

THE MIND OF THE TRAVELLER
Meditation and Selfhood - by Eric Best

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The Mind of the Traveller: meditation and selfhood.

The purpose of this essay is to explore and clarify, initially for myself but also for anyone else who is interested, a philosophy underpinning the practice of meditation. This paper, then, does not focus on 'how?' but 'why?'. Because meditation is practised in many ways by many people across many cultures, it is absurd to think that there is only one reason for meditating. The approach taken in this essay reflects this writer's experience, attraction and reading as a forty-something, theologically trained psychologist. Furthermore, the approach, like my personal meditation practice, is eclectic, borrowing as much from Oriental thinking as from Western, Neo-Platonic, Christian thought. There are many people who would claim to obtain real, practical benefits from meditating yet not wish to own the ideas presented here.

From discussing with many people their experiences with meditation, it appears that meditating will deliver differing experiences according to the intention and expectations of the practitioner.

Some people will have visionary experiences: they may see shafts of white light or receive messages, etc. I suspect that such visions are hypnotic hallucinations. Meditation is very closely related to hypnosis and practitioners can easily slip from a meditative to an hypnotic state. Under hypnosis, the mind is highly suggestible, as has been recently highlighted in the recovered memory controversy. Visions *can* be very valuable and therapeutic; but I tend to believe our personal angels and demons inhabit the space between our ears, not outside them. Other people have told me of experiencing a dissolution of the self far more radical than the one I am describing in this article [see below]. I have no argument with this. As it is outside my present experience, I have not presumed to write about it.

The discussion below develops its argument from common experience and use of language and does not assume adherence to any particular faith tradition. Nevertheless, the nature of this topic necessitates the introduction of some generic religious concepts. Religious language should rarely be taken literally: it points to a reality that is beyond words and images.

1 Entering the Mystery

Many people are unsure about what meditation is, other than it being a mysterious act that has something to do with Eastern religion, martial arts and "being spiritual". So a preliminary look at some of these terms may be useful.

i What is meditation?

'Meditation' refers to a set of practices usually leading to a stilling of the mind and a heightening of awareness. A related, and, perhaps, more traditional term for this practice is '**contemplation**'. ['Meditation' properly means 'to think deeply', sometimes as a means towards contemplation.] 'Contemplation' primarily refers *to a state of consciousness*, sometimes called 'mystical union'. Its secondary, adjectival, meaning is to describe a way of praying [including meditation] used to facilitate this state. This kind of prayer is also known as *orison*.

Contemplative practices are used around the world, across cultures and religions and hold a central place within the mystical traditions in Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Despite their obvious differences, these traditions hold much in common, for two reasons: firstly, there is a commonality in the human condition despite cultural differences; and secondly, these faiths have historically influenced each other. In the West, apart from a few religious orders, contemplation was largely forgotten after the Enlightenment. In the 1960s, an Indian guru [teacher], the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, seeing a need, reintroduced the wider Western public to contemplative prayer in the form of a Vedic technique, which he dubbed "*transcendental meditation*". Hence, the term 'meditate' came to appropriate the meaning of the traditional term 'contemplate'.

TM is one of many widely available techniques that help dispose a person towards entering a contemplative state. In promoting these techniques, many people have emphasised their *functional* benefits [stress release, clearer thinking, etc]. However, in removing them from their religious context, they have failed to communicate their essentially *spiritual* purpose: the transformation of the Self.

ii What is spirituality?

Human beings have the ability to stand back and observe themselves and their practices. They can then adjust their procedures in order to achieve desired results. We do this all the time: from boiling an egg to developing a corporate mission statement. To achieve a desired end, one must set clear goals, and develop values and practices that support those goals. The name given to this ability is *self-transcendence*.

As people apply their self-transcendence to their functional activities, they also apply it to their lives as a whole. People will ask such questions as, "What *is* the human vocation: how are we to *be* human?" or "What is the nature of existence and how am I to live in a way that is true to that?" Unlike, I expect, being a cow, being human is a *project* that involves decisions, wrong turns and triumphs. The conscious engagement in *humanity as a project* is what is meant by 'spirituality'. When individuals and cultures cease asking these questions, we place ourselves at the mercy of vested interests who will decide for us, to their advantage and not necessarily to anyone else's.

iii What is religion?

