



Wilson Van Dusen

# The Design of Existence

EMANATION FROM SOURCE TO CREATION

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Wilson Van Dusen  
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West Chester, Pennsylvania

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*Dedicated to my fellow adventurers,  
the mystics of all times, places, religions, and cultures.  
A special thanks to the Hindu Upanishads,  
to the Buddhist sutras,  
and  
to Emanuel Swedenborg,  
a giant, even in this wondrous group.  
A deep bow of respect to all of you and to the  
Spirit that animates you.*



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## INTRODUCTION

# Approaching the Design of Existence

The design of the whole of existence is an awesome idea. Even recently, it would have seemed impossible to describe the basic design. There are too many levels, too many conceptions. The whole fits together too wondrously. Now it seems that a quite adequate approach to the whole design can be made. In future centuries, other explorers will improve on this approach.

First, I will lay out what is really meant by this bold enterprise. Then, as part of our stage-setting preparation, I will explain how this may be possible now and, finally, how we will proceed. All this is to prepare and orient the reader.

By the design of existence, I mean the total ordering of all levels of existence from God down to the material universe. You and I, as individuals, already participate in varying degrees at different levels. Our bodies are part of the material universe, but our minds and inner experiences transcend the material world. But a key element is what occurs after the death of the body. Understanding the design beyond our present life is critical because it has everything to do with how we should live today. There is an overall drift in the design toward the Ultimate. It is critical for us to understand this drift, or the order within the order, because it explains and gives meaning to every aspect of our existence.

Individual spiritual explorers have already found most of this grand design, so, in effect, we can draw on the work of many mystics. But because Emanuel Swedenborg found the critical missing pieces of the puzzle, we can now comfortably speak of the entire design. Become accustomed to the idea that I will be speaking of a grand hierarchy of orders of existence of which our lives are a part. When we reach what is known of the ultimate level, we will only be able to point beyond and indicate that there is much more unknown to us. Yet the drift of the whole design is so clear that we can each offer a hypothesis on the general nature of that more that is beyond our knowledge.

The lowest element of the design of existence is the material universe. Certainly, we experience this aspect of the design fairly easily, and the systematic probing of science has found much to explain its workings. We have no trouble in accepting the material world as it is now known and being discovered by science. As a scientist myself (a clinical psychologist, to be precise), I enjoy learning about scientific findings. Still, I will not examine the wonders of the material world since the design I will be describing stretches well beyond this realm, although, occasionally to illustrate points, the design of the material world will be referred to.

Although I have no quarrel with science, I feel that many people take the whole of existence as simply physical. This assumption is understandable since it is the material world we know best. Present-day cosmology, which attempts to stretch the material world to explain everything, is limited to the four-dimensional, space-time material world. But, in trying to explain our conscious experience and even more so in explaining levels approaching God, the four-dimensional material world is simply too limited.

Our brain is part of the physical world. Impairment of the brain alters both the conscious experience of persons and the physical expression of themselves in the world. This is immensely clear.

Although our brain is part of the four-dimensional, space-time physical world, our conscious inner experience is of a different order from the material. All material objects exist in four space; however, our inner awareness occurs in five space and above.<sup>1</sup> This accords with our experience. We can see and interact with material things, but, in our understanding and awareness, we bring a different element to existence.

The aspects of creation that we will be dealing with include our whole inner life and how this fits into the spiritual worlds beyond this one, indeed, fits into eternity. The inner life can be seen as both psychological and spiritual. For example, suppose a woman gets into an argument with a child and loses her temper. On one level, it is a simple interpersonal difficulty. But suppose this woman is a good Buddhist and becomes concerned that she has temporarily lost sight of the *dharma*, the way of Buddha. For her, the same incident has then become spiritual, that is, seen in relation to ultimate concerns of her life. The meaning of the spiritual will become clearer as we proceed in presenting the design, but, basically, it means seeing our life in relation to ultimates. In order to present the design, I will look at human experience in its larger, and even its ultimate, context. This is not in the least to deny

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1. In my doctoral dissertation, entitled *The Mind in Hyperspace* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1952), I took the mathematics of space and generated five-to-seven-dimension real spaces, demonstrating that mental events occur in five-to-seven spaces and explaining how these levels interact with the four-space material world.

the ordinary limited view of our experience, but rather also to try to see it in its ultimate context and implications.

There is an important secret here. In looking at the design of existence, I am not looking at some massive intellectual structure outside ourselves. We are each a living example of creation itself. There is no one so limited as not to show aspects of this grand design. Since the design of creation preceded us, we issue out of it. We are in it and reflect it. Science's elaboration of genetics and the formation of the human being is just a lower, material part of this. Because we are part of the design of creation, many simple points can be made and clarified by reference to ordinary human experiences, as I did by showing the different reaction of a woman who argued with a child and then felt she had temporarily failed to follow the way of the Buddha.

The full implication that we are each in ourselves a part of the design of existence will only gradually become apparent. Because we are each a living example of the vast design, much of what might be considered "otherworldly" can be intuitively recognized by each of us. Heaven and hell may seem beyond us while we live in a body in this world, yet we will soon see that each of us has already repeatedly experienced both heaven and hell. The more sensitively and reflectively we look at our own experience, the more we will begin to recognize intuitively the larger design of which we are an example.

Why go into all this? It is a major clarification, an antidote to the stress of conflicting doctrines, opinions, and information overload. It clarifies our nature and the nature of all that is. *The design of existence is what is*. Our ultimate aim should be to live harmoniously within this design. This is the key to simple happiness. But, in a deeper way, coming into harmony with the design leads to an experience of wonder at the design. This

experience is enlightenment, which we will deal with at greater length later. Ultimately, the Lord wants the design to be known. In no sense is it limited to any one group, sex, age, race, culture, or religion. It is literally the universal. Certainly, in terms of religion, the design described here is universal and thus transcends all sectarian differences. As I mentioned earlier, there are still unknowns and vast mysteries in the design, but we actually know as much as we need to know of the essentials. The design of existence is basically simple, and it is a wondrous delight to see and begin to feel a part of it.

Because we exist in and are a part of the design, we will be able to confirm the main lines of the design from our own experience and understanding. This is not a matter to be taken on faith; it is far preferable that we attempt to confirm this knowledge for ourselves, just as we can confirm the laws of physical reality with simple physical experiments. There is one proviso, however. We cannot fully understand and believe what is beyond our direct experience. So some people may be intrinsically limited in how much they can intuitively appreciate until they get more experience. After all, who understands marriage better, the unmarried teenager immersed in romantic movies or an old married couple?

## **HOW I CAME TO THIS**

Normally, I would prefer to be the unknown, anonymous writer, but my own story behind this effort helps to set the stage. I am by nature a mystic. I use the term *mystic* in its largest and most widely accepted meaning, as one who has enjoyed the experience of God, one who has known God to such an extent that it has changed him or her from within. A

mystic can relatively easily recognize this change in other mystics. Only because one needs to be a mystic truly to understand and appreciate a great mystic, my own experience becomes relevant.

I was born into an irreligious family and had no religious training. Yet I had the direct experience of the Divine in infancy (age one), childhood, and adolescence. By adolescence, I knew my experiences were unusual and concealed them. I also became self-aware enough that I asked myself how these wonderful experiences came about. I learned the way. When alone and peaceful, I emptied myself so as to be instructed by all there is: as simple as that. The instruction I received could vary all the way from tiny gentle lessons to overwhelming visions in which, for a time, I lost track of this world and even of being a human.

Over the years, this natural experience has been aided and deepened by reading mystics of all traditions. Even as a young man, I was captivated by the wonder of the Hindu Upanishads and Zen Buddhism because they spoke to me of my own experience. Christian mysticism was actually more difficult for me at first, but among the first Christian mystics I could appreciate was Emanuel Swedenborg. Later, for some years, I read ancient Christian literature and feel as though I lived a very full decade with Eastern Orthodox saints.

There is an interesting story as to how I came to Swedenborg before any other Christian mystic. My paternal grandmother was a spiritualist minister, calling on the spirits of the departed to aid in counseling people. She lived on the goodwill offerings of clients and was much honored when she died. I visited her only a few times, so she cannot really be said to have influenced me. But I do remember, one day, her pointing to a row of red volumes on her fireplace shelf. She

said, “This is all you ever need to know, and I have willed these to you.” Unfortunately, she didn’t even tell me the name of this great author.

Now, my mother was completely skeptical about anything bearing on religion. She said my grandmother talked to spirits because she could not hear real people very well. My mother considered my grandmother foolish when she pronounced me her spiritual heir; and, when my grandmother died, her red volumes were thrown in the trash. That year I was gravely disappointed to get a book about Pinocchio for Christmas. I had already graduated from children’s books to psychic phenomena in my reading.

Years later, I found works by Emanuel Swedenborg and became something of an expert on him. One day, in a Swedenborgian library, I saw a row of red books, and my hair stood on end. I knew these were the same as the volumes promised to me. They were B. F. Barrett’s, *The Swedenborg Library*, a work no longer in print. I realized that, somehow, my grandmother had managed to make me her spiritual heir even though my parents tried to cut the link.

What is the real use in a mystic’s reading other mystics? To a child, the mystical experience is like being shown all there is at once; it is too much to grasp. But reading the thoughts of other mystics was like walking around the matter, recognizing similarities here and there. It was only in late adulthood (I am now seventy-eight) that I began to get a sense of the entire mystical landscape. Only recently did I describe world mysticism.<sup>2</sup>

The writings of other mystics spoke to me directly of my

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2. See Wilson Van Dusen, *Beauty, Wonder and the Mystical Mind* (West Chester, Penn.: Chrysalis Books, 1999), “The Landscape of World Mysticism,” 97–125.



own experience. In contrast, reading scholars of mysticism, who never had the experience of God themselves, was quite useless, like watching pretenders trying to create the experience of God. Their work led to so many misunderstandings and false leads that I ended up throwing the books away—with the exception of the books of Evelyn Underhill and of William James. Neither ever claimed the mystical experience, but their accounts are so intuitively correct that, if there were a union of world mystics, Underhill and James would be voted in as honorary members.<sup>3</sup>

By far, the bulk of great mysticism is ancient. The available writings of mystics passed down through the centuries is a gleaning of the best that has survived. In contemporary writing, unfortunately, not much of real worth shows up. This is not because the true experience of God is rare; rather, few mystics write or get published. Publishing for a mystic has its own difficulties, especially since true mystics would like to remain unknown and present only what is higher than themselves. Indeed, the Buddha directly asked his followers not to speak of these things, so Buddhism, the religion that produces most of the world's mystics, has relatively few direct accounts of the experience. What is the danger for the mystic who “goes public”? It is egotism. So, they have to weigh the danger of ego and vanity versus the possible benefit to others.

Along the way, I have encountered a few pretenders, none of whom I will name. Each of these pretenders, in his or her own way, claims to be the messiah, but overweening vanity gives their game away. This accounts for many cults with followers of the strangest and most foolish beliefs, all to finance

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3. See, for example, James's chapter on mysticism in William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library, 1902); and Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism* (New York: Dutton, 1915).

their false messiah. One can hardly blame the leader who finds so many foolish people anxious to support a redeemer. At best, these pretentious people present a somewhat confused borrowing of the spiritual teaching of others. At worst, they come nowhere near the spirituality of even ordinary people. Anyone with a giant ego is no messiah.

My survey of mystics of various traditions, in *Beauty, Wonder, and the Mystical Mind*, was undertaken with some trepidation. Would all these mystics from different cultures and traditions provide a universal message or would there be insurmountable differences? I found a universal message. The major differences that seem to divide them are the topics of reincarnation and karma; yet a close examination of these doctrines shows no separation between Eastern and Western religions. (I deal with this matter in a later chapter.)

It is easy to see cultural differences. Christians have an incarnate Son of God, whereas the Buddha claimed only to be an enlightened man; the very name *Buddha* means “the awakened one.” I found that both Protestantism and Judaism showed few signs of mysticism. On the other hand, Hinduism and Buddhism are like advanced universities of mysticism. Still, despite these apparent cultural differences, a great underlying unity is shown by the world’s mystics.

Often, I begin working by becoming plagued by a question and pursuing it until it is answered. Having been grounded in the works of the mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, I was plagued by a question while surveying the world’s mystics. Do the other mystics report on the worlds beyond this one as well as Swedenborg did? The final answer was no. There are many Christian accounts of heaven and hell compiled from biblical passages, but the result is a rather

confusing hodgepodge, nothing at all like Swedenborg's great work *Heaven and Hell*.<sup>4</sup> *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* has the morality represented in other religions but is in no way comparable. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* really does not describe worlds beyond this but is rather a guide to be read to the dying and as a prayer over the dead because the Tibetan Buddhist purpose is to aid the dying to find enlightenment.<sup>5</sup> All told, nowhere in the mystical literature was there anything even remotely comparable to Swedenborg's 27 years of exploration of heaven and hell.

Then it occurred to me that Swedenborg had provided something more than a rich account of heaven and hell, the worlds beyond this one. He also provided detailed connections between heaven and hell and our personal experience. Our mind is inwardly in the form of heaven and hell. There is a clear dynamic connection between heaven and hell and the very order and nature of our inner experience.

One more piece fell into place that led me to see that the design of existence could now be described. In the main substance of Swedenborg's writings, he presents the universal message of all the mystics. When you read mystical writings, it is as though all mystics have visited the same land and have come back with the same general understanding. Yet Swedenborg appears unique in that he also came back with critical

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4. First published in 1758, Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell* has been translated into many languages. A new translation in English has just been published: *Heaven and Hell*, translated by George F. Dole (West Chester, Penn.: The Swedenborg Foundation, 2000.) The many quotations from *Heaven and Hell*, which I cite in later chapters, are taken from this edition.

5. Ernest Budge, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (Magnolia, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1990). Robert Thurman, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (New York: Bantam, 1994). There are various translations and commentaries on this latter work.

details on our future worlds and how they relate to our present experience. Of course, Swedenborg was a Christian and, like most mystics, reported what he found in the only religious frame of reference he knew. Yet he was also reporting the universal in Christian terms.

These various trends combined into one insight:

- (1) All great mystics report the same universal design.
- (2) Yet to translate between the outer terms of the major religions seems an almost impossible task.
- (3) But suppose I take one great mystic, such as Swedenborg.
- (4) I could then report the universal design through his writings.
- (5) With Swedenborg, I would also have the major elements of worlds beyond this one and their intimate connection with our own internal design, elements missing in the writings of other mystics.
- (6) Even though Swedenborg reported the universal in the only terms he knew—Christian—I could aim at the universal of mysticism and the universal in Swedenborg, which is the very heart of his work.

Following this line, I could make an adequate presentation of the universal design of existence in a way that might be acceptable to people of various faiths.

This will be a little challenging to the reader. The findings of a mystic whom most people never heard of will be presented, and a few new terms will be introduced. But, since the universal heart of Swedenborg's works and that of the works of other mystics is the same, if you have any feeling for this heart at all, it should be recognizable.<sup>6</sup> It is no accident

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6. See Jeffrey Moses, *Oneness* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1989).

that the Golden Rule lies at the heart of most religions. You will have the task of confirming the design for yourself and doing any translation necessary into your own frame of reference or into your own religion.

We now need a little understanding of Emanuel Swedenborg's role in this. He seems to come on stage as a central figure. Neither he nor I would find this acceptable. Like all true mystics who write, Swedenborg never saw himself as a major figure. For most of his life, he published anonymously and reported himself as simply, "A servant of the Lord Jesus Christ." His works are the revelations he was given. Greatness lies in the works, not in Swedenborg, the poor scribe who must have used up thousands of quill pens to set it all down in the 1700s. In respect of this, his own wish, I will henceforth use his name as little as possible and refer instead to his works, because he regarded them, as do I, as the most faithful revelation a servant could put down. There are certain minor limitations in his works, for they were written in Latin by an early Western scientist over two centuries ago. But these need not concern us. As another simple servant, I aim to take out of his writings their universal heart, where they conform to the teachings of great mystics of various faiths down the centuries.

You might think that by putting Swedenborg's writings in the center place this work will be easy for those familiar with his theology. This is not quite so. His adherents tend to see the writings as supporting Christianity alone; they often do not see them as part of the universal, even though there are strong statements on the universal church within the works themselves. Some may regard the Christian church as the universal. For some, it will be difficult to shift to a larger view in which Christianity and all other religions are part of the uni-

versal. When you ask how each religion actually functions for people, some broad commonalities emerge. William Paden, for example, writes on the social functions of religion.<sup>7</sup> Once we see this viewpoint, we can see all religions as serving social and human uses. Then, we can begin to get beyond the divisive questions, such as which religion is the right one. All ways to God are good. The right one for each individual is the one that leads him or her to God and to loving conduct. So, in general, followers of Swedenborg might have as much difficulty as a reader who never heard of Swedenborg before.

Some Swedenborgians expected Swedenborg's philosophy to reform the whole of Christianity. In this work, Swedenborg is presented as only one among the world's great mystics. The reform he was to lead is the deepened understanding of the true nature of life that all mystics represent. His works have been chosen as the focus because they have certain critical elements, missing in those of other mystics, not because one is better than the others. I could easily point out spiritual aspects other mystics handled far better. But for presenting the overall design of existence, his writings will serve us well.

## HOW WE WILL PROCEED

We have established that the author is a mystic, sympathetically interpreting other mystics' writings so as to present the design of it all. Now we face the daunting task of presenting this in a way to serve a variety of readers. How shall we proceed?

A basic problem in presenting the design of existence is,

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7. William Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

oddly enough, that the design is quite simple, even though, because it applies everywhere, it may appear complex. It occurs to me we can present the design rather like theme and variation in music. In one chapter, the theme—the simple design—will be described. Then, in subsequent chapters, elements of the design will be examined in more detail, showing variations of the theme. So, for most of the book, it will be as though the central simple design—the real theme—will turn up repeatedly but appear somewhat varied in different contexts. One variation of the central theme occurs when we look at the design of ourselves. The central theme will be laid out in stark, vivid contrast when we deal with heaven and hell. Complex issues such as enlightenment and the Second Coming concern our acting in accordance with the design. The doctrine of reincarnation really speaks of the one life. But, overall, the reader should begin to sense the design of existence anywhere from the smallest personal experience to ultimate reality. Theme and variation—a simple truth or theme that shows up over and over again as variations in different contexts. Once the theme is grasped, we have the means to understand it in varied contexts. As was indicated earlier, we will, to some extent, intuitively grasp the central design so that, as in music, there will be a certain pleasure in finding the central theme in other contexts.


We will begin with a chapter to introduce the relatively unknown mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. A brief biography will introduce the man in his time and cultural setting, brief because there are better biographies available. To get beyond history into the very nature of the man, we will describe his own spiritual search and the spiritual practices that worked for him. We will see how he entered heaven and hell. Then, to elaborate on this theme, we will look at how, in general, we

can enter the spiritual. Thus, we move from an outer biography, to his inner spiritual search, to the way people in general can enter the spiritual. In the first chapter, Emanuel Swedenborg is on center stage. Thereafter, we put the man aside and look to the works that describe what he found.





# **The Design of Existence**







## Swedenborg's Way into the Spiritual Realms

The works of Emanuel Swedenborg will serve as a key to presenting the design of existence. Before visiting his extraordinary works, we will introduce the man.<sup>1</sup>

There are over 100 biographies of Swedenborg available in several languages. Our sources for his life are particularly rich, even though we are speaking of the years 1688–1772.

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1. There are many excellent biographies of Swedenborg available. The best and most accessible, with an excellent summary of Swedenborgian theology, is George Trobridge, *Swedenborg: Life and Teaching*, revised by Richard H. Tafel, Sr., and Richard H. Tafel, Jr. (New York: The Swedenborg Foundation, 1992). Signe Toksvig's *Emanuel Swedenborg: Scientist and Mystic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948) contains much information with a bias toward psychic phenomena. *The Swedenborg Epic* by Cyriel Sigstedt (New York: Bookman Associates, 1952) is particularly complete, with much information on his early years. A good concise biography is George F. Dole and Robert H. Kirven, *A Scientist Explores Spirit*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (West Chester, Penn.: Chrysalis Books, 1997).

His own reports on his inner experiences and the reports of others on their relationships with him provide unusually rich biographic material. Swedenborg was a natural scholar who kept notebooks on dreams and spiritual experiences. He became so famous that people collected every letter and interviewed everyone who could report anything. The outer aspects of his life will be briefly reported in this chapter. After a brief “outer” biography, a report on the externals of his life, we will look at the process by which he entered upon some of the richest and most extraordinary spiritual experiences ever reported. Then, from the way Swedenborg entered the spiritual, we can generalize to the way others can enter the spiritual as well.

### **SWEDENBORG’S LIFE**

One of Swedenborg’s later great discoveries in the spiritual realm concerned the inner design of all persons, an innate, natural, given love of each life as the central tendency in a person. In subtle ways, this love bends and directs all activities toward this one end. His discovery of the love of life will be elaborated later. For the present, we will describe Swedenborg’s own life in terms of two tendencies that will be our first approximation to his own love. These two tendencies help us to understand the otherwise puzzling twists and turns in his life. They can be stated as two tendencies, even though they interact and actually function as one.

(1) Swedenborg was a brilliant man, quite possibly one of the most brilliant men who ever lived. What does the adjective *brilliant* mean here? It means that he was a man with an immense capacity to gather facts and information about

things, and then to see them in an overall order. One detail will suggest this. He spoke nine languages even though he had no special interest in languages. He simply needed them to do what he wanted to do.

(2) Swedenborg was driven to learn all that could be learned in a given subject, to summarize it in writing for others, and then go on to another subject. This interest extended all the way from crafts, to the sciences, to cosmology, and to the design of existence.

As his life unfolds, bear in mind that Emanuel Swedenborg was a brilliant man who had to know all about everything.

He was born Emanuel Swedberg in Sweden in 1688. His father, Jesper Swedberg, was at first a professor of Theology at Uppsala University and later rector of the university and a bishop in the Lutheran Church. Lutheranism was, at that time, the Swedish state religion. Emanuel was the oldest male of nine children. When he was eight years old, his mother died. His father, needing a mother for his children, married a second time, to Sara Bergia. In later reports of his otherworldly travels, Emanuel met both mothers in the spiritual realm and found he loved both of them.

We have little data on his early years. Of course, he must have attended church. We get the sense of a moderately strict and demanding father. In early years, Emanuel surprised adults by his grasp of Lutheran theology, although this is not really surprising given his gift and the fact that he lives in a home focused on the church.

