

Seeking To Attain What We Already Have

We already have what we are seeking to attain. We must, however, continue consistently, persistently, and insisently to seek to attain what we already have or we will lose experiential awareness that we already have what we are seeking to attain.

We were having dinner at another couple's home the other evening. The women were in the kitchen while I sat with the husband in the den. We were in the midst of casual conversation - the women were talking about the Texans and we were talking about fashion trends - when I hit one of those speed bumps that is becoming more common for me lately. I couldn't recall the author of a book I had just finished reading. I made some complaining comment about my memory and he said, "Have I got just the thing for you. I recently went for my checkup and complained about my memory. My doctor suggested an 'over-the-counter' medication that I've been taking for a couple of weeks now and it has done wonders for my memory. I highly recommend it."

"Really!?" I responded. "What is it. I'll get some."

He paused for a moment and said, "Help me out here. What's that flower with the long stem that has thorns, usually red?"

"You mean, 'rose'?"

"Yeah, that's it. Hey, Rose, what's the name of that memory medication I've started taking?"

(This, of course, is not a true story.)

I wish there were available a "all the talks on the Gospel of Thomas I've given" memory pill that we could take and instantly recall, perhaps not all, but certainly some of the vital points that have been made up to this point.

By the way, did you know that someone has come up with an invention that will allow you to see through a three-foot solid brick wall?

It's called a window.

See how easy it is to miss the obvious? To forget what you knew?

Jesus, the radical Jewish mystic whose teachings these talks are based on kept saying, even to those who, apparently, were the closest to him, "It's here. The power and presences of the Sacred that I keep trying to teach you about in deed and word is here. But, you don't see it. It is within you. It is your identity. But, you don't get it."

Those who did get it were transformed.

Those who didn't get it either ignored him, executed him or hung around and created a religion he wouldn't recognize.

When I got my first copy of the Gospel of Thomas, twenty years or so ago, I think I read it through in an hour. Maybe two. Doesn't take long. The narrative of the Jesus story that Robert Funk put together out of his work with the Jesus Seminar is something you can also read in an hour.

I read the Gospel of Thomas, latched on to a few things that I thought would make good sound bites to use in my talks and put it aside. Though I ranted against what the Fundamentalists had done and were doing with the teachings of Jesus, I was just as guilty because I was making him into a psychologist.

That favorite line of mine from the Gospel of Thomas that I based a talk on in here a few weeks ago - "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you fail to bring forth what is within you, what you fail to bring forth, will destroy you." - I made that all about the unconscious. That which is within us which we have denied or repressed will at some point have its say.

That is absolutely true. We are experiencing the consequences of the unconscious projected in our culture in incredibly destructive ways. Along with a massive inability or unwillingness for people, especially people in positions of power - either political/economic power or the power of brute forces that comes with shooting someone with a gun or blowing up a hospital with a bomb from the sky -

to take personal responsibility for the consequences of their actions. We live in a world where it is always someone's else's fault. Blame is the name of the game.

The unconscious is not complicated to define. It simply means: we don't know what we don't know. And, as I've just indicated, what we don't know can bring havoc to and in our personal lives and in our world.

One of my teachers in dream analysis said, "A dream is the only part of you that cannot lie." Dreams are a way of accessing the unconscious. This is why one aspect of a spiritual practice can be paying attention to and honoring your dreams.

So is noticing what gets your goat. It's always much more about you than it is someone else. How we accept and live a oneness with others is a concrete marker on the spiritual path. How are relationships you have with others going?

We've had figures in this world - Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, etc. - the systematic murderers of the twentieth century - who suffered from a twisted view of reality because they allowed themselves to be possessed by their delusions. They lacked compassion and mercy.

Those responsible for the genocides in Tibet and Rwanda and the "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia and Kosovo represent what happens when the ego is allowed to become God.