Humans do not exist as isolated individuals. The questions we ask and the answers we give are always in relation to others' questions and answers. In this way, we create cultures that profoundly determine both what we do and the meaning of what we do. Meaning, then, is always contextual. Consider, for instance, your current state of attire. What would your dress variously mean if you were suddenly transported to a village in Iran, the New Guinea highlands, Bondi Beach or to an audience with the Queen?

All individual acts express themselves as, and are expressions of, culture. Religion is an unavoidable product of our existence as both spiritual and cultural beings. Religion is a cultural expression of spirituality in the same way that architecture is a cultural expression of building. A living religious tradition, like any other part of a culture, will not remain unaffected by the people who practise it, but will change over time. Thus religions, like cultures, will vary as peoples' histories vary.

A meaningful human existence is one that has one foot planted in various aspects of one's culture and the other foot planted in one's own unique experience. We need a cultural context to give meaning to our experiences but we should not let any aspect of our culture, including our religions, overwrite and devalue our own experiences. In other words, for a tradition to be alive and enlivening, it needs to be a place of *dialogue* between the innocence of the unique here and now and the experience of the collective past.

iv What is revelation?

'Revelation' is the noun of the verb 'to reveal'. To reveal something is to disclose a reality that has been present all along to people who have failed to see it. Thus, recipients of a revelation characteristically experience it as a *recognition* or an *awakening* to the truth of a situation. A criterion of a good cultural act is its ability to expose us to truths about our world and ourselves; ie, its ability to be a vehicle for revelation. For Christians, the life of Jesus, including his acts and teachings, is the benchmark revelation of life's true nature. Many Australians find the cartoons of Michael Leunig a contemporary medium of revelation.

Language and culture are powerful servants that are constantly put to both good and bad ends. Many cultural acts distort or hide reality by appeal to prejudices, fascinations and insecurities. What is true of cultures in general is true of religions in particular. Rather than inviting and encouraging people to *expose* themselves to reality, many religious groups *impose* their beliefs and practices. While thinking they serve the cause of revelation, they are its antagonists. This type of religion fears the freedom of the mystic.

v What is mysticism?

Mysticism is the aspiration to locate the self in ever-greater harmony with the true nature of life and the practice of certain disciplines in order to facilitate this transformation. Central to this is the gaining of *wisdom* or insight into our true nature, which, because it *is* our true nature, is always present, informing our actions, whether we are aware of it or not. Thus, mysticism is not about obtaining something we do not already have. Rather, it is about letting go of that which obscures vision of, or insulates us from, our foundational reality. It is about dropping our illusions and waking up to reality in order to better serve the world.

Mystical disciplines commonly include acts of humble service, engagement in a dialogue between one's life experiences and the wisdom and stories of one's faith tradition, and the creative use of various kinds of prayer, including contemplation. The mystic knows that these disciplines only facilitate and express, rather than cause, mystical union: the privilege of

entering a contemplative state is an act of pure grace. Mysticism is a way of taking responsibility for one's existence as a spiritual being.

2 The mystical purpose of contemplative disciplines

A brief answer followed by a lengthy explanation: The purpose of contemplative disciplines, expressed psychologically, *is to loosen the hold of [the false 'I' of] the ego by strengthening the hold of [the true 'I' of] awareness.* Expressed experientially, *it is to encounter and be transformed by Sacred Reality.*

i The divided self

The common sense of what we are is false. It is false not because it is bad but because it is an illusion. You cannot attack an illusion: to do so only strengthens it; but you can learn to see through it. In order to understand what the self is, we need only go as far as our everyday use of language. Let us analyse this simple sentence:

"I am feeling carefree."

What is this 'I' that here is feeling carefree? There is a way of answering this question that will emerge from a sense of one's self as, fundamentally, a separate ego and there is another answer that transcends the perspective of the ego. Let us look at the former understanding first. One could call this understanding the 'commonsense, ego-based' view of the self. The emergence of the ego involves two broad movements: *division* and *identification*: Firstly, the 'ego' view separates the subject of this sentence, the "I", from its predicate, so that there are two things- the self and its experiences. Graphically presented, the sentence would look like this:

I[am feeling carefree].