Swedenborg reported that, as a child, he practiced minimal breathing as way into intense concentration. None of the Hindu texts on this way into the spiritual was available to him at that time, so he stumbled on this practice himself. A little elaboration may help us to understand. Here is a power-

ful intellect, perhaps bored in church. He explores focusing inwardly on a single idea so he can exclude all else. As part of this inner concentration, his breathing gets shallower. Carbon dioxide builds up in his blood. He finds himself in a very focused inner state in which there are rich ideas and imagery that all bear on his central focus. He continued this practice into adulthood, and it later became his way into the trance state and spiritual realms. But, as a young man, all he knew was that he had a way into great concentration and focusing that aided his analysis.

When Emanuel was fifteen years old, his father became the bishop of Skara. The family moved to an estate in Brunsbo, but Emanuel stayed behind at Uppsala University, living with Eric Benzelius, librarian of the university, who later married Swedenborg's older sister. Swedenborg's university education emphasized religion and Latin, although his real scholarly interests went toward science. At the age of twenty-two, he sent a whale skeleton to Uppsala, learned to play the organ, and went off to London to further his education in subjects closer to his interests. For this young man of twenty-two, London must have been like being released into a wider and more stimulating world. He took rooms with craftsmen, so he could easily learn a new trade. In this way, over the years, he more or less mastered the following crafts:

- bookbinding
- cabinet making
- engraving
- lens grinding
- clock making
- instrument making
- inlaying marble
- cartography

Indeed, when he couldn't afford to purchase the newly developed microscope, he practiced lens grinding and made his own.

Young Swedenborg visited scientists and studied algebra and geometry. A major problem at the time was how to find longitude without an accurate clock. He developed a method of finding longitude by measuring interlunar distances, a method later used by mariners until it was replaced with more accurate clocks. Compared to navigation today, this is an impressively complicated method.

Bursting with ideas, over the years, Swedenborg produced drawings for:

- a flying machine
- an ear trumpet
- a mechanical carriage
- a submarine
- a mercury air pump
- a musical machine
- a screw machine
- an airtight stove
- an experimental tank for ships
- a machine gun
- a fire extinguisher
- a drawbridge

At the age of twenty-eight, Swedenborg was back in Sweden and began publication of *Daedalus Hyperboreus*, a journal of invention and science. He came to the attention of Christopher Polhem, a leading inventor. The king of Sweden offered Swedenborg two positions: a professorship of astronomy at Uppsala University or a position on the Board of Mines. Swedenborg preferred the Board of Mines, and this was to be his only paid position, one that he held for 31 years. In this position, he traveled to explore new mining developments and brought them home to Sweden. He also settled disputes over mines and oversaw one of Sweden's major industries. Because Swedenborg was later to be so firmly associated with the spiritual, one needs to bear in mind that he enjoyed and was successful in the practical world of mining. He later published major works on all that was known on certain key minerals. There was probably nothing about mining



in northern Europe that he didn't know. As a mining engineer he wrote a treatise on rolling mills, inspected mines, developed assaying, and worked on ideas for house heating. Operating on a high level, he could bring good ideas from one area to be used in another. He enjoyed being useful and very much felt he was serving his country and the welfare of others.

What were his relations with women? At the age of twenty-nine, Swedenborg became betrothed to the older daughter of Christopher Polhem. Unfortunately, she married someone else. As it turns out, Swedenborg really preferred Polhem's younger daughter, a girl half his age, but she also married someone else. Obviously, he was not very able in the pursuit of women. Then, at the age of thirty-eight, he proposed to another woman—who also rejected him. His dreams, recorded in his dream journal, mark him as clearly heterosexual, but he suffered from guilt over his sexual drives. His true lifelong love affair appears to be with learning,

At the age of eighty, Swedenborg wrote a manual on the practical and spiritual aspects of marriage, *Conjugal Love*, a book once banned in Boston for discussing sex but considered quite tame and high-minded now. In this book (and elsewhere), he described marriages in heaven. Before his death, in a private note, Swedenborg listed his property. Oddly enough, among the list were several unseen valuables he had received in the spiritual world, many suitable as gifts to his spiritual bride. He described husbands and wives in heaven who appear to be one person from a distance, but close up are seen to be two people. There are marriages in heaven, he wrote; and, reading between the lines, we clearly intuit that he would have liked to have lived in a true marriage relationship.

Swedenborg's family had long been associated with

royalty and important persons in Sweden. As a bishop, his father served in one of the four houses in the Swedish Diet, the House of the Clergy. When Swedenborg was thirty-one years old, his family was ennobled. Emanuel Swedberg became Baron Emanuel Swedenborg. As the oldest son, Baron Swedenborg served in the House of Lords, a position he exercised whenever he was in Sweden. As a member of parliament, he worked on fiscal reforms, liquor regulation, mining legislation, and various activities concerning peace, finance, and commerce. He did his best to avert wars, even though he served under a warlike king, Charles XII.

Despite his being both a nobleman and one of the chiefs of mines in Sweden, Swedenborg always gravitated towards honest ordinary people. At the time of his death, he had taken rooms with a London barber and wigmaker named Shear-smith. He was on equally good terms with nobility, scientists, and ordinary people. A theme that runs through the writings is judging people on their real spiritual qualities rather than on their external status.

Let us step back for a moment and look at Swedenborg's setting in time. In the early 1700s in Sweden, one either walked or rode a sled or horse. Formal transport was a carriage. Overseas voyages were made only on sailing ships. Although the technology of printing had been known for some while, newspapers were just beginning to appear, the first one in Germany in 1714. Isaac Newton was still alive; J. S. Bach was Swedenborg's contemporary and his age. In fact, the early 1700s was a period in which philosophical speculation was starting to be replaced by the beginnings of science. Direct observation of nature was popular as a means of understanding the workings of the universe, a shift from speculation-based "reason." There was a kind of ferment as direct observation

started to reveal new facts. And Swedenborg participated in the early phase of this scientific ferment. He was startled to discover marine fossils on the top of a mountain.

Although Swedenborg enjoyed his position as a leading mining engineer, it was not enough to keep him challenged. So he explored and often published treatises on all the sciences of his day, making the latest available to others. He has aptly been likened to Leonardo da Vinci, who, although known as an artist, was also a considerable figure in other fields. Swedenborg's interests and contributions were somewhat broader even than da Vinci's. From about 1722 to 1744, a mere 22 years, Swedenborg published treatises on:

- chemistry
- hydraulics
- optics
- magnetism
- mathematics
- geology
- anatomy
- cosmology
- dynamics
- hydrostatics
- mechanics
- metallurgy
- acoustics
- pneumatics
- physiology
- cosmogony
- astronomy
- psychology

Some of these fields are related to mining, but in areas of mathematics, astronomy, and anatomy, Swedenborg was far from his chosen profession. The simplest explanation is that he came close to mastering everything known in his time. He took the findings of others and often saw implications in them better than others did. For instance, from the rude beginnings of astronomy, he may have been the first to formulate the nebular hypothesis, which has since been confirmed.

Now we move to closer to the mid-1700s; it is about 1740. For some while, Swedenborg had been reflecting on

the soul, an ancient problem in philosophy. Entire books have been done on the history of speculations on the nature and location of the soul. Swedenborg was really asking about the nature of life and the essence of the human. In Paris, he studied human anatomy. He thought that, perhaps by studying the details of the body, something might be inferred of the soul. At this time, Swedenborg seems to have conceived of the soul in a physical sense, as though one might discover where it is located in the body. He wrote volumes on the anatomy of the senses, the generative organs, and the brain, works quite advanced for their time. But, after much labor, he felt frustrated. Although he had learned much anatomy, he had not found the soul.

In 1742, he wrote a volume on psychology, *Psychologia rationalis* (Rational Psychology). Whereas astronomy and other physical sciences could be examined through direct observation, the area of psychology was still considered a matter of philosophy. The style of the day was to conceive of human factors such as will, intellect, etc., and then to speculate on how they function. But Swedenborg was basically an empirical scientist. His psychology is an unusual mix of older philosophic factors and direct observation. His psychology, in effect, was another attempt at finding the soul, the real nature of life and consciousness.

In 1743, at the age of fifty-five, Swedenborg made a decision that was a critical turning point. His greatness had always been in direct empirical observation. Why not really go within and observe the soul at work? He would observe himself. Thus, what started out as a travel journal suddenly became a journal of his dreams. Once again, he would use direct observation to set down findings, only the realm had shifted from outer things to inner events.

Swedenborg's *Journal of Dreams* begins with Swedenborg the tourist noting important people, places, and engineering features. Very soon it shifts into a record of dreams. His dreams are brief at first, as shown by this entry recorded under July 21, 1743:

1. Dreamed of my youth and the Gustavian family.
2. In Venice, of the beautiful palace.
3. In Sweden, of the white expanse of heaven.<sup>2</sup>

This is typical. He at first remembered little of his dreams. It is the effort to recall dreams that makes dreams vivid, but soon his dreams would be powerful and clear. One amazing fact is that, when he remembered and recorded greater details of his dreams, he interpreted them in accord with a clinical psychologist—myself—working over two centuries later.

Where did he learn this? Except for a few references in the Bible to dream interpretation, this matter was unknown territory at that time. Swedenborg entered into the “feeling” qualities of the dream. He assumed these were images of his own life. I elaborated a good deal in my interpretations of his dreams; but, basically, Swedenborg, on his own, did a remarkable job of interpretation.

Swedenborg began his dream series as a rational scientist. In the dreams, he had difficulties with his emotional side. But he saw what was being revealed of himself and adapted readily. During the dream period, he began to explore the hypnagogic state (the state between sleep and waking) and

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2. Wilson Van Dusen, *Swedenborg's Journal of Dreams*, trans. by J. J. G. Wilkinson (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1986). Another translation of this work is now available: Lars Bergquist, *Swedenborg's Dream Diary*, trans. by Anders Hallengren (West Chester, Penn.: The Swedenborg Foundation, 2001).

the trance. In the dreams, it becomes apparent that this rational scientist, who mostly avoided the church, was really a spiritual person seeking God. By the end of his recorded journal (1744), he had accepted and come to terms with his feeling side and with God.

Average churchgoing people allow themselves to be led by the forms and practices of their religion. Swedenborg, however, went beyond this to seek the soul at work with a direct attempt at an encounter with God. In the course of this attempt to record his inner experience, his basic faults are illustrated. He tried to adapt to the discovery that he had been far too rational and had neglected his own feeling/love side; and, as usual, he learned quickly. The entire period covered in the *Journal of Dreams* is only one year and ten months, with almost all of the entries in the period of March to October 1744. Even though dream interpretation could have become a major spiritual practice for him, he continued to explore other ways.

In the course of his recording his dreams, this very sincere seeker of God encountered the Divine in several ways. In the greatest of these, in April 1745, he learned from God that he is to be a major revelator of the Bible. So he set about learning Hebrew in order to read the original Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament. He could already read the New Testament in Greek or Latin. The *Journal of Dreams* was, of course, not written for publication; it was first published in 1859. The private journal was followed by his posthumously published notebook *The Messiah About To Come*.<sup>3</sup> Few have paid much attention to it or understood its real nature or its importance.

*The Messiah About To Come* is neglected simply because it

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3. Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Messiah About To Come*, trans. by A. Acton (Bryn Athyn, Penn.: Academy of the New Church, 1949).

is a collection of biblical passages. But if we look at Swedenborg's reason for writing down these passages and then examine the book, we begin to see his purpose and its importance. Swedenborg is reading the Bible and noting down passages in which he feels God is present and speaking to him. Now and then we see an *N.B.*, *nota bene*, note well, which marks off particularly moving passages. And what is the theme that keeps arising in the passages in which God seems to speak to him? The title tells it. The Messiah is about to come into Swedenborg's life; that is the message he feels coming through to him. Often people seeking the help of God will turn to a random passage in the Bible and seek an answer in it. Swedenborg was involved in a bigger and more thoroughgoing example of this same process.

There are several implications in this. After the *Journal of Dreams*, he is ready to operate in a more intuitive and emotional way. How else can you feel a passage is addressed to you? The rational intellect could not find these passages. Also, after having little to do with religion for decades, he is now taking the Bible quite seriously, the main wisdom book of his tradition. Another implication is that Swedenborg not only takes the Bible as God's revelation, but he takes it personally as God present here and now addressing him. He senses this immediacy in himself. Others reading the Bible would find other passages, if they could find any. Lastly, by being the scholar and setting these passages down and looking at the overall message, he can see clearly, over and over, the implication that God is coming to him. We should note that the Bible became his major source of inspiration for the rest of his life. He had stumbled upon the spiritual practice he was to use for his remaining years. The Lord had guided him

to the interior or deeper meaning in the Bible, which he faithfully wrote about for publication.

In the current English translation of *The Messiah About To Come*, it seems to me that the translator did not understand all this because the book's ending quite puzzled him. After the whole collection of passages that said the Messiah was coming, the book ends on a moment of enlightenment in which the Messiah does indeed come, and Swedenborg appends a note about it:

Nov. 17, 1745. I began to write. [in Swedish]

Lord Jesus Christ, lead me to and on the way on which Thou willest that I shall walk.

[The next line appears in Latin.]

Be ye holy; be ye gifted with the Spirit of God and Christ; and be ye persevering in righteousness. This will be the testimony of the Kingdom of God.

The End<sup>4</sup>

Swedenborg wrote out a prayer in Swedish. Suddenly, in the last paragraph written in Latin, the Messiah comes and answers through his own hand. "*Be ye holy; be ye gifted with the spirit of God and Christ: and be ye persevering in righteousness. This will be the testimony of the Kingdom of God.*" Thus, the Messiah came and laid down the general direction for his life, a direction he followed quite well. Swedenborg found such riches in the Bible that, although he was formerly a scholar possessing many books, only the Bible was in sight in his rooms, as a visitor in his later years reported.

Earlier, I emphasized Swedenborg's immense intellect, but now it is his persistent and wholehearted effort that be-

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4. Ibid., 105.



gins to make a real difference. When we are in unknown territory, where nothing is plain and obvious, we have to feel our way along. At this point, Swedenborg is feeling his way along and being guided by the Lord and the deepest currents in himself.

During Swedenborg's study of his dreams, he began to sense that he was overly intellectual and was missing his own intuitive side, which was often represented by women in his dreams. He sensed that he needed to be more sensitive and intuitive to move in the spiritual realm. It is common that people on a spiritual quest discover their faults and learn to improve their weak side. These faults are barriers to further discovery. So, personal development and spiritual development are related matters.

Swedenborg's weak side was his lack of intuition and feeling. To develop this, he tried another experiment. Up to this time, he had spent most of his life in heavy intellectual and rational pursuits; it now occurred to him to attempt a work primarily based in intuitive feeling. This would be practice in his new way of living. Thus, he wrote *The Worship and Love of God*, his first truly religious work up to this time, 1745. If you read the works that precede it, you would be startled by the change in tone, subject, and style of writing. It is a vigorously imaginative work, almost a psalm, concerning the birth of the first man, Adam, and his marriage to Eve. It would be difficult to believe the same author was involved in both kinds of writing, the minute and dry scientific treatise and the lyrical, almost pastoral fable of creation. Later, Swedenborg expressed some disdain for this work, but it plays a role in his finding the spiritual. In *The Worship and Love of God*, he allows himself to feel. On every page, his mind practices soaring in

this new freedom. Profound thoughts shine here and there. An example shows its quality:

But heaven, which is also called the kingdom of God, is interiorly within us. Our minds are such as to be capable of turning two ways, as upon hinges, namely, inwards and outwards, or upwards and downwards; for there are, as it were, two ways of entrance, or places of reception. Into our minds also two lights flow in, one which is called spiritual, from the Supreme and His Love; the other natural, from the sun of our world and its heat. These lights meet together in our minds, and from their meeting together they become as centres of the whole universe, namely, of heaven and of the world; hence from them, as from centres, it is allowable to wander forth with new vision into all the circumferences of the universe, and to examine each paradise, as it were, with two sets of eyes. In this way the Love of the Supreme has introduced thee to Himself. He only lifted up the little shade, and filled thee with His own Love, in consequence of which thou sawest thyself in inmost principles.<sup>5</sup>

Swedenborg thought little of this work. Now it is not even considered part of his real spiritual discoveries. Yet this free exploration of love and feeling is a useful part of his own development. In his later spiritual works, he acts as the observer, simply describing what he found; yet they have that powerful emotive tone that first appeared in this little work.

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5. Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Worship and Love of God*, trans. by Alfred H. Strohm and Frank Sewall (rpt. West Chester, Penn.: The Swedenborg Foundation, 1997), 112–113. A new translation of this seminal work, considered by scholars to be the last work of Swedenborg's pre-theological period, will be available in the fall of 2002.

Without feeling/intuition, he could hardly understand the spiritual.

Sometime in April of 1745, Swedenborg, in the privacy of his room at an inn, met the Lord. This was no dream. He was awake. The Lord spoke to him and laid out Swedenborg's task. He is to become a revelator of the inner sense of the Bible. In addition, heaven and hell were to be opened to him so that, while he still lived in this world, he could inwardly interact with those in heaven and hell. To say the least, Swedenborg was astonished:

that same night also were opened to me, so that I became thoroughly convinced of their reality, the worlds of spirits, heaven, and hell, and I recognized there many acquaintances of every condition in life. From that day I gave up the study of all worldly science, and laboured in spiritual things, according as the Lord had commanded me to write. Afterwards the Lord opened, daily very often, my bodily eyes, so that, in the middle of the day I could see into the other world, and in a state of perfect wakefulness converse with angels and spirits.<sup>6</sup>

Actually, in his dreams, it was predicted that he would be allowed to explore heaven and hell; but he could not even guess at the real meaning of those dreams. This meeting with the Lord lasted for only about 15 minutes. Because of it, he started on the two trends that were to be the sources of all his later spiritual wisdom. He was to be shown by the Lord a deeper internal sense in the Bible, and he was to explore heaven and hell for the rest of his life on earth, the next 27 years.

Swedenborg later reported that he believed his whole ear-

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6. R. L. Tafel, *Documents Concerning the Life and Character of Emanuel Swedenborg*, vol. 1 (London: Swedenborg Society, 1876), doc. 5, page 113.

lier life was really a preparation for this role. His intellectual journey through crafts, inventions, and particularly his scientific works was calculated to create a most careful and circumspect observer in the spiritual realms. As a part of this commission, he was forbidden by the Lord to read anyone else's work in theology or ever to speculate. He was merely to observe and report. He was a thoroughgoing empiricist admitted into the spiritual realms. His discovery of love, feeling, and intuition was a necessary part of his being able to see spiritually. This wasn't a realm of physical rock and ore. Of course, Swedenborg was not yet prepared to leap into this role. He had much to learn and had to grow into it. In this new realm, he felt as though he were a child. Indeed, in terms of what later developed in him, he was a mere beginner.

After 1745, there followed some three years of spiritual exploration and internal work. In 1748, he began to keep his *Spiritual Diary*, a five-volume work in which he daily sets down spiritual experiences.<sup>7</sup> As with his private dream journal, he did not intend this diary for publication; it was his personal record of spiritual experiences. He referred back to it many times when he summarized what he had found and included these remarks as interludes in later publications.

In 1749, Swedenborg began publishing what is to be the eight-volume *Arcana Coelestia* (Heavenly Secrets).<sup>8</sup> The *Arcana* is a surprisingly rich work of mature spirituality, almost

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7. Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Spiritual Diary* (London: Swedenborg Society, 1962). For even earlier experiences, we should include Emanuel Swedenborg, *Spiritual Experiences* (Bryn Athyn, Penn.: General Church of the New Jerusalem, 1998).

8. Emanuel Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia*, 12 vols., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (West Chester, Penn.: The Swedenborg Foundation, 1994–1998). This vast work was eight volumes in its original Latin; it has been translated into twelve volumes in English.

too rich. Outwardly, it is an analysis of the internal or hidden meaning of Genesis and Exodus, but, inwardly, it has several richly interrelated aspects. So rich is it that Swedenborg, in effect, drew the rest of the 18 volumes of the theological writings from it. These writings are so far and away different from the works of his scientific period that they seem to have come from the pen of a different author. The theological works deal with spiritual matters with confidence and surety. Swedenborg, the hard-laboring scribe writing with quill pens, is difficult to even find. He is nothing, just a laborer in the vineyard. The very few times one is even aware of Swedenborg is when he says, “I saw, I know.” His previous scientific and philosophical works seem quite tedious and boring. But the spiritual writings themselves are joyous and elevating. We see that joy in detail in later chapters.

## **THE GENERAL WAY INTO SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE**

There are a wide variety of ways into direct spiritual experience.<sup>9</sup> My survey of the world’s mystics, in *Beauty, Wonder, and the Mystical Mind*, assesses Swedenborg’s place among them. He was a lone explorer who found his way using God as his only guide. His being permitted to explore heaven and hell while still alive in this world is a unique experience without any real parallel in the world’s literature. It does appear that his whole life of intense observation and reporting back to others was a direct preparation for entering and reporting

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9. See Wilson Van Dusen, *Returning to the Source* (Moab, Utah: Real People Press, 1997).

back on these spiritual realms. Yet, overall, the writings clearly reflect the universal message of the world's mystics.

Earlier, I mentioned that I could name other mystics who were stronger in describing spiritual practices. Although wonderful in many ways, Swedenborg's works are weak on spiritual practice itself. My standard of greatness is the centuries of work on spiritual practices found in Hinduism and Buddhism. Swedenborg appears as a lone spiritual explorer with no real tradition to guide him as far as spiritual practice is concerned. Even among Swedenborgians, there has been only a gradual awakening to the process through which he found his way.<sup>10</sup>

I have long felt that, if Swedenborg had met with a group of spiritual seekers, they would have led him into clarifying the way. We are in an age of widespread communication. It is possible now to bring together the best from different realms. So we take from his writings the best they have to offer, acknowledging they are less gifted in terms of spiritual practices or ways to enter the spiritual.

Let us briefly review how Swedenborg entered the spiritual, and then we can generalize from that. First, Swedenborg devoted himself to his work. He had a servant or two for menial tasks. He was unmarried and had no children. Thus, his work was really his life. We must not credit his brilliance too much in his theological works. It was of great use in his capacities as a lord in the Diet of Sweden, an assessor of mines, and an author of many scientific works. But, in the period of the dream journal, his analytical bent became a major impediment. One has to note his tremendous persistence. Another

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10. An early fine work on this subject is Alfred Acton, *An Introduction to the World Explained* (Bryn Athyn, Penn.: Academy of the New Church, 1927).

key ingredient is that, when he turned his mind toward discovering the soul, he worked more and more independently of traditional and established ways. He felt prohibited by God from looking at anyone else's theology. He tried things out, experimented. He was guided by whatever brought him closer to his supreme goal of finding God.

