

TOWARD
ENLIGHTENED
RELIGION

for enlightened, sustainable religion

Introduction

Just before beginning on this book, we had completed an article representing a completely different—in fact, opposite—viewpoint. Its subject was the death of religion. We felt convinced that religion was dying—and that it needed to die. In the world as a whole, religion is doing exactly what it should not do: contributing to conflict. And it is holding humanity back, spiritually, in many respects. Further, religions are losing the power of true inspiration, with the result that church memberships are declining. Clearly, many people are as disillusioned with religion as we are.

But in this book, we've put our shoulders to the wheel of *saving* religion—in a form that is beneficial, healthy, and sustainable. It occurred to us that, although historically, most religions fade in potency and eventually die (even while possibly continuing to exist, and operate), that death does not need to happen, and indeed, it *should* not happen. For in truth, religion only dies when, in one important respect or another, it has failed humanity. Probably, it has failed to evolve a system of support that is effective in helping people grow spiritually. Or it has failed to be sufficiently adaptable to keep up with the times—and more importantly, to keep up with God. All of these failings are so common, they are expected—and *not* corrected.

The last item—keeping up with God—is crucial, because God is not dead. God is alive and well. And it is characteristic of Divine nature that God is not static, but adaptive and evolving; just as God's creation, because of *its* Divine nature, is not static, but adapts and evolves. The living God, if heard, can guide religion to solve any other problem that might exist. But religions, to their shame, usually teach that God's old word is God's last reliable word—and that, therefore, it is unnecessary to “keep up with

God.” That belief spells spiritual death—both for a religion, and its adherents.

A true religion must remain sufficiently alive and God-attuned as to keep up with God—not just as a source of ongoing inspiration, but in order to receive *ongoing* Divine guidance.

That brings us to the subject of this book: what are the inescapable requirements of any true and sustainable religion?

It is possible—indeed, inevitable—that all religions should achieve both universality, and sustainability—and both qualities are needed for either to be true. So, in this book, we explore the nature of an ideal, universal religion.

In considering these matters, and with some helpful guidance from God, we have been blessed with many useful insights into the nature of sustainable religion. We wish to share them with the hope of stimulating discussion, further thought, and favorable adjustments towards the ideal of universal, unitive, ennobling, and truly progressive religion—in short, truly sustainable religion.

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Enlightened Religion

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The Basis for Universal Religion

Much good can come from specific techniques, practices, or rituals, but make no mistake: insofar as any spiritual tool is allowed to become identified as essential, superior, or potent in itself, religion is deluded and divisive, and its members are misled—because that is untrue. The True Way is universal in its goals, and truly flexible in its means.

For the sake of humanity, religions have always created specific rituals and practices to meet certain human needs. And that, in itself, is necessary and appropriate. For example, an organization might create a group nature walk or social hour to fulfill the need for human fellowship. But needless to say, the value on group recreation can be expressed in infinite forms, any of which can perform the same function and fulfill the same need. Remember that.

The same can be said of spiritual practices, such as meditation and prayer: spiritual practices come in infinite forms, to suit the temperament and needs of various people. But religion makes a crucial mistake, however inadvertently, when it loses sight of the fact that a *particular* practice is not, in and of itself, the actual value. Any technique, however precious, is in reality only one of many means—possibly infinite means—to the same ends: upliftment, healing, Divine connection, cosmic Unity. Again: remember that.

Now obviously, there is some comfort in hearing, “*This* prayer is what is most effective; *this* technique is what is absolutely necessary, and other techniques are inferior to it.” Such claims

may also bestow a reassuring-but-false sense of superiority over others whose practice is different. But listen: every lie has its price, and those particular lies cost humanity dearly. As long as human beings get caught up in the value of *specific* techniques and rituals, they will tend to develop a magical, addictive, and spiritually dangerous attachment to them. And as long as there is excessive attachment to any particular practice, there will be division among the different religions.

In that case, you might hear people declare: “The right way to worship is to bow to Mecca five times a day.” Or: “You can’t be saved unless you have been baptized in water.” That kind of thinking is exactly what turns religion against religion, race against race, even family members against each other. And truly, such notions are an affront to the living power of Almighty God, Who wants all God’s children to love and respect each other—and Who deserves credit for power beyond any conceivable technique.

Truly enlightened religions of the future will never claim any monopoly on efficacy or technique. In its true, essential form, religion fills *universal* human needs. While it explains—in *principle*—all that is spiritually required for human beings to be healthy, happy, and connected to God, it honestly recognizes that the specific means to those ends are, in fact, interchangeable. Symbolic items can serve as useful reminders, but true spiritual practice will never depend on any *particular* talisman for its power.

And of course, what is actually important is *whether* human needs are fulfilled—not *how*, specifically, that is done. If we clearly understand and hold dear what is important—which is to say, *essential*—we can hold lightly what is unimportant, or non-essential.

When the true function of upliftment is provided in many different ways, and no one is nervous, skeptical, or upset about that, we will have entered the age of enlightenment. And conversely, as long as we cling tightly to the specific way spiritual needs are

addressed, religion excludes many people rather than embracing all people—and therefore cannot possibly qualify as a universal, sustainable religion. Besides, such narrow-mindedness offends human intelligence.

To appeal to a man’s intelligence, you can say to him, “A prayer such as this will help you. And here are two hundred prayers that are *like* this one, in two hundred different languages. The important thing is not what techniques you use, but whether you use them with true sincerity, dedication, and focus.” You see? Welcome to universal religion!

By virtue of broad and deep understanding, the universal religion of the future will offer a path that can easily be customized to suit the needs of different individuals and different cultures. And its members will clearly understand the universal principles in operation in every instance. They will also recognize, truly, that their particular form of worship or practice is not, then, superior to—or even essentially *different* from—the forms practiced by other members of the same religion in other cultures. And nor is their Way different, essentially, from the Way of *other* religions.

Any prayer can be helpful, in specific ways. Many practices can be helpful, in predictable ways. But no practice can possibly be as essential to humanity as true understanding of life, and proper attitude and orientation toward all things. Only a spiritually appropriate orientation to life protects us from the dangerous pitfalls of superstition and small-mindedness. While followers may derive some sense of security from the bold notion that a given technique is the best and most effective technique in the Universe, real security comes *only* from understanding, compassion, and righteousness.

All power rests on true knowing, true seeing, true understanding, and living connection. These are deep wells, not superficial puddles. How can we have a unified humanity unless

humanity knows how to move to higher levels of principled understanding, so as to draw strength from those deeper wells? Let us do so, together.

The significance and the spirit of practice

What's significant about any ritual or practice is, precisely, the significance of it. For example, the significance of a birthday song is our gratitude for the birth and personhood of the one being celebrated. If someone joined in the song without understanding its significance, the resulting mindless participation would hardly add to the joy of the occasion. Similarly, if the deep significance of any spiritual practice is unknown, what healing power can it have? Here, then, is a whispered conversation one would not wish to hear in church:

One worshipper asks, "Excuse me, why are we doing this?"

A second worshipper shrugs and replies, "I don't know!"

Clearly, the uplifting power of a practice whose meaning we don't understand is negligible.

Apart from significance, yet related to it, is the *spirit* behind the performance of any given technique. Obviously, the greatest, most beautiful prayer, song, or sacred mantra could prove practically useless if uttered in a spirit of, say, *boredom*. And any prayer, mantra, or sacred song could be less than useless—down-right destructive, even—if uttered in a spirit of *contempt*.

So two things, together, constitute the real value and impact of any spiritual practice: one, the knowledge of its significance; and two, the spirit of its performance. The rest is insignificant, except for this: *If* a person attaches significance to the *form* of an action, that is misleading and binding. In that case, the only certain result will be inflexibility and separation.

Toward harmony among religions

True harmony among the religions of the world will happen as true intelligence awakens in humanity, enabling all to see its rituals and practices in true perspective. Every religion will recognize that all religions exist only to meet the basic needs of all human beings. No religion will place excessive importance on *how* these needs be met, as long as they are met *by some means*. When humanity discards all the superficial religious prejudices that currently blind us, the light of Truth will more easily reach us, and show us all the way to heaven.

Integrated Life

All action is unselfish if it is done for the greater good. This principle applies to every form of SELF-service—even taking a bubble bath.

In considering the essential purposes of religion, we have found two concepts from Buddhism extremely useful: *Daijo* and *Shojo*. *Shojo* refers to “the lesser vehicle”—emphasizing the individual’s spiritual search. *Shojo* also implies the *vertical* or ascending nature of that search. *Daijo* refers to “the greater vehicle”—emphasizing acts of service and compassion to others, or even to “all sentient beings.” *Shojo* focuses on the *horizontal* plane of life.

These two seemingly opposite (yet complimentary) orientations are found in all religions; and ideally, all religions—and all people—need *both* aspects in generous measure. Normally, however, one orientation or the other strongly predominates in any given person or creed.

All paths that emphasize personal enlightenment could be called *Shojo*. They are indeed *vertical* in orientation, stressing the need for self-effort, self-discipline, and self-culture. The practitioner of a vertically-oriented path prays to God for illumination, for understanding, for self-healing, and does forms of spiritual practice aimed at helping oneself, as an individual, to ascend, or to be raised up, to be healed; to be made happy, whole, full, well, good. Monastic lifestyles and self-improvement programs are, in essence, *Shojo*.

The New Testament admonition, “Seek ye first the Kingdom of Heaven” is often construed as supporting *Shojo*-style spirituality.

But in general, Christianity is fundamentally *Daijo*—or horizontal—in orientation. It, like other *Daijo* religions, are (horizontally) expansive, humanitarian, faith-based, and Grace-based. They place primary emphasis on world service, charity, and universal love. Also consistent with *Daijo*-style orientation is an emphasis on salvation by faith—rather than by self-improvement efforts: “By faith alone shall ye be saved.” This lends confidence to those who prefer to serve others, rather than embracing paths of self-focused disciplines like prayer, meditation, and the like. Practitioners of a *Daijo* faith are not content to sit in a cave, in search of personal enlightenment; rather, they want to serve others. Feed the poor. Exercise social responsibility. Their primary motivation is for humanity service, and social healing.

The conflict between ascent and expansion is illusory

Horizontal religionists tend to relate to self-culture and self-discipline as selfish; while vertical religionists often construe horizontal efforts, like humanity service, as detracting from the pressing purpose of achieving salvation through personal enlightenment. However, due to the Unity of life, the seeming opposition between *Shojo* and *Daijo*—or between self-service and service of others—is, in essence, illusory.

Self-service, performed with the larger good in mind, should clearly not be called selfish—but could be called *Self-ish* (meaning, in the best interest of the One and All). For example, when a mother takes a vacation without her family, the well-being she gains would of course benefit her family, too. Recognizing that, her apparently self-serving act becomes unselfish.

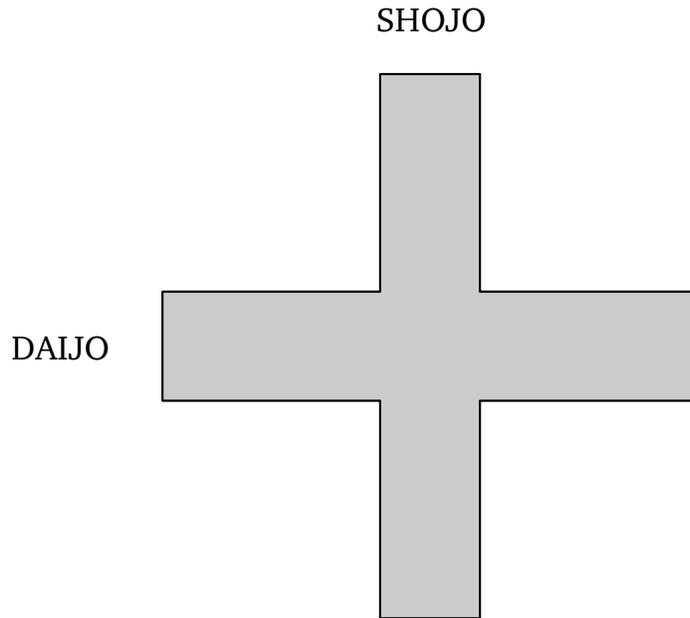
Any time acts of apparent self-focus are truly motivated by love, what is apparently selfish is, in reality, not selfish at all. Such is the impact of intention upon action: intention determines the meaning of action. *Shojo*, when motivated by compassion, becomes *Daijo*; self-service becomes service to others.

Likewise, true acts of compassion to others benefit oneself; thus, *Daijo*—other-benefiting—becomes *Shojo*—self-benefiting—in *effect*. For example, when serving her family’s happiness, the mother improves her own peace of mind and happiness. In that case, she experiences that her benefit is equal to theirs, and in fact inseparable from theirs. Thus, her service to her family is truly consistent with her own personal interests. What’s good for the goose is good for the gander.

However, what if a person believes, as many do, that self-benefit and other-benefit inherently conflict? Then problems will surely result. For example, when a mother takes a vacation but feels guilty about it, her guilt robs her of the very well-being that would otherwise benefit her family. As a result, she takes away with one hand while giving with the other. Likewise, if she serves her family with a sense of personal loss or depletion, then once again, she’s giving to the Self with one hand, while taking away from the Self with the other.

The mystical cross

The vertical axis of *Daijo* and the horizontal axis of *Shojo* form a cross. The vertical axis ascends to heaven; the horizontal takes care of the affairs of earth. The true form of spirituality is realized only at the center of this cross, the common point on the two intersecting lines, where the two motives of *Daijo* and *Shojo* come together and are seen as one. Universal religion must come to this realization, for only then can the perennial dilemmas of religionists be truly resolved and finally transcended. Failing that, the implicit conflict between vertical and horizontal religions can only continue.



It has been a common mistake of traditional spiritual seekers to think this way: “Even though God *is* all of life, one can connect to God *without* connecting to all of life.” That is indeed false. One can no more separate God from Creation than one can separate a mother from her beloved children, with whom she is fully unified. True spirituality is vertical connection and horizontal connection, *both at once*.

