

**S1-- "JOURNEY FOR TRUTH: FROM THE CAVE OF POLITICS TO THE SUNLIGHT OF SPIRIT: THE STORY OF A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY", SNR, 5/15/97**

Note: In the summer of 1990 Fred Branfman suddenly decided to leave a 25-year career in politics and embark on a spiritual search. This is the story of that search.

## **INTRODUCTION: FROM KNOWLEDGE TO MYSTERY**

In the summer of 1990, I was living in Washington, D.C., directing a think tank called Rebuild America. We had published a manifesto calling for "Investment Economics", foreshadowing Clintonomics, whose co-authors included future Secretary of Labor Robert Reich and Council of Economic Advisors Chair Laura Tyson. Then-Governor Bill Clinton had agreed to join our Board. We were promoting "industry-led strategy" together with semiconductor inventor and Intel founder Robert Noyce, the American Electronics Association, and National Center for Manufacturing Sciences chair Ed Miller. Our bank account was healthy, our conferences well attended, our press coverage remarkable for such a small organization.

1990 marked my 21st year of intense political involvement, a period that began when I set out to expose the U.S. secret air war against Laos in 1969, and included co-directing the Indochina Resource Center, helping found the Campaign For Economic Democracy in California, and working as a top policy aide to Governor Jerry Brown and Senator Gary Hart.

And 1990 was the year I abruptly dropped out of politics.

In August 1990, it suddenly emerged for me to close down Rebuild America and embark on a spiritual journey which was to last five years and take me to Jerusalem to live with Hassids, Hungary to study for a year with spiritual teacher Laszlo Honti, India to sit in meditation, study Hinduism, and work at Mother Theresa's Home for the Dying, Laos to visit the Plain of Jars from where the refugees I had interviewed two decades earlier had come, and a meditation center in

western Massachusetts for a 3-month silent meditation retreat. About 2/3 of the way through the retreat I experienced a shift and felt a deep sense of happiness and inner peace for the first time in my life, a feeling which has not left me until this day.

This is the story of my journey.

## **PART I: PREPARING TO LEAVE THE VILLAGE**

If there is a moment as good as any other to begin this story, it was in the early evening of a dark, winter night, in early 1982, in a large, beautiful dark-wooded house on a quiet street, at 4800 T Street in Sacramento. Where Jacques Barzaghi, Jerry Brown's legendary alter ego, a man who excelled above all else in sensing people's weak points and exposing them, began shouting at me: "Branfman! What is the matter with you? You have a beautiful and good girlfriend. You have a nice salary, a nice car, and a nice house. You have a good job, you are doing important work. Why aren't you happy? You have no right not to be happy!"

I remember looking at him dumbly. I couldn't dispute his point. I had everything a person could want. And I wasn't really happy.

And what bothered me most was that I didn't know why.

Little time, though, to think about such questions when you were Governor Jerry Brown's Director of Research, creating, designing and helping to lobby through his \$25 million 1982 State of the State initiative. It was called "Investment in People", and involved trail-blazing reforms in education, job-training and welfare reform that eventually become a model for Democratic governors around the nation, such as Michael Dukakis and Bill Clinton.

And it was only part of our larger strategic vision. If there was anything I believed in those days, it was that the Information Revolution constituted an incredible breakthrough in the search for human happiness. I remember well the weekend a friend and I sat around excitedly reading aloud excerpts from Jean-Jacques Servan-

Schreiber's The World Challenge, and the far more exciting experience of meeting Servan-Schreiber himself.

I deeply believed agreed with him that the Global Knowledge Revolution offered the exciting promise of an end to manual labor, greater equality between the sexes, more leisure time, richer human communication, global interconnection. It was exciting to think that our generation was making this revolution, and satisfying that our "investment in people" and technology initiatives were putting us on the cutting-edge of bringing this revolution into the political arena.

Despite the excitement of those days, however, I would from time to time remember Jacques' question, and make lists in my mind of the good and the bad.

The good things were obvious: all the things Jacques mentioned, summed up in the evening we spent around a piano, sharing stories and singing songs, with the 50 Administration member who had made "Investment in People" happen. It was a unique event - there were people from a dozen different agencies in Sacramento who had never before worked together on anything. Close personal ties had been forged, as we had created an initiative that would have statewide and national impact. The personal and the political had merged: I could not imagine anything more satisfying.

And yet. The list of Sacramento negatives was far longer. The fighting and the feuding: within the Brown Administration, between the Administration and the legislature, between the politicians and the press. The way lying was taken for granted. I would marvel how in none of the dozens of meetings I attended would anyone advocate saying something publicly because it was the truth. It was always what we could get away with, what would sound best, what the press would buy.

The egos, the concern for personal advancement. The agency Secretary who opposed our technology initiatives solely because they did not go through her. The Commission head who told the deputy she hired, "your job is to make me look good." The day the head of the

Energy Commission chartered an airplane to L.A. to make sure his chief rival, the head of the Public Utilities Commission, did not gain too much from his closeness to the Governor - during what billed as the first major electronic teleconference demonstrating that physical proximity was not important. The top aide who flew all the way to L.A., paralyzing state government, just so he would be seen behind the governor in a 5-second snippet on the TV evening news. The press conference at which the Governor announced the 1982-3 budget while Willie Brown, Mike Roos, and the other top Democratic legislators sat in the audience giggling and laughing as they passed a card back and forth that belonged to two women of the night they had met at lunch. The obsequiousness. The hypocrisy. The phoniness.

The strangest thing of all were the events that would occur when someone left the Administration. Only in Sacramento and other political cities was it considered normal hold a "roast," in which people vied to destroy and humiliate the departing Administration member. I remember leaving those events sick at stomach.

I remembered once going through a budget cycle with the Department of Finance, and realizing that there were civil service employees who could tell you exactly where they would be and what they were doing 20 years from now, as in "on November 12, 2003, at approximately 3 p.m., I will be meeting with Department heads to get their reactions to proposed cuts in their budget by the Governor's office." Though I knew I didn't want that kind of life, I also knew that I did not know what I did want.

Most of all, I didn't like what Sacramento was doing to me. To survive, I was becoming as competitive, paranoid, ego-driven as everyone else. I didn't really understand it, then, but I sensed that something was deeply, deeply wrong in the political culture in which I found myself working.

It was a confusing time. I was succeeding beyond my previous imaginings in politics. And I was unhappy. And, most confusing of all, I didn't know why.

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The years between when Brown left office in 1983 and 1990 were mostly more of the same. Working at Senator Gary Hart's think tank and drafting the Strategic Investment Initiative which became the key plank of his Presidential platform until Donna Rice came into our lives. Starting an organization called Rebuild America which was to write "Investment Economics" with Nobel Laureate Robert Solow, Boston Fed Chief George Hatsopolous, future Treasury Secretary Larry Summers, then MIT professor Paul Krugman, future Labor Secretary Robert Reich, future Council on Economic Affairs chief Laura Tyson, and several other top economists, foreshadowing Clintonomics.

During this period, however, other events occurred which pushed me in a very different direction.

Three such events stand out.

The first, and by far most important, occurred in August 1986, when I was working for Gary Hart and received a phone call. And ran out to the airport, jumped on an airplane, flew to Fort Lauderdale, and took a taxi to a small room where a thin, emaciated old man lay in a hospital bed.

My father. Dying.

I was totally unprepared for this experience. I had never seen a person die. I had no expectations or filters to shape it. It hit me head on, and turned me inside out. The two days I spent in that room, as his life slowly ebbed away, were to change my life forever.

The experience was non-verbal, and as such cannot be truly described here or anywhere. Suffice it to say that I was transported to a different realm of being, in which none of my previous experiences, supports, or concepts had any relevance. The intensity of feelings, the sense of other dimensions of existence, the nakedness of the horror and sublimity of my father's life ebbing slowly away, took me to places I had never been.

When I entered the room and he sat up and smiled at me, I experienced a love that I had never known possible. So too when he asked for yellow legal paper his last night on earth and wrote movingly of his love for us and my mother in words that he had never before uttered or wrote.

When he said aloud for the first time that he would die and my family and I spontaneously went out in the hallway and held each other and sobbed, when I had to tell him the doctor had declined his request to be "put out", and when his body would convulse horribly as they drained him of fluids so he could stay alive so till my brother came from Jerusalem, I experienced levels of pain that I had never before known existed.

And when, finally, on Sunday around 11 a.m. he angrily knocked away the oxygen mask, and for what seemed like hours I sat directly in front of his great, mustached head, as he slowly passed from life to death, I moved beyond love or terror to other dimensions of being which cannot be written about, only experienced.

I remember sitting in that hospital room and trying, from time to time, to remember my previous life. I would try to remember what I had been doing and how I could have ever taken myself, the Strategic Investment Initiative, even the Presidency, so seriously. It all seemed trivial, unreal, some kind of game.

When I left Fort Lauderdale to return to my life, I was full of plans. I would exercise more, eat better, try to develop my non-political side. Above all, I would try to figure out what had happened. For it was clear to me that, having spent twenty years in politics, I simply did have the framework, structure, concepts, ideas, to even begin to understand what had happened to me. I was confused.

The "change" lasted a few days. Within less than a week I was back to my old way of life: the 80-hour weeks, the scheming, the position papers, the conferences, the memos, the infighting.

But that was only on the outside. Without my realizing it, a change had occurred deep within. Without any plan on my part, I began to find myself increasingly drawn to spiritual books, lectures, audiotapes. At one point I discovered that "Yes" bookstore rented spiritual videotapes. Over a 2-3 week period I checked out dozens of tapes, made copies, and then began watching them slowly over a 2-year period, never knowing what to expect: the Dalai Lama, Ram Dass, a rabbi discoursing on the Kabbalah, a John Denver Windsong conference, a western Buddhist nun living in the Himalayas, Jack Kornfield, Charles Tart, Joseph Goldstein, Barbara Marx Hubbard, Sufis, Gurdyev, Alan Watts. The Bill Moyers interviews with Joseph Campbell, which were to provide a whole new language and set of ideas to process my increasingly spiritual experience.

One day I clicked on the tape and a thin, earnest, serious young man was leading a workshop. To my amazement it was about death, the first I had come across that seemed to offer direct answers to the questions that had arisen in my father's hospital room. I had never heard of Stephen Levine, but the tape was the most powerful I had seen - I would watch it nearly a dozen times, transcribe it, and listen to it over and over again on audio tapes.

His theme: death is a teacher, and that to deny death is to deny life. Workshop participants, most of whom had recently lost loved one, talked honestly at that workshop: a youth counselor talked about getting in touch with the pleasure he derived from physically hurting the boys, the woman who talked about her pain at losing an infant, the woman whose head was bald because of chemotherapy discussing her decision about whether to live or die. You didn't hear that kind of honesty in the political circles in which I moved.

In the fall of 1989 I attended a Common Boundary conference at which Levine was the keynote speaker. I went up to him at a break and introduced myself as an old friend of Jack Kornfield, a Buddhist meditation teacher I had known in Asia 20 years earlier. Then I asked him a question I had asked many others. "You know, I have been at my best in politics when I was angry. Now that I'm less angry, I am less

motivated, going stale. If you're not motivated by anger, what can motivate you to do politics?" I said.

"Compassion," he answered with great assurance.

And how does one develop that level of compassion, I wondered. "Getting in touch with your own grief," he answered, as if discussing the weather.

And how would I get in touch with my own grief, I asked.

"Meditate," he said. And how would I get started meditating? He responded that I said I knew Jack Kornfield, and that Jack led a 10-day retreat two months hence, and that I might call him and see if there might be a slot.

What struck me most was Levine's complete self-assurance. I had asked this question to dozens of others. No one really seemed to know. But Levine was saying "get in touch with your own grief" as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

I must have been missing something, I decided. I would try to find out. A few weeks later I did call Jack Kornfield, he did find a place for me in his retreat, and I did have my first meditation experience: a ten-day silent retreat at the Insight Meditation Society, at Barre, Massachusetts.

