

## Suffering and the Spiritual Ladder

Richard Oxenberg

**Bliss→Joy→Awe→Reverence→Dread→Anxiety→Despair→Mendacity**

**Mendacity→Despair→Anxiety→Dread→Reverence→Awe→Joy→Bliss**

### I. The Bliss of God

How are we to understand the reality of suffering from a spiritual perspective?

Let me first make this question clear. I am not now asking why God *allows* suffering. I am asking something more fundamental: How there can *be* suffering in a reality that is fundamentally blissful?

If the spiritual essence of God is bliss, and everything else is in some sense derivative of God's spiritual essence, then where does suffering *come from*? Suffering—as all things—must arise from what is ultimate in reality. If bliss is ultimate then suffering must arise from bliss. Suffering must be, in some sense, a *mode* of bliss.

To make this clearer perhaps we should spend a moment thinking about what is meant by 'ultimate reality.' Ultimate reality is *ultimate* insofar as it is not derived from, or rooted in, anything else. Ultimate reality *Is what Is*. It is not produced for a purpose, but is that from which all purposes stem. Ultimate reality does not—*can* not—produce itself. Rather, all that is produced—all that is less than ultimate—must somehow be produced from it.

If ultimate reality is, in itself, blissful, and we human beings, derived from ultimate reality, suffer, then our suffering must somehow arise from God's bliss. That is to say, the bliss of ultimate reality must have suffering as a potential mode.

But how are we to understand this? The very idea of bliss seems to exclude suffering. How can suffering be a mode of bliss?

Perhaps we may think of it by analogy with white light. White light has all the colors of the rainbow within it. White light, separated from itself, breaks up into these other colors. So red is a fragment of white light, blue is a fragment of white light, etc.

It seems that something similar must be true of bliss. All the affective modes, including the negative ones, must be latent within bliss, fragments of it, somewhat as all the colors of the spectrum are fragments of white light.

This, then, opens us to another question: What is the relationship of these other affective modes to bliss itself?

This is not an idle question. It is a question at the core of spiritual life, for spiritual life involves the endeavor to progress from states we experience as negative, states of suffering (*dukkha* in Buddhism), to a participation in, and enjoyment of, the bliss of God (nirvana; moksha; eternal life).

With this in mind, let us advance the following hypothesis: The more positive spiritual modes correspond to more fully realized states of ontological wholeness and relationality; the more negative with states of ontological isolation and rupture.

There is, in other words, an immanent teleology within reality as such. The word ‘teleology’ is derived from the Greek *telos*, which means end or goal. A teleological system is one driven to fulfill itself through the attainment of some end or goal. The teleology of ultimate reality is an *immanent* teleology, in that reality as a whole is its *own* fulfillment. Reality is fulfilled in itself to the extent that it experiences itself *as* itself; i.e., in its wholeness. Hinduism has a term for this: Sat-chit-ananda. *Sat* is eternal existence, *chit* is consummate awareness, *ananda* is bliss. Reality as a whole (in Hinduism: *Brahman*) has the character of Sat-chit-ananda.

But if reality as a whole is eternally fulfilled in itself, why aren’t we all, eternally, fulfilled?

Because reality is not a simple whole. It is an *articulated* whole. That is to say, it is a whole composed of elements each distinct from one another and distinct from the whole. These elements, when they achieve consciousness (e.g., in human beings), become aware of their separateness from the whole. A human being comes to see herself as an ‘I’ separated from the rest of reality, the ‘not-I.’ This awareness of separateness has its own affective modes, which might be understood as teleological fragments of bliss; teleological in that they are expressions of yearning for, (re-)union with, the whole. But this yearning, when frustrated and unsatisfied, is painful. Pain, of course, is also teleological. That is, pain is, inherently, a desire to be rid of pain.

Thus, reality is a paradox of unity and diversity. The unity underlies (or overarches) the diversity without eliminating it. We approach bliss as we come more and more to experience ourselves as part of this unity. We experience what might be called ‘deficient modes’ of bliss, fragments of bliss, spiritual suffering, as we experience ourselves isolated from the unity.

We may think of the suffering modes, then, as modes of *desire* for wholeness, modes, so to speak, of fragmented bliss *desiring* completion. At the furthest extremities, however, these modes do not *experience* themselves as desire, for they are ignorant of what would satisfy them. They experience themselves merely as suffering.

With this in mind, we can sketch out a progression, or regression, from the wholeness of bliss to the most deficient modes of bliss; a ladder, so to speak, of spiritual deprivation and attainment. Spiritual life may be thought of as the endeavor to climb up this ladder.