The intersection of vertical ascent and lateral expansion is the only point of True Divine Power. From that intersection, Divine Power and Love radiate in all directions—or, more accurately, in all places at once. In reality, because God is everywhere and life is everywhere, that point of intersection *is* everywhere. Still, it is the *consciousness* of Unity that unlocks Divine Power. Until and unless one stands at the point of the intersection of this cross, in

True consciousness of Unity, one can neither know God truly, nor provide substantial benefit in service to anyone.

God consciousness provides for Unitive connection—even identity—of giver and receiver, the server and the served. In Unity consciousness the true servant of God lives, thinks, and acts. And Unity consciousness is itself the source of (or requirement for) all true benefit. Indeed, what truly heals *is* the recognition of Life as One.

This brings to light the deeper significance of the expression, “What’s good for the goose is good for the gander.” There is, in truth, no difference whatsoever between the individual good and the good of all. What’s good for one and all forever stands beyond those dualities. True knowing does not partake of duality-based dilemmas, presumed contradictions, and presumed conflicts.

Unitary giving

In a Unified spirit, “others” are not seen as “other,” but recognized, truly, as OneSelf. In this Unified spirit, all service is understood to benefit one and all—including the server. Absent, then, is the mentality of sacrifice that creates impressions of loss, depletion, resentment, and martyrdom. Honestly, who does not feel healed by healing, cheered by giving cheer, and helped by helping? No such person exists.

Self/other separation is false; Self is Unitary. No event impacts exclusively upon one little self or another little self. Rather, all that happens impacts upon the Self, and pertains to the Self. If your mate suffers, you suffer; and if you gain, your mate gains. There is only benefit, or non-benefit—to *all*. So, how can we say that there is any possibility in the entire universe other than Self-benefit, or *not* Self-benefit? Any given action either benefits the Self, or not. And obviously, action that benefits Self is the only activity that *is* beneficial (to anyone and everyone).

Thus we recognize the simultaneity of all true benefit or harm. We recognize the illusion of narrow self-interest: all acts that appear to benefit *only* one person will ultimately prove hurtful—hurtful to one and all. And we recognize the universality of all real gain. There can be no difference between what could be called *true* personal gain, and the gain of all. All true good works benefit one and all *simultaneously*.

Relief from dilemma through Unity consciousness

The false distinction between actions described as “self-benefiting” vs. “other-benefiting,” and the infinite dilemmas it spawns, is, in itself, the root and epitome of human suffering. Indeed, the idea of disunity makes every possible act—“spiritual” or not—into some kind of dilemma. For in disunity, giving necessarily implies losing; receiving implies taking away. And of course, if you felt you were taking away from anyone in the world—yourself or anyone else—that negative thought would shadow the heart and trouble the mind. Then, if mind and heart were thus darkened, how could that fail to negatively affect one’s associates, and all? No matter what type of dilemma a person fashions, no matter what type of worry, anxiety, or concern a person incubates within themselves, how can such a cloud not, in fact, be a detriment to all?

In contrast, one who acts in the spirit of Unity does not act in dilemma, for he lacks the basis for dilemma. He lacks the *basis* for guilt, shame, recriminations. He lacks the *basis* for narrow self-protection, or for martyrdom, resentment, or guilt. He lacks the basis for all these fundamental forms of negativity that take away. That basis is disunity. In truth, the very presumption of otherness or disunity invariably detracts. Honestly now, in disunity, what else can one do but give at one’s own expense, or gain at the expense of others?

So, a mother who has the conventional duality assumption will feel guilty when taking a bubble bath or a holiday; and, she'll feel resentful when serving her family generously. Feeling that woman's life, you wonder, "Exactly where does she experience peace? In which aspect of the vertical-horizontal cross will she experience joy?" When every form of self-service or vertical ascent, even yoga, could create some sort of cloud of guilt in her, and when every form of world service or generosity could create some form of anxiety about being drained, or resentment about giving too much, having to sacrifice too much, etc., peace is nowhere.

Even when she has just finished her personal upliftment rituals, and she goes out full of energy to give what she's accumulated, she realizes that she is beginning to use up her energy, and will soon run out. It's like this: In a stroke of good fortune, you received a large inheritance. So, for the time being at least, you felt quite wealthy—wealthier than most of your friends. In a spirit of generosity you decided to take them all out, provide nice dinners and gifts for everyone, etc. But, even though you felt joyous and celebratory and generous in doing these kind acts, a little bird on your shoulder kept reminding you that your assets were trickling away. You realized, "I can carry on like this for maybe six months, spending freely on my friends, but after that I will be dead broke. The party will be over." That premonition is what the mother experiences upon returning from her retreat, full of energy, and ready to serve brightly. In the back of her mind, she believes she is now beginning a process by which she will deplete herself.

In order to give happily, the mother must know that in giving she is not, in fact, "running out"; she is not being drained. The only way that she can achieve that security is if she does not *believe* that she is emptying herself as she fills her children and her husband.

She must realize “As I give, so I receive.” She must know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that all acts of giving to the Self benefit one and all—which is to say, benefit oneSelf. “I’m giving to oneSelf today, and therefore oneSelf will be filled and benefited.” She can say that in her bubble bath, and again when she’s dishing out soup to the family.

Unity consciousness does not erase the need for what could be called personal self-culture, but it certainly eliminates the chronic feeling of desperate need for it. Someone asked a spiritual teacher, “Swami, in your busy life, when do you get a chance to meditate?” He replied, “I’m always meditating.” Another person asked, “You are always taking care of others. Don’t you want to take care of yourself?” His reply: “When am I *not* taking care of mySelf?” Such is Unity-realization.

Live at the point of intersection

As that teacher knows so well, all the benefits associated with an act of love accrue to one who acts in the spirit of love. Consider the profound effects of a loving attitude and orientation on a father who is going out and cutting firewood, or earning money for the support of his family. If he *knows* he is indeed expressing love in the form of this service, his knowing will transform actions that could otherwise be grumbling obligations, characterized by resentment, into happy, sincere acts of love. Gone is nagging dilemma: “Why can’t I be meditating right now? I’m having to chop this wood because my family needs me to do it. This is interfering with my relationship to God—etc.” Such a dilemma certainly deprives the father of the real joy of unselfish giving.

Without Unity consciousness, we cannot maintain a wholesome life, either on the worldly plane or in ascending spiritual practices. Without Unity consciousness, which connects us to Divine energies, what we give on the horizontal plane is flat and mundane. And by the same token, without Unity consciousness,

when we go on the ascending path, we lose touch with the world, and how our God communion is helping the world. Then, having completed our retreat, we will return to the world feeling a sense of difference. That entire cycle occurs within the realm of delusion.

Why set the good purposes of your life in conflict and contradiction, when you must, of necessity—for your own satisfaction and the satisfaction of all—fulfill *all* of them? Pure power is found at the intersection of all higher purposes: God connection and humanity service. Live at that point of intersection and you need not be divided—like a mother who, while nurturing her children, wonders when she will take her next bubble bath, or her next vacation; or like the monk who resents serving instead of meditating; or like the social activist who shuns self-culture because it seems “selfish.” Instead, you will be like the mother who is aware of the fact that in serving her children she is serving God and herself, and that when she takes her retreat, she is serving her children.

As awareness of Unity gathers conviction, dilemma loses force. Soon it becomes possible to quite seamlessly *live*. Thereafter, you maintain expansion and God-connection in everything you do, staying unified in spirit with all, always. When you’re acting in the spirit of love and compassion, the light of God is there with you. And when you’re communing with God, you are creating abundance to share. Thus, God communion and personal exchange become one and the same.

All true religions, and true spiritual practitioners, must know and practice this Way of Unity, for it is not, in essence, “practice” at all—it is, at last, the Real Thing.

Daijo-Shojo: Alternation or Integration

“Religion has until now been divided into these two types, vertical and lateral, but it is necessary finally to unite these two elements to form a cross. The true religion is at times vertical, at times lateral; it adapts itself to the time, place and situation, diversifying through myriad forms and metamorphoses to accomplish its work in the world. This cruciform, united way of working forms the true and deepest meaning of the worship of Kannon [Quan Yin].”

— *One Hundred Teachings of Meishusama
Shumei religion*

Christianity, the most common religion in America, is *Daijo*—outward and expansive. That quality serves to offset the fact that, culturally, American society tends to be quite the opposite: ruggedly individualistic, strong in self-expression, and often self-serving. Thus, the Christian religion works to compensate for the chronic selfishness of its population.

In the Orient, we see the same inversion, but in reverse. Eastern cultures are *anti*-individualistic: it is expected that the individual should be oriented toward group harmony and the good of the whole. But traditionally, Eastern religion is *Shojo*—inward and ascending; extremely individualistic; concerned primarily for self-culture and self-salvation, and extremely weak on the salvation of others, the upliftment of the world, charity, and the like.

Spiritual imbalances lead to alternation

Then comes yet another reversal, in which prevailing religious or spiritual extremes tend to give rise to opposite spiritual movements. In Japan, for example, the most modern religions are *Daijo*. These newer sects are like Christianity in that they are *expansive*. They emphasize compassion, humanity service, social responsibility, and world salvation through missionary work. Perhaps that is a compensatory reaction against the traditional, hyper-individualistic approach to spirituality.

In the United States a similar flip-flop has occurred: the *Daijo* religions of Judaism and Christianity have been rejected by many American seekers, and replaced with an entirely individualistic idea of spirituality—a form derived from, or at least similar to, ideals of the *Shojo*-style Eastern traditions. Thus, many spiritual seekers in America today are self-centered, meditation-oriented, and strictly concerned with personal salvation. Their concern is, “Seek ye first the kingdom of Heaven.” Or, “I must save myself! Lord, beam me up!” Such are the spiritual ideals not only of many so-called “new age” seekers, but even of many modern Christians, whose concern for their fellow man is indeed miniscule compared to their desire for personal salvation.

The need for balance

Neither religious extreme can possibly satisfy the heart and soul of humanity. True spiritual health depends on finding a balance—or rather, an integration—between the upward and outward directions. Fortunately, human beings tend to be sensitive to our own inner imbalances; but unfortunately, we also tend to try to correct imbalances by abandoning our current approach and embracing its *opposite*.

The corrective tendency is in some respects positive: it shows sensitivity, observation, flexibility, and adaptation. But in it we see another, less wholesome, human characteristic: the tenden-

cy to swing between unhealthy *extremes*. We can explain that tendency this way: the human mind often sees a problem in a fashion that is partially true, but somewhat over-simplistic. When it notices that it has gone too far in one direction, instead of moving to the middle position, it goes straight to the opposite pole. And that just sets us up for an equal but opposite reaction in the future. The resulting habit of endless alternation has a significant flaw: it tends to prevent human beings from achieving the integration needed for *spiritually harmonious* living.

A balanced way of living

A balanced, healthy life combines *Daijo* and *Shojo* in an integrated whole. We are vertically connected to God, given to healthy self-culture; and at the same time, we are horizontally compassionate, socially sensitive, and responsible to the human family, both at home and abroad. There is no real need, in that life, for extreme fixations.

Essential for true integration is the understanding that *what's good for the goose is good for the gander*. In other words, what's good for the individual is good for the collective; and what's good for the collective is good for the individual. In truth, as we have pointed out, there is no conflict between individual good and collective good. And indeed, *both* kinds of good need to be fully realized, or else *neither* is fully realized.

We mentioned, too, that in the cross comprised of the *Shojo* or vertical axis and the *Daijo* or horizontal axis, only the point of intersection is the truly enlightened position. This is the position to which all human beings must aspire, and which all must achieve, for true spiritual rightness to exist.

The *enlightened* way of thinking departs from the standard way of thinking as follows:

We recognize Daijo—or compassionate service—as an indirect form of self-culture. That is, to serve humanity is a good form of self-discipline, and is by no means lacking “personal” benefit, much less detrimental to self-interest.

And by the same token,

We observe that Shojo—or appropriate self-culture—is an “indirect” form of compassion. Whatever is TRULY good for the individual benefits the whole. The whole is, after all, nothing more or less than the sum of its individual parts.

Thus we see these opposites as a yin-yang: a perfect wholeness. *Shojo* and *Daijo*—personal upliftment and humanity service—are one.

We must recognize, at last, that true enlightenment is, in reality, a *simultaneous* achievement of social and personal responsibility. Each religion, and each person, can and should unify all spiritually valid objectives into a life that is whole and harmonious—both personally and socially. That enlightened life gracefully combines social rectitude or social harmony *and* internal well-being (including higher consciousness). This ideal of a balanced, perfectly integrated life reflects the highest truth about the Unity of life altogether. It is coherent.

Refreshing Religion

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Passion Brings Life to Religion

Every successful religion started as a gathering of bees to the nectar of spiritual realization. Back then, that nectar flowed copiously through the enlightened founder of the religion in the form of energy, blessings, teachings, and spiritual techniques. The members of the religion became, in effect, the lucky beneficiaries of a spiritual fortune.

Obviously, the challenge of religion is to keep inspiration alive in the group in subsequent years, after the passing of the founding elder. Unfortunately, the common pattern is this: the flame of inspiration burns low even as energy output runs higher. In its “maturity,” the organization’s lateral expansion continues in the form of charitable outreach and missionary work; but, unfortunately, the fervor and commitment that fueled the religion’s initial success gradually fade. Thus, spending is high, while earning (at the level of spiritual inspiration) is *less* high. Spreading thinner and thinner, spiritual power is diluted.

What next? What, if anything, can the religion’s followers do to reverse the trend? The only effective course is to face the truth. Instead of imagining that their contact with God is sufficient when it no longer *is*, admit that Divine contact has diminished, and work hard to re-ignite it. How? With the same passionate devotion and commitment that the founding elder had.

