in the 3rd century the philosopher Plotinus held that his:

*... was a belief in the ultimate One which lies behind all experience. In the One all distinction between thought and reality is overcome. The One is known by a method of abstraction - by saying what it is not like. By this Way of Negation all the non-essentials are removed. The One is known by profound, inner, mystical experience.*¹⁵⁹

So what is this 'One' of which Plotinus speaks?

¹⁵⁸ Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy, Canto xxxiii*. Quoted in Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.236.

¹⁵⁹ Brown C (1973) *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*. Inter-varsity Press, London. p.16.

The Christian perspective

The Christian position on this has tended to reject any form of description, with St Paul, for example, telling us that Christ ‘... *was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.*’¹⁶⁰ Another Christian teacher, John Yepes, known as St John of the Cross (1542-1591), a Spanish mystic and Carmelite Friar, wrote of the knowledge of God that comes from visionary experience:

*... there are neither words nor language to describe it, for it is the knowledge of God himself and his delights.*¹⁶¹

He goes on to describe the impossibility of making an intelligible report of the wisdom communicated by this experience:

*... it is still so secret that the soul cannot speak of it and give it a name whereby it may be called; for ... it can find no suitable way or similitude by which it may be able to describe such lofty understanding and such delicate spiritual feeling.*¹⁶²

More recently, Dr RM Bucke, author of the book *Cosmic Consciousness*, wrote of his own encounter with Ultimate Reality:

*... (there) came upon (me) a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness, accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe.*¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ 2 Corinthians Chapter 12, from The Official King James Bible Online: <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/book.php?book=2+Corinthians&chapter=12&verse=>

¹⁶¹ St John of the Cross, quoted in Bucke RM (1972) *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*. The Olympia Press, London, p.133.

¹⁶² St John of the Cross, quoted in Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England. p.87.

¹⁶³ Bucke RM (1972) *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*. The Olympia Press, London. p.9.

And the English poet and philosopher Edward Carpenter (1844-1929) relates a similar story in a letter to Bucke:

I really do not feel that I can tell you anything without falsifying and obscuring the matter ... The perception seems to be one in which all the senses unite into one sense. In which you become the object. But this is unintelligible, mentally speaking. ¹⁶⁴

In a similar vein the acclaimed Protestant theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) himself gave the explanation below for the difficulty in describing religious experience. For Barth, God is completely transcendent so:

Revelation comes to men in the same way as a vertical line intersects with a horizontal plane, or as a tangent touches a circle. Because it is a contact with the Wholly Other we cannot even describe it. All we can do (and all that the biblical writers can do) is to describe what they felt like after it. ¹⁶⁵

The Hindu perspective

In Hindu teaching our Everyday Reality is referred to as Maya and it is because of the illusory nature of the mayic plane that any attempt to communicate from within it will be doomed to failure. Needless to say, this is a rather fundamental difficulty in a book such as this that purports to do just that. But in Everyday Reality all approaches to communication are necessarily illusory, which is one of the ironies of any work aimed at clarifying what we mean by the term ‘Ultimate Reality’.

Nevertheless, the problem of describing the indescribable is summed up in the following verse of the philosophical teachings of the Upanishads:

¹⁶⁴ Bucke RM (1972) *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*. The Olympia Press, London. pp.190-1.

¹⁶⁵ Brown C (1973) *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*. Inter-varsity Press, London. pp.251-2.

*He whose reflective pure spirit sinks into Atman
Knows bliss inexpressible through words* ¹⁶⁶

The Buddhist perspective

As with Christianity and Hinduism, in Buddhist practice the transference of the wisdom gained in Cosmic Consciousness is considered impossible through the medium of language. For example, American writer John Earl Coleman (1930-2012), a teacher of meditation from the Theravadan Buddhist tradition, has written of his own experience of Cosmic Consciousness in this way:

There was an indescribable calm. There was cool equanimity that seemed to fill and encompass entirety. There was everything and nothing, a peace which passes all understanding. The mind and body were transcended. The mind was quiet. It was not pleasure as we understand the word; joy comes nearer to expressing the experience. There are no longer any words to carry on with.

These were the sentences I wrote down later in a quite inadequate attempt to record the superb moment of my enlightenment. ¹⁶⁷

Through his tale of Siddhartha, a mendicant seeker of truth in the days of the Buddha, novelist Herman Hesse also highlights this difficulty. Siddhartha is speaking to his friend and fellow monk Govinda:

Siddhartha said "... this one thought has impressed me, Govinda. Wisdom is not communicable. The wisdom which a wise man tries to communicate always sounds foolish ... Knowledge can be communicated, but not wisdom. One can find it, be fortified by it, do wonders through it, but one cannot communicate and teach it." ¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ *Upanishads*. Quoted in Hesse H (1973) *Siddhartha*. Pan Books Ltd., London, p.16.

¹⁶⁷ Coleman JE (1971) *The Quiet Mind*. Rider and Co., London. p.219.

¹⁶⁸ Hesse H (1973) *Siddhartha*. Pan Books Ltd., London, pp.111-112.

The description given by Sir John Woodroffe of the Void referred to in the Buddhist text *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* provides a good example of the tangle that can result when we seek to put the transcendence of Ultimate Reality into words. He states:

What then is this Void? It is not absolutely 'nothingness'. It is the Alogical, to which no categories drawn from the world of name and form apply ... (it is) the negation of all determinations, but not of 'Is-ness' as such, as has been supposed in accounts given of Buddhist 'Nihilism'; but it is nothing known to finite experience in form, and, therefore, for those who have had no other experience, it is no-thing.
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Zen writer Peter Matthiessen points out the drawback of trying to express the inexpressible in words:

*... anything written about Zen ... inevitably separates itself from Zen's "instantaneous" spirit. In using dead words to say that Zen is this or that, a separation is created, and the freshness of the Zen moment is lost.*¹⁷⁰

The point is again made by Abbot Shibayama in discussing *satori*, a term synonymous with Cosmic Consciousness. Shibayama talks of the Hindu/Buddhist scriptures known as the sutras:

...which were originally writings trying to explain the satori experience ... It is therefore the satori experience that can give life to these scriptures. It is impossible to attain satori by reading the sutras on the scholastic level. Once an experience is expressed in a conceptual form, it assumes its own objectivity which can be independently treated. Thus there is the danger of misunderstanding the concept as the experiential fact itself, and the experience itself

¹⁶⁹ Sir John Woodroffe in Evans-Wentz WY (1973) *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Open University Press. p.lxxi.

¹⁷⁰ Matthiessen P (1987) *Nine-Headed Dragon River*. Fontana Paperbacks, London. p.249.

will be forgotten and finally be dead. Zen is flatly against such a tendency and strongly warns us that we should not be attached to any of the scriptures which are likely to be lifeless records. ¹⁷¹

It's not surprising, therefore, that when faced with questions concerning the origin of the world, the nature of Nirvana or of the Self - all of which demand an answer in words - the Buddha maintained a 'noble silence'. Such intellectual debates would not, he held, lead to the experience of liberation that is called Enlightenment. And as Alan Watts has written, enlightenment is indescribable because:

... the actual content of this experience was never and could never be put into words. For words are the frames of maya, the meshes of its net, and the experience is of the water which slips through ...

Thus, from the standpoint of Zen, the Buddha 'never said a word', despite the volumes of scriptures attributed to him. For his real message remained always unspoken, and was such that, when words attempted to express it, they made it seem as if it were nothing at all.
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Clearly this did not impede the Buddha in his teaching however. It's said that he was once preaching to a large crowd of disciples, including the enlightened Bodhisattva (Buddhist saint), Mahasattva Manjusri. Part of their conversation illustrates the impossibility of describing Ultimate Reality or Cosmic Consciousness. Manjusri asks "What is the state of supreme enlightenment as attained by the Buddha?", to which the Buddha replies:

"It is the state of emptiness, because all views are equal. It is the state of sign-less-ness, because all signs are equal. It is the state of

¹⁷¹ Shibayama Z (1977) *A Flower Does Not Talk: Zen Essays*. Charles E Tuttle Company, Tokyo, Japan. p.21.

¹⁷² Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.65.

wish-less-ness, because the three realms are equal. It is the state of non-action, because all actions are equal. It is the state of the unconditioned, because all conditioned things are equal."

Manjusri asked, "World-Honored One, what is the state of the unconditioned?"

The Buddha said, "The absence of thought is the state of the unconditioned."

Manjusri said, "World-Honored One, if the states of the unconditioned and so forth are the state of Buddhahood, and the state of the unconditioned is the absence of thought, then on what basis is the state of Buddhahood expressed? If there is no such basis, then there is nothing to be said; and since there is nothing to be said, nothing can be expressed. Therefore, World-Honored One, the state of Buddhahood is inexpressible in words".¹⁷³

Perhaps it's because of the mental convolutions that can arise from these attempts to describe Enlightenment that some of the great Zen Masters have always refused to enter into any sort of debate on the subject. Their preference has been to answer questions with what might appear on the surface to be impenetrable and nonsensical gibberish. Indeed, the issue of inexpressibility seems to have sparked a rather unexpected reaction in them. One such example, among the many stories that illustrate the complete indescribability of the essence of Zen, appears in the tale below, which demonstrates the bewildering behaviour of one Zen teacher:

There was once a Zen Master named Sekito (700-790), and many monks came to his place to study under him. Sekito, however, did not give them any lectures at all. Finally the monks could no longer be

¹⁷³ *The Demonstration of the Inconceivable State of Buddhahood Sutra*. See HolyBooks.com:
<http://www.holybooks.com/wp-content/uploads/Buddhist-Sutra-Collection-D.pdf>

*patient, and one day they forcefully urged the Master to preach. To their surprise, Sekito this time quite easily agreed to do so, and he ordered the monk in charge to ring the bell to announce that a lecture would be given. All the monks assembled in the hall. The Master quietly stepped up to the lectern and said, "For clarification of sutras, there are scholars. For philosophical explanations there are philosophers. I am, however, a Zen Master, and you should well realize it." So saying, he stepped down from the platform and returned to his room.*¹⁷⁴

This little tale illustrates the view that explanatory words giving a philosophical interpretation of Zen principles will, in the end, simply go round and round in circles. To know what Ultimate Reality is like you must experience it for yourself - have a look at Do-it-yourself (Chapter 20) for more on this.

Why are words so limited?

But why is it so difficult to describe the experience of Cosmic Consciousness when we find no great problem in describing any other aspect of life?

The answer must surely be that Cosmic Consciousness - the personal encounter with Ultimate Reality - is an experience of absolute simplicity, beyond the confines of duality and the categorisation and differentiation of everyday existence. How can absolute simplicity be described when any attempt to express it will necessarily complicate things and result in greater complexity than the subject itself? It's because of this that any thought or discussion about Ultimate Reality, any attempt to communicate its meaning, any reflection upon it at all, can only relate to one side of it. This side is of course the Everyday Reality that is the earthly, mundane and material essence of Samsara, whilst the other side is the transcendence of Nirvana, being itself beyond both 'sides'. If you missed Chapter 13, on Simplicity, this

¹⁷⁴ From *Dento-roku* (The Transmission of the Lamp) compiled in the 11th century AD. Quoted in Shibayama Z (1977) *A Flower Does Not Talk: Zen Essays*. Charles E Tuttle Company, Tokyo, Japan, pp. 23-24.

takes a more rounded look at the absolute simplicity of Ultimate Reality for those who wish to read more.

In addition to the problems posed in describing that which is absolutely simple, the direct perception of Ultimate Reality - Cosmic Consciousness - is said to be beyond recollection. In other words it's beyond the capacity of memory to recall and conceptually concretise the unity, transcendence and non-duality of an experience of Ultimate Reality. As the English novelist Aldous Huxley has observed:

*... all visionaries insist on the impossibility of recalling, in anything even faintly resembling its original form and intensity, their transfiguring experiences.*¹⁷⁵

Dante likewise bemoans the failures of memory:

*... Henceforth my vision mounted to a height
Where Speech is vanquished and must lag behind
And memory surrenders in such plight ...*¹⁷⁶

But not only is the human memory flawed, any attempt to capture the *transcendental essence* of Ultimate Reality is going to be especially compromised. Though we may share some understanding of what we mean by the word 'transcendence' we cannot hope to truly know its meaning since this is inherently, by definition, unknowable as a concept. So we must use analogy to speak of Ultimate Reality. Words represent concepts and can only ever be fairly blunt instruments compared with perfect understanding, which would involve *being* the subject as well as its observer (as in the ancient Zen concept that an archer should not be only the one who wields the

¹⁷⁵ Huxley A (1973) *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England. p.116.

¹⁷⁶ Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy, Canto xxxiii*. Quoted in Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.234-6.

bow, but should also become the arrow and the target). In his discussion of Ultimate Reality (the 'Self') and Everyday Reality ('ordinary mind') Richard L Hittleman points out that:

Words constitute a grossly inadequate medium through which to communicate the nature of SELF. Their inadequacy is responsible for the ambiguities with which this discussion is permeated. Words are the product of ordinary mind - the very entity we are attempting to place in a wholly different perspective - and impose the limitations and distortions of their creator. ¹⁷⁷

It's because words are so limited that *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* seeks to describe not what Ultimate Reality *is*, but what it is *like*. Maybe this was why Socrates, when asked about his knowledge, is said to have replied that he knew nothing, and why Plotinus held that '*... there is more truth in silence than in any words whatever*'. ¹⁷⁸

Symbolism, Myth and Metaphor

It's perhaps because the whole experience defies description in words that other symbolic forms of communication have become so widespread in many of the world's religions. In Christianity, for example, the New Testament is well-known for its parables, and several references are made by Jesus to his use of these. Although the examples below are expressed in the terminology of early 17th century English, they communicate their meaning clearly enough: that which needs to be said cannot be said in ordinary words but can best be communicated through the use of allegory:

¹⁰*And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables?*

¹⁷⁷ Hittleman RL (1976) *Yoga: The 8 Steps to Health and Peace*. Hamlyn, London, p.28.

¹⁷⁸ Paraphrased in Russell B (1961) *The History of Western Philosophy*. George Allen and Unwin Ltd. UK, p.293.

¹¹ He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. ¹⁷⁹

and ...

³⁴ All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables; and without a parable spake he not unto them:

³⁵ That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world. ¹⁸⁰

In speaking about Ultimate Reality Alan Watts states that:

... conceptual thinking cannot grasp it ... the foundation or 'ground' of our existence and our awareness cannot be understood in terms of things that are known. We are forced, therefore, to speak of it through myth - that is, through special metaphors, analogies, and images which say what it is like as distinct from what it is. ¹⁸¹

And let's not forget that words themselves are no more than symbols, though as Carl Jung has pointed out, they have their role:

As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason ¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ Matthew chapter 13, verses 10-11.

<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/book.php?book=Matthew&chapter=13&verse=10&t=1>

¹⁸⁰ Matthew chapter 13, verses 34-35.

<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/book.php?book=Matthew&chapter=13&verse=10&t=1>

¹⁸¹ Watts A (1973) *The Book on the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*, Abacus, UK. p.19.

¹⁸² Jung CG (1964) (ed) *Man and his Symbols*. Aldus Books Ltd., London. p.21.

But ultimately of course symbols are not that which they symbolize, because:

*All symbols are abstractions. The symbol, insofar as it is a symbol, represents only an aspect of that which it stands for. This is particularly true of words, which are very abstract symbols. In spite of their importance, words are far different from things; they convey meaning only because people have agreed that a certain meaning goes along with certain sounds.*¹⁸³

And of course subjective experiences are not words. For me to share my experiences with you I must firstly *convert* them into words, *communicate* these to you by speech or in writing, and they must then be *translated* by you into meaningful ideas which hopefully will correspond to some extent with the experiences I wish to communicate. This process presents problems for any experience, but when the experience is one of Cosmic Consciousness the issues are of a significantly greater order of magnitude. If I talk to you of a large house with a red door, you can at least imagine what I might be referring to because you possess an understanding of the concepts 'large', 'house', 'red' and 'door'. But what if I wish to communicate to you an understanding of something for which you have no concept, something that is inherently pre-conceptual, something that is transcendental?

In the Hindu tradition the response to the fallibility of words has clearly been met with the adoption of symbols with a visual or auditory appeal. The philosophical teachings of the Upanishads form the basis of the Hindu religion. The Mandukya-Upanishad is the shortest of these and describes the mystic syllable Om, sometimes spelled 'Aum'. This syllable is frequently used in meditation, either as a visual aid or as a chant, to represent the highest name of God within the states of waking, dreaming, sleeping and the transcendental state of Cosmic Consciousness. Use of such a symbol

¹⁸³ Kelsey M (1974) *Encounter with God: A Theology of Christian Experience*. Hodder and Stoughton, London. p.136.

goes some way to side-stepping the need for words, though understanding still remains with the individual.

Within the Mandukya-Upanishad is written the following:

The Self is the lord of all; inhabitant of the hearts of all. He is the source of all; creator and dissolver of beings. There is nothing He does not know.

He is not knowable by perception, turned inward or outward, nor by both combined. He is neither that which is known, nor that which is not known, nor is He the sum of all that might be known. He cannot be seen, grasped, bargained with. He is undefinable, unthinkable, indescribable.

*The only proof of His existence is union with Him. The world disappears in Him. He is the peaceful, the good, the one without a second.*¹⁸⁴

No wonder it's so difficult to describe Ultimate Reality.

But isn't this all just a little bit too convenient?

Of course, you may say, it's all very convenient that those who would argue for the existence of a transcendental and ineffable Ultimate Reality should claim their beliefs to be especially difficult to grasp or impossible to describe. It may be equally difficult to grasp or describe, understand or account for the existence of fairies, the claims of astrology, magic or any other fanciful notion about the supposed true nature of reality, including some of the hypotheses of eminent particle physicists. Indeed, it's been suggested that scientific approaches to the description of reality are at least as encumbered as some of the more esoteric interests described here:

¹⁸⁴ From the Mandukya-Upanishad, quoted by Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England. pp.146-7.

*Eastern mysticism is based on direct insights into the nature of reality, and physics is based on the observation of natural phenomena in scientific experiments. In both fields, the observations are then interpreted and the interpretation is very often communicated by words. Since words are always an abstract, approximate map of reality, the verbal interpretations of a scientific experiment or of a mystical insight are necessarily inaccurate and incomplete.*¹⁸⁵

Nevertheless, the inability to describe Cosmic Consciousness, or to clearly explain or account for it, is exactly what one might expect from people who are not to be trusted because they are advancing a theory or belief system for which there is little evidence. So it's accepted that these doomed attempts to communicate the truth behind Life, the Universe and Everything, might seem to be a little perverse. And this is not helped by the fact that logic and rationality seem to be compromised at every turn.

.....

But there's a good reason why the usual mode of analysis and exploration that's offered by the Scientific Method is of no use here, and it's to a consideration of this that we now turn.

¹⁸⁵ Capra F (1981) *The Tao of Physics*. The Chaucer Press Ltd., Bungay, England, p.41.

Chapter 18.

Scientific method

*In every science certain things must be accepted as first principles if the subject matter is to be understood; and these first postulates rest only upon faith.*¹⁸⁶

Some proponents of religion will no doubt argue that the truth behind their belief is necessarily beyond any sort of testing based on scientific approaches because it rests on faith *in the absence of evidence*. The logical extension of this argument is that it is spiritually commendable that one can believe in a deity, miracle or otherwise unlikely event *despite* evidence to the contrary. This is a risky position to uphold, as illustrated in the 19th century proverb *What can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence*, and is not the approach adopted by this book. Here the view is taken that the scientific method of enquiry should be rejected solely because it is ill-equipped to perform the search for Ultimate Reality.

What's wrong with the scientific method?

i. The scientific method rests on soft foundations

As long ago as the 15th century, Nicholas of Cusa, whose words you read at the top of the page, suggested that science ultimately rests on faith. He was not only a cardinal and theologian of the Catholic Church but also a philosopher and mathematician, and here he draws our attention to one of the problems with scientific enquiry: it rests on soft foundations. The scientific approach to discovery - known as the *Scientific Method* - is based on assumptions about the fundamental nature of reality *in advance of* enquiring into it. A similar conclusion might be reached from the work of mathematician Kurt Gödel. It is said of Gödel that in 1931 he:

¹⁸⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, quoted in Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.26.

... demonstrated that within any given branch of mathematics, there would always be some propositions that couldn't be proven either true or false using the rules and axioms ... of that mathematical branch itself. You might be able to prove every conceivable statement about numbers within a system by going outside the system in order to come up with new rules and axioms, but by doing so you'll only create a larger system with its own unprovable statements. The implication is that all logical systems of any complexity are, by definition, incomplete; each of them contains, at any given time, more true statements than it can possibly prove according to its own defining set of rules.

*Gödel's Theorem has been used to argue that a computer can never be as smart as a human being because the extent of its knowledge is limited by a fixed set of axioms, whereas people can discover unexpected truths ... It plays a part in modern linguistic theories, which emphasize the power of language to come up with new ways to express ideas. And it has been taken to imply that you'll never entirely understand yourself, since your mind, like any other closed system, can only be sure of what it knows about itself by relying on what it knows about itself.*¹⁸⁷

This has a direct bearing on the scientific method since, like any system of analysis, it's based on a number of fundamental postulates that are taken to be self-evidently true in and of themselves (such as the presumption that cause must chronologically precede effect). But if these assumptions themselves rest on shifting foundations, scientific discoveries will always be suspect since they have been reached by virtue of a system that is inherently flawed. Most of the time this seems not to be of any great import, but there are times, such as this particular moment in this book, when these fundamental assumptions of the scientific method are crucial. For example, historically science has made the implicit assumption that two

¹⁸⁷ Jones J and Wilson W (1988) *An Incomplete Education*. Unwin Hyman, London. See the Miskatonic University Press website: <http://www.miskatonic.org/godel.html>.

mutually conflicting interpretations of the causation of a particular phenomenon cannot both be true. Whilst on the surface this assumption seems perfectly reasonable, it's possible that it's incorrect and may be posing hidden obstacles to our understanding of Ultimate Reality. Such implicit assumptions abound in Everyday Reality and mean that questions like 'Does God exist?' continue to exercise the minds of scientists. As we've seen before, Richard Dawkins has asserted that:

*The presence or absence of a creative super-intelligence is unequivocally a scientific question, even if it is not in practice - or not yet - a decided one.*¹⁸⁸

Professor Dawkins is clearly making a number of unsupported assumptions here: what, for example, if the cosmos in its entirety is not subject to the same boundaries as those set by the scientific method? What if Ultimate Reality is not founded on logical reasoning, cause and effect, linear or even non-linear time?

This is not to say that all scientific conclusions are necessarily incorrect. It simply means that we should always remember they are hypotheses rather than proven facts. They're also based on a man-made set of principles marking the boundaries of what we'll accept as being possible. Furthermore, it's worth remembering that these principles have no validity beyond that which mankind allocates to them. In fact, there may be equally valid approaches to enquiry into Ultimate Reality that do not follow the scientific method and, for all we know, these may include the necessity of *faith* as an essential starting point – Chapter 24 (Faith) will present a more thorough discussion of this.

ii. The scientific method tends to find only what it looks for

As well as the weaknesses described so far, science tends to find 'natural laws' where it looks for them and not where it doesn't. So, we look and find that water boils at 100°C at sea level; we look and find

¹⁸⁸ Dawkins R (2006) *The God Delusion*. Bantam Press, London, p.82.

that antibiotics inhibit the growth of bacteria. However, as Danish physicist Niels Bohr (1885-1962) has pointed out, we don't know whether there are meaningful connections between the orbit of electrons around the central nucleus of an atom and the orbit of planets around a central star, because science hasn't seriously explored the possibility of these links.

The scientific method adopts a procedure '*... that has characterized natural science since the 17th century, consisting in systematic observation, measurement, and experiment, and the formulation, testing, and modification of hypotheses*'.¹⁸⁹ On this basis it's quite reasonable that the scientific method should exclude from its remit anything that's inherently untestable. Conditions 'before' the Big Bang, the concept of Unhappening or the eternal existence of ideas like 'truth' (as described in Chapter 8, on Belief) are beyond the scope of science because their existence cannot be measured, experimented upon, tested or re-tested. Does this then mean that they couldn't possibly be true? Of course not. It simply means their existence cannot be established by the scientific method. It's also worth bearing in mind that the very untestability of some hypotheses may itself be a clue as to the true nature of reality - why should only those things that are amenable to scientific testing be real?

iii. The scientific method is simply not equipped to ask the big questions

The aim of scientific enquiry is not to reveal absolute truth but to discover more and more useful ways of thinking about phenomena.
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Theoretical physicists might argue that some questions are simply beyond the remit of scientific enquiry. For example, 'Who or what set up the conditions for the Big Bang?' is not likely to be seen as a question that science can reasonably address. Conditions *before* the Big Bang have no relevance to science because the term 'before' has

¹⁸⁹ Oxford Dictionaries Online.

<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/scientific+method>

¹⁹⁰ Weil A (2004) *The Natural Mind*. Houghton Mifflin Co., New York. p.9.

no meaning outside the existence of time, and time as we know it did not come into being until the advent of the Big Bang. Physicists reject the need to describe conditions 'before' this because the singularity of the Big Bang meant that cause and effect were reduced to zero. Because of this, events before the Big Bang can have no consequences and play no part in the scientific model of the universe. This understandable but nevertheless, narrow, definition of the remit of scientific enquiry is one of the main limitations of the value of the scientific method. If science circumscribes its business in this way that is fine, but it will not help us to answer the big questions we are posing in this book: 'Is there an Ultimate Reality behind the reality we know?', 'Who are we?', 'Why are we here?', 'Why is there a universe?', indeed, 'Why is there anything at all?'. And, just as a reminder, our common conception of the Big Bang as some sort of vast explosive expansion is distinctly erroneous, since there would be nowhere 'outside' the Big Bang into which it could expand.

iv. The scientific method has not been devised to look at *everything*

Quite reasonably perhaps, the scientific method has been designed to examine only certain specific aspects of the universe. As ordained minister and writer Christopher Bryant (1905-1985) has noted:

*Science ... limits itself to the task of discovering truths about particular regions of reality; and within these regions it concentrates on what it can measure and map.*¹⁹¹

There's nothing wrong with this of course, it's just that we find it very difficult to remember that scientific enquiry is quite so restricted, especially when what we want to examine is as big as *everything*. And in the process of this it's arguable that scientific enquiry can only provide us with a descriptive rather than truly explanatory account of things. As it proceeds in its development of hypotheses, data collection, analysis, re-generation of hypotheses,

¹⁹¹ Bryant C (1978) *The River Within: The search for God in depth*. Anchor Press Ltd., England. pp.80-81.

data collection and re-analysis, scientific enquiry gathers ever more information and detail about the natural world. But in doing so, does it penetrate to the heart of Ultimate Reality? Rather, one might argue, it moves in a sort of spiral, perhaps getting closer and closer to it but never actually reaching that beyond which there is nothing more, that beyond which there is no 'beyond' - Ultimate Reality. The bottom line is that science fails to go beyond the description of phenomena. It can show us how some specific parts of the universe relate to some other parts of the universe, but fails to reveal how the entire cosmos could work as a single entity. We see how the cogs interact with each other but we never see the whole machine - and the whole is almost certainly greater than the sum of its parts.¹⁹²

The eminent 19th century biologist Thomas Henry Huxley was an ardent supporter and friend of Charles Darwin and coined the term 'agnostic'. He's been mentioned earlier for his assertion that seeking scientific proof of God's existence is as sensible as using musical notation to prove the Earth is round. And it may be that the basis of the limitations of the scientific method described so far lie in the sort of questions science asks. Religious questions have frequently been formulated by reference to final causes, and ask 'What is the purpose of such and such a thing?'. These are what philosophers call *teleological* questions. Those questions that ask 'What earlier circumstances caused such and such an event?' are *mechanistic*. As Bertrand Russell has pointed out:

*... experience has shown that the mechanistic question leads to scientific knowledge, while the teleological question does not.*¹⁹³

Perhaps it's because science has focused so very much on asking mechanistic questions that its discoveries seem to be only

¹⁹² OK, it's possible that there is no 'whole' and that Ultimate Reality is no more than a collection of innumerable 'parts'. But it's also possible that this is an illusion. Have a look at Chapter 10 on Duality for more on this.