The mind constructs a sense of an independent self, or ego, that relates externally to its conditions. This 'I' has a life of its own, abiding and substantial, separate from but vulnerable to the flux of its own acts and experiences. The predicate, in this case 'feeling carefree', is accidental to but influential on the ego self's integrity. It is like a piece of clothing. It affects the wearer while he is wearing it but it is not identical with him.

Division is an essential feature of the ego. Under the spell of the ego, the mind imagines that the self and the world are mutually exclusive realities whose relationship is external, or accidental, rather than internal and ecological. Notice, however, how the boundary between these two realities curiously fluctuates. The mind may think that the ego boundary is the skin. However, this boundary often extends beyond the body. When a person has been in a car accident, she will likely say, "*he hit me!*". At other times the ego boundary will cross the body, such as when one is engaged in learning a motor skill. When learning to type, for instance, the hands become a part of the external world that one is attempting to submit to one's will. In circumstances such as this, the ego view divides the self into a controller self [an 'I'] and a controlled self [a 'me' or a 'my...body, thoughts, etc'].

The second movement of the ego is *identification*. It is a kind of nostalgia for that from which we separated ourselves: a clinging to a remembered, current or anticipated situation that has been idealised by memory, expectation or fear of loss. Just as each individual has his preference of clothes, so he has his preference of predicates. Humans share with all creatures a natural attraction to certain states of being and an aversion to other states. Unfortunately, our capacity for self-transcendence and abstract thought leads us to complicate things. Commonly, our predicates are *not* like any pieces of casual clothing that we wear, get used to and forget, even though at times they may impose some passing discomforts. Rather, we allow them to influence profoundly our self-image and sense of well-being much more than is necessary. We do this, firstly, by investing our passing states with various personal and social meanings. Thus, our predicates are more like the clothes we wear when we believe that it is important that we look 'good'. Believing our own thoughts, we confuse reality with the valuations we impose upon it. Our likes and dislikes become 'objective' needs, seriously limiting our freedom of response to our situations. Secondly, we tend to forget that our predicates, including our states of mind, are ever changing. What is important to us now will be unimportant later. Thus, our constant *imposing* and *forgetting* cause us to overvalue our current circumstance and make ourselves unhappy when we do not get our way.

In consequence, the 'I' works hard at forcing its world to change so that it will within its constructed zone of comfort. This is the source of much conflict: "*I demand that you [or I] change so that I may feel happy!*" Attempting to escape our unhappiness or secure our fragile good fortune, we find ourselves as in a nightmare from which we cannot, despite all effort, awake: going from room to room in search of an exit to contentedness but finding in each another kind of purgatory.

What does the ego *feel* like? The notion of the ego is closely related to the socio-economic and legal notions of authority and ownership. We experience the ego as an *attachment* to our selves and to things. [Thus, for example, when you attack *my* property, you attack *me*.] This attachment is intimately connected with the creation of meaning. In order to make sense of our lives we author narratives out of our acts and possessions. These stories are, in fact, optional: the same set of events can be read in many different ways. An event that was, at one time, a source of pride can turn out to be, at another time, a source of shame. Psychological therapies frequently work on the level of meaning creation, assisting the client to replace or supplement destructive narratives with constructive narratives. Mysticism, on the other hand, seeks to liberate people from the tyranny born out of the idolatry of confusing our stories with Reality itself. It seeks to remind us that we are dreaming.

Because the ego is constructed as the part of us that owns, controls and accepts responsibility for our lives and actions, it is most strongly sensed when circumstances threaten to unravel and expose this relationship; that is, when our lives spin out of control. Typically, our undoing is experienced as anxiety arising from a sense of guilt, meaninglessness or finitude. Here are two examples, one of finitude and the other of guilt:

As you know, you are mortal and are going to die. Imagine being told that you have just two months to live. The sense of tragedy and loss that this invokes is a function of the ego. The mind temporarily leaves the here and now of engagement with the world and imagines a panorama of its own life. The mind, forgetting that this panorama is of its own making, creates an attachment to it and grieves for its loss.