I put forward the following schema as a suggestion for how we may think of this ladder. It is organized in terms of increasing distance from the consummation of bliss: *Joy* is one step from bliss, *awe* a further step, *reverence* one more step away, *dread* further still, *anxiety* even further,

*despair* further again, and, at the furthest extreme from bliss is what I will call narcissistic *mendacity*, a state of egoic self-absorption and self-deception. The narcissist strives to satisfy her longing for wholeness through subsuming the whole of reality within her own ego.

Let us consider each of these modes in turn.

## II. The Spiritual Ladder (from top to bottom)

### 1. Bliss

Let us think of bliss as the essential spiritual experience of God (and therefore, also, of any who might experience a sense of union/communion with God).

It is an experience of wholeness, completeness, spiritual consummation. Its cognitive counterpart is the recognition (*re-cognition*) that underlying and overarching the great diversity of the universe is an overriding Unity with which one is, even in one's individuality, indissolubly associated.

This finds expression in Christianity through the figure of the Christ, the 'God-Man,' who is, at once, fully man, fully individual, *and* fully God, fully universal. It finds expression in Hinduism in the notion that the individualized Atman is 'One' with the universal Brahman. It is expressed in the central revelatory commandment of Judaism: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." The one whose love is so thoroughly immersed in God unites with God.

In the *Divine Comedy* Dante expresses his vision of this divine Unity:

O grace abounding, through which I presumed  
to set my eyes on the Eternal Light  
so long that I spent all my sight on it!

In its profundity I saw—ingathered  
and bound by *love* into one single volume—  
what, in the universe, seems separate, scattered.

As whole, bliss includes within it all the other spiritual modes as well, and, therefore, it involves an awareness of, and feeling for, all who fail to experience this bliss *as* bliss—who experience it deficiently, as suffering.

Thus, such bliss is also *love, compassion, and peace*.

It is *love* insofar as it is an experience of community with all things. It is *compassion* insofar as it entails an empathic participation with all who suffer states of disunity and fragmentation (in Christianity, this empathic participation of God in human suffering is figured in the Cross of Christ. In Buddhism it finds expression in the Bodhisattva vow to work toward the elimination of suffering in all beings).

And yet divine compassion for suffering is not despair, for at the level of the divine there is an understanding that even despair is but a deficient mode of bliss, a *desire* for bliss (however forlorn), and that all who despair will eventually be brought out of their despair; that—in the words revealed to Julian of Norwich—“All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of thing will be well.”

God’s bliss finds expression in the Jewish notion of the Sabbath, the seventh day (seven being a symbol of wholeness) in which God rests from all his work. God’s ‘work’ is the work of bringing the diversity of the creation into accord with the unity of the Creator. This work is ongoing. It does not come to an end at some point in time, but achieves its end, its *telos*, at a point beyond time. This point beyond time is the Sabbath. The Sabbath is not a moment in time, it is a spiritual mode, it is the Eternal as present within time itself. From the perspective of the Sabbath one sees the wholeness and fulfillment of the creation even in its diversity and unfulfillment.

Thus, in addition to love and compassion bliss entails an abiding sense of existential *peace*. Paul calls this the “peace that passes all understanding.” It passes understanding because it is not based in any worldly state of affairs. Thus, it is not subject to the vicissitudes—the ups and downs, gains and losses—of worldly life (which the East calls ‘samsara’). It is a peace present even in the midst of worldly strife.

Bliss, in itself, is ‘pure actuality’ (to use an Aristotelian phrase). It does not seek to actualize anything beyond itself. It is satisfied in itself. As dynamic, however, it seeks something *within* itself. The dynamic *life* of bliss is joy.

## 2. Joy

If we think of bliss as the experience of ‘pure actuality,’ then joy might be thought of as the experience of *coming to actualization*. Joy is the experience of moving from potentiality to actuality, the experience of *becoming* actualized. Thus, bliss is the experience of being fulfilled, joy the experience of becoming fulfilled. Bliss rests in itself, joy progresses beyond itself. And what joy is progressing toward, is bliss.

We might think of the relation between bliss and joy by analogy with enjoying a satisfying meal. Bliss is the feeling of satisfaction after having eaten the meal, joy the feeling of pleasure *in* eating it.