It was a New Year's retreat, and I greeted the New Year, the decade, in silence. I had begun the '80s by arriving at a subway stop around 11:50 p.m., December 31, 1979, and running in to Boston Commons when, to my amazement, I saw people running towards us. Suddenly, we realized we were in the middle of a melee, and that police on horseback were chasing kids out of the park. Enraged, I ran up to a cop on horseback, and began shouting at him, "why are you doing this? It's New Year's Eve, for God's sake! We just want to celebrate together!" In the background I dimly heard the clock beginning to strike 12, signaling the new decade. Just as it struck 12, the horse stepped on my foot. "At least I won't get stepped on by a

horse as the 90s begins!" I would tell friends as I prepared for the retreat.

Something a lot more important happened. The first few days were horrible, as I struggled to be able to sit for more than 5 minutes without going into agony. (I always advise people to also make their first meditation experience a 7-10 day retreat. If it had been only a weekend, I might have quite in frustration, feeling meditation was not for me.)

Finally, though, I discovered a high bench, found I could meditate on it, and began having some of the most extraordinary experiences of my life. I rarely cry, but during this retreat found myself sobbing at remembering my father's death, things I had seen in Laos, and wondering how, once one starts, one ever stops. I had insights, such as that one can only really have what one doesn't want, or that my suffering was precisely the distance between my reality and my expectations. At one point I grew really sad that I didn't have a partner in my life, someone who loved me. Then I thought of all the people in my life who had loved me and realized, with a shock, that what I wanted was to love not be loved. And I had moments of deep peace and joy, such as I had never known.

I had found that I was one of the lucky ones. Meditation worked for me. I liked it.

After January 1990, the contradictions in my life intensified. We had great success with a conference on Japan, the proceedings from which fetched a \$100,000 book advance. Then Governor Bill Clinton said he would be willing to join our Board of Advisors. We were attracting enormous media around our call for industry-led strategy, endorsed by Commerce Secretary Robert Mosbacher, to develop High-Definition TV (HDTV), and building support for such a strategy in Congress. We were working closely with Intel founder Robert Noyce, the American Electronics Association, and the National Center for Manufacturing Sciences. Our success had brought us to the attention of the highest reaches of the Bush Administration, and Messrs. Sununu, Darman and Boskin began organizing a counter-attack. Our

chair felt raising money would be no problem, and for the first time we felt financially secure.

The successes of our work, however, felt increasingly hollow. It became clear that the country was not willing to make the enormous investments and sacrifices needed to retool our industry, schools, environment and infrastructure. Our project suffered from the usual infighting and differences of opinions among the Board, staff, others I worked with.

My mantra during this period was that I was not really happy at Rebuild America, but we were successful and financially secure, and it made no sense to leave unless I had a better alternative. I would leave as soon as I had one, I would say. But I would not leave until I did.

Then, in May 1990 my mother had a stroke. She would never again be able to communicate with us verbally, though her body remained relatively whole.

In August, 1990, I decided to go to Florida and spend a month with her. I stayed in a motel by the beach, visiting her for several hours a day, eating lunch, going to movies. The rest of the time I was alone, during a hot, Florida August, sleeping in the afternoon or early evening, up most of the night.

Many things happened that month, too many to detail here. But perhaps I can mention two.

The first was one experience one night. I awakened about 3 a.m., my defenses down, and noticed for the first time, perhaps as a result of the meditation training to notice what occurs in the mind, that a fear of death was arising. I noticed also that I automatically began to push it away, and perceived that I had done this 1000s of times before. This time, though, for some reason, I found myself saying, "no! I won't push it away this time, let it come!"

The next 15-30 minutes were the most excruciating of my life. I felt that I was paralyzed, that I was burning alive, that I was

suffocating. I screamed at the top of my lungs for help but no sound would come out because I was paralyzed.

And then, something extraordinary happened. The horror passed and suddenly I felt more alive than I ever had before. In fact, I felt like I was in some sense alive for the first time. Everything felt beautiful, precious, rare. The feeling stayed with me for weeks.

The second major event of the month was a series of insights, thoughts, and experiences that amounted to prolonged experience of slowly disidentifying from the things that had always seemed most important to me. Before I began that month, I took comfort for example that I was mentioned in the N.Y. Times index, that there was a record of some of the things I had written and did. The highest experience of life of which I could imagine was feeling that I was a part, however small, of "making history."

This month, though, as I would walk up and down the moonlit beach in a bathing suit, alone, at 3 and 4 in the morning, I would stare into the ocean, symbolizing the subconscious, feel the sand beneath my feet, the conscious, and look up at the moon and beyond, the transcendent. I would think of how I live in a planet, one of ten, rotating around a star, one of two hundred billion, in a galaxy, one of a hundred billion, whose dimensions and purpose my brain would never evolve to comprehend. We could not even see planets in other solar systems or galaxies, let alone know whether intelligence existed on them - and those were just physical facts. How would we ever understand intelligences far different from our own?

And I would marvel at how I had ever taken myself so seriously as to take comfort from being mentioned in the NY Times, or flattered myself that I might have a shot at helping to "make history". If earth managed to survive human folly, it would last another 5 billion years, 50 million lifetimes, measuring one lifetime as 100 years. Our entire civilization would even be remembered a few hundred or thousand lifetimes from now, let alone me.

And, most to the point, this pitifully short lifetime I had was almost over. I mean, let's say I lived another thirty years. When I looked back on the past 30 years, since I was 18, my experience of it was that it had gone like that! An instant. There seemed little doubt that even if lived till 78, when I look backed on this moment, it too would have felt like it passed in an instant.

In one sense, in fact, my life was already over. Like the proverbial glass lifted by Buddhist teacher Acharn Chah, when he declared, "you see this glass. For me it is already broken, shattered into a thousand shards. And precisely because it is broken, I can really enjoy it, because this time with it, while it is not yet broken, is so precious."

The remaining years of my life. So short. So very short. And I was going to waste another minute doing things I didn't want to do, pursuing goals that I knew deep down didn't really matter?

To ask the question was to answer it.

At one point I realized that my deepest fear was winding up alone in a Medicaid nursing home, an old man with broken teeth, with no loved ones, no children, no accomplishment, no one who cared.

And a voice within said, "that's it! You've identified your deepest fear! And the only way you can now live is to face it - not shrink from it, running about, working in a system you no longer believe in, because of this fear. That's it! It's time to roll up this pretense of a life you have into a little ball, and throw it on the dice table! If you can face this fear, you can face anything. And besides, what lies on the other side of this fear? You'll never know till you roll the dice and find out."

When I left that beach I was not the same person as who arrived there a month earlier. I had made two irrevocable decisions.

The first was that I would no longer wait for an alternative to Rebuild America. Perhaps I did not know what I wanted to do. But I

knew what I did not want to do. So decision one had been made: "I would never again do what I did not want to do." I would close down the organization.

Having made that decision, I was stuck. What guidelines did I have for what I would do? During this month I reread Herman Hesse's Siddhartha, and was most struck by what happened when he went to the merchant to ask for a job. The merchant asked him what he knew about commerce. "Nothing," Siddhartha replied. "But I know three things that are more important. I know how to think. I know how to fast. And I know how to wait."

I realized that I, too, knew how to think and, my back to the wall, to fast. But I did not know how to wait.

And so I made a second fateful decision: I would not jump into anything. I would just wait. "I will only do what emerges."

What struck me most about these two decisions is that I had never, ever, thought that way prior to this month. No one had ever suggested them to me. They seem to have arisen spontaneously, from deep within or somewhere real without. Whatever the case, it felt like I had no choice. They had taken me over.

As the last few weeks came to an end, I noticed fear arising. Was I crazy? To close down Rebuild America, a secure source of income, with no idea of what I would do instead? Perhaps it was better to go back, keep it going, and see what emerged.

At the same time, however, I knew the die was cast, there was no going back.

A strange mantra arose in my mind every time fear moved through me: "it doesn't matter". Somehow, by looking at the fear, repeating "it doesn't matter" over and over again, and really thinking about how it didn't matter, the fear would disappear. Close down Rebuild America? It doesn't matter. Wind up as an old man with broken

teeth in a nursing home? It doesn't matter. This practice sustained me during this month of transition, and in the difficult months to come.

I awoke my last day with considerable anxiety. I said goodbye to my Mom, went to the motel to get my stuff. I had left a half-hour to go out to the beach. On the beach, the anxiety grew, for once unallayed by the "it doesn't matter" practice. The actuality of telling my staff and board that we were closing down Rebuild America, of facing all that had to be done, seemed overwhelming. I was by myself on a large portion of beach. Suddenly a cloud appeared just over me, and me alone. I looked up and saw, to my amazement, that it was in the shape of a hand, with the middle of the hand directly above me. It felt like a hand that was telling me not to worry, that everything would be okay.

I got on the plane, returned to D.C., gave my staff two month's notice, informed the board of my decision, and began to wait, with no idea of what was to come next.

I only knew one thing. I would stick to my guns: I would only do what emerged.

It was exactly four years since my father had died. It was time to begin.

## **PART II: THE JOURNEY**

The first thing to emerge was that I needed to remain in Washington, to phase out Rebuild America and regroup. Soon after returning from Florida a friend told me about a local meditation teacher. I went to her first meditation session, and found her a wonderful and wise teacher. I began studying meditation in earnest.

During this period I also managed to "fall in love" with a woman who was not interested in a relationship with me. Having the time and perspective to study what was happening rather than just acting it out, I realized for the first time how I had spent a lifetime projecting my needs onto women. I saw how the pain I was experiencing really had little to do with her and that I was instead acting out past patterns

from my childhood. During these six months, I was able for the first time to get a handle on how I had been relating to women my whole life.

Perhaps the most important result of this unhappy affair, however, was its impact on my meditation. As I experienced tremendous pain during this period, focusing for the first time on my internal workings, seeking to engage the inner demons causing me to seek an inappropriate relationship, there came a point when I needed relief. I had become both depressed and obsessed.

Years later I realized that this was precisely the kind of state that led many to turn to Prozac. I don't know what I would have done had I been seeing a therapist during this period who recommended some kind of anti-depressant. I might have tried it.

But I wasn't and the only tool available to me for relief was meditation. Indeed, this was one of the benefits touted by meditators: that by following one's breath, observing one's emotions, one could relate to rather than from negative emotions.

Transcribing some 200 pages of dharma talks by Jack Kornfield, I had distilled a meditation method that seemed designed to cope with emotional pain. I called it the "4L" method: while sitting silently, LABEL the pain, e.g. say "sadness, sadness, sadness"; LOCATE it in the body, e.g. "tightness in heart, tightness in heart", LOVE it, i.e. decontract, embrace the pain, and, finally, LET IT BE, that is do not try to "let go" of it or hope it will go away, but accept it as a member of the family.

I used this meditation often while in D.C., and found it offered some relief. But I was not able to really focus on it. Despite the fact that I wasn't working, found a thousand daily distractions which, together with the proximity of the object of my attentions, made any relief temporary.

And then came the day when the woman in question, at my urging, stated quite explicitly that she had no interest in a relationship

with me. Feeling as bad as I ever had in my life, unable to turn to work for distraction as I had in the past, focused on engaging rather than denying the pain, and unable to meditate concentratedly in D.C., I decided to fly down to my mother's by-then empty apartment in Florida and see if concentrated meditation could offer me the relief I sought.

On the plane on the way down I decided on a 5-day test. I would lock myself in my mother's darkened apartment, leave only for food when necessary, and spend the rest of the time meditating, focused on the "4L" method.