¹⁹³ Russell B (1961) *The History of Western Philosophy*. George Allen and Unwin Ltd. UK, p.84.

descriptive? These sorts of questions tend to relate to 'bits' of the universe and their interactions with other 'bits'. But Russell continues with an observation that crops up several times within this book, that the bit by bit approach of the scientific method is simply not appropriate when what you're enquiring into is *everything*. As Russell notes in relation to both mechanistic and teleological approaches:

*... in both questions alike, there is a limitation which is often ignored, both in popular thought and in philosophy. Neither question can be asked intelligibly about reality as a whole (including God), but only about parts of it.*¹⁹⁴

.....

Judge for yourself

So what are we left with when the scientific method falls short, when science either fails to address the *Why?* questions or simply can't be relied upon to look beyond its own rules and assumptions? What might we be missing that could lie outside the scientific method and how, without it, are we to judge the worthiness of the plethora of ideas being put to us in this book?

Maybe it's possible that other approaches - like faith, prayer and meditation - could offer something that science can't. Maybe, when all else fails, the next logical step is to seek Ultimate Reality through a non-scientific approach. One possibility to consider is the distinctly subjective personal testimony of others, and this is the theme of our next chapter, Seeing is Believing.

¹⁹⁴ *ibid*, p.85.

Chapter 19.

Seeing is Believing

*Now it came to passe ... that the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God ... I behelde ... The appearance of the wheeles ... and their appearance and their worke was as it were a wheele in the middle of a wheele ...*¹⁹⁵

Sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words

No doubt over the centuries attempts to communicate the personal experience of Cosmic Consciousness have been many and varied. Notable visual examples are found in the Flammarion Wood Engraving,¹⁹⁶ which seems to represent the ‘*wheele in the middle of a wheele*’ referred to in the quotation above, and in the similar, though very different, interpretation shown on the front cover of this book.

In some ways these images illustrate how, regardless of the cultural background of the individual concerned, it’s easier to grasp the essence of the experience of Cosmic Consciousness without words, which are at best strained and at worst doomed to failure anyway since their goal lies in Describing the Indescribable. Nevertheless, the written word can carry enormous significance, and writings originating in many cultures and peoples over the millennia have described Cosmic Consciousness. The experience seems to have been known to a number of ancient Greek philosophers as well as religious and secular figures of various cultures and times, including modern-day thinkers, theoreticians, religious devotees, atheists and ordinary people claiming no specialist skill.

¹⁹⁵ Ezekiel, chapter 1, taken from verses 1-16. King James Bible Online: http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/1611_Ezekiel-Chapter-1/

¹⁹⁶ *The Flammarion Wood Engraving*, attributed to Camille Flammarion (1888) *The Atmosphere: Popular Meteorology*. Hachette, Paris.

How much credence we should place on entirely subjective personal reports is debateable of course, and it's quite reasonable that we should be wary of the value of personal experience in demonstrating the merits of the ideas expressed in this book. Richard Dawkins has become a quite famous exponent of this debunking activity, and perhaps for good reason. He says:

*Many people believe in God because they believe they have seen a vision of him - or of an angel or a virgin in blue - with their own eyes. Or he speaks to them inside their heads. This argument from personal experience is the one that is most convincing to those who claim to have had one. But is the least convincing to anyone else, and anyone knowledgeable about psychology.*¹⁹⁷

This critique seems to be almost exclusively based on what Dawkins considers to be the mistaken visual perceptions of 'believers' who, it's implied, may frequently have been suffering from hallucinations. However, this viewpoint gives virtually no consideration to other reported aspects of the experience, such as the vast and instantaneous consciousness expansion that is said to accompany Cosmic Consciousness. In any case, it's not suggested here that personal accounts should be offered as some sort of objective evidence - in fact their essential subjectivity seems to be a fundamental part of the experience, as Chapter 20, headed Do-it-yourself, explains. In *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* the experience of Cosmic Consciousness is considered to be an extremely dramatic 'breaking through' the constraints of Everyday Reality. The personal reports that follow are therefore presented as entirely subjective accompaniments intended to flesh out the otherwise rather dry elements of the narrative.

Common factors in the experience of Cosmic Consciousness

The intensely personal nature of the experience of Cosmic Consciousness is not an encouraging feature for those pondering the

¹⁹⁷ Dawkins R (2006) *The God Delusion*. Bantam Press, London. See especially p.112.

possibility of its existence. The problem is that every report will differ from every other, sometimes in apparently irreconcilable ways: the individual with a background in Christianity will 'return' to tell you that there is a single omnipotent God, the Hindu will talk of a supreme being composed of many forms, whilst someone from a Buddhist culture will tell you there is Nirvana but no God. Of course, this may be because they have experienced widely different things - but not necessarily. On returning from Cosmic Consciousness to Everyday Reality, when they are back in their ego in the world of Samsara, it may be that the cultural environment of their formative years places some sort of barrier around the ideas and words that allow them to make sense of the experience to themselves, and so to communicate something of it to others. But beyond cultural background the way in which someone communicates their experience will be heavily influenced by their language, vocabulary, personality, intelligence and life experiences, none of which precludes the possibility that they are all experiencing *the same thing*. Happold's views on this are revealing. He observes that regardless of the differences in the reports made by mystics across the ages:

...Their unanimity is found at a deeper level. At the level of what I have called the Primary Imagination, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that all have glimpsed in varying degrees and in varying forms the same Reality and found the same Truth. ¹⁹⁸

Similarly, Christian writer Christopher Bryant has stated the opinion that:

... the mystical experience does not appear to depend on Christian belief, for those of other faiths and of none have described

¹⁹⁸ Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England. p.118.

*experiences strikingly similar to those of the orthodox Christian mystic.*¹⁹⁹

Nevertheless, in many aspects of life we're much more likely to find something we're looking for than we are to find something we're not looking for. One reason for this is simply that we all, at least unconsciously, seek the cognitive consistency that confirms what we already believe. So, when we look for evidence to prove a point, our mindset will be attuned to identifying confirmatory evidence rather than that which might invalidate our position. Under normal circumstances then, when we're looking at the revelatory experience of Cosmic Consciousness, we must exercise some caution whenever we come across what appear to be similarities or dissimilarities in the experiences reported.

However, caution is not our concern here. In this book we're not dealing with normal circumstances. Here we're wittingly and wilfully allowing ourselves to focus on the positive evidence for the existence of an Ultimate Reality behind everything. The elements of bias and subjectivity we'll encounter in our examination of personal reports are therefore to be tolerated in the hope of illustrating greater truths.

So what are the common factors of the experience? Five elements stand out as being the most frequently reported qualities of Cosmic Consciousness. They are an overwhelming, instantaneous, explosive sense of *suddenly awakening from a dream*; a profound sense that one has been *reborn*; a subjective certainty that what has been seen is a sort of *super-charged Ultimate Reality* positively radiating pure love and beyond any ordinary use of words; an undisputable sense that fundamentally the truth is somehow *absolutely simple*, and the conviction that behind the apparent diversity of our Everyday Reality all things are connected in perfect *unity*. There may be numerous

¹⁹⁹ Bryant C (1978) *The River Within: The search for God in depth*. Anchor Press Ltd., England. pp.73-4.

other features of the experience but these five are clearly cited in the literature and merit some further examination.

Suddenly awakening as if from a dream

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting ...
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God who is our home...*²⁰⁰

*He hath awakened from the dream of life ...*²⁰¹

So wrote the poets Wordsworth and Shelley and it's true that the idea of awakening as from a dream has been a common metaphor for the experience we might encounter at our death. But this imagery has not been confined to poetic description: the late British writer Philippa Pullar discusses Hindu guru Sri Ramana Maharishi (1879-1950) who wrote of the Self (God) as follows:

*When, forgetting the Self, one thinks
That the body is oneself and goes
Through innumerable births
And in the end remembers and becomes
The Self, know this is only like
Awaking from a dream wherein
One has wandered over all the world.*²⁰²

And the Buddhist perspective is outlined by Abbot Shibayama, who talks of the Buddha and what it is that he is awakened to in this description of Enlightenment:

²⁰⁰ William Wordsworth (1770-1850). From *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*. Quoted in Quiller-Couch A (1919) (ed). *The Oxford Book of English Verse: 1250-1900*.

²⁰¹ PB Shelley (1792-1822). From *Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats*. See www.bartleby.com/41/522.html.

²⁰² Quoted in Pullar P (1984) *The Shortest Journey*. Mandala, California, USA. p.146.

Subjectively explained, he is awakened to Buddha Nature, or Dharma Nature, which he was primarily born with. Objectively explained, he has realized the eternal truth or the fundamental source of existence. We also call such a person, the one who is awakened to his True Self. ²⁰³

But it's not only the sense of awakening that stands out in personal reports of Cosmic Consciousness, it's the dramatic suddenness too, as if all the lights had been switched on all at once in that huge pitch black palace we were in - the one described in Chapter 5 (Illusions) - where we were equipped with only the feeble pocket torch of our everyday consciousness. As Richard Bucke has noted:

The instantaneousness of the illumination is one of its most striking features; it can be compared with nothing so well as with a dazzling flash of lightning in a dark night, bringing the landscape which had been hidden into clear view. ²⁰⁴

The immediacy of the experience can be understood as a manifestation of the oneness, the indivisibility and essential Unity of Ultimate Reality. Alan Watts has noted that the teaching of Chinese Zen Master Hui-neng reflects this because:

... (his) doctrine does not admit of stages or growth. To be awakened at all is to be awakened completely, for having no parts or divisions, the Buddha nature is not to be realized bit by bit. ²⁰⁵

Although not everyone would agree,²⁰⁶ it's hard not to notice the repeated references to sudden awakening from a dream-like state that frequently appear in even the most prosaic of personal reports of

²⁰³ Shibayama Z (1977) *A Flower Does Not Talk: Zen Essays*. Charles E Tuttle Company, Tokyo, Japan. p.86.

²⁰⁴ Bucke RM (1972) *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*. The Olympia Press, London, p.67.

²⁰⁵ Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England. p.114.

²⁰⁶ See for example <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/>

Cosmic Consciousness. Is this simply a common metaphor for some sort of personal discovery or is it deeper than that? There's some logic to the notion that, if Ultimate Reality is indeed *everything*, you could never experience it without knowing *only* Ultimate Reality. So when you know Ultimate Reality you know nothing else because there *is* nothing else. It's a jump - a quantum leap - not a gradual accretion of faith or knowledge.

The Sanskrit word 'Buddha' means '*The Awakened One*' and, certainly, the sense of sudden awakening has been seen as a deeply meaningful experience in Zen Buddhism, which itself is known by adherents as 'the way of instantaneous awakening'. Zen teaches that:

... it seems that our life is all past and future, and that the present is nothing more than the infinitesimal hairline which divides them ... But through 'awakening to the instant' one sees that this is the reverse of the truth: it is rather the past and future which are the fleeting illusions, and the present which is eternally real. ²⁰⁷

Watts states that the Zen monk Tao-sheng (360-434) was the first clear and unequivocal exponent of the doctrine of instantaneous awakening. He held that:

If Nirvana is not to be found by grasping, there can be no question of approaching it by stages, by the slow process of the accumulation of knowledge. It must be realized in a single flash of insight, which is Tun Wu, or, in Japanese, Satori, the familiar Zen term for sudden awakening. ²⁰⁸

One Zen tale tells of Tokusan, a scholar monk living in China between 782-865, who studied under the Zen Master Ryotan:

²⁰⁷ Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.218.

²⁰⁸ *ibid*, p.103.

*One day Master Ryotan and Tokusan were spending the evening together. Ryotan said, "It is getting dark. You had better return to your place." Tokusan said "Good night" to the Master, and stepped outside. He returned to the Master, however, saying, "It is so dark outside." Then, the Master lit a candle to give to Tokusan and just as Tokusan held out his hand and was about to get hold of the candle, Ryotan vehemently blew out the flame. At this moment, all of a sudden Tokusan was awakened.*²⁰⁹

Abbot Shibayama, who relates this story of Tokusan, goes on to point out that:

*At the extremity of no-mind, no-self, where neither heaven nor Earth exists, all of a sudden the moment of breaking through this no-mind was given. He was revived as the Great Self of no-self. Reviving in Zen means this inner awakening experience.*²¹⁰

The awakening itself then frequently seems to occur suddenly, despite the fact that the individual may have been seeking it for many years:

*... Zen Master Reiun, after thirty years of hard discipline, had this blessed moment of awakening when he saw a peach blossom in bloom ... Master Kyogen, after a long search, came to the moment of awakening when he heard the sound of a stone hitting a bamboo.*²¹¹

Similarly, a modern-day adherent of Zen Buddhism, Koun Yamada-roshi (1907-1989), was one day considering a quotation of the great Zen master Dogen after his own enlightenment. Dogen said: "*I came to realize clearly that Mind is no other than mountains and rivers and the great wide Earth, the Sun and the Moon and the stars.*"

²⁰⁹ Shibayama Z (1977) *A Flower Does Not Talk: Zen Essays*. Charles E Tuttle Company, Tokyo, Japan, p.38.

²¹⁰ *ibid*, p.38.

²¹¹ *ibid*, p.46.

Yamada goes on to describe his own experience of Cosmic Consciousness later that same day:

*At midnight I abruptly awakened. At first my mind was foggy, then suddenly that quotation flashed into my consciousness, and I repeated it. Then all at once I was struck as though by lightning, and the next instant heaven and Earth crumbled and disappeared. Instantaneously, like surging waves, a tremendous delight welled up in me, a veritable hurricane of delight, as I laughed out loudly and wildly, "There's no reasoning here, no reasoning at all! Ha! Ha! Ha!" The empty sky split in two, then opened its enormous mouth and began to laugh uproariously: "Ha! Ha! Ha!"*²¹²

As we saw in Chapter 9, on Time, the instantaneous, spontaneous, qualities of attaining Cosmic Consciousness that are so fundamental to the Rinzai school of Zen Buddhism, are reflected in many aspects of more general Buddhist practice. They are seen in the mindfulness of the Zen meditation known as zazen, the here-and-now nature of sumi paintings, in haiku poetry and in the martial art of kendo. Each of these traditions is rooted in a consciousness focused on the eternally present moment of *now*. But this focus is not achieved by making an effort to concentrate on the present moment, since this would imply the existence of other moments. The past and future are abstractions that have no concrete reality. As we've already seen, the present moment is timeless: for how long is it 12 o'clock? For how long do the hands of your clock stop so that it can be 'noon'? A millionth of a second? A trillionth? Of course, the answer is 'no time at all'.

The Sixth Patriarch of Zen, Dajian Hui-neng, observed that:

In the present moment there is nothing which comes to be. In this moment there is nothing which ceases to be. Thus there is no birth-

²¹² Koun Yamada-roshi in Philip Kapleau (ed) (1965) *The Three Pillars of Zen*, quoted by Matthiessen P (1987) *Nine-Headed Dragon River*. Fontana Paperbacks, London. p.144.

and-death to be brought to an end. Wherefore the absolute tranquillity (of Nirvana) is this present moment. Though it is at this moment there is no limit to this moment, and herein is eternal delight. ²¹³

This suddenness is perhaps one of the reasons why a sense of awakening has so frequently been used as a metaphor in reports of Enlightenment, as if one suddenly awakens from a dream and immediately perceives that the dream was not in fact reality. But this seems likely to be much more than a literary device, being found in many settings beyond Buddhism. The classic Christian example of sudden awakening is the conversion of Saul (St Paul) on the road to Damascus:

*... as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven:
And he fell to the Earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?
And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest ...* ²¹⁴

The Christian tradition relates a number of similarly rapid conversion experiences, including those of St Francis of Assisi (c.1181-1226) and St Augustine (354-430), who described his own experience of Cosmic Consciousness in these words:

Thus with the flash of one trembling glance it (the soul) arrived at THAT WHICH IS. And then I saw Thy invisible things understood by the things that are made ... ²¹⁵

²¹³ Quoted in Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England. p.220.

²¹⁴ Acts, chapter 9, verses 1-6. Quoted from The Official King James Bible Online:
<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/book.php?book=Acts&chapter=9&verse=1-6>.

Though personal revelatory experience seems not to be as central to modern Christian practice as it might have been in previous years, there's no shortage of individuals who report some version of this. Writing (in the third person) of his own experience of Cosmic Consciousness Richard Maurice Bucke says:

*All at once, without warning of any kind, he found himself wrapped around as it were by a flame colored cloud ... Among other things he did not come to believe, he saw and knew that the Cosmos is not dead matter but a living presence, that the soul of man is immortal, that the universe is so built and ordered that without any preadventure all things work together for the good of each and all, that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love and that the happiness of every one is in the long run absolutely certain. He claims that he learned more within the few seconds during which the illumination lasted than in previous months or even years of study, and that he learned much that no study could ever have taught.*²¹⁶

A further example is given by William James, who quotes the report given by Alphonse Ratisbonne, a French Jew in Rome in 1842. He had wandered into a Catholic church and describes a sudden and totally unexpected revelation:

I can only remember an entirely black dog which went trotting and turning before me as I mused. In an instant the dog had disappeared, the whole church had vanished, I no longer saw anything ... or more truly I saw, Oh my God, one thing alone. Heavens, how can I speak of it? Oh no! human words cannot attain to expressing the inexpressible. Any description, however sublime it might be, could be but a profanation of the unspeakable truth ... in an instant the

²¹⁵ St Augustine of Hippo in *Confessions (Book VII)*. Quoted in Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.55.

²¹⁶ Bucke RM (1972) *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*. The Olympia Press, London. pp.8-9.

*bandage had fallen from my eyes; and not one bandage only, but the whole manifold of bandages in which I had been brought up. One after another they rapidly disappeared, even as the mud and ice disappear under the rays of the burning Sun ... I can explain the change no better than by the simile of a profound sleep or the analogy of one born blind who should suddenly open his eyes to the day.*²¹⁷

This sense of instantaneous clarity cropped up in Chapter 13, where we read how British-born philosopher Alan Watts, himself once an Episcopal priest, described his experiences with the psychedelic drugs LSD and psilocybin as ‘*quite suddenly ... dawning into a vast clarity*’. A final quotation from Dr R. M. Bucke sums up the suddenness of the conversion experience:

*Like a flash there is presented to his consciousness a conception (a vision) of the meaning and drift of the universe. He does not come to believe merely; but he sees and knows that the cosmos, which to the self-conscious mind seems made up of dead matter, is in fact far otherwise - is in truth a living presence. He sees that the life which is in man is eternal ... that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love ... Especially does he obtain such a conception of the whole - as makes the old attempts mentally to grasp the universe and its meaning petty and ridiculous.*²¹⁸

Rebirth

In much the same way as sudden awakening is used as a descriptive tool, references to rebirth are also frequently expressed by those reporting the experience of Cosmic Consciousness. Rebirth in this sense is not to be confused with the concept of rebirth in traditional Buddhist cosmology, Hinduism or the many religious traditions outside the Abrahamic faiths. In the West these beliefs are more

²¹⁷ Quoted in James W (1974) *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. Collins/The Fontana Library, UK. pp. 226-8.

²¹⁸ Dr RM Bucke, quoted in Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.55.

familiarly known as reincarnation, whereas references to a 'rebirth into Cosmic Consciousness' are metaphorical vehicles for conveying the enormity and suddenness of the experience from the perspective of the individual concerned.

In relation to Ultimate Reality, the concept of rebirth is closely allied to mystical experience. The word 'mystic' arose in the Greek mysteries, which were religious cults that flourished several centuries before the birth of Christ. A mystic was someone who had been initiated into these mysteries and who was considered to have been 'reborn into eternity' with an esoteric knowledge of things divine. His object was, as Happold observes, '*... to break through the world of history and time into that of eternity and timelessness*'.²¹⁹

The concept of rebirth has become quite familiar in Christian teaching, with Jesus making it very clear that:

... Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ²²⁰

The idea of rebirth appears in eastern thought too, the experiences being well-described by the Japanese words 'Kensho' and 'Satori'. Each of these terms represents an initial insight and awakening of understanding, a seeing into one's true nature that is close to enlightenment but still short of full Buddhahood.²²¹ From a Buddhist

²¹⁹ Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.18.

²²⁰ John chapter 3, verse 5 The Official King James Bible Online. See <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/John-3-5/>

²²¹ The full Enlightenment that is attributed to Buddhas is known as samyaksambodhi - the highest perfect awakening. However, Buddhist teaching also indicates that we are either in Samsara consciousness or Nirvana consciousness. This is an absolute thing: whilst Nirvana includes Samsara, it's not possible to be a little bit in Samsara and a little bit in Nirvana. This is one reason why here the term 'Cosmic Consciousness' is taken to be an absolute state - you're either in it or you're not. It's also a

perspective, when the Zen master Abbot Shibayama refers to rebirth he is alluding to Enlightenment, which is '*... to open one's spiritual eye to a new vista - to be born anew with an enlightened personality*'.²²²

What rebirth might mean for the individual is reflected in the following two reports of Cosmic Consciousness, along with some of the concomitant emotional content of the experience of spiritual rebirth:

*... my soul opened out, as it were, into the Infinite ... I stood alone with Him who had made me ... I could not any more have doubted that He was there that that I was ... Then, if ever, I believe, I stood face to face with God, and was born anew of his spirit.*²²³

and

In my mind's eye I leave the tunnel and for a second I float out of it into space. Before me I see a faint, slightly blurred but large, orange-red globe. I am moving gently but quickly towards the globe and the only thought I have, the first thought that seems remotely relaxed and clearly comprehensible in comparison with those up to now in the tunnel, is that the globe is the door to my unconscious. I enter the globe.

What happens next is phenomenal.

The order and detail of my experiences within the globe are enormously hazy and I am aware that I remember only a tiny part of what I experienced. I do recall several things however: as I enter the globe I feel I am entering heaven; the music on the record player

reason why this book includes all experiences of possible enlightenment, whether they be transient or permanent, accidental or intentional.

²²² Shibayama Z (1977) *A Flower Does Not Talk: Zen Essays*. Charles E Tuttle Company, Tokyo, Japan, p.123.

²²³ William James (1974) *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Collins, London. p.81.

appears to resonate with my thoughts - to put it another way, what I hear is what I am thinking - I hear my thoughts through the record player speakers; I lie on the bed and realise I am being reborn; that in a way I am going through the experience of birth.

I feel I am being told I will meet God. In my mind's eye I see an arena, much like those in ancient Rome. It is sun-drenched and full of cheering people. As I move into the arena I look to the far end, expecting to see God in some form. What I notice though, is that the people are all looking at me! Gradually it dawns on me that I am God! We are all God. The experience is absolutely perfect and beautiful beyond anything I can describe and beyond anything I have known before (or since).²²⁴

Super-charged, absolutely beyond doubt, REALITY

In an earlier quotation from Richard Bucke, we read his observation that he who sees Ultimate Reality '*... does not come to believe merely; but he sees and knows that the cosmos ... is in truth a living presence*'. In speaking of this heightened sense of reality that accompanies Cosmic Consciousness Bucke points out that:

The first thing each person asks himself upon experiencing the new sense is: Does what I see and feel represent reality or am I suffering from a delusion? The fact that the new experience seems even more real than the old teachings of simple and self consciousness does not at first fully reassure him, because he probably knows that delusions, when present, possess the mind just as firmly as do actual facts.²²⁵

This conviction that reality has become REALITY - as if someone has suddenly turned up the reality control knob to maximum volume - has frequently been reported, as noted by William James, who

²²⁴ Report of an experience of Cosmic Consciousness; *Personal Communication*.

²²⁵ Bucke RM (1972) *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*. The Olympian Press, London, p.63.

wrote on the psychology of religious experience. As we read earlier, he talks of an encounter with God in these words:

*I remember the night, and almost the very spot on the hill-top, where my soul opened out, as it were, into the Infinite, and there was a rushing together of the two worlds, the inner and the outer ... I could not any more have doubted that He was there than that I was. Indeed, I felt myself to be, if possible, the less real of the two.*²²⁶

Aside from the sense of Unity brought about through the transcendence of Duality, this personal testimony also alludes to a hugely enhanced sense of reality. This is again reported in the brief quotation below:

*The entire experience is completely saturated in a sense of Reality turned up to screaming pitch; it is beyond a shred of doubt that this is real. It is far, far, more real than my everyday experience of reality. It is a quantum leap more real! Everything I am shown shrieks at me with its Reality. Never before (or since) have I known anything remotely like this sense of reality.*²²⁷

Absolute simplicity

*As is so often the way, what we have suppressed and overlooked is something startlingly obvious. The difficulty is that it is so obvious and basic that one can hardly find the words for it.*²²⁸

So wrote Alan Watts in his attempt to explain how the self - the 'apparently separate, independent, and isolated ego' that is each of us - continually misconstrues experience and so fails to apprehend the true nature of reality. It might be expected that Ultimate Reality, being something that underlies the reality of everything in the entire

²²⁶ William James (1974) *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Collins, London. p.81.

²²⁷ Report of an experience of Cosmic Consciousness; *Personal Communication*.

²²⁸ Watts AW (1973) *The Book on the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*, Abacus, UK, pp.18-19.

cosmos, must be hugely complex. Indeed, as we've already learnt, Richard Dawkins has gone to some lengths to make the case that this is a logical necessity.²²⁹

Yet, it is argued, this is far from the case. In fact, it seems that Ultimate Reality is the very opposite: it's vastly simple. So absolutely simple that in our ordinary state of mind in Everyday Reality we can barely begin to comprehend the level of simplicity. We do not expect to come across anything that is perfectly - 100 per cent - simple, and this is a distinct obstacle to our understanding of it. But maybe this quality of absolute simplicity is more a characteristic of our tendency to see complexity in the everyday than it is a quality of Ultimate Reality, which is neither simple nor complex, being beyond such duality.