Thus, we have the key ingredients of a great and persistent effort directed toward finding God. To accomplish this, Swedenborg searched as diligently as possible and was led toward whatever served this end. His dream diary begins with a man who can barely remember his dreams, let alone interpret them, but soon he had adapted the basic principle true of dream interpretation used today. Since all the dreams issue from him, they must reflect his inner life. Later, he will also see his dreams as communications from the spiritual. When he realizes his weakness in intuition and feeling, he writes *The Worship and Love of God*, a work in which he practices these traits. His work *The Messiah About To Come* was another intuitive experiment. It is as though he said to himself, "If the Lord is present here and now in the Bible, why not assemble all the passages in which God seems to speak to me?" In the end of the *Messiah*, the Lord came and spoke through Swedenborg's hand. Later, Swedenborg deepened this first crude attempt into finding the internal sense of the Bible, one of his greatest contributions.

A key question is how Swedenborg knew he was discovering God. To understand this, we almost have to enter the depths of spiritual practice itself. In his dream journal, he received many clues, so that it became apparent that he was being led and guided by something wiser than himself. Spiritual practice is a two-part matter: the person seeks and meets a wiser and most subtle guidance coming from within. The

Lord then leads through the person's own faults and potentials. The wisdom of the leading becomes more and more apparent. Finally, Swedenborg experienced several direct encounters with God, encounters that laid out the path for the rest of his life.

It was also quite important to Swedenborg that this God he met was the same as the one he found in his Christian tradition, not some fanciful alien form. And even better yet, this God gave greater depth and meaning to Swedenborg's own Lutheran Protestant religious tradition. The seeker usually feels modified within to understand better the depth of his or her tradition. Although early on Swedenborg had tried automatic writing, when he ran into spirits inferior to his own understanding, he dropped this approach. But, in his main approach to God, he found a wisdom greater than his own.

Now let us step outside Swedenborg's situation to the spiritual quest anyone might enter upon. If you have a spiritual tradition, it would be well to explore its implications for you in your search for God. The initial phases of seeking God are experimental. Try the ways in your tradition. But be aware that tradition in this realm is something like a two-edged sword. Tradition can be restrictive, implying that only this or that way is acceptable. But your personal religious tradition (as in Hinduism and Buddhism, particularly) can have major ways that have worked for centuries for millions of people.

If you have no religious tradition, explore whatever is attractive to you. A common way is to read and reflect on the sacred literature that touches and affects you. The whole process is rather like trying to contact the invisible. At first, you have just the faintest hints of the way. But as you



continue to try, the way for you personally will gradually become apparent. God is attempting to contact you at the same time as you are seeking God. Gradually, there will be more and more little instances of contact, as you are led into a way appropriate for you.

Those who feel a religious tradition strong enough to find the way in that tradition are fortunate. All religions have a potential for leading to God, or they would not survive. Those without a tradition may have to wander further and be more experimental. No matter what your situation, keys to the process are sincerity and persistence of the effort. This means you will stay in the search until God's leading becomes clear to you; and the clearer his lead, the easier and more joyous is the search.

Tradition can be an important safety device in this field. We can be betrayed by our own vanities and what Swedenborg called falsities or wrong conceptions. If these lead you to feel superior to others, this is a wrong way. The inward way to finding God should make you feel humble and illuminate your religious tradition. Those who experience God tend to bring more meaning to their own religious tradition, as Swedenborg did to Christianity. That is, religious traditions have greatness in them, which the journey to God illuminates. Another clear and important sign of the right way is an enriching of relationships with others—and “others” are not only humans but also all the rest of creation. In its most basic terms, finding God leads to good, and good is useful everywhere.

So, in summation, you can seek God by trying out various ways until you discover what works best for you. Gradually, the sincere and determined seeker will experience an accumulation of little contacts with God. It then begins to be apparent that God has been seeking you at the same time, reaching

out through your inner potentialities. What begins as a searching in the dark gradually clarifies in light and friendship with God. Signs that you are on the right path are the deepening of meaning in tradition and the amelioration of relationships with others, indeed with all of creation. Because of each person's complex and largely unknown potentialities, we cannot detail the one right way for all. Swedenborg's way was right for him.

Later, we will look at Swedenborg's discovery of the love of life that clarifies the reason sincere seekers find somewhat different ways. Oddly enough, a variety of ways work because the central keys are the sincerity and persistence of the seeker to find God, who is also seeking the person.

We seek the ever-present,  
Subtle as our life itself.  
Consider even your seeking  
Given to you.  
Heaven knows how.  
Patient seeking  
Meets continuous Presence.  
Patient seeking  
Is continuous Presence.  
When in the invisible  
Enjoy the slightest seeing.  
Honor the slightest seeing.  
Gradually,  
What seemed uncertain,  
Takes form.

When you are settled  
In the way

Look at all traditions,  
And see if they aren't all reflected,  
In your way.  
What a paradox!  
We seek the design of creation,  
Which we are,  
And which is all about us.  
It is not so hard to find  
The ever present.<sup>11</sup>

So now Swedenborg steps out of the spotlight. He is a modest man with a slight stammer, who tried to remain anonymous until fame caught up with him. He will be more comfortable offstage. Now we look at what he was shown.

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11. Wilson Van Dusen, *Moments of Enlightenment* (Auburn, Calif.: 2000). This work of poetry can be found at the website E Bookstand.com under the heading "Poetry."

It is common for mystics to describe their findings in poetic form. Much ancient mysticism was poetry, but this has been lost in translation.



## The Universal Design

**W**hat is universal? Whatever is everywhere and always true. To enter the universal of religion, we need a little practice. If I simply presented the design of existence, some people might instantly experience confusion. It could all seem too fantastic or too remote. Or it could seem so simple as to be beyond belief. Many would point to their faith and say, “This differs from all I have been taught.” So, to prepare for understanding the design, we need a little practice in seeing things in a more universal way, a way that takes into account all our differences and yet transcends them. This is the broad plane of the universal where we all meet.

Most followers of Swedenborg’s theology would describe the New Church as a variant of the Christian Church. But, like a hidden beating heart, his works also describe a universal church. This is a little more difficult to understand since it transcends all religious differences. Although the concept of a

universal church is quite clearly described by Swedenborg, seldom has anyone taken this as an appropriate starting point for the design of existence. On the plane of the universal, we can begin to accept and comprehend all of our differences as simply an enrichment of the whole.

## BEYOND RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES

Many people find it difficult, perhaps impossible, to transcend religious differences, greeting any statement about another religion with, “What you say does not accord with my belief.” This is almost like saying, “You are lost and possibly even condemned to hell.” Thus, doctrine can divide us so that we can hardly speak of these matters without an argument.

Comparative religion and religious anthropology transcend religious differences. Social scientists examine the design of various religions and look at the essentials of their function in a nonjudgmental way.<sup>1</sup> Huston Smith’s work on comparative religion is justly famous because it describes the outlook of major religions in a way respectful of and acceptable to each. With this kind of outlook, we can appreciate different religions as variations in ways to deal with the “more than self.” Each religion makes sense to those who fully enter into its ways. Religions are like worldviews that have survived the centuries because they meet people’s basic needs. When we look sympathetically at what each advocates as good behavior, we find a wide area of agreement among religions

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1. In particular, I recommend the work of William Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994) and that of Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

on the essentials of good behavior. Thus, the basic Golden Rule of do to others as you would have them do to you is described in a variety of religions.<sup>2</sup> We ought to respect any form that has functioned in this way for many people over the centuries.

The aim of comparative religion and religious anthropology is to understand; the deeper we understand the better, more complex, and subtle a religion is seen to be. Religions function to guard marriage, birth, death—all the major human transition points. They all function to improve the conduct of their adherents and to bring them into a harmonious community. They all seek harmony with God and with all that exists. Religions are the collected and safeguarded wisdom of a people as to how to accomplish these high ends. We would do well to attempt to understand others' faiths in an open and accepting way as comparative religion and religious anthropology do.

Instead, we often meet those who have found “the one true religion” and who vigorously try to sell it to others. I accept the fact that their religion must be good for them, but to believe that it is right for the rest of humanity seems an unwarranted assumption. I have never known such proselytizers even to have looked at all the other ways they have discarded.

When we look at Swedenborg's writings, we also see a view of religion that transcends the differences. How is it that the deeply Christian Swedenborg came to a universal view that transcends religious differences? He claimed that the essentials of religion, which go beyond differences, were revealed to him by the angels. Several quotations from his works show this transcendent view:

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2. Jeffrey Moses, *Oneness* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1989).

Compassion constitutes the church, not faith divorced from compassion. How extensive the good in the church is if compassion were regarded as essential. Differences in doctrine and ritual would not matter.

*The Last Judgment in Retrospect* §39<sup>3</sup>

Love, compassion, respect for one another, the Golden Rule—these are the essentials. If we all adhered to them, we would find that differences in doctrine and ritual would simply not matter. We would be in the midst of the one, unified, universal church, and religious differences would be about as consequential as the color of one’s hair. Diversity enriches the whole. Then we could say, “I have a way that pleases me. I am pleased that you too have found a way that suits you.” Underlying this is the assumption that all good people contribute to the harmony among peoples and between individuals. Those against harmony really don’t fit. When, in the following chapters, we explore the spiritual worlds beyond this one, we will find that harmony is the key: the Golden Rule. Respect and enjoy differences and attempt to live in harmony. As Swedenborg found, “All nations that have believed in one God and have had an idea concerning him as man, are received by the Lord” (*Apocalypse Explained* §957 [4]). “All nations” in this quotation means all groups, all peoples. God as

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3. Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Last Judgment in Retrospect*, trans. and ed. by George F. Dole (West Chester, Penn.: The Swedenborg Foundation, 1996). This quotation is taken from a passage in which Swedenborg summarized his works with a number of references to parallel passages.

As is customary in Swedenborgian studies, the numbers following titles refer to paragraph or section numbers, which are uniform in all editions, rather than to page numbers. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Swedenborg’s works are taken from the revised Standard Edition of the Works of Emanuel Swedenborg, 30 vols. (West Chester, Penn.: The Swedenborg Foundation, 1994–1998), and will be cited within the text.

human, as being like us, is a central idea in Swedenborg's works, as it is in most religions. It means that the one God is accessible to us. If elephants conceived of their one God, I would expect it to be the Great Elephant—like us elephants in inner ways and, therefore, accessible to us elephants. We will see more implications of this idea later.

Of course, harmony does not mean complete agreement on every point. Differences in doctrine and ritual are permitted as long as the will of all tends toward what is good. Again, a quotation from Swedenborg explains this: "Dissent in matters of doctrine concerning faith does not mean the Church cannot be one church, provided all are of one mind in willing what is good and doing it" (*Arcana Coelestia* §3451 [2]). From this view, all our differences simply enrich the whole we belong to, the universal church that transcends sectarian differences and accepts and enjoys disparities as long "as all are of one mind in willing what is good and doing it." We will see later that the will to do good is the fundamental difference between heaven and hell. It is a natural spiritual division. Appreciate the wonder of a harmonious union of differences (heaven) or enter the world of fractious differences (hell). Such harmonious relations do not preclude you from having a faith or a way pleasing to you; it simply means you allow others freedom. From the view of the one whole, there springs a natural respect for other ways as being effective for other people.

The basic Hindu view of many different paths to the top of the mountain sets a tone of tolerance seen in wiser Hindus. Mohandas Gandhi's great work epitomized this; he tried very hard to unite Hindu and Muslim, a split still causing difficulty in India. Swedenborg too realized a heaven that accepts people of diverse religions:



For all these [spirits] to be in the heavenly humanity, which is heaven, it cannot be made up of human beings all of one religion, but of persons of all religions. Therefore all who make these two universals of the church (charity and faith) part of their lives have a place in . . . heaven, and enjoy happiness each in his measure.

*Divine Providence* §326 [10]

Heaven is the universal, where all meet. It would be impoverished if there were not people of diverse religious backgrounds as long as they agree on the essentials that are the basis of harmony. Shiites will not kill the Sunni there; instead, they will discover how much they share in Islam and enjoy each other's company. How much better it would be here on earth if we respected all people's efforts to improve their lives in their own ways.

So how does Swedenborg come to a universal religion? He makes clear that the great essential is the quality of our conduct with one another. Cultural differences, different forms, practices, doctrines, etc., are incidental to this. Moreover, his works often refer to the individual who is trying to live well with others as a church in the least form; in other words, such a person is a church within him- or herself. A real church is made up of the coming together of a number of such people/churches. The worth of the greater church, in a spiritual sense, rests on the quality of these people/churches in the least form.

Swedenborg also addresses the situation of people who have no idea of God but who live together harmoniously. Such people, as is evident from how they live their lives, have the essentials of religion; so, in heaven, they are easily further instructed, as he states in *Arcana Coelestia* §§2589–2604, 3263,

and 4190. Indeed, his writings have done well in Africa in part because they comment favorably on Africans in heaven (see *Arcana Coelestia* §2604 and *Heaven and Hell* §326). Africans lived in mutually supportive groups and were primarily animists, yet they were most welcome in heaven because they so easily received the truth.

We might well ask if Swedenborg's works favor Christians. The answer is a surprising no. Animists did better in heaven than Christians. Why? Too many Christians in heaven had wrong notions that had to be removed, while the animists were willing to see the truth. Also, his works speak strongly against the tenet held by some Christians in faith or belief alone as being all that is necessary to be saved. The essentials of religion are consideration for others *and* faith. Mere belief or any sort of intellectual understanding is not essential. In addition, outward religious practice does not save. Charity, compassion, loving one another, trying to live harmoniously—these are the cornerstones. No mental manipulation, however clever, is enough. If belief alone saved us, we would ask which is the correct belief and would be right in the midst of doctrinal differences again. Charity is primary, and faith should rest on charity. Charity is the substance or reality of faith. Faith alone is mere thought, not sufficient in itself because it has too little of our life in it.

Swedenborg wrote extensively of the New Church, an inward or spiritual church that unites all those who live in compassion, kindness, or charity. When people go out of their way to help others of a different race, culture, or religion, they make this New Church visible. It is the spiritual church of all those who act by the good they know. *Arcana Coelestia* §§2589–2604 specifically states that the New Church will

first arise primarily among non-Christians. Christians are favored in having the Word (the Bible) and having a man-God (Christ). Again the issue is essentials. Some Christians have made a serious error in substituting faith for charity or elevating abstract reasoning over good works.

We have all known religions that nursed the belief they would one day spread over the entire globe and become the recognized one true religion. Missionaries set out to bring this about. Of course, they see their religion as perfect. This is rather a misguided hope, saying, in effect, that an outer form is the one right and perfect one. Yet, if we were to examine closely the “interiors” of people in this one religion, we would see that they perceive somewhat different forms. If we look at the same situation from the universal view of Swedenborg’s writings, the one perfect church already exists and is the largest church of all—the church of all those who act by the good they know. It already exists and is massive in size. It includes people who come from countless creeds and forms. It is a spiritual reality anyone of good will already participates in. Its reality will become more apparent when we leave this temporary life on earth behind. Many hard-working missionaries will be pleased to discover the one universal church, which is far greater than even their grandest conception. They merely mistook their own good form of religion for the greater one that encompasses all forms. Recently, I read a very spiritual Theravadan Buddhist text, which explained the inner meaning of one of the triple gems—the basic pledge of a Buddhist—“I seek refuge in the *sangha*.” In a narrow sense, the *sangha* is the community of professed Buddhists. But the text indicated that, in a wider sense, the *sangha* is the worldwide community of all those who seek to live by

the good they know. They are referred to in Buddhism as the Noble Beings. Heaven is the country of Noble Beings:

In my mind's eye,  
I see so many  
Different worshipers,  
All over the world.  
A Jew reads the Pentateuch,  
Prayerfully.  
A Muslim prostrates,  
And praises Allah Akbar.  
A Catholic says beads.  
An old Hindu man  
Inwardly says his mantra  
In praise of Rama.  
How does the Lord  
Sort this out?  
Is the Lord plagued  
By various Gods,  
And sect differences,  
Strange ceremonies,  
And the fine points  
Of theology?  
Not in the least.

We are known  
By what we are,  
By what we are attempting,  
By our ends.  
The mass of religious differences  
Becomes clear,  
Simple and direct,

When the inward essential  
Of one's life is in view.  
Can you now see  
The Jew, the Muslim,  
Hindu, Christian,  
Buddhist, and indigenous people,  
All engaged  
In the same enterprise?  
So many ways  
To the One.  
The differences  
Are a colorful wonder.  
As a God,  
Could you not be considerate  
To all these people,  
Each trying  
In their own way?

## **THE HIERARCHY IN GOD**

As part of our preparation, we also need to understand the hierarchy of levels of God's manifestation. Many religious arguments arise simply because the adherents are not aware that they are dealing with different levels. This is a vast subject; but, in a simple and straightforward way, we can describe a broad outline of the hierarchy of levels of manifestation within God.

### *Level 1: The One*

The unknown, mysterious One beyond all possible description, in Christianity, is the Father; in Islam, Allah; in

Hinduism, Brahma, about which one cannot really say anything accurate. The Hindus say *netti netti*: nothing can be said. Why? Because God at this level is not only thus and so, but is also the opposite and all other possibilities; everything we would say about God would be wrong and far too limited. The philosopher Dionysius the Aeropagite or Pseudo-Dionysius said you can only say it is not this and not that, yet even this is wrong. Since God is all, it is both this and not this. No possibility can be excluded. The Jews have a word for this level, which can only be said under certain holy circumstances. Buddhists are sometimes said to have no God, but this refers to this level that cannot really be described—the level of the Godhead totally beyond our comprehension, our logic, and all our ways of understanding. This level is fittingly referred to as the One, because all mystics who have been shown this level discover, beyond doubt, that it is One, the Only, all there really is. It exists in itself and is the Real, more real than every other level of existence. It transcends time, which is a low level of manifestation. Although not much can really be said of this level, if you reflect on the One and Only, you will conclude that it is omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient. Mystics who have been shown this level are awestruck and have difficulty even implying what it is like. How can a mere person understand this level? We cannot. Our personal identity is removed on the way, so no mere person can view the Ultimate. Swedenborg states that there is no way this level can be fittingly represented. I feel very much in accord with traditions that prefer not to speak of this level because we too easily fall into the vanity of thinking that, because we can speak of it, we can understand it. Rather, it is more accurate to say it knows and grasps us. We can in no sense grasp it.

## *Level 2: God Incarnate*

In Christianity, this is Jesus Christ. In Judaism, it is the expected Messiah. In Hinduism, the many Gods are incarnate aspects of this One; these incarnations can be human or animal, real or mythological. At its root, Hinduism has a tolerance of multiple forms so that everyone may have his or her own access to God. This level can be male or female (a goddess). Swedenborg refers to the importance of a religion's having a human/God. Sometimes, as in Islam, the prophet or messenger functions almost as a human/God or a human level that manifests God.

This idea should not be too surprising. All religions have some sort of incarnate God so as to create an accessible God. It is best that the incarnate God have the same nature as ourselves. Very early indigenous religions often had gods of the sun, mountains, streams, trees, etc. Animal gods were an advancement toward a living creature like us. But a human God is even more approachable because he/she is like us. Thus, we are made in the image of God. If the deity is human, we can reach this God through our interior nature. There are mythological gods like the Hindu Ganesha, the elephant-headed son of Siva. Stories are generated about them, and they can be portrayed in dramas, so that their lives or adventures offer moral guidance.

There is also a host of human quasi-gods such as saints, avatars, or great ones. Saints are revered in several religions; although officially banned in Islam, they have a place even in this religion. These quasi-gods are people who lived such exemplary lives that God “shows” through them. Swedenborg writes against saints who are venerated persons, but usually it is God showing through them that is venerated. This is

an important distinction. In early centuries, religious icons were banned as idolatry because it seemed as though people were venerating paint on wood. But I have never known anyone who venerates icons to do this. People use the image as a reminder of the spiritual, which they address through the picture. It is said religious icons are windows to the spiritual. I have personally entered the spiritual with the help of an inexpensive paper icon and can well appreciate this wonderful avenue to the spiritual.<sup>4</sup>

The Buddha is both an enlightened man and in some sense a representation of God. Many Christians create difficulty when they see Jesus Christ as the only possible incarnation of God, so that all other representations are false. Yet great Christian saints often saw everyone as Christ. Even Christ stated, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40). The key idea in God incarnate is that God is like us and is accessible through our own nature and interior. A major spiritual practice is simply to attempt to be like one’s representation of a human/God, for example, for the Christian to be Christ-like. This idea is repeated in all religions that have a God incarnate. Far from seeming foolish, identifying with one’s incarnate God is a clear and appropriate way to enlightenment. It is not creating a false identity but rather a way to find the God within. It is equally possible for a male to have a male God within (Christ) or a female one (the Virgin Mary). And the same is true for females. I believe Catholicism needed a major female figure like the Virgin

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4. See Wilson Van Dusen, *Beauty, Wonder, and the Mystical Mind*, “Gazing at the Spiritual in an Icon” (West Chester, Penn.: Chrysalis Books, 1999), 83–96.



Mary because the religion had become one-sided toward the masculine. I have the Chinese Buddhist Quan Yin on my desk—a female embodiment of compassion. She seems delicately feminine, a nice way to represent compassion. If you go down this path, it becomes apparent the whole of existence is a representation of God. In *Arcana Coelestia* §§2758, 2999, 3483, and elsewhere, Swedenborg states that the whole world is a theater of representations of the Divine. The Divine is everywhere, in all others, even in ourselves.

### ***Level 3: God Within***

If you review the entire history of religion, you will notice that a very slow development has taken place from the concept of a remote God, out there, to one in here. Early religions saw the deity manifested in the sun, lightning, the mountains, etc., a God quite unlike us who showed itself in great natural forces. Later, there were animal representations of God, in which case God is a living creature but different from us. The religions of a God incarnate finally imply that God is like us but still other than us. When people practice being like their God incarnate, whether a real or mythic person, they open the way to the discovery of God as a potential in themselves. Carl Jung, the Swiss psychologist, remarked that there is hardly a better hiding place than within. Why? Because we tend to consider ourselves low in comparison to God. It would be like divinity hiding in mud. Another curious aspect of this third level of the Divine is that we must then discover our deeper selves, including our faults, to find the God within.