But bliss should not be thought of as static. God’s bliss is *living* bliss, *creative* bliss, and thus bears a dialectical relationship with joy. Bliss, following its create urge, separates itself out from itself and thereby experiences the joy of reuniting with itself. We are speaking, of course, in highly abstract terms. In the finite world, this joy of reunion is enormously varied; *as* varied as diversity itself. When a man falls in love with a woman he feels the joy of reunion. When an actress reveals her inner feelings to an audience she feels the joy of reunion. When a musician joins notes in a melody he feels the joy of reunion. When a political activist works for a better world, she feels the joy of reunion.

Ideally, worldly life should be a life of joy *working toward* bliss. This notion finds symbolic expression in the first chapter of Genesis, where God (joyously) creates harmonious order out of primordial chaos and rests “from all His work” on the seventh day. The six days of creation are days of joy. The seventh day is the day of bliss.

Thus, as *dynamic*, ultimate reality is best thought of, not simply as bliss, but as a dialectic of bliss-joy, where joy is the experience of advancing upon bliss, and bliss overflows into a potent disunity that then allows for joy in endless permutations of creative *re-union*.

As a spiritual mode, joy is the feeling of working toward, and approaching, the unity of God. Such spiritual joy, like spiritual bliss, contains within it *love* (community with others), *compassion* (feeling for the suffering of others), and *peace* (abiding contentment in self).

### 3. Awe

Awe arises when we first glimpse the greatness and luminance of God from out of the smallness and darkness of our felt isolation. There is an element of joyous surprise in awe, for awe bears a relationship to despair. Awe is the first experience of the real possibility that one’s despair can be overcome.

Awe is the experience of coming out of the darkness into the light; coming aware of the Whole and one’s inclusion within it. In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Arjuna experiences awe when Krishna provides him a vision of the divine Trimurti (Brhama-Vishnu-Shiva) generating and destroying countless worlds in endless creative activity. Moses experiences awe in his encounter with God at the burning bush. Jesus’ disciples experience awe at his transfiguration.

There is always a touch of dread within awe, indeed a twofold dread. There is the dread that one may prove unworthy of the divine presence: “‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty’” (Is. 6:5).

And there is the related dread that one’s very unity as a separate self may be overwhelmed by the Unity that is God: “‘You may not look directly at my face,’” says God to Moses, “‘for no one may see me and live’” (Ex. 33:20).

Nevertheless, despite such dread, awe contains within it a great yearning and hope, the hope that one will be able to approach, more and more closely, the overarching love (and bliss) that is God. Rudolf Otto speaks of these elements of awe as ‘*mysterium tremendum et fascinatum*’: the terror and fascination of approaching the divine mystery.

So awe, though dreadful in part, is the opening to joy.

#### 4. Reverence

As awe is the opening to joy, so reverence is the opening to awe; but reverence bears more of a relation to dread than does awe.

We feel reverence for God, or for tokens of God, that promise to bring us out of our isolation and into relation with wholeness. In reverence we humble ourselves in the face of that which we acknowledge as greater than ourselves, fuller than ourselves, more complete in meaning and worth than ourselves. Thus the devout Jew bends the knee in reverent prayer, the Christian kneels at the altar to take communion, the Muslim prostrates himself in humble submission.

Such humility, however, is not simply an expression of lowliness; it is at the same time an expression of grandeur, for it is just such humility that allows us to *transcend* ourselves toward the greatness beyond us. Through observing the terms of reverence the devotee approaches more and more fully the Wholeness of God.

But in the experience of reverence there is also the fear that if we fail to meet the terms demanded by the revered ritual, law, or dogma, we may be thrust back into isolation. So, again, there is dread within reverence.

And for this reason, reverence can all too easily degenerate into superstition. Religious superstition is rooted in the dread that if we fail to do what is prescribed in the prescribed manner, God (or ‘the gods’) will injure us, reject us, cast us away, abandon us. So we cling to this or that ritual, dogma, or practice, not for the way it opens us to the reality of God, but for fear of God’s wrathful judgment. This, in turn, feeds fanaticism, oppressive dogmatism, bigotry, etc.

Nevertheless, reverence, *rightly directed*, is a passageway to awe, joy, and bliss.

#### 5. Dread

Dread, as a spiritual mode, is the experience of what has been called the *wrath* of God. In dread we feel God’s disapproval, which is to say, we feel our own failure to meet the terms demanded by God, for communion with God. Again, dread, like reverence, is manipulable. In general, the farther we move from the higher spiritual modes the more our experience of God is mediated by that which is *not* God, that which merely *represents* God, and, hence, the more our spirituality is subject to manipulation, exploitation, and distortion due to inadequate representations. This is why theology—good theology—is so important.

