

What Does It Mean To Be “Enlightened”?

Introduction to The ABCs of Enlightenment (unpub'd)

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“The glory of God is the human person fully alive.”

--Irenaeus of Lyons

“It is only this simple thing: to be in rhythm with life’s conditions and to be in tune with the infinite.”

--Hazrat Inayat Khan, Mastery (1978 Omega Pub. New Lebanon, NY)

It is late at night in Oaxaca, Mexico when three elderly “curanderos,” or healers, gather to chew the leaves of the plant they call the Virgin Mary. A powerful hallucinogen, it methodically disassembles the world they see around them. “It is like a giant zipper. It unzips the walls, the building, the earth, and goes right up you as well. In ten seconds, there is nothing left of your world. And you are nothing.”

So, what do they see when everything has disappeared?

“Then you see what is real. All the worlds—the one you live in, and all the worlds that might have been, too. You are free to move from one to another, for they are all real. And when you come back to this world, you know what freedom is like. And you know that you are not free. Only when you have mastered the dreaming are you free.”

As he pours the tiny grains of colored sand onto the plywood surface, the young Tibetan monk imagines the perfect universe of the medicine Buddha. Elegant lotus blossoms take shape around the temple he and his three brothers have constructed over the past four days. For eight hours a day they work in the museum gallery in downtown Chicago, hunched over the table as curious tourists watch their meticulous and silent efforts.

“The vibrations of healing and purification pour forth from the forehead, the throat and the heart of the medicine Buddha. By meditating on this Buddha, by entering the universe of the medicine Buddha and by visualizing yourself as the medicine Buddha, all harmful obstacles will be cleansed away.” And then the monks begin chanting, in that impossibly low, other-worldly vibration that makes it impossible to think, impossible to worry. They blast the demons of negativity away with the frightening sound of horns that are ten feet long, and giant cymbals that clash like thunderclouds.

In the mathematics department at M.I.T., a graduate student is struggling to understand the implications of Georg Cantor’s set theory. A nineteenth-century mathematician, Cantor seems to have proved that the absolute infinite exists. In some circles, the absolute infinite is known as God. But it has also been proved that, by definition, the absolute infinite lies outside the scope of rational thought.

So what kind of knowledge would allow one to know the absolute infinite, he wonders? If rational thought isn’t up to the job, then the only way it can be known is through mystical awareness. Not by step-by-step reasoning, but all at once. Are mathematicians allowed to be mystics? Where is the science in that?

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Dr. John Hagelin stands comfortably at the lecture podium as he discusses the physics of the Unified Field Theory with an audience of scholars, university students and curious conference participants. Hagelin received his Ph.D. from Harvard in 1981 and recently ran for President as the candidate of the Natural Law Party. His academic credentials are impeccable, but his career has taken some interesting turns. Several years ago he resigned from the faculty of Stanford University to conduct research into physics and consciousness at Maharishi University of Management in Fairfield, Iowa.

One of the overhead slides shows a lengthy mathematical formula that Hagelin explains is the “Lagrangian of the Unified Field.” This is the formula for making our universe. “This formula includes the whole of physics, geometry, chemistry, biology—all the discoveries of science of

the past 300 years,” Hagelin says. “Everything you want to know is contained within this single formula. If you know how to read it, this will provide a map to tell you how to get home. It’s that comprehensive.”

And then Hagelin switches from physics to metaphysics. “What we now know is that the single force that underlies everything else in the universe, that unifies the five basic frequencies called gravitrons, gravitinos, forces, matter and higgs, is consciousness. As you go more deeply into the stuff of the physical universe—10 to the minus 33rd centimeter, which is a lot smaller than the tiniest subatomic particle imaginable—one arrives at the source of all that is. And this is exactly what the ancient yogis described as boundless awareness. When we are able to consistently maintain our connection with that unbounded awareness, that is called enlightenment. This is the destiny and birthright of every human being.”

John Hagelin is not the only scientist who is interested in enlightenment. Every year the Program on Consciousness Studies at the University of Arizona hosts a hugely popular conference that brings chemists, physicists, neurologists, and medical doctors together with theologians, shamans and meditation adepts to share data and theories. Their common ground may yet be a minefield, but each year there is progress. They sense a common language, although they may not yet speak it.