In Christianity, the God within is the Holy Spirit. Christians often seem to misunderstand the Holy Spirit: it is the

divine aspect of our very life within that leads us to God. In Hinduism, this is the Atman, a divine aspect, part of our life and nature and yet an aspect of Brahma, the God of the first level. If you consider it, it is not so strange that the omnipresent God is also part of our inner nature. If really omnipresent, God cannot be excluded from our inner life. And if in our very life, the Divinity is doing God's work in us.

The central aspect of this level of the Divine is that it is always real and present within. The individual, then, has the work of finding it. All religions that involve meditation or prayerful reflection are working at this process. We come to realize that learning of one's real self and finding the Divine within are one process. You can expect growing compassion for others as part of this. Those who believe in absolutist, judgmental religions are a long way from discovering themselves. If they make black-and-white judgments, they have not really explored their own inner nature. The discovery of one's self means coming to honor and appreciate all life. In discovering the full life within, you connect to all life. Life is one.

So, we begin our search at this level as separate entities. But, following the great religious traditions, we explore inwardly and find signs of a wisdom greater than our own. These signs increase until it becomes apparent that this little entity of life is really just a part of all life. This is enlightenment—to see how it all is.



Now let us begin to work with these three aspects of God. When Swedenborg speaks of “the Lord,” he refers to all

three levels simultaneously: (1) the One or the Father beyond our understanding, (2) the Son or God incarnate, and (3) the Holy Spirit as God within. Christians sometimes seem to have difficulty with their own Trinity. The worst possible error is to see these levels as three separate Gods. Consider it this way: our understanding is so poor that we need to break the Godhead down into this division because it reflects three aspects of a oneness almost beyond our experience. The Father is those aspects of the one beyond our comprehension. The incarnate Divine is God in a form like us that we can understand and relate to. The Holy Spirit is the Divine within our life. Yet these three are really the One. The threefold division is a concession to our limited ways of understanding.

The fact that the Lord of Swedenborg's works encompasses all of these levels has a number of implications. In these three levels, we have all possible ways of conceiving of the One. The Lord is the God quite beyond our limited understanding. Yet the Lord is also an incarnate person (real or mythological). And the Lord is also in us and the source of our very life. Thus, Swedenborg's writings are very much open to our actual discovery of the Lord, in whatever way we can.

Although we have portrayed God in three aspects, we can also open this effort to the whole of existence portrayed in many levels. For instance, the levels might represent the supreme Godhead, to lesser great gods, to godlike creatures, to humankind, to animals, to plants, and, finally, to the material earth. Or we could portray the inner human nature from God, down through many levels to our consciousness, to the body, to the earth.

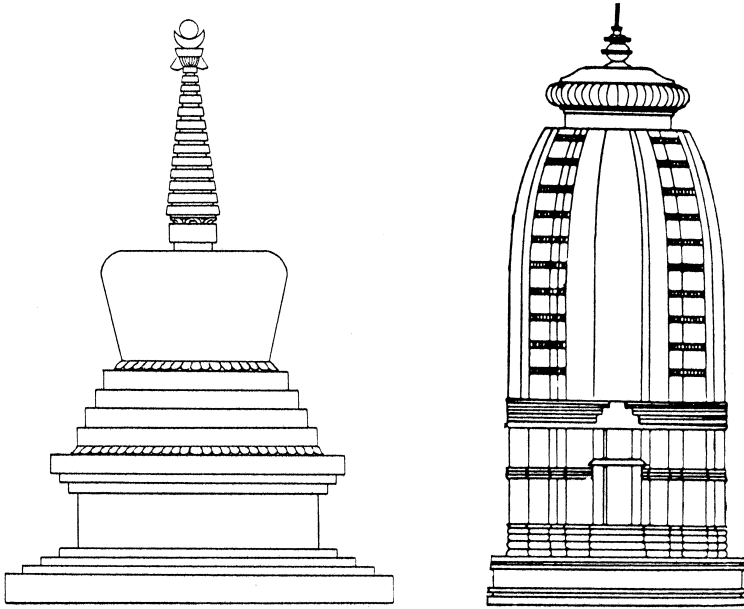
The *stupa*, a multilevel monument that can range from a small figure to a building of stone carved all over with various

forms, is a representation of the whole of existence shown as a hierarchical organization of levels. Found in both Hinduism and Buddhism, the stupa represents the total order of existence from the One down through various levels to the world, to the ground on which the stupa stands. It often contains something sacred, such as the bones of a saint. Those who appreciate it walk around it prayerfully in a clockwise direction, as though the ambulating person is venerating the total order of existence and is saying, "I wish to live in accordance with the real order of things."<sup>5</sup> I was once shown the order of existence in what resembled a Hindu stupa, except this one was not of stone but was made of intricately carved wood that was alive with meaning. And once in a kundalini exercise, my crown chakra opened to show the total design of existence. It looked like a beautiful, gigantic Hindu stupa. A multilevel Chinese or Japanese pagoda is a stupa. The forms vary between cultures, and the number of levels is not fixed, as shown in the examples on page 44. Worshipers represent as many levels as they can with their materials.

Indeed, if you could really see your full nature, you would realize you are a stupa too. Swedenborg refers to inward and even more inward levels in the human. The more inward are the higher levels in our stupa/self. Existence is hierarchically organized in as many levels as we can discriminate. Our existence is ambulating around a stupa, whether we know it or not. It is more fun to know it and to circle it consciously and willingly.

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5. For those unfamiliar with the stupa, I recommend Lama Anagarika Govinda, *Psycho-cosmic Symbolism of the Buddhist Stupa* (Berkeley, Calif.: Dharma Publishing, 1976).



*Drawings of two stupas: Tibetan Buddhist (left) and Hindu.*

## **CAUSAL RELATIONS IN OUR HIERARCHICAL EXISTENCE**

Swedenborg's works explore the hierarchical order of existence. No matter how many levels are represented, we have a rather static model at present. The One beyond all is at the top, the next level might be the God incarnate, and the next level God within, and beyond that all the inner levels in the human, to the body and the material world. Even visualizing it as a stupa, an excellent representation, the model is still set in static levels. How does existence function? To account for this, Swedenborg's writings introduced new ideas born out of his spiritual findings. I have not really seen ideas parallel to these in any other system.

In the hierarchical order of existence, there is an impulse

for what is higher to manifest—to become real or actual—in the world. The highest level of the One shapes the next level, which shapes the next, and so on. In this way, what is far beyond our comprehension creates all life and forms in the material world through levels. In a very real sense, nature’s forms are the end representation of this whole process. So we can look at the living creativity of all life forms and conclude that somehow there must be a creative intelligence behind all these manifestations. The details, complexities, and infinite interrelationships are a bit much to have arisen by chance.

Spiritually, the higher shows its potentials in the forms created at a lower level. In places where the higher is represented well by the lower form, Swedenborg states that the lower *corresponds* to the higher. *Correspondence*, in Swedenborgian terminology, is the link from the higher to the lower level. We can give an easy example out of our own experience. What a person feels inwardly would seem shut away, not available to us. But it is not, for inner feelings correspond to a person’s facial expression and affect even the subtleties of movement. The outer expression and movement correspond to inner feelings. The higher in us easily creates what corresponds to it. Since we are all human and similar, we can fairly easily “read” others’ correspondences. Happiness or depression shows.

Now suppose a woman is trying to conceal her feelings. This more complex situation is often represented by acting. Say she tries to act happy while feeling depressed. Then, to the subtle eye, both happiness and depression are present, as is the strain of dissembling. In such a case, the inner is said to be represented in the outer. A representation of the inner in the outer is a poorer, more confused picture. In the spiritual realm, we are usually not dissembling, so it is mainly a realm

of correspondences where each level of the higher shapes the lower into a correspondent. *This is the causal way in which each level creates, shapes, and guides the lower level*, true of all possible levels. Note also that creation works only from the higher down to the lower. No matter what you do on a lower level, you cannot shape the higher. Existence comes from the One, through all corresponding levels, down to the material world. Swedenborg writes that the whole of manifest existence is a theater of representations of the Lord. Notice that, on this earthly level, there are only representations of the spiritual: the connections from the drama of the world to the nature of God are not that clear to us, so our visual world is a theater of representations.

This same idea can be traced in all major religions. In Hinduism, creation is *maya*, illusion. This implies Brahma, the One, creates all, but tracing the line from things back to Brahma is not easy, as though the Ultimate is covered with veils of illusion.

So we now have the way the higher creates the lower by correspondences. Humans are a wonderful example of this. What is really going on in any of us? Look at dreams, which symbolically correspond to our inner reality. Our entire life down to details of what we love and hate correspond to deeper trends in us. We are ourselves a complete theater of representations, with endless scenes developing and disappearing.

We need one last idea from Swedenborg's works to understand the complete design. It is the subtle idea of *the end*. Again, his works develop a causal relationship that is necessary to understand the spiritual. As he explains in *Divine Love and Wisdom* §189, spiritually considered, there are three aspects of causality: end, cause, and effect. The end, whatever is to be achieved, lies in the spiritual world, which is also the

innermost of the human. The true end is not visible to others. This innermost end effects and arranges cause itself. Consequently, these causes lead to effects in the world. This is a somewhat different model from that of physics, which views causality like interacting balls on a billiard table: A imparts motion to B to C. Swedenborg presents a deeper form of causality from end to causes to effects. In Swedenborg's conception, the end is already established in the spiritual world and generates the appropriate responses through lower levels of existence, which will ultimately lead back to the true spiritual end. The design or end is in the spiritual world. The spiritual arranges causes and effects to realize these ends. In our spiritual life, we are already in the world of spiritual ends.

We can sometimes infer the end from the effect. It is clear that all living things attempt to procreate and multiply. This is the effect. The causes that led to this are a little beyond our ken; but if living things did not produce other living things, this life would end, so the end appears to be that life will continue. Ends can be easily illustrated from the human perspective. There are people whose end is money or power over others. Once you understand this of them, then you can watch the end subtly woven through all their actions. The end is almost the eternal aspect of many separate effects in their lives. I used to give a psychological examination to sociopaths, people who want to manipulate others. In my examination, some would often smoke and mess up my desk with ashes. I would absentmindedly clean up a speck of ash. They would spot this and plunge in to clean up all the ash. The truly mentally ill were too caught up in their inner processes to notice my subtle gesture, but the sociopath is alert socially and out to impress others. So with a simple and



subtle gesture, I could demonstrate this alert and pretentious front.

In a way, we could describe the general spiritual end of all things as being freely chosen loving awareness. This end generates an infinity of causes and, through these, an infinity of effects. Much of our personal development hinges on finding our true ends. What is supremely important to each of us? So ends, generating causes and effects, exist in us and are part of the total order of our existence.

Now we can put together Swedenborg's findings concerning correspondences and ends. Correspondence accounts for how things function from a higher to a lower, more limited level, the lowest of which is the material world. The higher does its best to live, or even to exist, on lower levels, so it shapes lower levels as an image or representation of itself. The general nature of the higher favors life, as we see from the example of a flower, which is lovely and colorful and has built-in procreative possibilities. Correspondences represent this "pro-life" function between two adjacent levels. The process of end-cause-effect is a broader formulation of the same tendency as in correspondences. End-cause-effect can exist between two levels or among all levels of existence. Human ends are the broadest understanding of what a person really is and will attempt to accomplish. We may see a disheveled, homeless man on the street. If his ends could be opened up, we might see the potential of a great person, but this end cannot manifest itself under his limited circumstances. For most of us average human beings ends are more or less represented in our life's endeavors. On a higher spiritual level, we can only guess at the ends of the Lord. If we could find the spiritual ends, we would have a very broad understanding of the order of existence itself.

Now with these conceptual tools, we can look at the general design of the whole of existence. Although I am presenting a concise explanation of what Swedenborg's works state, be aware that it is also what great mystics of various other religious traditions have found.

## THE DESIGN OF IT ALL

The One alone is. All other levels of existence are representations of the One. The One is uncreated and is the Only. All other levels of existence are manifestations of its potential. As Swedenborg writes in *Divine Providence* §157, "The only one and very self is omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. This only one and very self is the Lord-from-eternity or Jehovah." All other levels of existence are dependent on the One. We can trace the various aspects of our own dependence. We are created from beyond ourselves into a form that we are still discovering, even after a long life. We are dependent on the earth to stand on, on air to breathe. Even the designs of our mind and inner life are discoverable to infinity. We are dependent on parents, relatives, friends, and society as a whole. We are dependent on what others have discovered and have shown us. Thus, we are totally dependent. The One creates the whole hierarchy of existence of which we are simply a part. All other levels are correspondents and representations.

The conception of this universal design transcends individual religions. For instance, the Christian may well say the only possible image of the God incarnate is Jesus Christ. As my poem presented earlier in this chapter suggests, we take all peoples' images of God incarnate as valid. Why? An

analogy may help. E-mail simply will not go through if there is the slightest error in the address. But the Lord being the End of All and already operating in our lives sees our real ends. So no matter what incarnation/address we use, the message gets through. The Lord sees our intent. And perceiving ends, the One sees quite well whether a person intends to work with the whole and join the spiritual community of all who act by the good they know. This level transcends even our own favorite images.

The One manifests through all levels of existence, down through us and all life to the ultimates of the material world. There is a universal tendency for all to return to the One. As we have said, the One represents itself through all levels of existence including our inner self and the material world; yet, within all creation, there is also a tendency to return to the One. Our lives are very much a manifestation of both this going into creation and this return. This is the design of all there is. The enjoyment of the order of things is the experience of the return to the One.

When we describe heaven and hell in the next chapter, you will begin to see a clearer picture of levels of correspondence and representations of the One. Later, when we deal with our internals as humans, you will see something of levels of representation and the return to the One. The return to the One will be seen most clearly when we deal with enlightenment, which allows some individuals to approach the One. For the present, it is enough to know that the One manifests through all levels of existence down to nature and the material world and that the One also calls back all to Itself.

Why does the One create all this? This is a speculative area. Great religions have given various answers. I remind

you that, at this level, the Divine is not limited to one purpose, so there could be an infinity of answers. In Hinduism, the question of creation is answered as *lila*: creation is just play, for fun. Some may be shocked by this answer, especially when they look at war and human privation; but this answer comes from the experience of mystics who found that creation was done very casually, like a child playing and having fun. I once gave the answer, “Just to pass the time.” This arose out of an image of the One alone needing something lengthy to fill up the vessel of time. In one vision, I was shown the absolute necessity of creation because, without others, there would be only the One. Once it created, it had to step down from the One to the material world. So the determination to create in some respects had to have a stair-step form such as we see. How could the One suddenly be material? There is a stair-step design as in a stupa, and we are part of the steps.

Swedenborg’s works provide two reasons for creation. To the question of why humankind exists, the answer is “that there might be a heaven of the human race” (*Divine Providence* §27 [2]). This statement needs some elaboration to be understood. Suppose God wanted intelligent agents to help carry out the design. In this case, our lives on earth are our education, with each person experiencing different things and becoming wiser in his or her own way. Then, when we died and went to heaven, we would each have something to contribute to the whole. Swedenborg found that heaven is a kingdom of immense coordination, where each spirit becomes a part of a massive sphere of wisdom and coordination called heaven. Thus, the answer to the question of why humanity exists is that there might be a heaven of a wise human

race. In heaven, wise humans are angels who have functions in the cosmic design.

The other answer found in Swedenborg's writings comes from his work *Divine Love and Wisdom*. The Lord is love itself but is alone, so love creates others it can love. We see this in children who, when playing alone, create life in dolls that they can imaginatively interact with:

It is the essential of love not to love self, but to love others, and to be conjoined with others by love. It is the essential of love, moreover, to be loved by others, for thus conjunction is effected. The essence of all love consists in conjunction; this, in fact, is its life, which is called enjoyment, pleasantness, delight, sweetness, bliss, happiness, and felicity.

Love consists in this, that its own should be another's; to feel the joy of another as joy in oneself, that is loving. . . .

From this it is clear that divine love must necessarily have being and have form in others whom it may love, and by whom it may be loved. For as there is such a need in all love, it must be to the fullest extent, that is, infinitely in love itself.

*Divine Love and Wisdom* §§47–48

The entire passage, §§47–51, explained over several pages, is worth looking at. So here is another possible answer as to why our creation was necessary: so that, in our relative freedom, we might return the love that created us and sustains us to eternity. A similar formulation exists in Hinduism and in the philosophy of Plotinus. All of existence was created that you yourself might freely and consciously return to the One, the return of the prodigal son or daughter. And love is this returning, the means of conjoining, making two like one.

Human marriage and even sexual union are correspondents of this conjunction or union with the Divine.

And now, with this preparation, the design of it all can be stated in a few lines:

God is Love.  
Love is the End of All.  
This End creates causes,  
And through them effects,  
And hence existence itself.

Insofar as we participate in love,  
We participate in the End of All,  
And by this means existence returns  
To the love which is the All.

Now we begin to sense the overall design of existence as discovered many times in various religious traditions. In subsequent chapters, we will begin to fill in details of this design, starting, surprisingly enough, with the spiritual worlds beyond this one. These spiritual worlds are lower level correspondents to the Lord.



## Heaven and Hell

**W**e have attempted to transcend religious differences, so the Godhead has been presented in its universal nature. And, as has been stated, Swedenborg writes of the Lord that includes the One beyond our comprehension, the One incarnate in a host of forms in the world's religions, and the Holy Spirit, the divine aspect functioning within everyone's life.

Now we move on to examine heaven and hell, which comprise all of the spiritual realms between us and the Godhead. Much speculation and many guesses and mythological ideas of this realm exist. However, Swedenborg carefully explored and described these realms based on his 27 years of direct experience. To my knowledge, no parallel to this exists in the world's literature. Mystics of various religions have described aspects of the spiritual, but actual accounts of heaven and hell are missing. Because the issue is critical, we need to

question Swedenborg's accounts in his writings. Still, a number of aspects point to their validity:

(1) Swedenborg spent a lifetime learning and reporting new areas of science and philosophy, so he was one of the most learned men who ever lived. He considered this study as mere preparation for his exploration of the spiritual.

(2) During his lifetime, Swedenborg did not regard himself as special. Indeed, his main spiritual works were published anonymously; he tried to conceal who was behind these spiritual works until his authorship was revealed late in his life.

(3) Although he was a Swedish nobleman and a great scientist, Swedenborg consistently lived and acted modestly. That he died in the rented room of a wigmaker and barber is not surprising; he liked to live with craftsmen to learn their trade.

(4) His spiritual works have an internal validity. Swedenborg did his utmost to give a clear presentation of what he found. Considering he used a quill pen and saw his own 30-plus volumes of theology through the press himself, he worked very hard. His writings are consistent on spiritual matters, even though he postulated new ideas (such as the theory of correspondences, end-cause-effect, etc.) to present his findings. The basic morality in all religions is amplified and deepened within his writings. The universal message of mystics is here, and well presented.

(5) The spirituality of Swedenborg's works stretches our understanding, but it moves in a direction most will find intuitively reasonable.

(6) In a few instances, Swedenborg was involved in somewhat miraculous events that suggest he really was in contact with spiritual worlds.

(7) Modern findings in the near-death experience fit with reports found in Swedenborg's writings. In addition, studies



done on hallucinating schizophrenics fit with what he reports of hell.<sup>1</sup>

Read the accounts given below and ask yourself this question: does the report of heaven and hell here fit with your own intuition of what is true?

We also need to review Swedenborg's personal relationship with heaven and hell. About 1740, he began to seek the seat of the soul. To do this, he mastered anatomy but found this was not a suitable way to find the soul. So, he turned to examine his own inner life to see if he could find the soul at work. This led to his study and interpretation of his own dreams. In the dream period, we see a man passionately seeking God and see that God becomes progressively clearer to him. In April 1745, Swedenborg states, the Lord appeared as a man to him, giving Swedenborg his task for the rest of his life and also opening the spiritual worlds to his exploration.

Swedenborg's *Spiritual Diary* is his private record of varied experiences in the spiritual worlds. He later pulled this material together in his work *Heaven and Hell*. In addition, his spiritual experiences permeate all of his theological works, especially the 12-volume *Arcana Coelestia*. In all these extraordinary experiences, Swedenborg is like a curious tourist. He stated that the Lord forbid him to read anyone else's theology (except the Bible) or to speculate and mix in his own ideas. Thus, throughout, he reports his actual experience. In many places, he states that what he reports is based on "countless experiences." If we, as a society, were asked to find and delegate someone to explore the spiritual worlds, it is doubtful a more suitable candidate could be found.

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1. For more information on points 6 and 7, see Wilson Van Dusen, *The Presence of Other Worlds* (West Chester, Penn.: Chrysalis Books, 1994). See Chapter 7.

Swedenborg presents the structure and design of heaven and hell from the Lord down to the individual; but, here, I will present his findings from the individual to the Godhead because this is the order in which each of us will discover it.

Just as we introduced the universal outlook in religion together with Swedenborg's theory of correspondences and end-cause-and-effect so that the Godhead would be better understood, we also need to understand a central aspect of the spiritual worlds. Understand this, and you can readily grasp all that Swedenborg says on heaven and hell. There is an absolute emphasis on what a person truly is. Swedenborg often described this as the external person versus the inner person. The externals are what we see of each other in the world, including social pretense, so a man may seem sincere and yet be a clever con man, skilled in extracting people's money. Externals also include what we think of ourselves. Within a person's true inner nature, however, we see that person spiritually, inwardly, in what they really are. The inward view goes beyond externals and may even present a picture opposite to that presented by the external person. So, Swedenborg's work presents a depth psychology deeper even than the depth psychology of today, which only begins to interpret the inner person. In the spiritual worlds, the inner person is central, clear, and completely revealed.

So, as we enter the spiritual, we see not only the external but, even more fully, the internals, the reality of the person's nature. Moreover, in the spiritual worlds, we are *not permitted* to say we believe one thing and then to act differently. In other words, we must be of one mind. What is said and what is done must be congruent, fit together, or we will be denied entrance into the higher spiritual worlds, since pretense or deceit is not possible in heaven. Hell is the place for any kind

of deception. The central aspect of the true revealed nature of the individual is not clearly presented or stressed in other depictions of the spiritual. The appreciation of what a person truly is goes to the extent of the ruling love, another relatively new idea found in Swedenborg's works.

The ruling love is the core tendency of a person. We end up in the higher spiritual worlds in a society of people like ourselves because of our ruling love. Thus, our ultimate spiritual function lies in our ruling or supreme love, which we can begin to realize in this world. If we could know a person's ruling love, we would understand all his or her choices.