In every case, the original elder had a passion to find Truth absolute, regardless of the personal consequences of finding it. And his or her pursuit of Truth was anything but limited, or dogmatic. But, unfortunately for the followers, once the religion is well-established, the “need” for passionate pursuit of truth is officially obsolete. Having inherited the fruits of the founder’s ef-

forts, the religion's membership assumes that—since the truth has been discovered for them, and a simple, easy way has been revealed—they can achieve spiritual satisfaction *without* passion. All they have to do, presumably, is read their book, do their rituals, and follow some minimal rules. They've been told, "Here is the Truth, all pre-packaged for you. You don't have to long for it or work for it; you don't need the uncompromising willingness to risk everything for it. Just be a member, pay your tithe, and you'll be in with God."

This should not have to be said, but, of course that is not true. Real God connection is fiery in nature. It's powerful, not mediocre. It's *alive*. And in reality, God communion cannot be pre-packaged. People can only experience it directly as a result of their own desire. Each individual member of every organization, church, or group needs to secure his or her own connection to God.

Passion, not technique, lights the fire

Naturally, founders of religion take spiritual techniques they found beneficial, and offer them to others. And generally, the promise is made, "If you do this, you will experience this." But can any enlightened one share a sublime realization just by writing down some teachings and offering a few easy techniques? The answer, unfortunately, is no.

This point should never be overlooked: Although people will gratefully take up the path described, they will rarely follow it with *nearly* the passion, purpose, and sincerity that brought enlightenment to their prophet. How, then, can they expect to enjoy the same marvelous results? Strong passion for enlightenment allows for enlightenment; great desire for God makes strong God connection. Truly, it's our intention, our passion, our sincerity to which God responds. And indeed, God *would* respond to passionate intention no matter *what* particular technique was employed—even if *no* technique whatsoever was employed.

There is nothing wrong with declaring the excellence of this or that technique or process. But one crosses the line from inspiration into confusion when representing any technique, however grand, as a sure way to spiritual fulfillment—or any belief as sufficient to enlighten a person. Instead, every effective religious organization must fan the flames of passion in its members. To neglect to do so is religious *malpractice*. And only at its own ultimate peril does a spiritual group depend largely on technique, doctrine, and belief for success.

Artificial desire doesn't count

Now that we've called attention to the value of true passion, beware of fake passion. People can and will, at times, try to talk themselves into some sort of emotional state that emulates true passion. We see this in many religions that have included the display of passion in their method. But of course, the real requirement is to fan in oneself *sincere* desire—not artificial emotionality.

Any parent can tell you about fake passion. Small children who want something for Christmas will walk around the house for hours crying, to make sure they get what they want. But you know how children are: they may throw a tantrum to make their point, then suddenly see something distracting, and stop crying immediately. Only later, remembering their original purpose, they resume the task of crying.

Children will work themselves up because they feel they must in order to accomplish their objective. But, how deep is their concern? Is it profoundly sincere, or is their strategy merely manipulative? Surely, if their concern were profoundly sincere, they would not be so easily distracted. They would, instead, be inconsolable.

Sincere religious desire is by no means a childish tool of manipulation. Nor is it an act of social conformity in which, for example, everyone in church is supposed to pray passionately, get down on

their knees, cry, and wail, and console each other. Granted, in that context, there is social *pressure* to be impassioned, and under social pressure, many people will try their best to behave as expected. But that doesn't make their passion true and effective. Clearly, if passion is to be employed for its tremendous potential, the person *must* be sincere. Absolutely so.

Single-minded passion

A powerful secret of passion lies in the power of single-mindedness. A person could have considerable passion, but also, in contradiction to it, a certain fear or unwillingness. For example, a little boy is crying to get another cookie, but he also wishes to go outside to play. Thus, he feels slightly ambivalent about having to make this passionate display of desire for the cookie. He may worry, "If I keep this up, I might lose my chance to play outside."

Similarly, when some people go to meditate, they may already be thinking about the cup of coffee they plan to enjoy later. Thus, a dilemma arises: "How long should I sit here for the purpose of God realization, when in fact I am hankering for a cup of coffee?" It's not that a person shouldn't enjoy a cup of coffee, of course; it's just a matter of priorities. Obviously, any person who feels significantly distracted by such a dilemma is inwardly divided. And under conditions of inner division, it's unlikely that any spiritual practices could prove optimally effective.

Cultivate the passion of a God-realizer

The relationship to God is like any other relationship: it may be superficial or deep, dull or radiant. Its quality depends on the extent of our passion and willingness to enter into the relationship.

A woman can get out of bed and sincerely but casually say to God, "Lord, please help me be good for the people at breakfast this morning." Now, given her interest in the matter, God will certainly respond. But she should honestly expect that the response will directly reflect the power and sincerity *behind* her request.

Thus, a casual, half-hearted request receives a relatively weak response.

What if that same woman got up in the morning and sincerely prayed, “God, I will kill myself if I fail to be Your beautiful and effective representative at breakfast”? You can well imagine how such a strong desire would, most likely, evoke from God a strong reciprocal response. [Please note, this is *not* a recommendation for the questionable practice of extorting favors from God under threat of suicide! A woman who feels a lofty desire with that *degree* of fervor is exemplary, that’s all.]

The point is, no person in the course of human history has ever achieved spiritual illumination except insofar as his or her passion sufficed for it. As you may know, the Buddha said, “I will sit under this Bodhi tree until I am enlightened or die—whichever comes first.” And he *meant* it. Likewise, all of the world’s great religious leaders had true passion—deep and sincere desire to fully realize Divinity. Thus, what they desired came to pass. It was the passion to which God so strongly responded. God does indeed respond to all desires in proportion to their power and sincerity.

Building passion in the faithful

Passion is such a personal matter; *can* religions actually do anything about the passion of their members? We have often observed, “You can give people almost anything *except* true, sincere motivation.” Nevertheless, you can *help* others build motivation if you simply tell them the truth: that intense motivation is, in fact, the primary requisite for enlightenment. If people fan within themselves the intensity of desire that a God-realizer has, then they, too, will become a God-realizer. What we *really, really* want, we *really, really*, get. This is an unfailing truth.

Why Religions of Compassion Lose Power— and How to Prevent that Loss

Traditionally, the Christian faith is watery (outward and expansive), while Buddhism is fiery (inward and ascending). Christians, in general, have very few mystical practices, and rarely make formal efforts at spiritual self-discipline. They focus primarily on compassionate outreach. Hinayana Buddhists, and many other mystic traditions, do the opposite: they focus almost exclusively on self-culture and spiritual realization on the path of vertical (or mystical) ascent.

In some religions, the imbalance between the two motivations is being corrected. For example, the Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of the traditionally esoteric Tibetan Buddhists, is significantly compassionate (horizontal) in orientation, and actively involved in public teaching. Perhaps this new development is a form of a compensation for past religious focus on self-centered spiritual seeking.

Christianity shows less signs of correcting its course. It takes the intelligence of higher consciousness even to recognize when you are off track. When religions become too horizontal and neglect the vertical achievement of Divine connection, spiritual and intellectual brilliance is seriously compromised. Religious organizations that attend exclusively to the horizontal plane of action end up relatively dull and complacent.

When there is insufficient fire in an organization, there is not even enough bright intelligence to see the *need* for more fire. In that case, when a religion suffers from profound ills, the church elders barely recognize the true source of those ills. They say either, “Huh? What’s wrong? I don’t see anything wrong.” Or, “We have great problems, but we have no idea how to fix them.” Thus,

for want of sufficient fire, organizational leadership lacks the intellectual keenness to even recognize how perilous their situation really is—or what must be done to correct it.

In such a state of affairs, the *only* hope is to reinvest in the fire element.

In the beginning, there was fire

In the previous chapter, we pointed out the obvious: that almost every religion was *all* upreach and *no* outreach in the beginning. In the beginning—and surely *before* the beginning—the founder meditated and prayed passionately, trying to get in touch with Divinity. And it was *truly* a result of that passionate desire that spiritual enlightenment was achieved, and the founder’s intellect was illumined. The result was tremendous power, magnetism, charisma, and profound insight of heavenly scope. On the basis of all that, a religion was formed: a conception of heaven, born through an enlightened mind.

Thus, when the religion first starts to reach out, it has tremendous resources of Godly passion and heavenly knowing. That makes it relatively easy to do tremendous “horizontal” mission work—just as it may be easy for a young person, in the peak of fitness, to stay up all night, pay no attention to diet, etc. But as the spirit of enlightenment fades, the same amount of effort in the lateral plane, or even less, easily drains the vitality of the religion (particularly when, owing to the considerable demands of missionary work and internal administration, the attention focused upon the maintenance of vertical God-connection is reduced).

The life cycle of a religion of compassion

So you see, the first leader powerfully attended to the need for Divine realization, and achieved it. That alone set in motion all the horizontal activity which attracted followers, established a religious or spiritual organization, and created a salvation mission, complete with various associated activities.

But as the God-connection weakens, the fire at the heart of the organization weakens. The founder's successor, being, in general, *less* enlightened, *less* strongly connected to God, may be only half as brilliant, half as charismatic—and those estimates are optimistic. And the third leader may be only a quarter as brilliant, or less. The trend is obvious, and almost inevitable.

It is easy to see why, given that trend, the organization gradually loses spark, drive, energy, charisma, drawing power, and spiritual credibility. Inspiration can remain high only so long as the organization is powerfully God-connected, presently God inspired, and Spirit-fired. Otherwise, before long, the leadership becomes more administrative than truly inspired. It may even become more political than truly spiritual. Eventually, the organization may be run by paper-pushing managers who are, spiritually, rather dull. Lackluster. So the spiritual fire dies out.

To avoid such a fate, religion must *avoid* becoming excessively (or exclusively) involved in world service to the detriment of God connection. When, by virtue of excessive lateral investment, the religion has spread itself too thin, even its compassionate outreach is compromised—in spirit. And, where spiritual power is concerned, spirit is everything.

Balance is necessary

How can people do true good for the world when they lack *powerful* God-connection? Any person who is not yet fully aware of the Unity of life has a tendency to gradually become distracted, drained, and disconnected from effective God-consciousness while serving. In that case, humanity service loses its spark, and the religion loses Divine power.

To correct that tendency, it behooves every religion to encourage in its congregations some sort of healthy alternation between self-culture and care for others. Members must maintain a balance in which direct God connection is personally reinforced,

regularly and repeatedly—and ultimately secured, individual by individual.

Granted, in many if not most religions, the weekly worship service represents a sincere attempt to re-inspire their participants, and reconnect them to God. And it does help. Certainly, “Where two or more are gathered in my name” is a true principle, full of resonance, and positively uplifting. Unfortunately, in virtually every religion, with these nominal observances comes an unspoken assumption that “this is enough.” Enough for what? Consider this: If once-a-week worship really were enough to keep God connection truly vibrant and powerful, *no* religion would be in the mess that almost all religions are in today. Any religion that disregards the need for authentic God-connection is in grave peril, ignoring the truth of its own experience.

In addition to group worship, people need the experience of personal prayer, personal meditation, and the like. And since the relationship with God has a personal aspect, no individual should ignore the fact that relationship with God needs to be personally maintained—and that their experience of God needs to be a profoundly *personal* experience.

Build high the flame

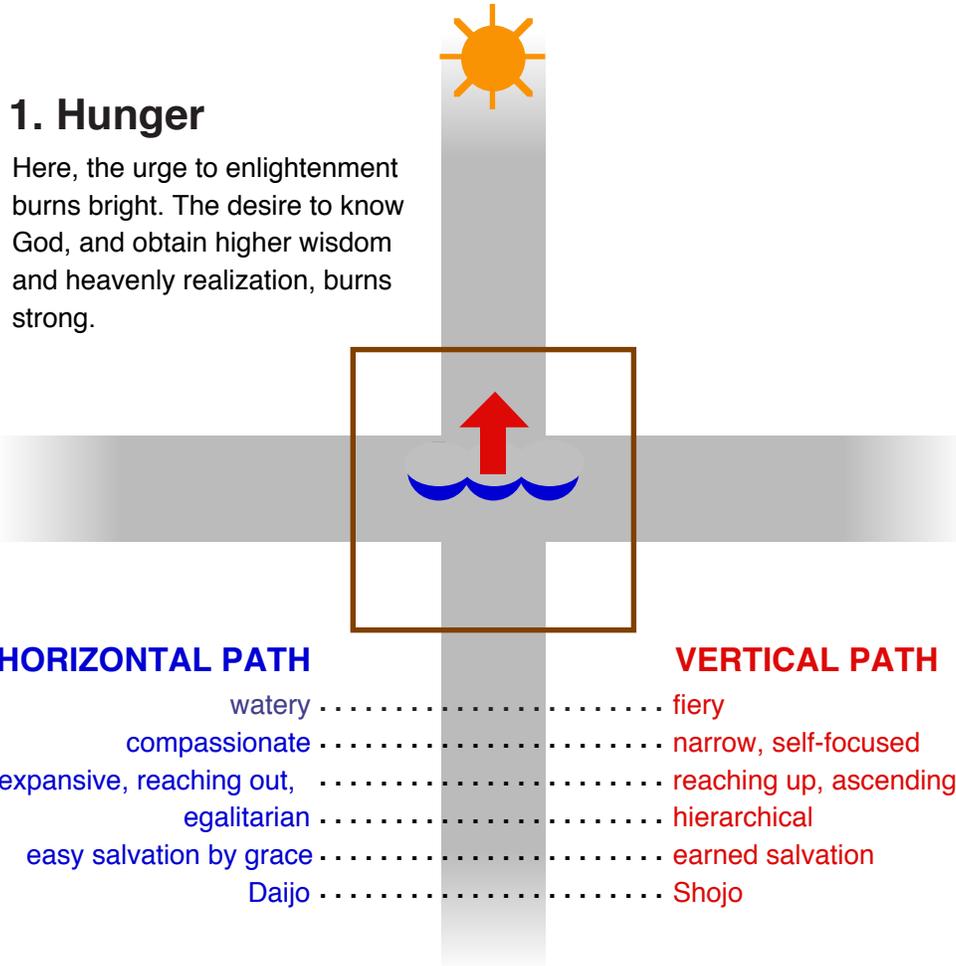
Realistically, at a given time, the members of any spiritual organization represent varying degrees of passion for God-connection. This is natural, and inevitable. Yet those that have the *most* passion are, without a doubt, the most fertile soil. That soil should be cultivated as intensively as possible since, in reality, the hope and inspiration of all the members—and the vitality of the organization as a whole—rests squarely on their shoulders. A church that does not see fit to support a few qualified individuals as spiritual lights *deserves* to sink into the oblivion, making way for the *next* dynamically inspired religion.