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Buckminster Fuller, the brilliant design engineer and futurist, said that there are really only two directions in the universe—“out” and “in.” To be human is to wonder what lies beyond the frontier of the known in both directions. We gravitate towards the limits, and press against them. Our extroverted curiosity about the world “out there” leads us to exploration, discovery and quantification. What is the furthest boundary of space? What populates the strange world of a subatomic quark?

But the peculiarly human realm of “interiority” is equally fascinating. No matter how beautiful the world around us appears to be, we find ourselves drawn to our own thoughts about it all. What is this thing within us that feels, that wonders, that suffers? What are its dimensions and limits? What lies beyond those limits?

Like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, we hunger for something more. We feel incomplete, restless. We suspect that we are more than what is reflected back to us by the worlds we have constructed or explored. In the darkness of a depth we rarely visit there is a desire to know, to apprehend, to connect with everything, to unify the vast universe. “Let there be light,” we say. In every culture, at every time in

human existence, we have sought illumination. Not merely to inform the mind, but to bathe it in the radiant awareness that mystics call “enlightenment.”

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The word “enlightenment” is burdened with connotations that are often either ponderous or superficial. On the one hand, it seems preposterous to talk about enlightenment as something ordinary mortals can achieve. On the other hand, our most casual conversation is full of references to “enlightened self-interest,” “enlightened business practices” or “enlightened relationships.” The word has a strange, somewhat foreign feel to it. We don’t know how to take it, so we don’t really take it seriously.

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The quest for enlightenment begins with a simple question: What does it mean to be human?

Consider your life. Imagine those whom you love, the tasks that you perform from day to day, the experiences that make you happy or keep you awake at night. Is the full extent of your humanity defined by the doing of these things, or by the thoughts or feelings that accompany your activities? Or are you like the fisherman who sits in his boat all day, having caught many small fish, but knows in his heart that somewhere in the depths below there swims a great being?

Each of us struggles to devise a strategy for coaxing the great fish of our own being to the surface. We pick a place under the overhanging trees or in the middle of the pond, we try different kinds of bait and lures, we drop our lines in the early morning or under the moon. But, after years of this routine, we come to believe that who we really are is defined by the kind of boat we are sitting in, or by the fishing rod we hold. “Life is the journey, not the destination,” we tell ourselves.

But, periodically, we see a dark shape moving in the water, or even break the surface, and again we hope. And the restlessness returns.

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My own restlessness reached a peak after a trip to India several years ago. For nearly a week, I was involved in helping out with a series of dialogues between the Dalai Lama and forty leading-edge thinkers. The intellectual and emotional stimulation was relentless. When I returned to

the United States, my world had been turned upside down. I just couldn't seem to keep my feet on the ground. In fact, the ground had disappeared.

After several turbulent weeks, I called the Dalai Lama's younger brother, Tendzin Choegyal, or "T.C.", who had become a good friend. T.C. is a very wise and down-to-earth man, a former military officer in the Indian army, and has a great sense of humor. "How are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. Being with His Holiness has really shaken me up. I don't really know where this is taking me. You must have seen this before. What should I do?"

T.C. laughed. "He has a way of doing that to people. Don't worry. I suggest you think of your experience as a negative. Don't be in a rush to analyze it. Just be patient and see how the picture develops."

So I waited—and watched my life come apart (and not for the first time). Although I was disoriented, I wasn't upset or afraid. I was losing much of my familiar world, but it felt natural, even if somewhat painful. The problem was, I had no clue where I was headed.

One afternoon, I received a call from my sister Michaela. We hadn't spoken in months, and there was a lot to catch up on. But she had a sense of urgency in her voice that prevented me from asking the usual questions about children and grandchildren.

"I was just out meditating in Rock Creek Park, and saw something. This never happens to me. But I had to come right home and call you. It seemed important."

Michaela is a nurse, midwife and college professor who is an extraordinarily sensitive healer and spiritual teacher. When she speaks, it is always best to pay attention. I asked her to tell me about it.