Now let us put together this core tendency of the ruling love and the design of the worlds beyond this one. Since people are seen in their inner qualities, even to the point of their ruling love, if their ruling love is egotism, they are destined for hell. If it is to live harmoniously with others, they are destined for heaven.

Thus, if you regard the spiritual worlds as a place where people are sorted into what they really are inwardly, even to their ruling love, you understand the nature of heaven and hell. If you accept the impossibility of saying or pretending one thing and doing another, you see the basic difference of heaven and hell. These things are of the intrinsic design of existence. This is the essence of it all. As we explore death and its aftermath, we will begin to see how this intrinsic design works out.

## **THE WORLD OF SPIRITS**

According to Swedenborg's direct experience, when we die, we awaken immediately in what his writings call the world of spirits, a sort of holding place, while our eternal destiny for

heaven or hell is worked out. Swedenborg experienced this realm for some 27 years and met many of his relatives and friends who had died.

Is this realm like purgatory or any of the in-between spiritual realms described in various religious traditions? The basic answer is no. What Swedenborg found is quite unlike conventional ideas of purgatory.

The first critical question is why we wake up in a spiritual realm. Swedenborg's simple answer is that we awaken in a spiritual realm because we have always been a living spirit in a body. The body aids our learning in the material world through our senses, our moving about and interacting with others. The body is a useful but temporary vehicle in the grand scheme of things. It dies when breathing and the heart-beat stops. Within minutes after these functions cease, an irreversible physical deterioration sets in. But the person awakens in the world of spirits and undergoes intense experiences. In that realm, we are a person as before, but our body is then spiritual and not material. This is confirmed in the near-death experience.

Most religions of the world teach this. Is there some way we can confirm it? Yes, in part. When we sleep and are "dead to the world," the spirit becomes active in dreams. If we study our dreams, we will find they are representations of our present life condition. This process, in which what is true for us becomes manifest, occurs throughout all the spiritual worlds, according to what Swedenborg found.

In deep reflection and meditation, we may discover that our true inner self is alive and living a life only partly recognizable by the person we are in everyday life. We may come to the primal insight that there is some sort of awareness within that is always there, an awareness that precedes all

perception. As Swedenborg indicates, it is not the eye that sees but rather the spirit in a person that sees through the eye. It is possible to intuitively discover this insight.

Another simple example will illustrate. You find a loved one dead. At first, you expect them to awaken and be their usual living self. But they don't respond. Suddenly, you realize the living self that person was is gone and his or her body, a mere shell, is left behind. Thereafter, the loved one lives better in one's memory.

The near-death experience is a massive recent confirmation since there are now thousands of cases. A man dies in an accident or on the operating table. Outwardly, he appears to have no sense awareness. But inwardly, he has intense and impressive experiences. For a brief time, he is in his spiritual body at the very entrance of the spiritual world. For some reason, he is sent back to this world and recovers consciousness. Much research has shown that often there is a positive long-term effect of this experience on the person's outlook.

Another simple example can be found when we grow old and decrepit. Our body will gradually cease to perform at maximum capacity, yet the inner self may still feel young and adventuresome. Which is more true: the outer creaking, pain-racked body which will soon fall away, or the inner excited and questing spirit which continues on? In fact, as we will see, the inner self comes to shape our outer appearance in the spiritual worlds so that we will come to look young and lively, no matter what our age or physical state at the time of death. Through all the spiritual realms, the inner person is substantial and real. The fact that we always have been a living spirit becomes more apparent when the body falls away. In both Swedenborg's works and in accounts of the near-death experience, it is reported that people awaken in the

world of spirits so much like what they were that they have to be told that they died.

The Lord permitted Swedenborg to explore the world of spirits whenever he wanted to. He was also ushered through the process of dying so he might know what it is like. We should not take his account of dying as absolutely standard for all. Modern accounts of the near-death experience suggest a basic pattern with some individual differences. Compared to the sudden death of people in accidents, however, Swedenborg's experience appeared more leisurely and educational—after all, he was being instructed by angels.

So, after death, we immediately awaken in the world of spirits. Because we have our body and all capabilities as before, it is difficult to believe we have died. And we may well meet friends and loved ones who died before us. As my mother died, she saw my father and was a little surprised that I could not also see him. Swedenborg describes this first stage after death in *Heaven and Hell* §493–494:

Our first state after death is like our state in this world, since we are then similarly involved in outward concerns. We have similar faces, voices, and character; we lead similar moral and civil lives. This is why it still seems to us as though we were in this world unless we notice things that are out of the ordinary and remember that angels told us we were spirits when we were awakened. . . .

Since this is what we are like as spirits immediately after our life in the world, our friends and people we have known in the world then recognize us. Spirits perceive who we are not only from our faces and voices but also from the aura of our life when they come near. In the other life, whenever we think about someone, we call up

that individual's face in our thought along with many details about her or his life; and when we do this, the other is called to us. . . . Further, we talk with each other and continue to see each other in keeping with our friendship in the world. I have heard many people who had just come from the world overjoyed to see their friends again, and their friends overjoyed that they had arrived.

It often happens that married partners meet and welcome each other joyfully. They stay together as well, but for a longer or shorter time depending on how happily they had lived together in the world.<sup>2</sup>

The central purpose of the world of spirits, which is located between heaven and hell, is to reveal our real nature, the “judgment” that will decide our eternal fate. Swedenborg indicates that the usual Christian idea of a judgment in which the soul joins the body at some remote future time is a mistake (*Heaven and Hell* §456). The “judgment” Swedenborg reported is a subtle psychological process in which one's true nature is opened. Out of that revelation, we decide for ourselves where we would be most comfortable, in heaven or hell.

What does it mean to have our real nature opened? There are comparable experiences in life, and they usually occur when we are relaxed, reflective, and receptive. During these times, we can look back through our lives and see mistakes, but we can also look forward and sense what we would most love to do. This can be quite pleasant and elevated, even joyous, to get a strong sense of what we really are. In this,

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2. Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, trans. by George F. Dole, The New Century Edition of the Works of Emanuel Swedenborg (West Chester, Penn.: The Swedenborg Foundation, 2000). All quotations from *Heaven and Hell* in this book are taken from this edition and will be cited in the text.

one's nature is open. In the world of spirits, this same process is more intense and clearer. It is out of this that we decide how we would like to live for eternity. So we drift toward a society in heaven or hell most suitable to us.

Swedenborg found that there are a few people whose natures are so settled and sure that they enter heaven or hell within a few moments of entering the afterlife. But, since most of us are a mixture of good and evil, the usual process of selection can take days, weeks, or months—even up to 30 years. This is the second state, being let into one's internal and real nature.

The basic truth underlying this process is that we cannot progress further into the spiritual worlds while we are of two minds, willing one thing and doing another. Those whose inner nature destines them for heaven are then instructed by angels about the nature of heaven until they are of one mind (*Heaven and Hell* §425). They then go to their place in heaven where they are warmly greeted by people like themselves. I have known artists who were in a joyous and elevated state when in the company of other artists; heaven must be like that. As we advance into our real nature, even our external appearance changes. And this refers to correspondences again: what is inside becomes reflected faithfully on the outside.

There is much more in *Heaven and Hell* on these realms that can only be touched on here. For example, if we leave this world seeking to learn, then we can go on learning in the spiritual worlds. On the other hand, if we are obstinate and closed to accepting truth, we will be stuck in that attitude, as we see from *Heaven and Hell* §508 [7]:

This is how they behaved in the world when they were thinking in their spirit—that is, when they were thinking



within themselves, from the deeper affection. This is because intent is the essential person, not thought except as it is derived from intent; and volition is the essential nature or character of the human being. So being remanded to our own intentions is being remanded to our own nature or character and to our own life as well. . . . After death, we retain the nature we had gained by our life in the world, which for evil people can no longer be changed for the better by the path of thought or of understanding what is true.

So, it pays to die seeking.

Thus, among the many details of Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell*, there are a few basic principles that make sense of events in the world of spirits:

- (1) We are a spirit in a body, and when the body can no longer serve the spirit, the spirit goes on.
- (2) We enter our sojourn in the world of spirits in a situation so like our previous life in the world that we may have to be told we have died.
- (3) We are at first in an external situation where we can meet and talk with other spirits.
- (4) The overall thrust of the spiritual worlds is that we each drift toward the inner life we have acquired.
- (5) It is not difficult to reach heaven, as Swedenborg amply explains in Chapter 55 of *Heaven and Hell*. Indeed, he often wrote against prolonged pious meditation, rather advocating a life of useful action:

Some people believe it is hard to lead the heaven-bound life . . . because they have heard that we need to renounce the world and give up the desires attributed to the body and the flesh and “live spiritually.” . . . No, if we would

accept heaven's life, we need by all means to live in the world and to participate in its duties and affairs. In this way, we accept a spiritual life by means of our moral and civic life; and there is no other way a spiritual life can be formed within us, no other way our spirits can be prepared for heaven. This is because living an inner life and not an outer life at the same time is like living in a house that has no foundation, that gradually either settles or develops gaping cracks or totters until it collapses.

*Heaven and Hell* §528

Some church authorities later objected to Swedenborg's account of heaven and hell. Where was God's judgment? Spirits are allowed to go where they are most comfortable indeed! But Swedenborg showed that a loving God does not punish. It is punishment enough that some people are let into the inner world they have created for eternity. Through this, Swedenborg sees punishment in more depth than we are accustomed to.

## HEAVEN

We are beginning to see that the spiritual worlds differ in subtle yet significant ways from the theories of various imaginative people and different religious cultures. In the brief space of a short book, we cannot hope to cover all aspects of *Heaven and Hell* and the immense number of references to these matters in the rest of Swedenborg's works. Instead, we will attempt to clarify the essential aspects of the design of these worlds. Why? Because the essence of the design can be covered in a relatively brief space yet implies the destiny of everyone.

Clearly, the Lord is the all in all, and in heaven we are in a realm between the more limited life we know in this world and the all in all. Just as we have seen levels in the universal, there are three levels of heaven. Descending from the highest to the lowest, they are the celestial, the spiritual, and the spiritual-natural heaven. Or they are called the third, second, and first; or the inmost, middle, and outmost. Throughout his works, Swedenborg uses the term *inmost* to mean the deeper, the more spiritual, or the higher. To understand the design, we must understand the inmost. When the human mind is described in depth, it also has an inmost. In effect, our mind is in the form of heaven itself. We are something of a heaven in the least form. Insofar as our inmost is opened, we begin to experience the celestial. So, inwardly, we are a microcosm or a miniuniverse in the design of all there is. This will become more apparent when we deal with the design of persons.

This is a simple and yet profound aspect of heaven: on whatever scale we look, there is the same design. We said earlier that existence is a theater of representations. We can look at the whole or a level of heaven or a community of people in heaven or an individual person or the smallest leaf and see the same design. With enough wisdom, the Divine may be seen in anything and in everything.

In the world of spirits, we sort ourselves according to our real nature. Those for whom love is most central become celestial angels. A further implication of their love is that they act out their love and love God directly. Those who live by the Golden Rule and love their fellow humans become spiritual angels. They express their respect for others through deeds. They also tend to reason about spiritual matters, whereas celestial angels do not. The celestial angels show their love by what they do, whereas angels of the spiritual

level are more likely to debate issues. The last or outermost heaven is the spiritual-natural, which has more of the outer aspects of our world in it.

The levels of heaven are separated to some extent, insofar as we can experience them only according to what we are. Spirits in the spiritual-natural level can ask to visit the celestial but the intensity of feeling and the light (awareness) there are so intense that they soon want to return to the level they are used to. Of course, that we can appreciate only what is already in us is true of life on earth too. How much can a person who spends a lifetime getting money understand the wonder and satisfaction of helping others? How much does the lifelong criminal understand of the spiritual? So what is seen in heaven is not altogether different from life on earth but is a clarification of what is true here.

Each heaven is made up of innumerable societies, communities of people who are inwardly alike and thus function together in great harmony. We see something similar in this world; for example, baseball fans come alive when they can be with someone who also loves the game. The harmony and coordination in heaven are extraordinary. The Lord flows into and is the life of all these angelic societies. Indeed, heaven is organized into societies of like-minded spirits because these angels are part of the means by which the Lord rules all. Each angel does what he or she most loves to do and, in this, feels great happiness and freedom. The essence of freedom is being able to do what you most want to do. This coordination of people who are inwardly similar working together is one of the ways the Lord achieves his ends.

Have you ever been in a disaster and suddenly become part of many people who wanted to help others? It is a remarkable feeling, an intense high. Say a building collapses,

and many people are there to remove rubble. There is such joy for all when someone is found and saved. Societies in heaven are imbued with that joyful feeling all the time. This is what love of the neighbor means in the spiritual heaven: enjoying doing good with others.

Picture heaven as an immense ordering and coordination of forces in which individuals participate in whatever way they would most enjoy. In the celestial heaven, the people/angels are most aware of the wonder of the Lord in their lives. At the two lower levels, this awareness is realized in a less immediate form as love of the neighbor and enjoyment in being useful. We see a kind of stepping down from the Lord to a life of love to a life of uses. But overall there is an immense satisfaction of people living out their highest loves in a cosmic design beyond our understanding, as we see from *Heaven and Hell* §49:

All the communities communicate with each other, but not through open interaction. Actually, not many individuals leave their own community to go to another, because leaving their community is like leaving themselves or their life and crossing over into another that does not suit them. Rather, they all communicate by the outreach of the auras that emanate from the life of every individual. An aura of life is an aura of affections based in love and faith. This reaches out far and wide into surrounding communities, farther and wider as the affections are deeper and more perfect. Angels possess intelligence and wisdom in proportion to this outreach. The ones who are in the most inward heaven and therefore at the center have an outreach into all of heaven, so that there is a communication of everyone in heaven with each individual and of each individual with everyone.

## LIFE IN HEAVEN

In *Heaven and Hell*, Swedenborg describes many details of life in heaven, which the following briefly summarizes. We have already noted that those entering the world of spirits are in all respects as they were in life, except they now have a spiritual, rather than a physical, body. Because their senses function and they think and feel much the same as they did on earth, it comes as something of a surprise to learn they died. The significant exception is that, as people become more of what they truly are, their appearance shifts toward a truer correspondence of their nature. In heaven, everyone sees what others are by their appearance.

In addition, spirits have two memories—an outer memory of all the events of their lives and an inner memory of their true desires and thoughts. As their outer appearance shifts toward a better representation of their nature, they also find that their external memory recedes for the truer, internal memory. All this is part of the process of becoming more of what one really is. On earth, those who find and live out their true nature are in a state close to what they will experience in heaven.

Another significant shift in heaven concerns time and space. On earth, we are embedded in clock time; but, in heaven, angels exist in “psychological” time, which follows and represents their state.<sup>3</sup> Also, the angels’ sense of time comes from the endless changes of their emotional state in heaven. Space, too, is no longer a rigid outer structure, as we experience it on earth, but shifts to reflect one’s loves. The

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3. For a description and explanation of heavenly time, see Wilson Van Dusen, *Returning to the Source* (Moab, Utah: Real People Press, 1997), Chapter 4.

effect of this is that those you love are near, while those you conflict with are distant. To bring a person into your presence, you only need to think lovingly of him or her. This, in part, accounts for heaven's arrangement into societies of people of similar loves. They naturally go together and work together in harmony.

All this illustrates a central principle of heaven—the world of correspondences. What we are conditions our appearance, going so far as to be reflected in our heavenly clothes. The quality of life in a spiritual sense is represented even in our dwellings. Heaven is a kingdom of representations of a person's true nature. This is true, although in a less clear way, in this world. Study what kind of world a person experiences, and you are looking at a representation of what they are. Inkblot tests and other projective tests work on this principle—what we see reflects what we are.

Angels also have occupations in heaven. People serve and are useful in the way most satisfying to them. Since the angels are part of the Lord's governing all aspects of creation, there is a greater and more subtle variety of occupations in heaven than we experience on earth. There are also marriages in heaven. The sexual element is seen in all its spiritual aspects as the wonder of a union of differences. Married couples at a distance may appear to be one person because they are united in spirit. There are also governments in heaven, but they are an intrinsic reflection of divine order, of which our earthly governments are a poor representation.

There are also books and learning of the highest kind. The sacred writings of our earthly world also exist in heaven. The angels naturally express themselves in a universal and more subtle form of speech and writing, not the Tower of Babel we know here. Also the thoughts of angels are far

richer than ours. There are also churches of various kinds and worship. Diversity is tolerated. Heaven itself is an immense union of differences.

Infants and children who die go to heaven, never to hell, where they are educated by angels who enjoy caring for them. You might think that the profound innocence of infants might lead them to be regarded as the highest form of angelic purity, but this is not the case. There is some mysterious need for the hard knocks of our life, so those trained only in heaven and not tested on earth are not the highest angels.

There is so much more that can be said of the richness of heaven. Over and over, Swedenborg's writings seem touched by the celestial, so that I am aware of the inadequacy of my words in attempting to describe his experiences. The design of heaven is so wise and elevated that we need to read Swedenborg's description and then reflect a long while on its implications and the interrelationships involved. Practically every aspect of heaven can be seen in some way in our present life, although not clearly. This is to be expected; Swedenborg clearly indicates that those inwardly preparing for heaven already have a place in a society there, so it is as though all the higher aspects of our earthly life here are preliminary experiences of heaven. Since we are inwardly made in the form of heaven or hell, we have a real access to these realms. We can easily read *Heaven and Hell* as a description of our present life and still discover countless connections. Certainly, our life on earth mixes aspects of heaven and hell, as we work out our destiny, so neither realm is really alien or otherworldly. To me, this is another sign of the validity of these writings.



## HELL

Why is there hell? The answer lies in our own freedom. Creation could be designed so everyone would go to heaven. Instead, we were created with enough freedom that we can choose to stand against the design, in which case we create a world that is, in fundamental ways, the opposite of heaven. Swedenborg asserts that we live under the influence of heaven *and* hell, that we are balanced between these opposites. That is our freedom. In our earthly life, we are forever deciding between heaven and hell; but, when we die, our inward tendencies are opened in the world of spirits, and we find which we prefer, heaven or hell. Thus, no one is cast into hell as punishment; we simply choose our fate. Our inner qualities may have become such that we prefer the hellish life. We were free all along; our end in heaven or hell is the consequence of a myriad of personal choices.

Of what use is knowledge of the ultimate design of things? It is perhaps the most critical piece of knowledge we could have because we can study the differences between heaven and hell and work out our eternal destiny in freedom. The freedom Swedenborg speaks of is inward, internal. Certainly, some people's lives are meaner and more stressful than the lives of others. But what is your real end, your true love? In spite of terrible circumstances, do you treasure beauty and yearn for something better? Or do terrible circumstances lead you to want to defeat, even to kill, your oppressors? Same circumstances, different choice. We are internally free to choose what we want, what we honor and seek out, even in the most depraved circumstances. I recall that Russian Orthodox Christians in Soviet prison camps traced out the Orthodox cross in the dirt so they could see their ideal. They chose

heaven. This is the inner aspect on which heaven and hell turns. If you will, heaven and hell are spiritual magnifications of life choices.

Both heaven and hell rest upon taking care of one's self. In the way of heaven, we care for ourselves so we can remain of service. In the way of hell, we care for ourselves because we think we matter more than anyone else. Everything that leads us beyond our individual being into being useful, into taking care of people, and into caring for creation is the way of heaven. The way of heaven expands beyond one's self. The life of hell contracts to one's self because personal aims matter more than anything else. The life of hell spirals in and contracts into itself.

One serious implication of this is that, from moment to moment, we are shaping the limits or expansiveness of our experience. The burglar visualizes his next break-in and what he might get; this is a limited view. A social activist tries to save an ancient forest and works in coordination with others; this is the essence of heaven. The attempt to save trees honors existence, which is also a mark of heaven. This is a more expansive life, out beyond mere self. If an expansive life is chosen while we live on earth, we will find an ever-expanding life beyond this one. If a contracted, me-for-myself-above-all-else life is chosen, we will live a contracted, limited existence eternally. Even if we are forced by external pressures into a mean and limited life, our inner goal can still be set high, and heaven results. The difference between the experience of heaven and hell is immense. No one is actually punished in hell, beaten, burned, and tortured, as is popularly imagined. It is just that existence there is so limited, mean, and full of conflict. All the wisdom, wonder, joys, and special delights of heaven are missing. A constricted, conflicted

existence is the ultimate “punishment of hell,” a limited existence that misses the ultimate wonders of existence. How paradoxical: choose a me-for-myself-alone existence and you get it, in all its terrible limitations. Swedenborg presents a vision of hell that is more human, deeper, and wiser than other speculations. The Lord is ultimately loving, giving us what we worked toward for a lifetime. The real issue is what have we become now. There is always the chance to become better in the present.

## **THE STRUCTURE OF HELL**

Hell is the direct opposite of heaven. Parallel to the outer, middle, and inner levels of heaven, there are three levels in hell, which are set against the basic order of existence and hence of God, the source of all order itself. The three levels of hell represent degrees of opposition ranging from slightly opposed in the outermost hell to fiercely opposed in the innermost level. Just as there are societies of like-minded spirits in heaven, so are there societies in hell of those with like hatreds; and there are as many societies in hell as in heaven. The whole form of hell is a polar opposite to the form of heaven. Just as the Lord rules heaven, the Lord also rules hell. Being omnipresent, the Lord is in everyplace and never absent. Through angels, the Lord sets the boundaries and limits to hell; otherwise, the spirits and demons there would break out and try to rule the universe to their ends. And there is no one master Devil or Satan there; all the spirits of hell were once just persons, as were angels.

Thus, Swedenborg found that heaven and hell are, if you will, a representation of the total ultimate possibilities in

human choices. In our earthly existence, we live at the confluence of heaven and hell. At this point, we each create heaven or hell.

From time to time, angels are sent into hell where they calm things down by their presence. Generally speaking though, Swedenborg found that people in hell are controlled simply by their own fears.

There is a paradox about all this. Ultimately, only the Divine—which is love and good—exists. What then is hell? In *Heaven and Hell* §539, Swedenborg describes the illusion of power in hell:

All the power in the spiritual world belongs to benevolent truth and none whatsoever to malevolent falsity.

The reason all power belongs to what is good and true is that the essential divine nature in heaven is divine good and divine truth. . . . Malevolent falsity has no power because all power belongs to benevolent truth, and there is no benevolent truth in malevolent falsity. That is why all the power is in heaven, and none in hell.

Hell, it seems, has no power or substantiality. In my professional work as a clinical psychologist, I often encountered the demons of schizophrenics and had the impression that they were all empty pretensions, shadows of the real. When we spiral in on ourselves alone, we enter a world of illusions and false ideas that only seem substantial.