Still, dread, like reverence, is an authentic spiritual experience on the path toward wholeness. As a spiritual modality it is what John of the Cross calls ‘the dark night of the soul’: “The soul, because of its impurity, suffers immensely at the time [the] divine light truly assails it. When this pure light strikes in order to dispel all impurity, persons feel so unclean and wretched that it seems God is against them and they are against God” (John of the Cross, *Selected Writings*, Paulist Press, New York, 1987).

But this sense of God's disapproval is a mode of transformative relation to God. In the dreadful experience one feels the *judgment* of God for one's "impurities," i.e., for those spiritual dispositions ('sins') that make one unable to commune with the whole. We feel unacceptable, unaccepted. But we experience this only because we are moving *toward* the whole, and, thus, feel our inadequacy in respect to it. Thus we must undergo a 'repentance,' a *metanoia*, a 'death and rebirth,' to realize our spiritual potential.

This, of course, is figured in the death and resurrection of Christ. Christ's *dreadful* death on the Cross is, symbolically, his dying to sin (to that which cannot harmonize with the whole) so as to be resurrected in the Spirit (harmonious relation with the whole). The death is *for the sake of* the rebirth: we are condemned *in order to be* redeemed. Still, the experience of condemnation is dreadful. In the words of the Christian spiritual *Amazing Grace*: "Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fear relieved."

In Buddhism, such dread is represented by Buddha's encounter with Mara on the eve of his enlightenment.

Such dread of God, rightly understood, is a blessing. It marks (for many) the beginning of their spiritual journey, their approach to God, hence the first step toward reverence, awe, joy, and bliss. In the words of the Hebrew Bible: "Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

## 6. Anxiety

Existential anxiety *per se* is the experience of alienation from God. But unlike dread, anxiety does not know itself to be in relation to God at all. It is an experience of deep restlessness at the core of one's being. But it has—often unacknowledged or misunderstood—elements of spiritual dread within it.

The person in touch with her existential anxiety will wonder about her 'self-worth' (a wondering that is a kind of amorphous dread), but will have little idea of what she would need to do to establish that self-worth. She will feel, deep within (but not necessarily acknowledged) a general sense of rejection, unworthiness, inferiority. As a result, she will turn to the things of the world to shore up her sense of self-worth; looking upon worldly goods, worldly success, even worldly luck, as tokens of ontological worth. Such anxiety, thus, leads to what in the East is called 'attachment'—the association of finite powers, goods, and circumstances with one's sense of fundamental, ontological, well-being. In the West such attachment is called 'idolatry'; the worship of finite goods *as if* they were God.

Such worship of finite goods leads to intensive rivalry between human beings, as we violently compete with one another for access to, and control over, these goods—in what Thomas Hobbes calls "the war of all against all." But such internecine war is not merely, or even principally, a war over material goods. Even more, it is a war for *standing, status*; for it is through such standing and status that we seek to reassure ourselves of our ontological worth. In effect, the anxious person, no longer in any authentic relation to God, seeks to make a god of herself, as

compensation. In Christianity, this is the spiritual sin of Pride. In the context of Eastern religion it is often spoken of as ‘the ego.’ In modern psychology, we speak of it as ‘narcissism.’

And, ironically, it is just such narcissistic Pride that prevents healthy, honest, communion with others, and thus, with the love that would move us along the path to true wholeness. It is one’s narcissistic pridefulness that one experiences as *condemned* when one’s anxiety *rises* to the level of dread. It is this pridefulness that must ‘die’ in order for authentic communion with God to commence.

We might think of anxiety, then, as *ignorant* dread. Anxiety is dread that is no longer aware of *what* it dreads or *why* it dreads.

## 7. Despair

Despair is *congealed* anxiety, anxiety that can no longer rise above itself or escape itself. The person of despair has been conquered by her sense of alienation and worthlessness. Whereas the person of anxiety turns to the things of the world to shore up her sense of worth, the person of despair experiences herself as having failed to shore it up. Despair is a profound feeling of isolation and abandonment. It is the extreme of loneliness. The despairing person feels loved by no one (or, at least, no one of any *worth*), and feels no further hope that she ever will be.