"I saw you struggling to pull something very large and not quite defined out of the ground, out of the mud. You were pulling, and the effort was almost too much, so you kept stopping. It was like you were trying to pull a man-like being right out of the earth, but it was all covered with goo, and I couldn't see it clearly. But it is vital that you succeed. That's what I have to tell you. Whatever it takes, you must bring this thing up out of the ground. Don't give up."

Now I understood the turbulence in my life. My soul was trying to be born. Apparently I was in labor.

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What does it mean to give birth to one's own soul? In the Gospel, we are told that "man must be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven." As every mother and child knows, birth is not a matter of good

intentions or arcane theory. It is a matter of effort, of perseverance, and of nature. The tiny infant, unable to see and unused to adversity, must strain with every muscle in the struggle for liberation. Liberation from what? To what end? The infant cannot know, cannot imagine. She is driven only by the inherent will to live, pushed along by the suffocating contraction of her once-familiar world.

To be born again requires an even greater effort than the first time around—for we must struggle against our own mind with its self-generating labyrinth of beliefs, ambitions and fears. The first birth is the arrival of the physical body and its personality. The second birth is the awakening of consciousness. It is only when we have been born the second time that we become fully human.

This struggle to reach consciousness is the work of nature unfolding at the depths of our being. Just as the mature plant produces flowers and fruit, we are designed to attain awareness. Without human awareness, the universe would be a lonely and unappreciated work of artistry, and therefore, incomplete. Indeed, there are prominent physicists who say that the universe cannot exist at all without consciousness. But the point is this: The maturity of human existence is achieved only through the birth of awakened consciousness. All experience up to that point is but a nutrient for the great soul—the “mahatma”—that emerges from the womb of ordinary life.

As with all of nature, there are stages in our complex growth pattern—the cultivation of reason and curiosity, a facility for problem-solving and an educated sense of moral responsibility—that must be mastered before our life force can be directed to the generation of its most magnificent creation. Each stage must be complete before the next one can begin.

But growth also demands that we be willing to undergo a voluntary death to what has been in order to give life to what might be. If we are to experience the eternal, we have to relax our attachment to the finite. Again, to return to the Gospel:

*“I solemnly assure you,
unless the grain of wheat falls
to the earth and dies, it remains
just a grain of wheat.
But if it dies,
it produces much fruit.
The man who loves his life
loses it,
while the man who hates his life in this world
preserves it to life eternal.”*

[John 12: 24-25]

Attachment (which is discussed in some length in the first chapter), is what keeps us from the labor of the second birth. One of those attachments is the way we cling for dear life to the comfortable confines of ordinary consciousness.

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How can we be certain that there is any form of awareness beyond the everyday waking consciousness that gets us to the grocery store and reminds us what we need for dinner? Well, for one thing, we experience an “altered” state of consciousness every night when we dream. Dreaming consciousness is quite different from waking consciousness. Dreams operate in the realm of living symbols, rather than in the literalism of ordinary life. So, it has been known since earliest days that dreams must be “interpreted” into a rational narrative to make any sense to us when we return to waking consciousness. That is, we translate the dream symbols into concepts, which are the currency of the rational mind.

But there is also a dream-like quality to everyday life. One who is sensitive to this quality lives in a world of inexplicable synchronicities, remarkable transformations, paranormal phenomena, answered prayers and miraculous healings. These experiences are dismissed or even “disproved” by the rational mind, which takes everything literally. That which is not literal is not true, as far as the finite mind is concerned. If it were up to the finite mind, there would be no music, poetry, love or movies. “Bah, humbug!” it proclaims. “It’s all fantasy.”

But I believe that the dreaming mind does not switch off when we wake up in the morning. By giving so much attention to waking consciousness, we simply become unaware of the operation of the dreaming mind. But it continues to operate very powerfully, constantly weaving a coherent narrative of all the data it receives. That is, it translates the literal facts of daily life into symbols, by which they acquire meaning. Without meaning, the endless stream of data would drive us completely insane.

We get glimpses of the dreaming mind whenever we engage our imagination, for that is the realm in which it operates. The artist, the corporate visionary, and the daydreaming seventh grade student all switch attention to the dreaming mind in order to make it through the day. But the dreaming mind does not merely interpret data. It creates it. Indeed, some hold that the dreaming mind is the source of the very world in which that data appears. This hypothesis is explored in the chapter entitled “Imagination.”