The next three days were among the most unpleasant of my life. I had committed to not leaving the room. But I could not meditate. I was trying to sit for 45 minutes at a time. I would sit, sit, sit. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, I would look at the clock. Only 10 minutes had passed! I had to sit for another 35 minutes! It was unbearable.

After two days of this, I found myself sitting in a delicatessen, eating lunch, at a decision-point. I had told no one what I was going to do in Florida. I was on my own. I took out a newspaper began checking out the movies, rationalizing. I could go to the movies, hit a nightclub, get loaded, whatever. No one would know. Hey, I'd failed. It happened. It was pointless to continue.

And something inside me, mainly deep despair I guess, made me return to that darkened room, and try it again. And I began to sit, and still the agony, and then suddenly! A total shift.

Suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, I began meditating for 15, 30, 60, 90 minutes at a time without even being aware of the time. I spent the next two days in a kind of peaceful rapture, entirely in meditation except when I would fall asleep. My question had been answered: meditation worked to bring relief from deep pain, at least for me. I returned to D.C. feeling healed.

And it all started up again, though somewhat less intensely. And I meditated, and found relief.

The cycle ended during my second ten-day retreat at Barre, for New Year's 1991. During the early part of the retreat, the pain and despair of unrequited love once again emerged in full force. During an interview with my meditation teacher, John Travis, I brought it up. How did meditation help such matters of the heart, I asked? Like I felt I faced a decision of remaining in Washington and trying to win over the woman in question, or embarking on a journey following the advice of a character in a Somerset Maugham novel, to the effect that "I have always found 10,000 miles the best solution to a broken heart." Laughing, he said he'd been in this situation many times himself.

He said that for him, it was like when you sat down to meditate, you were a mass of conditioning, with all the patterns of your past moving through you. With each breath, however, you slowly began to clean out the conditioning, to go deeper and deeper, to find out what you, rather than your conditioning, really wanted. In the end, he said, you knew the answer to such questions, but they came from a place very different from, and far deeper than, the mind which really could produce no answers.

When I returned to my bench, I the image of a bellows came into my mind. My insides are dark and dirty, sooted up with a lifetime of conditioning and attachments. But each intake of breath was bringing in clean, purifying air, each out breath was breathing out the soot. Over time, my psyche would be cleansed and it, not I, would know what to do.

By the end of the retreat I felt cleansed and the next step had emerged: I would leave America and set out on a search to some of the world's spiritual centers. As a Jew whose brother was a Hassid, it made sense that the first step would be Jerusalem. I would study the religion of my forbears, reconnect with my brother and his wife, and get to know their then seven children, most of whom I had never met. Sooner or later I would get to India, a place I had dreamed of visiting, especially the "Black Hole of Calcutta", since I was a child.

Coincidentally, it might help my broken heart. But that was no longer key. What was important was that it was clearly time to leave. No more. No less.

By then my spiritual journey had become my psychic focus, and would remain so until August 1995.

Prior to August 1990 I had rarely thought about my internal processes, what was going on within. My focus had always been outside myself: how to succeed in my work, meet the woman of my dreams, get my name in the paper, buy the best computer. I literally had no idea even how to think about my inner emotional and spiritual life.

Between August 1990 and 1995 I focused on little else. I trained myself to watch my emotions arising and falling away. I paid close attention to my non-verbal experience of life, not only what I was feeling, but what lay beyond the realm of feeling. I tried to understand what a thousand different internal experiences of life - compassion, enlightenment, anger, pain, joy, love - really meant. For the first time in my life I observed and thought deeply about my relations with my parents, siblings, ex-wife, past lovers and current partner.

What was important was not the particular conclusions I came to - perhaps someone else might come to very different ones. It was the process: that for the first time in my life I was making a conscious effort to observe, to be aware of my internal life, to live consciously rather than unconsciously.

It is difficult for a political person to leave the arena and go within. If she or he doesn't feel guilty enough for becoming "self-absorbed" and not doing all one can to help the unfortunate of the world, there is no shortage of friends and acquaintances willing to show their disapproval.

The moment when I most realized how far I had shifted from focusing on the external to the internal occurred in the beautiful town of Rishikesh, in the foothills of the Himalayas.

I needed to work for about half this 5-year journey, in California and Washington, D.C., to make enough money to keep going. The rest of the time was spent with Hassids in Jerusalem, studying with spiritual teacher Laszlo Honti for a year in Hungary, traveling to India for 5 months - including working at Mother Theresa's home for the dying, a 3-week silent retreat at Bodh Gaya where the Buddha was enlightened, and studying the Bhagavad Gita and talking with a variety of extraordinary Hindu spiritual teachers in Bokaro Steel City, Benares, and Rishikesh - and returning to Laos for the first time in 25 years.

I absorbed countless teachings by spiritual folks of every variety, read countless books and tried, with "beginner's mind" (Suzuki Roshi: "in the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's few") to be as open as I could be to all: Zen, Tibetan, Vipassana Buddhism, Hassidic Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam of every variety.

The most difficult people for me to deal with were my own, the Hassids. On the one hand, I totally admired their devotion to matters spiritual, as they prayed in synagogue three times daily, prayed constantly throughout the day, and studied the incredibly complex Talmud, even as they also reared large families and worked to make a living. I felt great pride, humility, and tenderness at the sight of my dear brother, struggling beyond endurance, to juggle God, his family and work. I felt humbled by his devotion. Perhaps his beliefs were different than mine. But how could I not admire the fact that his dedication and commitment to his spiritual path were so much greater than my own?

At the same time, however, I was repelled by their intolerance. Though understandable perhaps, the result of hundreds of years of anti-Semitism, it was far from the need to feel my connection with all living beings that I felt so deeply. And then there was the fundamentalism as when, searching for the positive, I said how much I admired Judaism as a metaphor for non-verbal experience. "Metaphor!," shouted the woman to whom I was speaking. "Metaphor! What are you talking about? It's all true! How can you call it a

metaphor," she screamed, genuinely enraged for the only time since I'd met her.

No, despite my brother's belief that I had a "Jewish soul", I felt myself ineluctably drawn to the softer path of Buddhism. Buddhism had its fanatics too, I was to discover. But focusing on the teachings not the teachers suited me, and opened me up to worlds that met my deepest needs for understanding.

The heart of the experience was the total of 5 months spent in formal silent retreats, practicing Buddhist insight meditation, including a 3-week retreat in Bodh Gaya, and a 3-month retreat at the Insight Meditation Society, in western Massachusetts.

There is a natural tendency to try and tell this story chronologically, as it occurred. Space does not permit this - my first three months of study with Laszlo alone generated some 500 pages of notes, and I have many hundreds of pages of other material from other parts of the journey.

Near the end of this journey I felt a need to try and summarize for myself all the spiritual teachings and experiences I'd been exposed to. They seemed to break down into 3 categories: (1) my relation with myself: who am I?; (2) my relation with other living beings; and (3) my relation with the cosmos, Gaia, the mystery of being itself.

Perhaps I can describe these three journeys.

## **I. MY RELATION WITH MYSELF: THE PATH TO ALIGNMENT**

I began this journey with an uncomfortable relation with myself. No matter what I achieved or did, it was never quite enough. My former wife used to say that I was the type who, when standing on this mountain, was always looking at the next one. I looked outwards for vindication - to others, the media, the amount of money I raised or "impact" I was having.

I knew, deep down, it meant little. For I had had an experience in 1983 when, lying in bed, I suddenly felt I was experiencing my last night on earth. As I lay there, I had thought of all the things I had done in my life. None meant anything. All that really mattered is that there would be people near my bedside whom I loved, and that what I doing would be relevant to those who would come after me.

Early on, Laszlo said that we were all "little emperors" until about age 3, when society stepped in to tell us how we "should" behave - parents, teachers, friends, mentors, media, leaders. By the time we were adults we were all confused, our brains filled with dozens of voices, not really sure what we believed. He invited me to return metaphorically age 3, to work on sorting out the voices in my head and decide what I believed, independent of what others told me I "should" do. I accepted his invitation -- for every sphere of my life.

Laszlo also, time and time again, invited me to be "selfish". I was stunned by this teaching, for it seemed the opposite of what one expected from a spiritual teacher. I was living with Zsuzsa Beres in Hungary at the time, and had chatted with another woman at a workshop I attended. To test what Laszlo meant, I asked him if being "selfish" meant I should try to have an affair on the side. "I wouldn't tell you not to," was his response.

As I thought about it, however, I realized the last thing I wanted was an affair - it would poison the wonderful relationship I was having with Zsuzsa. And I began to realize what Laszlo was getting at: what we call selfish is not really selfish at all, it's self-destructive: doing things which poison our relations with others, over-indulging in alcohol or drugs, living in constant contraction from seeking money, power, fame, comparative advantage.

At one point, I did a self-retreat for five days in a friend's apartment in Budapest. Going in, Laszlo had suggested that I "slow down", that as much as possible whenever I noticed a thought I was to say it aloud, very slowly. I did so, and was amazed and distressed to discover how many of these thoughts were negative ones, that without

realizing it, I was constantly judging myself negatively, calling myself "you asshole" as a matter of course, constantly noting my failings.

What amazed me most was realizing that I had never even been aware of it.

A turning point occurred near the end of my stay in Hungary. Much of my discussion with Laszlo concerned the emptiness, confusion, occasional despair I was feeling in my unaccustomed role of spiritual student. Time and again I would talk about how I had spent my whole life fighting for spiritual and political causes, and that I felt empty sitting here in Hungary, doing nothing to help my fellow beings, doing nothing but talking about me. Time and again, Laszlo would basically answer with a question, "well, why are you doing it? I guess if you want to know what you really want, look at what you do. I see someone sitting across from me who is here in Hungary, doing what he is doing. Is this not what you want?"

One day, meditating, the penny dropped. I didn't just understand the words. I got them. Yes, here I was sitting in Hungary, trying to figure it all out. So it must be what I want to do. And what I must want right now is to be a spiritual seeker, to do this search. And that was okay.

The turning point was feeling okay, accepting who I was within.

And acceptance was to become the key to my relation with myself, acceptance of whatever was to arise.

At first, the struggle was built around accepting "me", and who I was. It was to no longer be so harsh on myself. If I saw myself behaving in unuseful ways, to accept that there was a reason for my behaving that way, and if I could accept it, it would give me more freedom in the next moment to behave a different way.

I also spent much time in that and the subsequent years trying to think through what "I" really knew to be true. The results were astonishing.

My whole life I thought that one of the things I'd been searching for was to find one person to settle down with the rest of my life. As I looked back, however, I realized that what had actually happened is that I'd been involved in 8 serial monogamous relationships with entirely different kinds of women. Testing Laszlo's notion that "what I did is what I want", which was sometimes true and sometimes not, I realized that in this case what I wanted was precisely what had happened. I wanted to meet and live with a wide variety of people. We would come together, share deeply, and then each grow in different directions. I had never wanted to just settle down with one person, as evidenced by the fact that I had never had kids.

To me, this was a revelation. I realized that the pain in the relationships had come from not realizing what I, and by extension my partners, really wanted. (They clearly did not want to spend their lives with someone who did not want to be with them.) Conditioned to believe we wanted something other than what we really wanted, the joy of the years that were good between us had gotten lost in the pain of trying to hold on to what no longer existed.

Separating out society's voices from my own, I realized that I would never have dreamed up the institution of marriage on my own.

And what was important about this, again, was not the specifics but the principle. Yes, marriage might be for others. If so, God bless them. The important point is that I had realized what worked for me, and that I needed to do this for every other domain of my life.

The insights began to flow, as I reexamined every aspect of my former life. I realized that society had conditioned me to believe that fame, power, wealth, sex was important, but that my own minor experience with them showed that was not the case. I realized that even my need to work in politics, to "help others", was largely driven by ego, a feeling that I didn't matter unless I could show, at least to myself, that what I did mattered. I shuddered at how I had been driven by a desire to "make history", realizing it as the expression of an inner sense of worthlessness more than a genuine compassion for others.