The Zen Master, Hakuin Ekaku wrote of the simplicity of Ultimate Reality, which he said is right in front of our eyes:

*All beings are primarily Buddhas.
Like water and ice,
There is no ice apart from water;
There are no Buddhas apart from beings.*

*Not knowing how close the Truth is to them,
Beings seek for it afar - what a pity!
It is like those who being in water
Cry out for water, feeling thirst.
It is like the rich man's son,
Who has lost his way among the poor ...*

*... At this moment what is there that you lack!
Nirvana presents itself before you,
Where you stand is the Land of Purity.
Your person, the body of Buddha.²³⁰*

²²⁹ Dawkins R (2006) *The God Delusion*. Bantam Press, London, p.151.

The sense that absolute simplicity lies behind our everyday experience has been reported in several instances of Cosmic Consciousness. The writer Warner Allen for example, in his book *The Timeless Moment*, describes experiencing a flash of illumination during a performance of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. He states that:

A dim impression of the condition of the objective self might be given by a jumble of incoherent sentences. Something has happened to me - I am utterly amazed - can this be that? [That being the answer to the riddle of life] - but it is too simple - I always knew it - it is remembering an old forgotten secret - like coming home - I am not 'I', not the 'I' I thought - there is no death - peace passing understanding - yet how unworthy I - ... ²³¹

Another personal report states that:

I knew the whole cosmos was perfect - always. I knew the distinction between knowledge and belief. I had seen the light. I laughed wildly at my own stupidity and blindness on seeing that the truth is perfectly simple (literally) and perfectly complex (literally). But why not? God is perfect intelligence. ²³²

If you would like to read more about the ideas discussed in this section, have another look at the discussion on Simplicity in Chapter 13.

Unity in all things

Of those who have known Cosmic Consciousness Bucke says:

²³⁰ Excerpted from the *Song of Zazen*, quoted by Shibayama Z (1977) *A Flower Does Not Talk: Zen Essays*. Charles E Tuttle Company, Tokyo, Japan, pp.65-67.

²³¹ Warner Allen quoted in Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, pp.132-3.

²³² Report of an experience of Cosmic Consciousness; *Personal Communication*.

The person who passes through this experience will learn in the few minutes, or even moments, of its continuance more than in months or years of study, and he will learn much that no study ever taught or can teach. Especially does he obtain such a conception of THE WHOLE, as dwarfs all conception, imagination or speculation, springing from and belonging to ordinary self consciousness, such a conception as makes the old attempts to mentally grasp the universe and its meaning petty and even ridiculous. ²³³

Chapter 14 (Unity) dealt in some depth with what Bucke might mean here by 'THE WHOLE', but even in this brief reference the words convey a sense of the oneness and immense understanding that are experienced in one fell swoop in Cosmic Consciousness. This encounter with cosmic unity seems to arise when we jettison our beloved sense of self and know consciousness with no egotistical correlates. As Andrew Weil observes:

... persons who forsake ego consciousness, even for a moment, often have an overwhelming sense of the essential similarity of all things; indeed, this direct perception of unity is the very heart of mystic experience. ²³⁴

But just how convincing is all this talk of seeing and believing?

Richard Dawkins has discussed the argument in favour of God's existence that is founded on personal religious experience. He's clearly far from convinced that personal testimony based on alleged 'visions' or hearing heavenly voices is ever likely to represent more than mistaken perception or in some cases mental illness, and concludes:

If you've had such an experience, you may well find yourself believing firmly that it was real. But don't expect the rest of us to

²³³ Bucke RM (1972) *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*. The Olympia Press, London, p.66.

²³⁴ Weil A (2004) *The Natural Mind*. Houghton Mifflin Co., New York. pp.114-5.

take your word for it, especially if we have the slightest familiarity with the brain and its powerful workings. ²³⁵

.....

In this chapter we've seen some attempts to describe what, to the individuals concerned, must have been an experience of earth-shattering significance, whatever you might think of the validity of their personal reports. Have they done justice to it? Are you convinced? Well if not, maybe it's not entirely their fault - they are, after all, trying to describe the indescribable, though admittedly this sounds like a rather weak excuse. Perhaps it's time to look in a little more detail at why personal experience is so important – why you have to Do-it-Yourself.

²³⁵ Dawkins R (2006) *The God Delusion*. Bantam Press, London. p.117

Chapter 20.

Do-it-yourself

All at once, without warning of any kind, he found himself wrapped around as it were by a flame colored cloud. For an instant he thought of fire, some sudden conflagration in the great city, the next he knew that the light was within himself. Directly afterwards came upon him a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe. Into his brain streamed one momentary lightning-flash of the Brahmic Splendor which has ever since lightened his life; upon his heart fell one drop of Brahmic Bliss, leaving thenceforward for always an after taste of heaven. ²³⁶

Richard Maurice Bucke wrote these words about his own revelation, and we can see that they sparkle with the excitement and energy so often found in those reporting an experience of Cosmic Consciousness. If he was really experiencing the immediate, awesome, world-shattering *internal explosion of awareness* that comes with a personal encounter with Ultimate Reality then it's not in the least bit surprising that his language should effervesce with exuberance and exhilaration. And all this is fine of course, for Bucke and the others who claim to have experienced this. For them, no doubt, seeing was indeed believing. But where does this leave everyone else? You might be willing to entertain the slight possibility that our everyday understanding of the world is really an illusion that hides some sort of transcendent reality, but it seems this somewhat grudging acceptance doesn't actually get you there.

²³⁶ Bucke RM (1972) *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*. The Olympia Press, London. pp.8-9.

So, where do I start?

Traditionally this is where prayer, religious ritual, fasting, meditation, yoga and psychoactive drugs come in. It may be that a great many of these activities - and more - are useful in pursuit of the experience of Cosmic Consciousness, but crucial to each is the responsibility they place on you, the individual. The answer, it seems, has been inside you all along:

A Native American myth recounts that the Creator gathered all of creation and said,

"I want to hide something from humans until they are ready for it. It is the realization that they can create their own life and their own reality."

The eagle said, "Give it to me; I'll take it to the Moon and hide it there." But the Creator said, "No, one day they will go there and will find it."

Then the salmon said, "Give it to me; I'll hide it in the bottom of the sea." "No," said the Creator, "they'll get there too."

Well, the buffalo came and said, "Give it to me; I'll bury it in the plains." The Creator said, "No, they will get there. They will cut into the skin of the Earth, and they will find it even there."

But then Grand Mother mole came, the one that has no physical eyes to see on the outside but has spiritual eyes and the capacity to see on the inside, and she said, "Put it inside them; they'll never find it there."

And the Creator said, "It is done."²³⁷

²³⁷ Gad I. Jung's *Model of the Psyche*. Jung Society of Washington.
http://www.jung.org/jungs%20model%20of%20the%20psyche_gad.html.

Andrew Weil has made a similar point in his work on psychoactive drugs, *The Natural Mind*, first published in 1972. He observed that:

... wise men throughout history ... have told us again and again, that there exists within us a source of direct information about reality that can teach us all we need to know ... the only requirement for getting in touch with this source is the suspension of ordinary mental activity. ²³⁸

And it may be that this insight is not restricted to the select few: in his discussion of the philosophical texts the *Upanishads*, EWF Tomlin points out that in the Hindu tradition, union with 'the Divine Ground' is available for all:

Such an act of union would be impossible if the self consisted simply of the phenomenal self, the natural ego. But every individual, even the most corrupt and self-obsessed, possesses another and deeper self, the Eternal Self. It is by discovering within himself this deeper Self that man is able, if he chooses, to apprehend the Divine Ground ... Such state of union which the sages call Nirvana, is not to be reached without discipline, renunciation, and indeed complete self-surrender. ²³⁹

Likewise, Buddhist teachings are very clear that the true or original nature of all beings is that of Buddha, which is united with Ultimate Reality. For example, the *Song of Zazen* by Zen Master Hakuin Ekaku states that, like the Buddha:

... we human beings are all enlightened ones ... We are primarily Buddhas ... all born with the seed, or the potentiality, of being

²³⁸ Weil A (2004) *The Natural Mind*. Houghton Mifflin Co., New York. pp.131-2.

²³⁹ Tomlin EWF (1969) *The Eastern Philosophers: An Introduction*. Hutchinson and Co., Ltd., London, England. pp.166-167.

enlightened ones. Although we were born with such potentiality, for the moment it has not yet been awakened or developed. ²⁴⁰

The message is plain: whilst we can all do it, no-one can do it for us. Achieving Cosmic Consciousness is very much a do-it-yourself pursuit. Only you have your consciousness. And maybe you just need to be very serious about it. An old Hindu tale tells of a man who wants to see God and goes to a guru for his advice:

The holy man looked incredulously at the pilgrim and asked several times if he were really in earnest. Each time the man protested, "Yes, yes! There is nothing in the world I want more than to find God."

Finally the old teacher strode out into the Ganges with him and looked him sternly in the eye. "Are you sure? Do you really want to find God?" he asked.

"Oh, yes!" came the answer, and the teacher plunged him under the water and held him there until the last bubble of air came from his hapless lips. Then the guru let him come up, gasping for breath. "And what do you want now, more than anything else?" the guru asked.

"Oh! for a breath of air!" the man gasped. And the guru came back dryly, "When you want God that much, you will find him." ²⁴¹

But this doesn't mean that finding Ultimate Reality is necessarily difficult, just that you'll need to be pretty well motivated: as Jesus said, *'Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.'* ²⁴² In fact, it's been said that finding God is actually quite straightforward:

²⁴⁰ Shibayama Z (1977) *A Flower Does Not Talk: Zen Essays*. Charles E Tuttle Company, Tokyo, Japan. p.89.

²⁴¹ Kelsey M (1974) *Encounter with God: A Theology of Christian Experience*. Hodder and Stoughton, London, p.179.

²⁴² Matthew, chapter 5, verse 8. *King James Bible "Authorized Version"*, Pure Cambridge Edition. Quoted from <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>

In whatever way a human being shall seek me, in that way he can find Me. The paths are many, but ultimately all come to Me ²⁴³

And again:

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you ... ²⁴⁴

But how do you ask? And *who* do you ask?

Although it's perhaps not entirely fashionable amongst orthodox Christians to seek direct experience of God in the form of Cosmic Consciousness, we should note that in the classical Christian community it was quite acceptable for 'ordinary Christians', rather than a specially elect group, to have an encounter with the divine.²⁴⁵ And for the Christian with a belief in a loving God, the answers to the questions 'How do you ask? And *who* do you ask?' may seem rather more obvious than to others. This is where meditation comes in.

Whilst a religious belief is not in the least important to mindfulness meditation, the search for direct experience of the divine has been a singularly common feature of religions throughout human history and meditation has frequently been one of the favoured approaches to achieving this. In fact, in some form it has been advocated by all the major world religions:

Buddhism

There is no meditation apart from wisdom.

There is no wisdom apart from meditation.

Those in whom wisdom and meditation meet

²⁴³ Krishna to Arjuna (from the ancient Hindu scripture the Bhagavad Gita, part of the epic Mahabharata).

²⁴⁴ Matthew, chapter 7, verse 7. *King James Bible "Authorized Version"*, Pure Cambridge Edition. Quoted from <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>

²⁴⁵ Kelsey M (1974) *Encounter with God: A Theology of Christian Experience*. Hodder and Stoughton, London, p.48.

Are not far from peace.
(Dhammapada)

Taoism
*Those whose hearts are in a state of repose
give forth a divine radiance
by which they see themselves as they are.
And only by cultivating such repose
can man attain to the constant.*
(Kwang Tze)

Jainism
*He who is rich in control renounces everything,
and meditates on the reflections on life.
He whose soul is purified by meditating
is compared to a ship in water.
Like a ship reaching the shore, he gets beyond
misery.*
(Sutra-Kritanga Sutra)

Christianity
*Whatsoever things are true,
whatsoever things are honest,
whatsoever things are just,
whatsoever things are pure,
whatsoever things are lovely,
whatsoever things are of good report,
if there be any virtue,
and if there be any praise, think on these things.*
(Phillipians)

Islam
*Meditate on thy Lord in thine own mind with
humility and without loud speaking, evening and morning.
And be not one of the negligent.*
(Koran)

Hinduism

*Whoever here among men attain greatness,
they have, as it were, part of the reward of
meditation.*

Reverence meditation.

*He who reverences meditation as the Supreme -
as far as meditation goes,
so far he has unlimited freedom.*

(Chandogya Upanishad)

Sikhism

The world is an ocean, and difficult to cross.

How shall man traverse it?

As a lotus in the water remaineth dry,

As also a water-fowl in the stream -

So by meditating on the Word

Shalt thou be unaffected by the world.

(Guru Nanak)²⁴⁶

It is of course widely open to debate whether these various uses of the term 'meditation' are referring to the same thing. In fact, each religion is likely to have attributed somewhat differing meanings and interpretations to the word depending on the prevailing culture within which the particular verse was written. So, for the sake of clarity, it's stressed that the specific approach referred to in this book is that of *mindfulness* meditation which, it is said, was taught by the Buddha and is still found in Buddhist practice across the world.

Why mindfulness meditation?

Some of the earliest references to meditation are found in the Vedas, the primary texts and oldest scriptures of Hinduism.²⁴⁷ However, in the West it's Buddhism that has become synonymous with the practice of meditation. The late Zen master Zenkei Shibayama

²⁴⁶ Hewitt J (1960) *Yoga*. Hodder Paperbacks, England. pp.8-10.

²⁴⁷ Everly GS and Lating JM (2002) *A clinical guide to the treatment of human stress response*. Springer, New York. p.199.

recounts the means through which the first Zen practitioners came to Cosmic Consciousness. He has said:

Zen history tells us that Masters in the early days came to the attainment of their Satori by themselves by going through a natural and unique training process of their own. If we, however, try to summarize the processes of these Masters' spiritual development, we can find more or less similar patterns ... they first start with an extremely intense religious quest; then comes hard, strong-willed search and discipline, which will be followed by spiritual crises, or a sense of the abyss; and finally, they experience the moment of awakening. These are the inner processes they generally go through.

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Over the centuries this procedure has become somewhat more refined and adapted to modern life but it remains similar in modern Zen monasteries, with a strong emphasis on the form of meditation specific to Zen, known as *zazen*. This involves 'just sitting' and being mindful, and is very similar in this respect to the sort of meditation we're going to be discussing here - the *Mindfulness of Breathing*. The first thing you should know is that to practise mindfulness meditation requires no religious faith or belief in anything in particular. You don't even need to believe that it will work. It involves none of the rituals or rites commonly associated with religious practices and is easily learned in a morning by anyone with the ability to think - although thinking is actually the last thing you'll be doing.

And mindfulness can be practised anywhere: you don't need to site yourself in a church, temple or religious building of any kind. The ancient Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu, who lived around the 6th century BCE, is considered by many to have been the founder of philosophical Taoism. He is credited with pointing out that:

²⁴⁸ Shibayama Z (1977) *A Flower Does Not Talk: Zen Essays*. Charles E Tuttle Company, Tokyo, Japan. p.39.

Without leaving his house, one can know everything that is necessary. Without leaving himself, one can grasp all wisdom.

*Without opening your door,
you can open your heart to the world.
Without looking out your window,
you can see the essence of the Tao.
The more you know,
the less you understand.*

*The Master arrives without leaving,
sees the light without looking,
achieves without doing a thing.* ²⁴⁹

This point is again made in the title of the book illustrating the transformation of psychologist Dr Richard Alpert into spiritual teacher Baba Ram Dass - the book that is simply called Be Here Now.²⁵⁰ And mindfulness can help you to be here now. It can enable you to transcend that which keeps you separate from a consciousness of Ultimate Reality and can help you to experience what lies behind the illusion of Maya. Maya is what makes us all so very sure we are separate from other people and it's what makes us believe in the impressions communicated to us through our senses. The whole concept behind maya - the illusory nature of our Everyday Reality - is important so we look at it in a little more detail below.

Mindfulness meditation transcends the illusion of maya

It's as if human beings are hard-wired to classify and categorise the acts, objects and events that they observe every day within their ordinary lives. We routinely reflect upon our experiences in much the same way as we are now dealing with the ideas expressed in

²⁴⁹ Lao-tzu *Tao Te Ching XLVII*, from a translation by S. Mitchell. See <http://acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/texts/taote-v3.html#47>. It's from this chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* that erstwhile Beatle, George Harrison, derived the lyrics to his song *The Inner Light*.

²⁵⁰ Baba Ram Dass (1978) *Be Here Now*. Crown Publishing Group, New York.

these pages, word by word and concept by concept. And our unacknowledged assumption is that everything is in essence differentiated from everything else, as if the world itself consists solely of countless interconnected parts. Fundamental to this classification is the dualistic separation of events and objects into the opposing forces that have been described in Chapter 10, on Duality.

The term most commonly used in Indian philosophy to describe this illusory but most basic and largely unconscious part of being human, is 'maya'.²⁵¹ The activities of classification and categorisation are so very human that arguably they are less *something we do* and more *what we are*. In other words, human beings *are what happens* when the complete undivided unity of Ultimate Reality is broken down through categorisation. Though we each routinely consider ourselves to have an existence that is independent from what we do, we are in truth not separate from our actions at all. And because humans do not need to have some sort of independent existence 'outside' or separate from their activities, they can be considered *to be* the activities. This is a theme the book considered in Chapter 7 (Ego) and will be returned to again. It is perhaps what is described in the following verse of the Visuddhimagga (which is the condensed summary of the theoretical and practical teaching of the Buddha, written around 430 BCE):

*Suffering alone exists, none who suffer;
The deed there is, but no doer thereof;
Nirvana is, but no one seeking it;
The Path there is, but none who travel it.*²⁵²

²⁵¹ Though traditionally seen as illusory, Maya is not, of course, outside Ultimate Reality since by the definition we're using here everything that is, is within it. However, this differentiation is itself illusory since there is, in reality, no distinction between inside or outside, within or without. These are simply once again examples of our habits of thought, and are best considered in light of the concept of duality.

²⁵² Quoted in Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.76.

But why is it that we don't see how dualism imprisons our thinking? Why don't the fish see the water? In the words of Abbot Zenkei Shibayama, whilst the true nature of each of us is Buddha, it's so very difficult to perceive this because:

*... although we may have True Nature deep within ourselves, in actuality we are covered by the many thick veiled layers of dualistically discriminating consciousness.*²⁵³

What these 'veiled layers' might be is a difficult thing to grasp because, like the activities of classification and categorisation, dualistic thinking is so very much a part of what it is to be human. From infancy we routinely and without reflection come to conceive of the world in dualistic terms - we are happy or we are sad, we are hungry or we are full, we are warm or we are cold - and so on. This mode of thinking and experiencing the world seems to be so natural and easy that we rarely even notice how fundamental it has become to defining *how* we know the world, *what* we know of it and what we *can* know of it. Yet at heart it's only one way of structuring thought, and the essence of Ultimate Reality is beyond this dualism.

Perhaps the point is best illustrated by some of the anecdotes emanating from Zen Buddhism. These suggest that knowing Nirvana is less a matter of looking in the right place and more a matter of the *process of looking* itself. A tale we encountered earlier in the book concerning the ancient Chinese Zen Master, Joshu (Chao-chou), gives some insight into this.

Everyday Life is the Path:

Joshu asked Nansen: "What is the path?"

Nansen said: "Everyday life is the path"

Joshu asked: "Can it be studied?"

Nansen said: "If you try to study, you will be far away from it."

²⁵³ Shibayama Z (1977) *A Flower Does Not Talk: Zen Essays*. Charles E Tuttle Company, Tokyo, Japan, pp.105-106.

Joshu asked: "If I do not study, how can I know it is the path?"

Nansen said: "The path does not belong to the perception world, neither does it belong to the nonperception world. Cognition is a delusion and noncognition is senseless. If you want to reach the true path beyond doubt, place yourself in the same freedom as sky. You name it neither good nor not-good."

*At these words Joshu was enlightened.*²⁵⁴

In Hinduism, Brahman is the name given to denote the one supreme and universal Spirit that here we are calling Ultimate Reality. As a form of Brahman, itself formless, the deity Brahma stands in contrast to maya and can be seen to be the one universal truth, whether we relate to Him in a personal way or as some sort of impersonal principle underlying the illusion of our Everyday Reality. To experience Brahma one needs to let go of the usual classifications we make of the world. As Watts says:

*Maya is, then, usually equated with ... the mind's attempt to grasp the fluid forms of nature in its mesh of fixed classes. But when it is understood that form is ultimately void - in the special sense of ungraspable and unmeasurable - the world of form is immediately seen as Brahma rather than maya. The formal world becomes the real world in the moment when it is no longer clutched, in the moment when its changeful fluidity is no longer resisted.*²⁵⁵

But how are we to cease our endless attempts to 'grasp the fluid forms of nature' and see beyond the illusion of Maya? Intellectual debate, even when it's at a basic level of reasoning, is part and parcel of the way in which mankind attempts to solve everyday problems and difficulties, so it's entirely natural that we should seek to apply this approach to the search for Ultimate Reality. But there are difficulties here, as Andrew Weil has observed:

²⁵⁴ Reps, P (1971) *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*. Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, pp.109-110.

²⁵⁵ Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.62.

*... we cannot know reality directly through intellectual activity. Instead, we construct models or paradigms of reality through which we interpret and make sense of our experience.*²⁵⁶

And again:

*In order to perceive reality directly, one must sooner or later learn how to abandon the intellect and disengage oneself from the thoughts it produces incessantly. All instructional materials on meditation stress this theme.*²⁵⁷

In our Everyday Reality we are conditioned to making some sort of sense of what we experience by linking up our moment-by-moment understanding into a coherent storyline. To move beyond this rather circular process we can take one of two approaches. One is to attempt to discover the meaning of everything in its totality, which many might see as the ultimate aim of scientific enquiry. The other approach is to pursue a path whereby we aim to generate no meaning at all, such as through the techniques of meditation.

The role of the koan

It was in order to prise us from our routine and unconscious attachment to Everyday Reality that the koan was devised, and it's long been a practice in Zen training. The koan is a concise, paradoxical and apparently nonsensical statement with which the novice is confronted in order that they may realise the limitations of their usual way of thinking. As Paul Halmos has noted:

The Zen Master ... deliberately uses the 'double bind' of mutually exclusive commands, so that stretched taut by them the pupil can

²⁵⁶ Weil A (2004) *The Natural Mind*. Houghton Mifflin Co., New York. pp.xiv-xv (preface to the 1985 edition).

²⁵⁷ *ibid*, p.105.

*renounce the logical categories of everyday thinking and be lifted to an incommunicable and ineffable state of freedom from them.*²⁵⁸

This sort of paradox is not at all restricted to verbal communication for in pursuing the approach the Master may hold a stick above the pupil's head and fiercely state "*If you say this stick is real I will strike you with it. If you say it is not real, I will strike you with it. If you don't say anything, I will strike you with it.*"

But the quizzical features of the Zen koan are not restricted to Buddhist texts: a witty English epithet that shares some of the same sense might be '*It's no good standing out there like one o'clock half struck.*'²⁵⁹ That which seems to make sense yet is clearly impossible is no doubt intriguing in all cultures, and perhaps we can all see that one o'clock half struck might be the sound of one hand clapping? The point is that it's often our unrecognised reliance on logic in the pursuit of deeper truths that is challenged by the koan, which enables us to see beyond the limitations of logic and rational discourse. The koan is a teaching device intended to break down the intellectual concepts that are so familiar to us. The aim is to open the way for a profound grasp of the oneness of Ultimate Reality that lies behind Everyday Reality. The Japanese teacher of Zen Buddhism in America, Maezumi Roshi (1931-1995), has described the koan as:

*... a touch-stone of reality ... in which a key issue of practice and realization is presented and examined by experience rather than by discursive or linear logic ... to help us penetrate more deeply into the significance of life and death.*²⁶⁰

The principle is that the koan will confront our usual way of thinking and bring it to an immediate full stop, so allowing us to apprehend

²⁵⁸ Halmos P (1969) *The Faith of the Counsellors*. Constable and Company Limited, London. p.169.

²⁵⁹ A term used to great effect in the film *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998). Handmade Films International *et al*, London.

²⁶⁰ Quoted in Matthiessen P (1987) *Nine-Headed Dragon River*. Fontana Paperbacks, London, pp.121-2.

Ultimate Reality instantaneously. As Abbot Zenkei Shibayama observes, koan are sayings left by Zen Masters to show their own experience:

These sayings and phrases sound so irrational that our ordinary dualistic reasoning utterly fails to interpret them. For instance they say:

*"If you clap both your hands there is a sound;
what is the sound of one hand clapping?"*

*... This very irrationality of koan, which refuses all the intellectual approaches, plays a most important role in Zen training, for it makes us realise the limitations of our discriminating intellect and finally drives us to despair of it.*²⁶¹

Beyond dualistic thinking

If you've read all the chapters up to this point you'll appreciate the logic behind transcending the dualistic reasoning that conditions our everyday existence. The concept of duality is most frequently associated with Taoism, Hinduism and Buddhism and is the essence of the ancient Chinese principle of yin-yang. It's at the heart of the illusion of maya. Although seeing beyond duality has not been one of the strongest messages to emerge within Christianity, the Bible contains numerous references to the ongoing battle between good and evil, and of course the story of Adam and Eve itself encapsulates this in its rawest form. More is said in the Gnostic Gospels, where Jesus is attributed with the following saying:

*When you make the two one, and
when you make the inner as the outer
and the outer as the inner and the above*

²⁶¹ Shibayama Z (1977) *A Flower Does Not Talk: Zen Essays*. Charles E Tuttle Company, Tokyo, Japan, p.43.

as the below ... then shall you enter (the Kingdom) ²⁶²

A similar sentiment is expressed from the perspective of Zen by Abbot Shibayama, who notes the importance of escaping from the usual dualistic thinking patterns of Everyday Reality:

In one way or another, human beings have to once and for all make a leap out of this discriminating consciousness. As long as they remain in the dualistic world their sufferings will never be dispersed, nor will their contradictions be solved. In other words, they will be unable to have the Zen personality. If we want real freedom and true emancipation, we must at any cost make this transcendental leap. ²⁶³

Shibayama goes on to point out that Zen Master Hakuin Ekaku talked of seeing into 'the Self-nature that is no-nature', where:

... logical or verbal efforts are of no use ... No-nature of course does not mean 'empty void'. It refers to the truth of quite another order, where the dualism of being and non-being are both transcended. It is therefore the realm where logical intellectualizations are of no use.

²⁶⁴

The Buddha taught a Middle Way between the excesses of sensual indulgence and complete abstinence from worldly pleasures. But this is not the same as seeking to be neither yin nor yang, neither hot nor cold, neither happy nor sad. It's not simply a matter of taking some sort of middle line and living the most bland, undisturbed and undisturbing life you can find, because the middle line must always

²⁶² From A. Guillaumont et al (1959) *The Gospel According to Thomas*. Collins, pp.17-18.