At the portal of Dante’s Hell are the words: “Abandon all hope ye who enter here.” But to understand this properly we must ask what kind of hope those who enter Hell possess, which they have to abandon. It is not hope in God, for if they had hope in God they would not enter Hell. It is hope in worldly goods, hope in their attachment to ‘samsara,’ hope that their narcissistic pride can succeed in its project of becoming God. This is the hope they are forced to abandon. It is the very structure of samsaric, finite, life that forces this.

In John’s first epistle we read: “Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever” (1 Jn 2:15-17).

“The world is passing away,” hence those who place all their hope in the world’s goods are doomed to experience the loss of hope. This is Hell.

But at this point we must note a fundamental, and devastating, error on the part of the Christian tradition. It is an error—rooted in the spiritual experience of dread—to suppose that Hell can be eternal. The moment Hell is *experienced* as Hell it is no longer despair but dread, and dread is ultimately transformative. It leads to reverence, which leads to awe, joy, and finally bliss. To feel oneself *condemned* to Hell is already to be on the way out of Hell.

How do we know that the idea of eternal hell is an error? We know because it is inconsistent with the possibility of bliss, which entails universal love. God cannot be blissful while knowing that some whom God loves are suffering eternally in hell. An awareness of this would lead God,



and all united with God, to despair. But God would not be God if God were in despair. So, it is not possible that there is a blissful, loving God *and* an eternal hell. Belief in one precludes belief in the other.

Nevertheless, hell is real. The meaning of hell is despair, and despair is real. But despair, as a mode of bliss, does not abide in itself. Despair is a frustrated longing for bliss – and this longing will finally break one out of despair.

As Kierkegaard writes: "[I]f repentance is to arise, there must first be effective despair, radical despair, so that the life of the spirit can break through from the ground upward" (*The Sickness Unto Death*, 59).

From this perspective, despair might be seen as a *higher* spiritual modality than simple anxiety, for it has the power to propel one into the life of the spirit. We place it below anxiety because the *fear* of it leads to a flight from authentic relation to self. We dub this flight 'mendacity.' We place mendacity at the farthest extreme from bliss because a prerequisite of authentic relation to God and others is authentic relation to self. Despair, though it entails more overt suffering than mendacity, involves a more authentic encounter with self than mendacity. The mendacious person must move through despair and anxiety in order to rise to the experience of dread.

Mendacity is, in effect, a management of despair made possible by the way the spiritual good is reflected in finite goods.

## 8. Mendacity

Thus far we have been speaking of the above modes in their relation to spiritual life. Bliss is the experience of union or communion with the ultimate. Joy the experience of active approach to the ultimate. We feel awe upon first apprehending the magnificence of the ultimate, and reverence for the tokens of the ultimate. In dread we experience our inadequacy in relation to the ultimate, and in anxiety feel our alienation from the ultimate. Despair, finally, is the feeling of no longer being able to progress toward the ultimate.

Implicit in this scheme is the notion that all modes of distance from the ultimate are modes of *desire* for the ultimate. Bliss is the satisfaction of this desire, despair its utter frustration.

But these spiritual affective modes (bliss, joy, awe, etc.) also appear in ordinary life, in our relation to finite things and circumstances. Indeed, this is their *first* and most *immediate* appearance for us. We fall in love and experience the joy, approaching bliss, of union with our beloved. We stand atop a towering mountain and gaze in awe at the grandeur of the mountain range before us. We revere our family, our traditions, our nation. We dread the breakup of our romantic relationships, the loss of our jobs, the death of our loved ones. We are anxious in the face of the many uncertainties of life, and can be driven to despair when life no longer presents us with access to its basic goods.

How are we to understand the relationship of these modes, as modes of spirituality, to these same modes, as they appear in worldly, mundane, life?

My suggestion is that the things and circumstances of finite, bodily, worldly life may best be understood as *reflections* and particularized *instantiations* of the modalities of the spiritual.

Perhaps we can make this clearer through the following image. Imagine God as a painter with a palette of colors at his disposal. These colors are, so to speak, the colors of bliss—that is, they represent the various modalities of desire into which bliss breaks up due to individualization (that is, the individual’s separation from the whole). God employs these colors to *paint* a finite world; some things are painted red (awe-inspiring), some green (dreadful), some blue (joyous), etc. But these colors of the finite are not chosen randomly; they reflect, in their various, finite, ways, the meanings of the spiritual modalities themselves.

Thus the *joy* and *bliss* of sexual romance is a finite reflection of the joy and bliss of communion with the divine (this association is the basis for the Bible’s *Song of Songs*). Thus, the *dread* of romantic breakup is a finite reflection of the dread of rupture with the divine.