Somewhere in there I read these words by the Dalai Lama:

"Think of somebody whose main activity of life is to act out his attachments and aversions. Such a person may become very powerful, very famous, he can even go down in history. But what has such a person attained? He has merely attained his name's going down in history. He has not become happy, he is dead."

As I thought of the political leaders I had known, those words made sense. A lot of sense.

But if I knew what didn't make me happy, if I saw through the illusions of the past, what could I replace them with? What would bring me happiness?

A few other teachings Laszlo gave me began to suggest clues.

One was the deceptively simple one of "include". Walk down the street, eat your meal, wash your face, and include everything, as if it was all meant to be, as if it was exactly what you wanted. Try it. It's very, very difficult, especially when you miss the bus or cut yourself shaving. And, over time, it is a most powerful teaching. For slowly, you begin to shift your focus. Instead of focusing on achieving something outside yourself, something that may not be achievable like catching the bus, you focus on something you can achieve, something under your control: like accepting that you have missed the bus. And, when it's your goal, how good it feels to choose to accept.

Another was the day I was talking about how Laszlo would rank in importance various positions - politician, religious teacher, writer, etc. "I think Gaia is interested in our process, not our function," he said. As I thought about it, it made more and more sense to me.

If millions of people pay attention to process - their patterns of consumption, how they treat people and other living things, their own internal level of peace - Gaia will prosper. And the place to start was with me. Far more important than any position I might hold, even

President, was how I behaved, how I felt inside. In the end, it was not only important to me, but to others. Far more useful to be a good person than a powerful one "doing good" from a place of internal conflict. The former could serve as a model to others of what Gaia needed. The latter might make things temporarily better, only temporarily.

Another teaching was the culmination of my studies with Laszlo. One day, as I was complaining about this or that external circumstance in my life, he said, "you know, Fred, I wonder if you want to make your enlightenment conditional on some person or circumstance outside yourself. For me, I do not want to do that. I want it to depend only on myself. Do you?"

It took a long time for that teaching to sink in, several years in fact till after the meditation retreat in Bodh Gaya. The highlight of the day for me was the tangerines we would get at lunch. The only problem was that for every good one there were two or three rotten ones. If you just grabbed the first two that you felt, the chances were you would wind up with tangerines you couldn't eat. As I would reach the tangerines, several dozen people day behind me, I would find myself compulsively feeling them as quickly as I could, to find the non-rotten ones.

Now mind you, I was in the middle of a silent meditation retreat, the primary teaching of which was "non-attachment," the Buddha's Third Noble Truth. But though I felt vaguely guilty about my tangerine behavior, it didn't occur to me to stop it. It persisted throughout the retreat.

After the retreat ended and we could talk again, a bunch of us were sitting around and I asked one of the retreatants, a beautiful, peaceful young woman in her 20s, how she had behaved when she arrived at the tangerines.

She looked at me, uncomprehendingly. What did I mean? Well, I asked, did you reach in there, looking for eatable ones, or did you just take whatever you got? She looked at me uncomprehendingly again. I

repeated my question. "Well, I mean, I just took whatever was there," she said, not even understanding that there was an alternative. I persisted, "well, suppose you got some rotten tangerines, what did you do?" "I just threw them away," she said gently, looking at me as if I was a creature from other planet.

Finally, I got it. If I made my goal acceptance, accepting even the rotten tangerines, I could keep my peace. If I went for the good tangerines, I might succeed, but only at the cost of my own internal happiness. And, like Laszlo, I did want my happiness to be as independent of anything outside myself as possible.

As with tangerines, so too with my myself. By the time I entered the three month retreat at Barre in September 1993, I was not yet anywhere near "enlightenment". But I finally understood what it meant for me, in terms of my relationship to myself.

My internal goal had become one of acceptance, letting be, including. I, Fred Branfman, was 51, and unlikely to change. I was unlikely to change who I was. My unhappiness was precisely the difference between my reality and my expectations. I had spent my life trying to change my reality. Now I would try and change my expectations, to accept what was put before me.

As I thought about it, though, the term "acceptance" was not quite it. It implied, in certain contexts, passive resignation. I certainly was not willing to accept the injustices of starving children or America's inner cities.

So I found another word which better expressed where I wanted to be: "alignment", alignment with the universe, with Gaia. Of course, one wanted to change injustice. And first one needed to align with it all, to be at peace.

This lesson was brought home most forcefully for me that day, by the reservoir, with Gajendra.

Gajendra. Dark. Mysterious. Contained. A quiet charisma. He was one of two Indians among 100 westerners at the meditation retreat at Bodh Gaya. I figured any Indian coming to a western Buddhist retreat must be interesting, and sought him out at the end of retreat. We talked for many hours, and I found him to be among the wisest spiritual teachers I had met.

It was time to leave, and I asked him if I could talk with him more. Yes, he said, if I wished to visit him at Bokaro Steel City, several hundred miles away, where he worked as an engineer. It took two tries, but finally I found him. It was fascinating. It turned out that though he was one of the wisest spiritual teachers I met, none of the people among whom he lived knew about that side of him. They knew him simply as a talented, competent, good-hearted engineer, always ready to participate in planning for the next athletic competition for the high school students. I was the first person who had ever come to him for this kind of talk, he said.

So I listened. Hard. Somehow receiving the teachings from a person who lived rather than taught them made them all the more authentic.

So the sun was setting. We were talking by this huge reservoir, just the two of us. I began to complain, as I was wont to do at this stage of my journey, at how selfish I felt, at how bad that I wasn't helping others, that I felt disoriented.

He exploded! "How can you talk that way, man!", he shouted. "The world is full of people running around helping other people, and look what a mess they are making of it. Help yourself, man! Help yourself! Only then, maybe, just maybe, can you be useful to anyone else."

He went on to say that what the world needed was peaceful, loving, compassionate, people, who taught others how to be that way. Then maybe the world could be saved. But people who were running around trying to help others out of their own needs usually wound up doing more harm than good.

I didn't agree completely with Gajendra. Clearly, if we wait until everyone is enlightened to feed the hungry, an awful lot of people will starve to death. Exaggerated, this point became grotesque, as when I read a statement by a high-ranking Tibetan Lama specifically arguing against feeding the starving of Somalia because it was more important to complete the huge Buddha he was constructing near Bodh Gaya. The starving were suffering because of sins committed in a previous lifetime, he suggested.

But, still. I had spent most of my life among people in politics and social movements who did not acknowledge the need to become decent people as meaningful in any real sense, who justified all sorts of inappropriate behavior in terms of the "cause."

From this point of view, Gajendra's words seemed like a necessary corrective. Yes, maybe the Indians could use a bit more entrepreneurial spirit and ambition if they were ever to emerge from poverty. But this was the last thing American political and business leaders needed more of. What they - and all of us - needed was for them to go within, to become more decent people.

Over and over again, what this all came down to was "acceptance", acceptance of at least one I could not, or did not want to, change.

It all came to a head that night, in the cave. One of the things I most wanted to do in India was spend some time in a cave. To find out what it was like. It turns out, though, that this is not so easy, at least if you are a visitor to Rishikesh. It turns out that all the good caves are taken, and that it's hard to meet anyone who know the bad ones.

Anyway, after many travails, I finally wound up this one night in a cave, all by myself, overlooking the Holy Ganges. At first the experience was ecstatic. I took off my clothes, and crawled forward into a tiny crawl space, which you could not stand up in, sat up, and began chanting loudly, "ommmmm! ommmm! ommmm!" (as Joseph Campbell described it, as in "aum", with "A", your mouth open,

symbolizing the beginning of things; "U", your mouth half closed, symbolizing the middle; and "M", your lips pursed, symbolizing the end. Followed by the most important, the pause, symbolizing the Mystery, God, the ineffable, the transcendent.)

Just as I was beginning to feel one with the sound, I heard a voice at the door of the cave. I was terrified. It suddenly dawned on me that I was all alone in the darkness, at the mercy of whoever was at the door. I spoke no Hindi and he no English and, when he wouldn't go away, I decided to open the door only to discover a traveling sadhu carrying (what seemed to be at the time an ominous) metal trident. I sadly gestured that he should move on to the village, closed the door, and found I was no longer in the space to meditate.

No problem. I would get into bed, turn on my flashlight, and read the spiritual book I had brought with me. As I did so, I suddenly started to hear noises. I shined my flashlight towards the noise, and there it was! A giant, bewhiskered

Rat.

A rat, for God's sake! In the cave, with me! Deciding to go into denial, I turned around, began rereading my book, heard more noise, shined my light towards it, another rat! And then another, and another, and another. I stopped counting after a while.

Then I realized that they were over at my suitcase, working on gnawing through it to get at the food within.

I was in sheer terror. Visions of rats gnawing at my eyes if I fell asleep entered my mind. I could not sleep if I wanted to. I lay awake, bolt straight, in my bed.

As the hours passed, however, I remembered the teaching. Include. Accept. Align with. The "4L". I began working myself to truly be able to align with this situation, to move towards it and engage it, choosing to decontract and let it be.

And I succeeded in relaxing into it, just before I feel asleep. And awoke happy. Not only that I had survived the night with my eyes intact but that, far more importantly, I had made my goal accepting the situation, and achieved my goal.

Perhaps my most important insight during my trip to India was one that sounds mundane, but became the core of my understanding of acceptance.

About midway through my trip I noticed that I was locked into a pattern. I would arrive in a new place - Bodh Gaya, Bokaro Steel City, Calcutta, Benares, Lucknow, and spend enormous amounts of time the first week or two trying to decide how long I should stay, and what I should do. Balancing the activities I could engage in here vs. what I could do in the next stop of the journey. Trying to figure out where I should go next.

And the thing is, I could never figure it out. I noticed that as long as I was trying to make a decision, the answers would never come. I was just being contracted, anxious, because that is how I knew to be in the world and, thus, something that made me comfortable.

And then I noticed something else. At some point it would just become clear that it was time to leave the town in question and go on to the next stop. No decision to be made. It was just clear.

The day I realized that was a big turning-point. Because I realized simultaneously, that this insight applied to much of my life. I spent enormous amounts of time trying to make decisions. As long as I was trying to make a decision, however, I could not. Choices got made, actions were taken. But the actual process of an action being taken had nothing to do with my deciding. It just emerged, became clear. So in that sense I did not make choices. Choices were made. It was only because I had grown up in a western mindset that I lived under the illusion that "I" was making them.

In retreat, on the road, with plenty of time to look within for the first time in my life, I realized this for the first time, not merely as an

intellectual awakening, which it was, but also as a profound experience of life.

And it led to a profound sense of alignment, acceptance, inner peace. For me the riddle was solved. I did not think, but was being thought, did not breathe but was being breathed, did not dream but was being dreamed.

By the time I left India, I felt I had achieved a real understanding of how I wanted to relate to myself: with acceptance, to accept who I was. I had my faults, to be sure. But I would no longer beat up on myself about them. I would accept who I was. I felt I had arrived at the most important of understanding.

Then, during the three-month retreat, my understanding of the path to alignment, of achieving some degree of internal peace, radically changed.

Until the retreat, I had been basically working on developing my "I". I had been trying to figure out who "I" was - my real attitudes toward spirituality, work, relationships - and then accept and align with this "I". To stop beating up on myself. To begin to include it all, what Zorba called "the whole catastrophe," to take the rotten tangerines along with the good.

During the retreat, however, my "I", now more secure, began to disappear. The combination of the "no separate self" of the dharma teachings and the actual experiences I was having, created a sense of, as the Buddhists say, "behaviors moving through" rather than any fixed I.