Do we experience something like hell in this world? Certainly, even on the simplest level. Suppose you have been confined to bed with nausea and aches and pains. You cannot do anything but wait it out. This situation is similar to being confined within yourself. It is such a joy to begin to feel well, to sit up, move about, and start to do the things that lead out

of yourself into the world again. Even going to work is far preferable to illness.

Most of us have known eccentric people who have spiraled in on themselves. They want to avoid people. Their living quarters are a mess. They are often paranoid about what others are doing to them. In their limited existence, they inhabit a small space and live a dark, fearful existence. The hell described in *Heaven and Hell* fits this kind of existence. Are the spirits in hell being punished? Not really. They chose to be for themselves alone and slowly created this situation. To one who has known the joy of being useful, living for yourself alone has little to commend it.

## LIFE IN HELL

Swedenborg's description of hell captures the image of the life lived without thought of others better than any brief summation. So, in the following section, we see hell in Swedenborg's own words:

All the people who are in the hells are devoted to evil goals and the distortions that result. . . . Many evil people in the world know about spiritual truths, the truths of the church, since they have learned them first in childhood and later from sermons and from reading the Word and have gone on to take them for granted in their conversations. Some of them have even led others to believe that they were Christians at heart because they had learned from these truths how to talk with apparent affection and to behave honestly as though motivated by a spiritual faith. As for the ones who inwardly thought the opposite, though, and who carefully refrained from doing the evil things they were

thinking of simply because of civil laws and for the sake of their reputation and rank and profit, they are all evil at heart, involved in what is true and good only physically, not in spirit. So when their outer layers are stripped off in the other life and the inner natures that constituted their spirits are unveiled, they are wholly absorbed in evil and false concerns, unconcerned with anything true and good. . . .

When people like this are let into their inner natures—into their evils, that is—they can no longer say anything true. They can only say what is false because their speech arises from their evil intentions. It is impossible to say anything true for evil ends because by then their spirits are made up of nothing but their own evil, and falsity emanates from evil.

*Heaven and Hell* §551

Since the basic quality of hell is to live for one's self alone, the demons or hellish spirits are at odds with each other. There are as many ways to be in conflict with others as there are ways to cooperate, as we see in this passage from *Heaven and Hell* §§580–581:

You can gather from their unspeakable arts what the malice of these hellish spirits is like. There are so many of these arts that listing them would fill a book, and describing them would take volumes. Most of these are unknown in the world. One kind has to do with the misuse of correspondences; a second kind has to do with the misuse of the most superficial features of the divine design; a third kind with the sharing and instilling of thoughts and affections by distractions, focusing inward, and the use of decoy spirits as well as by emissaries; a fourth kind with manipulation by hallucinations; a fifth kind with external

projections that enable the spirits to be present outside their bodies; a sixth kind with various types of imitation and persuasion and pretense.

The spirits of evil people come into these arts spontaneously when they are freed from their bodies. . . . They use these arts to torture each other in the hells. . . .

The reason tortures are permitted by the Lord in the hells is that there is no other way evils can be restrained and tamed. Fear of punishment is the only means of controlling and taming evils and keeping the hellish mob in restraints. There is no other way, for if it were not for the fear of punishment and torture, evil would plunge into rage and destroy everything, as would happen in a kingdom on earth where there was neither law nor punishment.

The hells themselves are the image or correspondence of the inner lives of spirits there, as described in *Heaven and Hell* §§584–586:

There are hells everywhere. They are under the mountains and hills and cliffs and under the plains and valleys. The openings or gates to the hells that are under the mountains and hills and cliffs look at first sight like crevices of fissures in the rocks. Some of them are quite broad and open, some narrow and confined, full of rough places. All of them seem dim and gloomy when you look in, although the hellish spirits who live there have the kind of illumination you get from glowing coals. . . . This is because when they were living in the world they were in darkness about divine truths owing to their denial of them. . . .

Some of these hells looked like the lairs or dens of wild animals in the woods, some like the vaulted chambers and crypts found in mines, with caverns leading downward. . . .

In some hells you can see what look like the ruins of houses and cities after a fire, where hellish spirits live and hide out.

In milder hells you can see crude huts, sometimes grouped in something like a city, with alleyways and streets. There are hellish spirits in these homes, with constant quarrels, hostility, beating, and violence. The streets and alleys are full of thieves and robbers. . . .

There are also dark forests where hellish spirits roam like wild beasts; and there are underground caves there where they flee when they are being threatened by others. Then there are desert areas where everything is barren and sandy. . . . People are exiled from the hells into these desert places if they have suffered to the limit, especially people who in the world were craftier than others in the skills of deliberate manipulation and deceit. This kind of life is their final lot.

Why is there so much conflict in hell? That is easy. Those who want it all their way, who live for themselves alone, are bound to come into conflict with others. The spirit of heaven is working together for higher ends.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF HEAVEN AND HELL IN THE DESIGN OF EXISTENCE**

In presenting what Swedenborg says about heaven and hell, it has become clear to me that I cannot do justice to the extent and richness of his writings in these matters. Swedenborg freely explored these realms for 27 years, and the wealth of his experience is apparent.



Yet, we might ask of what importance is a full description of heaven and hell. The answer is as follows:

Our lives on earth are brief, but we all make innumerable choices during our lifetimes. It is of central importance for each person to understand the kinds of choices which tend toward heaven or hell. Heaven and hell are the design of what lies between our lives here and God. We said earlier that the Lord creates us (and all the rest of creation) so that we might return finally to the source of all creation. Heaven represents stages of the successful return. Hell represents stages of being lost, of aimless wandering. The possibility of being forever lost is the ultimate result of our freedom.

We can hardly conceive of any other knowledge that is of so much consequence. Anyone may understand the overall design and meaning of these revelations of heaven and hell. Yet to see how they are already present in our lives takes some reflection. Even if there were no real heaven and hell, Swedenborg's work illuminates the subtle and interior aspects of our lives on this earth. But this life is a real preparation for the life to come. When we look at the design of human beings, we will see many aspects of heaven and hell since we are internally of the same design.



## Our Inner Design

**S**wedenborg's works are based on a great deal of direct spiritual experience including decades of spiritual exploration in heaven and hell. Out of this experience, his works also present the design of our lives. Each human being is a microcosm, an example of the whole. Heaven is like itself in its greatest and least forms, in its entirety and in each of its parts—like a hologram. The individual is one of the least forms, yet each person reflects the whole design of creation. So the design of heaven and hell is very much at issue when we look at the design of persons.

Although I have been a psychologist for some 50 years, I feel that the field of psychology today consists of thousands of disordered bits and pieces. A few pieces are commendable; for example, we seem to have recently figured out how to treat phobia and obsessive compulsiveness. Yet the field lacks an overall ordered design. But the psychology of

Swedenborg's writings is truly a spiritual psychology, born out of a lengthy direct experience of the spiritual worlds.

You will recall that Swedenborg began his search for the soul about 1740. This search took him on a journey through anatomy, particularly the anatomy of the brain on which he became an early expert. Yet he failed to find the soul in anatomy. Then he explored his own dreams and inner states and entered the spiritual. After years in the spiritual, he finally came to a simple definition of the soul: our soul is essentially our life, particularly that aspect of our life in contact with the Lord, the highest potential of our life. How simple this is! The elusive, mysterious soul is life, just as we know it on a mundane basis, but somewhere in our life, we can connect with the Lord and the design of it all. The soul is the deepest aspect of life that can connect each of us to it all. Can people lose this connection with the whole of creation? Yes, most certainly. If we do not know that there is anything greater than ourselves, we have no connection. People in hell are examples of those who lost this connection. So, their spiritual lives are spent in relative torment because the greatest joy is in this connection to the all. We can know and enjoy the design of it all, coming into potentialities far greater than our little self.

An essential element of the design of persons is an intrinsic way to heaven. We are made for this end. All things that lead out beyond the little self toward the all are marked by special joys, satisfaction, and pleasures. All things that lead to being locked within our limited self and its little concerns lead into some sort of unpleasant experience. This is not just some people's experience; it is the intrinsic nature of everyone's experience, our intrinsic guidance system to heaven. We each have an abundance of signs saying this is the way to go.

We can ignore these intrinsic signs, but at our peril. We all lose our way for a while, but most of us become wiser in time. Those who extol the joys of gambling, drinking, drugs, or other lesser pleasures may have never experienced the higher joys that are available, or they would not mistake the lesser for the greater. These higher joys are part of the Lord's guiding us back home. If we individually examine our own highest joys, we will be discovering our personal path back to the One because the order of our own existence contains our unique way back to the One. You are already on this way; in fact, your interest in reading this book is part of the unfolding of your way.

Swedenborg asked the Lord if he should give some of his own experiences in the spiritual worlds as illustrations; the answer was yes. So, his writings are punctuated by his spiritual experiences. For example, the following excerpt from *True Christian Religion* §§71–72 is too long to quote its full extent. Swedenborg hears a commotion from underfoot (hell). Out comes a demon pretending to be an angel. The demon shouts, “Where is the man who talks and writes about an order to which almighty God has restricted himself in his dealings with man?” The demon demanded this order. Swedenborg gives a beautiful summary:

“I will give you,” I replied, “a summary, but not the details, because these would be beyond your grasp.” I told him: (i) God is Order itself. (ii) He created man from order according to order and to be subject to order. (iii) He created his rational mind in accordance with the order of the whole spiritual world and his body in accordance with the order of the whole natural world, which is why the ancients called man a micro-heaven and a microcosm. (iv) It is

therefore a law of order that man from his micro-heaven or little spiritual world should control his microcosm or little natural world, just as God from his macro-heaven or spiritual world controls the macrocosm or natural world in all its parts. (v) A consequential law of order is therefore that a person ought to enter into faith by means of truths from the Word, and into charity by means of good deeds, and so reform and regenerate himself. (vi) It is a law of order that a person should by his own efforts and ability cleanse himself from sins, and not stand idly confident of his inability to act, waiting for God to wipe away his sins in an instant. (vii) It is also a law of order that a person should love God with all his soul and all his heart, and his neighbour as himself, and not hang back waiting for God instantaneously to place either love in his mind and heart, like bread from the baker's in the mouth.

I told him much more besides.

Here we have the whole order. God is order itself and creates all into order, including ourselves. The human mind is in the order of the whole spiritual universe, and the body reflects the natural order. Each person controls his or her little universe just as God does the whole. And how does a person come to experience the larger order? By means of an effort to sense and cooperate with the order. Picture again the Hindu/Buddhist monument of a stupa, which is a representation of the entire hierarchical order of existence. The humble seeker circles the base clockwise as though saying, "I sense the total order and wish to live in accord with it." A large stupa has many levels and stretches high above the seeker. But, by an effort to cooperate, the individual participates in the design of the whole.

## HEAVEN AND HELL WITHIN

As was explained in the previous chapter, Swedenborg found that there are three discrete levels to heaven and three opposite discrete levels in hell. The three ascending degrees of heaven rise from the lowest (similar to life here) to the highest or innermost degree, which has the pervasive quality of love. The individual on earth exists at the confluence of heaven and hell, coming under the influence of both. This is our freedom. We can turn either way. It is as though the Lord wanted not just creatures he designed but wanted creatures that were free to choose. Only things decided in real freedom count. It appears that the seriously mentally ill are not in freedom and so are not governing their fate, while those acting in spiritual freedom are deciding their fate.

Because we are inwardly in the design of heaven, we have potentials ranging from controlling and understanding the natural world up to experiencing celestial love itself. Even though it appears we have to die to experience heaven and hell, the opposite is true. We are already made up of both potentialities, so we have experienced something of heaven and hell while living on earth.

We must become accustomed to mystery. Although we come from order and exist in a giant ordered universe, we can easily be puzzled about the order. How much do we really understand of our own order? Not a lot. Even if we died and went to heaven and were instructed by angels, how much would be left to discover? Everything. We are in a massive order, far greater than we can understand. Yet we are not alien to this order but are created out of it, so we can have some vague intuitive sense whether a thing is more likely true or not. This sense can be deepened and can even lead to

enlightenment, which is essentially being shown critical aspects of the order by God. The main point of mystery is that it is all right to view yourself as mysterious to yourself and embedded in a mystery greater than yourself. The opposite, a self assurance that we know it all, is deadly in its implications. It makes one too presumptuous. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, there is a lovely saying, “We are not given to understand it all.” So even though this book is about the ultimate design of it all, life surely remains full of mystery. The Lord is wise enough to sense our trying in the midst of this pervasive mystery.

We stand at the conflux of heaven and hell; this is our freedom. Through the choices we make in this life, we are setting our potential for heaven or hell in the life to come. The way to hell turns in on the self, regarding one’s self as more important than anything else. The way to heaven leads out from the self into interest in and cooperation with all else. The way out beyond the self is marked by special joys. The way to hell, away from it all, into regard for the self as the all, leads to a constricted painful existence. The basic design is as obvious and sensible as that.

## **INFLUX AND RECIPIENT VESSELS**

Since Swedenborg’s writings arose out of years of direct spiritual experiences, we might expect that they could come up with discoveries unlike the formulations of most religions. Swedenborg approached the spiritual worlds as a scientist seeking the truth. He wondered what it was like to die, so he was ushered through the experience of dying, as he relates in *Heaven and Hell*, Chapter 46. Later, he noticed something

called *influx*, which simply means something from a higher spiritual realm flows into a lower realm and arranges the lower realm into *correspondences* of the higher realm. For instance, he was shown how angels could affect his dreams by influx out of the spiritual realm. Dreams, then, can be a correspondent, on our level, of the intent of angels on a higher level. Swedenborg gradually saw that the Lord governs the innermost heaven, which conditions the lower realms that inwardly influence us. Through this spiritual influx, the Lord rules all. Influx always flows from a higher to a lower realm. Lower realms in no way can flow into and shape heaven. The lower cannot influence the higher. But the higher, through influx, is the real power behind the lower. Thus the Lord rules all, even the hells.

But can we experimentally find influx in our own lives? Yes. We dream, don't we? Are we clever enough to create the subtle symbolism of a dream? If we were, we would know immediately what each dream means. Or do dreams just appear? Dreams and all spontaneous inner imagery are examples of influx. Negative and even murderous imagery comes from hell. We are at the confluence of heaven and hell.

But there is an even better way than dreaming to experience influx. Those who set their mind adrift in meditation discover all sorts of imagery and inner events. This is pure influx, which anyone can observe. Some images can inflow from heaven or hell or in-between realms. When I experience influx, I always find it surprising. Why did I suddenly visualize this? Influx occurs in a sudden, surprising, often not understood mental event we did not deliberately construct. Creative people are given all sorts of ideas out of the blue. When I lie down to rest, I bring paper and pencil with me because the author in my head may have other writing ideas



even when I am ready to nod off. Carefully observe one day how much simply arises without forethought, and you may notice a good deal of influx.

But there is a deeper sense of influx in Swedenborg's works: we receive our life itself out of the spiritual. In *Arcana Coelestia* §3318 and *Divine Love and Wisdom* §§4–6, he states that we are actually recipient vessels. Each person and all existence are supported out of the spiritual. Recall the image of God's manifesting on successively lower levels in the image of the stupa. In this way, we receive life so we are really recipient vessels. We are not alone in this process; the whole of creation, except God, is a recipient vessel. Each person is a recipient vessel amid a creation of recipient vessels. This seems to be contrary to our sense that each of us is a person or self who rules his or her own body and life. Swedenborg makes clear that we rule *as if* from self.

A number of things supports our identity. For one, we have a body we can more or less control even though most of its inner functions are a mystery. We have a name, an identity reinforced by others and even by the law. We have a memory of events up to this moment. All these things support our sense of being someone. With the sense of self on one hand versus our being recipient vessels on the other hand, we have a major paradox.

First, Swedenborg makes clear that we are to act as though we are responsible. The quotation above on order included this aspect, so I will repeat part of it:

(iv) It is therefore a law of order that man from his micro-heaven or little spiritual world should control his microcosm or little natural world in all its parts, just as God from his macro-heaven or spiritual world controls the

macrocosm or natural world. (v) A consequential law of order is therefore that a person ought to enter into faith by means of truths from the Word, and into charity by means of good deeds, and so reform and regenerate himself. (vi) It is a law of order that a person should by his own efforts and ability cleanse himself from sins, and not stand idly confident of his inability to act, waiting for God to wipe away his sins in an instant. (vii) It is also a law of order that a person should love God with all his soul and all his heart, and his neighbour as himself, and not hang back waiting for God instantaneously to place either love in his mind and heart, like bread from the baker's in the mouth.

*True Christian Religion* §71

So we are to plunge in and act as though we are responsible and not wait for God to do it all. But the more we explore inwardly, particularly in meditation, the more it becomes apparent that we are really recipient vessels. Swedenborg presents a basic truth: although the Lord rules all, we are given the sense of self by God, and out of this we are to act *as though* ultimately responsible.

The idea of influx and the fact that we (and all else) are recipient vessels really constitute a deeper truth. If we explore inwardly, we begin to see we receive our very life and all our ideas and thoughts out of the spiritual world. If we reflect on it, although we are each a life, we hardly know what life is, and even less how livingness is created in us. Influx can be directly experienced, mainly through meditation. When the person is passive, inwardly doing nothing, life still manifests within. After much meditation, I began to recognize influx even in ordinary daily events. Things flow in. Our lives and even our sense of being alive are given to us. The sense of

influx and of ourselves as a recipient vessel are higher spiritual insights. It is an insight on the way to seeing that only God exists and is the actual life of all.

So both views are true. On the small individual level, we are given a sense of being in control and of being responsible; out of this sense, we are to act as accountable agents. Yet the underlying greater reality is that we receive our life moment by moment. We are really recipient vessels, but such vessels as are permitted to join in and perceive creation.

If the little self uses its freedom to stand against creation, being for itself alone, it ends up in hell where its experience is tormented by its own limitations. If the little self wants to discover the real order of existence, then it can. A little exploration within shows all is given by influx. The three levels of heaven are within us and are part of our inward design. Our small self recedes into the background while coming to participate in all there is. What is the little self compared to this? The wide open vessel can know and enjoy it all. This is the subject of enlightenment to be dealt with later.

## **THE RULING LOVE, THE ESSENCE OF OUR UNIQUENESS**

There is another unique idea in Swedenborg's works born out of the fact the writings stem from his 27 years' experience in spiritual realms—that of the ruling love. Swedenborg found that the ruling love is the basis of societies in heaven. People who are alike—that is, who have the same ruling love—naturally come together. Such a group of people in heaven then can work harmoniously together to a common end so the whole society reflects an aspect of divine order. For instance,

those who enjoy caring for and instructing children comprise a society in heaven. There are heavenly societies reflecting different kinds of arts and the creation of beauty. I hope to join a society of those who enjoy learning of ultimate things and presenting these for the use of others. So what is this ruling love that brings together like-minded people?

Each of us was created with a unique ruling love, an in-born central tendency. Obviously, we have no part in creating this. It is present all along in each person. Say we have a society of people of a similar tendency who want to create painting. Each painter in the society will still have a unique love that his or her art expresses, so each is a unique expression of the love of creating beauty by painting. But because they are all painters in this society, they enjoy being together and support each other's art. It is as though the Lord's love is infinite and each person is ultimately a unique ray of that love. They are delighted by whatever brings them closer to what they love, and tend to reject and hardly perceive what is contrary to it. The passages in Swedenborg's writings which describe this ruling love are lovely in themselves, as we see in the following excerpt from *The Heavenly City* §§54–55:

Our love is our life. Whatever our love is like, that is what our life is like—in fact, that is what our whole self is like.

But our primary or controlling love is what makes us the person we are. This love has many subordinate loves that come from it. These loves appear in different ways outwardly, but all of them fit in with the primary love and make one realm with it. The primary love is like their ruler and head. It guides them and uses them as intermediate goals in aiming for and working toward its own goal, which is the primary, underlying one. It does this in both direct

and indirect ways. Our primary love is whatever we love more than anything else.

Whatever we love more than anything else is constantly present in our thinking and our motivation. It is the central nature of our life. Here are a couple of examples:

If we love wealth more than anything else, whether it is money or possessions we want, we are always turning over in our minds how we can obtain it for ourselves. We feel very happy when we gain wealth, and very sad when we lose it, because our heart is in it.

If we love ourselves more than anything else, we keep ourselves in mind in every little detail. We think about ourselves, talk about ourselves, and do things for our own benefit, because our life is a selfish one.<sup>1</sup>

Swedenborg always seeks the essential, the deeper aspect. In this example, the core of the person is seen in his or her ruling love, the love that defines all the unique personal tendencies. This ruling love controls all subordinate tendencies. I know a woman artist who has a kind of kinesthetic feeling for the qualities of the lives of animals. So, it is no surprise she lives in the country with a number of pets. In college, she studied animal behavior. She is an artist who can take a piece of clay and soon has shaped a typical cat curled up and snoozing. She doesn't even need to look at a cat to do this because she has a natural feeling for the qualities of animals. Her study of animal behavior and desire to have pets are subordinate loves to her central one, her love of animals. In heaven,

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1. Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Heavenly City: A Spiritual Guidebook*, trans. by Lee Woofenden (West Chester, Penn.: The Swedenborg Foundation, 1993). This work has also been published under the title *The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine*.

her central love can be further elaborated into more aspects of her unique ruling love. Again, we quote from *Heavenly City* §56:

Whatever we love more than anything else, we have as our goal in life. It is what we pay attention to in everything we do. It is present in our motivation like a hidden current in a river, pulling and carrying us along even when we are doing something else. It is what moves us. This primary love is what we look for and see in other people. Depending on what their primary love is, we either use it to influence them, or we work together with them.

When doing what we most enjoy doing, we feel most free. We give ourselves to the task and thoroughly enjoy ourselves. It is our personal way to heaven.

Yet the ruling love can be perverted and turned against itself. The potential painter may become a bitter critic, finding fault with other painters' work, hoping to destroy their reputation. This critic may wish to lower others and fantasize that this act elevates himself. The destructive critic (who is choosing hell) is the opposite of the painter who loses herself in her work and hence chooses heaven. Also this idea illuminates what true human freedom is. We feel most free when expressing our deepest love, when we are doing what we most enjoy. We are also realizing our highest potential. In this world, we tend to think of a person's highest potential in worldly terms, such as asking how much has this or that person shaped the world. In spiritual terms, our highest capacity has a much wider scope. It can involve anything, whether or not significant in the world's eyes. Anything that contributes to the quality of life is equally wondrous.