Concerning guilt, the ego works like this: imagine a sequence of three related acts, A1, A2 and A3, occurring at times T1, T2 and T3, consecutively:-

A1 Jill pays Jack, a work associate, a compliment on his appearance.

A2 Jill criticises herself for saying it because she fears that Jack may take it the wrong way. She starts feeling anxious.

A3 Jill tells herself that she is being too critical and needs to lighten up on herself. She now feels angry with herself for being so prone to anxiety.

Here we have three acts in a chronological order:

T1 T2 T3
A1 A2 A3

In the ego view where there is a self behind or above one's acts, the simple chronological order is subsumed into a hierarchical order:

A3
A2
A1

Act A2 stands in a privileged position regarding A1. A2 is a comment by the responsible ego self upon A1 for which it is responsible. Unfortunately, when A3 occurs, *it* will now be understood as the responsible ego self, commenting on A2. The ego is a very slippery fish, luring Jill into a spiral of guilt.

Another example of the ego is found in our use of the word 'try'. To try can mean, legitimately, to *attempt*; ie, to have a go at something, to give it one's best shot. It can also mean to force oneself to do something where such forcing divides the person from himself and yet does not objectively assist the action. Thus, I might *try* to pay attention rather than just attend, or *try* to aim at a target rather than simply aim.

The existence of the ego is not wrong in itself. The ego plays an essential role in our development as responsible individuals. It only becomes a problem when we believe it to be the last word in what it is to be 'me' and forget that it is just a creation of our minds, the product of thought.

The 'ego' understanding of the self is a Western cultural assumption that is so thoroughly ingrained in us that the chance of finding another way to understand the 'I' may seem remote. Nevertheless, I will now argue for an alternative understanding of the self that, although unrecognised, has been staring us in the face.

ii The non-self

Under the spell of the ego, the mind constructs an impassable divide between the self and the world, or the self as controller/owner [I] and the self as controlled/owned [me]. It is *dualistic*. The alternative view does not divide the self. It is *non-dual*. However, in order to attain a true non-dual realisation, it is useful for analytical thought to make a provisional conceptual distinction between *self as object* and *self as subject*. I will introduce the self as *object* first:

We return to our sentence:

"I am feeling carefree."

and ask again "what is this ' I ' that is here feeling carefree?" Taking this sentence at face value, the answer to our question is ' feeling carefree' . ' Feeling carefree' is ~~what~~ [what constitutes *me*] at this point in space and time. An ' I ' seeks an ' am' and an ' am' demands a predicate:

[I am] [what?] feeling carefree.

I am always *some thing*; or, usually, a lot of things: feeling carefree, watching the trees move in the wind, listening to music, etc, etc. These constitute my existence at any point in time, *without remainder*. There is no subject without the objects that condition it; no self without other. In this view, there is no abiding, substantial self that relates, externally, to a changing world or to its own acts. There is no ' I ' that thinks. Rather, a coalescence of certain mental and physical processes constitutes, and creates a sense of self. My existence as a lived experience is always changing as my internal and external environment changes. Life is a dance.

Do not worry too much about losing your ' self' : everything else is in the same ~~to~~ Speaking of boats, is a boat the sum of its parts? No. If you remove or replace the rudder it is still the same boat. The alteration does not destroy its identity. Is it then to be identified with a single, essential, part? No. You can lose or replace any single part and it is still that boat. Does it then exist as an idea, apart from its physical reality? Not really: if the boat is utterly destroyed, then that boat no longer is.

How, then, does this boat exist? *It exists as a social convention*. Were that boat to be taken to a land where there were no lakes or oceans and the inhabitants had never encountered or had use of boat, it would be understood as something else, perhaps a shelter. Furthermore, without a concept of 'b oat' to organise their experience, the inhabitants may not even see it as one thing. They might view it as a collection of strange objects. If one removes the culturally imposed, conventional label of 'b oat' what remains is an aggregation of ~~of~~ events. Indeed, when we see through our labels, we realise that everything we conceive as a self-existent *thing* is, in fact, a spacio-temporal event, ie, a process occupying a finite place in time as well as in space. Moreover, every event is itself both an aggregation of events and a part of larger aggregations of events. The term ' event' has another value: it implies spectators, thereby exposing the interdependence of subject and object. ["If a tree falls in a forest, does it make a sound?"] Without a subject, there are no objects; without objects, there is no subject.