The spiritually mature person achieves a clear perspective on his or her shadow. Mother Teresa was once asked by a journalist why she did what she did. That is, how was she able to take the dying poor from the streets of Calcutta, nurse and love them. Her response reflected her deep self-knowledge: "I realized a long time ago that I had a Hitler within me." This realization became the basis of her self-transcendence and of her unique holiness. (This I found in "The Mystic Heart.")

So, though the psychological dimension is true and it is important for us to continue to "know ourselves," this wasn't what Jesus was talking about in his teachings.

The teachings of Jesus were about developing the skill, the willingness and the courage to see the world as God sees. I'm not sure which comes first: the willingness to see or the courage to see. But if we are seriously interested in transformation we must access the inner light of our true identity and grow in our ability to walk the way that light illumines. This is not something we do for ourselves, though no doubt we benefit, but we do it for the sake of and love for all who are and all that is.

If we had that magic memory pill, we would recall an earlier teaching from the Gospel of Thomas. It is the one that clears everything up. It is saying 22. Recall it?

I'll remind you:

Yeshua noticed infants nursing and said to his students, "These little ones taking milk are like those on their way into the kingdom."

So they asked him, "If we too are 'little ones' are we on our way into the kingdom?"

Yeshua replied,

"When you are able
to make two become one,
the inside like the outside,
and the outside like the inside,
the higher like the lower,
so that a man is no longer male,
and a woman, female,
but male and female
become a single whole;
when you are able to fashion
an eye to replace an eye,
and form a hand in place of a hand,
or a foot for a foot,
making one image supersede another
then you will enter in."

What is the theme of the Gospel of Thomas? If you had to put it in a word? Unity. Unity over division.

What our time suffers from is the tyranny of division and fragmentation. Division versus wholeness is a constant theme in the teachings of Jesus, especially in those found in the Gospel of Thomas.

The name of the game that we are immersed in in this world is “divide and conquer.”

This is the strategy of the ego. We learn very early to divide the world into “inside and outside,” “higher and lower,” “mine versus yours.” It seems that we inevitably do this simply in the process of developing consciousness. But, unless we develop a desire to grow psychologically and spiritually, it continues into behaviors of possessiveness, entitlement, competition, judgment, “them against us” - all of the conflictive stances that keep us, as well as the various worlds in which we live, trapped in the vicious circles of alienation and violence that are apparent at most every level of every society today.

Remember also from a few teachings ago Jesus clearly saying, “I am not a divider.” Jesus seemed unwilling, contrary to the prevailing theme of our culture, not only to be identified as the divider but also unwilling to participate in divisiveness at any level. His mission was, and is, all about unity. He wants to lead people into a whole new way of being, founded no longer on division but on what one writer I found calls “symbiotic unity.” That is, the mutual “giving-is-receiving” of Divine Love. Not the judgment and separation that are so much a part of our culture. Jesus offered and offers the immediate experience of wholeness and belonging made possible by their participation in the abundance of divine love. (In its first few drafts I called this talk “Learning to Do the Divine Abun-Dance.”)

One of the things I love about using the Gospel of Thomas for spiritual practice, and I’m glad being here is part of your practice, is that it gives us an opportunity to experience afresh not only the teachings of Jesus, which some of us have become all too familiar with, leading us to think we know them and that there is nothing left to learn, but also to re-image Jesus. We have been led, by our culture and its

alleged “Christian” orientation, to believe that Jesus was a white guy. I grew up that way. I was taught implicitly and believed explicitly that Jesus was not only white, that’s what we called Caucasians then, but that also he was Baptist.

Imagine your country is at war - which it is. The future of your way of life is at stake - which some say it is. Everybody is expected to pitch into the “war effort” to protect “our way of life.” People in many different countries have this ideology. Anyone who is not willing to do participate is thought to be a coward. Or, worse - a traitor.

Well, Jesus is the one who says, “I’m a conscientious objector to any war you have going on. I refuse to pass judgment or to participate in the violence.”