²⁶³ Shibayama Z (1977) *A Flower Does Not Talk: Zen Essays*. Charles E Tuttle Company, Tokyo, Japan, p.54. It's interesting that the concept of making a 'transcendental leap' from our 'discriminating consciousness' bears a close resemblance to the 'leap of faith' that some have said is necessary if we are to perceive Ultimate Reality; for more on this have a look at the chapter on Faith.

²⁶⁴ *ibid*, pp.117-118.

be the middle line of *something*, between two extremes. In seeking the transcendental Unity of Ultimate Reality we're seeking to delete our conception of the duality of these extremes. Since the extremes are an illusion, their middle line is also an illusion and to see beyond this a conceptual leap must be made.

The 'dualism of being and non-being' that Shibayama talks about is an integral part of our Everyday Reality and is said to be transcended in the state of Cosmic Consciousness. It's not surprising therefore that in reports of Cosmic Consciousness there's often a strong sense of overcoming the conflict between opposites. We saw for example in Chapter 10 (on Duality) how Warner Allen's own experience gave him a sense of peace '*where all opposites are reconciled*'.

This impression that a perfect unity lies beyond the opposing elements of our Everyday Reality seems to be a familiar feature of religious experience. It reappears again in the quotation below:

In my mind's eye I find myself in a sort of tunnel. The tunnel is very dark, much like outer space, but is composed of dullish circular rainbows, one inside the other, that appear to be moving towards me. Because of this I have the sensation that my entire body is moving through a tunnel of rainbows at a fairly rapid pace. Furthermore, I am being increasingly bombarded with random and hypothetical moral questions and feel I must answer each of these immediately; I have no time for reflection and must give the first answer that comes to mind. I do have something to guide my answers however, because to my right and left, as I tear along the tunnel, I am aware of positive/good and negative/evil influences, one on one side of the tunnel and the other one opposite it. I am also vaguely aware that I am in no way able to control any of this experience ... My thoughts are in chaos but still I have to answer urgent moral questions and resolve the conflict between the good and evil influences as they arise moment by moment. This is a hellish experience!

Suddenly, and without any warning, the questioning stops. In my mind's eye I leave the tunnel and for a second float out of it into

space. Before me I see a faint, slightly blurred but large, orange-red globe. I am moving gently but quickly towards the globe and the only thought I have, the first thought that seems remotely relaxed and clearly comprehensible in comparison with those up to now in the tunnel, is that the globe is the door to my unconscious. I enter the globe ... What happens next is phenomenal ... as I enter the globe I feel I am entering heaven. ²⁶⁵

Chapter 10 also cited the fifteenth-century mystic, Nicholas of Cusa, who used the concept of transcending dualism to explain how we may find God. He held that we must go beyond our constant desire to apply rational thought because God is beyond this and beyond dualistic conceptualisation, and said:

The place wherein Thou art to be found unveiled is girt round with the coincidence of contradictories, and this is the wall of Paradise wherein Thou dost abide. The door whereof is guarded by the most proud spirit of Reason, and, unless he be vanquished, the way in will not lie open. [Therefore] I observe how needful it is for me to enter into the darkness, and to admit the coincidence of opposites, beyond all the grasp of reason, and there to seek the truth where impossibility meeteth me. ²⁶⁶

How mindfulness empties your cup

Getting beyond our fascination with the world of duality appears to be a task beset with barriers, and some of the most potent of these are those we who fail to see because we're so sure we're being open-minded.

²⁶⁵ Report of an experience of Cosmic Consciousness; *Personal Communication*.

²⁶⁶ Quoted by Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.61.

A Zen tale:

Nan-in, a Japanese (Zen) master during the Meiji era (1868-1912), received a university professor who came to enquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. "It is overfull. No more will go in!"

"Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty the cup?" ²⁶⁷

Perhaps this was the point behind the words of the 6th century BCE Chinese philosopher and Taoist, Lao Tzu, when he said:

When your mind is empty like a valley or canyon, then you will know the power of the Way. ²⁶⁸

It's the illusion of maya that gives us the impression that Cosmic Consciousness is something we can acquire. But rather than being a skill or knowledge that we must gain, seeing beyond duality is more about something we should lose. As a recognised authority on the Hindu practice of Hatha Yoga, Richard L Hittleman points out that Self - Ultimate Reality - is our original and ongoing state of being from which we cannot be separated:

Consequently, there is nothing to be acquired; rather, Yoga might be described as the process of divesting - divesting oneself of those layers or veils that confine him to an existence in which his identification with a body, senses, and mind give rise to the illusion of a self that is real. The disengagement from illusion, resulting in

²⁶⁷ Reys, P (1971) *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*. Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, p.17.

²⁶⁸ Quoted in Matthiessen P (1987) *Nine-Headed Dragon River*. Fontana Paperbacks, London, p.44.

the reemergence of SELF, is accomplished, in Yoga, in a series of stages each consisting of certain prescribed practices. ²⁶⁹

The claim that in order to experience Ultimate Reality one must divest oneself of the illusory trappings of the ego, is found again in Taoism and Buddhism:

... the transformation of consciousness undertaken in Taoism and Zen is more like the correction of faulty perception or the curing of a disease. It is not an acquisitive process of learning of wrong habits and opinions. As Lao-tzu said, "The scholar gains every day, but the Taoist loses every day." ²⁷⁰

This sense that we are much too egotistical and full of ourselves, has not been restricted to the eastern religious traditions however. In Christian theology the idea of emptying one's own will and becoming entirely receptive to God is known as 'kenosis'. It's said to be the act whereby Jesus relinquished divine attributes and became human and, according to the American Episcopal Bishop and prolific writer James Pike (1913-1969), it's a generic feature of mystical experience:

This is illustrated by the fact that present-day Zen Buddhist philosophers use the same Greek word as is used by both Paul and Western theologians to describe a process which experience - in East and West - has been found to be a principal route to the consummation of personal fulfilment. The word is kenosis, that is, self-emptying. ²⁷¹

It's particularly difficult for each of us to identify the limitations we have set for ourselves on what we are personally prepared to believe

²⁶⁹ Hittleman RL (1976) *Yoga: The 8 Steps to Health and Peace*. Hamlyn, London. p.37.

²⁷⁰ Watts AW (1965) *The Joyous Cosmology: Adventures in the Chemistry of Consciousness*. Vintage Books, New York. p.11.

²⁷¹ Bishop James Pike. Quoted in Harris TA (1973) *I'm OK - You're OK*. Pan Books, p.227.

to be true or to accept as being even possible. The issue here is that these limitations are largely unconscious (so we are unaware of them most of the time) and they are inevitably based on soft foundations that are subject to change and, on occasions, collapse. For example, we rarely question the inherent 'realness' of tangible stuff - rocks, rocks, chairs and cheese do seem to be very real. They have a physical presence that is immediately susceptible to multiple senses - touch, sight, sound, smell and taste. Certainly it's very difficult to ignore something that threatens or hurts us, but this doesn't mean that its reality is not relative (more of which is to be found in Chapter 4, What's really real). It's worthwhile reflecting on what your own conscious and not so conscious rules and assumptions might be in relation to whatever is going on behind the universe we know. Does there have to be one single, all-encompassing, explanation for 'Life, the Universe and Everything' or could there be, as some cosmologists have suggested, overlapping explanations? Must explanations make sense to humans? Must Ultimate Reality be benign, all-loving and omniscient or could it be illogical and fail to follow the dictates of cause and effect?

We all have rules, stated or implicit, conscious or unconscious, and we need to start with as clean a slate as we can muster. In a way we need to 'turn off' whatever cognitive mechanisms we've gradually constructed from infancy that disallow us from seriously considering alternatives to our fixed ideas on creation. Even if we continue to hold that Cosmic Consciousness is a ludicrous idea, we need to allow that it's at least theoretically possible. Without this suspension of disbelief, we continue to create obstacles for ourselves and to limit our potential for experiencing outside the box.

And this is where meditation comes in. The act of self-emptying is the process of ridding oneself of ego, which has long been the role of meditation. But what is meditation and how does it do this? In answering these questions, it may be easier to say what meditation is *not*. In the words of the Zen writer Peter Matthiessen:

*Meditation has nothing to do with contemplation of eternal questions, or of one's own folly, or even of one's navel, although a clearer view on all these enigmas may result. It has nothing to do with thought of any kind - with anything at all, in fact, but intuiting the true nature of existence ... Among Hindus and Buddhists, realization is attained through inner stillness, usually achieved through the samadhi state of sitting yoga. In Tantric practice, the student may displace the ego by filling his whole being with the real or imagined object of his concentration; in Zen, one seeks to empty out the mind, to return it to the clear, pure stillness of a sea shell or a flower petal. When body and mind are one, then the whole being, scoured clean of intellect, emotions, and the senses, experiences that individual existence, ego, the 'reality' of matter and phenomena are no more than fleeting and illusory arrangements of molecules.*²⁷²

What is it about ego that makes its displacement so important? Chapter 7 (Ego) is the place to go for a thorough discussion of this but, in brief, the sense in which the term 'ego' is used in *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* has nothing to do with ego as described by eminent psychologist Sigmund Freud, but refers to that which maintains us in the Everyday Reality of Samsara. Thus ego is to be understood in a philosophical rather than a psychological sense. Ego is the perception we each have that we are essentially independent entities separated from every other person; it's the illusion that we have an independent self. The Adam and Eve allegory reflects this idea: in eating the forbidden fruit the pair attained a knowledge of good and evil *and a knowledge of themselves as separate entities*. Until then they were unaware of duality; they were at oneness with God in the Garden of Eden. Alan Watts describes in some depth the universal habit of humans to create a symbolic reality of things they experience in addition to the material reality of the things themselves. He suggests we even create a symbolic reality of ourselves as being somehow separate from our physical, bodily, selves. He goes on:

²⁷² Matthiessen P (1987) *Nine-Headed Dragon River*. Fontana Paperbacks, London, pp.81-2.

But the mind, or the true nature, of man cannot actually be split ... The illusion of the split comes from the mind's attempt to be both itself and its idea of itself, from a fatal confusion of fact with symbol. To make an end of the illusion, the mind must stop trying to act upon itself, upon its stream of experiences, from the standpoint of the idea of itself which we call the ego. ²⁷³

This is a difficult concept to grasp but is fundamental to an understanding of Zen Buddhism. For Zen there is no duality of subject and object, no difference between the knower (you and I) and that which is known. Watts again:

Our problem is that the power of thought enables us to construct symbols of things apart from the things themselves. This includes the ability to make a symbol, an idea of ourselves apart from ourselves. Because the idea is so much more stable than the fact, we learn to identify ourselves with our idea of ourselves. Hence the subjective feeling of a 'self' which 'has' a mind, of an inwardly isolated subject to whom experiences involuntarily happen. With its characteristic emphasis on the concrete, Zen points out that our precious 'self' is just an idea, useful and legitimate enough if seen for what it is, but disastrous if identified with our real nature. The unnatural awkwardness of a certain type of self-consciousness comes into being when we are aware of conflict or contrast between the idea of ourselves, on the one hand, and the immediate, concrete feeling of ourselves, on the other. ²⁷⁴

Moment by moment every human being is the sum total of their entire experience: they are no more than their actions, wishes, thoughts and so on. There is no other 'self' that is outside this or somehow separate from the individual's experience, despite the generally unquestioned assumption that this is so. This imagined self

²⁷³ Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.154. N.B. How the mind might go about '*stopping trying to act upon itself*' is discussed further in the chapter on Meditation.

²⁷⁴ *ibid*, p.140.

to whom 'things happen' is the illusory symbolic self to which Watts is referring. None of us is 'something to which experiences happen', rather, *we are each the experiences themselves*. And perhaps it's the non-existence of this illusory 'self' that lies behind the failure of philosopher David Hume to at any time catch himself without a perception, or to ever observe anything but the perception? ²⁷⁵

This enduring concept of a symbolic but illusory 'me' is closely tied to the notion that time is an illusion, that there is only the moment of *now*. This possibility that all sense of the past and future is erroneous is an idea that has been described in more detail in Chapters 5 and 9, on Illusions and Time. For now, it's sufficient to consider that in the timeless state that is Ultimate Reality all that is real is the present moment. This means that every action we take at any given moment is all there is. And since this moment is all that is real, then actions, events, feelings and experiences are not simply something that happen to us. They *are* us; we are what 'happening' is. This is true of all our experiences: the moment by moment change in our perceptions of the world that we call consciousness is *what we are*; the classification and unquestioned perception of everything in our Everyday Reality as possessing qualities and characteristics that fall into the opposing dualities of yin-yang is *what we are*; the sense of change that we all know and call 'time', this too is *what we are*. We do not simply and passively pass through time as we commonly assume. *We are time*. There is no separate entity called 'time' and no separate entity called 'me'. So it is with all our experiences: we are no more than these and they are no more than us. As Richard Hittleman has observed, it's as if we are simply '*a vessel through which these events are flowing*'.²⁷⁶ There is no separate 'me' and no separate 'you' to whom things happen. Indeed, things do not happen to you at all; you *are* happening. What you're doing at this moment – including your memories, psychological make-up and the conscious and unconscious predilections and preferences that make you *you*, these

²⁷⁵ David Hume (1739-1740) *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1(iv).6.

²⁷⁶ Hittleman RL (1976) *Yoga: The 8 Steps to Health and Peace*. Hamlyn, London, p.54.

are all that is. The apparent past and future, what you were yesterday and may be tomorrow, are neither here nor there. They do not exist. This applies equally to all animals, insects, bacteria and fungi, of course. Each organism is neither more nor less than what it is *now*. But this is extraordinarily difficult to grasp, perhaps because it's always been right there in front of us. If there had been a high-pitched whistle everywhere in the world all your life from birth, indeed if there had been a high-pitched whistle from the accretion of planet Earth from inter-stellar dust 4.54 billion years ago, you wouldn't hear it and instruments designed to detect sound wouldn't detect it because it would have been built into the presumption of a silent baseline when the instruments were constructed. Our entire experience of reality is as constant change; everything is changing all the time. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus is attributed with observing in the fifth century B.C, '*You can never step into the same stream twice ...*'. But, this is hard to grasp with any precision simply *because* everything is changing all the time and we never experience the conditions that would equate to 'non-change'.

However, there are times when we are particularly mindful and realise *we are aware that we are aware*. It's possible in these periods of self-reflective lucidity to realize that the experience of change within both ourselves and the world is an illusion and that there is no separate 'me' to which 'things happen'. It's this mindful lucidity, the experience of non-change, that we cultivate when we regularly practise meditation. It enables us to be aware of the 'now-ness' of the present moment, which allows us an insight into the fact that we are no more than the sum total of our experiences. If there is no separate self of course, no 'doer' doing the actions we perform in life and no 'time' other than now, then it's all one. That is, life as we know it is not separated into anything at all; it's all Being, Here and Now. This is Unity, the transcendental oneness of Ultimate Reality that itself must be beyond oneness.

It's worth noting that there have been huge periods when conscious perception of the passage of time (as we conceive it) was absent from the universe, such as those times in the history of the Earth when no

sentient beings existed.²⁷⁷ On Earth life evolved around 3.5 billion years ago, so for just over a billion years after the planet first formed, no living organism with consciousness could be said to have existed. What does this mean for the concept of self? The answer is that we should remember that we only know what we know *now*, at this moment. We only remember that which we remember now, in the present moment. Our belief in anything else, including those periods before life evolved on Earth, exists only in the 'now' and it is the 'now' within which is rooted all debate, including debate about the nature of 'self'.

Mind and body

What is this sense of 'self' that we are calling 'ego' and where does it come from? The experience of ego is a function of our physical form as well as a function of our psychological make-up. Your internal world is composed from both your physical experiences and your psychological reflections. And the numerous sensory impressions we each experience in our waking hours are communicated to us through the mechanisms built into our bodies for this very task - the five senses. But are our senses to be trusted? Plato's dialogue *The Phaedo* describes the last moments in the life of his teacher Socrates, who is attributed with holding that:

The body is the source of endless trouble to us by reason of the mere requirement of food; and is liable also to diseases which overtake and impede us in the search after true being: it fills us full of loves, and lusts, and fears, and fancies of all kinds, and endless foolery,

²⁷⁷ Consciousness is taken to be a characteristic of living organisms only; that is, only living beings can have consciousness. The term *sentient beings* is used here to refer to the ability of a living entity to have subjective perceptual experiences, and is used as a shortcut to defining any organism with consciousness of some sort. This is taken to include even those micro-organisms that can sense, for example, light, at what to us is a very rudimentary level. Exactly which organisms on planet Earth have sentience is debateable and is not the point at issue for us here. Nevertheless, it's worth remembering that there are approximately 37 trillion (3.72×10^{13}) cells making up an average human body: is each one a sentient being?

and in fact, as men say, takes away from us all power of thinking at all. ²⁷⁸

The possession of a physical body is part and parcel of our ego - our sense of individuality, of being separate from all other people. But from the standpoint of much eastern religious thought this separation is entirely illusory because:

We suffer from a hallucination, from a false and distorted sensation of our own existence as living organisms. Most of us have the sensation that 'I myself' is a separate center of feeling and action, living inside and bounded by the physical body - a center which 'confronts' an 'external' world of people and things, making contact through the senses with a universe both alien and strange. (But) ... Every individual is an expression of the whole realm of nature, a unique action of the total universe. This fact is rarely, if ever, experienced by most individuals. Even those who know it to be true in theory do not sense or feel it, but continue to be aware of themselves as isolated 'egos' inside bags of skin. ²⁷⁹

Watts holds the view that according to Hindu teaching, each of us is God 'pretending' to be an individual ego; each of us is God acting through a self, so *you are God playing at being you*. This is of course a rather dangerous idea. To think you are God not only runs very close to heretical beliefs in some religions, it could also be well within the definition of psychosis:

... in our culture this is the touchstone of insanity, the blackest of blasphemies, and the wildest of delusions. This, we believe, is the ultimate in megalomania - an inflation of the ego to complete absurdity. ²⁸⁰

²⁷⁸ Quoted in Russell B (1961) *The History of Western Philosophy*. George Allen and Unwin Ltd. UK, p.151.

²⁷⁹ Watts AW (1973) *The Book on the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*, Abacus, UK. pp.15-16.

²⁸⁰ *ibid*, p.23.

Yet it's an idea with a long history. Watts goes on to point out that the notion that we are all essentially God is at the heart of the ancient writings of the Vedanta, the Hindu teachings expressed through the stories, poems and dialogues of the Upanishads. However:

*... no Hindu can realize that he is God in disguise without seeing at the same time that this is true of everyone and everything else. In the Vedanta philosophy, nothing exists except God. There seem to be other things than God, but only because he is dreaming them up and making them his disguises to play hide-and-seek with himself.*²⁸¹

"But ..." you might well ask, "I clearly have a body that feels pleasure and pain and is as real as anything else I know. I see nothing to suggest that it's only an outfit I'm wearing to disguise my true self."

Yet this emphasis on the role played by sensory experience in obstructing our access to Ultimate Reality arises over and over again in philosophical and religious thought. In the writings of Plato, for example, it's clear that the body is seen as a hindrance to the perception of true knowledge. This is extended to include all learning based on empirical knowledge, for this belongs to the world of appearance. Thus scientific observation and experimentation are excluded from methods to attain knowledge of reality and, for Plato, the philosopher will look instead to the truths that may be grasped through mathematics and mystical insight. To experience the real world, Plato says, we must go beyond the sensible world, the world of the senses:

...the body introduces a turmoil and confusion and fear into the course of speculation, and hinders us from seeing the truth: and all experience shows that if we would have pure knowledge of anything we must be quit of the body, and the soul in herself must behold all things in themselves: then I suppose that we shall attain that which we desire, and of which we say that we are lovers, and that is

²⁸¹ *ibid*, p.24.

*wisdom, not while we live, but after death ... And then the foolishness of the body will be cleared away and we shall be pure and hold converse with other pure souls, and know of ourselves the clear light everywhere; and this is surely the light of truth. For no impure thing is allowed to approach the pure.*²⁸²

So Plato is arguing that ordinarily we know nothing of these aspects of Ultimate Reality until we die. And if Alan Watts is correct then:

*Death is, after all, a great event. So long as it is not imminent, we cling to ourselves and our lives in chronic anxiety, however pushed into the back of the mind. But when the time comes where clinging is no longer of the least avail, the circumstances are ideal for letting go of oneself completely. When this happens, the individual is released from his ego-prison. In the normal course of events this is the golden opportunity for awakening into the knowledge that one's actual self is the Self which plays the universe - an occasion for great rejoicing. But as customs now prevail, doctors, nurses, and relatives come around with smiling masks, assuring the patient that he will soon get over it, and that next week or next month he will be back home or taking a vacation by the sea.*²⁸³

He continues with the advice that:

*If you are afraid of death, be afraid. The point is to get on with it, to let it take over - fear, ghosts, pains, transience, dissolution, and all. And then comes the hitherto unbelievable surprise: you don't die because you were never born. You had just forgotten who you are.*²⁸⁴

In the words of Zen Master Bassui Tokusho (1327-1387) when writing to a disciple who was dying:

²⁸² Plato giving voice to Socrates in *The Phaedo*. Internet Classics Archive, see <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/phaedo.html>

²⁸³ Watts AW (1973) *The Book on the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*, Abacus, UK. p.40.

²⁸⁴ *ibid*, p.42.

The essence of your mind is not born, so it will never die. It is not an existence, which is perishable. It is not an emptiness, which is a mere void. It has neither color nor form. It enjoys no pleasures and suffers no pains.

*I know you are very ill. Like a good Zen student, you are facing that sickness squarely. You may not know exactly who is suffering, but question yourself: What is the essence of this mind? Think only of this. You will need no more. Covet nothing. Your end which is endless is as a snowflake dissolving in the pure air.*²⁸⁵

And the good news is that we don't actually have to wait until we are dead in order to see behind the illusion of the ego, for meditation is said to enable this in the living. The novelist Peter Matthiessen, who was later to become a Zen Buddhist monk, wrote of his own experience during a Buddhist religious meeting thus:

... I chanted for her (his dying wife) with such intensity that I 'lost' myself, obliterated my self - a function of the ten-line Kannon Sutra, dedicated to the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, which is chanted hard, over and over, thirty-three times, with wood gong and bells, in mounting volume and intensity. At the end, the chanters give one mighty shout of MU! - a mantric word corresponding to Om, which symbolises the Absolute, eternity - this followed instantly by a great hush of sudden ringing silence, as if the universe had stopped to listen. But on this morning, in the near darkness - the altar candle was the only light in the room - this immense hush swelled and swelled and kept on swelling, as if this 'I' were opening out into infinity, in eternal amplification of my Buddha being. There was no hallucination, only awe, 'I' had vanished and also 'I' was everywhere.
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²⁸⁵ A widely quoted saying, cited here from the website:

<http://www.osho.com/shop/ShopDetailPage.cfm?ItemId=2839>

²⁸⁶ Matthiessen P (1987) *Nine-Headed Dragon River*. Fontana Paperbacks, London. p.21.

All you need is love

If everything is always in a state of Absolute Perfection what's the point in trying to do anything? Surely nothing's going to make any difference anyway, so we might as well get on with our own lives and not worry about other people - is there any problem in indulging our egotistical desires to the full?

But state of mind does seem to be important in seeing beyond Everyday Reality, especially the cultivation of a mind receptive to whatever this 'beyond' may be. And this receptivity lies beyond our ego. Indeed, it could be said that the extreme absence of ego that is sought through the practice of meditation is another way of conceptualising what the word 'love' has frequently meant for teachers across the ages. And if love is what we feel when we lose our ego, it's not surprising that personal accounts of the experience of Cosmic Consciousness should often allude to an overwhelming sense that love lies at the root of Ultimate Reality. However, in this context the term 'love' refers to absolute selflessness, what a Buddhist might call 'mettā', rather than the rather sickly sort of cloying adoration and dependency more associated with the word in western romantic literature.

But if there is a God, why would He be a God of love? Perhaps those who have experienced Cosmic Consciousness have used this word because that's what we (humans) call the experience we have when we come face-to-face with Ultimate Reality? And perhaps the 'love of God' is simply the profound sense of unconditional acceptance often reported? But whatever the reason for this, it's clear that for many respected teachers, love is fundamental to seeing beyond the everyday world. Those living in Christianised areas can hardly have failed to notice the immense emphasis placed on love by Jesus Christ. In the New Testament the word 'love' appears 263 times.²⁸⁷ And some sayings of Jesus have become so much a part of our language that we hardly notice their presence:

²⁸⁷ According to the King James Bible Online. See <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/search.php?q=love&bsec=N&order=1>

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;
(Matthew 5:44)

Honour thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.
(Matthew 19:19)

A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.
(John 13:34)²⁸⁸

So what is Jesus talking about when he speaks of love? Is this simply being nice to other people, thinking of their needs and putting them before your own? It may well include this of course, but what if he meant something much more extreme than this rather insipid sort of feeling? Mystics and spiritual teachers across the world have indicated the intense selflessness that the word 'love' can imply. The qualities most easily identified with this extreme sense of love are the absence of ego and total focus on 'the other'. As the widely-respected religious teacher Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986) has pointed out:

When you love, that is, when you give yourself over to something entirely, wholly, then there is no relationship ... In such love there is no friction, there is not the one and the other, there is complete unity ... It is a state of being when the activities of the self have ceased ...
²⁸⁹

Purity of focus at this level is not an everyday experience for most of us. In fact, it's doubtful that many may ever have consciously known

²⁸⁸ King James Bible Online. See

<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/search.php?q=love&bsec=N&order=1>

²⁸⁹ Krishnamurti J (1969) *The First and Last Freedom*. Victor Gollancz Ltd., London. p. 180.

it. It's an intense state of egolessness wherein one's entire sense of self dissolves. In this respect Buddha and Christ seem to have had very similar views. For example, they both refer to an ego-free state of consciousness, albeit one that is achieved through seemingly quite different means - Buddha through meditation and Jesus through prayer.

Within the many sayings attributed directly to the Buddha are those in the Itivuttaka, a collection of 112 short discourses that belongs to the Pali Canon of the Theravada school of Buddhism. According to tradition these teachings were collected by the woman lay-disciple Khujjuttara from sermons given by the Buddha to ordained monks (Bhikkhus) and lay people alike, while he was staying at Kosambi in northern India. Buddha clearly considered loving-kindness to be crucial to his teachings and is said to have taught the meditation practice *Mettā Bhavana* to his followers to aid them in developing this. In the Theravadan Buddhist tradition the *Mettā Bhavana* (which is described as *Exercise in Cosmic Thinking no.9* in Chapter 22, Meditation) is about extending loving kindness towards everything with consciousness. It's about individual cells, microbes, bacteria, insects, fish, animals, people and extra-terrestrial life-forms (whether you believe in them or not). In short, it's about accepting all sentient beings as they are, without judgement or limit. This includes not just humans but any organism with a level of consciousness, no matter how rudimentary it may be (though it's worth remembering that what we might consider to be a rudimentary consciousness may be sparkingly clear to the microbe concerned). Of loving-kindness itself Buddha said:

Bhikkhus, whatever grounds there are for making merit productive of a future birth, all these do not equal a sixteenth part of the mind-release of loving-kindness. The mind-release of loving-kindness surpasses them and shines forth, bright and brilliant.