As we bestow upon one particular aggregation of processes, as a useful social convention, its identity and meaning as 'b oat' , so we bestow upon another aggregation of processes its identity as ' you' ! ' You' are the label of convention ~~given~~ to the transient combination of your predicates [descriptions]. Beneath the convention of your own name, is a flux of organic processes and mental events that is your living reality. ' I ' , ' me' , ' you' , ' they' , your name, are packaging.

While some predicates have their ground in our lived experience [eg "pain in the left ankle"], many are *labels* bestowed upon us by our society as part of our cultural formation. Consider how you change according to your situation and the various roles the society asks of you: parent, worker, spouse, etc. The more you identify with labels derived from your society and the less in touch you are with your actual here and now experiences, the more you will be feeding the illusion of your ego.

While much of this may initially seem counter intuitive and the ego seem completely real and foundational, a period of contemplative practice will likely shift this perception. In the

meantime, what initial evidence might we muster that the ego may *not* be natural and original but, rather, is a mental and social construct?

Consult your own experience. We have already seen how the ego boundary re-draws itself in differing situations. Like the illusion of the changing moon, the ego will also wax and wane according to one's situation. When you are actively engaged in a task, such as driving a car, the separate 'I' is not present. All that is present *actions*: hearing the radio, watching the idiot in the car ahead, feeling the cold of the steering wheel, planning the day's activities, etc. When you are talking about your plans, the 'I' awakes. When you have been accused of a wrong doing, the 'I' takes control. Guilt and pride are the two most fertile fields for the emergence of your ego. The ego is thus revealed as a form of social control. The mind imagines a 'thinker' that is separate from but responsible for its acts. The ego is about the self creating itself as its own project. The ego is not truly a thing, but an *effort* of the mind. However, the terms of our self-creation are instilled from and formed against a set of cultural expectations. You are expected to take responsibility for all the emergent activities of your being and you judge your success by someone else's criteria. The price we pay for societal control is huge. We pay for it out of our vitality and *joie de vivre*.

What might a transcending of the ego feel like? In the example of Jill [above] we saw how slippery, to the point of it becoming involved in a possibly infinite regress, the ego was. A non-ego approach removes the hierarchical model, leaving behind a simple, horizontal, sequential model:

A1 A2 A3.

None of Jill's acts has privilege over another. None can claim to represent the 'true' Jill that lives above her actions and experiences, because there is no 'true' Jill. Each act *is* Jill at that point in time. A3 is just one more behaviour in a sequential chain. Should Jill ever come to recognise this, her thoughts and other acts will tend to lose their self-absorption and focus more on the objective reality of her circumstances. In a scene from an episode of *Fawlty Towers*, Basil's car stalls. He hops out, threatens the car and hits it with a branch. This is funny because we know that there is nothing in the car to praise or blame. It has no ego. Egolessness is the absence of praise or blame, towards oneself and towards others.

iii The higher self

The previous section discussed the self as object. We will now consider the self as *subject*. Consider the following two statements; the former presupposing a common-sense ego understanding of the self, the latter suggesting a non-ego approach:

**"I want you to consider my needs."
"I am wanting you to consider my needs."**

Say them to yourself a few times to get some sense of how they sit. I find that the first sentence gives rise to a sense of being locked in to a situation, while in the second sentence there is a sense of relative spaciousness and freedom. Why is this? The first sentence is a *demand* spoken by someone who is locked into her situation. The second sentence, on the other hand, is an *observation upon oneself*. Rather than responding *from* her current state of being, the speaker is responding *to* this state. The speaker is not lost among the clouds of her situation, but is, in part, risen above the clouds, observing them. The act of being aware of the shifting states of being that constitute her selfhood has created a space. She is no longer *identifying* with these states, which inevitably leads to efforts to control them either by

embracing them or by distancing herself from them. Thus, she has gained some freedom to *act* rather than just react to her situation.