The way to fan the flame of organizational inspiration is to encourage those with real passion to pursue higher spiritual experience, and support them fully and gladly in so doing. For immersion and focus, let them set other responsibilities aside insofar as possible, at least periodically. An atmosphere of prolonged retreat and intensive Divine communion should be liberally provided for those that desire it, and will make good use of it.

What magnificent empowerment the individual receives when steeping in a high communion with God! From time to time, many people have enjoyed that kind of communion. But only the *regular refreshment* and *maximal intensification* of that communion would make any church member more like the blessed one who started the religion in the first place. This inspiration is precisely the energy the entire group depends upon for its future.

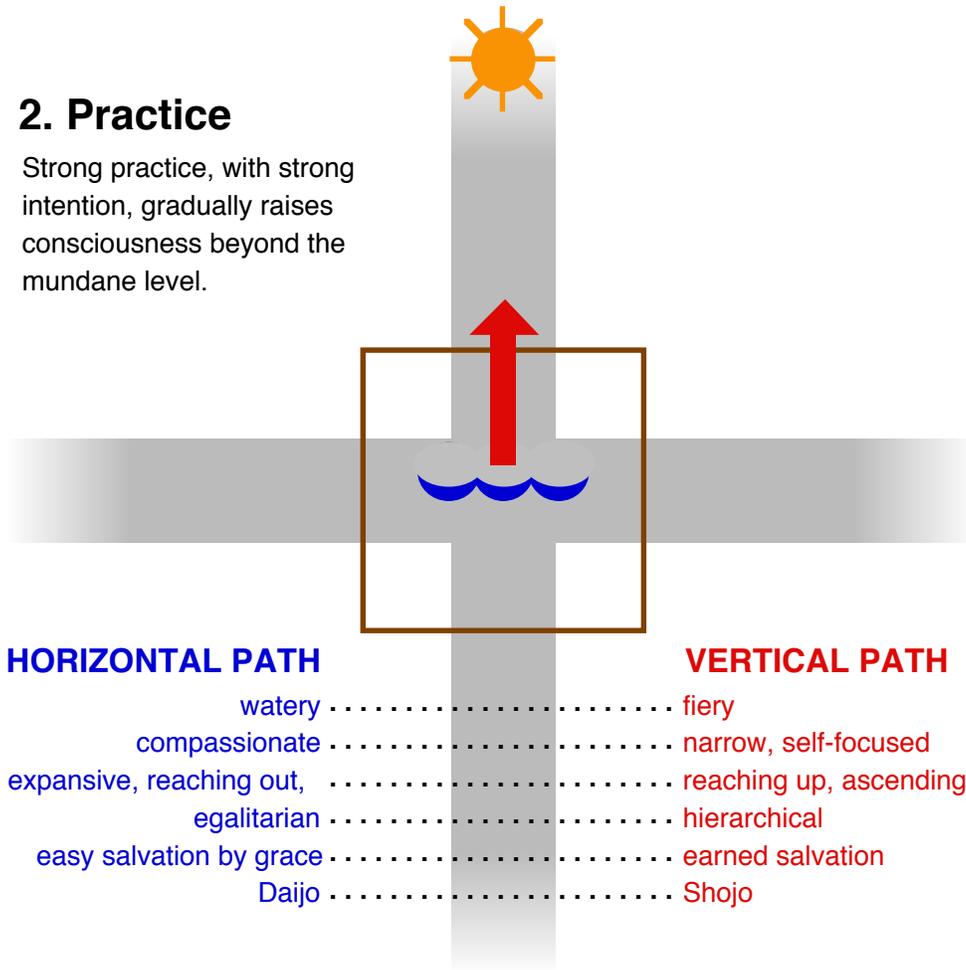
Let all who will, turn strongly to God. Let them establish in themselves the true flame of passion and devotion that was the original impulse and force and power of the charismatic leader, and of his or her most inspired followers. Let them find the true energy and spark that inspired and spiritually empowered the *initial* horizontal outreach of the religion. And then, keep the flame alive. This is the way for any organization to offset the inevitable predations of time and mediocrity: to forever start afresh.

The following diagrams show how a religion rises and falls when the zeal to share expands but God connection fades.



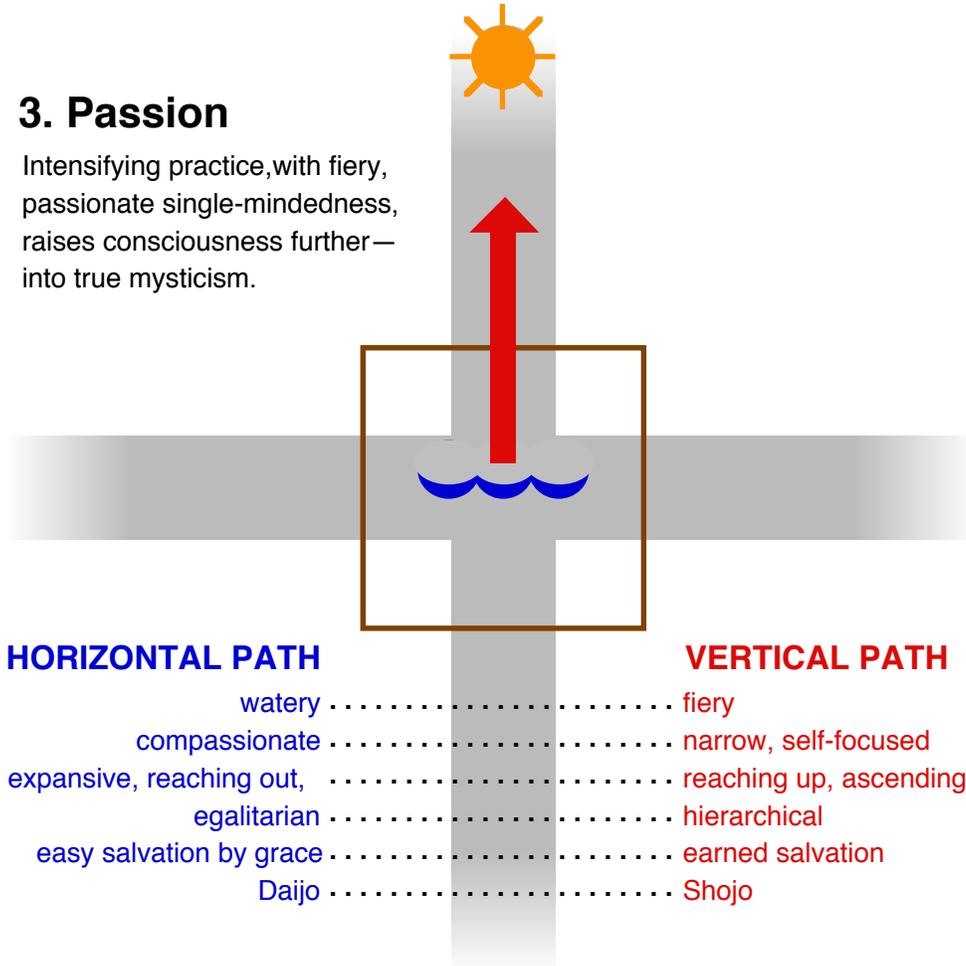
2. Practice

Strong practice, with strong intention, gradually raises consciousness beyond the mundane level.



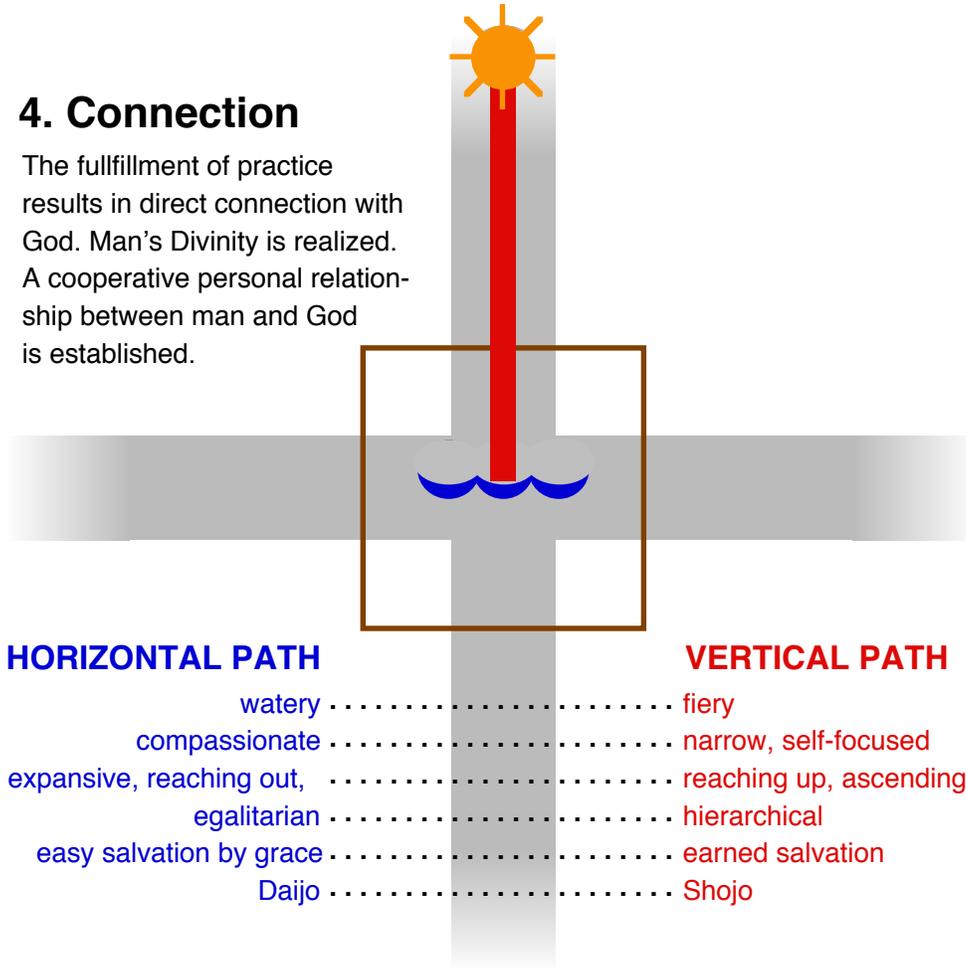
3. Passion

Intensifying practice, with fiery, passionate single-mindedness, raises consciousness further—into true mysticism.



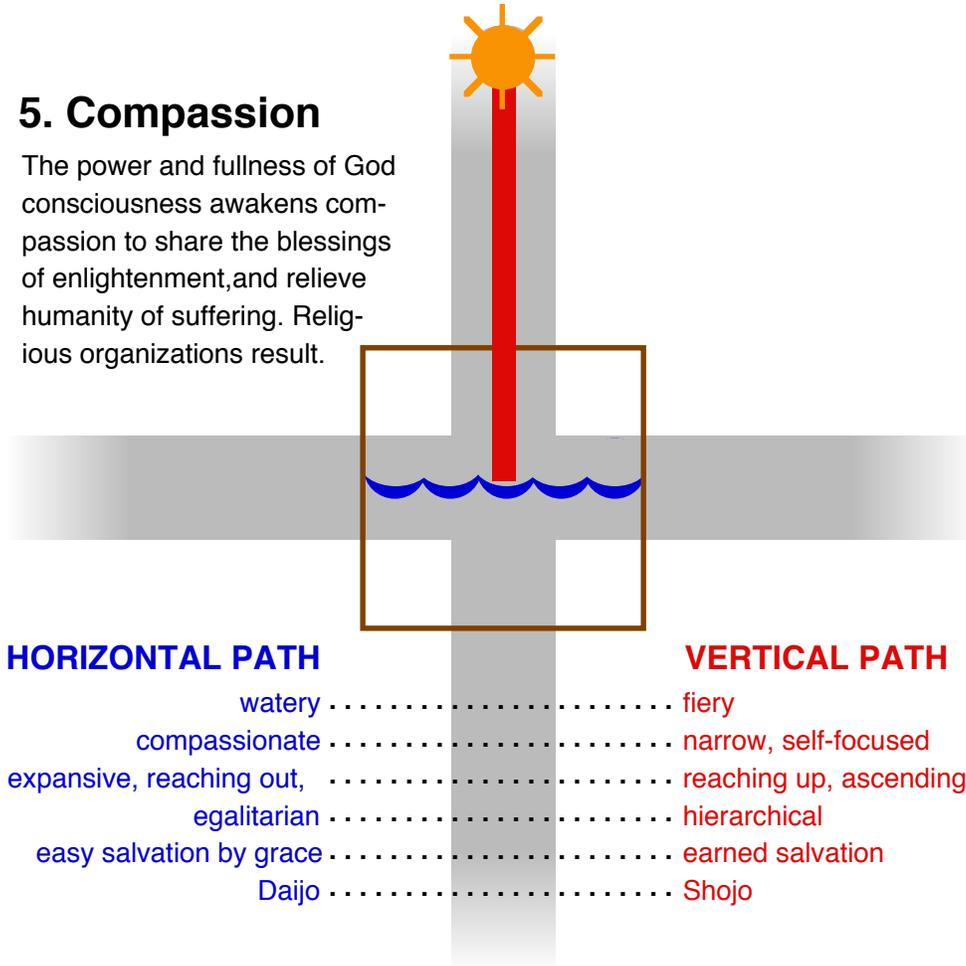
4. Connection

The fulfillment of practice results in direct connection with God. Man's Divinity is realized. A cooperative personal relationship between man and God is established.