This true not only for conflicts in the outer world but also for our interior life as well. It is true that what we see going on in the outer world first start inwardly.

Jesus is the cosmic conscientious objector. He knows what we have difficulty seeing. Namely, that perception founded on division can only lead to violence. His stand is not for division but for wholeness, for healing.

Unlike most aspects of the three mono-theistic religions today, the final judgment - if there is one - is not eternal separation and damnation but, rather, a complete assimilation into the wholeness of Divine Love and Sacred Mystery.

This is very hard for some people to hear. Especially, amazingly enough, people who pride themselves on their religious convictions.

We don’t have a magic memory pill. One of the reasons I reminded you of that earlier teaching from Thomas is that it holds so much of what the mystical journey is all about. Please indulge me just to remind you.

Here is that on-first-glance bizarre teaching:

Yeshua noticed infants nursing and said to his students, “These little ones taking milk are like those on their way into the kingdom.”

So they asked him, “If we too are ‘little ones’ are we on our way into the kingdom?”

Yeshua replied,

“When you are able
to make two become one,
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so that a man is no longer male,
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become a single whole;
when you are able to fashion
an eye to replace an eye,
and form a hand in place of a hand,
or a foot for a foot,
making one image supersede another
then you will enter in.”

First, what we have here is Jesus teaching, because he knew it experientially just as all true mystics do, that you cannot not live in the heart of Sacred Mystery. We have no choice about this. All we can do, what we can do, is spend what days we have left on this planet being more fully and deeply aware of this. And, we never know how much time we have left, do we?

I went to see my cardiologist for my annual checkup this week, which took two days of testing. When I sat in his office to get the results I asked him point blank: “What is the status of my disease?” He said, “All looks well. However, Buddha said, ‘To have a body is to live in a house that is on fire.’”

We can’t earn this status of our Sacred Identity. It is a given. We aren’t worthy of it. We don’t deserve it. It is just ours. So much of religion has been made into a worthiness or belonging system.

I thought of a line attributed to Michelangelo in this regard. Someone asked him about how he produced such a beautiful statue and he said, “I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.” That’s our task. To chip away the encrustations of the False Self in order to allow the True Self to find freedom of expression.

There is no religious problem solving going on here, no spiritual rescue taking place, just unbounded awareness of the Mystery. When any religion attempts to say in any way that “God is here but not there, in this person but not that one,” that religion has just become heretical and dangerous.

Second, the agency of this transformation is the Sacred Feminine. The image of infants nursing at the breast stresses how important the Sacred Feminine is to the kind of transformation Jesus had in mind. The feminine aspect nurtures what is within and without. It is our being open to that reality that sustains us and give us true security. It is having this kind of relationship to God, like the abandon and trust that an infant has with a mother. Without this aspect the kind freedom and love of which Jesus spoke will not be born either in us or in the world.

The third big emphasis of this teaching is that of non-duality. Dualistic thinking in spiritual work renders us impotent. Dualistic behavior is not only powerless but usually become destructive.

The fourth emphasis is what in Christian mysticism is referred to as “the power of resurrection.” Notice I did not say “the” resurrection. Many people who call themselves Christian have been so insistent on stressing the literal nature of a physical or bodily resurrection that this has been missed. “Then you make an eye to replace an eye, and a hand to replace a hand, and a foot to replace a foot, and an image to replace an image, then you will enter the Kingdom.” This is poetic, metaphorical language. Those who undertake truly to follow Jesus come to know a life that death cannot defeat.

These four things give us an extraordinary map to follow. They give us such assurance, comfort and promise.

I'm bringing this up because of the particular teaching we have gotten to today. In one way or another it is repeated frequently in the recounting of teachings of Jesus. It is about "the narrow gate."

Here it is:

Yeshua says,

Many are standing
at the door,
but only the single
or solitary will enter the place of union.