Just as the radiance of all the stars does not equal a sixteenth part of the Moon's radiance, but the Moon's radiance surpasses them and shines forth, bright and brilliant, even so, whatever grounds there

are for making merit productive of a future birth, all these do not equal a sixteenth part of the mind-release of loving-kindness ...

Just as in the last month of the rainy season, in the autumn, when the sky is clear and free of clouds, the Sun, on ascending, dispels the darkness of space and shines forth, bright and brilliant, even so, whatever grounds there are for making merit productive of a future birth, all these do not equal a sixteenth part of the mind-release of loving-kindness ...

*And just as in the night, at the moment of dawn, the morning star shines forth, bright and brilliant, even so, whatever grounds there are for making merit productive of a future birth, all these do not equal a sixteenth part of the mind-release of loving-kindness. The mind-release of loving-kindness surpasses them and shines forth, bright and brilliant.*²⁹⁰

The ego-free state of loving-kindness appears in other guises of course. In personal reports of Cosmic Consciousness the perception of hell is sometimes recounted and this can be construed as the subjective experience of the individual who is engaged in letting-go of self, of ego. The idea that we must 'let go' of our ego and Everyday Reality and cease the ego-driven search for Ultimate Reality appears also in the works of Plotinus:

But how shall we find the way? What method can we devise? How can one see the inconceivable Beauty which stays within the holy sanctuary and does not come out where the profane may see it? Let him who can, follow and come within, and leave outside the sight of his eyes and not turn back to the bodily splendours which he saw before ... We cannot get there on foot; for our feet only carry us everywhere in this world, from one country to another. You must not get ready a carriage, either, or a boat. Let all these things go, and do

²⁹⁰ Excerpted from *The Itivuttaka: The Buddha's Sayings*, translated from the Pali by John D. Ireland (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1997). See <http://www.vipassana.com/canon/khuddaka/itivuttaka/iti-b.php#27>

not look. Shut your eyes and change to and wake another way of seeing, which everyone has but few use. ²⁹¹

Plotinus conceived the notion of nous, which can be loosely translated as 'spirit' and as 'seeing the One'. In the words of Bertrand Russell, Plotinus held that:

It is possible for us to know the Divine Mind, which we forget through self-will. To know the Divine Mind, we must study our own soul when it is most god-like: we must put aside the body, and the part of the soul that moulded the body, and 'sense with desires and impulses and every such futility'; what is then left is an image of the Divine Intellect. ²⁹²

So for Plotinus we must look beyond the ego, the body and its five senses, if we are to know Ultimate Reality. And though he doesn't actually refer to mindfulness meditation, for centuries this has been used as an aid to just this, letting go of the '*bodily splendours*' and waking '*another way of seeing*'. In moving the focus of our awareness to the present moment, mindfulness can be seen to enable us to transcend the sensory barrage to which, in our Everyday Reality, we're routinely exposed. It may just be that when your present awareness becomes your awareness of the present, you will unite with Ultimate Reality.

The Receptive Mind

And in the end, maybe the whole point of turning away from the senses and the ego towards meditation, prayer, faith (and perhaps even psychoactive drugs) is that they are all means by which we can nurture and grow what the Christian might refer to as the receptive state of mind known as 'kenosis'. The receptive mind may be just

²⁹¹ Plotinus, The Enneads, quoted in Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.189.

²⁹² Russell B (1961) *The History of Western Philosophy*. George Allen and Unwin Ltd. UK, pp.293-4.

what we need to see the truths of Ultimate Reality that are said to be present everywhere. But what is this receptivity?

One thing it is not is clinging on to material possessions, because:

*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God*²⁹³

It's also about not clinging onto our own ideas of *what should be*. It's about a willingness to suspend disbelief. The receptive mind is one that is, at least on the surface, emptied of expectation, ego and the limitations of *what can be*. Instead it's ready to experience *whatever is*. Receptivity of mind is a state of readiness, not a state of achievement. In the words of modern Christian mystic and Episcopal priest, Morton Kelsey (1917-2001):

*Before one can go very far spiritually, he must accept at least tentatively that there is a realm of the spirit, that there is something to explore. This open attitude is very necessary ... If a man does not even dream that there are vast caverns beneath the surface of life, he is not very likely to find an entrance to them. One must be prepared first for the possibility that there is something of reality beyond this material world ... The man who takes the chance that the spiritual realm does exist, who acts upon that hypothesis as best he can, then has every chance of finding this realm and being able to relate to it in a sustained and creative way. And this is possible for all of us. Any man can enter upon this religious way no matter what he thinks or doubts.*²⁹⁴

Nevertheless, it does seem clear that a strong belief in the dogma associated with any specific religion, scientific theory or other doctrine purporting to account for existence, could be an obstacle to

²⁹³ Mark chapter 10, verse 25 The Official King James Bible Online:
<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Mark-10-25/>

²⁹⁴ Kelsey M (1974) *Encounter with God: A Theology of Christian Experience*. Hodder and Stoughton, London. p.175.

the development of a receptive state of mind. Receptivity is likely to work best when we are open to new ideas and experiences, and perhaps the only thing we need to believe is the possibility that behind all the persuasive froth of *Everyday Reality there just could be* a greater, an ultimate, reality of the sort described in these pages. But this state of mind is not achieved without taking some risks; receptivity of mind may mean we need to be willing to know everything, to experience anything and everything - anxiety, paranoia and fear. But experiencing these things doesn't mean we need to dwell on them. This is a benefit of meditation, where our minds do not become caught up in repeatedly going over negative thoughts. In meditation we're not thinking anything at all.

There's considerable debate about the Chinese mystic and philosopher Lao-Tse, author of the *Tao Te Ching* and by tradition the founder of Taoism. He's said to have lived in the 6th century BCE, though modern historians are more inclined to view him as a synthesis of multiple historical figures who actually lived in the 5th-4th centuries BCE. Whatever the truth, the point here is that in his words we find some small jewels of wisdom that relate directly to the receptivity of mind that we're discussing. For example, in the 48th chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao-Tse wrote:

Pursue knowledge, daily gain
*Pursue Tao, daily loss*²⁹⁵

which is more frequently translated as:

To attain knowledge, add things every day. To attain wisdom, remove things every day

The following little tale provides an example of this principle in action:

²⁹⁵ Quoted from www.Taoism.net and *Tao Te Ching: Annotated & Explained*, published by SkyLight Paths in 2006.

"I am learning," Yen Hui said.

"How?" the Master asked.

"I forgot the rules of Righteousness and the levels of Benevolence," he replied.

"Good, but could be better," the Master said.

A few days later, Yen Hui remarked, "I am making progress."

"How?" the Master asked.

"I forgot the Rituals and the Music," he answered.

"Better, but not perfect," the Master said.

Sometime later, Yen Hui told the Master, "Now I sit down and forget everything."

The Master looked up, startled. "What do you mean, you forget everything?" he quickly asked.

"I forget my body and senses, and leave all appearances behind," answered Yen Hui. "In the middle of Nothing, I join the Source of All Things."

The Master bowed. "You have transcended the limitations of time and knowledge. I am far behind you. You have found the Way!" ²⁹⁶

• • •

Making a convincing case for Cosmic Consciousness - a state that evades even the vaguest description - seems to be asking quite a lot of anyone. Perhaps the best approach would be to see what such a transcendental experience could be like, and so we move to Transcendence and discover whether this too is beyond even the simplest descriptor.

²⁹⁶ Quoted in Hoff B (1982) *The Tao of Pooh*. Methuen, London. p.149

Chapter 21.

Transcendence

Transformation contains both change and stability, plurality and unity, movement and constancy. It has the nature of life, namely, to connect organically the polar opposites, the stumbling blocks of logic, and to unite them in an all embracing rhythm ²⁹⁷

It's tricky to describe what the word 'transcendence' could refer to, though Lama Govinda has summarised it quite expertly as 'transformation' in the few words above. From the perspective of Everyday Reality, Ultimate Reality itself is transcendent, but grasping the essence of this is far from simple: an example we touched on earlier in the book might help.

An example of transcendence

You are at present reading these words. If you are alone, no-one has witnessed the fact that you are reading and when you die all knowledge of the event may well die with you. However, it's true that on this particular day at this particular time you read these particular words. Moreover, it will remain true forever. This simple truth is composed of no material substance. It's not directly knowable through sight, smell, touch, taste or hearing, nor, so far as we know, can it be deduced from any external source such as a vast cosmic repository of everything that has ever happened to you. It's unchanging and unchangeable and yet is continually present insofar as it exists at every point of the universe. Go to the planet Mars in one million years' time and it will be true even there that on this particular day at this particular time you read these particular words (albeit on planet Earth). The truth of this one small act, and every single act, action or event throughout all time, could be said to exist transcendently. Whether it actually does exist transcendently is

²⁹⁷ Lama Anagarika Govinda (1977) *Creative Meditation and Multidimensional Consciousness*. Mandala Books.

not the point; the point is that this gives some sense of what transcendence might mean because, by definition, something like transcendence is inherently beyond words and so cannot otherwise be described in words.

Not surprisingly perhaps, the concept of transcendence crops up in all sorts of religious traditions. For example, Colin Brown discusses the existentialist Christian theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) and explains that basic to his view was the conviction that God is neither 'a thing' nor 'a being', for God is beyond such finite phenomena as things and beings. Brown notes that for Tillich:

*God is beyond the limitations of existence and beyond the range of conceptual thought, for both existence and conceptual thought belong to the realm of the finite and are limited in time and space.*²⁹⁸

Not only does this brief sentence provide at least one answer to the question 'Does God exist?' but it also rather neatly summarises the essence of transcendence. The transcendent neither exists nor does not exist; it is neither finite nor infinite; it is neither limited nor beyond limitations. We struggle to comprehend this because in our Everyday Reality we dwell within the realm of duality. But the idea is far from restricted to Christianity. The Hindu Mandukya Upanishad is a religious scripture dating from several centuries before the rise of Christianity. It describes the transcendental nature of Ultimate Reality thus:

The Self is the lord of all; inhabitant of the hearts of all. He is the source of all; creator and dissolver of beings. There is nothing He does not know.

He is not knowable by perception, turned inward or outward, nor by both combined. He is neither that which is known, nor that which is not known, nor is He the sum of all that might be known. He cannot

²⁹⁸ Brown C (1973) *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*. Inter-varsity Press, London. p.195.

be seen, grasped, bargained with. He is undefinable, unthinkable, indescribable. ²⁹⁹

So it's clear that in the Hindu tradition the idea of transcendence goes back some way, and was certainly something with which the ancient Greek philosophers were familiar. In the 3rd century the founder of Neoplatonism, Plotinus, held a conception of God that Russell considers to be transcendent. Thus, God (or 'the Good'):

... transcends Being ... We must not attribute predicates to it, but only say 'It is' ... It would be a mistake to speak of God as 'the All', because God transcends the All. God is present through all things. The One can be present without any coming: 'while it is nowhere, nowhere is it not'. Although the One is sometimes spoken of as the Good, we are also told that it precedes both the Good and the Beautiful ... The One is undefinable, and in regard to it there is more truth in silence than in any words whatever. ³⁰⁰

Why is it so hard to grasp transcendence?

We've read that behind the Duality of Everyday Reality lies a sort of Unity that's beyond ordinary understanding and can be said to be transcendental. But this does not explain why it's so very difficult to imagine what the word 'transcendental' could mean, and this requires some consideration.

For one thing, the concept of transcendence is not a concept in the usual way of concepts. It holds claim to be beyond conception and so, by definition, cannot be conceived of. The dubious among you may well think of this argument as a mere trick of semantics of course, and conclude that to the rational mind it surely makes more sense that such a state doesn't exist; that those who think there can be

²⁹⁹ There are many translations of the Upanishads; this one is taken from Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England. pp.146-7.

³⁰⁰ Russell B (1961) *The History of Western Philosophy*. George Allen and Unwin Ltd. UK. p.293.

'something' beyond the duality of up and down, in and out, black and white, are simply kidding themselves. So, how to describe the indescribable? It's as if our Everyday Reality is on one side of something that has another side, a side that's the opposite to our side in every way. A side that has no time, no space, no other side ...

To borrow from an ancient Zen koan, it's the sound of one hand clapping. It's the point at which the spikes that travel both outwards forever and inwards forever turn inside out, the timeless moment of Unhappening where the yang of our familiar creative Big Bang annihilates the yin of the time-reversal in the un-creative Big Bang. Words simply won't work here, but a receptive mind will help. Nevertheless, the suspension of disbelief required for this is far from simple and this may be a good time to try something much easier than any cognitive act: it's time to have a look at how anyone can do it for themselves.

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It's time to look at Meditation.

Chapter 22.

Meditation

*The Buddha succeeded in reducing (the) 'immediate occasion' of an act of cognition to a single moment of consciousness, which, however, in its subtlety and evanescence, cannot be observed, directly and separately, by a mind untrained in introspective meditation. Just as the minute living beings in the microcosm of a drop of water become visible only through a microscope, so, too, the exceedingly short-lived processes in the world of mind become cognizable only with the help of a very subtle instrument of mental scrutiny, and that only obtains as a result of meditative training. None but the kind of introspective mindfulness or attention (sati) that has acquired, in meditative absorption, a high degree of inner equipoise, purity and firmness (upekkha-sati-parisuddhi), will possess the keenness, subtlety and quickness of cognitive response required for such delicate mental microscopy.*³⁰¹

Of course, you might understand, or believe you understand, that our Everyday Reality is an illusion and that behind it lurks an Ultimate Reality that transcends space, time and duality. But this doesn't actually get you there. This is where meditation and several other systems, techniques and approaches can prove their worth. As the quotation above illustrates, within the scriptures of the oldest surviving branch of Buddhism, Theravada, the highly scholastic work the Abhidhamma Pitaka gives a sense of the value of meditation in allowing the adherent to bring their focus to the 'moment of consciousness'. But what is it about meditation that can take us to this point and how is it any different from the ongoing consciousness that we all have? In other words ...

³⁰¹ Quoted from *buddhanet*, the online Buddhist Education and Information Network. See <http://www.buddhanet.net/abhidh05.htm>.

What is meditation?

At the end of this chapter are two brief *Exercises in Cosmic Thinking*, numbers 8 and 9. These describe two types of meditation: one based on mindfulness and the other focused on the development of an emotionally positive state of mind. For anyone who has never tried meditation, it might be worth having a read through these two exercises and giving meditation a go before reading on: personal experience beats book-learning every time.

The theory behind meditation is not complex. Integral to the concept of Samsara is the observation that in life, in our Everyday Reality, we routinely categorise as distinct phenomena, those actions and events that share some supposed connection and happen within a discrete period of time. So we say "I have just brushed my teeth", "This morning I ate breakfast", "Last month I attended a wedding", "I spent last year in Greece". The events denoted in this way could have lasted for a period of milliseconds, seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, years, decades, or eons (as with 'the Palaeolithic period' or 'the evolutionary process'). But they all share one thing in common: we're almost randomly assigning them to specific, finite, periods of time and then categorising them as discrete events. In fact, whether the supposed event lasts milliseconds or eons, none has any reality as 'an event' outside our projection of this onto the world. Our perception of events, acts, occurrences, seconds, minutes, days, weeks, months, and so on as having some sort of inherent reality is an illusion. Each of these is part of a virtual matrix that we spread across our experience in order to reflect, manipulate and plan our actions. But the flow of change that we experience in Everyday Reality is neither inherently categorised nor inherently categorisable, despite the inconvenience this presents to our reasoning faculties. We have invented, and continue to invent, the world in which we live.

"So what?" you may well say, "Isn't this simply stating the obvious? ... And anyway, isn't this what being human is?" The answer is "yes" and "yes". But the significance of this has been well-described by Alan Watts, who refers to the way we routinely grasp little pieces of the world, and call them 'things' and 'events'. This is not simply

something we do; in fact, the classification of our experience as we go through life is *all* we do, it's not separate from us. In other words we *are* this process of classification. We do not have an existence that is separate from this activity - have a look back at Ego and Time (in Chapters 7 and 9) for more on this.

This process of categorisation is part and parcel of the fact that we experience the world bit by bit, partially, and it's this that gives us the sense that the world is constantly changing and so, that time exists. Categorisation, partial experience of the world and our sense of time are not separate entities, they are one and the same. This is our Everyday Reality, what Watts calls 'superficial consciousness', and contrasts with Cosmic Consciousness which he calls 'original mind'. In describing how we can experience this 'original mind' he's effectively describing the basis of Buddhist meditation:

*. . . it is not as if the superficial consciousness were one thing, and the 'original mind' another, for the former is a specialized activity of the latter. Thus the superficial consciousness can awaken to the eternal present if it stops grasping. But this does not come to pass by trying to concentrate on the present - an effort which succeeds only in making the moment seem ever more elusive and fleeting, ever more impossible to bring into focus ... Making an effort to concentrate on the instantaneous moment implies at once that there are other moments. But they are nowhere to be found, and in truth one rests as easily in the eternal present as the eyes and ears respond to light and sound.*³⁰²

But saying that effort is not required to know 'original mind' does not tell us *how* to know it, how to experience Cosmic Consciousness, and this is where meditation comes in. Meditation is about deautomatization, which leads to learning what it is to *be* without

³⁰² Watts AW (1978) *The Way of Zen*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.219.

categorising or experiencing in any predetermined way likely to result from habit, set, selective inattention or selective perception.³⁰³

However, whilst this is perfectly natural, learning to become adept at experiencing deautomatization through meditation turns out in practice to be extremely elusive. Writing from the perspective of Hindu philosophy (and especially that of Hatha yoga described by the Hindu sage Yogi Swatmarama in the 15th century) Richard L Hittleman has outlined his views on the way the 'ordinary mind' of our ego-driven Everyday Reality resists any attempt we make to 'turn off our thoughts' and experience pure awareness. Since this is the essence of mindfulness it's useful to see how Hindu interpretations of it compare with those of Buddhist commentators like Watts and the various Zen Masters mentioned elsewhere in *Mindfulness, Now and Zen*. In Hindu teaching Hittleman says:

*Ordinary mind fiercely resists this 'illogical' suspension of thoughts (which it is really interpreting as an extraordinary threat) and makes it extremely difficult to execute. Consequently, a concerted effort is required to interrupt the thinking process for even the briefest interval. But if I succeed there is no more 'I'. There is consciousness but it is not 'self' consciousness. There is awareness, but it is not awareness being perceived by an 'I'. It is awareness only. Awareness alone. AWARENESS. This is not to be confused with 'nothingness'; it is a profound state, transcending maya, that manifests when it is unobscured by ordinary mind, by thinking. It is the approach to our REAL state.*³⁰⁴

We can see that there's an immediate conflict here between the language of Buddhism and that of Hinduism: terms like 'effort', 'nothingness' and 'mind' can mean quite different things depending on the background from which the speaker comes. But, if you're able

³⁰³ From West M (1979) Meditation. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, (November)135:457-67.

³⁰⁴ Hittleman RL (1976) Yoga: The 8 Steps to Health and Peace. Hamlyn, London, p.27.

to suspend your feelings about this and hear the underlying message, surely they are saying the same thing? Everyday Reality is an illusion: in Buddhist terms it is Samsara and in Hindu terms, Maya. There is Cosmic Consciousness and nothing more because your sense of self, your ego, is illusory; you can experience Cosmic Consciousness if you discard your continuous grasping to make sense of the world as a series of events and objects. Whilst our senses are stimulated by external phenomena, our subjectively experienced Everyday Reality is generated by the projection of meaning onto the world, which involves conceptions of both past and future. If you have read Chapter 9 (Time) you'll be aware that it opened up the possibility that neither the past nor future exists. At any given moment the entirety of reality *is* that moment - it's not to be found in our misperception of what is 'past' or what is 'to come'. The practice of meditation is focused on the present moment.

So let go

Mindfulness meditation will gently take you into an experience that is beyond the transient, ever-changing nature of our Everyday Reality. And, importantly, you can set off on this journey into Being Here Now in full confidence that you can return to your usual ego-bound self whenever you wish. But of course, you're not really leaving an 'ego-bound self' or going anywhere at all: mindfulness is simply about *being where you are now*. Like the young fish who had no idea what water is, all we know, *all we have ever experienced*, has been constant change. Not surprisingly then, we find the whole idea of timelessness incomprehensible - which it is, within our Everyday Reality. Meditation is about learning to experience 'non-change', a concept that's not easily grasped from within the confines of our logical, rationality-focused world, where holding onto our thoughts and reflecting on our experiences is so very much a part of what we are. But it's entirely feasible for human beings to learn how not to hold on to thoughts and experiences - in fact, some people become exquisitely adept at it.

Ask a Zen Master not to think about pink elephants, and he won't

There's a plethora of guidance available to those who wish to learn the techniques and practices of letting-go and freeing ourselves from our seemingly desperate grasp on thoughts and the process of thinking. But what exactly is going on that makes thoughts so very captivating? And what is happening within our thought processes that constrains us to think within particular parameters? Until it's pointed out to us, it's difficult even to see that we are holding onto anything at all. It all feels so very natural, as the following tale illustrates quite nicely:

Two Zen monks were out walking one day. One was a novice and one an enlightened Master. They met a young woman by the side of a river and noticed she was weeping. When the Master asked her why she was upset, she explained that the river was too deep and flowing too rapidly for her to cross. To her delight the Master offered to carry her over on his back.

He did so, setting her down on the opposite bank. She thanked him and continued on her way. The two monks carried on along their own path, walking in silence, but the novice was clearly becoming more and more agitated and distracted. After a couple of miles he could contain himself no longer and asked the Master:

"Master. Why did you carry that woman over the river when you know we're not supposed to have anything to do with women?"

*The Master replied, "It is true that I carried the woman over the river. But I put her down when we reached the riverbank. You on the other hand, well, you're still carrying her."*³⁰⁵

Letting go is particularly difficult when you don't even know that you're holding on, and this is distinctly true of 'letting go' of your thoughts in meditation. The practice of meditation entails

³⁰⁵ An old Zen tale, anon.

recognising what you are doing - in this case, thinking a thought - and moving on from this, turning your back on the thought and leaving any further thinking of it behind you, unthought.

The quotation at the start of this chapter indicated that the Buddha succeeded in reducing the '*immediate occasion of an act of cognition to a single moment of consciousness*'. This implies that those of us in Everyday Reality - rather than in the meditative state of the Buddha - are not actually experiencing the peak of the moment of consciousness. It's as if we're some sort of reflection of reality. Meditation enables us to be not just conscious of 'something', but conscious of consciousness itself, unchanging and timeless. But to achieve this we must stop thinking completely and in so doing open ourselves to whatever Ultimate Reality may be.

How does mindfulness meditation work?

In many ways meditation is a perfectly normal activity. You don't need to be an acrobat preparing to step onto a tightrope to experience mindfulness - anyone can know something of it in their ordinary life. For example, those who play golf, or darts, or who take part in rapid downhill sports like mountain biking and skiing, will recognise the importance of ensuring that their concentration is centred in the moment. The focus of meditation is very much like this, but without the danger of falling from a tightrope, ski run or mountain bike. In fact, any form of really focused activity (physical or mental) is the same: the difficulty lies in maintaining this level of mindfulness in the longer term.

In our everyday lives when we are not deeply involved in these sorts of activities that concentrate the mind, our attention is far from focused and we are frequently so distracted that our thoughts might be compared with the background noise emanating from a de-tuned radio. So it's fortunate that meditation can be used to tune this deluge to one station. Meditation is about learning to divest ourselves of the constant barrage of reflections, interpretations, planning and hoping that fills our day, the theory being that through regular repetition we'll become increasingly better at re-tuning our minds. In so doing

we're gradually improving our ability to reach an increasingly intense state of mental alertness. You do this through frequent practice in which your attention is repeatedly brought back to 'the same place' every time you realise it has wandered off into a thought. To assist in returning awareness to 'the same place' a mantra is repeatedly brought to mind. In the *Mindfulness of Breathing* the mantra is the breath as it enters and leaves your nostrils, rather than being a word, sound or image as in many other forms of meditation. There's nothing magical or mysterious about this; focusing on the mantra is a thought like every other thought, but it's different in that it brings you back to the same place rather than leading on to further thoughts.

In Everyday Reality, throughout the day we pass through brief periods, maybe only lasting a few seconds, when we're aware that we are thinking and realise that we are conscious. But we then rapidly lose this thread of self-reflective lucidity and continue to be absorbed in thinking, albeit in a way that's completely lacking in the self-awareness we previously had. We're thinking but we don't know we're thinking. These are the times when we're daydreaming in a way, not consciously aware of the passage of time. Such occasions are generally pleasant and are hardly rare - in fact, they account for most of our waking lives. It's only when we come back to the here-and-now and realise we've not been self-aware that we have a sense of time passing. There's no easy way to judge how much time has passed when we've been in this 'daydreaming' state because when our thoughts linger on remembered actions and planned activities we're not 'in the moment'. Meditation is about systematically learning to be in the moment all the time, though it's been said that mind-expanding drugs such as cannabis can heighten this experience considerably and may have a use for some in enhancing self-awareness - see Chapter 23, on Psychoactive drugs, for more on this.

Meditation is a gentle, comforting and safe way of releasing you from your ego but in a manner that allows you to rapidly regain contact with your ego and with Everyday Reality. In this way it differs from psychosis and from the effects of some of the most powerful psychoactive drugs, like LSD, where contact with the

everyday sense of reality can be lost. In meditation, as in everyday life, there are periods when we're conscious that we're conscious, when we're aware that we're aware. But because we continually return to the mantra in meditation, these times are more frequent and protracted, which can give us the sense of something unchanging. This is an experience of that which continually *is* rather than that which *is happening* since it's not constrained by time so does not 'happen' in the conventional sense of the word. To 'happen' would imply coming into being and ending. When you can retain a focus on the mantra and experience the sense of being 'in the same place' throughout a period of several minutes, you have an indistinct sense of being outside of time. At this place you are unmoving and anchored in the moment.

In this way meditation interrupts the continuous stream of thoughts and plans that are ever-present as we go through life. Whereas we usually leap straight from one line of thought to another with barely any awareness that we're doing so, the enhancement of our capacity for mindfulness through meditation allows us to experience the bits in-between thoughts. This becomes apparent when first learning mindfulness. You might begin each session of meditation practice with a tight focus on the mantra, so you breathe in and out and count 'one', you breathe in and out and count 'two', you breathe in and out and count 'three', you breathe in and ... wonder what you'll eat for lunch and then whether you need to go shopping and then ... you realise you're not on the mantra and get back to it. You breathe in and out and count 'one', you breathe in and out and count 'two' and so on. The point is that when learning the practice of mindfulness, our routine everyday thinking process is so ingrained in us that it's almost a reflex action. Though they may be soft and comforting, in meditation even the gentlest of thoughts can powerfully burst into your consciousness like a dam breaking. Thoughts can pick you up and carry you off before you're even aware of it, like water from a burst dam pouring down a valley. When you do become aware that this has happened and that you're no longer focused on the mantra, you gently return to it.