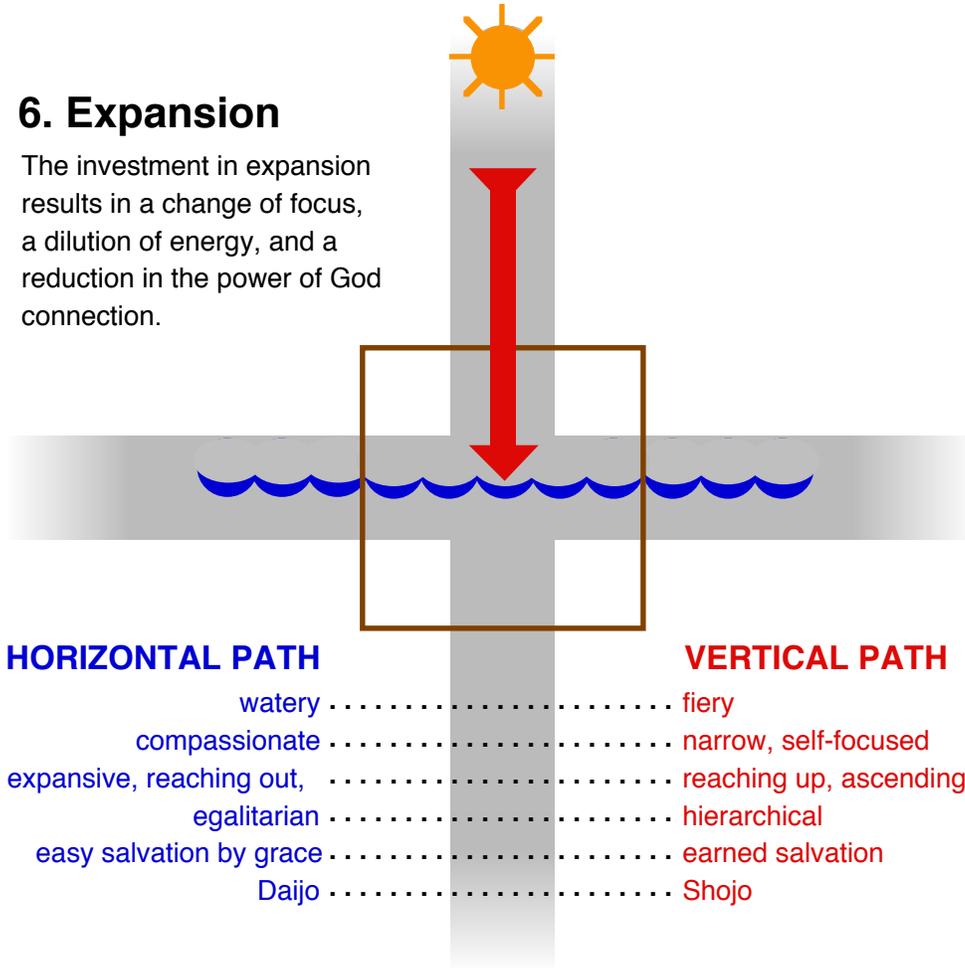
5. Compassion

The power and fullness of God consciousness awakens compassion to share the blessings of enlightenment, and relieve humanity of suffering. Religious organizations result.



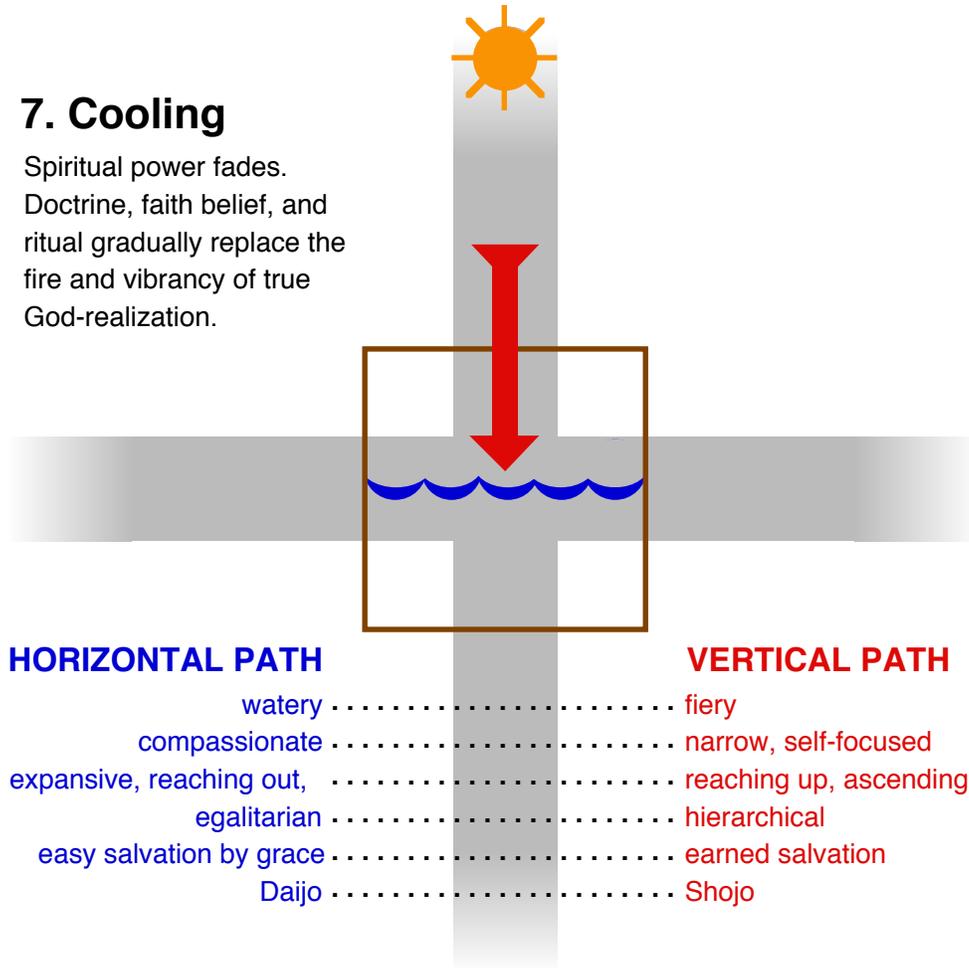
6. Expansion

The investment in expansion results in a change of focus, a dilution of energy, and a reduction in the power of God connection.



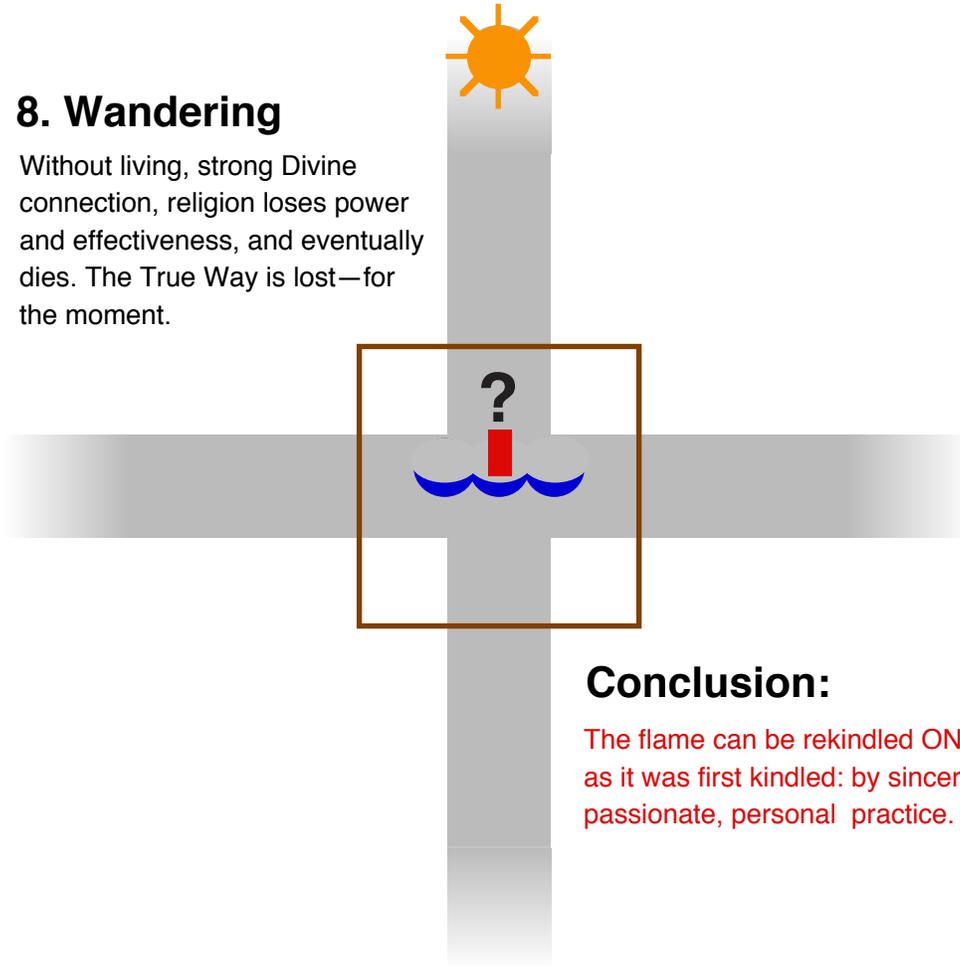
7. Cooling

Spiritual power fades.
Doctrine, faith belief, and
ritual gradually replace the
fire and vibrancy of true
God-realization.



8. Wandering

Without living, strong Divine connection, religion loses power and effectiveness, and eventually dies. The True Way is lost—for the moment.



Conclusion:

The flame can be rekindled ONLY as it was first kindled: by sincere, passionate, personal practice.

Problems of Selfish Motivation in Religion

Obsessed with self-interest, common culture endlessly repeats its old, familiar mantras: “Live for number one. Do nearly everything you can to advance your personal interests.” Government carries that same selfishness into international politics: “Plunder other nations for the sake of our country’s national interests and security.” Sure, that’s ego talking, and we may not expect much better from “worldly” authorities; but we certainly expect more from our spiritual sources.

Religion and spirituality give us messages that sound better, spiritually, and sometimes they are. But when religion and spirituality appeal too strongly, or exclusively, to self-interest, a line is crossed. There’s nothing wrong with self-interest—*healthy* self-interest, that is. But *excessive* or *exclusive* self-interest is terribly unhealthy. So, for religion and spirituality to promote self-interest is neither wise or noble, but shameful.

For example, religion often says: “Be saved! Be forgiven!” And, “Just have faith, and God will give you what you want: unlimited forgiveness, eternal life, and wealth!” Do you see anything that’s *not* selfish in the appeal of those promises? Popular interpretations of traditional spirituality have a similar ring: “The purpose of life on earth is to get *out of* life on earth. Become enlightened, and beam up out of this mess!” With that comes this reasonable-sounding advice: “Your best contribution to humanity is to withdraw from this world, and enlighten *yourself*. There’s no other way for you to be truly good for anyone else.”

Granted, self-culture and periodic retreat have a valuable place in spiritual life. We have strongly supported that in this book. But how can narrow-visioned pursuit of “spiritual” goals

provide the proper foundation for salvation or enlightenment? Impossible! Surely, people who desert their rightful obligations to family and friends in the good name of pursuing enlightenment won't find it. We're fit to be enlightened only if we're willing to be good to others! Furthermore, no consoling mystic experiences can make up for neglecting our rightful, *humanly spiritual* purposes/obligations.

Best and worst reasons for religious membership

What attracts people to the spiritual path *should* be, first and foremost, the naturally expansive spirit of altruism. Never consider the benefits of joining a religious organization too selfishly. Be cautious when thinking, "How will joining this group improve *my* life?" Think again.

Joining any religion, or taking to any spiritual path *primarily* to gain personal advantage is inconsistent with the highest spiritual ideals. After all, any true religion calls everyone to live a life of unselfish love and service. How sad, then, that people often embrace otherwise unselfish processes, techniques, or organizations in a selfish spirit.

Granted, without some selfish appeal, attracting membership is more difficult. And we can honestly admit that self-benefit is perfectly okay. God certainly wants each of us to be happy and fulfilled. But when it comes to the purposes and methods of religion, please note: In the long run, "success" in recruiting selfish people for selfish reasons becomes the undoing of religions.

What sort of person responds to the promise of great personal gain for minimal sacrifice? These are poor converts—the "rocky ground." Selfish people don't tend to thrive on spiritual teaching because they can't relate rightly to its meaning and spirit. They can't make the best use of technique, teaching, understanding, fellowship, service activity—any part of it. While filling church seats, and giving the ministers plenty to do, they drain organi-

zational energy and resources, reducing the available energy for accomplishment in *either* direction—the “horizontal” dimension (of charitable outreach) or the “vertical” dimension (of spiritual ascent and authentic spiritual experience).

Selfish people generate ninety percent of the problems on earth. Thus, it is easily possible for an organization that has enthusiastically swelled its ranks with selfish people to spend *most* of its time and energy dealing with their problems. Inevitably, the administrative burden for maintaining selfish members grows in proportion to the “success” of recruiting them.

What would the religions’ founders think?

Religion should always make its primary appeal to man’s moral sensitivities and soul hunger for God. That, one hopes, is obvious. And yet, in this day and age, so much of religions’ appeal is to the narrow self-interest of possible members. How did religions go so far off track, when their own prophets—the men and women whose lives and examples inspired religions—clearly *knew* better, and *lived* better? Those great souls knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that in their hearts all humans want to live beautifully, in harmony with both man and God. They knew, too, that human beings were endowed with the intuitive knowingness and the feeling sensitivity to confidently set out on the high road—*even*, if necessary, without the aid of external authorities. And they were also completely aware that no one *needs* to go it alone, because God’s real-time guidance is freely available to all. Surely, such wise beings would never have deliberately created such mediocre institutions as our religions have become. How did that happen?

It happened because of ego. Even a messenger of God can’t sell true soul values to ego-driven people. Even God Him or Herself can’t hold people to responsibilities they’re not willing to live up to. At the bottom line, humanity has demanded, creat-

ed, and aligned itself with social and religious institutions that support ego values *instead of* true values of heart and soul.