In these ways, the finite world in general reflects (and instantiates) the infinite life of the spirit. This is one way of interpreting what Plato means in speaking of time as “the moving image of eternity.” In temporal life, we live amidst reflections and finite instantiations of the eternal reality. Plato expresses this again in his famous Allegory of the Cave. Reflected on the wall of the cave (though often in distorted ways) are material realities that have their primary meaning as tokens of the immaterial forms of true goodness outside the cave. The cave represents the finite, material, world.

It is just because of this *reflective* quality of finite life that *attachment* (as the East calls it) and *idolatry* (as the West calls it) are possible. *In attachment (or idolatry) we mistake a finite reflection of an eternal good for that eternal good itself*, and thus pursue it and cling to it—indeed worship it—as if our fundamental spiritual well-being depended upon it.

Such idolatrous attachment is the principle malady of finite life. In Buddhism it is called *tanha*, often translated simply as craving or clinging. It is the root of greed, lust, malice, and the other seven ‘deadly’ sins. It leads to intensive competition for material goods and for social status, which *represent* to us the eternal goods we truly seek. But precisely because they are *not* these eternal goods, we cannot get enough of them. The problem is not that they do not satisfy at all (they do!—that’s why we crave them), it is that they do not satisfy for very long or very deeply; hence we forever crave more. In the Catholic tradition, this endless desire for more is called the sin of *concupiscence*.

Idolatrous attachment distorts our relationship to the goods of finite life and blocks our spiritual advance by diverting our attention away from what is of true, fundamental, worth. It is not the most viscerally miserable spiritual condition, because as long as one is succeeding in acquiring such worldly goods one’s misery is assuaged. Indeed, if one is very successful one can feel great, if spiritually ersatz, joy. Nevertheless, idolatrous attachment is at the furthest extreme from true spiritual communion (bliss). Thus Jesus says of the wealthy man attached to his riches: “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of

Heaven.” The rich man is enthralled with the joy bestowed by his riches and comes to worship those riches above all else, above God.

Idoltrous attachment is a mode of falsity; it involves a false estimation of the meaning and value of finite goods. In Hinduism, this falsity is called *maya*, often translated ‘illusion.’ I have chosen to call this stage the stage of ‘mendacity,’ because it entails a failure to honestly acknowledge the fundamental inadequacy of one’s finite condition. This failure and dishonesty can be more or less deliberate. Indeed, as one becomes more aware of oneself one is forced into more and more deliberate modes of mendacity in order to shield oneself from despair. In the philosophical tradition what I am here calling ‘mendacity’ has been called ‘inauthenticity.’ Such mendacity-inauthenticity is driven by anxiety—our sense of being insufficiently rooted in the power (or powers) of being. We seek to shore ourselves up through the acquisition of finite goods, but at some level we know that they do not, will not, suffice.

Moral evil has its basis here, as we exploit and abuse others in order to provide more (more stuff, more status) for ourselves.

And, of course, there is a great irony in such evil; for through it we rupture our relations with others and, hence, with the Whole with which we (more fundamentally) desire to commune.

Idoltrous attachment, and the mendacity associated with it, are native to the human condition. We are born into it, or at least with the proclivity for it. This is the truth underlying the Christian doctrine of original sin. We see the same idea (although expressed in a less condemnatory tone) in the Buddhist notion of *tanha* and the Hindu notion of *maya*. In the words of the Hebrew Bible: “The inclinations of man’s heart are evil from youth” (Gen. 8:21).

Why? Why are we prone to idoltrous attachments?

The Eastern traditions tell us that at the root of idoltrous attachment is Ignorance, i.e., ignorance of our rootedness in the eternal. It is due to such ignorance that we take, *mis*-take, the goods of the finite world *for* the goods of eternal life. Indeed, given our *need* for the eternal, *and* our ignorance of it, such mistakeness is inevitable. This ignorance is *visceral*, it is an ignorance of our affective dispositions themselves; it cannot be resolved through mere cogitation. It is possible to be very intellectually ‘enlightened’ and yet very spiritually immature. This does not mean that the cognitive is unimportant, for it provides the roadmap for one’s spiritual journey. One needs both head *and* heart. On the one hand, if one follows an inaccurate roadmap one will never get to one’s destination. So we need a good roadmap; we need good theology and philosophy. On the other hand, if one stands still studying even an excellent roadmap one will also never get to one’s destination.