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In addition to waking and dreaming consciousness, there is a third kind of consciousness (actually, there are others as well, but they are outside the scope of this discussion), which might be called “non-conceptual consciousness.” In this state the mind is active but it cannot translate the content of its awareness into a conceptual framework. One can only speak, at most, in poetry, metaphor or symbol. Even a brilliant philosopher like the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas, who was ferociously rigorous in his conceptual analysis, was utterly at a loss when it came to the non-conceptualizable. After completing his monumental Summa Theologica, Aquinas had a direct mystical experience of the infinite, after which he reportedly said of his masterpiece, “It is all as straw.”

Awareness of this realm can be obtained only by means of what might be called the “infinite mind.” Just as the physical brain has a left and right hemisphere, each with its own jurisdiction, so too does the non-physical mind operate in both a finite and an infinite capacity. Because the finite mind cannot imagine infinity (which is boundless and therefore is not a concept), the finite mind (quite logically, but incorrectly) rejects the possibility of the existence of infinite mind. The finite mind, by definition, is short on imagination.

As long as we experience life through the conceptual model of our finite minds, restlessness is inevitable. The cause of this restlessness is that we somehow know what we cannot know. We know that there is more than we can imagine. Infinitely more. And the only way to end our restlessness is to shift our thinking from the finite mind to the infinite mind. This shift might be called “the turning.”

Imagine that you are a ray of light flashing from the sun into the darkness of outer space. Your attention will be on what you see before you—dim shapes of reflected light that occasionally interrupt the vast emptiness that reaches out to the edge of the universe. Now imagine that you are able to slowly turn your head around to look right back down the length of the ray to the sun itself. All you will see is light. This is the turning of awareness known as enlightenment.

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Enlightenment is not complete until we learn not only to access the different aspects of the mind, but to engage these capacities appropriately. Balance is the measure of mastery. And, as we will see in the chapter entitled “Compassion,” what holds it all together is love. Enlightenment is not so much matter of the intellect, but of the awakened heart. A heart that is infinitely sensitive, touched by

everything it sees, feels, tastes. A heart transfixed in a state of awe, and one that therefore cannot bear the sight of blindness.

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The more we access the other dimensions of the mind, the more our perspective changes. For example, do you know how large you are in relation to the universe? Do you think of yourself in relation to the entire universe, or just in relation to your city or neighborhood? From how much of the world, and beyond that, the universe, have you withdrawn your attention? And, at the microcosmic level, how deeply are you conscious of the movement of your body, of your bloodstream, of the countless humming universes that are contained within the dirt under your fingernail?

To be human means to fully inhabit these realms—all of them—from the subatomic to the furthest star a billion constellations away from your front yard. It may sound a bit ambitious, but this is the human challenge. And we are fully capable of meeting it by refusing to limit ourselves to the small selves that we inhabit in lives that we make so unbearably insignificant. To be fully human is to see with new eyes—with eyes that are open to the limitless realms of consciousness in which we live and move and have our being.

When the mind has been fully awakened, one is able to experience the world simultaneously on several different levels. With the finite mind, one drives to work, balances the checkbook, and lives out the “personal” story of one’s life. With the dreaming mind, one sees the symbolic significance of each encounter and event. With the infinite mind, one observes the daily ebb and flow from the vantage point of eternity. This is the meaning of the admonition to be “of the world, but not in it.”

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The history of humanity is, in many respects, the story of our endless efforts to make our fleeting transcendent experiences endure. Such efforts can be summarized as the quest for “the good, the true and the beautiful.” Religion seeks to reveal the good; science and philosophy, the true; and the arts, the beautiful. Each is a gateway to the infinite. The artist—as well as the one who contemplates the work of art—is completely satisfied only by intimations of eternity. The philosopher is content only with the absolute truth. The mystic is satisfied only by union with ultimate goodness, which he calls the “godhead.” Once awakened in any of the three paths, infinite mind finds delight in the

treasures of all three domains. The mystic becomes a poet, the artist a saint, the scientist is lost in awe of the beauty of all things.