I mean, when I really paid attention, I noticed that within a 24-hour period you are angry, happy, gentle, sad - so who was I? As I walked down the road I was meditating, but with close attention it felt more like I was being thought than that "I" was doing the thinking; my experience of myself was as a kind of thinking, feeling, sensate machine, of whom I glimpsed the occasional end of a nose, arms, hands or feet. Thousands of thoughts, feelings, sensations moved

through me, but they were really no different than those moving through everyone else. From the outside, our bodies seem solid. From the inside, mainly space and water. Now imagine someone looking at earth from a certain distance. Would they not see only "one body", composed of billions of separate human cells, separated mainly by space and water.

During the three month, in short, I realized that true alignment, true peace, meant removing the "I", the subjective, distorting factor. Alignment occurred most profoundly when there was no "I", during the experience of non-attachment, acceptance, alignment with what is.

It is in short, experiencing "being". An experience of "I", narrowed that "being". An experience of "no separate self" broadened that being, gave one a sense of the universal.

I saw that I had held on to my "I" out of insecurity. Who would I be without it? During the retreat, however, in a safe environment, nothing to "do" for 3 months, my needs taken care of, my "I" relatively secure after two years of spiritual work, it was no longer needed.

During those three months there were moments, then longer periods, when an experience of alignment occurred. And at those times there was no identification with "I", no sense of "Fred Branfman" being anything very important.

The two, an internal experience of acceptance, inclusion, alignment, deep peace, and an absence of identification with this particular body or ego, seemed to go together.

Who was I? The question could not be answered intellectually. It could only be experienced, an experience of alignment. I could not remain in alignment once I left the retreat, needed to make money, sought to influence society. But I could go in and out of it, and live the rest of my life knowing that the experience of alignment was available to me whenever I most needed it.

## **II. MY RELATION WITH OTHERS: THE PATH TO CONNECTION**

Laszlo looked at me with a glint in his eye, which I later came to realize only occurred when he was to talk about sex. We were talking about love.

Laszlo has been married twice. He explained that one day he realized that the key to having decent sex with his wife was to study how to masturbate. As long as you were looking for others to fulfill your needs, he said, you were on some level using them, unable to fully satisfy them. But once you could satisfy your own needs, you were then able to be present and aware for them in your lovemaking.

And as in sex, so in life, he said. You can only be of true service to others when you are no longer needy, no longer using others to serve your own needs. The work is to fulfill your own needs. Once you no longer have them, it naturally happens that the suffering of the world speaks to you, moves you, you act out of compassion. Until you have satisfied your own needs, even if you are acting to help others, it is usually mixed up with some need you have, which often leads to problems.

I never have figured out how I feel about Laszlo's views on sex, but his overall point on my relations with other human beings proved over time to be true.

An example occurred the day Zsuzsa came home from work and angrily demanded that I make a hot meal for her. I mean, here I was just sitting around, being "spiritual", and she was working. In the old days I would have either been defensive and angry or mewling and apologetic, perhaps agreeing to do as she asked out of guilt, soon resenting it, the tensions mounting between us. In this case, remembering Laszlo's teaching to be "selfish", I said that I did not want to get into cooking as we had agreed, that it was not part of our agreement. I said she could call any time and I would buy her one from the restaurant next door. Better still, we could work out a deal with the old woman next door who had been a restaurant chef in her time, and would like nothing better than to cook for Zsuzsa.

When Zsuzsa immediately lost interest in the subject, I realized that the issue had not been about food at all. She had been, as I often did with her in other contexts, "testing" me, wanting some kind of tangible proof that I loved her.

And I realized, too, that Laszlo's advice for being "selfish" was working for one simple reason: it was making me happier. And the happier I was, the more helpful and loving I could be to Zsuzsa. No, I didn't feel like cooking. But because I was doing my thing and feeling good, I could be present for her and aware when she came home from work and wanted to talk about things. And I could be clear-minded: helping her quit her job for much more lucrative and satisfying as an independent translator. She was often to tell me that I had been the best relationship, and most helpful person, in her life. It was also the most successful relationship experience of my life, and it was occurring because I had the space and time to think through what I really wanted, rather than careening from event to event, emotion to emotion, situation to situation.

This dynamic operated in a very different way in Calcutta. When I first arrived, it was a copy of Street Without Joy in my hand, and I spent the first few days wandering the giant slums described in the book: tiny, tiny streets that meandered for miles and miles, with hot, tin shacks providing bare cover to the millions who dwelled within.

I emerged from the slum to one of the most incredible sights of my life: the great Hourai bridge at sunset, summing up Calcutta in all its magnificence and horror. This giant bridge is filled at sunset with thousands, tens of thousands, of people, cars, trucks, cows, goats, bicycle, motor scooters, bicycles. No lanes, no paths, you just grunt on through.

Westerners stay on Sutter street, where you are greeted as you walk down the street by beggars missing hands or legs, mothers thrusting anemic babies with mucus streaming out of their noses in your face. I heard a squeaking at my hotel one night, and looked over at the bathroom to see a giant rat staring at me quizzically. No traffic lights. No stop signs. It's every person for her or himself trying to cross

the giant boulevards. The taxi drivers turn off their cars at the frequent stops, to conserve gasoline.

I volunteered to work at Mother Theresa's Home for the Dying, where there were 3 western volunteers for every dying person. My first thought was whether I would get an infectious disease as I washed the dishes, cleaned up the bloody rags. One day I found myself with one end of a bamboo pole over my shoulder as I and another volunteer carried a large tin filled with bloody bandages, vomit, remains of needles, unnamable disgusting globs of whatever. As we reached the dump and began to pour it onto the ground, we were besieged by dozens of children and women fighting each other to pour through the garbage for remnants of stuff.

One day, in the volunteer bus out to the Home, the chief of volunteers directed the driver to pick up a dead body he had seen in the street earlier that morning. Our animated conversation suddenly halted as the body was placed in our van, and we rode in awkward silence. When we arrived, a shouting match ensued as the head nurse objected that receiving the dead body would create problems with the authorities.

I made friends with the one chap who spoke English at the Home for the Dying. He had been picked up on the street with his legs swollen to the size of balloons, half-dead, and brought to the home. He had pretty much healed, though he complained of stomach pains. As we talked one day, a doctor came by. Did he have any idea what was causing the stomach pain?, I asked. The doctor responded that he hadn't check his case and would. Five minutes later he returned and said that there was nothing wrong with him, and he would be discharged. I asked Andy what that meant, and he said the man would be given 50 cents and returned to where they had picked him up. You mean for the same thing to happen all over again, I asked? Andy shrugged.

I did not return to the Home.

I had another friend who worked for Dr. Jack, the world-famous doctor who maintained a clinic in the streets, the only medical care available to hundreds of thousands of dirt-poor Indian peasants. I worked there a few days. Thousands and thousands of desperate Indian villagers, some of whom had traveled for days just to get there, stood patiently and humbly in the street, sometimes having to wait for hours in the hot sun, just to receive a few pills and maybe an injection. A tiny fraction were actually helped.

By the end of three weeks in Calcutta, I felt obliterated. My nerve-endings were raw. I had been overwhelmed. Most of all, I had finally realized, I wrote a friend, the true meaninglessness of my existence. The only difference between me and these people were the traveler checks in my wallet. And what had I done to deserve these traveler checks? I had been born in the right place at the right time, to parents in a country which could afford to give me marketable skills. There was no rationale, no ultimate meaning to even my relative existence, i.e., as an American at this time and this place, let alone the cosmos.

I left Calcutta depleted and wiped out. The connection had been broken, not by denial and distancing as was the case for most of us in the West, but by too much proximity. I could not find a place to stand.

This sense of broken connection was intensified by my return to Laos, which had been perhaps the central experience of my life other than my father's death. As a young man I had interviewed peasants from the Plain of Jars, discovered the U.S. had bombed them for five years while claiming it had never dropped a bomb on Laos, and realized that hundreds of thousands of other Laotians were living under the bombs at the very moment that I was interviewing the relatively few who had escaped.

I set out to expose the air war, interpreting for journalists and getting stories on TV, sending letters and documentation to Senators Kennedy and Fulbright, writing articles, interviewing U.S. pilots and other airmen, and eventually helping lead a campaign back in the U.S. to stop the bombing.

During this period, I believed Pathet Lao guerrillas were far preferable to the Royal Lao government we supported. I thought that if they won they would provide the first non-corrupt, hard-working, peasant-oriented government that Laos had ever had.

Returning in the summer of 1993 was my first visit in 22 years, and the first time I would get to visit the Plain of Jars itself. I had high-level contacts, and could expect to get a pretty good view of what was going on.

To make a long story short, I was gravely disappointed. Though it could be argued that the Pathet Lao were an improvement over their predecessors, the improvement was not nearly as great as I had assumed. There was still enormous corruption, little energy for helping the peasants, and things were just stagnating. Most depressingly, it seemed clear that Laos was destined to become a poor cousin of Thailand, who had won the war while losing the battle. The good news was that television, operating on a few sets for a few hours a day, had come to the Plain of Jars. The bad news was that it was showing tawdry Thai game shows and soap operas.

All those years spent struggling to end the war! And it had come to this. Sure, it was great that there might be some people alive who might be otherwise be dead had we not fought to end the bombing. But beyond that, it seemed relatively little had been accomplished in the long run.

Yes, it seemed Gajendra was right. We needed to straighten ourselves out before we could reform society. But where to find meaningful connection, how to relate to society, other living beings in the meantime?

And of course, if I saw a hungry child in the streets of Calcutta, I felt horrible. But was it compassion if one gave him or her a coin? And how did it become the kind of compassion that was sustained, that led one into ongoing social service? And even if one had the kind of compassion that led to social service, how to reach the even higher

level needed to sustain a one in a political world of press releases, reports and faxes?

These were the questions whirring through my mind as I entered the retreat. Above all, I was confused. I did not even know how think about the issue of my relation to others, let alone where to find answers.

What kept moving through my mind on this question, however, like a song I couldn't quite understand, was Stephen Levine's mysterious dictum, uttered with such self-assurance, that the key to developing compassion is "to get in touch with your own grief". I had thought about his statement frequently in the four years since I'd heard it, but never could really figure what it meant on an experiential level.

As I began sitting seriously, four, five and six hours a day, I found the phrase increasingly in my mind and heart. I decided that I had to find out what it meant, and that it would become one of main goals during the retreat.

So you're sitting by yourself, maybe in the meditation hall, maybe in your darkened room, hour after hour, day after day, no end in sight. And you decide you want to explore the words, "get in touch with your own grief." What do you do?

What I did was first to make one crucial decision: grief is grief. It is a feeling, a non-verbal experience of life. I would forget about the stories, why I had grief, not think about it: the grief of how I grew up, the grief of what happened in Laos, whatever. No, I would just see if I could experience Grief Itself, the pure, unadulterated experience of Grief without words, concepts, explanations.

I found this extraordinarily hard to do. For one thing, since the basic instruction in Vipassana is not to seek certain states, to just sit there calmly and wait for things to arise, dealing with them as they do, what was I to do if grief did not arise spontaneously? How was I to get "in touch" with it?

I realized that I had developed a tough internal carapace precisely so I would not have to be in touch with it. For example, I could count on the fingers of one hand the times I could remember crying. I felt the resistance and toughness around my heart that kept me from feeling my grief.

Finally, I decided that if I was going to get "in touch" with it, I would have to violate the basic meditation instructions. My lifelong conditioning had been not to feel my pain. If I wanted to feel it, I would have to make a conscious effort to direct my attention to the pain I knew I carried within in, and literally try to "grow" it. That is, there was definitely pain within it. Now I would need to focus on it, really TRY to feel it, send my attention to it hours at a time, like giving light and water to a plant, if I was to really feel it.