Why are we Ignorant? Our Ignorance is a result of our individualization as finite, free, beings whose finite lives depend upon finite goods. In the Hebrew Bible it is said that human beings are created ‘in the image of God.’ This is generally read as a very positive thing and, in an ultimate sense, it is. But (ironically) it is our very status as ‘images of God’ that conditions our Ignorance of God, for it tempts us to seek to become God in our own finite person. We make an idol of our

finite selves. This is the spiritual sin of Pride, which may be precisely defined as the endeavor to make our finite selves into God.

But, because we are *only* an image of God and not in fact God, our making an idol of ourselves obscures and obstructs our relation to the true God beyond us. Now we are alone. Now we feel dependent on ourselves (just as God is dependent on God). *But*, since we are not in fact God but only an image of God we *cannot* actually depend on ourselves. We look down and find that we are naked (finite, vulnerable, insufficient in ourselves). So we rush to cover up our nakedness (mendacity).

All this is symbolically figured in the Garden of Eden story. The Eden story is not the story of an event that took place at the beginning of human history, nor is it a symbolic account of an event that takes place in each of our lives. It is not an account of an event at all. It is a symbolical diagnosis of the human condition as alienated from God.

The mendacious person strives to find ultimate satisfaction through the acquisition of worldly goods, material and social. We speak of this mode of life as ‘mendacious’ because such ultimate satisfaction cannot be achieved through worldly goods. Thus, the mendacious person is forced to deceive herself and others in order to avoid despair. Again, such mendacity does not necessarily or generally rise to the level of full conscious awareness. It is habitual; a mendacity, so to speak, of our bones. Once we become fully aware of it we move beyond mendacity, toward despair.

Despair is an advance on mendacity. In despair we honestly encounter our destitution. It is only through such honest self-encounter that we can begin to make progress up the spiritual ladder.

### **III. The Spiritual Path: Ascending the Spiritual Ladder**

The spiritual path involves movement up the spiritual ladder. It must be said in this context, though, that the human psyche and spirit are enormously complex. One’s spiritual state, at any given time (especially the further one is from bliss), is a combination of many states, and the individual states themselves have elements of the others within them.

For instance, mendacity has despair and anxiety within it. Mendacity is *denied* despair, despair is *congealed* anxiety, anxiety is *ignorant* dread, dread is *inadequate* reverence, reverence is the *threshold* of awe, awe is the *beginning* of joy, and joy is bliss in *dynamic actualization*.

Indeed, given that *all* of these states are *modes of bliss*, they are only properly understood in their relation to one another. For instance, reverence contains an anticipation of awe, but with a large admixture of dread. Dread contains an anticipation of reverence, but mixed with, and dominated by, anxiety. Anxiety contains an intimation of dread, but weighted down by despair. But even despair contains within it the impetus out of despair, for the pain of despair will drive one beyond it.

Further, the move up the spiritual ladder does not proceed in simple steps forward. It is as if one has the entire spectrum within oneself all at once, but with the weight of one’s psyche-spirit

dominated by one or another mode. Also, parts of the psyche can be at one level while other parts are at another. Parts can slip backward, or lurch forward only then to slip backward again. One can be largely in despair yet have intimations of bliss. One can have a joyous life on the whole, but with a lingering taste of despair in the background. Indeed, one can use one's access to joy as a way of *covering over* one's despair, such that one's capacity for joy serves, *at the same time*, as an enabler of mendacity.

And all this is further complicated by the fact that *worldly* goods and evils serve, *both*, as iconic representations (symbols) of spiritual reality *and* as finite instantiations of spiritual goods and evils. Thus (for instance) the *joy* of winning a football game, the *joy* of falling in love, the *joy* of eating a good meal, are *finite instantiations* of the joy of spiritual actualization. Indeed, it is just because of this that we form *attachment* to worldly goods. Attachment may be precisely defined as the ignorant *mistaking* of finite instantiations of spiritual goods for the spiritual good itself. Such ignorant attachment is *native* to human existence, we are born into it ('original sin') and must evolve beyond it. The problem (to be clear) is *not* that we enjoy winning the football game, it is that we ignorantly confuse this enjoyment with spiritual wellness. Once we overcome such confusion we may still enjoy winning the football game, but we are no longer *attached* to winning.