I do hope you remember that the two teachings that precede this were also about something missing, or not complete. The one two teachings before this was about there not being enough workers to deal with an abundant harvest. The one we looked at last week was about people standing around a well that was experienced as empty - because no one was willing to go down into it. And, now, this one where many are standing at a door to enter but certain conditions apply for entering into it.

There is this paradoxical, contradictory-sounding, non-dual truth at the heart of spiritual reality: you are already in the heart of Sacred Mystery. Home free. Already arrived. No wait to get into heaven. Done deal.

Imagine you are out driving looking for a place you have never been. The territory is unfamiliar. The day is coming to an end. You are tired. Finally, you pull off to a place where there is what looks like a "mom and pop" general store. You go inside and ask the people there, "Can you tell me how to get to such-and-such?" They smile at you and say, "You are there." Somehow you had missed the sign along the way. Or, as Jim Finley puts it, "Even if you are in the ocean only up to your ankles, you are still in the ocean."

That is one side of the coin.

The other side is that we have to work like hell, or heaven, to realize that. To wake up to the reality of “what is” is extraordinarily difficult, painful and full of anxiety. That’s why so few people do it.

Let me quickly say: everybody in this room has had this experience. It is in disciplining ourselves to spend longer and deeper periods of time in it that turns out to be costly.

In what to me is one of the most beautiful passages in all of spiritual literature, and I’ve read this to you before but I want to repeat it as an example of your already having experienced what Thomas Merton refers to as God’s mysterious, cosmic dance. Listen:

“We do not have to go very far to catch echoes of that game, and of that dancing. When we are alone on a starlit night; when by chance we see the migrating birds in autumn descending on a grove of junipers to rest and eat; when we see children in a moment when they are really children; when we know love in our own hearts; or when, like the Japanese poet Basho we hear an old frog land in a quiet pond with a solitary splash - at such times the awakening, the turning inside out of all values, the ‘newness,’ the emptiness and the purity of vision that make themselves evident, provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance.”

People who make the journey through the narrow gate and stay there are called mystics. Mystics and mysticism date to 2500 B.C. Nothing new with Jesus.

A mystic is a person who has gone through a profound transformational experience from which they emerge with a profound sense of their oneness with the Sacred. People can sense that there is something different about them. They usually attract followers who want something of what they sense the mystic has.

Now here is the rub, or at least one of them, the transformation that the mystic has experienced and that the seeker desires is not something that can be talked about. That’s why mystics speak in parables, riddles, koans and the like.

Jesus came out of his mystical experience saying, “I have met the God who is the God of everyone and creator of everything. Further, though I am not this God, I am

not other than this God either. And what is even more or better, this is true for you as well.”

For the mystic division and fragmentation, the very hallmarks of our world today, lose their tyranny. These people live the life abundant. They learn to do the abundance.

If we were to compile a list of people who had undergone this transformation from any tradition over the long history of the human race, what would be some of the characteristics these people would have in common? What does the mystic look like?

The first thing would be a fully operative moral capacity. These would not be people who lie, cheat, steal or violate others in any manner whatsoever. Only when a person is in touch with and displays what the Buddhists call “loving-kindness and compassion” can they be said to have a strong inner spiritual life. This is true across all the world’s religion through all of history. It is simply not possible to live a mystical or spiritual life without this moral dimension. This is why all religions have a moral code of some sort.

Judaism is full of moral precepts such as honoring the Sabbath and one’s parents. Jesus took those precepts and made them even more stringent.

For the mystic, these moral codes are not imposed from the outside, they come out of the inner consciousness of the mystic. The transformed person acts from love, from compassion, from mercy, from kindness.

Another element of the true mystic is a deep realization of the interconnectedness of everyone and everything. Thich Nhat Hanh refers to this as “inter-being.” Everything and everyone is connected.

When I first heard Thich Nhat Hanh at a conference decades ago he used the example of a vase of beautiful flowers. We buy them and bring them home and put them on the dining room table. In a few days they find their way into the garbage can under the sink in the kitchen. Then they make it to the land-fill or compost heap only to be used as fertilizer to grow more beautiful flowers.

