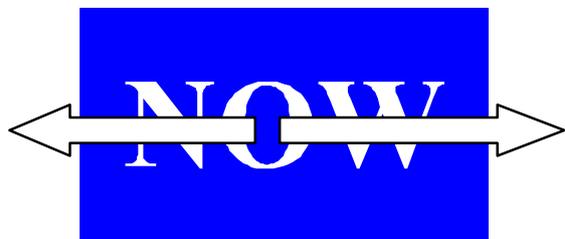


## Issue 150—October 2010

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### Editor's Note,

This is one of our rare single article issues, an essay by Eric Best whose earlier contributions can be located on the Capacitie website. (NOWletters 59, 70 & 76).

I received reports that some of last month's email notices are being blocked by protective software or quarantined by anti-virus programmes. Would you please identify me on your machine as an approved source?

I made a ridiculous mistake in the last issue No. 149 in quoting Douglas Harding: *The true mystic, on the other hand, completing the circle, returns to eliminate our common life, to serve regretfully all creatures, and to demonstrate the truth that the spiritual is not other than this despised material world, but the same world seen under the form of eternity.*

Please eliminate 'eliminate' and replace with 'illuminate'. I couldn't have got it more wrong if I'd tried.

My thanks to Art Ticknor for his assistance with my URL difficulties.

A couple of announcements of forthcoming events from Christopher McLean:

- *First, on 11<sup>th</sup>-12th December there'll be a two-day 'Radiant Mind' workshop with Peter Fenner, hosted by Tortoise Mountain in North Sydney. Peter presents the 'non-dual' approach to spiritual work. You can learn more about Peter's work at [www.radiantmind.net](http://www.radiantmind.net) Registration & Enquiries: [christophermclean50@gmail.com](mailto:christophermclean50@gmail.com)*
- *Secondly, in February there'll be a seven-day Buddhist meditation retreat - Worlds of Your Body - led by myself, Christopher McLean, and Joyce Kornblatt. This is a very practical retreat concentrating on how we experience our body-mind selves in the world. (There is also an opportunity for a weekend retreat within this offering). Registration & Enquiries: Connie Watson - [cjwatson@optusnet.com.au](mailto:cjwatson@optusnet.com.au) - (02) 9981 1400*

The NOWletter appears between 8 and 12 times every year and is a vehicle for news and views about awakening to what is really going on. The content is based primarily on contributions from readers, either their own writing or examples of what moves or interests them. Subscription is free.

Index of articles and back numbers from 1993 at:

<http://www.capacitie.org/now/archive.htm>

## The Everyday Narcissism<sup>1</sup> of the Idea of Self.<sup>2</sup>

***The myth of Narcissus:*** *Narcissus was a handsome young man who chanced to see his reflection in a pool. So fascinated was he by the object of beauty before his eyes he remained there, transfixed, until he pined away and died. In an alternate ending, when he realised his beloved was just a reflection and thus unobtainable, Narcissus, in a fit of anger, killed himself.*

**A** certain amount of suffering is unavoidable: it is built into the nature of the universe. This is primary suffering and includes such things as physical pain, grief, trauma and anguish.

But there is much suffering that is avoidable; this is secondary suffering arising from a sense of disconnectedness from or resistance to reality. All people at some time feel at odds with life - life is going in one direction but they wish it to take another.

It has been observed that the distance between how life is and how we would want it to be is a measure of our suffering. Well, not quite: suffering is more an inverse measure of the *sense of power* we possess to close the gap between what is and what we would want. The more impossible the task seems, the more we suffer.

Frequently people in this situation will seek out and find support from others who can provide the skills and encouragement to close that gap, such as life coaches or a person who can teach you how to operate that dang computer.

But there are times when we find ourselves destitute, with no means of closing the gap. It is to assist in these occasions that my interest here lies. The aim of the approach outlined here is to help ease psychological suffering by assisting individuals make peace with reality.<sup>3</sup>

### A Perspective on Suffering

Secondary suffering is, at least in part, based on a misunderstanding of what we are. It is this misunderstanding which forms the basis of much of our struggle against ourselves and against life in general.

The misunderstanding I refer to arises from a capacity, which, when used rightly, gives humans an enormous advantage over most other species: the capacity to make a mental representation of ourselves and then think about that representation as if it were our actual selves.