And just as ignorance gives rise to attachment, so attachment gives rise to mendacity. As we become aware of ourselves we come to realize (on some level) that the finite goods we crave (*tanha*) cannot provide the spiritual satisfaction we seek. But, to the extent that we know of no other means for achieving this spiritual satisfaction, we must *deny* to ourselves that this is true (otherwise we sink into open despair). Mendacity, thus, is necessary to *preserve* our ignorance of the inadequacy of worldly goods so as to avoid the despair acknowledgement of their inadequacy would bring us. This mendacity is then employed as a tool for the acquisition of such goods in the 'war of all against all,' i.e., the competition with others *for* these goods.

This frenzied competition ruptures our relationship with others, which increases our sense of isolation and plunges us further into anxiety and despair, which, in turn, inflames our desire for the worldly goods through which we relieve our anxiety and despair. And this inflamed desire for worldly goods intensifies the competition for them, which further ruptures our relationships, which further increases our isolation, which further exacerbates our anxiety, which further inflames our desires, which further intensifies competition, which further ruptures our relationships. . . and on and on.

This is the circle of *sin*.

For many, the spiritual journey begins when this circle breaks down and one's despair can no longer be denied or covered over. Once the person in despair has *seen through* and acknowledged the mendacity of the life of attachment she is finally in a position to understand her anxiety *as* spiritual dread. And this recognition of dread is "the beginning of wisdom," the beginning of the endeavor to overcome it through spiritual advance.

Thus dread moves us toward reverence, reverence toward awe, awe toward joy, and joy toward bliss. But this movement, again, is not simple. There is backsliding, confusion, bewilderment, and struggle all along the way.

And, of course, we have not discussed the *cognitive* dimension of this. These spiritual modes have cognitive counterparts, i.e., ways of *understanding* life and God, which reflect them and which they in turn reflect. For instance, there are theologies of dread (Calvinism), theologies of reverence (halakic Judaism), theologies of awe and joy (Hassidism), and theologies of bliss (Vedanta). This is why theology is important; it provides a cognitive roadmap for the spiritual journey. And this is why the *critical examination* of theology is important; a bad roadmap will lead us in the wrong direction.

In general, then, human life may be thought of as a spiritual work in progress. Human life progresses toward, but does not finally achieve, consummate spiritual fulfillment.

#### IV. Individuality and Freedom

All the spiritual modes (except bliss) are modes of *distance* from God, which is to say, modes of distance from ontological wholeness, completeness. What accounts for this distance? Simply put (although there is nothing simple about it!), individuality and freedom themselves involve a distancing from God. That is to say, in creating individual, free, beings, God creates distance between God and creatures. This distance is felt as anxiety, which, mingled with ignorance, all too easily slips into despair and mendacity.

Such *Ignorance* (an Eastern term) yields *Sin*. Sin and Ignorance may be subtly distinguished from one another. *Ignorance* is our failure to know ourselves as rooted in God. *Sin* is our endeavor to root ourselves in the finite world, in response to the feeling of rootlessness that results from Ignorance. These two are mutually reinforcing. The more we engage in acts and attitudes of sin, the more remote we feel from God, the more remote we feel from God, the more driven we are to acts and attitudes of sin.

The *telos* of the creation—its aim or goal—is, in Christianity, represented by the figure of Christ, the ‘God-Man.’ Christ is a revelation of the free, individual, human being who experiences (at the most profound level) unity/community with God. This is what we are *all* to become. This fact is obscured in Christian theologies that overemphasize the uniqueness of Jesus as a god on earth. Christ represents the fulfillment of human potentiality. The relation of Christ to God is not simply the relation of God to God. It involves a dynamic distancing and overcoming of distance; thus the life of Christ is not simply a life of bliss, but of joy-love-bliss. This dynamic divine unity-in-distance and distance-in-unity is expressed in Christianity by the idea of the Holy Trinity. Of course, any verbalization of it, or conceptualization of it, can at best suggest it to us. The *living God*—the dynamic ultimate reality—is beyond anything we can capture precisely in thought or words.

## V. The Love of God

Finally, we should say again that *all* the modes of spirituality, *including despair*, are *modes of bliss*. They are all inherent to the divine reality. Thus God as God *knows* despair, but knows it as eternally overcome in the divine reality. God (so we might imagine) looks down upon the despairing person as a mother might look upon a small child who has fallen, scraped its knee, and is now howling in shock and pain. The mother's heart goes out to the child, suffers with the child, while, at the same time, knowing what the child does not: that "all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of thing will be well." Thus the mother both cries in pain with the child and laughs in joy within herself; both at the same time.

This is how we might imagine the compassionate love of God. And this love – this compassionate, joyous, serious love – *is* divine bliss. As we ascend the spiritual ladder, we approach it more and more.