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We search for infinity in almost everything we do, even if we are not conscious of that fact. Romantic love, mind-altering chemicals (hallucinogens, alcohol, even cigarettes), sports, entertainment, risk-taking and obsessive work are often avenues by which we hope to escape the prison of the ordinary. But it is not the ordinary world that is the problem. Our restlessness comes from the awful limits of the mind with which we perceive and interpret experience.

The Oracle at Delphi in ancient Greece gave this simple command--“Know thyself.” The “self” to which this refers is our dormant capacity for infinite awareness, by which one can see things as they really are. The hunger for liberation from the prison of conceptual thinking is really just the natural desire to awaken our innate capacity to think with an infinite mind. For that, nothing short of enlightenment will do.

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Enlightenment is not a strange or exotic condition reserved for naked mystics wandering the forests of India or sequestered in an unheated cave in the Himalayas. Enlightenment is simply the state of a human being who is *fully alive*. In this sense, enlightenment is the realization and the expression of who we really are. Without apology, self-absorption, guilt or remorse. Someone who not only lives in the present—but really *lives* there.

Enlightenment, then, is not a matter of becoming divine, but of becoming human. Not supernatural, but extraordinarily natural. For this reason, one might use the term “natural spirituality” to describe this condition. To be simply who we are, to fully accept and express our own nature, is the truest form of spirituality. The term “spiritual” is used here in the sense of a “spirited horse” or “the human spirit.” It means something like the courage to be yourself and to engage openly with others, even in the face of opposition, temptation or death. Spirituality is the actualization of human character. It is transcendent only because it is unbearably real, like the impossibly red color of a sugar maple tree in October or the selflessness of dying men in battle. But it irrefutably belongs to this world, and not some other. When it is present in this world, it demonstrates that “the kingdom of God is within you.”

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Enlightenment is not the exclusive domain of religions, even though it is the focus of the “esoteric” or mystical traditions of all religions. As often as not, religions obstruct the path of enlightenment by discouraging independent thought, imposing unconscious rituals and obligations and by advocating fantastical narratives about their own history and beliefs. (The role of religion—both positive and negative—is explored in some detail in the chapter entitled “Religion.”) Yet religion has also been the repository of centuries of wisdom and experience about the path to enlightenment, and its wealth of learning—particularly what is known as esoteric tradition of the “perennial philosophy”—is the foundation for any serious exploration of the topic.

Historically, religion has been the custodian and protector of an essential insight that science has long struggled to extinguish. Religion advances the proposition that there is more to life than meets the eye—that there are dimensions of human experience that are very real, even if they cannot be metered by an electron microscope. Whether called consciousness, the soul or any of a thousand other names, mastery of this domain is fundamental to the complete human experience. The urge to understand and to inhabit this invisible realm is what is known as “spiritual hunger.” And we all feel its pangs.

Nevertheless, the time has come for enlightenment to move beyond the province of religion. Thinkers as diverse as Harvard’s John Mack, with his inspired interpretation of the “alien abduction” phenomenon, and the Dalai Lama, with his advocacy of secular ethics, have advocated a “spiritual revolution.” We must learn to see reality differently. If we are to succeed in this endeavor, spirituality must become the business of all intellectual disciplines and fields of inquiry—especially science.

Unfortunately, the word “spirituality” has been worn thin by over-use in recent years, especially by writers of the “New Age” sort. Nevertheless, the advent of the New Age movement has had the revolutionary effect of rendering accessible a wealth of religious scriptures from the world over. Today it is possible for any interested layperson to study the once-inaccessible practices of an Incan shaman, a Sufi master, a Zen roshi, or a tantric adept—and, at many conferences, all within the same weekend.

But, given our Western consumer culture, there is also a tendency to treat these teachings as objects that can be bought and sold. This is what might be called “spiritual materialism.” But spirituality cannot be acquired—it must blossom from within. Its fruit is not an expanded esoteric vocabulary, but a life lived for others. Now, as before, we must judge ourselves by our works. It is time for the New Age to come of age.