Before we consider how our ability to think about ourselves in the third person - to imagine ourselves as if we were someone else looking at ourselves - when

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<sup>1</sup> The 'everyday narcissism' that is the topic of this discussion should not be confused with *Narcissistic Personality Disorder*, a specific condition requiring specialised psychological or psychiatric intervention.

<sup>2</sup> Very little of this essay is original. It is intended to draw out some of the psychological implications of the writings of, principally, Albert Low and, secondarily, Douglas Harding, Ken Wilber and several other 'non-dual' authors for my therapeutic work with clients.

<sup>3</sup> While this paper does not present a psychotherapy as such, it does have implications on the way psychotherapy might proceed. One therapeutic approach that would appear to be in broad sympathy with the approach presented here is *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*. There may be others.

misunderstood, becomes problematic, it is important to see how it gives us a distinct advantage over other species and contributes to human uniqueness.

Let's take a simple sentence about a common occurrence: "*Sarah borrowed five dollars from me yesterday.*"

This sentence is an expression of our ability to think about ourselves in this way - as if looking at the event from an outside perspective. And, of course, it must be this way because it concerns an event that is distant from myself (who is always here and now) in time. Without this ability, articulating an event from the past in a way that would remain in memory would be very difficult. As a result, I would be much less likely to ever again see that five dollars!

So the ability to 'third person' ourselves enables us to consolidate past events in memory.

This ability not only gives us a past, it also offers a future. Let's say you want to visit Paris. To do so you will need to plan. You will need to fund the trip, organise time off work, passports, tickets, the care of your pets, etc, etc. To organise all this will require your imaginative powers to 'see' yourself in your mind doing these tasks. This, too, obviously requires the ability to think of oneself in the third person, which is why you can organise a trip to Paris but your dog cannot.

A further great gift of this power is the ability to think ethically. Ethical thinking requires being able to think outside the immediacy of our own experiencing, to view our actions as if from the perspective of a third person. Also, the power to imagine oneself in another's shoes is critical for the development of empathy.

Thinking about ourselves in this way is pervasive - we don't even recognise we are doing it (and it is precisely this amnesia that is the problem). This can be



demonstrated by giving people an exercise to visually scan themselves and then draw a representation of what they see. With few exceptions everyone will draw a representation from the perspective of someone else looking at them, not from what they are actually seeing. For example, they will draw themselves with faces; but, of course, (unless viewing our reflection) we do not see our own faces.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike other members of his species, Ralph, due to his ability to imagine himself from a 3<sup>rd</sup> person perspective, is able to make effective use of a mirror.

*Nick Best 07*

\* Drawing courtesy of Nicholas Best, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> For a fascinating exploration of the significance of this, visit the website, [www.headless.org](http://www.headless.org)

### **How does this ability contribute to our suffering?**

Our ability to create a third person representation is not the problem. What is problematic is that we forget this representation is only a mental / social construct and consequently mistake this idea of ourselves for what we truly are.

All of us are fascinated by our self image: much of our lives are dedicated to serving it, protecting it and enhancing it. This service ensnares us in a number of ways, including the following:-

- Fundamentally, it creates a sense of separateness from our experiences, such that we can never fully inhabit our own lives. We wish we were someone else, somewhere else or something else.
- A secondary problem is that our identification with the thought of ourselves (what we are and what we ought to be) inhibits our ability to respond with optimal intelligence and flexibility to our changing circumstances.
- A third problem is that our self-concept is very subjective and therefore unreliable. It is tightly bound to our 'inner critic' (the superego). Our judgements determine the 'look' of the image. But our judgements, influenced as they are by experience and social and cultural contexts, may change significantly over time. Actions or failures to act that may be judged critically at one time in one's life may be seen in a much less critical light at another time. For some events, our judgement might harden over time; for others, they might lighten. At the time, however, we always believe that the view we have is objectively true. A distorted self-concept, such as an inflated or a low self-esteem, is a central issue in psychotherapy. However, this arises from the more fundamental mistake of identifying too closely with the thought of ourselves in the first place.
- Finally our habitual self-imagining stands in the way of us seeing who/what we actually are. It creates a misconception about the nature of reality - ourselves and our world. Specifically, it hardens the fluid lines of living experience into strict categories, such that I am one thing and the world, another. I am a thing that knows and the world consists of things that can be known. I am a subject and the world is an object. But I, too, am an object - a thing that can be known to myself or to someone else. In this I am also part of this world. It is a source of our sense of anxiety, shame and failure.