Can we know our own love of life? Yes and no. A few

people early in life sense the way they want to go. We often hear of great artists who knew as children what they would most enjoy. I am one of these; even as a child, I knew I would seek the design of existence and would write of it. It is part of my given love of life. Others seem to be on a long search for their ruling love. I have found that many women are delayed in finding their unique love until the children leave home. You can begin to guess at your own ruling love by asking in which situations you are happiest and then by looking for the thread that connects these situations. In what situations do you lose track of time because you are enjoying yourself so much? Of course, events in the spiritual very much define our unique place in the scheme of things.

According to Swedenborg's writings, our ruling love is the very essence of our uniqueness, our own path to heaven and to enlightenment. The implication of a heaven that is an immense coordination of many unique ruling loves is that heaven welcomes, needs, and tolerates an immense variety of people. This heavenly variety is far different from churches that secretly hope to convert the world to their own way. The real order of things is a good deal wiser than that. It amazes me that the science of psychology, with tens of thousands of studies, has come nowhere near the simple idea of the ruling love, the key to understanding human uniqueness.

## **THE DEPTH ASPECT OF PERSONS**

The depth aspect—the larger potentialities of ourselves and of the realities beyond us—pervades these writings. This aspect takes us beyond surface appearances into the real nature

of things, which is all our potentialities and the way into greater pleasures and enjoyment.

What is the spiritual? We are spiritual and live in the spiritual. But the real awareness of this opens when we consider the larger dimensions of life. Then we consciously enter into the spiritual. So the spiritual is not some rare or strange life—it is our life just as it is, but especially when we consider ourselves and life in relation to ultimates. Although the world's various religions present the garnered and sacred wisdom about ultimates, an actual description of heaven and hell finally gives some relative certainty to our understanding.

When we consider heaven and hell and our life in relation to ultimates, we may confront a curious paradox. The way to hell is marked by false ideas and limited assumptions. We can picture a person on the way to hell saying, "When you are dead, you are dead. There is nothing else." "Religion is the opiate of the people." "Because I live only once, I'll get all I can and have all the fun I can." In contrast, the way to heaven is marked by mysteries. We are a mystery, surrounded by mystery. The way to heaven is marked by a humble seeking for what is better, even in the face of all these mysteries. So, hell is marked by foolish and limiting certainty, while the way to heaven is marked by a very sincere effort in spite of profound ignorance. No wonder we have so many religions. If the way to heaven were marked by some ultimate examination of our cleverness, none of us would succeed. But if the key to heaven is really in the sincerity of the effort, then we all have a chance to succeed, even in the most limited circumstances and with limited capacity. It is paradoxical. Those who are most sure they are right are destined for the limitations of hell. Those destined for heaven are far less sure but try to work humbly with what they perceive to be the real



order of things. These people have the key to ultimate discovery.

There is a clear loving aspect to entering into depth. The astronomer who plies his or her science with a certain awe and respect for the heavens is already living in the spiritual. The spiritual is all the larger aspects of our existence, with or without a God being named. Some of the incarnations of God are beauty, wonder, and awe at the order of things. This is “religion” in its humble origins. Love some aspects of existence, and you have a good start. We could literally keep a notebook of how many times a day we were in the spiritual and what came to us in this state. At this moment while writing this, I am listening to Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No. 1. I wonder: I am writing this or is the music? Thus, in the spiritual, we experience a rich mix of things.

Swedenborg often speaks of the “external” and the “internal”; chapter 3 of his work *The Heavenly City* describes this quite well. The external and the internal express the same basic distinction as in the spiritual above. We are in externals when caught up in things of the world, even in bodily concerns. We are in internals when we consider our ends, what we love above all else, what we really want out of life. We are even in internals when we reflect on our real nature. Thus, externals involve specific mundane things, like “Has the price of this milk gone up?” Internals are more general. They take in a greater sweep of our life. For instance, when reflecting on our life, we are, as it were, compiling the general tenor of many memories. This deeper and broader aspect of our own internals is true through all the spiritual worlds. In Chapters 27 and 28 of *Heaven and Hell*, Swedenborg describes the speech and thought of angels, which comprises so much more than our own. In our own internal being, it is easier to deal with much all at once. I started

writing poetry because a single poetic image could describe a wealth of things. When our own internals are open, it is as though we visit a broad, wondrous, and ideal world of possibilities. It is indeed like heaven itself because our innermost internals are in the form of heaven itself. If we were to see another person's internals, we would see them in what they really are. Great mystics sometimes see people in this depth. A man had fought cancer and seemed to be well, but he couldn't shake off the feeling he might be ill in some deeper way. He went to see Sai Baba, who said in greeting him, "But you are well already!" thereby perceiving and answering the man's real question while first meeting him.<sup>2</sup> In our internal, we can perceive aspects of heaven. As Swedenborg found, the innermost heaven is the celestial, a sphere of love; and, in our internals, we can experience our deepest loves and the loves of others.

Even in our memories, there is the external and internal aspect, according to Swedenborg's writings. The external of memory is filled with the details of our outer life, while the internal memory contains the deeper, more touching, and sacred experiences that shape our life and reflect what we really are. In *Arcana Coelestia* §1739, Swedenborg even describes our inner memory of everything sacred, terming it our *remains*. When faced with death, people draw on their remains, their personal treasure of spiritual understanding. The inner memory and our remains are the depth aspect of our memory. This is explained in *Arcana Coelestia* §561:

But what are remains? Not only the goods and truths  
which one has learned from the Word of the Lord from

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2. Recounted in Howard Murphet, *Walking the Path with Sai Baba* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1993). Sai Baba is an important contemporary mystic in the Hindu tradition.

early childhood onwards and so had imprinted in his memory, but also all resulting states, such as states of innocence from early childhood; states of love toward parents, brothers and sisters, teachers, and friends; states of charity towards the neighbor, and also of compassion on the poor and needy; in short, all states involving good and truth. These states, together with the goods and truths that have been imprinted in the memory, are called remains, which the Lord preserves with a person and stores away in his internal man, though the person himself is not at all directly conscious of this. Here they are separated completely from the things that are the person's own, that is, evils and falsities. The Lord so preserves all of those states with the individual that not even the least of them perishes. I have been given to know this from the fact that every one of man's states from his infancy right through to extreme old age not only carries over into the next life but also reappears. Indeed those states are exactly the same as when he lived in the world. Thus not only are goods and truths in the memory carried over, but also all states of innocence and charity.

Again we have an instance in which Swedenborg reports a surprising aspect of the spiritual world we might not have guessed exists. Remains and the interior memory contain our treasures.

Here are examples of remains. A man is in an airplane hurtling to earth. He is about to die. He prays to the Lord just as he once did long ago, as a child. Or a criminal with a life of cheating others has a remain. Once in an idle moment, he helped a child in trouble. He will not forget the pleasure he felt. Why? Because he had touched the way to heaven.

Over and over again, Swedenborg's works deal with

dualities such as good and truth, love and wisdom, substance and form, will and understanding. In fact, he conceives of the whole human mind in terms of will and understanding. It was some while before I saw the significance of this. All of the dualities in his works circle around a single issue that permeates our lives and reflects the realities beyond us. Let us examine will and understanding, which characterize our life and mind. Once we understand this duality, we will be able to understand all the other dualities.

In each of these dualities we are given an interior and critical one (in the case of the mind, will) and a less significant, outer one (here, understanding). The will, being the more interior, is the less obvious. The person can speak at length of his or her understanding, so it is the more external and obvious. But how that person expresses his or her will can lead to heaven or hell. The outer understanding is far less critical to our destiny. We can understand all about the spiritual and lecture extensively on it and still be destined for hell. What you will—what you do—is critical. This is the same as saying one's end or real intent is everything in the spiritual. People can easily pretend and falsify their exteriors, such as when they try to impress others. So, the dualities expressed in his writings are another way of describing ourselves in depth.

Let us apply this to people. A man might make a living lecturing on human love and yet be rather cruel to his family and may even set out to defeat competitors. Here the outer does not match the inner, in which case the man tends toward hell. But suppose we have a woman who is almost tongue-tied and unable to speak on these things. Yet she is loved by many for her pleasant ways and kindness. She has the key to heaven. Heaven does not rest on clever words and any kind of pretense—it rests on actual kindness.

In all the dualities addressed in Swedenborg's writings, we have one aspect that is the inner and absolutely critical. At best, the other, outer side of the duality is merely a sign of the inner. We come into the spiritual when the depth aspect of the duality is accurately reflected in the outer reality. In this case, one's wisdom is of love. Our understanding stems from our will, but our good is expressed in truth. That is, joined together, understanding and goodness comprise a congruent life in which each person expresses and shows his or her deeper side. When the duality is joined into one, life exists. The frequent use of dualities in Swedenborg's writings points to this depth understanding. Congruence in these is the way to heaven.

This can be illustrated. In the period of Swedenborg's journal of dreams (1744), his main problem was that, while outwardly he was a very verbal and clever man, he was weak and ignorant on understanding love. This was portrayed in dreams as his relationship to women (love). One translator was so scandalized at the apparently sexual content that, although translating Swedenborg's journal into English from its original Swedish, the translator translated the sexual dreams into Latin! During the period in which he recorded his dreams, Swedenborg was on a major quest to find God. In his dreams, he worked out his relationship to women/love. He literally could not enter the spiritual unless he came to terms with love. When this problem was worked out, he could and did literally enter the spiritual. Ever after, one can see in his writings that love rules and is the key. God is love, and loving is a pleasant way to God. So love, being the nature of heaven and of our own interior, is critical.

So many make the mistake of believing that just the thought of spiritual things saves. Some religions clearly

indicate that faith saves. Yet Swedenborg makes clear that what we love and do is critical. So, when you see a duality like love and wisdom, think of love as the center. Wisdom arises out of love and shows something of the form and nature of love. This is the central understanding of both ourselves and of the ultimate nature of the universe. God is love, and even in reflecting on our ultimate nature, love is a good guide. If each of us can find our own positive ruling love, we realize both our individual self and our highest gifts to the world. Our love of life is also our private and built-in path to God. So, in this way, we can begin to experience the aspects of divine love that are nearest to ourselves.

## **THE LIVING MODEL OF WHAT WE ARE**

Now we can put these elements together to form a more dynamic picture of our life. To begin with, let us not forget we are something of a mystery in ourselves and embedded in a larger mystery. A major implication of Swedenborg's philosophy is that, in spite of mystery, we should press forward to do as well as we can. Life is an adventurous discovery; we should do our best while respecting the more that is not yet understood. Religion is a culture's sacred way to approach the more.

Many things point to our inner being as more than our outer selves understand. One instance is our dreams. Others are our imagination and the ideals that arise within. It is as though, if we are at all sensitive, we have presentiments of the "more-than-self" nature of our existence. This "more" includes all the spiritual worlds of which we are a lesser aspect. We are a part of heaven and of hell, and our sense of freedom

reflects in our having both potentials. We are committed to an adventurous journey in which even dreaded death itself is a step into greater discovery.

The way to a higher and more satisfying life is toward all that brings us our highest pleasure, including realizing our innermost ruling love. The pleasures associated with hell are brief and often mixed with painful guilt, so not worth it. The joy associated with heaven opens to a larger sphere in which one works with others and comes to experience a larger universe. We can enter into these states because we are a microcosm, created in an image of it all. So, the image of love as the source of wisdom is not only a guide for each of us into our real nature but is also an aspect of the worlds to come. Through understanding and wisdom (which is life understanding), we can approach the threshold of higher worlds. Our individual love—and love in general—is the key to the highest heaven, whether within us or within the universe since these two are really one. If we realize our true nature, we have the way to the all.

Many people have asked why the Lord permits evil. If we consider it, evil really means what is contrary to our will. So, an immediate answer is that such evil illustrates that we are not God. A deeper answer is provided in *The Heavenly City* §276, where it states that God permits evil so that the good may be illustrated. Without darkness, we cannot really understand light. If we survey a variety of people, we will find that often they have experienced rather different evils. The evils we personally experience make us permanently opposed to certain kinds of evil. So the darkness in an individual's life brings about certain central eternal tendencies. The person who has lived through political leaders tearing up society for their own personal gain may forever be the one who eternally

treasures and promotes peace and cooperation between people. The evil in my life has been a lifetime of serious illnesses. As a result, I have an innate interest in healing and health. Actually, one purpose in my writing this book is healing in a cosmic sense. An appreciation of the order of things is, in itself, a healing of a person's relationship to this order. Being in accord with the order of things is well expressed in Chinese Taoism.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the evils we experience are a divine way of shaping our eternal tendencies. In heaven, the refugees of the world will eternally treasure peace and amicable relationships. The survivor of several bad marriages will ever seek and value a good stable relationship. The blind will value seeing.

In every instance where God seems blind and uncaring, we fail to see the real form of things from our limited perspective in this world. Were we able to see the eternal uses, we might, like God, permit evil. This does not make evil good; but, in spite of all our efforts to stand against events we do not choose, we might notice what deeply ingrained tendencies are being built into us. This can combine with the love of life to create our eternal use. Evils are permitted that we might learn and perhaps be conditioned for our eternal use. Compared to eternal uses, the evils of this world are like a bump put in the road to slow people down.

Swedenborg's works present a simple model of what we are to do. The Lord gives each of us a sense that we are responsible; thus, in all situations, we are to act responsibly.

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3. See Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. by Stephen Mitchell (New York: Harper, 1988). There are many translations of this key work of Taoism. Written around 500 BCE, it introduces a non-Western, Chinese view in which all things are interrelated. I consider one's religious education incomplete without a knowledge of this work.



But, as we progress in our coordination with the real order of things, we begin to discover what the celestial angels know. Only the Lord really exists. We are like recipient vessels. In this world, we receive influences from both heaven and hell; but, as mere vessels, we are not to take credit for either heaven or hell. This leads to seeing ourselves as very little, if anything at all. The Lord is the all. We are just an element of all this, an element caught in cosmic events, like a cork in a storm at sea. But this little cork has a number of guides:

- (1) heavenly joy, our primary guide
- (2) the world's religious traditions, the collected wisdom of a people or a culture
- (3) our individual ruling love, an implanted guide to the best way for each person and his or her place in the scheme of things
- (4) the inner memory of life's critical discoveries, our remains which are our personal treasure of spirituality
- (5) the ability to explore our own internals in the spiritual practices of various traditions, especially in meditation
- (6) the hard knocks of life, lessons we can use for our eternal benefit.

Rather than God's absence, we have an abundance of guides every moment. I agree with the Buddhists that life as a human being is a very great gift, a window of opportunity, which all humans would do well to use as best they can. I would not be surprised that plants, animals, and even rocks would be envious of the opportunity of being human. The spiritual person prays for them too.

Swedenborg's works come from the perspective of years of direct experience in the spiritual worlds, which included illumination of our human situation. That we are inwardly

made in the same form as the spiritual worlds has rarely appeared in any psychology. As we become acquainted with our own depths, we begin to explore the spiritual worlds of which we are already a part. The discovery of ourselves in depth is preparation for heaven and part of the return to the One, in which we join all life.

In this chapter, we have tried to show the inner connection of the spiritual worlds beyond this one to our own experience. This is another contribution from Swedenborg's writings, for they not only describe heaven and hell but also show that our interior is really structured to be an image of the spiritual worlds. There are so many new ideas here, let us review those in this chapter.

We are essentially spiritual beings with our interiors reflecting our potential status in heaven or hell, depending on our choices. This potential will reflect in our eternal life. We are each an image of it all, a microcosm of it all.

We are created out of the order of it all, to discover and participate in the order. Hell is basically turning against the order and is marked by its own difficulties. The potential of heaven is based on discovering, cooperating with, and enjoying the order.

We are given a sense of self that requires us to act responsibly. Yet the deeper truth is that we are given our life and tendencies out of influx from the spiritual worlds. We are really recipient vessels. The sense of self is a lower-order correspondent of the life given to us. Our self is an order reflecting the larger order.

Our ruling love is our unique tendency given at birth. This governs what we notice and enjoy, as well as all of our lesser tendencies. This ruling love is the essence of a person's uniqueness; no two ruling loves are totally alike. Our love of

life is our personal way to heaven. We sense the greatest freedom when acting in this love, which is also our highest use and greatest satisfaction.

We have an external world of outer concerns and a more internal world of spiritual realities. Even our memory has an external and an internal aspect. The interior memory contains our remains, a sacred personal collection of little realizations of heaven.

Life's difficulties are permitted by the Lord as lessons to contribute to our eternal wisdom.

Basically, this life is a brief opportunity to find ourselves in the total order of things. Everything in our experience is a guide in this maturation into our way. It is enough that we try our best in the face of the mysteries of ourselves and of existence.

Now we can look at available guides that are often overlooked.



## Exploring Our Inner Life

**I**n the total design, we have descended through levels, as in a stupa, from the Divine, through the spiritual worlds, down to our interior. Up to this point, the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg have been the major source. Now we leave them to approach Eastern religious practices. Early on, we said that our interior is very much part of the overall design. This is not apparent if we look at just our conscious life. Because we seem to ourselves to be so much a unique and separate unit in the scheme of things, we can easily wonder if the overall design has much to do with us. Maybe humanity is just a chance fluke in the design of things, and we are destined to shrivel and die like a plant. Many do not believe in God. The spiritual worlds seem remote; we have to die to find out if they are real or not. In part, this gloom and remoteness stem from not looking at our own inner life, which is available to all of us and naturally illuminating. It is strange

to announce that an elevated experience is readily available and yet so little known. But this is an area in which the real order of things becomes apparent and available.

Our life has a distinct inner aspect in addition to the outer. Many people are so involved in outer things that they hardly know there is an inner, let alone how to explore it and what is there. A portion of our inner shows in our sleep and dreams; few pay attention to these inner events either, even though the dream is a useful image of our real status. But the royal road into the inner world is meditation. All religions that regard one's own personal discovery as the real essence of religion (for example, Hinduism and Buddhism) use meditation as a major tool. Meditation is a valuable tool even if one has no religion. We will not go into techniques of meditation because there are plenty of competent books on that subject. Instead, we will deal with the adventure of exploring your inner life. So here we will slight techniques in favor of understanding the inner landscape of meditation.

First, what is the basic situation of meditation? In regular practice, you would decide on a comfortable time and place. Sit or lie down, as you wish. Your eyes can be open or closed. Much of my own practice takes place in the middle of the night when I feel wakeful; I have found that some understanding is being given to me at this time. The basic attitudes of meditation are (1) to let your mind go and (2) to observe whatever arises—the opposite of daily living where you, in effect, are driving the bus of the self in traffic! In daily activities, you are busy adapting, getting things done. In meditation, you let your mind go; but, because you are awake and alert, you can observe what is going on. These are the simple basic parameters of entering your inner world.

If you wait to meditate until you are tired, you will easily

fall asleep. Sitting up with eyes open will help prevent sleep. Early morning is an excellent time to meditate when you are rested and about to greet a new day. In addition to letting your conscious mind go, I will also speak of posing questions and other activities. But these rest on becoming accustomed to meditation first, so the process is not really disturbed if you play with it a bit.

The basic situation is relaxed alertness, letting the mind go. The mind, however, will continue to express itself, and you are there to observe what it is up to. There is nothing to control or to achieve. Let it be, watch, and learn. It is a slow gentle exploration. You only need 15 to 30 minutes a day. At first, the exercise may seem empty and boring; that's because you have not yet come into its mood and feeling. Give it time. Great meditators of the past stared at plain cave walls and found their way into ultimate wisdom. I stared at an Eastern Orthodox icon 30 minutes a day for two years and consider it one of the most delightful and instructive periods of my life.<sup>1</sup>

Your first task is to become accustomed to this state. You are not in control. You are present only to observe. Do not grasp at whatever arises; just let it go by. This is a leisurely relaxed state, an excellent way to leave stress behind. The first effect you may notice is that your breathing slows and you become peaceful. There is nothing to do but to remain alert and notice the underlying processes of mind. Soon, you will notice a good deal is going on. Feelings, thoughts, images, and even words may come and go. Your inner world is very alive, but it differs from the outer life that usually engages you.

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1. See Wilson Van Dusen, "Gazing at the Spiritual in an Icon," in *Beauty, Wonder, and the Mystical Mind* (West Chester, Penn.: Chrysalis Books, 1999), 83–96.

When you first try to meditate, you run into what has been called the “monkey mind,” like that of a restless monkey jumping from this to that. When you learn to meditate, the monkey slows down. You may experience “one-pointedness,” in which the mind is steadily focused. As you become accustomed to the inner state of meditation, it becomes easier to reach one-pointedness. One-pointedness is like meditating in a Zen garden and becoming one with the feeling, mood, and tempo of the whole garden, a way to savor your own inner experience. Without this experience of the inner life, you live on the surface and conceive of yourself in a limited way. Meditation expands the concept of your own nature.

An early experience in meditation is that it becomes a natural antidote to egotism. When you have spent some time watching thoughts come and go, you lose the vanity of thinking you run this whole show. Obviously, the world blooms and blossoms without you. It shows a wisdom that you, the little meditator, barely can understand. You are in the presence of life and wisdom; and, if you do not disturb them, perhaps you might learn from the experience. Soon, you are not just watching but coming to appreciate. How opposite it is from your theory of yourself before meditating, when you thought you (ego) were the only one in there and in control. After meditating some while, you find you come out on a verdant landscape full of life. Without any input from you, you find your mind fully occupied and busily doing creative things. You shift from ego doing everything to ego finding itself in the midst of a new garden of life.

One of these new things that arises is called “autosymbolism.” Given any inner state, however subtle, the mind can speak of it or represent it in imagery. For instance, I was reflecting on my heart irregularity. Suddenly, I envisioned a

brass clock wheel. This image felt comforting. There was a brass wheel in me, so my heart could become regular. I once was reflecting on a dull headache when the words “power thought” came to me. I recognized how the words confirmed something I long suspected. My headaches are like powerful ideas jammed in my head. They have to be gotten out to relieve the headache.

The inner world has an immense and endless capacity to represent itself. This means it shows forth its nature. All I had in mind was a headache, but it came forth with a representation of the real nature of the headache. This is condensed spiritual speech, “spiritual” because you are given the real nature of a thing. Swedenborg describes the speech of angels in heaven as being condensed like this. Words in this state are not an auditory hallucination. Instead, they are just suddenly there, in your mind, almost as though you thought them. But they come as a sudden surprise because you did not create them, the opposite of your own thinking, which does not emerge suddenly or come as a surprise. Without a long background of reflecting on headaches, I would not know what “power thought” meant. In addition, I had to reflect a while to understand these brief words.