In a world of people dominated by ego and self-interest, religions “succeed”—or rather, achieve widespread popularity—by catering to ego. The rapid spread of modern, popularized Christianity around the globe offers a marvelous example. Billy Graham, the father of modern evangelism, personally preached to over two hundred million people in almost two hundred different countries. Wherever he went, great throngs came to hear his simple message of salvation by faith belief. What he told them was, “Jesus Christ loves you. All you have to do is accept Him as your Lord and Savior, and you will be saved.” The response to this easy, no-money-down, no-payments-later offer was *huge*. After his speeches people stood up in great numbers to take the incredible “deal.” The new converts stayed an hour or two after the main presentation to find out “what they needed to know” about how to live a good Christian life. Such was the offering that millions gratefully received. It was music to ego’s ears!

With that in mind, please consider this: On the road of life, the sure way to get the most possible followers is to slow down. The slower you go, the faster your followership will accumulate behind you. If you go slow enough, everyone can keep up—no matter how weak their vehicle may be. Thus, the slow lane—of few expectations, almost no requirements, and all-embracing tolerance—seems like great news to many. But the bad news about that good news is this: If nearly everyone can keep up, that means you’ve slowed down to the slowest common denominator. Slow leadership satisfies those who are unconcerned about reaching their destination. But at that rate, the faithful might not live long enough to reach any spiritual destination. Not that ego would mind that, of course.

Ego-driven people who join religions and spiritual paths want to “have their cake and eat it too.” In other words:

- Ego-driven people want to have God “in their lives”—but at a safe distance.
- Ego-driven people want spiritual truth—as long as it doesn’t cramp their style.
- Ego-driven people want to feel righteous—without meeting the challenge of spiritual responsibility.

In short, ego cuts every corner it can in its pursuit of spiritual life, but what’s left when it’s done isn’t worth much. Those who seek true happiness, and true usefulness in the family of God, set their sights high, higher, and highest. Religion and spirituality should strongly encourage and support those who want to be perfect as God is perfect. The greatest joy awaits those who want what God wants for them.

Advantages of Community to Religion

Almost every religion maintains some kind of standards for the practice and participation of its members. What will the expectations be? And does membership depend on meeting any requirements, or not? Short-term recruitment objectives and long-term spiritual viability may require different answers to these questions.

In this day and age, where discipline is often poor, and moral values are weak, standards of practice and participation—if any—are generally set rather low. This may reflect compassion; it certainly reflects realism.

But, it also reflects priorities. Most religious organizations place high priority on bringing as many people as possible into the fold. For that, hope rests on *lowering* the requirements for involvement: clearly, the lower the requirements, the more people will join. The result? A membership whose ranks are swollen with spiritually dysfunctional, nominally committed people. The flock may be large, but it is certainly weak. Obviously, compassion is wonderful; but low- or no-requirement religion has problems of its own. While a weak membership may help keep the religion in *existence*, it does little to keep religion truly *alive*, spiritually.

Here's the point: if a religion is to survive *spiritually*—instead of suffering the gradual death that constitutes the usual fate of religions—it must carry on in a truly vibrant, genuinely inspired spirit. And make no mistake, the ultimate source of inspiration is not good sermons or administrative excellence, but from God-connection. Not just *any* God-connection—*strong* God connection. The stronger, the better. From such a connection, inspiration

and energy flow like the fresh, sparkling streams of spring, rushing down from the mountain peaks into the valley.

What all religious and spiritual organizations need is not so much new membership, attractive ministers, competent administrators, or dedicated missionaries, but *spiritual pioneers*. They need souls whose personal passion is to achieve and maintain an *exceptionally* strong God-connection. Spiritually inspired individuals are the organization's hope, for only they can truly inspire the membership. And further, because of the potency of God's work through them, they perform much more than their share of the organization's humanity-healing work (the spiritual work that is, at least in theory, the primary reason for the existence of the organization).

No matter what the bulk of the members do or don't do, a spiritually strong *core group*, however small in number, can provide abundant inspiration for the rest. The power of their inspiration, not their numbers, does the job. Because their power springs directly from God—manifesting as love, radiance, inspiration, healing, and illumined mind—they can be depended upon to be *powerful* transmission towers.

Granted, everyone *can* transmit God's love, and to admit this fact is crucial. But to transmit God's love, willingness is required, and surrender—and people vary widely in their willingness and their surrender. Also, of course, strong, living God-connection is a *must*.

As a general observation, a strong God-connection seems to result from a combination of strong desire and intensive spiritual practice. In truth, practice may be optional, but strong desire is mandatory. And generally, where strong desire is found, that desire will tend to manifest itself in spiritual practice. Because of a middling level of desire, many people engage in some sort of spiritual practice more or less regularly, but minimally, and often in lackluster fashion. One can never, by so doing, inspire

oneself, let alone the entire organization, with passion and purpose.

Therefore, to address the needs of all members—both those who desire a rigorous spiritual life, and those who don’t—religions must develop two distinct (but mutually dependent) branches: the exoteric, and the esoteric. The exoteric group is comprised of the general church membership, those who practice religion nominally, but rarely venture into spiritual heights. The esoteric community is made up of highly committed individuals with relatively high aspirations for spiritual realization. Out of a thousand followers, perhaps five or ten become spiritual pioneers.

Almost every spiritual tradition supports members of its esoteric branch in retreats or monasteries—crucibles of spiritual growth. At least periodically, they live together in close community, receive ongoing spiritual training, and engage in spiritual practices of greater intensity. They become exceptionally bright lights. The power of their spiritual realization feeds the entire organization, spiritually, through successive generations.

Where two or more are gathered in My name

While the setting need not be as secluded as the words *monastery* and *retreat* imply, intimate community is almost indispensable for intensive practice. And therefore, if a religion knows what’s good for it, and wants to stay spiritually alive by supporting a cadre of advanced practitioners, an intimate context for spiritual growth should be created.

For purposes of generating spiritual intensity, one can hardly overestimate the value of close association in living-together arrangements. A great power arises from the resonance of souls when they join together with a common Godly intention and understanding. It is to this power Jesus referred when he said, “Where two or more are gathered in My name, there I am

also.” From within such a gathering can come great energy and light that has the ability to uplift, heal, and even transform the individuals in it, and beyond. This Divine principle is one that spiritual and religious organizations have known for centuries, and used to advantage. That same benefit is always available for those who would use it.

The physics of transformation

Most likely, at stake in all this is the prospect of major transformation. Here’s why: Transformation depends, in part, on energy. Both scientists and mystics have observed that certain transformations will not happen until and unless energy is sufficiently intensified. For example, water will not turn to steam until an exact amount of energy has been added to it. If the temperature remains one degree below the boiling point, the water will never boil, no matter how long it remains on the stove.

Similarly, when it comes to personal transformation, a certain concentration of energy facilitates the spiritual/emotional changes we long for. *When* we are uplifted to a certain degree, we enjoy a subtler appreciation of spiritual realities; we feel more connected, more generous-spirited; we have a greater sense of clarity and understanding; we enjoy a heightened awareness of the presence of God.

Of course, though close human association raises energy, spiritual enlightenment can never be guaranteed *just because* people practice their spiritual path in community. Individual will figures powerfully into the equation. It is possible, then, that in some cases there will be no visible benefit whatsoever. Even so, a complete lack of benefit is relatively rare; significant benefit usually occurs. Therefore, even though many other success factors, such as individual attitude and other imponderables, may prevent or limit the full success of the venture, it is well worth the effort and investment to groom a

few astronauts, and optimize conditions for vertical ascent. Overall, any religion would be well advised to make the gamble.

The mechanics of transformation

A hot fire is an efficient fire. And for a fire to burn hotly, it must be highly concentrated. Accordingly, a small firebox full of wood creates the most efficient and powerful blaze. If the firebox is much bigger than the wood it contains—or if we reduce the number of logs or spread them out in the firebox—the blaze weakens, or even goes out.

The fact that energy is intensified by close human gathering can make a collective home into an effective generator of transformative energy. The intention involved, both individual and collective, is *fuel* for the fire of transformation; the close proximity of the community context is like a small *firebox* that concentrates energy for maximum effectiveness. As we said, water boils at 212 degrees Fahrenheit and not at 211 degrees Fahrenheit—not even in infinite time. The same applies to quantum leaps of change in spiritual state.

Now, compare if you will, the small firebox of concentrated group practice with its opposite, the usual case: the context of widely dispersed worldly habitation. In spiritual organizations, when members are broadly scattered, the group lacks the power of energy concentration. Under ordinary conditions, followers worship together and then disperse afterwards, all going back to their own apartment or home, where the energy level is dramatically less. Whether they realize it or not, the congregants suffer the insufficiency of light, energy, and resonance at home. This is partly, but significantly, due to the small number of people there.

Even within a group living environment, the observations about the size of the firebox still matter. If the shared dwelling is too large, so that each person has far too much space, they lose

much of the energy value of the group. The same is true if people in the group always eat alone, or always pray separately instead of frequently praying *together*.

Community supports the practice of spiritual virtue

People will not advance very far or very fast unless they commit to a more intense involvement than just periodic gatherings and occasional practices. We need a spiritual context in which our daily lives can become something that continues to mold us, inspire us, enlighten us, chasten us, instruct us, and guide us throughout our days. Again, close spiritual community provides such a context.

The opportunity for spiritual growth and direction:

Let's face it: in alienated, minimally relational society, ego runs amok. An isolated life is a spiritually unsupervised, unguided life. In such a life, the lower tendencies of ego and selfishness are more or less passively ignored or tolerated—or perhaps actively supported and resonated—while positive spiritual tendencies can easily be overlooked or even suppressed. That's why the usual religionist almost always plateaus at a relatively low level of spiritual development. Without more and better support, they can't go much further.

For significant spiritual advancement, we need a crucible in which we can be tempered in the refiner's fire of concentrated spiritual life—a hothouse where we can grow and learn; where people with similar spiritual aspirations and values can give us feedback; where we can practice under the challenging conditions of human relationship, and hone the crafts of compassion, tolerance, and self-understanding. Again, close association helps.

A context deliberately relieved of extremes of conventional egoic thought and influence: The entrenched, intractable machinery of society works directly against the establishment of the spiritual foundation we are trying to build. While living in the regular world, it is very difficult to free ourselves from the ordinary cultural mindset. Everywhere we turn, we are constantly under the influence of conventional, worldly supposition and belief. We are bombarded with gross cultural ideas and ideals.

When we live in a community, we are somewhat protected from worldly influence and worldly programming. Even if we mingle freely with the public in the course of daily employment, we have a resonant home base to return to each night. There we always have the opportunity to practice our spiritual principles with the emotional and philosophical support of those around us.

Community's value for the spiritual upleveling of religion

There are many levels on which religions may choose to operate, but to the extent that they wish to serve on a higher spiritual level than the usual, and draw from deeper springs of Divine connection, the creation and support of close-knit spiritual communities is indispensable. As we have seen, community provides the necessary context to create and sustain a real spiritual fire—the kind of fire required to keep any religion viable, spiritually dynamic, inspired, and, most of all, profoundly inspiring.

The Basis for Universal Humanity

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The Basis for Universal Humanity

What we need in today's world is Unity—Unity in diversity, and Unity despite diversity. We need an appreciative recognition of sameness in the family of God worldwide. We need consciousness, both individual and collective, that overcomes all cultural differences with an all-embracing spirit of affinity, identity, and Unity.

Some have hoped that technologies of connectivity would unify humanity. With all the technological advances in the world today, our planet has become incredibly well connected. We can now communicate instantly with people all over the world. Without ever leaving our homes, we can expose ourselves to many other cultures.

But the realization of a united world still eludes us. Perhaps some progress in consciousness has been made as a result of new technologies, but not nearly enough. Despite these marvelous connections, and despite the constant flow of information of every conceivable kind, cultural differences still bewilder us. We still feel overwhelmed by our diversity.

Where, then, is the real solution to the persistent mentality of difference, alienation, and separateness? Perhaps unity can be found in religion after all—or rather, in *universal* religion. Unity can be found in a consciousness of spiritual identity which all can recognize and share.

The search for what is universal

In the realm of religion and spirituality, many noble attempts have been made to find what is universal in man. Much has been discovered, but these discoveries are, for the most part, gen-

eral observations of universally accepted spiritual and philosophical truths.

Humanity has been less successful at discerning universal principles that can be flexibly adapted, so as to truly unify varieties of spiritual practice, various religions, and souls of differing cultures. Instead, people have fixated excessively on solutions and methods that, in themselves, particularly and almost exclusively fit within one culture or another—and are not, in fact, *universally* human.

For example, in our community, we have developed a spiritual practice of dancing blessings. But of course, dancing is not for everyone. Similarly, the characteristically Oriental rituals of bowing and clapping are wonderful practices, and they may have more universal appeal than dancing, especially if one understands their true significance. Even so, the practice of bowing is almost as alien to Western culture as it is familiar in Eastern culture.

It is clear to me that we cannot truly unify our world simply by teaching Orientals to dance blessings, or Americans to bow and clap. I have now concluded that there is only one way to build a truly functional bridge between the many diverse cultures on this planet: instead of becoming overwhelmed by focusing too much on the differences, and trying to bridge between *them*, we must look to the similarities, and find deep commonalities. We must find what is *already* the same in all of us, and base our understanding and relationships upon that.

Through earnest effort, together we are bound to discover that, in spite of the differences between our cultures, all of us are unified by the same easily recognizable characteristics, principles, and cosmic laws. This knowing can build bridges to all who are, fundamentally, like ourselves—which all human beings are. This is a spiritual understanding of human nature, of human composition, and of our shared Divine parenthood. It is an understanding sufficiently profound as to be worthy of the name *spiritual*.

True affinity grows out of a deep and true recognition of commonality, and even identity. This profound bond will stand the test of time and weather the winds of change. So, we should not be discouraged if, in order to find those similarities, we must dig a little deeper. It's good to dig deep. Indeed, it is foolish not to do so. We need to persist to the point where we can achieve a *truly* universal understanding. We need a universal understanding of what humanity is, what it needs, and how to work with human minds and hearts more effectively than we have managed to do thus far. We should all pray for that. We should work for that. We should put our whole hearts, minds, and souls to that.