For the sake of clarification, one can view mental life, or sentience, as consisting of three movements. The first movement is the vast world of sensory and thought experiences of an organism, most of which occur outside of conscious awareness. Examples of this are as close as the sensations on the tip of one's nose. The second movement is the activity of consciousness. While most nervous activity happens outside consciousness, a tiny few rise into consciousness. This is, in part, determined by the intensity of the activity [I am usually unaware of my left foot until it starts to hurt], one's training [a musician will more quickly detect an out of tune instrument than would a non-musician] and intention [I will usually not register the number of a passing bus until I want to catch one].

Consciousness, the second movement, can be likened to an intense, narrow beam prison spotlight forever shifting from event to event, its movements determined by the concerns of the guard and levels of activity within its field of operation.

The third movement is the concurrent awareness of movement two. It is being present to the flow of one's own consciousness. This third movement, while always accessible and necessary facet of sentience, is usually underdeveloped and under utilised: rather than remaining present to our unfolding circumstances, anxiety and craving entice us to flee *this* moment as we try to secure a better future moment. The practice of this third movement of sentience [often called '*mindfulness*'] is, for many, the core contemplative technique: awareness *is* enlightenment.

Conceptually speaking, any observation requires 1) a thing observed and 2) an observer. Both are necessary and each entails the other. Who, or what, is the observer? Mystics sometimes call this the *true* 'I', or 'higher self', in contrast with the 'me' -~~self~~ that is the fluid sum of my predicates [experiences, actions, qualities etc].

Unfortunately, this terminology can be confusing because people can take it to imply the existence of another, objectifiable, self that exists separately and above the 'me'. Any such notion resurrects the disabling confusion of subjectivity and objectivity of the ego. A subject can have no life of its own, independent of its objects. If we wish to objectify the basis of our subjectivity by employing conceptual thought, the mystical 'I' is best conceived ~~the~~ *transparent cup of awareness that holds the fluid mixture of events that comprise one's experiential world.*

Expressed experientially, it is *the ever-changing world of lived experience apprehended in non-judgmental, non-clinging awareness.* The point of my argument is that true 'I' of awareness is *not* a mental image, a *thing* towards which one can strive, existing separately from one's here and now experiencing. This 'I' can no more objectify or experience ~~itself~~ than can a knife cut itself. In fact, it is not *anything* at all. Like a flawless mirror, it has no qualities, consisting exhaustively of those objects of which it is currently aware, and it does not act [yet it enables true action]. It is pure subjectivity. It manifests as the grace of accompanying oneself, intimately, without objectification. It is the quality of being awake to one's experiencing rather than unconsciously reacting, according to one's programming, to stimuli.

Our faculty of awareness enables us to attend to our experiences and, consequently, rather than attach labels, name them truly. At all times, it is readily accessible. We cannot strive for it; rather, we rest into it. Right now, turn your attention back onto yourself and become aware of what you are experiencing, eg, the touch of this paper if you are holding it or your visual perceiving of the black print on white background. How are your eyes feeling right now?

What are you currently thinking and feeling? You have just moved from unconscious activity to conscious activity. Interestingly, the more attentive you are to your present experiencing, the more you, as a separate experiencer, disappear into the living of the experience. The experience also changes because it is no longer subject to the reification and isolation of conceptual thought. The world is less *labelled* and more *lived!* It is only by seeing through our labels that we can speak truly. This quality of being awake to one' s experiencing is an essential part of the contemplative state and a primary goal of many mystical disciplines. Contemplation brings into full bloom the freedom hinted at in our everyday use of self-observation.