Will meditation turn me into a Buddhist?

Is meditation dangerous? Could it change the way you think, the things you believe or the way you live? Will it turn you into a Buddhist?

Meditation is a practical, mechanical action that can be learnt by anyone who is able to think. As such it's no more likely to turn you into a Buddhist than is riding a bicycle or learning to juggle. Nor will it mean you're no longer a believer in the religion or non-religion of your choice. But like learning to ride a bicycle or juggle, meditation is hard work. Just like a game of chess, though in theory it's simple to learn the technique, it's hard to put your everything into its practice. And you must do this every time you meditate. Doing is rather important because you have to *experience* meditation. It doesn't matter how many meditation books you read, how much you pay for your meditation stool, how many scholarly talks you attend or how often you think about 'giving meditation a go'. It *only works if you do it*. And do it frequently and regularly: as with any learning curve, it's the frequent and repeated practice of the approach you choose that will be of value to you. As we repeatedly meditate we build up the relevant neural pathways - that is, we learn and improve in our practice of meditation. As the experience of 'being here now' is repeated in meditation, with no effort at all a link is made across experiences, and this is mindfulness. And, by the way, don't be misled by all this talk of meditation being hard. It's the most natural thing you could do and is frequently deeply relaxing and satisfying.

But meditation is a long-term project. It needs to be practised (learnt) in all conditions – noise, heat, cool, anxiety, anticipation - indeed any form of arousal - so that it becomes strong and flexible: it may be needed urgently in extreme conditions! An old and over-used (but effective) analogy is that of a seed planted indoors, away from wind and rain etc. The plant grows tall and quickly but when taken outside it collapses at the first sign of rough weather. However, the seed planted outside grows slowly and strongly and is able to withstand the roughest weather. So it is with meditation. By all means practise when you feel good; practise when all around is peace and

tranquillity and when external distractions are unlikely. But you need to be the seed planted outside and practise also when you feel distracted, anxious, hungry and tired. Practise when noises in the environment interrupt your inner calm and your practice will grow strong and resilient. The process of exiting your ego via meditation is not painful but it is hard work. Your aim is to really go for it the whole time you are meditating, holding your focus on the mantra at every moment.

What is it like to meditate?

Are you in a trance? Do you know where you are? Is it an ecstatic, 'far-out', spacey feeling?

Meditation is about mindfulness, so 'What is Mindfulness like?' may be the better question. Mindfulness is about taking over some of the controls of your conscious experience. It's like putting the brakes on your thoughts, which frequently jog and sometimes race along, seemingly at their own pace. In Everyday Reality either our thoughts are confusingly numerous or they're speeding along, but they rarely seem to be slow enough to be easily deciphered. Through meditation you gradually learn to interrupt this unending flow of chatter from the mind and to make a little space for no-thinking time. As we noted earlier, sometimes in everyday life you may notice that you are thinking. You realise where you are and what you're doing - you have an awareness of the 'here and now', an awareness that you are aware. However, most of the time you're not aware of this awareness and these are the times when you're simply thinking, when the dam water has picked you up and carried you off with it, which happens often in the early days of meditation just as it does in ordinary life. At these times of non-self-awareness you're daydreaming in a way and you don't consciously experience the passage of time. This is not generally a problem in life so long as you are able to focus on the matter in hand. In fact, it can be quite pleasant to be lost in thought, and it's only when you come back to the here and now and realise you've not been self-aware that you have a sense of time passing. Although some Psychoactive drugs can heighten this 'awareness of awareness' experience considerably, the practice of meditation and

consequent development of mindfulness has a similar, and arguably more profound, effect. Because meditation assists you in learning to remain in an unchanging state of being in the here and now, as your practice improves so you are able to stay for longer and your experience of this state of consciousness is intensified.

In theory you can be mindful of any action. Walking, eating, bathing, making a cup of tea and so on, though some actions present considerably more difficulty and - as with driving a vehicle - are potentially more dangerous to attempt mindfully than others. Indeed, relatively simple, repetitive actions are the most rewarding because they lend themselves to the quiet, focused and relaxed attitude that the meditation seeks to generate.³⁰⁶ The aim is to bring the mindfulness developed in meditation practice to everything you do:

*The purpose of meditation practice is not enlightenment; it is to pay attention even at unextraordinary times, to be of the present, nothing-but-the-present, to bear this mindfulness of now into each event of ordinary life.*³⁰⁷

So outside of the times when you're actively in meditation, mindfulness can be developed by allowing your awareness to rest on whatever you're doing at the moment: if you're out walking, focus on the walking; if you're washing your hands, just wash your hands. But during the mindfulness-based meditation practice described here the intention is to keep the focus of your awareness on your breath, that is, *in the same place*. Not in the sense that you might if you were working your way through a complex mathematical equation or closely reading an academic article, but in the sense that your conscious awareness remains in the present, focused on what you're

³⁰⁶ Purists will quite rightly take issue with use of the word 'seeks' here, arguing that meditation seeks nothing because we're already where we're supposed to be (in Nirvana) - the illusion of Maya is that we just don't know it. For now, the term, like any other word, is used on the understanding that it's erroneous.

³⁰⁷ Matthiessen P (1987) *Nine-Headed Dragon River*. Fontana Paperbacks, London, p.104.

doing *at that moment* (which is, of course, breathing in or breathing out). It's only when you notice that a thought has silently enveloped you in its warm and tender glow that you realise you're not focusing on breathing at all. But how do you recognise when this is happening? How do you spot an invasive thought? Indeed ...

What do thoughts look like?

Well, you already know what thoughts *think* like of course. But as you turn your attention away and re-focus on your mantra (which in this case is your breath) meditation can help you to get a different view of the thoughts you are ignoring. In meditation when your concentration wanders from the mantra it encounters a thought. But at this stage, as you become only distantly aware that the thought is within reach of your consciousness, it's still an intriguingly unknown experience nestling quietly away from your full awareness. It's as if you have a general but rather fuzzy sense of its content, which is not fully in focus and more properly might be called a 'pre-thought'. If you're able to hold on to the mantra the thought will remain undeveloped and dissolve rapidly, but a burgeoning thought such as this can be surprisingly enticing - *you want to think it and to know what it holds!*

Metaphors for this experience are hard to find for those who don't already meditate and you'll no doubt conceive of your own practice in quite different terms from those described here. What follows is just one way to picture an entirely natural intrapsychic experience that lasts for no more than a fraction of a second, and your own inner experiences need be nothing like this. However, in one sense meditation can seem as if you are floating in the darkness of your own virtual inner-space. Within this space, separate thoughts are akin to very welcoming soft bubbles, large enough to envelop your entire body. These bubbles gently entice you as you float towards them. At this point you are drifting away from the mantra but you may be unaware of this and continue towards the thought bubble. As you approach it you might notice that it has a mirror-like outer coating in which you are reflected, it's so very much a part of you. As you touch the thought bubble you begin to effortlessly and gently enter

into it as if it has a soft and yielding exterior. Your slide into the thought feels right and your interest in it is satisfied as you begin to experience its content. Like an actor walking into a very familiar character in a scene being played out on a stage, as you enter the bubble and so 'think the thought', you experience a completely new, though pleasantly familiar, space around you and forget the previous space you were in (which was focusing on the mantra). It's as if you have smoothly and comfortably walked into your own body in this new experience and immediately animated what was previously lifeless potential. As you bring this 'you' to life, you bring to it your usual personality, wishes, concerns and so on and you're barely aware that this has happened, so natural and everyday is this action to you.

Indeed, *it is you*, in Everyday Reality.

Re-mindfulness

As you first learn the skills of meditation you'll frequently not recognise that you have left the mantra and been taken up by a thought. The thought is almost certainly going to lead you through a series of connected thoughts, each of which offers the same enticements. This is of course something you do perhaps tens of thousands of times every day: it is Everyday Reality and it's what happens when you move from one thought to another. It's simply 'the thinking process' - following a line of thought - and can be very useful in navigating the everyday world.

But in meditation we seek to interrupt this process. At some point you'll recognise that you are 'in a thought' and this is when you may return to the mantra. Though they are frequently relaxed, comfortable and pleasant, the thoughts experienced during meditation are distractions from the mantra. They're initially so very subtly different from – and so very similar to – the mantra that it's very easy to be distracted by them. It's as if they are the same thought as the mantra itself at the time you first become aware of their presence and so it's very hard to recognise them as non-mantra. However, as you follow one of these lines of thought into connecting

thoughts, the whole experience becomes progressively less like the mantra and at some point you realise you have left the mantra and need to 'get back'. This aspect of meditation is entirely positive and is in no way a sign of incorrect practice. In fact, when you realise your attention has drifted away from the breath and you return to it, this is good because this is when you are learning! As your practice improves over the months and years the general pattern is that you encounter progressively fewer and fewer distracting thoughts in the course of your meditation and those that you do encounter prove to be easier not to think.

Exercise in Cosmic Thinking no.7

Thinking about not thinking

As a prelude to learning the practice of meditation it might help to think a little about mindfulness, in particular how you might go about recognising when you have it. Whilst meditation can help in developing the ability to generate and sustain a mindful state of awareness in everyday life, other approaches are entirely feasible. In the novel *Siddhartha*, Herman Hesse tells of the eponymous hero of the tale, who is a travelling monk in the days of the Buddha. The description Hesse gives when relating how Siddhartha sits for hours listening to the sound of a large river conveys something of the essence of mindfulness:

Siddhartha listened. He was now listening intently, completely absorbed, quite empty, taking in everything ... He had often heard all this before, all these numerous voices in the river, but today they sounded different. He could no longer distinguish the different voices - the merry voice from the weeping voice, the childish voice from the manly voice. They all belonged to each other: the lament of those who yearn, the laughter of the wise, the cry of indignation and groan of the dying. They were all interwoven and interlocked, entwined in a thousand ways. And all the voices, all the goals, all the yearnings, all the sorrows, all the pleasures, all the good and evil, all of them

together was the world. All of them together was the stream of events, the music of life.

*When Siddhartha listened attentively to this river, to this song of a thousand voices; when he did not listen to the sorrow or laughter, when he did not bind his soul to any one particular voice and absorb it in his Self, but heard them all, the whole, the unity; then the great song of a thousand voices consisted of one word: Om - perfection.*³⁰⁸

The next time you're out walking, preferably on a fairly level and uncomplicated straight track, pay attention to your footsteps as you proceed - right, left, right, left. As you walk, picture the movements in your mind's eye, rather in the way a cartoon of someone walking might look. Now stop walking, but keep that moving image in your head, walking, right, left, right, left ... Remain standing still for a few moments, but imagine you are about to start walking again with the idea of consciously attuning your footsteps with the imaginary 'you' that in your mind's eye is already walking. This imagined walker can be thought of as a constant 'stream' of walking. In a moment you'll be stepping directly into this stream by planting your own feet into the very footsteps of the cartoon image in your mind. Now, as you focus on the mental image of your walking, catch the moment when the mental image of your right or left foot is about to step forward and step into this with your actual foot, and so begin actually walking again. The sense of walking that you retained in your mind's eye while you were walking and stationary was an increased sense of mindfulness, though it might not yet be called meditation. It becomes meditation when you forget all about walking and just walk: mindfulness is about *just doing*. You need an extraordinarily concentrated focus to be 'in the moment' because then you can put it aside and *simply be*.

An alternative exercise to this 'walking mindfulness' is as simple as standing still. An open and empty field in the countryside is the ideal

³⁰⁸ Hesse H (1973) *Siddhartha*. Pan Books Ltd., London, p.107.

place to try this, preferably well away from the dominating sound of anything mechanical, like cars or tractors. Close your eyes and listen. Without attempting to focus on anything in particular, pay attention to whatever you can hear. After a minute or two turn ninety degrees and do the same, again turning after a minute or two until you've turned through all four quarters of the full 360 degrees. This very simply becomes the *Mindfulness of Walking* when you retain this focus on what you can hear and begin gently walking through the field.

Exercise in Cosmic Thinking no.8

How to practise the *Mindfulness of Breathing*

The *Mindfulness of Breathing* involves a focus on the breath as it naturally flows in and out of the body, and this action is what we refer to here as the 'mantra'. This term is more usually applied to a word or sound that can be repeated to aid concentration in meditation, but there are many other types of mantra. These have been used in spiritual practice for millennia and can be any sound, word, phrase or visual stimulus that's used to focus attention. By directing your awareness to the process of breathing, your tendency to become distracted by thoughts unrelated to the breath is gradually reduced. Over time, with regular practice, you'll find your ability to retain your attention on the breath improves considerably. And over the weeks and months, as your practice improves, you'll notice your concentration resting increasingly on the present moment of breathing. Through this development of mindfulness, you are nurturing the states of meditative absorption known by the Sanskrit word 'Dhyāna'. In these states of deep and receptive tranquillity you are most definitely not in a trance; in fact you are fully aware of your surroundings, your body and senses, but you've put them to one side and are not overwhelmed by their presence. You are not thinking; you are simply *being*.

In practising the *Mindfulness of Breathing*, each time you meditate you'll progress through four specific stages. It's a good idea for

beginners to spend about five minutes on each stage, and for someone else or an automatic meditation timer to ring a small bell or gong to mark the end of the five minutes. As you pass through the meditation you'll notice that you are becoming progressively focused on a smaller and smaller area of awareness, which will be accompanied by an increasing intensity in the experience. The stages themselves are simple and easy to learn, and in each you should allow your breathing to take place naturally:

Stage 1: Sit in a position that is comfortable for you. Generally speaking this will mean your back will be vertical, though you can be seated on a chair, a meditation stool, a cushion or on the floor. (The full lotus position might be the most desirable pose but it takes years to master). In the first stage of this meditation you breathe in and out, and after the out-breath count 'one' silently to yourself. You then breathe in again, breathe out and count 'two'. You breathe in and out and count 'three', and so on up to ten or until the timer chimes. If you reach 'ten' before hearing the timer you begin again at 'one'. If at any point you realise you are no longer focusing on the breath, simply turn your attention away from the thought that has hi-jacked you and return to counting the breath from 'one'.³⁰⁹

Stage 2: In the second stage you take a more proactive role because you count 'one' *before* taking a breath. So, count 'one' and inhale, breathe out, count 'two' and take the second in-breath. Exhale, count 'three', take the third breath and so on again to ten, and then start

³⁰⁹ And if you happen to experience an itch during meditation you should know that in the early days it's very difficult to ignore such a thing. Do not scratch yourself to relieve the itch but stroke your hand gently over the surface of the skin. This will generally be enough to relieve it, whereas full-on scratching is likely to inflame the tissue and lead to even more insistent itching. As your meditation practice deepens you may wish to simply ignore an itch. But beware, this is not for the faint-hearted! The Buddha said that anyone who wishes to know the experience of the ascetic need only attempt to sit completely still and unmoving for one hour. Ignoring an itch even for a minute or two can be exceedingly disruptive for anyone short of Zen Master status.

again at 'one' until the timer chimes. During Stages 1 and 2 of the meditation your timer device will frequently sound whilst you're in the middle of the process of counting a particular number. When this happens, continue to finish counting the number and then gently move on to the next stage.

Stage 3: You no longer count the breaths in the third stage, but simply observe the breath as it is drawn in through your nostrils, down into your lungs and exhaled once again. Bring your attention to rest on the breath moment-by-moment as it passes through your airway. When the timer chimes you move on to stage 4.

Stage 4: The focus of your attention in this final stage will become even more narrowed. In this stage you concentrate your awareness on the very subtle sensation made by the breath as it enters and leaves your nostrils, focusing specifically on the very tip of your nostrils. When the timer chimes, you have finished.

If you feel you need more assistance in developing this technique, most Buddhist Centres will happily teach the *Mindfulness of Breathing* for a voluntary donation or at no cost at all. There are also numerous websites that will demonstrate this approach to meditation.

Exercise in Cosmic Thinking no.9

How to meditate on loving-kindness

The *Mettā Bhavana* is a practice taught within the Theravadan Buddhist tradition. Its aim is to extend feelings of loving kindness to all life-forms in the universe, accepting all sentient beings as they are, without judgement or limit. It's frequently taught alongside the *Mindfulness of Breathing* described above and the two approaches can be practised alternately on the same day, or on different occasions as you prefer. The *Mettā Bhavana* is not mindfulness-

based but its practise in conjunction with the *Mindfulness of Breathing* is intended to help balance the personality.³¹⁰

The stages of this meditation aim to extend your positive feelings to include a gradually widening circle. It's sometimes referred to as 'the development of loving-kindness' because its name is derived from the Pali words *mettā*, meaning love or kindness, and *Bhavana*, meaning development or cultivation.

As with the *Mindfulness of Breathing*, the *Mettā Bhavana* follows a small number of stages. Again, it's a good idea for beginners to spend about five minutes on each stage, and for someone else or an automatic meditation timer to ring a small bell or gong to mark the end of the five minutes.

Stage 1: As with the *Mindfulness of Breathing* pose described already, sit in a position that is comfortable for you. Starting with a focus on developing positive emotions about yourself, give yourself permission to feel warm about how you are and who you are. Consider the repeated thought 'may I be well, may I be happy'. Imagine that Ultimate Reality, the universe in its entirety, totally and unconditionally accepts you as you are, right now, warts and all.

Stage 2: Building on the same emotion, in the second stage focus your mind on a close friend and think what it is about them that you like. Again repeat to yourself the words 'may they be well; may they be happy'.

Stage 3: The third stage focuses on someone you have no strong feelings for or against - perhaps the person who sells you petrol at your local garage, a shopkeeper or someone you see around at work but have little contact with. As with the first two stages, they are

³¹⁰ Yes, your personality - along with the rest of the universe - is already perfectly balanced, as we learned in the chapter on Absolute Perfection. But this is one of those many occasions when *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* asks the reader to tolerate a little illogicality!

again taken into your growing radiation of positive thoughts - 'may they be well; may they be happy'.

Stage 4: This penultimate stage is all about someone you actively feel negative towards. This could be only a mild dislike or you might think of them as an enemy. Once again you call up positive feelings and seek to accept them as they are. Picture your positive emotions radiating out to them.

Stage 5: Now consider all the people you have pictured in your thoughts so far. Imagine all four of them together in front of you and recall the positive feelings you felt towards them. Hold these feelings in your mind and picture them spreading like energy waves ever outwards to include everyone in your building, your local neighbourhood, your town, your country, the entire world and universe. Think of all the people, all the animals, insects, plants, all life-forms and beings everywhere: 'may they be well; may they be happy'. When the timer chimes, you have finished.

As with mindfulness-based approaches to meditation, the opportunities for learning *Mettā Bhavana* in person or online, at no cost at all, are numerous and the two approaches will be frequently taught together.

.....

But meditation may not be the only means by which Cosmic Consciousness can be known. Both psychoactive drugs and simple faith have been presented by some as feasible approaches. So let's move first to have a look at the arguments around the chemical alteration of consciousness.

Chapter 23.

Psychoactive drugs

*Our studies, naturalistic and experimental ... demonstrate that if the expectation, preparation, and setting are spiritual, an intense mystical or revelatory experience can be expected in from 40 to 90 per cent of subjects ingesting psychedelic drugs.*³¹¹

American psychologist Timothy Leary (1920-1996), whose words these are, was one of the leading lights in the psychedelic movement of the 1960's. He was in no doubt that what evidence there was indicated a clear link between psychoactive drug use and religious experience. Whilst Leary's academic credibility became somewhat tarnished by his strong advocacy of lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), this does not in itself mean the whole idea should be rejected. Maybe drugs really can open the way to a direct encounter with Ultimate Reality?

The argument presented in this book suggests that Ultimate Reality can be grasped in one almighty moment. But the question remains, how likely might it be that those instances arising from the ingestion of psychoactive drugs are the same as those arising without these drugs?

We know that natural bio-chemical processes are always at work in the human body so naturally-occurring psychoactive substances may frequently have been present in intensely mystical or revelatory experience where the purposeful ingestion of drugs was not an issue. For example, the Bible tells us that Jesus went into the wilderness and fasted for 40 days and 40 nights, after which he was tempted by the devil (Matthew chapter 4, verse 2). Buddha is said to have been enlightened under a sacred fig tree and figs are known to be high in l-

³¹¹ Leary T (1973) *The Politics of Ecstasy*. Paladin, St Albans, UK. p.15.

tryptophan, a precursor to the neurotransmitter serotonin which is closely associated with several hallucinogenic drugs.

There's no shortage of examples where visions have been reported by those undergoing the deprivations of asceticism, and the route through which these visions come about may well be traced back to the electrolyte imbalances that result from lack of fluid or food. The drama-therapist Peter Slade (1912-2004), writing in the journal *Psychological Medicine* in 1976, pointed out that:

*It has long been recognized that hallucination-like experiences can occur in normal healthy individuals under certain conditions. Sir Francis Galton (1883), who collected a series of such examples from his colleagues and relatives, noted that fasting, lack of sleep and solitary musing were often 'conducive to visions'. The relationship of such experiences to severe food and water deprivation has become a matter of common, universally accepted folklore ...*³¹²

So nowadays it perhaps comes as a surprise to no-one that sensory deprivation, hallucinogenic drugs and other physiological disturbances, including imbalances in the body's own chemistry, can be associated with unusual visual or other sensory experiences. But whether this somehow invalidates the experiences of Jesus in the wilderness, Gautama Buddha under the fig tree, or prophets and seers of old (and new) is rarely questioned, perhaps because the biochemical imbalance that precedes these experiences seems trivial when compared with the enormity of the message being delivered.

Subjective experience

In this discussion we're particularly interested in exploring the effects of drugs taken with the express intention of stimulating the sort of head-on experience of Ultimate Reality that's indicated by the term 'Cosmic Consciousness'. When psychoactive substances are used for religious, shamanic or spiritual purposes, they are known as

³¹² From Slade P (1976) Hallucinations (editorial), *Psychological Medicine*, vol 6, pp.7-13.

'entheogens'. All entheogens originally were obtained directly from natural sources but nowadays they are more likely to have been synthesized in a chemical process. Examples of entheogens include peyote, psilocybin mushrooms, ayahuasca, cannabis, LSD, ecstasy and even tea.³¹³ But what sort of experience might one expect from such exotic substances?

Cannabis

Looking at just one of the better known psychoactive drugs, cannabis, it's perhaps surprising just what a furore seems to have been created over recent decades in the international debate on legalisation. Cannabis is a plant indigenous to Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent and provides one of the oldest hallucinogenic drugs known. The principal psychoactive constituent is Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), which is present in both the dried leaves of the plant (frequently known as marijuana) and the resin extracted from the leaves and stalks (hashish). Relative to many other psychoactive agents the effects of cannabis are generally mild, and as a British NHS information website indicates:

The effects of cannabis vary from person to person:

- *some people may feel chilled out, relaxed and happy*
- *others get the giggles or become more talkative*
- *hunger pangs are common – this is sometimes known as "getting the munchies"*
- *you may become more aware of your senses – colours may look more intense and music may sound better*
- *it's common to feel as though time is slowing down*

Cannabis can have other effects too:

³¹³ Indeed, the renowned Japanese Zen master Eisai (1141-1215) is known for the importation of green tea from China which he used as a stimulant for his monks during zazen meditation. Cited in Matthiessen P (1987) *Nine-Headed Dragon River*. Fontana Paperbacks, London. p.172

- *it makes some people feel faint and/or sick – this is sometimes known as a "whitey"*
- *it can make you feel sleepy and lethargic*
- *some people find it affects their memory, making it harder to remember things*
- *it makes some people feel confused, anxious or paranoid, and some experience panic attacks and hallucinations. These effects are particularly common with stronger forms of cannabis, such as skunk and sinsemilla* ³¹⁴

The debate on the legalisation of cannabis continues unabated, but here we're not concerned with the rightness or wrongness of cannabis. Here our focus is on use of the drug as a vehicle for the propulsion of the user into Cosmic Consciousness. Before going any further, however, it's worth bearing in mind that this phenomenon must be fairly rare: if an almighty experience of Ultimate Reality came unbidden to everyone who tried cannabis then it seems undeniable that we would all have been made aware of this many centuries ago. Even so, there are those who would argue for use of the drug for this very purpose, so what is it about cannabis that might launch the user into Cosmic Consciousness?

Anecdotally, cannabis seems to be associated with a small but significant number of subjective experiences that are allied to the sort of visionary reports discussed elsewhere in this book. For example, as the website *British NHS Choices* points out, one common effect of cannabis is on the user's subjective sense of time. This distortion can entail both the elongation and contraction of time, a phenomenon described in Chapter 9 (Time). This is important for those experiencing Cosmic Consciousness because, for them, there is only the present moment and this lasts for no time at all.

But whatever the physiological origin of the distortion in sense of time for the cannabis user, one subjective experience is that

³¹⁴ Taken from the *British NHS Choices* website:
<http://www.nhs.uk/livewell/drugs/pages/cannabis-facts.aspx>

consciousness itself is able to process greater amounts of data than usual in the same amount of time. But rather than this feeling like too much information is being presented to consciousness, the subjective experience is frequently that things are slowing down. Clearly this is not itself the experience of timelessness that has so often been reported of Cosmic Consciousness, but it's perhaps a sense that the passage of time is no longer the fixed entity that in Everyday Reality we assume it to be.

Another subjective impression attributable to the consumption of cannabis is a transformed sense of significance. This is allied to becoming more aware of incoming sensory data, as noted in the NHS website, but is wider than this, encompassing intellectual understanding as well as sensory perception. The essence of this drug-induced phenomenon is difficult to communicate in Everyday Reality because outside of drug use it's rarely known and ill-defined. It's allied to the sensation that someone has been tampering with the 'reality control knob' mentioned in Chapter 19, Seeing is Believing. In practical terms this distortion in significance changes the level of what is considered meaningful to the individual at any given moment. This seems to be on a sort of sliding scale, from being very evenly balanced, with everything having more or less the same level of meaningfulness, to the other end of this where very minor things seem far more important and meaningful than usual.

For the cannabis user who feels the level of importance of different phenomena has changed, the world is now seen in a slightly different way: some elements of experience that formerly seemed to be trivial are now perceived to be important, and those which were important appear to be less so. For some this can be a mind-expanding experience, and as we've seen, the benefits of having an open, receptive, mind may be considerable. One powerful effect of this is that the individual may now believe with some conviction that which would formerly have been doubted. They feel able to see behind some of the usual beliefs that have inhibited their openness to what they can accept as being real or even possible.

Not so far removed from these changes in the subjective sense of significance are other changes in thinking. For the experienced user, cannabis might fire them like a cannonball into more and more lucid moments (those times when you are aware that you are aware, as discussed in Chapter 22 on Meditation). This sense of being launched at speed from a sort of psychedelic cannon could be something like the tunnel experience referred to in Chapter 20 (Do-it-yourself) and it's not difficult to picture it as the subjective experience of being blasted like a bullet from the grasp of the ego. The common finding here is that cannabis use facilitates a more intense sense of the thinking process itself. Thoughts might be experienced as turning and folding in a tangible form in the mind's eye - as shimmering rainbow coloured lines, dots or circles in the blackness of space. The simple and pleasing novelty of this might well account for some of the popularity of this drug.