This article is a start.

Apparent differences, deep similarities

In my search for universal principles, I chose to look at two extremely different cultures—America and Japan. I started with the specifics, and looked for underlying similarities.

At first glance, the Japanese and American approaches to communication and human relationship seem diametrically opposed. Americans are highly individualistic, prizing assertiveness and candid self-expression. Japanese are much more group-conscious, emphasizing harmony and diplomacy in interpersonal dealings. But by looking more deeply at the apparent differences, we can actually see the similarities within them. What's most interesting is that we can draw lines between human minds everywhere.

What can be seen is this: While culture expresses and handles human tendencies in different ways, the tendencies themselves are, in fact, absolutely universal. For example, here are a few universal tendencies that strongly influence social behavior. (In each case, you can readily see how the same tendency can produce many different expressions under different circumstances.)

- In both East and West, people don't want to move outside of what is normal in their context. The principle applies

everywhere, even in little sub-cultures, like families, businesses, clubs, and groups of friends. Everywhere you look, there are expectations, and people wanting to live within those expectations.

- Likewise, all persons, regardless of culture, fear disapproval from their peers. That's human nature, and it is universal.
- All people want harmony. That, too, is human nature, and universal. Americans achieve what they think of as harmony largely by *physically* disengaging, more or less at will, from the social arena in which conflict is possible. The Japanese have gone to greater lengths to protect people from the problems of disapproval and disharmony, with more detailed behavioral rules. In that case, the art of disconnecting behavior from feelings becomes a method of *emotional* withdrawal and hiding.
- Despite the American value on individualism, everyone wants to be a part of something—even if they're being part of something that is superficial, unreal, and therefore ultimately unsatisfying.

The combination of all of these universal human traits—the desire for normalcy, approval, harmony, and belonging—leads all people, in all cultures everywhere, toward conformism. We may conform to *different* standards, but for the *same* reasons. This may not *seem* to be the case, but when one explores more deeply, one finds that it is true.

Conformists, East and West

Granted, it may seem particularly strange to suggest that Americans, with our ruggedly individualistic ways and our well-deserved reputation for rebellious temperament, could be conformists. Americans often think of their Eastern neighbors—especially, perhaps the Japanese—as conformists, and consider this to be a significant point of difference. But actually, we are

all conformists—Americans and Japanese alike. In reality, what differs is only the particular set of expectations to which we conform. In the descriptions of our expectations that follow, I will refer to these standards or ideals as the “gold standards.”

American gold standards: rugged individualism and assertiveness. In America, a country of Mavericks and Marlboro men, what superficially *appears* to be non-conformism is, in fact, part of our cultural gold standard. Consequently, in our culture, rugged individualism (seemingly the height of non-conformism) amounts to little more than pure conformism. For example, a teenaged boy will try to wear his hair in a way that’s different from anybody else’s hairstyle. That, precisely, is the American style of conformism: to be different. Americans feel compelled to “be different,” because “being different” is the gold standard, the expectation, the ideal. Thus, *different* is what everyone wants to be.

In American society, the individualistic “gold standard” exerts enormous pressure to be independent of others, to think for oneself, and to act in the spirit of self-interest. In some respects, under that standard, being concerned about others is viewed as a vice. Yielding to the views of others or to the group is considered a sign of weakness. Loving and caring are often considered excessively hazardous to self-interest—etc.

Japanese gold standards: conformity and tact. In Japanese society and other Eastern cultures in general, as well as in socialist and communist countries worldwide, the prevailing “gold standard” is the exact opposite: the individual should sacrifice personal interests for the common good.

In these cultures, the way to properly conform is never to rebel, but rather, to fit in as completely as possible with the group. Thus, individualism is frowned upon. Individual well-being must be subservient to the collective good: the good of the

nation, the good of the company, the good of the family, the good of the marriage—right down the line. This gold standard requires subordinating individual identity to group identity, personal well-being to collective well-being, personal aims and desires to group will and collective objectives. And for the preservation of harmony, it is essential never to openly object, criticize, or disagree.

The paradoxes that unify

What unity can we find in the apparent differences between these two standards? One common factor is conformism itself; and another is that, in both cases, the motivation to conform is selfish self-protection.

In America we see the paradoxical fact that conformism requires (apparent) rebellion and rugged individualism. Appearance and reality are reversed. Thus, we may think of the American conformist as a “sheep in wolf’s clothing.”

Let me explain this surprising metaphor: Because of the tendency towards rugged individualism, and the tendency to pursue personal purposes aggressively, the average American *appears* wolf-like. But to understand the reality behind the appearance, one must look to the matter of motivation. Beneath the wolf-ish mask, the American is fearful and insecure. He is simply protecting himself when, compelled by his insecurity, he acts in a fashion that satisfies the “fiercely individualistic” ideals of his culture. Thus, we metaphorically describe American conformists as sheep in wolves’ clothing.

In Japanese society as well, appearance and reality are reversed. In Japanese society, paradoxically, selfishness dictates that a man conforms to the ideal of (apparently) unselfish behavior. Thus, the Japanese conformist can be seen as a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

Again, to understand the metaphor, we must look at motivation: In Japan, if you wish to protect your own survival interests (such as popularity, perceived character virtue, acceptance, etc.), you will conform to a scrupulously “unselfish” standard of behavior. The Japanese knows that if he fails to act in an (apparently) unselfish manner, he will be subject to disapproval; he will lose face and general esteem; he may even lose friends and business allies. He is simply protecting himself when, compelled by his insecurity and self-interest, he acts in a fashion that satisfies the “selfless” ideals of his culture. Thus, since a selfish motivation underlies an unselfish exterior, we may think of the Japanese conformist as a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

Cultural gold standards vs. spiritual gold standards

This insight about conformity allows us to discover another underlying similarity: By conforming to our respective *cultural* gold standards, both Americans and Japanese tend to deviate from our *spiritual* “gold standards” of true sincerity and real integrity—Divinely implanted standards which all human beings have in *common*.

For example, in Japan it is ill-advised to speak the truth, even when doing so could be genuinely helpful, and morally correct. Following that path, the individual feels obliged to suppress the urgings of moral conscience and Divine promptings. On the altar of cultural conformism, the Japanese sacrifices true integrity for reasons that are, ultimately, cowardly, immoral—and presumably self-protective.

In America, we see “protective” conformism working to similar effect. For example, Americans view the practice of generosity as being dangerously low in selfishness or self-interest. Likewise, if a woman wishes to serve a man, she is considered weak and ill-formed. Flexibility and accommodation are similarly distrusted, and people who exercise these spiritual virtues are targets of

criticism, correction, and warning both by friends and society at large. Here again, the cowardly path of conformism denies spiritual rectitude in favor of narrowly-defined self-interest.

Obviously, the tragedy of the American gold standard is that it argues strongly against many values upon which spiritual and emotional fulfillment depend. It argues against service and against surrender. It argues against spiritual learning and true discipleship. It even argues, in some ways, against kindness and compassion. But of course, all this is fine with the ego because, as you know, ego desires that the spiritual needs of humanity go unmet.

The tragedy of the Japanese gold standard is that it diminishes the value of the individual and argues against free and open exchange of ideas. Direct, candid expression provides the opportunity for affinity via shared understanding. The desire of the individual to be known and to be heard is a universal desire—as universal as the value of existence itself. It should come as no surprise to recall that human beings who feel mutually understood are often *ecstatic*. The Japanese are, to a great extent, deprived of these joys.

Under both American and Japanese cultural gold standards—and I dare say the gold standards of all cultures—the desire to *appear* good or be popular stands directly in the way of true, authentic goodness. And that, of course, is a tremendous impediment to the real, dynamic requirements of true spiritual rightness. All persons, East and West, suffer tremendously from the spiritual deviance brought about by an insufficiency of courage and true integrity.

Before we can create any universal religion or unified world culture, the notions of sheep and wolf must end. Children of God are neither sheep nor wolves. False identities are nothing but the denial of true identity. We are, in reality, beings of Divine nature. All must know ourselves in truth. All children of God—in every

land, every culture, every context—must live as we *are*. We must all be just as God made us to be, and not otherwise.

Looking for balance in another culture

Walking down the street with a wise man on his left, and a fool on his right, the sage said, “I am fortunate to have two excellent teachers: one shows me what to do, the other shows me what not to do.” Today’s sage is privileged to have as teachers an Easterner on his left, and a Westerner on his right. Both are, in some respects, wise—and both are, in other respects, foolish. And, *both* are excellent teachers of what to do, *and* what not to do.

When you consider the American and Japanese gold standards side-by-side, you see two things:

1. Both cultures have obvious flaws, and each culture tends to compensate for the excesses of the other, in a mutually complimentary fashion. This fact offers hope for achieving a universally satisfying balance from the two.
2. Each culture represents an unhealthy extreme, having gone too far in its own direction. This fact makes us appreciate the challenge of finding a healthy balance between them.

Americans tend to err on the side of brutal, self-serving honesty. The Japanese are right in recognizing the terrible results of that approach—that brute honesty often destroys harmony. Thus, by showing that brutal outward honesty is, in fact, an unworkable solution, American culture has proven certain Japanese concerns and values correct. The American cultural experiment has, in this important respect, been an excellent teacher, helping to advance the universal cause of true understanding.

The Japanese tend to err on the other side, the side of self-suppression. While group harmony is thereby apparently main-

tained, the outer harmony thus achieved may be relatively superficial. Due to suppression, internal disharmony—inner-conflict and stress—can run extremely high, even to the point of creating the world's highest suicide rate in Japan. By proving that suppression, even for the noble objective of group harmony, is not a good solution, Japanese culture has validated certain American values and concerns. In this way, the Japanese experiment has also advanced the cause of universal understanding.

This is not to say that both of our social ideals entirely lack merit. Each of these fools has some real wisdom. One redeeming merit of American ideals, for example, is the high value on individuality. Individuality, if properly construed, is indeed a cosmic ideal. Just as every snowflake is unique and precious, every human being is precious. Individual self-expression and forthrightness, too, are cosmically, absolutely precious.

But of course, when ego has its way with things, hell breaks loose. Selfish individuals run roughshod, both over inner sensitivities and the sensitivities of others. Excessive individualism, insensitivity, and selfish competition are all examples of the dangers of the American way, when it is carried too far by ego. These pitfalls demonstrate a disregard for the truly *spiritual* components in individuality, thus creating an imbalanced, even monstrous form of ego-driven individualism.

Fortunately for us, the East has preserved the balancing values we in the West need: the value of cooperation; the value of surrendering personal preference for the common good; the value of sensitivity itself; the value of loyalty that comes from group belonging. These are eternal values that humanity needs.

But, like us, the Japanese have found ways of construing their high ideals that cost them dearly. For example, the way of diplomacy or suppression recognizes that a great deal of trouble may be avoided when self-expression is minimized. However, diplomacy and suppression only treat the problem of negative

thought symptomatically, by avoiding its outward manifestation. They completely fail to solve internal problems—either shared or hidden—that lie at the root of all disharmony. Suppressing problems does not eliminate them; and, more importantly, suppression is likely to make them worse. Bad things grow in the dark. Childhood grievances still trouble old men.

Two wrongs don't make a right

Perhaps, the artful combination or balancing of the complimentary values of East and West has some merit. Clearly, if we could take the *true goodness* from the ideals of East and West, we would have something beautiful. However, a hybrid created from the two cultures could never succeed if either tried to round out their particular folly with the folly of the other. What would happen if the two aberrant adaptations were combined—Rambo (aggressive individualism) and Robot (self-suppressive conformity)? The resulting progeny—“Rambot”—would itself be monstrous. [*See illustration, next page.*] This hybrid is already appearing in Japan, and clearly, only further suffering results.

Unruly expression on one hand, and diplomatic suppression on the other—these are the respective ways of West and East. Each way represents a culturally-approved attempt to solve certain recognized problems—or at least, a culturally accepted reaction to those problems. Thus, individualism is a reaction against the problems of robotic self-sacrifice. And self-suppression is a reaction against the problems of brute individualism. Unfortunately, both the Western and the Eastern adaptations exacerbate the very troubles they attempt to solve.

The American seeks fulfillment through individualism, only to find himself alienated, and thus unfulfilled. The Japanese seeks fulfillment through the sacrifice of individualism, only to find that the harmony he seeks is marred by inner unhappiness. The intense suffering of humanity in both the East and the West is absolute evidence that we have both wandered off the true path.

THE BASIS FOR UNIVERSAL HUMANITY

WESTERN INDIVIDUALISM IDEAL

True Individuality



Individuality Confusion



False Individuality

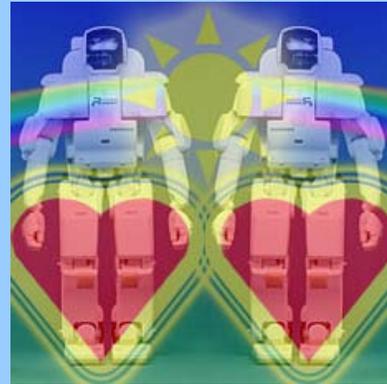


EASTERN UNITY IDEAL

True Social Unity



Social Unity Confusion



False Social Unity



Two wrongs can never make a right. The truth is, the cultures of East and West are both deluded, and badly in error in one way or another. So we must, in trying to assemble a perfect combination of human cultures, exercise great care to avoid distorted versions and gross misapplications of otherwise valid ideals.

Too longs don't make a light

But the truth of the matter is, hybridization will not succeed in achieving a truly enlightened world culture or a universal religion, even if we attempt to blend only what is *best* in the world's various cultures. Cultural thinking itself represents a limitation. It chains man, through inertia, into entrenched patterns that are no longer vibrant, no longer truly human in their responsiveness, no longer truly bright.