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Evolution's process of natural selection advances a species only when it is faced with extinction. We are now at that moment, and I believe that enlightenment is the key to our survival. It is the next stage of human evolution. It makes it possible for us to live as if there is common ground between what is good for us and what is good for others. Without this advance, the win-lose thinking that earlier social theorists assumed was unalterable human nature will lead inevitably to warfare over ideology, power and resources, widening the gap between "haves" and "have-nots" and plunging us into deepening chaos. One who is enlightened may not worry about where his next meal is coming from, but he is deeply concerned about how his neighbor will eat.

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I have been interested in the process of "awakening" since my earliest days. When I was five years old, I decided to become a Catholic priest. This ambition was derailed when, at age thirteen, I was interviewed by a priest from the order of Maryknoll missionaries, who suggested that I might want to learn a little about the world before entering a seminary.

"What do you mean, 'world'?" I said. Father Doody lowered his voice. "Well, you know. Girls." So I decided to investigate. The investigation continues. But the desire for "something more" than the concerns of everyday life has never left me.

When I was seventeen, my cousin the late Jesuit scholar David Toolan introduced me to the work of G.I. Gurdjieff, a turn of the century Armenian-Greek spiritual adventurer who tracked down a secret school of Sufi mysticism in Afghanistan. Gurdjieff learned a number of sacred practices that he claimed could awaken human consciousness from its slumber. I found this idea extremely compelling. "Awake" and "asleep" made more sense to me than often-arbitrary moral standards of good and bad behavior. The idea of God as a cosmic Santa Claus keeping track of who is naughty and who is nice always struck me as infantile; if someone were to be "admitted to heaven," the laws of nature (which must apply in all realms) demand that it be only because such a person had the eyes to see it. The key is to develop the necessary vision, rather than to follow a religious code that seemed to be an end in itself. Gurdjieff's insight also was consistent with the accounts of ecstatic experiences reported by mystics such as St. John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart and others.

For the past thirty-odd years I have studied and practiced a variety of disciplines, from Buddhism to Christian Science to all-night Native American Church ceremonies. I have been privileged to spend time with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the Japanese Zen scholar Masao Abe, the Christian mystic Brother Wayne Teasdale and other teachers who know whereof they speak.

At some time or other, each of arrives at the moment when we fully grasp the idea that spiritual maturity must be achieved on our own. At some point, we have read enough, or seen enough, or done enough, to claim our own sovereignty. The Trappist monk Thomas Merton once asked a Tibetan abbot about his escape from the rapidly advancing Chinese troops of Mao Zedong in 1959. The abbot sent an urgent message to a nearby monastery, asking for advice whether to stay or flee. The response came, "It is time for each of us to stand on his own two feet." At some point, we realize that who we are is entirely in our own hands. This is the point at which we understand that the only wisdom that we can live from is our own. But we have to claim it to make it useful. That, and no more, is what I have attempted here.

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As the title suggests, this book is intended as a "primer" for enlightenment. One cannot write like Shakespeare unless one first masters the alphabet and the basic rules of grammar. This book is not intended to teach the arcane mysteries of Christian hermeticism, Tibetan Buddhism, Jewish Cabbala, advaitic Hinduism or any other advanced path of mysticism. For these, one must find an acknowledged master or guru. This book is meant only as a beginning. It is my hope that anyone who starts along the path outlined in these pages will be inspired to discover the next stage of development, whatever that may be.

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This book is organized by the letters of the alphabet. Nothing could be more arbitrary. So there is no right place to start, or any logical order of presentation. Enlightenment is a non-linear process. It can begin anywhere. Read what seems to appeal to you, whenever it seems appropriate. There is no test at the end.

Neither is there any particular magic in the topics themselves. For example, in the first chapter I have chosen to talk about attachment, but it just as easily could have been about acceptance, anger, attitude, attention, accountability or annihilation. There is no magic formula. Theoretically, the contemplation of a single word could lead to

enlightenment, even though reading every book in the Vatican Library might not. The key is to find the word that works for you.

The doorway to enlightenment is everywhere. As the mathematician Jakob Bernoulli wrote:

Even as the finite encloses an infinite series
And in the unlimited limits appear,
So the soul of immensity dwells in minutia
And in the narrowest limits, no limits inhere
What joy to discern the minute in infinity!
The vast to perceive in the small, what Divinity!

What we seek is all around us. It is everywhere and nowhere. There is nowhere to go, because we are already there.