Before leaving this discussion of the ways in which cannabis might be used as a means to experience Cosmic Consciousness, the American physician, drug researcher and author, Andrew Weil, deserves some mention. Weil has explored the relationship between drug use and altered states of consciousness and draws attention to similarities in reported experiences, irrespective of whether they have been triggered by psychoactive drugs or something else. For Weil, many of the psychological effects of psychoactive drugs are in fact a response to physiological cues. The drug itself, he argues, is an 'active placebo' that merely *triggers* the psychological effects within the consciousness of the individual concerned, for whom the particular mode of consciousness was in fact available all the time. He concludes that furthermore, many of these effects have been ascribed a negative value by mainstream pharmacology when they could equally be seen in a positive light. So, for example, the association between marijuana use and memory disturbance can be seen to be a good thing:

... the phrase disturbance of immediate memory bristles with negativity. Is it a negative description of a condition that might just as well be looked at positively?... the ability to live entirely in the

*present, without paying attention to the immediate past or future, is precisely the goal of meditation and the exact aim of many religious disciplines.*³¹⁵

and again:

*I no longer subscribe to the negative hypothesis that marijuana interferes with normal processing of perceptual data. Rather, I observe that in altered states of consciousness, people frequently gain the ability to interpret their perceptions in new ways and that this ability seems to be the key to freedom from bondage to the senses.*³¹⁶

This sense that we're somehow ignoring the positive side of drug use, highlights the importance of nurturing a spirit of acceptance, which is the receptivity of mind discussed in Chapter 20 (Do-it-yourself).

Neural correlates

Of course, there's no reason to presuppose that the moment an individual experiences Cosmic Consciousness - the point at which they grasp the Ultimate Truth - will not be accompanied by the excitement of specific groups of brain cells, what might be called the neural correlates of the experience. After all, this would be the case with any other cognitive event that has been triggered by an emotional or sensory stimulus. And no doubt a neuropsychologist could pinpoint these physiological changes in brain chemistry and relate them to changes in activity in one or more specific areas of the brain. Nevertheless, this in no way limits the significance of the experience in a person's life, nor does it in any way negate the reality of the experience for them.

³¹⁵ Weil A (2004) *The Natural Mind*. Houghton Mifflin Co., New York. p.78.

³¹⁶ *ibid*, p.82.

The presence of neural correlates in the subjective experience of Cosmic Consciousness does however raise the possibility that the converse may be true: if the appropriate psycho-physiological changes could be artificially induced in the brain then the individual will experience Cosmic Consciousness. Whilst this might seem a little hard on the ascetic monk or saint who has spent a lifetime in penance, prayer and fasting, it could account for the reports of Cosmic Consciousness that have been made by users of psychoactive substances across the ages. And of course, this doesn't mean there is necessarily something wrong with this or that it shouldn't happen. As Chapter 15, on Absolute Perfection, points out, we have no reason to presuppose imperfection in anything.

But the question remains: 'Should psychoactive drugs be used in the pursuit of Cosmic Consciousness or should they not?'

Why are we not all doing it?

The discussion so far might seem to suggest that psychoactive drugs offer the possibility of a short-cut to achieving Cosmic Consciousness, to the direct experience of Ultimate Reality. So why are we not all doing it?

There are, of course, several very strong arguments against this behaviour, not least the well-known dangers of addiction, mental illness, over-dosage and criminality that are associated with some of the drugs involved. But these are not our concern here. What we will consider is whether the experience brought about by psychoactive substances can ever be *the same* as that earned through the hard years of fasting and self-denial that are more commonly associated with visionary experience. Zen master Shibayama evidently thought not:

... Zen experience effects a fundamental change in oneself, philosophical and intellectual as well as psychological. It is the total conversion of one's personality to where one is reborn with absolute freedom and creativity. I cannot assent, therefore, to the idea of attempting to taste Zen experience by means of drugs. Only hard,

*difficult searching processes result in creating firm, and sound personalities.*³¹⁷

Shibayama believed that those reliant on drug-induced experiences were not adopting an authentic Zen approach. Whilst the effects of a drug like LSD may induce '*... some superficial resemblance to some aspects of Zen experience ... it goes no further, and remains no more than that*'.³¹⁸ Drug-induced experiences, he felt, were at best temporary and shallow. Although he says very little about it in his opus magnum *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*, Richard Maurice Bucke expresses somewhat similar opinions to Shibayama:

*Just as the drinking of alcohol induces a kind of artificial and bastard joy, so the inhalation of ether and chloroform induces (sometimes) a kind of artificial and bastard cosmic consciousness.*³¹⁹

These are strong words by modern standards, especially in the light of evidence from more recent converts to the use of drugs. Perhaps the most vociferous of these was Timothy Leary, who wrote:

*Transcendence - becoming aware of a reality which lies outside of time, space, and the beloved ego - has been a basic privilege and goal of man since earliest times ... A large number of serious and responsible citizens, along with a million or so young people, believe and have stated that transcendence can be brought about by the psychedelic chemicals, given suitable preparation and an appropriate setting.*³²⁰

Earlier in *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* we read that the immediate, awesome, world-shattering *internal explosion of awareness* that

³¹⁷ Shibayama Z (1977) *A Flower Does Not Talk: Zen Essays*. Charles E Tuttle Company, Tokyo, Japan. p.117.

³¹⁸ *ibid*, p.116.

³¹⁹ Bucke RM (1972) *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*. The Olympia Press, London. p.256.

³²⁰ Leary T (1973) *The Politics of Ecstasy*, Paladin, England, p.72.

comes with a personal encounter with Ultimate Reality, is what we mean by the term Cosmic Consciousness. Whether this experience is quite what Leary is speaking of here is debateable. However, he was clearly strongly in favour of the use of psychoactive drugs in the pursuit of visionary experience and did at least make an attempt to study the subject scientifically. The words quoted at the beginning of this chapter, and repeated below, sum up his findings:

*Our studies, naturalistic and experimental, thus demonstrate that if the expectation, preparation, and setting are spiritual, an intense mystical or revelatory experience can be expected in from 40 to 90 per cent of subjects ingesting psychedelic drugs.*³²¹

Whether we can take this bald statement to reflect of the sort of academic rigour one would expect from sound scientific enquiry is open to debate. Leary was himself a frequent user of LSD and in the minds of many, this will no doubt cast considerable doubt on his academic detachment. But even more importantly, many might well be shocked to even contemplate the possibility that simply taking a drug could ever bring about such a life-enhancing and revelatory experience as a direct encounter with Ultimate Reality. We should nevertheless remember that over the centuries some quite eminent authorities have testified to the worth of this - including a lengthy list of poets and writers including Samuel Taylor Coleridge (laudanum), Thomas De Quincey (laudanum), Charles Dickens (opium), Charles Baudelaire (hashish), Robert Louis Stevenson (cocaine), Aldous Huxley (mescaline), Jack Kerouac (benzedrine) and William Burroughs (heroin), to name but a few.

But this practice has not been restricted to literary types - even the renowned philosopher, psychologist and author of the now famous *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, William James (1842 - 1910), used nitrous oxide and ether to

³²¹ *ibid*, p.15.

'stimulate the mystical consciousness in an extraordinary degree'.³²² Furthermore, Andrew Weil has argued that criticisms of commonly used illegal drugs on the grounds that they are psychologically dangerous are largely fallacious, and that in any case they are medically '*much less dangerous*' than alcohol. In his opinion these drugs are generally less addictive than cigarettes, and he concludes that there are no '*... valid medical arguments against the choice of drugs as a means to satisfy the need for periodic episodes of altered consciousness*'.³²³

Yet the raised voices of politicians throughout the world continue to clamour for psychoactive drugs to remain illegal. Journalist Suzanne Moore (b.1958) makes the case for the other side of this coin, when she points out that:

*It is our choice, not the state's, whether we want to chemically reduce or expand our consciousness. At a time when mindfulness and every other yoga class promises nirvana, why are we so afraid that we could just reach transcendence through a pill?*³²⁴

Drugs or no drugs? That is the question

So what are we to think when there are such strong voices on either side of the debate? Despite his otherwise deep commitment to psychoactive substances as a means to achieve episodes of altered consciousness, Andrew Weil draws our attention to the fact that:

³²² Quoted in Watts AW (1965) *The Joyous Cosmology: Adventures in the Chemistry of Consciousness*. Vintage Books, New York. p.xi.

³²³ Weil A (2004) *The Natural Mind*. Houghton Mifflin Co., New York. p.42.

³²⁴ Moore, S (2016) LSD has improved my life considerably. *The Guardian*, 14th April 2016, p.5.

... every major religion and system of mind development that stresses the value of direct experience urges the avoidance of chemical highs
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The reason for this according to Weil, is that drug experience strongly reinforces the erroneous belief that raised consciousness is to be found through external, material, sources when in reality it comes from within the individual's own nervous system. In his view the action of psychoactive drugs results not from the direct effect of the drug's chemicals on consciousness but from their triggering a natural process in the human psyche. This rather unusual view seemingly endorses the more 'natural' practices described earlier in the book, including prayer, fasting, meditation and yoga. Nevertheless, Weil is not against drug use *per se*: he simply advises the user to ensure that some sort of ritual is built into this in order to regulate the intake of these substances. In support of this he notes the elaborate procedures often encountered in tribal societies when drugs are to be consumed. He goes on to explain that:

*This kind of ritual seems to protect individuals and groups from the negative effects of drugs, possibly by establishing a framework of order around their use. At least, people who use drugs ritually tend not to get into trouble with them, whereas people who abandon ritual and use drugs wantonly tend to have problems ... I do not think it matters much what rules one makes for using drugs as long as one makes rules. If a rationale is needed for these rules, any rationale will do as long as it is consistent with prevailing beliefs.*³²⁶

Though his name has now become rather infamous, perhaps Timothy Leary has identified the greatest obstacle to an honest and balanced discussion of the value of psychoactive drugs in the pursuit of revelatory experience. Leary was especially fervent in his belief that those wishing to discuss the subject should personally know the

³²⁵ Weil A (2004) *The Natural Mind*. Houghton Mifflin Co., New York.
p.58.

³²⁶ *ibid*, pp.93-94.

effects for themselves. History has shown that the scientific community has not been entirely united in sharing this view of course, and the problem remains. The American author and ethnomycologist, Robert Gordon Wasson (1898-1986), whose studies have included the effects of psychoactive mushrooms, is attributed with pointing out the tendency for opinion to fracture in such a way that:

We are all divided into two classes: those who have taken the mushroom and are disqualified by the subjective experience, and those who have not taken the mushroom and are disqualified by their total ignorance of the subject. ³²⁷

But in the end, perhaps the final question is not whether drugs are good for you or bad for you. Perhaps the question really is 'If you have experienced Cosmic Consciousness, does it matter what led you there in the first place?'

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Aside from meditation and the use of psychoactive drugs, it's been argued that there are other means through which we can access Cosmic Consciousness. Although it's currently rather unfashionable, an age-old route has been through simple Faith, and this is where we're headed next.

³²⁷ Robert Gordon Wasson, quoted in Leary T (1973) *The Politics of Ecstasy*, Paladin, England, p.71.

Chapter 24.

Faith

*And the Lord said, If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you.*³²⁸

Despite the longstanding assertion that you can do quite a lot with only a little bit of faith, in the search for Ultimate Reality many might argue that faith should be excluded from the debate. Faith is seen as being rooted only in wishful thinking and superstition. It fails the first test of scientific acceptability since it frequently deals with intangible things and untestable assertions that have never, and possibly can never, be made subject to rigorous scientific examination.

On the face of it this seems fair enough. After all, the Scientific Method works pretty well when we're talking about most things: the processes behind chemical interactions, events in the physical world, our cognitive mechanisms and so on. But is this still true when we're looking for meaning in our lives or searching for Ultimate Reality? It may be that in dismissing faith so readily we risk throwing out the baby with the bathwater. After all, many might claim that faith can offer a perfectly adequate route into Cosmic Consciousness, and it's not beyond the realms of possibility that some of the greatest religious leaders the world has known may have been able to make immediate personal contact with Ultimate Reality by an act of faith, by simply believing in it at that moment.³²⁹

³²⁸ Luke, chapter 17, verse 6. Quoted from the King James Bible Online: <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Luke-17-6/>.

³²⁹ Whether this act alone could confer a reality on the object of their belief is dealt with in Chapter 8, Belief.

Faith in the Scientific Method of enquiry

But how are we ordinary mortals to begin the search for Ultimate Reality? How can we know what is a valid and reasonable course to follow? The scientific method has had a long and generally illustrious career in the investigation of hypotheses, so why not apply it to the ideas presented in this book? Does Ultimate Reality exist as an underlying 'super-real' reality beneath our Everyday Reality? Does everyone experiencing Cosmic Consciousness 'see' the same thing? These can certainly be phrased as hypotheses, but can they be rigorously tested?

It's been suggested that the existence of God can quite reasonably be examined by subjecting it to the scientific method, and Richard Dawkins is definitely of this mind:

*The presence or absence of a creative super-intelligence is unequivocally a scientific question, even if it is not in practice - or not yet - a decided one.*³³⁰

However, as we saw in Chapter 18, this confidence in the validity of scientific discovery is itself open to question. What if the cosmos in its entirety is not subject to the same boundaries as those set by the scientific method? Regardless of our beliefs in the universality of the laws of physics that arose with the Big Bang, what if Ultimate Reality is not founded on reason and based on the sort of cause and effect that follow chronologically within linear time? Where the application of heat to water leads to its boiling and the production of water vapour in the form of steam. What if Ultimate Reality doesn't work like this? What if cause does not always precede effect? What if time itself is an illusion? Where would this leave the scientific approach to evidence testing?

Traditionally, and certainly until recent times, the scientific method has demanded that the basic qualities of everyday reasoning and cause and effect, be present before it can be applied. But in the

³³⁰ Dawkins R (2006) *The God Delusion*. Bantam Press, London, p.82.

search for Ultimate Reality in this book, we're attempting to avoid making prior assumptions about that which we seek. We cannot therefore assume *a priori* that Ultimate Reality will be founded on logical reasoning or based on cause and effect within linear time. The absence of these assumptions therefore precludes scientific testing, at least in this one specific case. This is not to say that scientific theorising is an incorrect approach to everything however. It simply means that we should always remember that scientific theories are hypotheses rather than proven facts, and they are based on a man-made set of principles specifying the boundaries to that which we will accept as being possible. It's worth remembering too that these principles have no validity beyond that which mankind allocates to them. What's more, in the final analysis, scientific enquiry can only provide us with a *descriptive* account of the universe. We gather more and more scientific data and detail about the natural world and discover with increasing confidence the causal relationships between different parts of the physical universe, from the micro to the macro. Yet in doing so we are not penetrating to the heart of reality, but are moving in a sort of spiral, perhaps getting closer and closer but never actually reaching it. The bottom line is that science fails to go beyond this description of the interactions between phenomena. It never actually reveals the entirety of the mechanism at work behind the reality we experience every day: to use a rather tired cliché, science may be able to tell us *how* but it never seems to tell us *why*.

Nevertheless, in the search for Ultimate Reality the scientific method may offer many benefits. Without it how can we test our ideas and know what is real and what is misguided or erroneous belief? How can we separate wishful thinking and personal prejudice from the real world? The scientific approach of repeatable experimentation with physical matter has been the common answer to these quandaries over the past few centuries and has provided huge and laudable advances in medicine, physics and technology, among other fields. Nor is the scientific approach restricted to the physical world, for as Bertrand Russell has observed of the use of logical analysis in philosophy:

... many questions, formerly obscured by the fog of metaphysics, can be answered with precision, and by objective methods which introduce nothing of the philosopher's temperament except the desire to understand ... as in science, we can make successive approximations to the truth, in which each new stage results from an improvement, not a rejection, of what has gone before. ³³¹

However, whilst the scientific method is fine for testing hypotheses relating to phenomena in the physical world, it's less obvious how it might be applied to many of the intangible ideas expressed in this book. Chapter 18, on the Scientific Method, explored these ideas in more detail, but for now it's simply suggested that the scientific approach is redundant in testing the validity of a concept such as Unhappening, where the entirety of existence, rather than an identifiable and definable part of it, is the phenomenon under examination. And this is where Faith comes in.

Faith and Cosmic Consciousness

It may be that something as vast as the understanding of everything - Cosmic Consciousness - requires a jump of Faith before it can be grasped. There's an ironic logic to the idea that in order to take our comprehension beyond the limits of everyday human life, we must lose the self-imposed boundaries of logic, rationality and reason that themselves have been the very cornerstone and building blocks of our understanding of the universe. It may also be necessary that *we believe we can do it*: as the author Richard Bach has pointed out, '*Argue for your limitations, and sure enough they're yours.*'

This idea that we are compelled to make an act of faith before we can know anything at all has been debated for some time. In the fifth century AD, St Augustine of Hippo wrote:

Understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore do not seek to understand in order that you may believe, but make the act of faith in

³³¹ Russell B (1961) *The History of Western Philosophy*. George Allen and Unwin Ltd. UK, p.789.

order that you may understand; for unless you make an act of faith you will not understand ³³²

This has a direct bearing on the scientific method since, like any system of analysis, the scientific approach is founded on a number of fundamental postulates that are taken to be self-evidently true in and of themselves. This observation was made several centuries ago by the philosopher and Christian theologian Nicholas of Cusa, who pointed out that:

In every science certain things must be accepted as first principles if the subject matter is to be understood; and these first postulates rest only upon faith ³³³

So, in adopting the scientific method as the only feasible approach to discovering the essence of Ultimate Reality we must firstly endorse the implicit acceptance that science is based on some very shaky foundations. The question is, does faith offer a preferable approach to the exploration of reality?

Faith in religious methods of enquiry

The power of faith - in the sense that it is a '*strong belief in the doctrines of a religion, based on spiritual conviction rather than proof*' ³³⁴ - is much emphasised within the Christian religion, with 'faith' being cited 280 times in the New Testament. ³³⁵ In his words to (doubting) Thomas, Jesus made it clear that he valued faith above much else:

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came.

³³² Quoted in Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.26.

³³³ *ibid*, p.26.

³³⁴ Oxford Dictionaries online:

<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/faith>

³³⁵ The Official King James Bible Online:

<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/search.php?q=faith&bsec=N&order=>

The other disciples therefore said unto him, "We have seen the Lord". But he said unto them, "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe".

And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace be unto you".

Then saith he to Thomas, "Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing".

And Thomas answered and said unto him, "My Lord and my God".

Jesus saith unto him, "Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.
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Another brief statement, from Jesus' disciple Matthew, also conveys this emphasis on faith:

*... for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.*³³⁷

Here Jesus seems unlikely to have been referring to actual mountains but to be speaking metaphorically to illustrate that there is nothing that faith cannot accomplish. It's not surprising therefore that faith should have played such an extremely important role in the development of Christianity over the centuries. In the Middle Ages the relative significance of faith was debated in relation to the

³³⁶ From John, Chapter 20, Verses 24-29. The Official King James Bible Online: <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/John-Chapter-20/>

³³⁷ From Matthew, Chapter 17; Verse 20. The Official King James Bible Online: <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Matthew-17-20/>

importance of rational argument in apprehending religious truth. Two of the greatest thinkers of the time, the Christian saints, Anselm of Canterbury (c.1033-1109) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) held somewhat differing views, the latter believing that the existence of God could be proved by rational discourse. Anselm, on the other hand, held that commitment and faith are prior conditions to understanding the central truths of Christianity, preaching that:

I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe, - that unless I believed, I should not understand. ³³⁸

So rather than stating the more predictable *seeing is believing*, Anselm here seems to be suggesting that *believing is seeing*. In later centuries the cause of faith over rationality was taken up by others, among them the Catholic mathematician and scientist Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), who argued that:

The heart has its reasons which are unknown to reason ... It is the heart which is aware of God and not reason. That is what faith is: God perceived intuitively by the heart, not by reason. ³³⁹

Nevertheless, within Christianity faith is rarely about the act of seeking direct experience of Ultimate Reality, tending to refer to doctrinal matters that relate to specific parts or sections of the teaching. Was Jesus brought into the world through virgin birth? Did he heal the sick and bring life to the dead? Is the Roman Catholic belief correct in holding that the consecrated wine in the rite of Eucharist literally turns to the blood of Christ when it is dispensed to the communicant?

³³⁸ St Anselm of Canterbury. Versions of this saying are frequently cited - in this case the quotation is from the Roman Catholic website <http://biltrix.com/2012/04/21/saint-anselm-of-canterbury-man-of-faith-seeking-understanding/>

³³⁹ Quoted in Brown C (1973) *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*. Inter-
varsity Press, London, p.59.

Buddhism, on the other hand, has been far more concerned with the direct personal experience of Ultimate Reality:

*Zen, especially Rinzai Zen, emphasizes the primary importance of religious experience which will satisfy the human spiritual yearning, and it maintains that the essence of religion lies in religious experience.*³⁴⁰

Whilst faith has been advocated in traditional Buddhist thought as an important conduit to religious experience, the Sukhavati, or Pure Land School of Buddhism, a sect based within the Mahayanan tradition, holds faith to be *essential* to achieving Nirvana. The principle is that all our attempts to become a Buddha are works of the ego, whereas members of the Sukhavati sect might argue that all we need do is to have faith in the power of repeating the name of the sage Amitabha. And who knows, maybe for them this works? The principle is that since we are all essentially Buddha, all we need to do to enter Nirvana is to have faith in our original Buddha nature.

But why would faith work?

Perhaps like many things in life, the ideas in this book become much more feasible when viewed from the perspective of 'the believer'. In a sense, because a believer has faith in the object of their belief they find it much more palatable and understandable than any alternative viewpoint. This doesn't make them right of course. Nor does it mean the object of their belief is somehow made real (as we noted in Chapter 8, on Belief).

Nevertheless, it may be that in order to experience Cosmic Consciousness we must first be willing to at least open ourselves to the *possibility* that there's something to it - a point discussed further in the next chapter (Impossibility). In practice this means we must foster a spirit of receptivity, and more has been said about the development of a receptive state of mind in Chapter 20, Do-it-

³⁴⁰ Shibayama Z (1977) *A Flower Does Not Talk: Zen Essays*. Charles E Tuttle Company, Tokyo, Japan. p. 34.

yourself. Whilst some of the assumptions made in *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* can't be logically justified, we should remember that the logical approach to reasoning is ultimately man-made. And it can be man-unmade: it's not immutable and if we want to suspend, remove, reverse or rescind it, we can. And maybe, sometimes, we should jump outside of logic because Ultimate Reality may not be based on, composed of, or follow logical reasoning in any form. This jump is a manifestation of Faith. The final irony of life may be that 'the next logical step' in discovering Cosmic Consciousness for yourself is to dispense with logic and to believe, to have faith. And this is why a mental set characterised by receptivity on the part of the believer may be more important than anything else. Remember the professor in Chapter 20? He went to see a Japanese master to learn about Zen and watched in horror as his tea was served until it overflowed his cup. And when he protested, he was told in no uncertain terms that he was full of his own opinions and speculations and could not be shown Zen until he first emptied his cup.

But how do you go about emptying your cup? How do you become receptive and acquire faith? After all, believing in something is hardly a conscious decision.

.....

An interesting thing about faith in this context is that it may not be about believing in Ultimate Reality *per se*, but about suspending our disbelief in it. Is it beyond the bounds of possibility that, bizarre though it may be, to experience Ultimate Reality we need simply to access a *different understanding* of Everyday Reality, one that unites every aspect of it into a single totally interconnected whole? Is it possible that whatever you have known and experienced in the world - the apparent diversity and differences between people, objects, events and so on - could be seen in a different light? That despite all outward appearances they all just *could be* one fundamentally interconnected and inseparable Unity? Is it possible that they just *could be* reflections of the same thing seen from the standpoint of numerous differentiated perspectives? This possibility may seem

ludicrous at first, and that's ok. You only need to accept that it's not totally impossible. And how could you know anyway? The next chapter - Impossibility – will demonstrate that we're simply not in a position to say what is and what is not possible in the vastness of time and space.

Chapter 25.

Impossibility

Clarke's First Law: When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong.

Clarke's Second Law: The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible.

*Clarke's Third Law: Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.*³⁴¹

The above three laws of prediction were formulated by the celebrated English science fiction writer Sir Arthur Charles Clarke (1917-2008) and like many apparently flippant remarks they no doubt have more than a hint of truth about them. They also raise the question 'Can we ever say anything is absolutely impossible?' The point is, for us to be able to state this with confidence would require that we know beyond any doubt what limits can and should be imposed on what can and cannot be real - and without knowing everything about everything this is simply not possible. Whenever we attempt to place limits on *what can be* we are faced with an absence of criteria by which to judge the matter. Just because we haven't seen, heard or experienced something, and may not even be able to conceive of it, doesn't mean it's impossible. And ultimately, if we can't say something is absolutely impossible then we must accept the alternative that, in theory at least, it's absolutely possible. This idea is familiar to particle physicists, who might consider that in a universe with unlimited possibilities *everything that can happen does happen*.³⁴²

³⁴¹ Quoted from

<http://physics.about.com/od/physics101thebasics/f/ClarkesLaws.htm>

³⁴² See, for example, Cox B and Forshaw J (2011) *The Quantum Universe: Everything that can happen does happen*, Penguin Books, London.

However, it's also quite useful for our purposes in this book because here we're interested in exploring the possibilities around what may be, and what may not be, real. In fact, here we're particularly interested in exploring what we mean when we say something is real, and an example might help to clarify the issues.

The Celestial Teapot

Because something cannot be said to be absolutely impossible does not, of course, mean its reality is necessarily equal in probability with its non-reality, and Bertrand Russell has provided us with an admirable example to demonstrate why this should be:

*Many orthodox people speak as though it were the business of sceptics to disprove received dogmas rather than of dogmatists to prove them. This is, of course, a mistake. If I were to suggest that between the Earth and Mars there is a china teapot revolving about the sun in an elliptical orbit, nobody would be able to disprove my assertion provided I were careful to add that the teapot is too small to be revealed even by our most powerful telescopes. But if I were to go on to say that, since my assertion cannot be disproved, it is intolerable presumption on the part of human reason to doubt it, I should rightly be thought to be talking nonsense. If, however, the existence of such a teapot were affirmed in ancient books, taught as the sacred truth every Sunday, and instilled into the minds of children at school, hesitation to believe in its existence would become a mark of eccentricity and entitle the doubter to the attentions of the psychiatrist in an enlightened age or of the Inquisitor in an earlier time.*³⁴³

The point is well made and fair enough. But the value of a receptive mind remains: if something is not completely and utterly impossible, and of course nothing is, then we would do well to remember that it's completely and utterly possible. This means Unhappening, the non-existence of Time and our entrapment within Maya, whilst perhaps

³⁴³ Russell B, quoted in Dawkins R (2006) *The God Delusion*. Bantam Press, London, pp.74-5.

not probable, are at least possible and since they are offered here as *Exercises in Cosmic Thinking*, they remain valid.