For too long, people of East and West have been thinking about things in certain specific ways, each on their own. The unique characteristics of each culture have solidified out of these idiosyncratic ways of approaching life, crystallized into rigid forms of behavior. These artifacts of culture, fossilized conceptions of life, are dragging humanity down, like a big lead weight on a swimmer, and holding us apart from each other and our own true nature.

Too longs don't make a light. We can't take the antiquated (too long) baggage of multiple cultures and assemble them into an enlightened (light) universal religion or unified world culture. Globally, if we want to go on into a brighter future, we have to release some old baggage. We must find a new, more authentic basis for living together.

True rectitude can never result from slavishly following cultural ideals, rules of conduct, and patterns of behavior—no matter how refined and balanced those ideals may become. To achieve unity, humanity must find *true* rightness, which dwells at deeper levels than conformism to cultural values can possibly recognize, much less achieve.

True rightness is of God; it is Godly, or Divinely human. It can never be achieved by any reference to culture. True rightness is, and will always remain, a function of heart and soul. The way of true rightness will be found only when individuals, listening to their higher nature, are willing to react and respond freely in obedience to spirit.

The emptiness of conforming

The true way is not the (apparently) easy way. The high road demands higher fidelity to true goodness—inwardly as well as outwardly. When compared to the motive of mere personal self-protection and survival, one individual against all others, the intention required is more pure and generous. Of course, that's a challenge, a significant change, and perhaps that's why the true way has not achieved widespread acceptance. But at the same time, although following the low road may seem “easier” in the sense of not requiring much effort, it creates so much suffering that it is, in that respect, harder. Thus, to *not* live the true way is shortsighted (just like a company that refuses to invest adequately in its future, thus diminishing its long-term chances for success, or perhaps even survival).

Conformism may seem to be the path of least resistance, but it's never satisfying. Even after we gain all the comfort conformity can provide, we still feel empty and unfulfilled. Should we be surprised? Conformity is all about *acting*—acting the “right” way; creating the “right” appearances; behaving the way we're supposed to behave. What could be more superficial than to live by appearances, and formulas? And, what could be more depressing than to be surrounded by people who are following that same shabby path, for the same shabby reasons?

Circumstantial associations, like those found in workplaces, classrooms, churches, and social clubs, may provide some social comfort, but the comfort experienced will be minimal. And of

course, the same observation applies to association with larger groups, such as groups of common racial background, culture, or national identity. As human beings, our deep needs simply cannot be satisfied by any kind of superficial belonging. We need something more, and deeper.

For one thing, people need to be *chosen*. When social involvement is based on the circumstances, the relationships are based on coincidence, not a choice. *You* have not been chosen—and nor did you choose *them*. Rather, the people may be, for selfish, personal reasons, committed to what they are doing, and selfishly seeking the benefits of conforming, but are not deeply committed to *one another*.

How can we be happy in any context where we have limited understanding of each other, limited interest in each other, and limited love for each other? How can a person be happy without true love, and true commitment? How can a person be happy without both giving and receiving these real treasures? Impossible!

In any circumstantial gathering of any size—small or nationwide—the people do not, in general, *deeply* love. Therefore, all circumstantial groupings leave us with an underlying emptiness, a hollow place that can only be filled with true, heartfelt spiritual companionship and loyalty of a higher order—*higher* than company loyalty; *higher* than religious or club membership; *higher* than national or racial belonging.

We need to honestly face the shortfalls of what could be called impersonal associations, general loyalties. One can be a patriotic citizen of a beloved nation, or an even a committed, enthusiastic church member—but can loyalties of that type *really* fulfill the needs of heart and soul?

We need love. We need to give love, and receive it. Most sane people would much rather be in love in a strange land than out of love at home. Perhaps that's because, for all children of God, love *is* home. Love is our true home. Love is life's true goal, and

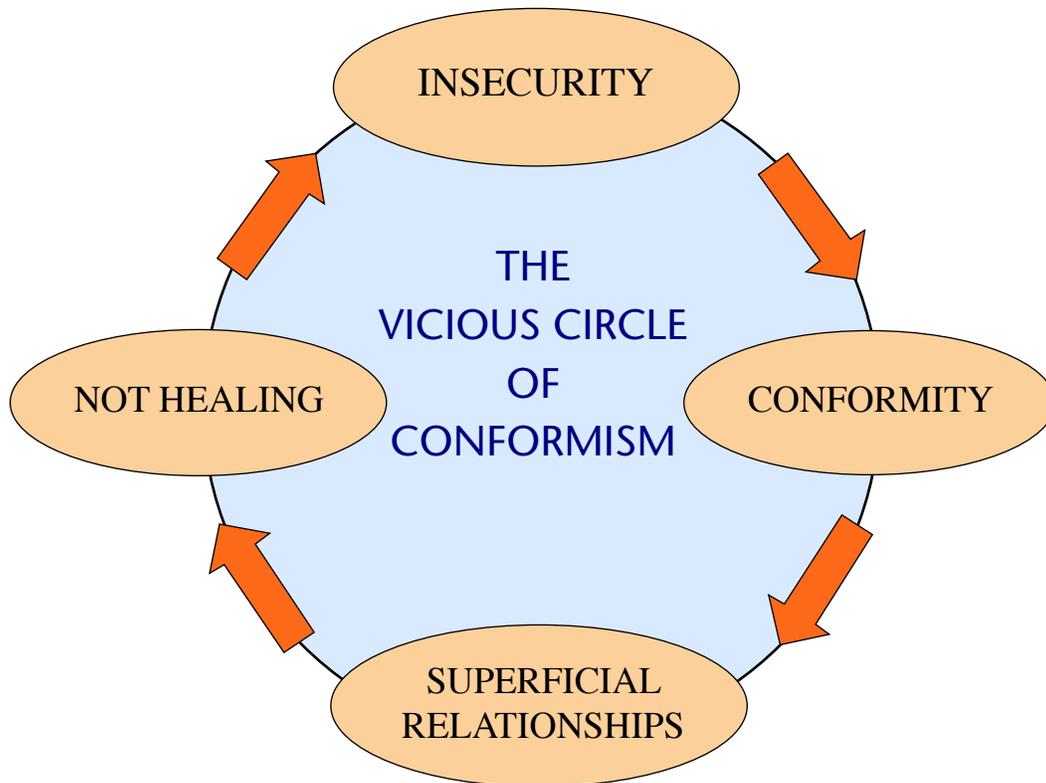
the means to attain it. Love is heaven, and love is the fastest way to heaven.

So, for real satisfaction, we need to find an entirely different basis for belonging—a belonging built of real love, sincere caring, heartfelt affinity. That true basis is honest, not false or superficial. Nothing less can satisfy the heart, and make people feel truly secure, socially.

The vicious circle of insecurity and conforming

Do you see the irony here? The one thing conformism absolutely fails to provide is what it seeks: social satisfaction; a deep sense of belonging; a true feeling of security. It all boils down to what we could call “homeness.” The social standards to which we conform are *superficial*—and the associations created by conforming to such standards are also superficial. Is it not obvious that superficial relationships do not—indeed cannot—provide deep satisfaction? Why, then, do we so often pursue superficial belonging, and fail to pursue the deep relationships we need? The most we can expect from conformism is minimal feelings of acceptance, camaraderie, and a fragile sense of security. We would be lucky if we got *that* much. So, conformism leaves the soul hungry for reality and the heart thirsty for love—and leave us anxious to continue to conform further (presumably, to get the genuine love we still crave).

Thus conformism and insecurity work together insidiously, in a vicious circle. The following diagram illustrates the relationship between insecurity and conformism:



- Conformism results from insecurity (insecure people hasten to conform).
- Conformism creates superficial social relationships.
- Superficial relationships don't heal people, or make them strong.
- Insecurity continues (and so does conformism).

That circle is so small and empty, it's a wonder more people don't see the futility of the whole game, and escape it!

Around and around it goes, and where it stops, *somebody* knows: it stops when we realize that the gold standards way of living really doesn't work, and embrace a better way—God's way.

Pressures to conform

Besides the fact that conformity *seems* “easier” than the way of true, dynamic rightness, there is another reason why people continue to conform in spite of the unhappiness it causes them: tremendous social and institutional pressure. Mass social organizations—governments, schools, religions, armies, etc.—all rely on conformism. And most of all, they rely on the personal insecurity that *motivates* conformity, and is *perpetuated* by conformity. It is feared that, if the populace were personally secure, the established order may not be served.

Secure, healthy people are harder, if not impossible, to control; they are not subject to exploitation or manipulation. Healthy people see what’s there. Secure people trust their own judgment and follow their own conscience without regard for the cost of doing so. They respect their own spiritual intuition more than dogma. As a consequence, supposedly, efficiency—or membership, or sales—could suffer; dubious aims could be questioned; law and order could even break down. So, anyone who tries to escape the system—the vicious circle of conformism—can expect resistance from all sides.

Of course, it’s not true that anarchy would reign if human beings became secure enough to stop conforming. People don’t become truly secure until they become honest, sensitive, and responsible—which makes them morally accountable to others, to their own conscience, and to God. Therefore, secure, free people are neither dangerous nor negatively unruly.

However, insecure, egoistic people are erratic and perpetually off balance. Just as children need training wheels to ride a two-wheeled bicycle, insecure people need the constraints of behavioral expectations and cultural norms to stay in line socially. Training wheels are for people who can’t keep their balance. But the ultimate solution is to restore people’s inner balance, not to

keep them in training wheels forever. God does not want to see God's child treated like that! God said,

“To create a situation where man, believing himself to be bad, believing in his egoic tendencies as his real nature so strongly that he believes he must keep himself in a cage of rules in order to control himself; and where his church leaders and his friends believe the same thing about him—this is very, very diminishing; very, very sad to the soul of man. It is believed that such restraints are necessary, but we must have a greater faith in one another and in ourselves, and support a higher way of good living—rather than to be as if we were a number of chained mad animals. You see? This is not a healthy way to see one another and ourselves. And it does not promote a feeling of being God's child at all.”

How can we escape?

Every coward may prefer to stick with the path of least resistance—the path that traps humanity in shallows and miseries. And yet, as long as misery continues, the desire for escape will continue to arise. We *must* be fulfilled. We *must* be free. We *must* escape.

The question is, *how*? How can we move from the rather modest consolations of conformity into a deeper belonging? These fundamental elements of the solution have become obvious to me:

- 1. Spiritual refinement.** As individuals, we must persist in developing deeper understanding, truer compassion, truer generosity, and more sincere, heartfelt service. These qualities must grow more and more sincere, more and more truly spiritual, more truly Divine in substance, nature, intention, and scope. These advances of spirit raise the basis for true comfort.

2. Understanding human commonality. True understanding comes not so much from learning about what's different in cultures other than our own; we need to see the commonality. We can start to see this through the recognition of universal principles, like the ones I've mentioned here. For example, I have noted the tendencies toward conformity and self-protection as common traits. But of course, we also have common qualities that are positive. We have in common, for example, sensitivities about the real wrongness and rightness of what we're doing, and the wrongness and rightness of other people's ways. We have in common certain deep intuitive sensibilities about the true meaning of rightness, about the way of Truth, and about the way of God. Indeed, every man, worldwide, will stand up and raise the same objections to the state of the world; at least if he is honest he will do so. What he will say is what I have said. His objections will be the same as mine.

3. Understanding who we, as human beings, truly are. Most importantly, we need to find our true identity, not of mere biology or culture, but as children of God. Within our true identity are found our true humanity, our higher sensitivities, and our spiritual knowing. This is a deeper identification, a truer rightness. Once we have found these inner treasures in ourselves and others, we can build our affinities upon them. And we can then bring others along—making the road less traveled into the road more commonly traveled, even universally traveled. We can do this just as easily across gender lines, family lines, religious lines, and cultural lines. There are no hard and fast lines in God's household.

Beyond the crutches of language and culture

The unification of the human race can only result from the universal achievement of absolutely true and heartfelt agreement. And this can only be achieved by honest people acknowledging the actual Truth.

We start by acknowledging the truth of humanity. The truth of humanity is universal. And, in the heart of *all* humans is an appropriate blueprint for the unification of humanity with itself, and for the healing of the wounds of alienation, difference, separation, presumed conflict. This blueprint is completely free of the limiting belief that cultural differences render affinity impossible, and loyalty unobtainable.

Conformism is a crutch. With crutches we get around rather poorly, and with difficulty. They may be useful for a time, but eventually they become an impediment. A morally strong person—or even a person who wishes to be stronger—will eventually throw away his crutches, and walk. He will choose, with a great resolve, to seek true security instead of false security (which is to say, continuing insecurity). With this decision in mind, he will leave behind the shallows and miseries of conformity, and seek true security in the *only* place where it can be found: in true rightness. True rightness is the real world; all else is false and illusory.

Perhaps someday, once we recognize and accept the real needs of heart and soul, we will all realize that we are able-bodied. Perhaps then we can discard *all* the crutches of culture, and find a *better* basis for relating. In that case, no matter what our ability to understand each other culturally, or to even understand each other's language, we will approach each other openheartedly, and love one another sincerely.

If we have a sufficiently strong intention to love, we can then develop a profound intimacy based on love *alone*. Imagine this: You are stranded with a stranger on a desert island, just the two

of you. You happen to have no similar customs or language. You share only some sandy beach, a few coconut trees, and water. Can you imagine how, under such an unusual circumstance, the two of you might, as matter of intention, develop a magnificent love relationship? Even without having any verbal way to communicate freely. Without any cultural basis, any shared behavioral expectations. Look: often, that which seems to help gets in the way. Indeed, without the crutches of conformity that tend to keep things shallow, so much more could happen! On that island, you could develop the deepest love relationship that two human beings could have. It could be sublimely, deeply true.

Any love worthy of the name transcends everything—everything, that is, except that which is absolutely important, absolutely essential, absolutely moving, absolutely true, and absolutely valid. The bedrock of relationship lies beyond all that normally separates, and all that commonly attracts.

If it is true love you want, there's little use fooling around with any more superficial means of bonding. Go straight to the heart of the matter: *Love!*