The adaptive advantage of this ability - to plan for danger - comes at a price of constant stress as our worries extend from coping with real and present threats to having to cope with hypothetical threats to a hypothetical self.

Our identification with our concept of self acts as a shroud that both subtly and profoundly obscures our view of reality. To lift this screen is to feel at home with what is. But, how do we proceed to do this? We have all worn our self-image for so long it feels like a second skin. Indeed, the thought of existing without it is, initially, quite scary and disorienting (which is probably why we keep it). But stronger than our attachment to our self-concept is our attachment to truth. So, if you recognise some essential truth in what you are reading, you might find yourself, even provisionally, being prepared to step outside your self-image.

The task of recognising our mistake can be addressed by exploring the act of experiencing from two directions: that of 'the knower' and that of 'the known'.

## The Unity of Knowing 1: The known

Starting with the that which is known, aka, ‘the world’, ‘the object’, or ‘Being’, it becomes clear upon inspection that our experience of Being is, in truth, a form of knowing, ie, experience. We never experience Being nakedly; rather, we actually experience our own experience as Being. All we ever know is perspective.<sup>5</sup> An analogue of this exists in the technologies of sonar and radar. All that is received is the echo of what has been transmitted, from which, contours of an external world that are relevant to the operator, are inferred.

To appreciate this better, let’s begin with the senses. Many animals (including humans) experience certain air pressure waves (Being) as sound (Knowing). Our brains do that because in transforming air pressure waves into sound we can discriminate events with much greater refinement than if they remained just air pressure waves. Likewise, light and colour do not exist ‘out there’. Rather, they are means of Knowing that reality has developed to enable organisms to discriminate their environment (Being) from a certain band of electromagnetic wavelengths that reflect off remote objects. So rather than hearing sound or seeing colour – as if hearing and sound were two different things, it is truer to say that sound *is* hearing and colour *is* seeing.

If we observe how various organisms use their senses, it becomes clear that they inhabit distinct, subjective worlds. A decaying carcass will smell attractive to a dog but repellent to a human. Because a sparrow’s coat reflects ultraviolet light which other sparrow’s brains are evolved to perceive, a plain brown sparrow to a human will look brightly coloured to another sparrow.

Perspective does not simply manifest on the level of sensory perception, it also manifests on the levels of human culture, sex and personal history. Men tend to see the world differently from women; what is acceptable in one culture will be unacceptable in another; my musical tastes may differ markedly from yours. This happens not because one of us has it wrong; it happens because we all inhabit, subtly or grossly, different subjective worlds, formed by our diverse genetic inheritances, cultural heritages and personal histories.

Because whatever we experience or believe is a perspective, and because each of us is unique, there will always be areas of divergence. For many, Joseph Stalin was a monster; for others, a national hero. An encounter with my cat, Maya, will be a different occasion to me, you, a sparrow, a flea or its own self-sense. Which is the real Maya?

One of the functions of language is to control this diversity. Through language we lay down (and call upon) certain rules and definitions for the particular interchanges in which we engage. However, our languages are themselves ambiguous, which creates misunderstandings and ongoing argument.

In summary, because what we see is a reflection of how we see (and how we see is a reflection of what we are), the ‘common sense’ view that I, as a knower, passively witness an external world, is incorrect. What we call ‘the world’ is, in fact, our own knowing *as* the world, ie, ‘Knowing as Being’. Knowing is the ocean in which we swim.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The significance of perspective on spirituality is explored in detail by Ken Wilber in his book, *Integral Spirituality* [2006: Shambhala].

<sup>6</sup> This is not to suggest that Being is dependent on Knowing (or vice versa). See the discussion that follows.

Let us now turn our attention to the other side of the coin: the knower. If I am always 'inside' this ocean of knowing, who or what is it that knows?