For a while, it was really tough going. For days on end I would intermittently remember I wanted to "get in touch with my grief", and sit there for ten, fifteen, 45 minutes trying to do so, and failing. Feeling little more than a dull ache, surrounded by a kind of emptiness, coldness, rigidity. I realized that had been the basic pattern of my life. The one major sustained exception had been those years in Laos, when the sheer horror of the bombing had broken through my defenses, mobilized me. But then when the war had ended, my body had no longer wanted to feel that kind of pain any more, and had mobilized against it. Now, nearly 20 years later, I was locked into a pattern of avoiding pain.

Then, one day, BOOM! Sitting on my cushion, focusing my attention on my pain, trying to grow it, I was suddenly overwhelmed by incredible pain, grief, suffering, pain that filled every cell of my body. And, from that moment on, for weeks, it became my dominant experience. A heavy, intense, overwhelming sadness, depression, pain, would periodically overwhelm me, weighing me down, tiring me out, finding myself seeking sleep to avoid it.

I had gotten in touch with my grief. And it was now overwhelming me. What to do now?

Now here is where the beauty of meditation, and dharma talks, and teachers comes in. I was having these experiences. And I was breathing consciously, going to the dharma talks, and with a teacher every other day for ten minutes. And the basic message, over and over again, was to feel the pain or other feelings, but also to find a place to stand midway between trying to escape them or be overwhelmed by them.

One of the teachers during this period spoke of standing on the beach, by the ocean of grief, and you don't want to be overwhelmed by the waves, but you also appreciate their majesty and don't want to get into our car and drive away. So you find a place to stand on a hill nearby, close enough to feel everything without being overwhelmed by it. And I remembered Laszlo's teaching that when the pain arises don't run away from it, but breathe into it, enter it.

And, over time, I did.

I learned, over time, to work with the grief, and the pain, so that I neither denied or suppressed it, nor let it overwhelm me. I visualized it like adjusting the flame on a stove: not too low, not too high.

I would sit there, day after day, "in touch with my grief", but not overwhelmed by it. And, one day, something unusual happened. I began to cry. And I found, after a lifetime of never crying, that I could cry at will. And I made crying, just pure crying, for no reason, just as an authentic reaction to my grief, part of my daily practice.

And this practice led to a major realization. My whole life I had thought that what I wanted was to escape this plane of grief, and pain, to live in a world of light, and ecstasy and bliss.

And I found, as I got in touch with my grief, that what I actually wanted was to feel my grief, along with my joy, but be captured by neither. To feel bliss all the time - the unbearable lightness of being indeed! Why would I want to shut myself off from much of the

experience of life, much of the time? How empty, to simply feel joy and bliss 24 hours a day.

And at the same time, I certainly didn't want to walk around all day feeling heavy, depressed, miserable, immersed in suffering.

I found myself reveling in those moments when I could feel the pain, the grief, the suffering, but suspended in a lake of peace, of calm, of light. Where the burners of the stove were adjusted just so.

And as I learned to be in touch with my grief on my terms, without being overwhelmed or in denial of it, I also learned the true meaning of compassion.

I had always thought of compassion as feeling sorry, or love, or sympathy, for someone else. Now I learned that it was feeling my own sorrow, and then just seeing someone else.

One night, for example, I was thinking of the war in Yugoslavia which was raging throughout our retreat. I had seen a reference to a school having been bombed, children murdered, seen a photo of a father holding his son in his hands. I had felt bad for a moment, the feeling had passed.

This night I spent some time imagining a son of my own. As I meditated, I gave him, in my mind, a name and a face. I played with him. I imagined him eating, asking questions, playing. Then, after some time, I imagined him, my own son, dead. The pain was unbearable, intense, long-lasting. Then I turned my attention to the father in Yugoslavia, thought of him, holding his dead son in his arms. The pain was unbearable, intense, long-lasting. I understood. This was compassion.

One cannot truly feel another's feelings. To do so is an illusion. One can only feel one's own feelings, and then, to feel genuine compassion, there is nothing else to do but turn one's attention to another, and take the time to see them.

Near the end of the retreat I focused a great deal on this practice. For when I left I wanted to see if it would be true that getting in touch with my own grief would create the kind of compassion that would lead me back into political or social action in a new way, from a different place, from a place that I would not burn out.

On one of the last nights of the retreat a teacher spent some time describing the plight of one of our fellow retreatants, who had spent the last three months meditating with us, and was homeless. He asked for contributions. At that moment I had less than \$500 to my name, no job awaiting me, no idea of where I would live next. And I am normally not particularly generous when it comes to charity. But at this moment, in touch with my own grief, able to identify with what our homeless retreatant must be feeling, I contributed \$75 to his fund.

I had, I felt, solved the answer to Levine's riddle. I had discovered how getting in touch with my own grief led to compassion.

And I had discovered something else besides. At my best, my relations to others for the rest of my life would also be characterized by this kind of compassion or, to use a better word, connection.

I knew I would not always be able to live that way when I returned "to the world" - past conditioning, the pressures of life, finances, would take care of that. I was no Mother Theresa.

And at least, for the first time in my life, I knew how I wished to behave, what my goals toward my fellow beings were. Nothing to do with rule, "shoulds", guilt.

This was quite "selfish", involving just my own feelings in the first instance. I knew I felt better when I was in touch with my own grief, neither denying or being overwhelmed by it. And that when I was, and just seeing my fellow beings, compassion and connection, would follow automatically.

### III. MY RELATION TO THE COSMOS: MYSTERY

When I began this journey, my experience was pretty much limited to human purpose. When I thought of the meaning of life, it was in terms of helping other humans. The furthest out I could think was in terms of making a contribution to future generations to humans. As I've described, my highest goals were to make history, to make a difference, to be mentioned in the history books. My work was in politics, and politics is in the realm of people. My deepest philosophical frameworks were bounded by human purpose, human experience, human goals.

I had, like all of us, other experiences of course. Mystical experiences where time had stood still, matter dissolved, I experienced being in a very different dimension of time and space. Moments making love or taking drugs when human purpose dissolved into experiences of pure being far beyond my normal human dimensions.

It was not until those two days in my father's hospital room, however, that such experiences were sustained and powerful enough to shatter my previous way of being. Though non-verbal and inchoate, they were the fundamental experiences that had propelled me to quit politics, to set out on this journey. I had to know. If there was a whole world out there beyond human experience and human purpose, what was it? And how could I relate to it?

Yes, there was my internal world, which I was exploring with such delight during this journey. How "I" wished to align with, accept existence. How I wished to feel inside. And there was still the world of people and, as I expanded my horizons, living things, to which I wished to relate with compassion and connection. And there was something more, whole dimensions indifferent to human purpose, including but only infinitesimally, human experience, that I also wanted to explore. But how to do so?

A key turning point in the journey beyond human purpose occurred in the fall of 1992. Clinton had just been elected. I had a secure job as a consultant for 1993, many friends and acquaintances in the Administration. I had about \$15,000 in the bank, which I owed

the IRS. One option was to stay in D.C. and seek to try to influence competitiveness policy through my contacts, perhaps even eventually land a job somewhere in the Administration, remain near my mother, and stabilize my financial situation.

At the same time, however, there was a part of me that wanted to intensify my spiritual search. My mother's situation had stabilized, I felt that I had closed with her, it seemed like she could have years to live, and there was no longer the same sense of urgency about staying on the East Coast.

At the same time, I was being pulled to India. I had been drawn to India since a child, and knew I could not complete my spiritual journey until I had been there. And I wanted to go now, while I was still healthy, rather than waiting for some undefined future point when my situation might preclude it.

I had also just met a powerful spiritual teacher, Christopher Titmuss, during a visit to London. Christopher taught a well-known Vipassana retreat every January in Bodh Gaya, India, where the Buddha was enlightened. A terribly committed, decent and impeccable person, Christopher's invited me to the retreat. His view was that I need not put it off. Why wait a year to do what I know I needed to do?

This was 1992, and I still lived in a world of "choices". I was agonized. What to do? I could not decide. There was a strong economic and political case staying in D.C. The economic case was that it was crazy to not pay my taxes, and face enormous fines and penalties. I could make a minimum of \$75,000 in 1993, save the money I needed for my trip, and simply go to Christopher's retreat in Bodh Gaya in January 1994, solvent and better prepared.

Politically, the first year of the Clinton Administration would be a once-in-a-lifetime political opportunity. Here was a Democratic Administration, led by friends and colleagues my age, taking political power for the first time in our lifetimes. I was on the wavelength of a great many, such as Robert Reich, Laura Tyson, and a great many others. I had been working in this arena for two decades. Now was the

time this work might be brought to fruition. It seemed crazy to just leave when I could always go the next year.

Around this time I heard of a weekend workshop that one could take that offered a conscious use of LSD and other psychedelics. Although I had lived through the '60s, and read all the accounts, I had never used it in a conscious setting. I decided to give it a try.

One thing I knew was that if I did it, I really wanted to take a significant dose. I am highly intellectual and conceptual, and I was curious to "get out of my head," to compare the impact of the LSD to meditation and other spiritual techniques in taking one beyond the realm of thought.

When I arrived at the session, the other participants recommended a dose of about 300 mgs. In the event, I was to take a first dose of 750 and a booster of 500.

The experience was extraordinary. When I described it afterwards, the key word that came to mind was that I had had an intimate experience of what the Buddhists call "samsara," the cycle of existence, in an incredibly detailed way. For about 8 hours my central experience was to experience how birth, the rise of hope, decay and death, followed by birth, growth, decay and death, followed by ... applies to all things.

This was not an intellectual experience or understanding. I experienced the birth, rise of hope, decay and death of a thousand internal thoughts and sensations. I experienced the woman next to me laughing one moment, crying the next. I experienced the beginning, middle and end of the Vietnam war. I experienced whole civilizations rising, holding sway for hundreds of years, decaying, and disappearing. The birth, growth, decay and death of planets, stars, galaxies, the universe. And, above all, I experienced the birth, rise of hope, then decay, then death, of my own feelings, in thousands of ways. I looked back on my life, remembered in detail relationships with people, the work I had done, my hopes, my dreams at every moment of my life: entering first grade, flying to Africa when I woke from a deep sleep

and saw a giant red sun waking up over the Equator, entering, living through and leaving relationships, starting, leaving and dissolving think tanks, organizations, jobs.

It was a painful, painful experience. How ridiculous, how silly, how fundamentally untrue were the pitiful illusions we humans hold on to. It goes to the point when I hated the rise of hope most of all. How horrible, how sad, to see hope arise, knowing that it was destined to be disappointed. And yes, death was followed by rebirth, but rebirth brought with it that sense of hope which was inevitably to be betrayed.

At times I felt like I could not breathe, that I was suffocating in a viscous mass of palpable illusion. I felt trapped. Caught in a cage. Unable to stop the rise of hope, and thus unable to feel the pain of decay and death.

And, above all, there was this experience: I had nowhere to stand. I was part of this mess. I was doomed myself to spend a lifetime in illusion, to remain trapped in this cycle.

During the discussion of this experience afterwards, both at the workshop and in the weeks that followed, I remember saying over and over again, "this experience taught me that I must find a place to stand. Somewhere, somehow, I have got to find another way to be in this world."

And after this experience, the decision was made. I was on my way to India a month later.

When I arrived there, the key question that seemed to emerge that might point the way to finding a place to stand beyond human purpose was this: "what is enlightenment?" The experience of enlightenment was clearly the central one in Eastern spiritual experience. It was the word the Buddha had chosen to try and express his place to stand, how he had escaped this realm. But what on earth was it? Perhaps if I could find an answer to this question, I could gain some fundamental insight into the answers I was seeking.

But trying to understand "enlightenment," of course, poses a real problem since, by definition, an unenlightened person like me could never understand it until I was enlightened. And besides that, it had as many explanations and definitions over the centuries as the word "God". Still I persisted, wanting to at least get a taste of what it might mean, some way to feel what it was all about, having a sense that if I was going to discuss all this stuff, if words had any value to a spiritual quest, this was the central word that needed elucidation. None of the dozens of wise people I asked, however, could give me an answer that connected. I learned a great deal just by asking the question. But I did not get answers that satisfied me.