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But the question still stands, when faced with two or more conflicting arguments, how are we to judge the most valid? And this leads us directly to the next chapter, Ockham's razor.

Chapter 26.

Ockham's razor

In the fourteenth century the English Franciscan friar and theologian, William of Ockham (c.1287-1347), outlined the methodological principle for problem-solving that has come to be known as 'Ockham's Razor'. This has been described as '*a principle of parsimony, economy or succinctness*' and states that in deciding between two competing hypotheses, the one that makes the fewest assumptions should be favoured. In other words, so long as both theories account for the phenomenon we're interested in, the simpler one should be adopted over the more complex one because, in general, it will be more susceptible to testing and so to falsifying if it is indeed false.

.....

In the final chapter that follows, the arguments being made throughout this book will be summarised. It will be suggested that the ideas put forward offer some benefits over other accounts of the nature of reality. In particular, the chapter will explore the possibility that Ultimate Reality as described here, has considerable merit in terms of parsimony, economy and succinctness.

Chapter 27.

A Likely Story

*It isn't unusual for philosophy departments to get mail from cranks, convinced they have solved the riddle of existence ...*³⁴⁴

So what?

What has this book had to say about the riddle of existence? What's really going on behind Life, the Universe and Everything? What do we actually know for certain and what *can* we know about the nature of reality beyond our personal whims, beliefs, dreams, hopes, fears and wishful thinking? How far can we trust religious dogma or scientific theorising to really get to the truth behind everything? And how far *can* they get to the truth?

At the start of *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* we read of Stephen Hawking's ambition. In his words:

*My goal is simple. It is a complete understanding of the universe, why it is as it is and why it exists at all.*³⁴⁵

How far Hawking, science and the collective wisdom of mankind has gone in achieving this goal has been discussed in these pages. But the ideas in *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* originate not just in the teachings of our greatest thinkers - they're also in accounts given by the most ordinary of people. What's proposed in the book is that the reality we so fondly assume to be *it*, can be thought of as some sort of illusion or at least as a rather pale reflection of *what's really going on*. This is not necessarily saying the world as we know it doesn't

³⁴⁴ Oliver Burkeman (2013) The man who solved the world. *The Guardian Weekend Magazine*, 19th October, 2013, London. p.25.

³⁴⁵ Hawking S (1985) The Final Question. Chapter 7. In Boslough J. *Beyond the Black Hole: Stephen Hawking's Universe*. HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, England. p.77.

exist at all, just that our conventional, everyday, understanding of reality is not the whole story. Whilst our five senses can be seen to provide only very limited, misleading and sometimes quite erroneous information about the world, the really significant illusions arise from *the way we think*.

Mindfulness, Now and Zen describes what this means and looks especially at the way we deal with the world by classifying and categorising objects, experiences and events. This process seems to work well enough in everyday life, but it's based on a couple of seriously suspect assumptions. One is that reality is inherently divisible in the way we each divide it up - an approach based on the unwritten and unacknowledged premise that the universe consists of innumerable but separate bits and pieces - chairs, cars, stars, thoughts, people, and so on. The second suspect assumption is that the inherent meaning of every object, experience and event we encounter, is identifiable not only from its individual characteristics but also from the characteristics that it does not have. Thus we know what 'dark' means because it's not only black but is also not 'light'. The argument is that although it enables us to get by in the world, thinking in this dualistic way, within a structure based on the oppositional concepts of yin-yang, may not tell us *how the world really is*. Added to this are the very common assumptions that not only does each of us exist as an independent entity, but also that time exists somehow on its own, outside the present moment and independently from us. The perception we each hold of ourselves as isolated egos and of time as consisting of 'the past, present and future' are so very much ingrained in our everyday way of thinking that they are rarely questioned.

The resulting (mis)understanding of Life, the Universe and Everything is known as Samsara - the illusion of maya - in both Hindu and Buddhist thought. In the western world, however, positivist scientific endeavour has traditionally had a powerful influence and the idea that human understanding could be mistaken on such a cosmic scale is hardly ever considered. There's no problem with this of course. The use of a word like 'illusion' suggests we're

somehow being misled or even wilfully choosing this erroneous path (a view that has spawned a plethora of religious doctrines around the concepts of temptation and sin). But *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* does not suggest there is anything wrong with the way we see the world; what it does suggest is that there's a greater, universal, indeed cosmic, understanding behind our everyday understanding, and that it's possible for every single one of us to experience this.

Possibilities

In this book we've looked at the possibility that behind the world as we know it lies an Ultimate Reality that's both beyond description and beyond ordinary conception. This Ultimate Reality is not made of anything, has no parts, was never created or caused and is not going anywhere. It seeks no final end for mankind nor does it select only the saintliest, nicest and kindest of us: we can all unite with Ultimate Reality.

In support of the assertions made in the book the various chapters have outlined a number of possibilities. In Chapter 4, What's really real, we were introduced to the idea that the entire universe could be no more than an idea – far simpler than thinking of it as somehow tangible. Chapter 5 dealt with Illusions and outlined the possibility that everything we believe to be real could really be only a screen, a veil of appearance that could fall away to reveal Ultimate Reality. Chapter 9 described how the existence of Time itself may possibly be quite erroneous because the only time there is, is *now*, and it's here and gone within the same timeless moment. Which means neither the present moment nor infinity exist in Ultimate Reality because they are each functions of the way in which we're programmed to think. In fact, the book has described how it's possible that our patterns of thinking are everywhere constrained by the limitations of Duality. The other side of this, the transcendental unity of Ultimate Reality, is posed as an alternative. Chapter 14, on Unity, has described how it could be entirely possible that, whether we believe it or not, in the end absolutely everything 'fits together' perfectly. Not just the big things, but every single moment - all the minutiae - from the vibration of every single atom to those seemingly

irrelevant thoughts, episodes and adventures we each experience minute-by-minute every day: why we dropped our glasses on getting out of the car, why we repeatedly encountered the person we were avoiding as we walked around the supermarket, why we won the lottery on the day we learned we had a serious illness.

Chapters 19 and 20 - Seeing is Believing and Do-it-yourself - showed us that the possibilities mentioned so far are only knowable through an intuitive and personal encounter with Ultimate Reality. This is because logical thought, rational analysis, the whole edifice of the Scientific Method and indeed any attempt whatsoever to 'make sense of things', can never lead us outside our entrenched patterns of dualistic thinking. These patterns guide our interpretation of every experience and fashion our every expectation of what reality can be. What's more, it's possible that rather than being simply *how we do things*, these qualities are actually *what we are*. Outside of this way of thinking there is nothing more, no me and no you because, as Chapter 7 (Ego) has explained, being an individual, separate, entity is a complete illusion. Nor can we expect to read a clear account of these rather peculiar claims because the whole thing is beyond words. This book is therefore, admittedly, no more than a doomed attempt at Describing the Indescribable.

But all is not lost: tried and trusted methods of approaching the personal experience of Ultimate Reality have been passed down to us across the ages. Whilst simple Faith may be accessible to the few and the use of Psychoactive drugs may appeal to others, the approach of Meditation, based on the very simple technique of mindfulness, is available to all who wish to use it. But it should be stressed that nothing in the possibilities described here and, especially, nothing in mindfulness meditation, requires the reader to believe in, practise or not practise, alchemy, astrology, magic, mystical energy line alignment, crystal consultation, shamanism, spiritualism or any other similar New Age (or old-age) practice or belief system. Whether they be real or imaginary, true or false, these are all irrelevant to the practice of mindfulness. Nor is it necessary to be highly intelligent or to have a deep piety, moral strength, purity of action, clarity of

conscience, optimistic approach to life or to have had a happy childhood. Mindfulness meditation is a practice requiring no specific or general religious belief or world-view. An atheist can practise mindfulness meditation just as well as a devoutly religious person.

Why should I take any notice of *Mindfulness, Now and Zen*?

As we saw in Chapter 26, Ockham's Razor states that in deciding between two competing hypotheses, the one that makes the fewest assumptions should be favoured. In other words, so long as both theories account for the phenomenon we're interested in, the simpler one should be adopted over the more complex one.

In this book the ideas behind Samsara and Nirvana, Duality and Transcendence have been outlined. These have been proposed in an attempt to describe and account for our experience of Everyday Reality in terms that do not require the acceptance of assumptions about the prior existence of Gods, demons or an afterlife. Within this book it's been suggested that the idea of Samsara, with ourselves and our fondness for dualistic thinking at its heart, offers the most simple explanation for what we experience. Not only does it account for everything we each know but it can be seen to be the most simple explanation for what we know of the way the universe works.

Furthermore, the concept of Samsara can be seen to encompass some profound religious teachings from across the globe and across the centuries, whether or not you personally believe these teachings to be literally true. There are symbolic elements within the story of Adam and Eve, for example, that duplicate elements at the heart of yin-yang. The ideas behind these two sets of teaching stem from very different religious traditions and are ostensibly unrelated. Nevertheless, whilst the book draws out some similarities between these conventionally unconnected narratives, it makes no suggestion that these similarities are necessarily *intentional*. The point is that the parallels between the two ideas - the account of Adam and Eve and the dynamics of yin-yang - can work just as well for those who take a literal interpretation as they can for those for whom the Adam and Eve tale is purely allegorical. It's also worth remembering that many

of these ideas are used in the text for their value as heuristic devices, as a means to facilitate our enquiry into that which cannot be said in words. So, for example, the existence or non-existence of Time, the truth or unreality of Unhappening and the literal understanding behind Adam and Eve are not the issue. Creation myths are used in the book as a metaphor or exercise to aid the identification of a greater truth. And so it is with specific words used in the text. The Hindu term Samsara has proved to be most useful in pithily summing up a whole range of ideas, but this doesn't mean Hinduism is necessarily the most potent religion. Indeed, whilst *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* leans heavily on several specific religious traditions, especially Zen Buddhism, it doesn't seek to endorse or refute any particular teaching, whether religious or not. Furthermore, which religion is 'most right' is not the point. Whatever helps us to understand the ideas described in *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* is what matters.

The paradox of duality

So how do we know an Ultimate Reality of the sort described in the book, exists? The answer is, not surprisingly, that this is a circular question, an attempt to describe the indescribable and conceive of the inconceivable. *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* aims to demonstrate the case for something that neither exists nor does not exist, that neither *is* nor *is not*. The point is that in our usual analytical mode of thought we can only conceive of something as either existing or not existing. This is the conceptual framework within which we carry out our daily lives and we have difficulty in conceiving of anything other than that which is within these dualistic parameters. But we are wrong. Because dualistic thinking is how we think, *what we are*, we cannot use it as a means to understand that which is neither *nothing* nor *something*, neither *nothing* nor *not nothing*, neither *something* nor *not something*. And because logic is itself part and parcel of this way of thinking, it cannot take us outside of duality. This suggests we should turn our attention to some of the alternative approaches discussed in the book, especially prayer, faith, meditation and, controversially perhaps, psychoactive drugs. Some or all of these

may enable us to surmount the constraints imposed by logic and dualistic thinking and to transcend their limitations.

Is this really possible?

Could it be possible that behind all appearances - *despite* all appearances - there lies a timeless reality, a changeless unity that is inherently beyond both words and concepts? This book has argued that this Ultimate Reality is not made of anything, nor is it made of nothing. It's bound by no rules of reason, logic or natural laws. It's not been created so needs no creator. It will never end because it has never begun. It's neither bound by time nor outside of time: it is transcendental. Because it encompasses everything, Ultimate Reality contains illusion - Samsara - and this is us. It's us who inhabit an Everyday Reality where the differentiation of objects and events is so much a part of experience that we're conceptually blinded to anything beyond the duality of yin-yang. We spend our time wandering and wondering on the ways of the world, on cause and effect, real and unreal, on salvation and damnation, all the while missing the obvious - that everything we think we know is a product of *the way we think*. And the way we think is *dualistically*. Indeed, we *are* dualistic thinking. There's no-one to whom dualistic thinking is happening: *we are it*. It's this core element of our nature that makes us ask: 'Who are we?', 'Why are we here?', 'Where are we going?' Indeed ...

... Why is there anything at all?

The concept of Unhappening raises doubts about our commonsense assumption that *anything* is actually happening. If everything that comes into being, simultaneously reverts into non-being, then surely everything that seems to us to exist will simply be cancelled out, in the way the mathematical constructs of +1 and -1 cancel each other out? But perhaps there's more to the question 'Why is there anything at all?' than simply concluding that nothing is 'happening' anywhere.

Mindfulness, Now and Zen has suggested that questions of this sort are founded on our unwritten and almost universally hidden (and erroneous) assumption that the essential nature of reality, Ultimate

Reality, must be based within the parameters of logic and reason, cause and effect, the passage of time, and so on. These are questions that could only arise within a cognitive set constrained by dualistic principles. If *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* has done its work, such questions as 'What was there before the Big Bang?', 'Why was there a Big Bang?' and 'Why is there an Everyday Reality anyway?' should be seen to be meaningless outside our dualistic world-view. Ultimate Reality, as described in this book, stands outside all that is relative and outside all that is absolute: it is transcendent.

So what is duality? It's the invisible structure upon which we hang our concepts and within which our cognitive processing takes place. Dualistic thinking in the everyday understanding of life is an important stage of learning for infant children; we seriously doubt there could be an alternative to it because it's all we know and all we have ever known. We see it all around us every day of our lives; why would we ever think it might not be reality in its entirety? But imagine a world in which all humans, like some animals, can only see in shades of grey rather than in the spectrum of colours we are used to. No doubt we would have developed a detailed language to describe the finer gradations in the range of shades we see, but all would nevertheless lie between black and white. Now imagine someone coming along and pointing out that in fact all the London buses so familiar to millions of Britons are not grey at all but are actually red. Clearly, no-one would know what they were talking about because everyone knows London buses are grey, and 'red' whatever that is, would be a concept beyond anyone's understanding. We would seriously doubt that there could be an alternative to shades of grey because grey is all we know and all we have ever known. We see it all around us every day of our lives; why would we ever think it might not be reality in its entirety? So it is with Duality. If you only know a world of up/down, black/white and Yin/Yang, you only expect, and only see, a world of up/down, black/white and Yin/Yang. This duality is the framework we have each contrived to enable us to make sense of our experiences. It facilitates the development of an Everyday Reality that can be shared between us, but the downside is that this actively prohibits serious consideration of anything that may

not be encapsulated within duality. And this is where non-duality comes in, along with those who claim to have experienced this. The question is, are they ...

Saints or sages, simpletons or psychotics?

No doubt we'll differ in the plausibility we each accord to those people who tell us they have seen beyond the constraints of dualistic thinking. Certainly in past times 'Seeing God', 'communing with the universe', 'escaping the confines of the ego' or whatever, might have rapidly provoked a stunning range of reactions, from reverence through to bemusement, rejection, psychiatric intervention and martyrdom at the stake. And perhaps one serious strain on our credulity has been the apparent inability of the individuals concerned to describe in simple terms what they claim to have witnessed. Somewhat surprisingly perhaps, it turns out that Ultimate Reality, the ground of our being, is completely indescribable in words. Chapter 17, Describing the Indescribable, considered this in some depth and attempted to explain why efforts to communicate the meaning of dualistic thinking have frequently been couched in analogy and metaphor. Some of the most authoritative attempts have been described in this book but we don't need to rely on the words of religious teachers or philosophers and sages from bygone ages to see what they were talking about. We can each see examples of duality all around us wherever we look in the world. Indeed, so universal is our experience of duality that we might well conclude that we're somehow entrapped within it. But are we really trapped, and would it matter if we were? We've already seen that everything is just fine as it is (in Chapter 15, on Absolute Perfection) and maybe we're quite happy with our life anyway and have no desire to escape the illusory experience of dualism.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁶ This perspective on life might remind some of the film *The Matrix* (Warner Bros, 1999), where the character Cypher is a crew member who becomes disillusioned with the bleakness of the real world. He double-crosses his comrades, betraying them to the Agents of the machines in exchange for a return to a life of comfort and illusion within the Matrix.

But those who choose otherwise are offered the possibility that Ultimate Reality really can be found outside the usual dualistic way we navigate our cognitive framework. It's said that when we transcend our usual way of thinking we can each know the sense of vibrant REALITY that is brought by Cosmic Consciousness, as well as the immeasurable intellectual illumination and the deeply personal, profoundly loving and unconditional acceptance that's found in Ultimate Reality. For after all, *we are it*.

The teachings of many who have known Cosmic Consciousness frequently bear testimony to the overwhelming sense of love, acceptance, mercy and beauty that the experience has shown them. Does this mean these are actual characteristics of Ultimate Reality or are they the nearest that words can come to communicating the experience of Cosmic Consciousness to those within Everyday Reality? Perhaps the description of Cosmic Consciousness as being one of overwhelming reality, love, joy and unconditional acceptance is the best we can do to describe the ineffable experience of transcending all conceptual understanding? Since this is essentially an experience of the pre-conceptual, within which all concepts, thoughts and ideas originate, it's perhaps inevitable that when we come to communicate it to others we have no way to do so other than by translating the experience into concepts and words. And straight away we're into the world of Everyday Reality, of Samsara, with all its inherent characteristics, categorisations, differentiation and duality.

**Although we can say what Ultimate
Reality *is like*, we cannot say *what it
actually is*.**

So, where are we now? The introductory chapters to *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* posed two basic questions concerning Ultimate Reality: *Does it exist?* and *How can you see it?* The question now is, have these been answered?

Does Ultimate Reality *really* exist?

Maybe Ultimate Reality is right in front of us all the time - the illusion being that we think we're not seeing it when, in reality, we are. It's as if we're on the side of Ultimate Reality that doesn't know itself, unlike the side called Nirvana that knows both sides as one (rather like the sound of one hand clapping). Unlike anything else - atoms, unicorns, gravity, flightless birds and fairies - the existence of Ultimate Reality is in a rather unique position. For one thing, it completely defies description, and for another its existence remains untestable. When it comes to judging the evidence for and against a hypothesis the usual approach might be to weigh up those factors that identify the characteristics of the phenomenon under investigation and to assess whether experiment and experience confirm or deny the presence of these. For most things this methodology is perfectly acceptable, but it makes very little sense when what we're looking at is *everything*.

However, one aspect that we should take into account in assessing the likely existence of the sort of Ultimate Reality discussed in these pages is *why* such a thing might exist. One way to phrase this question would be to ask why a deity of any sort would bother to create human beings, or indeed anything? Some might argue that for an omnipotent supreme being that is outside the confines of time and space, the whole thing - humanity, the world, the universe, time and space - all seem to be utterly pointless to the sort of God capable of creating and re-creating these and innumerable other entities without end.

But the concept of Ultimate Reality alluded to in this book is not a God in this sense. It's neither a 'being' in time nor a 'being' outside of time. Nor is it subject to the laws of cause and effect. Indeed, it's not a 'thing' in any sense. While it can be described as a Unity, as

Absolutely Simplicity and Absolutely Perfect, these are not separate characteristics because they are all part and parcel of the Unity. Nor should we assume that Ultimate Reality must envisage a final destiny for creation that would provide a final justification for the existence of mankind. Perhaps humanity has no ultimate destiny because we're there already: in a timeless state nothing is changing so nothing is going anywhere anyway. What this boils down to is that there are no grounds for us to make any assumptions whatsoever about the 'intentions' of Ultimate Reality. All such ideas are firmly rooted in Samsara; in the timelessness of Nirvana they are seen to be mere illusions.

But we can all see beyond illusion. Whilst many reports of Cosmic Consciousness have originated in wholly exceptional individuals, some quite ordinary people claim to have united with Ultimate Reality. This has apparently not required them to have a particular religious background or to be any more or less virtuous than any other human being. Nor have they been any less egotistical or any more devout or deserving than any other person, which does suggest there is hope for us all.

The question is, if they did it, how can you?

How can you see Ultimate Reality?

One of the main points described in *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* has been that, despite all appearances, we are literally living in the past. In relation to the present moment we are a sort of echo, a memory, a trace or a reflection. It's been suggested that the only way to grasp Ultimate Reality, to experience Cosmic Consciousness, is to Do-it-yourself, and it's in this spirit that the book has made great play of the role performed by Meditation in bringing us personally into the here and now. No claims are made that meditation is the *only* way to attain Cosmic Consciousness, nor that it's necessarily the best approach for everyone. Indeed, simple Faith, in the form of an intense and immediate belief in Ultimate Reality, may be a much more productive approach for some. Similarly, prayer, in its numerous forms, might offer many the most profitable approach to

spiritual experience. But at the heart of each of these is the development of egolessness - the loss of that sense of self that makes each of us so certain that we are separate from each other, separate from the world and separate from the entire cosmos. And whilst some might argue for the use of Psychoactive drugs, less controversial is the role played by simple acts of contemplation and reflection in the quietness of one's mind. The *Exercises in Cosmic Thinking* that have been outlined in the book are intended to stimulate such musings, in anticipation that ultimately this will enable our thinking to be more versatile.

Is there anybody in there?

The bottom line is that in our search for Ultimate Reality maybe the most important thing we can do is to stop looking 'out there' and start by looking in the here and now. Our fascination with science, and especially particle physics, as the route to knowledge of Ultimate Reality is reflected in (and maybe arises from) our continual search for truth 'out there' - in the world of tangible stuff, the world of phenomena. But in seeking Ultimate Reality in the material world, we've seen that the scientific method is seriously limited. It restricts our judgement of the acceptability of evidence for what *can* really be real to a tight set of rules, when we can't know in advance exactly which rules - if any - are relevant to the search for *knowledge of everything*. Add this to the exclusive focus on what is tangible and measurable, and you've imposed rigid and artificial boundaries on what sort of Ultimate Reality you can actually hope to find.

What it all boils down to is this: Stop looking out there! When Jesus said *the Kingdom of Heaven is within* he was affirming a particular piece of wisdom that's been passed down to us through the ages from many different religious traditions. And those who have spoken of this:

... have always told us the same message, repeated in a different dialect, using the metaphor of their time, using the vocabulary of their tribe, but it is always the same message. 'Turn off your mind.

*Step for a moment or two out of your own ego. Stop your robot activity for a while. Stop the game you are in. Look within.'*³⁴⁷

In simple terms: practise Meditation. Unlike prayer it requires no religious belief; unlike fasting it requires no physical hardship, and unlike psychoactive drug use it requires no external neurological stimulus. With meditation, everything comes quite naturally from within, but this does require the rigorous personal disciplines of perseverance, patience and persistence.



³⁴⁷ Leary T (1973) *The Politics of Ecstasy*, Paladin, England, pp.194-5.

Glossary

Cosmic Consciousness

Cosmic Consciousness is the immediate, awesome, world-shattering internal explosion of awareness that comes with the personal encounter of uniting with Ultimate Reality

As used in *Mindfulness, Now and Zen*, the term includes experiences that theologians from varying religious traditions will inevitably have referred to by a number of different names, including *Enlightenment, kensho, satori, revelation* and *awakening*. To the theologians concerned, these may well denote finely nuanced differences in experience or varying degrees of the same experience; some might refer to temporary glimpses, others might be near-permanent; some may have been purposefully encountered, some apparently stumbled upon by accident. But *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* makes no such distinction. If the experiences refer to the personal encounter of uniting with Ultimate Reality, then they are Cosmic Consciousness. And, within this state of consciousness, the illusory condition of life that is Everyday Reality is seen as it truly is and always has been, as Ultimate Reality.

.....

Enlightenment

Mindfulness, Now and Zen equates Enlightenment with the enduring experience of Cosmic Consciousness, though it's acknowledged that it has specific definitions within Buddhism, from where it's derived from the term *Bodhi*, meaning to awake to the true nature of reality. Several other words convey the meaning quite adequately however, including *kensho, satori* and *revelation*. Here, rather than speculating on the minutiae of definition, we take the pragmatic view that at some level all correspond with Cosmic Consciousness. We are not concerned here with whether, in the illusory state of Everyday Reality, this experience appears to be transient or permanent,

accidental or intentional. The important feature is that within this state of consciousness:

*'... Samsara, which is life as you know it, now becomes Nirvana, or life as it really is.'*³⁴⁸

The experience of Enlightenment is the final goal of the followers of Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. In the words of Fritjof Capra, for followers of each of these religious traditions:

*The highest aim ... is to become aware of the unity and mutual inter-relation of all things, to transcend the notion of an isolated individual self and to identify themselves with the ultimate reality ...*³⁴⁹

.....

Everyday Reality

Everyday Reality is Samsara. It's the world as you know it, unlike Nirvana, which is Ultimate Reality - life as it really is. Everyday Reality is the home of the Illusions of Time and Duality. But in truth there is no difference between Everyday Reality and Ultimate Reality since the latter encompasses the former and can be thought of as every expression of it compressed into the moment of Now. Everyday Reality is the illusion of maya, which is what prevents you from seeing the Absolute Perfection and Unity of Nirvana.

.....

³⁴⁸ From an un-named modern-day Buddhist monk quoted by Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, p.84.

³⁴⁹ Capra F (1981) *The Tao of Physics*. The Chaucer Press Ltd., Bungay, England, p.23.

Maya

As used in this book, the term ‘Maya’ refers to the claim that the external world we each experience is illusory or somehow unreal. This idea has a very long history in the East, where it lies at the root of yoga and meditation. It raises questions about the validity of our senses in delivering us a true version of reality and refers to our universal tendency to be deceived by appearances. These include the belief in our sense of self, our Ego, and in the validity of our understanding of the external world. Nevertheless, this does not mean the world as we know it - our Everyday Reality - is not there or is not in some sense real. The world of maya is real but is more of an ignorance of the true reality behind things. Like the image reflected in a mirror, the world as we perceive it is really there, but is very far from being the whole story.

.....

Nirvana

Nirvana simply is ... like the 'kingdom of heaven', it is here and now ... Nirvana is a purely mystical conception; it cannot be conceived or expressed; it can only be realized by what can only be called mystical intuition. ³⁵⁰

Nirvana is Ultimate Reality. It’s the world as it really is, unlike Samsara, which is the Everyday Reality of life as you know it.

.....

Samsara

Samsara is Everyday Reality. It’s the world as you know it, unlike Nirvana, which is the Ultimate Reality of life as it really is. Samsara is the home of the Illusions, of Time and Duality. It’s the illusion of

³⁵⁰ Happold FC (1964) *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England. pp.80-81.

maya, which is what prevents you from seeing the Absolute
Perfection and Unity of Nirvana.



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This book explores how each of us knows what we know. It considers claims that we see only illusions and that behind it all there is an indescribably beautiful reality – both a God and a Nirvana. The book goes on to explain in simple terms how these two ideas, so different on the surface, may not be so different after all.

Ranging across the centuries the book draws on the teachings of a wide variety of thinkers from vastly different cultural, philosophical and religious backgrounds. The message they each bring is distilled into one consistent story in which our everyday sense of reality can be thought of as a deceptive and rather pale reflection of what's really going on.

And although our thinking processes are seriously limited, the book describes how we can all transcend these limitations and experience Ultimate Reality through the simple practice of mindfulness – for mindfulness meditation offers freedom from thinking.



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