## The Unity of Knowing 2: The knower

Reality, it would appear, has two great faces: *Being* (what is) and *Knowing* (the experience of what is). While, clearly, not everything knows (I'm fairly confident that my shoe does not have an experience of 'shoeness'), the fact that some instances of being (you, me, the cat) are also occasions of knowing, lends reality a greater depth and magnificence than it could ever have as blind 'isness' alone. As far as we yet know, this planet is the only locale of this quantum qualitative leap by Reality and is therefore, perhaps, the most precious jewel in all creation.<sup>7</sup>

One could picture each instance of knowing as a coin made of exceptionally thin gold. The coin is Oneness, with one face Knowing, the other, Being. While Being and Knowing do not directly encounter each other (because they face opposite directions), nevertheless, the coin's thinness means that any change to the one will involve a change to the other.<sup>8</sup>

These cosmic faces are not static - they are *dynamic*. Everything is in flux. It is not so much that things change but, rather, change is things. Reality is a river without banks.

It has been observed that the engine behind change is a drive towards oneness, or simplicity. However, because reality is ambiguous, oneness lies in two directions. On the one hand there is *elemental* simplicity or *exclusive* oneness, on the other, *functional* simplicity or *inclusive* oneness. Examples of the former are 'me' (as opposed to 'us'), disintegration and analysis, while the latter finds expression in 'us', integration and synthesis.

Life involves a balancing of these directions. As and through living organisms, this drive is understood and recognised as *intention*.<sup>9</sup> The creativity that forms the bird, through the bird forms the nest. The loss of dynamism is commonly experienced as melancholy or depression.

These great fundamentals: the dynamic drive to Oneness, expressed through Being and Knowing, manifest as the present moment, as you and me. In Christian theistic terms they correspond to the essence and persons of the Trinity.<sup>10</sup> Both transcendent and immanent, we do not possess them as qualities; rather, they express themselves as us.

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<sup>7</sup> The extent of Knowing could be much wider than we have, by and large, acknowledged. Certainly single celled organisms are now being credited by scientists with exercising intelligence. Process philosophy argues that knowing, as a basic category of reality, is intrinsic and co-extensive with Being throughout the universe, i.e., all natural occurrences that are not mere conglomerations (e.g. rocks) or artificial assemblies (e.g. shoes), including cells, molecules and atoms have some kind of 'inside', i.e., a primitive prehension. Just as Being took a gigantic leap of complexity when inanimate matter became life, so, in the same moment, did Knowing.

<sup>8</sup> See Albert Low, *Creating Consciousness* [2002, White Crow Press], for an in depth discussion on the relationship of these fundamental categories and their ambiguous, dynamic nature, as summarised below.

<sup>9</sup> In traditional philosophy, the major areas of study, Ontology, Epistemology and Ethics, explore, respectively, Being, Knowing and Intention.

<sup>10</sup> The Holy Spirit corresponds with dynamic Oneness; the Father, the creator, is the ground and power of Being, or Being Itself (Paul Tillich); the Son, the Logos, who reveals the Father, corresponds with Knowing.

Because of the conventions of our language, this is obvious for Being but obscured for Knowing and Dynamism. For example, in the case of Being, we do not talk about existence as an action by, or quality of, ourselves. I do not think of 'existing' as something that I *do*, as if I abided upstream of my existence; rather, Being resides upstream of me (with me as one of its myriad self expressions). I suggest that the same logic applies for knowing. I do not *know* (as an act) anymore than I can *be* as an act. Rather, I *am* this being and I *am* this knowing. Just as this particular human *being* is what I am - I cannot be anything else (or I would be that something else) - so, likewise, is this human *knowing* what I am. It is not something I *do*, it is what I already *am*. There is no separate doer, there is only the doing.

But herein lies the mistake: through our creative faculty to think about ourselves and through language we assume the existence of a self that lies along side of, or upstream of, these experiences and activities (such that we can seriously entertain the thought of what we would do differently if we were someone else). Furthermore, we think of the relationship between this imagined self and its qualities and behaviours as that of possessing or enacting and as being responsible for them. This is the myth of the transcendent ego.

In summary, we can look at ourselves (and each instance of sentience) as having two sides: an absolute and universal side, and a unique, contingent side:-

- the absolute side - *that* you are (do / know);
- the contingent side - *what* you are (do / know)<sup>11</sup>.