At that time, in Rishikesh, a Hindu priest, maybe 85 years old, would give a teaching at 6:30 a.m., at the giant Sivananda Ashram. A modest, unassuming man, very different from the charismatic gurus to whom so many flocked, the priest would simply enter a small room where 20 or 30 of us were already seated, listen to a beautiful devotional hymn, and then open the huge 500-page book called I Am That by Nisirgidatta, a classic modern exposition of ancient Hindu teaching in dialogue form between the teacher and his disciples. He would read it from sentence by sentence and commenting on what he read, perhaps covering a page or two each session. At the end he would simply stand up and walk out.

The idea that we have three basic states of consciousness - awake, sleep, and deep sleep - is a classic theme in Hindu thought. The state of deep sleep is taken particularly seriously, for there is no separate self in deep sleep, and we are at the deepest possible peace - why then do we assume that the separate self of our awake consciousness is who we really are?

Anyway, he was reading along this particular day, and something he said triggered a question on my part: "Sir, is one way to picture enlightenment as deep sleep plus total awareness?," I asked. When he answered yes, it was like a mini-explosion went off in my being -for the first time I could get a sense of enlightenment, it passed from the abstract realm of fine words to something that I could actually have a

feel for. After my long search, this was the first time I had a sense of what it was. I was ecstatic, feeling I had had a key breakthrough in my understanding.

Still high, I hopped on a taxi to go into town for some errands, as previously planned, where I noticed the new Newsweek and its cover story on none other than the Information Revolution. I opened it up, and read the first few paragraphs, which exceeded even the usual media enthusiasm for this kind of thing. It read something like, "Can you imagine! In just a few short years, every home in America will have a giant "information appliance" in their living room which will allow every family to do everything from Johnny's homework to downloading any movie it wants!"

As I read along, I realized with a start that I had once taken all of this seriously, that just a decade ago, it had once begin the organizing principle of my life, the vision that had sustained me and given me meaning.

Now, all I could think of was, "what does this have to do with enlightenment?" Even if you can download every movie ever made, how much of them will deal with how to achieve deep sleep with total awareness? Isn't it just "garbage in, garbage out"? Even if you can make love to the goddamn "information appliance", is it really going to make people happier? Will the world really be a better place?

I tried to remember how I could have been so caught up in the "global knowledge revolution." I couldn't.

While also in Rishikesh, I got glimpses of the other side from a remarkable man, named Brahm Chaitanya. Devi, the head of ashram at which I was staying, and a brilliant, pious and lovely teacher of the Bhagavad Gita, told me one day that she had trouble answering all my questions, and that I should talk with a man she had just met, that he might be able to help me. He lived in Gangotri, she said with some awe in her voice, explaining that it was a Hindu holy place next to a glacier, believed to be one of the sources of the Ganges. Brahm Chaitanya, she said, lived there year around, where he ran an ashram.

During the monsoon season, he had visitors, Gangotri was a site for pilgrims. During the cold season, it was impassable, no way in or out, and he lived there six months a year on his own with just a few other people. In the mountains around Gangotri were to be found holy men who lived year-around in caves. He was in Rishikesh by accident this cold season, temporarily caring for one of his sister ashrams in Rishikesh.

I rushed over to the ashram, and was directed to a building, where I was told he was teaching meditation. As I looked in the window, I saw a man who looked the part of Hindu holy man: tall, thin, with long hair that fell to his waist, sitting erect. And when I introduced myself and asked if we could talk, I met a remarkable man who lived the life of a holy man as well. Educated in English schools, Brahm Chaitanya spoke the King's English. He loved to talk, had a booming laughter, and had a rare interest in and gift for trying to translate Hindu thinking to foreigners. We spent many hours in conversation together. At one point I asked him if I should refer to him as my teacher. "My God, no!" he burst out in laughter. "We are just communicating, I learn as much from you as you from me."

What did me most to point me to the realm beyond human purpose were our talks about good and evil. Brahm Chaitanya was clearly a deeply ethical person, with a strong sense of right and wrong. He lived the life of a holy man, eschewing the desires of the flesh, praying, studying, teaching, helping others meditate, and do yoga, and improve themselves. He even exercised himself politically in his world, helping lead a local political movement to prevent an onslaught of tourist buses bringing mere tourists and not genuine pilgrims to Gangotri.

And yet, in response to my questions of how he could pray to a Lord who allowed such evil to occur in the world, he not only maintained that his Lord was not "good," but simply the energy of the universe. "Goodness has been unnecessarily imposed upon the Lord. Because as soon as you impose good you must also impose evil. As I explained to you, the concept of goodness is inclusive of the concept of evil. So how can you impose goodness without also imposing evil?"

He said he would hate to live in a world where there was nothing but good, that he accepted, even welcomed things as they were. "The illness we see is also the health of the Universe. Do you understand? You don't understand health unless you understand disease. Both are coexistent. Why do you want only one? And why do you impose only one aspect on the Lord when He is everything? We don't love God in the sense of His being Good. We love God in the sense of His being All."

But how can you love the All, when it encompasses so much evil, I asked. "Aaahhhh!!! Yes! Now you've come to the proper question," he answered. Because it comes to the final aim of humanity. It gives me peace. It gives me a total existential peace in this world, even while living in it, with its anomalies, its disagreements, and its viciousness. And how could he love viciousness? "Simply because it brings virtues also, just after it - as well as just before. If there was only sunlight in the world, could you see the sun? If there were nothing but the sun, would you even have a concept of it? Without night the day loses its charm. The day loses its meaning. So this variety has to be there. The ultimate Truth is pure consciousness, which we call "God". There is no personal deity. The Hindu and Buddhist concepts are of impersonal deities. At the impersonal level there is no question of blaming anybody or loving anybody. It is acceptance. The word "love" gives the wrong connotation. It gives you the wrong meaning. Love is an emotion."

As I grew to feel what he was saying more than understand, I interpreted it this way for myself: that, yes, I would always fight against injustice, never accept that children starved to death in this world, that women were abused, that curable disease went unchecked. And, at the same time, sitting beside Brahm Chaitanya's glacier, and contemplating what is, I saw that I could only truly struggle to make things better if I could first align with, be at peace with, be at one with, things as they are. From that place perhaps my struggle to change the things I did not like could work. But only if I was first at peace could I then bring peace to others.

And being at peace meant aligning myself with the universe as it was, in this moment, a universe that existed far beyond human affairs, extending into dimensions that my pitiful human brain had not evolved to be able to understand.

During my many hours of talks with him, there was one constant theme: there existed a realm far beyond human purpose, which should become the object of my attention. One time, for example, I asked him how to avoid thinking badly of a person one does not like. Should one look for the positive in them, see the universal spirit within? In a typical answer, he replied, "of course, this can sometimes help. But it is better to sublimate lower thoughts to higher ones. Why spend so much time assessing our neighbor? It is better, perhaps, to spend one's time meditating, contemplating, praying. If we fill our mind with higher subjects, like God, the universe, and our role in it, we will have less of a place for other questions."

He certainly lived from that place. After I had gotten to know him a bit, I asked him one day if he had a goal, a life work. "Certainly," he said, growing deadly serious for a moment, before returning to his customary mode of booming good cheer. He went on to explain that, living in Gangotri, he had one day been given a remarkable present: his very own Rigda, an original Hindu scripture, which Hindus believe are brought to earth by Rishis or invisible beings from another realm, a Rigda which tells the story of the universe from ancient, ancient times, until now, and into the future. When I asked when it was written, he explained that they do not believe there is a date when such sacred texts are written, that they have always existed and will always exist.

He then explained that his lifework was to translate this particular rigda into English, "purely for my own amusement". He had no interest in having it published. Could I see his notebooks, I asked timorously.

Sure! he said with his usual bonhomie, and took me into the next room where I saw one of the most remarkable sights I have ever seen: dozens of schoolboy notebooks with tiny, English writing, years of

work, part of years of work to come, a translation of an ancient Hindu text into English that no one would ever read.

When I asked him to read me a page, I was stunned to hear an esoteric description of time, going back tens and tens of thousands of years, as the author set the stage to describe an event that occurred several tens of thousands of years ago.

One day I challenged Brahm Chaitanya on his assertion that he did not fear death. How would you now, I asked, until you faced it? He laughed uproariously, and with even greater excitement and verve than usual, explained that "well, I've been on a bus that slid nearly over the ledge of a mountain, and I was sitting on the corner and saw right down into the valley. The bus swerved away from the mountainside to avoid an oncoming car, and luckily stopped right at the edge."

And you were completely calm, you felt no fear, I said. He responded "not at all. And I have gone through that same situation at least twice more, and have enjoyed the fun, and exuberantly shouted out in joy in the moment, much to the consternation of all the rest of my fellow passengers". And he broke into an unusually loud, long and booming peal of laughter, one that lasted almost a minute, as he recalled that experience. And as he laughed I felt, not understood, that yes, it is possible to live in other realms, realms in which the death of the body, the stuff of ego, was at most secondary.

One day I tested him about an issue that was very important to me. I asked him, "if you could see the future and knew that all your learning and wisdom would, all your charm, all your wisdom, was never going to be of use to anyone, that you would die completely anonymously, your few friends shedding a tear and then going about their business..."

"Amen! Amen! Amen!," he interrupted, joyously. "So be it. Because that would be the desire of the system, of total nature. Amen. This is acceptance."

At such moments of knowing not understanding, along with the many other moments of transcendent experience common to a spiritual journey - walking along the Ganges at sunrise in Benares as thousands solemnly, piously, quietly bathe in the waters they believe to be not merely sacred but literally God Itself, passing burning corpses of people who have come many hundreds of miles to die in God, experiencing the ferocious intensity of feeling in a Hassidic synagogue in Jerusalem, losing oneself in music and dance and the sound of people talking in tongues in a fundamentalist church in London - I glimpsed the "realm beyond", had flashes of my relation to the cosmos independent of my connection with my fellow human beings, or harmonizing my own inner drives.

But though I was experiencing, glimpses, getting flashes, I had not yet really understood. That understanding was to await the three-month retreat.

I had entered the retreat in October, 1993. Like many travelers on this kind of journey, it was a strange moment in my life. I was 51 years old. I was not only unmarried and had no children, but, things not having gone well with Zsuzsa, was not involved in a relationship. I was not especially close to my family, had a handful of real friends. I had burned most of the bridges from my past, and neither wished to nor could go backwards. I had five \$100 American Express traveler checks to my name, and a debt to the IRS that was eventually to reach some \$30,000 before I was able to repay it. I had no job I really wanted, and certainly no promise of a job awaiting me when I left. I knew no one at the retreat, and it would hardly have mattered if I did, since it was to be silent. Virtually no one knew where I was or what I had done in my past, and even fewer cared. My name was "Yogi Fred."

While former colleagues were serving as Cabinet Secretaries, White House aides, and department heads in the new Clinton Administration, or serving as Senators or Representatives, my "work" was counting out oranges and bananas for "breakfast prep" the next day. I was in short, at that moment in my life, about as devoid as was possible of the external accomplishments I had always assumed would bring me happiness.

Nor was the retreat, particularly the first month, any kind of joyride. The schedule involved waking about 5 in the morning, and sitting and walking silently in alternate 45-minute periods until ten at night, with breaks for meals and jobs. Although retreatants were not forced to keep to this schedule and I certainly didn't, I spent at least three or four hours meditating and, for more than a month, dealing with a great deal of psychological and to some extent physical discomfort. For me, and I imagine others, it is natural that the first period of the retreat in particular starts to raise a whole range of issues that one has never before really dealt with. A ten-day retreat is over almost before you start. But during a three-month, a lot of old psychological issues surfaced in a painful way.