The exercise and development of one' s awareness faculty, by nonjudgmental awareness of the self as an ever-changing sum of sensory and mental experiences, dissolves the illusion of the self-existent ego [*or the self-existent anything*] and collapses the distinction [made above] of self as either subject or object. Our ego image dissipates into the flux of lived experiences. Like the smile of the Cheshire cat, the actor disappears, leaving only the action. Seeing through the ego frees subjectivity and the objectivity to be truly and freely themselves, coming together, in mutual interdependence but without confusion, in the being of sentient creatures. My world and I are one. The consequence of this is acuity, freedom and joy, expressing itself in action as love.

iv The three 'I's

I have now discussed three 'I's, which may have left you a little confused, so a recapitulation may be useful. The first 'self' I discussed is the divided self: the 'me' under the control of the illusory, constructed 'I' of the ego, the imaginary driver of the train of my life. Its error is to mistake a conventional reality as being ontologically foundational.

The second 'self' discussed is the bundle of processes I now am, including thoughts, perceptions of the body and the environment, conscious and unconscious actions etc. From this perspective, the ego sense is just another process in this mix. There is no one standing outside these processes who owns them. The third self is the mystical ' I ' of pure subjectivity: the quality of awareness that allows me to know that "I am x". This ' I ' has no identity apart from what it attends to; it cannot be objectified. The second and third selves are two sides of the one coin and through meditative practise, collapse into one.

The ego lives in a divided world. It *conceptualises* itself as a point, separated horizontally from other ego points in the world:

me| you/ it

The enlightened consciousness, on the other hand, *experiences* itself as an expansive field:

**awareness [= I]
of
experiences and actions [= Me]**

In classical Christian terms, this expansive field is an instance of God as Trinity. Its emotional quality is bliss.

v Devotion

This discussion would be seriously incomplete if I did not mention the devotional dimension of contemplation. Many people practise contemplation as a form of *prayer*. The logic goes

something like this. As mooted earlier, all the *things* that comprise our universe are better understood as space-time *events*. God, however, is no finite object or event at all. God is not a being, no matter how great, existing alongside other beings. Rather than, say, 'the Supreme Being', it would be truer to employ terms such as *Being itself* or *'the power of Being'* as pointers to the Sacred Reality. God, therefore, cannot be encountered as a distinct, separate reality. Instead, God is disclosed, sacramentally, in and through the events [acts of people, stories, historical events, experiences of love, awe or beauty, etc] that comprise our life/world. This sensibility is well captured in a Hindu image of God as a dancer and the world as his/ her dance. Contemplative prayer, in awakening us and making us receptive to our experiences, opens us to the Holy Mystery "in which we live, move and have our being". We come to realise that truly we are "at play in the fields of the Lord" and relax our anxious grip on our lives.

Many people seek God in encounters with Nature and with other people. Communion with Nature- that greater reality that is indifferent to the utilitarian busyness of the human realm and upon which we are ultimately dependent and to which we must finally surrender- is, I believe, necessary for the development of a healthy spirituality. Seeing the Divine in other people is the work of saints. However, in my experience, this approach remains inadequate if it seeks God in the world to the exclusion of one's self. Embracing both seer and seen, God is best understood to be in the seeing.

3 The consciousness of the traveller

Some people may fear the loss of the ego: If the ego, as the responsible controller of '*project me*' disappears, what will fill the vacuum left behind? What becomes of personal responsibility? If *I* do not live me, who will? The answer is: God, the Mystery behind the mystery of your life. This is the heart of mysticism: *to accept God's invitation to live us into freedom*. Rather than being captains of our destiny, we become willing participants and adventurers in the mystery of our life journey. Our job is to place ourselves at the disposal of God, and let God take it from there.

A good example of this is to be found in the overseas traveller. Some people travel as an ego project, so that they can say "I've been there, I've done that". Others, in a spirit of adventure, travel to place themselves at the disposal of Life and what it may offer. They know that their experience may well change them in ways that they do not yet know. But that is a welcome by-product of their travel, not the intention, which is to experience Life. The traveller's contribution is to buy the tickets, make the bookings etc, but the *important* things happen after the planned parts- the flight, the accommodation- are done. They occur while exploring the town, having coffee in an unknown restaurant, climbing a rainforest mountain, or being befriended by locals. The wide-eyed traveller, his soul in wonder at all the strange new experiences, has left his egotism behind, perhaps at the hotel room. Having lost his mind and come to his senses, he is living in the here and now, in the real world. Our traveller does not waste his time worrying about how his travels will affect his being and reputation. It is not his concern. He is too busy living. Nevertheless, he will be changed.