The latter manifests the former.<sup>12</sup> The absolute is our underlying oneness; the contingent is what constitutes each of us as unique, individual expressions of the former. There is no one or thing pulling the strings, least not ourselves; it is just the universe 'becoming' / Reality unfolding / dynamic Oneness instancing - as ourselves.<sup>13</sup> There is no one who knows; each of us is One knowing.<sup>14</sup>

## The Sense of the Doer

One reason this perspective can seem counter intuitive is that we experience having control of our actions. This is our executive functioning - the capacity to selectively attend or to maintain a course of action that runs counter to concurrent thoughts and feelings (as in, for example, courage).<sup>15</sup>

It is important to notice that executive control works well in some areas, but poorly or not at all in others. Executive functioning is primarily geared towards actions: while I can think deliberately, I have little direct control regarding the stream of thoughts and feelings that pass through me. Nor do I have conscious control over much of my body functions. Some famous psychological research has shown that we make our choices

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<sup>11</sup> See Albert Low, *The Origins of Human Nature* [2008: Sussex University Press].

<sup>12</sup> In regard to knowing, an ancient metaphor likens this to a mirror and its reflections. *That* I know is the mirror; *what* I know, the reflections.

<sup>13</sup> For this reason, when used to denote a particular, the words 'occasion' or 'arising' more accurately reflect reality than the term 'thing'.

<sup>14</sup> Hence the Buddhist observation that 'all beings are Buddha'.

<sup>15</sup> Given human's capacity to imagine possible futures and predict outcomes, the group survival value of being able to override such thoughts and their associated emotions is obvious. Without this, we would not take risks, such as going into battle.

before we are aware that we have done so. 'Conscious choice' turns out to be 'consciousness of choice'.

Furthermore, we frequently have no idea about how we do our actions. I choose to turn my head to the right, and it happens: but I have no idea how I 'make' this happen. So our ability to control certain aspects of ourselves does not indicate the existence of a transcendent controlling possessor of one's mind and body - a separate actor; only the existence of areas of executive functioning.

A quick comment on responsibility: while, legally and at work, for instance, I may be allocated responsibilities for this or for that, it is, I think, a mistake to apply this sense of 'responsibility for' to one's 'self' or one's actions. It is probably truer to think in terms of one's responsibilities to one's world (with 'responsibilities for' being special cases of our general 'responsibility to'), and one's actions in that regard as being either responsible or not.

So, we should not see our executive functioning or sense of responsibility as mistaken. It just does not mean what we frequently take it to mean. It is, in fact, Oneness in action as us.

This may seem like a recipe for passivity. However, Reality is not passive, it is dynamic, and each of us is a locus of the creative dynamism of the cosmos. We do not necessarily lose our inherent dynamism when we dispel the myth of the transcendent, separate self; rather, we set it free from our neurotic constrictions.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, disengaging from belief in a separate, controlling, Self does not prevent one from using this ability to think in those terms in order to make plans or recall events etc, but we are simply not taken in by it. It is just a useful tool 'given' to us to get things done and prepare for contingencies.

## Sifting the chaff from the wheat.

Is it possible to sift out our constructed sense of self from our real self?

Recall that we do not directly know Being. Everything we experience is a form of knowing. Knowing itself lies upstream of all particular experiences: it is not the light that we see - it is the light by which we see. Our experiences consist of reflected knowing - Knowing reflecting off the contours of Being, selected, filtered and transformed by all the factors since the dawn of time that have led to you who are here, now, reading this.

Much of our experiencing (knowing as Being) happens below the level of consciousness (eg, the feeling in your left knee before you read this). Attention (or consciousness) acts like a spotlight, lighting up a narrow section of a much larger and more fundamental world of knowing as being. Consider, for example of all the things you must be pre-consciously aware of to enable you to drive while your conscious awareness is on looking for a car park.

We could describe consciousness, then, as: 'awareness of awareness as being'.