Ilija Delio refers to this as “divine entanglement.”

String theorists refer to it as “the butterfly effect.”

Sandra Maitri in “The Spiritual Dimension of the Enneagram” refers to it as the perfection that is in everything “from excrement to an emerald.”

St. Francis sang to the flowers and birds and called the sun his brother and moon his sister.

I could go on and on giving examples from all traditions over time of how we live in solidarity with all living beings, the earth and the cosmos. Nothing, no one exists in isolation.

For true mystics this is more often than not connected with the world’s suffering. Jesus most easily ignored teaching is “as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto me.”

A natural outgrowth of these two things is, of course, a deep commitment to nonviolence. Some extend this to the non-harming of all sentient beings and to the planet itself.

Gentleness, calm, patience and humility are all part of a non-violent expression. You can find roots of this stance all the way back to pre-Hindu times in India. This attitude heavily affected Hinduism and Buddhism. The Jains, (and for those of you who don’t know about this ancient Indian religion, here is a link - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jainism>)

Jainism is believed to be much older than Hinduism and they have never fought a war. Whereas Christians, who use as one of the titles for Jesus - “The Prince of Peace,” have fought thousands of wars; most of them “pre-emptive.”

Indeed, one could say that the three mono-theistic religions are the most violent of all the worlds religions.

Wayne Teasdale in his book, “The Mystic Heart,” says that “people who attain inner spiritual wisdom have no need to be aggressive.”

We were on our way to dinner the other night driving on a quiet residential street toward the restaurant. In front of us the driver of one car did something to offend the driver of another car. So, they did the only logical and mature thing to do: got out of their cars to get into a fight.

Every person has the right to be respected and protected.

Most people, especially people in Western cultures, and especially in the United States, do not understand the importance of nonviolence. We have built a culture of violence as seen in our movies, video games and the so-called “news.” Study after study shows that violent behavior is not innate. Not only that, it can be overcome through education.

I believe that each of us is called to be a mystic. To be a human being means that we are invited into the possibility of transformation.

I’ve mentioned three qualities that mark those who have undergone this transformation. In the weeks ahead we’ll add to this list. On it, of course, will be having a spiritual practice. You can’t think of anyone in any tradition who would qualify as a mystic or a transformed person who doesn’t have a daily spiritual practice of some kind.

However, let’s return to this teaching we are looking at today:

Many are standing
at the door,
but only the single
or solitary will enter the place of union.

A misunderstanding of this teaching, and it appears in other places and from others in early Christian literature is that the word “single” is taken to mean unmarried. To be sure the Greek word “monachos” gives us our word for “monk” and “monastery” but already Jesus has taught that the “singleness” he has in mind is

that of entering the place of union and comes much closer to what the Buddhists refer to as “enlightenment,” or what I have been referring to as non-dual realization.

The “single” one is the person who is able to make “two into one.” That is to say, the person who has transcended that fundamental perceptual dualism of the mind and can see from wholeness.

To see this teaching in this way brings both a sense of liberation and brings a new dimension of personal responsibility.

It brings a sense of liberation because it opens the door to anyone who is willing to walk through it.

It brings a new dimension of personality responsibility because we can no longer hide out behind the excuse that this kind of spiritual transformation is only open to a few select people. Each of us has to do her or his own work.

Jesus would say, “I and the Father are one.” Or, as my teacher put it to me: “Not one, not two, but both one and two.” This is our true identity and once we acquire a clear perspective on ourselves, we are in a position to evolve more fully into the ways of love, compassion, mercy, kindness and wisdom.

We already have what we are seeking to attain. We must, however, continue consistently, persistently, and insistently to seek to attain what we already have or we will lose experiential awareness that we already have what we are seeking to attain.

Whatever your spiritual practice outside of here is, I hope it leads you to continue to see to attain what you already have.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.