What was particularly maddening was how they would persist and persist and persist. The instructions are to watch your thoughts, feelings and sensations arise, exist and fade away, and not to get stuck in them. In reality, I found myself totally stuck in my thoughts, going over years of painful incidents from my previous past relationships, re-experiencing bad feelings and bad vibes and past slights that I had assumed were long forgotten. Colds seemed endless. Depression seemed like it would never lift.

As time wore on, however, as I grew used to my surroundings, as I developed a daily schedule which include sleeping when my body felt like it for the first time since I was an infant, eating vegetarian food, going for long daily walking meditations in the beautiful woods surrounding the retreat center, doing daily meditations outside in the sunlight, I found myself growing stronger and healthier, -- physically, emotionally, mentally. Going into the retreat, for example, I would joke about losing my short-term memory. During the retreat I was struck at how I could remember both recent and long-term events in incredible detail. Powerful, powerful dreams, hard to explain them. Strange experiences, like meditating and having it turn into a "dream", or dreaming and having it turn into "reality", the two states often touching and merging in ways I cannot here explain.

And then, suddenly, it happened.

Two months or so into the retreat. Four or five in the afternoon as the sun was setting. As I was doing walking meditation by myself in a large hall usually occupied by several dozen meditators. Walking slowly, step by step, being aware of each movement of the foot, lifting, moving, falling, impact, lifting, moving, falling, impact, one foot, then the other.

It happened.

I cannot say much about the experience itself. It was non-verbal, non-conceptual. It literally cannot be described in words. And even if it could be, it is not clear that it would be appropriate.

All that can be said here is what happened afterwards. There is nothing wrong with using words, to try and understand our structure our experience, to try and communicate it to others. In fact, it could be argued that our ability to structure our own experience using words and symbols is what most distinguishes us from all other living things. But what is important is to always remember that the words are just words, as different from the actual experience itself as the experience of drinking a glass of pure, clear, cold water from reading about it or seeing it on TV. And also that the words come afterwards, that first there is our pure, primal experiences of life, and that then come the pale, cold words we use to try and hold on to and understand and communicate them.

In the days and weeks following this experience, the key words I found emerging into consciousness to try and explain to myself what had happened were "happy" and "deep peace". A shift had occurred, not a shift from one mood to another, but from one state of being to another.

What struck me most about this new state of being was that I had not really known it existed until now. I kept thinking of Plato's analogy of the cave. All I had known was darkness. I had counted myself happy if one of the links of my chains had broken and I had a bit more freedom of movement. Or if I had gotten some extra food. I had

not known the sunlight existed. Now I suddenly found myself living in it.

From this perspective, I looked back on my previous life with amazement. For one thing, I realized that I had truly enjoyed the external satisfactions that had come my way in the past - great sex, a good relationship, having an impact on society, making money, getting my name in the paper, a great high from some drug, having some power. And they had never lasted. From my new perspective, I saw now that these external pleasures were merely temporary reductions in my basic unhappiness.

And here I was in this retreat, no money, no sex, no drugs, no work, no impact, no fame - and I was happy. I mean really happy.

I had now discovered that happiness was an internal phenomenon, how I felt inside, and had no direct relationship to the external events of my life outside. It seemed that my real work, if I wanted to remain happy, was to continue to pay attention to my internal state of being.

At the same time, I was aware that I still wanted some of those externals: I was not ready to become a monk and give up sex, still wanted relationship, needed money to live comfortably in the world, and so forth. But I saw that at best these were cherries on the cake: perhaps they could add to or enhance my happiness. But they were not the cake.

On deeper reflection, though, I wondered this formulation was not too simplistic. While perhaps in theory one could have both, perhaps in practice the pursuit of external satisfactions hampered the realization of inner peace.

It was immediately clear, for example, that the achievement of external satisfaction had always had an opposite. The satisfaction of seeing one's name in print also meant one was frustrated when an article was rejected. To find joy in sex meant one would experience

pain at its absence. A drug high was literally followed by a low, often for days or even weeks.

But it felt like this new state of being, this deep sense of internal peace, did not have an opposite, that it represented a permanent shift in my internal state of being. It felt like (and this was to prove to be true) that although I would experience sadness, anger, jealousy, pain, in the future, that these emotions would be suspended in a deep pool of peace.

And from this perspective, it felt like seeking money, fame, sex even relationship in an attached way in the future was not only unnecessary, but could interfere with maintaining my internal peace.

It was clear that this was the central question emerging from this experience, and its answer would remain to be seen.

I also noted, as mentioned above, that this experience was fundamentally about experiencing a deep inner peace, not the kind of bliss and joy and ecstasy I had imagined in the past. Feelings of incredible joy were moving through, but so too were deep sadness and pain. In fact, for the first time I could truly allow myself to feel these feelings, because I no longer had to fear that they would crush me.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the experience, was arriving at the door of Mystery.

The idea that we humans are not given to truly understand the world in which we live had been a growing theme of my thought for many years, particularly since I had looked into the void in my father's hospital room.

It seemed obvious that though we humans could understand many important things about the material world - all the wonder that sciences had produced - these learnings were limited, that in fact if one were to add up all knowledge of the human species it would be an infinitesimally small portion of what there is to know.

I mean, there are so many physical facts we don't know, nor are likely ever to understand. It seems clear that our human brains have not yet evolved, and may never evolve, to a point where we will fully plumb either the outer or inner limits of the physical universe. No matter how long we peer into the heavens, for example, we are unlikely ever to know how many planets there are in our own little galaxy, let alone all the other galaxies. And we are even less likely to know which if any have life, or the laws by which that life operates and communicates and thinks.

And as without, so within. When we finish mapping the human gene, we will have barely begun to understand its component parts, and then their internal workings. What is a thought? Would we ever know? And if we cannot fully understand our own internal structures, and the true origin of our consciousness and feelings, how could we understand the larger mystery of consciousness itself? What if, for example, the practitioners of the poetic sciences are correct, and consciousness does not even originate from within, but instead is inflected into us from sources far outside ourselves that we will never understand?

And if we cannot understand the physical world, how on earth could we understand the non-material universe, the world of spirit and soul and dimensions we can glimpse but never fully understand. I remember once standing outside a zoo within a foot or two of a squirrel, and wondering at how the squirrel was right next to us but, as far as we knew, merely sensed colors, a change in air pressure or light, our vibratory fields. And I looked into the sky and imagined a vast net of intelligence and consciousness spreading above me in every direction, peopled by intelligences as far beyond my comprehension as did mine exceed that of the squirrel's.

I mean, most of us sense that we are fundamentally something other than the body, call it soul, spirit, consciousness, and that from this sense the body is fundamentally vestigial. What if there were Beings within a few feet of me, as invisible to me as I was to the squirrel, that were communicating in ways I could sense but could not understand? And what if these Beings had evolved far beyond we

humans, and were maintaining us just as we were maintaining the animals in the zoo: for their amusement and because, by studying our behavior, they could better understand their own origins and present way of life?

The point to me was not that this was true, but that it was as logical as any of the other explanations we humans come up with - religious, spiritual, cosmological, scientific - to explain the realms of life we are not given to understand. Indeed, with a little time, effort and imagination, one could probably come up with an explanation of life following this thesis that was even more logical than science or religion.

I had, in short, become **intellectually** convinced of the mystery for many years prior to this experience.

I had also read and heard much about it. It was my understanding that when Joseph Campbell, for example, talked about "epiphany" as being an experience of life beyond good and evil, the bombing of Dresden, an experience of the awesome power of the universe, he was talking about the Mystery. This, too, was what Brahm Chaitanya was reaching for when he talked about his understanding of God. And it was what I had seen glimpses of interviewing refugees in Laos from American bombing, staring into my father's face as it passed from life to death, wondering the rooms of the Holocaust Memorial at Yad Vashem.

But this experience during the retreat was the first time that I fully participated in it, **experienced** it as a felt sense, knew it to be true in my body, in the deepest recesses of my being.

And what I was left with was the most profound possible sense of awe and humility, a figurative bending of the knee before the awesome power of the universe, a power that I not only did not but could not understand.

This experience, then, propelled me far beyond the realms of understanding my own internal processes, or my relationship to my

fellow human beings. It turned my attention simultaneously as far out and as far within as I could extend it.

When I looked within, the whole sense of being "Fred Branfman" dissolved into a pool of mystery, wonder, awe. From whence came this voice that I heard speaking to my teacher, and which others called "me". From whence came these thoughts, feelings, sensations, so profound, so mysterious, so complex, and which were so much more than the sum-total of my fifty years of pitiful wonderings about, and experience of, life on this planet? What mysterious force, energy, moved through "me", impelling me through this realm?

And what on earth was "out" there? When one turned one's attention outwards, one was struck first by the most profound sense of mystery just by looking closely at the chair or table or mirror in front of one, by using what I call "the five whys", or asking "why" five times. Why am I here? Because my parents birthed me. Why did my parents birth me? Because they wanted children. Why did they want children? Because evolution bred it into them. Why did evolution breed it into them? Because there was this Big Bang which set into motion this complex chain of events that led to my being here. Why was there a Big Bang? Because ... well ....

And that was just looking in the mirror. Properly seen, any object, person, thought or phenomenon was an invitation to mystery. And that was just on earth. To look out into the cosmos was, of course, to experience a sense of awe magnified 10,000 times. The very idea of the cosmos, let alone all the questions about it that we could never answer, most centrally not only whether there was life on other planets and, if so, what laws it operated by.

And that was just the cosmos, the material realm. What about the "worlds to come" of which the Hassids speak, all the subtle states of being invisible to the human eye or measurement, but no less real for all that of which all religions and mystics speak?

The awe and sense of mystery that I had periodically experienced in the past shifted as a result of this experience. Before, I

had lived from what I knew, and only intermittently touched the mystery. In the months that followed this experience, I fundamentally lived the mystery, periodically dipping back into this plane of reality.

And it remained a mystery. I realized that I simply did not know. I would never again accept a scientific-materialist framework, which said that this was all there is, that matter was all that existed. And I would remain open to the possibility that this view was correct.

And neither would I adopt some particular version of "spiritual reality." It seemed to me that we simply were not given to know anything specific about the realm beyond in which I was living, other than that it existed. And I would remain open to the view that perhaps there was an explanation about it that one day would be proven correct.

I simply did not know.

In the years that were to follow this experience, I have found living from the mystery the great challenge of my life. I cannot, of course, live from that place all the time. To really open oneself up to permanent awe and wonder would make it impossible to function in the world, drive from point A to point B, make a living. I also live from thousands of unconscious assumptions of which I am not even aware.

At the same time, my deepest moments of peace and joy come when I can not only remind myself of but actually enter the mystery, to dissolve my sense of "self" into the totality of being.

One way to describe the shift that occurred that fall day was to say that, suddenly, it propelled me into the Land of Mystery. And I realized I was home.

It was a strange home, to be sure. No up, no down, no good, no bad. No life, no death, no answers, only questions. A silent world of light and nothing else. And because it was strange, and so foreign to what I had only known, I found myself frequently leaving and going back to what I had known.

I would often forget the mystery. I would find myself back in a world of answers, a world where I took seriously what I read in the newspaper or bothered myself about this person's behavior or that missed "opportunity".

But, deep within, I would never again take this world as seriously as I had in the past. For I had experienced the world of human purpose as the tiny portion of reality that it is. I felt the deepest possible compassion for myself, and thus for my fellow beings. And, this compassion dissolved into the light of the greater Mystery of things.

And, after all my searching, I knew one thing above all: I would never completely forget this light. I might lose myself on occasion, or even longer periods of time. I might once again delude myself into thinking I knew what there was to know. But such delusions would, in the end, be temporary. I had experienced Mystery so deeply that it had become part of me.

Or, more accurately, I had become part of It.