This reflexive nature of knowing - to be, as just discussed, aware of itself (as being) - also enables knowing to be aware of itself as *knowing*: I know that I know. This is the source of the sense of 'me'. At the same time as it gives rise to 'me', it also gives rise

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<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, animals not burdened with this faculty do appear to spend a lot of their time chilling out!

to ‘you’. ‘I’ am my sense of being the seer; ‘you’ are my sense of being seen. ‘You’ actualises not just in the people I meet, but in my sense of God, as well as my sense of being loved or of being under threat. All this happens in real time. It is pure process and does not require me or you to be any particular thing. Animals, too, express this process.<sup>16</sup>

On top of the recognition of self that arises from awareness of awareness, there is added a secondary sense of the self as some *thing*.<sup>17</sup> This erroneous sense that I am something or another, where the transcendental truth of ‘I am’ becomes distorted into the assertion that ‘I am’ (with ‘I’ representing some unique thing that is not *you* or *them*), is what gets us into trouble.

A common mistake is to imagine oneself as one’s body: that one’s skin is the boundary between ‘me’ and ‘not me’. This is contraindicated by violence. Most aggression, abuse and bullying is not physical but psychological, involving verbal attacks and humiliation. Even when violence is physical, the aim is mostly social and psychological. The same is true for love. To be loved for one’s body is hardly to be loved at all. Romantic love may employ the body as a medium but is not of the body. In the cases of both violence and love, it is our existence as subjects, not objects, that is addressed.

There is a traditional spiritual practice based on the question ‘*who am I?*’ Any possible answer to this cannot be correct because it lies downstream of your own consciousness, as a sensory experience, thought or feeling. So, who is the one to whom an answer occurs? This is intended to lead the seeker away from identification with any thought or object of experience to the recognition that there is no knower, only the knowing, as both pure awareness and awareness as being (traditionally likened to a mirror and its reflections).<sup>18</sup>

Time spent in self-awareness practice soon discloses the existence of a cluster of habitual moods, physical sensations and convictions that are our sense of a separate self; you might call this the activity of ‘*selfing*’. It is a kind of contraction against the broader world of your real time experiencing.

When you are fully and happily engaged with an open focus, say, when lying on a beach or enjoying good company, this activity tends to subside. When you are feeling misunderstood or devalued, or when you are concentrating and trying to shut out extraneous activity, this sense of self moves more to the foreground.

This contraction, combined with our ability to think about ourselves in the third person, gives rise to the objectivised sense of self as one who stands over and against his or her world, as one thing amongst others and who constantly strives to secure themselves against the flux of life and death. Thus I experience myself as separated from life.

This separation creates a nostalgia and yearning to reconnect. The name we give to our lost sense of connection is ‘God’.<sup>19</sup> Frequently, when asked about their wellbeing, people will reply, “Getting there.” Where (apart from a grave) are we all getting? And will we know when we’ve arrived? Like the proverbial carrot tied to the donkey, our

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<sup>17</sup> Albert Low argues that we are motivated to develop an ‘I’ concept as a mechanism to mediate, and thereby alleviate the pain arising from the clash of the two aforementioned opposing perspectives (me as seer / me as seen).

<sup>18</sup> See footnote 12.

<sup>19</sup> While the notion of God is more than just this, nevertheless, I would contend that at its core lies an intuition of and longing for a lost primal unity of self and others, self and world.

sense of separation leads us ever on to an ever receding end point where our divided sense of self, as both subject and object, rejoin in ecstatic union, mythologically symbolised as heaven or paradise (or in prosaic contemporary parlance, 'self actualisation'). We seek heaven in our relationships, in knowledge, in power. Everyone wants to come home.

The human story is a holocaust of trusts betrayed, hearts broken, lives destroyed by our endless quest for paradise and just like Narcissus, the frustration arising from the recognition that the desired fulfilment is unobtainable can lead to extreme violence against oneself and the world.

Once the spell of the objectivised notion of self is undone and the shroud is lifted, all that remains is the present moment, uniquely instancing to itself in what is before you right now (including, of course, any continuing feelings and thoughts of self-contraction).

This is it. End of story.

The shift in perspective from regarding oneself as a separate actor / knower of an external world to realising oneself as an occasion of the manifestation of self illumined, dynamic Oneness - and that manifestation-to-no-one is all there ever is / was / will be - can be frightening and disorienting (is this the ultimate dark 'truth, the emptiness we all fear?) but in the end its embrace is an invitation to drink the living waters of life itself.<sup>20</sup> It is the true beginning of faith.

*Eric Best.*

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<sup>20</sup> Christians may find in this a harmonic of the resurrection-death of the Christ and the rite of baptism.