The mystic path is the appropriation of the consciousness of the traveller to our everyday lives.

4 Further reading

There is a lot written around this subject. One need only browse the T S Bookshop, in Russell St, to get an idea of how much material there is. Like everything else, for every great mystical

book there are many mediocre books. A good way to tell a rubbish book is to ask if it massages your ego, such as by offering some esoteric insight that places the knower in some privileged vantage point above the rest of the human race. A good book will give the reader a realistic yet gracious insight into the human condition and a commitment to working with what you have, rather than reliance on a utopian vision. A true spirituality will foster humility, a compassionate solidarity with the world and a sense of humour; never aloofness.

An excellent first read is Awareness by Anthony de Mello [*London: Fount, 1990*] [all his works are worthwhile]. If that whets your appetite, I would suggest Krishnamurti' Freedom from the Known [*San Francisco: Harper, 1969*] as a next step. Jon Kabat-Zinn' Wherever You Go, There You Are [*Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*] [*London: Piatkus, 1994*], and De Mello' Sadhana [*Anand, India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1988*], are both excellent practical manuals for developing your contemplative skills. Each one of these books provides many clues to practical ways of testing and applying the concepts addressed in this article to your daily living. All mystics agree that the point is not to arrive at a new conceptual theory but to encounter Reality with the whole of one' s being. Indeed, the very thought process that we would use to re-conceptualise our world is the thing that distracts us from seeing clearly! Theory is a servant; Life is the master.

Do not die without having been intimate with the Bhagavad-Gita, TS Eliot' Four Quartets [*London: Faber & Faber, 1944*], and the writings of the Islamic mystic, Rumi. When read from a mystical perspective, the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, for many grown stale from over-familiarity, can again become an illumination.

For those who wish to explore, on a conceptual level, the issues raised in this article, the following writings may be of interest:-

- Robert E. Carter, The Nothingness Beyond God: an introduction to the philosophy of Nishida Kitar, [*New York: Paragon House, 1989*].
- John Cobb, Beyond Dialogue, [*Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982*].
- Tohihiko Izutsu, Toward a Philosophy of Zen Buddhism, [*Boulder: Prajna Press, 1982*].
- William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience: a study in human nature, [*London: Penguin, 1983*].
- J. K. Kadowaki, SJ, Zen and the Bible, [*London: Arkana, 1989*].
- Keiji Nishitani, Religion and Nothingness, [*Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982*].
- Raimundo Panikkar, ' The Treenfold Linguistic Intersubjectivity' , in Archivo di Filosofia Vol LIV, [*1986 No. 1-3, pp 593-606*].
- Sueng Sahn, The Compass of Zen, [*Boston: Shambhala, 1997*].
- D. T. Suzuki, The Zen Doctrine of No-mind, [*York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, Inc, 1972*].
- Mark C. Taylor, Erring: a postmodern a/theology, [*Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984*].
- Paul Tillich, The Courage to Be, [*Yale: Yale University Press, 1952*].
- Chogyam Trungpa, Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism, [*Boston & London: Shambhala, 1987*].
- Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism, [*London: Methuen &Co, 1911*]

Eric Best

"Eric Best [b. 1954] works as psychologist in Kilmore, outside Melbourne, Victoria. The focus of his work is educational psychology. He became interested in spirituality in the mid 1980s through the writings of the Indian Jesuit writer, Anthony de Mello. Since then he has completed a theology degree, focussing on spirituality, cross cultural issues [including inter-faith dialogue] and hermeneutics. Eric is involved in a church community in Port Melbourne where he has recently run a 'headless' workshop. For several years he facilitated a meditation and discussion group in this community.

Eric has been involved in the 'Transpersonal Psychology' and 'Christianity and Psychology' interest groups of the Australian Psychological Society. His hobbies include playing the guitar and enjoying many kinds of music. He is currently living on the family farm and enjoys good relations with the horses and cattle.

Eric wrote this essay in the Winter of 1998 in order to make some sense for himself of some of his experiences arising out of meditation practice and some notions he had encountered in his reading in Buddhism."