Dreams are autosymbolic, which means that we are each given a symbolic representation of our true state at that time. Somehow, autosymbolism is a natural capability of the inner, one of those primal guidance systems in the inner world that most people hardly know exists or even use. Here is a clue to understanding autosymbolism. Try to get back to the thought and mood you were in when the image or phrase arose. That is what it represented. These brief autosymbolic phrasings go by so quickly that you may have trouble catching the words, let alone the state out of which they arose. But when the state



is put with the words, their meaning is clearer. They are a creative symbolic representation that contains higher ideas. It is not a simple repeat or rephrasing of your situation. For instance, an implication of “power thought” when reflecting on a headache is that, if I were to get these ideas out, as in writing, they would hurt less. And that is the actual situation.

So far as I can see autosymbolism is a natural capacity that arises out of our being spiritual beings. It has nothing to do with status, religion, culture, or anything else, but simply exists in all persons. Swedenborg regards it as an example of correspondences and representations. What is the implication of this natural autosymbolism? Within our understanding, there is another awareness that sees better, further, and more creatively. In the East, this alternate awareness has been referred to as a “mirror mind” because it reflects our essence and enables us to see ourselves better. Isn’t it odd that this faculty, available within everyone, is barely known?

## **THE BODY SPEAKS**

Often your own body is one of the first of the inner kingdoms heard from. Is there pain or discomfort? Pain too can be accepted as part of what arises in meditation; but, in the meditative state, you can look at your own body using your inner tools.

In the inner world, the body is something of a mystery. Without it, we could not get around and do things, so its function is essential. Yet the body has so many regulatory processes going on moment by moment that it is as though we are accompanied by some mysterious wonder. Now and then, it cries out with pain or discomfort. If ordinary

medicine provides a quick easy solution, take it. But often the medicinal solution has undesired side effects. In meditation, you are always observing what arises in the inner world. It may be simple pain or discomfort you can then observe. Your sore feet immediately arise with an image of walking a great distance. Your back pain leads you to recall the moment you stooped to pick up a big rock, saying to yourself, “I can do it,” and hearing an opposing voice saying, “You will hurt yourself.” You can even work with this voice and meet inner criticism regarding your attitude. Sometimes, the inner finds and elaborates all your faults, a tendency in dreams. It seems a blessing that dreams are in symbolic form so we can better disregard inner criticism.

But a real, persistent, and serious bodily condition can also be reflected on. Allow the distress to be, and watch for any suggestions. The inner may well link your illness with imagery, words, or hints of some sort. At first, these may make no sense. But remember that you are in a different realm: ask the inner to help you to understand. The help may not come immediately but can arise within a few days. You become extraordinarily alert to anything that might be relevant. You run into a friend who had a similar situation, and he is helpful. I have had a medical newsletter discuss my rare condition in the issue that arrived after I was diagnosed, although it had not even been mentioned in the newsletter for five years. The help can come in the form of a sudden intuition. There is a real wisdom of the body. Asking for help from within prepares you to receive help from any source.

In recent years, I have had cancer (lymphoma) growing around my aorta. The cancer was diagnosed as inoperable and couldn't be radiated. I was told that the chance of my dying, even after chemotherapy, was 50%. The condition

hurt even when I took narcotics. I could not sleep, so I meditated, closely observing the pain. Surprisingly, I fell asleep. The next day the palpable mass was gone. Tests showed a total remission. This came as a profound surprise to me. It seemed a clear indication that I was to reflect on my body. For years I had simply overlooked my body.

A recently published book, Donald Bakal's *Minding the Body*, presents evidence for the theory that merely paying attention to the body is therapeutic; however, Bakal does not make clear how this happens. After my experience in this area, I can make a suggestion as to how it works. The body is an intelligent kingdom in its own right. When it screams with pain, it wants attention. When you give it attention, it screams less. It needs your awareness and cooperation. With your attention and awareness, you and your body begin to work out your differences. Body is aware of your ignorance but responds well to any kind of attempt at cooperation. And by honestly seeking help from any source, inner or outer, you prepare yourself to get ideas that can be tried.

There is another possibility in this realm. Remember autosymbolism or Swedenborg's theory of correspondences? In the inner realm, you may encounter symbolic representations of the real meaning of a physical problem. These are the spiritual equivalents of a disorder. For instance, heart problems often have to do with love, anger, or strong emotion. Difficulties in digestion reflect accepting and making use of the environment. Psychosomatic medicine is filled with such representations. If you are given an autosymbolic representation of your illness, reflect on it, play with it until you can see its truth. All this inner work is not to replace the ordinary conception of ourselves as a complex machine that needs to be kept in order, but it is a deeper aspect of living with a body.

It is better to work with it and cooperate than to overlook and neglect it.

In this inner world, you will always deal with mysteries. Your inner attitude in this matter is critical. If you assume there is nothing in the inner world of any use, you deprive yourself of all its possibilities. This could mean an untimely death. In the inner realm, we often have partial understanding and intuitions that should be checked out. It is well to assume you are dealing with a wisdom greater than your own because, over the long run, that is what you will find. Seek, try, play with it, experiment. The deeper aspect of yourself is a mystery. A little modesty and patience in dealing with the mystery will do quite well. It is rather like a mystery awaiting your approach. Isn't it an interesting conception that we are embedded in a mystery that is ready to cooperate with us?

## **FINDING YOUR OWN TRUTH**

We too easily assume that we know what we really want. This is another area of mystery. We slowly discover what would suit us—for eternity. One of the considerable values of old age is that a long life makes clearer your own way. What matters most to you gradually reveals your deeper currents and nature.

Suppose you spent the evening watching television. When you go to bed, you find some aspect of what you saw reverberating in you, going round and round. In the quiet space before falling asleep, notice what goes round and round; it is showing you some of your values. But it isn't only images or stories from television. Out of the multitude of situations in any day, certain ones are selected to reverberate in

you. In your quiet space, look at them. What is being shown of your values? Perhaps it is something you abhor, or it may be something you admire. Our deepest nature and values are part of the general mystery that surrounds us, and they are discoverable. An eleven-year-old boy told me he wanted billions of dollars. How much he has to learn. Billions of dollars is a whole life and career in itself. He sees only the billions. He doesn't see the whole life required.

In your quiet space, you can present any situation to yourself with a fantasy. Fantasy is an internal capacity to create an envisioned situation and decide how it suits you. Do you want the world to adore you? Try it out. In fantasy, you are famous. People crowd around your house and try to get in to see you, to get your autograph. You will have to put up fences and hire guards. Is that how you want to live? When they crowd around and want to touch you and gaze in your eyes, do you feel comfortable or do you cringe? Whenever we reflect on a situation, we are soon looking at our own values. After a few minutes of "world fame," I am quite happy to be quietly at home, practically unknown, nothing special. That is my ideal.

When it comes to making an important decision, you can use the value aspect of your inner world to help you choose. This does not involve a rational analysis of pros and cons but rather a "feeling out" of the situation. Put your concern over a decision at the center. Meanwhile, you are at a little distance, meditating, watching what arises. In this way, you allow your inner dimension to participate in the decision.

In many ways, the practice of letting go and observing what happens allows deeper currents to emerge. The basis of your decision in this realm is broader, emerging from your own life currents. You may even find that the decision you

thought so pressing has no real importance in this realm. Or you may find something significant in the inner realm that you cannot grasp. Be patient. Your values, or your way in the inner realm, extend much further than any conscious suppositions. Values are gradually shaped in the inner realm over the years. For the most part, the inner realm leaves you free, but you have to work with it and seek its help to begin to see that it reflects a deeper way, not quite like your old ways. It takes some work with the inner to begin to sense its wisdom. Out of this arises a greater ease and comfort in working with it. What is this inner? It is your own stream of life, or better yet, life itself. As such, it is intrinsically wise in relation to you. Meditation teaches we are like limited little corks bobbing on a great ocean of wisdom.

Finding your particular love of life is possible in meditation. You can deliberately seek out all those situations in which you had the greatest enjoyment. In this inner realm, you slowly savor them, taste them. Some will fall away and be forgotten. But you soon come to far more stable, even permanent, representations of the way that is best for you. What could you do forever? You may find pleasant memories of incidents from your past that touched on your individual love of life. These are your remains, as Swedenborg termed them, your personal collection of what is sacred to you. Your love of life is your central value, the center of what you really are, full of ideas, memories, and associations. This center also contains what you can do best. What do you easily remember and enjoy? That is your love of life. What do you have trouble remembering? That is not your love. Do not be afraid to fantasize. Fantasy is an inner tool to elaborate and clarify hidden currents in ourselves.

I once spoke with a woman, who began to reveal herself

through her words. As she spoke, I gradually got the impression she was an anthropologist. She was forever discovering peoples, cultures, and their ways. When I told her she was an anthropologist, she stated that she had never heard the word before. So I had to explain. A couple of weeks later, I received a thank-you note from her. This information had really helped her to understand herself. It is possible that the circumstances of your life do not permit you to live out your love of life. Even so, it is critical that you understand and accept your ruling love because it is the core of all your tendencies. We often hear of people who are financially successful in some field, when suddenly they quit and go on to some utterly different life. I knew such a man who moved on to aid turtles. You would think financial success might be enough, but not so. There are things even more important than money. The inner world can reveal these.

Suppose a woman has a love of life that she cannot realize within her present circumstances. She should try to explore it fully in fantasy to get the nuances of her way. If she could find a fitting way to represent her love of life, she could honor it in any form because her love of life is her way to heaven. It will condition her death and help her to realize her love in heaven.

Knowing your love of life is like holding the sum total of your existence in your own hand. In heaven, it is the society you belong to. Knowing it on earth gives you glimpses of your eternal destiny. The eternal is ever present, not off somewhere in a distant time. You can realize all this in meditation. Because of the emphasis on personal discovery in Hinduism and Buddhism, meditation is central in these religions. Buddha would literally not answer questions in this

realm but rather require people to go within to find out for themselves.

## PROCESSES IN A LARGER PERSPECTIVE

Often in the opening experiences of the inner dimension not much seems to be going on. This stems in part from the person's being in a hurry, while the inner flows at a slow leisurely pace. At first, it may almost seem like consulting plants; they don't answer and seem much the same from day to day.

But, gradually, your approach slows to the leisurely pace of the inner itself. Then you may discover for the first time that this practice reduces stress. You feel more peaceful because of it. You have opened an inner refuge, a sanctuary. No matter how bad the outer world is, you have your own quiet inner place to experience peace in deeper and deeper ways. It is not just that it is peaceful; *you* become peaceful too. After 20 years of working with the mentally ill, I have never known one who meditated. Mental illness and meditation seem opposite processes. The mentally ill are forever trying to bring their inner into some supposedly good order. That is what really messes up the process. The peace of meditation is found by letting the inner be. Why this paradox? The stream of life already is and flows nicely. Then an ignorant person, filled with stupid ideas, tries to change the stream. It is far better to find and learn from the stream. Go with the flow. You become peaceful and this peace spreads to daily life.

Then you can bring serious questions to the process. You will probably not get an immediate answer. In my own inner work, I have found the process prepared me for the answer over days. Then, suddenly, the answer was apparent, given



when I was prepared to understand it. Which questions should you ask? Since you are consulting the stream of life in you, it is best to consider life-sized questions, broad, serious questions of life itself. The answers, when eventually given, just flow in by influx. They are suddenly there, in your midst. Slowly, out of this comes a growing confidence that you are in touch with a process wiser than yourself. It is one thing to understand something like a computer process but quite different to be given the wisdom of life itself. Such wisdom involves more of the self. This wisdom is so much of yourself you will be inclined to live it.

There is an implication in this. Successful long-term meditation is a process that gradually extends what you thought was yourself. At first, there is just you, resolved to let your mind go and observe what happens. Later, you discover your own inner refuge, which may protect you from madness. Then, you discover you can consult your own inner life and learn to work with wisdom itself. Gradually, the concept of what you really are broadens. It is like you started out in a cramped cabin, fearful of what is outside of that space. Then, you discover all the surrounding land and forests are yours, and even the animals are friendly. Your place has enlarged out to mystery (the forests and the animals).

There are many collateral gains. For instance, you become less presumptuous about yourself. You leave the concept of a simple fixed ego behind. Your boundaries have extended out into life itself. There is mystery in your very existence. Where are the boundaries of the self if it includes the broadest mysteries?

You may find your appreciation of art and music is extended. The same attitude of meditation opens up art appreciation. Selected music can go well with meditation.

The attitude of letting things be and observing them also helps in appreciating them. If you let art be and closely observe it, you merge with that art. It is no longer alien but is part of your stream of life.

This same process helps illuminate other people. You have come all the way out of the total unknowingness of the infant to adulthood. In meditation, your boundaries have been extended to heaven knows where. A little practice in letting others be and observing them soon shows where they are too. I spent years in a long, slow observation of schizophrenics. They each had a big theory how they had to control everything. And like an incompetent government, they end up destroying everything. Is there anything in meditation about infinite control? No, the way into depth and happiness is in letting be and discovering what is there. You let deeper and deeper levels of yourself be so you can discover and work with them. You may be able to help some people. Certainly, understanding another person is the first step. But mostly people find out for themselves, as you did.

Is religion necessarily connected to meditation? Not really. One can be an atheist or agnostic and benefit from entering this process. But if you go far enough into meditation, you may begin to see the dawn of religion in you. Personally, I would like to see meditation widely recognized and used by people of all ages as a part of life, even by children. In time, we might learn how to adopt it in early childhood. Would not all benefit from little periods of quiet observation? Teenagers need it desperately; they are at a major decision point in their lives and ill-equipped with understanding. In old age, there is a natural kind of summing up of life, a preparation for dying. Meditation helps here too.

How much time should be spent meditating? You can do

well with 15 minutes a day. A practiced meditator might deliberately seek a setting where he or she could do it most of the waking day for days or weeks. Some have tried years in meditation, but this is for the very few. Most people would do well to manage 15 minutes per day. This is time enough to get acquainted with the little-known inside of your life and gradually come to realize its guidance.

Throughout this chapter, I have implied that the inner is the depth aspect of a person. You may wonder if the inner contains only a wisdom of your own life or whether it is universal wisdom. It is both. That is, the universal is quite capable of understanding the nuances and complexities of your own life. The universal helps you through the details of your own life.

Also, the whole process can be seen as a corrective balancing, as though we are stumbling, ignorant creatures who can be guided by this inner knowing. If your life is unbalanced in one way or another, the matter will come up in meditation, and you will discover a better way. This is an antidote to egotism and the foolish notion that we know all about ourselves and life. By dealing with processes greater than yourself, a certain natural humility arises. The journey within guides, enlarges, and completes yourself. It balances by bringing in aspects you would otherwise overlook. Your body and inner life need your awareness and cooperation. Your awareness is not separate. It is part of the very health of the body and of the quality of the inner life. All of life is a cooperative enterprise.

There are many other aspects of this inner journey. I have dealt with just enough to show its importance to encourage you to go this way. Some aspects will become clearer as we deal with enlightenment. Enlightenment is the way this inner

life is headed. Can this design of it all be personally confirmed? Work with the inner begins the process of confirmation. But enlightenment is the full confirmation. Enlightenment is a glimpse of the whole design. You can then see for yourself.



## Enlightenment: Returning to the One

**I**n the design of existence, the One creates out of itself all the orders of existence from the divine representations of the One, to the spiritual worlds, to the interior and exterior of the human, to the ultimate level of the natural world. There is a parallel return of all things to the One. In Hinduism, this is represented in the lovely image of Brahma (God) breathing out (creating all) and taking in a breath (all returning to the One). As in breathing, this in-and-out movement is part of a single process. The word *inspiration* means both taking a breath and being lifted to greater heights of understanding. We now emphasize taking a breath, the return to the One.

Enlightenment is the highest experience given in this world. In this experience, the individual is shown that God exists and may be shown the creation of the universe and the

whole design of existence. One mystic of my acquaintance was shown the whole of creation in a brilliantly colorful form. God, as the center of it all, emitted colorful streamers that went out into space and curved back to the point of origin. Thus, the whole form of existence from the One, out into space, and back to the One was shown. Each life is one of these streamers. Over and over again, and in various ways, mystics have been shown the design. Their various experiences all point to the design described here. One mystic remarked that he could far more easily doubt his own existence than doubt God's existence. This statement shocked his listeners. For them, their existence was rock-solid reality, whereas the existence of God was doubtful. But, for the mystic, his own self was a temporary representation of the One that is the all. His ego was like a projection on a movie screen—eye-catching but fleeting. It could blink off in a moment. He was immersed in eternal things—what is beyond the temporary show.

There are both little and great steps in the return to the One. First, let us look at the little ones.

### **THE FIRST SMALL STEPS**

Properly seen, all of human life consists of steps toward the return to the One. All that is needed is to see the Source of all and how everything functions in relation to it.

We are born into the almost-total ignorance of infancy; but, even at this stage, we have trends already programmed in us. The capacity to breathe and the need to suck are just the first to appear. Later, our muscles mature, and we practice becoming an upright, walking creature. Society in the form of

family and friends is there to guide us. The ways of our culture become ours by a subtle process. All of the early stages of maturation set our foundation. Our foundation of becoming someone gradually widens, and we make discoveries at every point. Our being someone is the foundation for the return to the One. We have become like a little god of our own universe. Religious instruction in the variety of faiths varies from poor to wonderful in the preparation for this little god/ego, which is really a temporary stand-in for the One. If young people are wise, they come to realize that they are a very small and somewhat puzzled part of the whole. If unwise, they will go through a period of seeing themselves as already knowing it all. They then see themselves as big and regard the rest of the world as small. Young people are fortunate if they live in a culture that has clear steps for graduating to adulthood. Dating, marriage, and sex open up entirely new worlds of discovery.

Our innately given and latent love of life has already been working in the background. If the young person's choice rises above peer pressure and the influence of the culture, then their love of life points the way to unique personal choices. We are not only a person among others but a unique person trying to find our own way. Some find their way easily because their tendencies are readily accepted by society. For others, their real way has to be an avocation, something done on their own time.

By young adulthood, many of the complex choices that determine our eternity of heaven or hell have been and are being made. It is best not to think of heaven and hell as places but as states of living. A preponderance of choices that places regard for yourself over others leads to a constricted existence represented by hell. Choices that lead out toward finding

one's role among others, an expansive way of living, are represented as heaven. One of the main reasons for reflecting on the design of existence is to grasp the difference between heaven and hell, which is the sum total of our life's choices. The hellish choices have no way to open up and reveal the design of it all. It is a paradox. Doing everything for yourself does not in the least improve one's situation. Rather it worsens it. In contrast, those who get excited about some endeavor useful to others find their deeper selves in becoming a contributing part of the design. Their existence potentially can expand into all there is, which is a heavenly experience. Lose yourself to really find yourself. There is a guidance system leading away from hell like choices toward the heavenly. The choices that lead toward a constricted existence tend to lead to pain. Endless partying may sound wonderful, but it leads to a whole array of dissatisfactions from hangovers on up. But activities that reflect the innate love of life in their usefulness to others bring an array of satisfactions and joys. It only takes a little reflection to discover this palpable difference. The way to return to the One is actually clearly marked. It is as though the entire order of life prefers we return to the One

We need to get over the prejudice that only pious reflection leads to the One. The way is as simple and challenging as heading for your highest and longest-lasting satisfactions. Thus, as we have said, our personal love of life is our innate and individual way back to the One. Find and live out your highest and longest satisfactions and you head back to the One, which created them in the first place. Our love of life leads to our highest use, which is our individual place in the scheme of things, both in this world and in heaven. Recall that the societies of heaven are divided into people of similar



loves, so it is our place in heaven and what we are ultimately good for.

Seen rightly, all aspects of our present life are very much part of the return. In the spiritual view of things, we become quite accustomed to working with unknowns. Our own bodies have processes we depend on that we either vaguely understand or have no idea about. We see much of the foolishness of our life, even more so with age. We also come to see our own errors in terms of hell versus heaven. The wonders of the innate and God-given love of life gradually unfold in larger potentials. We have a whole inner world that is easily accessible through meditation. We become students of our own larger potential. We are always working with ultimate mysteries and doing our best. Learning is eternal.

One mystic of my acquaintance was dying. He somewhat feared the responsibilities of heaven but was greatly cheered to find continued learning was possible in the afterlife. He did not have to plunge into great spiritual responsibility. He would arrive like an impressionable college freshman who was excited about all the course offerings. Out of a greater wisdom, his ultimate use in heaven would emerge.

Much of life is settling on an ideal and then working toward it. There is much on this in the raja yoga of Hinduism. Working toward ideals in this life, we taste eternity. Spiritual eternity is not endless time; rather, it is significant time. We can easily tell when our experience is significant and memorable. When we find our highest and longest-lasting satisfaction, we are also encountering significance. A boring term in prison or doing things you would just as soon forget is an example of insignificant time. Life is a schoolhouse in which we discover what is significant to each of us. Finding our highest and longest-lasting satisfactions introduces significant time,

as does finding our love of life or our greatest uses. All experiences of significant time give a foretaste of spiritual existence. It is eternal in the sense of forever living a life in significant time. Spirituality is simply finding a life of the highest significance. And this is also a return to the One.

A long life with all its twists, turns, and pitfalls is nicely designed to educate a person both as to what really is and to show each person what he or she truly is. So, everyone spends a short time (that is, a lifetime) in the schoolhouse of existence. There are many lessons, and the overall curriculum is broad. Here are subjects in the curriculum:

- (1) The person with a body in a material world
- (2) The person with other forms of life, such as plants and animals
- (3) The person with other people
- (4) The person in the midst of conflicting theories of existence
- (5) The person with an inner way to see it all.

Each of these could be traced out as part of the way to return to the Source. All levels below the One are levels of representation of the One. Since the material world is an ultimate representation of the One, learning to work with the world is a way back to the One. The world is part of the ever-present real, and so is your body, a temple of the One. How good a temple keeper are you?

In our work with the other forms of life (plants, animals, and even the soil), we are really tested in our understanding of and consideration for the less-than-ourselves. This is part of our choice for heaven or hell. Some ecologists will wake up in heaven surprised to find that respect for the rest of existence is so significant a choice. But, of course, respect for all of existence leads back to the One.

In our interactions with others, we confront the double mystery of what we really are and what they really are. Again, the choice of heaven or hell hinges on this. In enlightenment, we make the odd discovery that others and ourselves are really one. What I do to them, I do to myself. In hell, the spirits see themselves as really superior to all others. In heaven, each is the equal of all others.

That we are in the midst of conflicting theories of existence is really a delight. We must find out what is true for ourselves to find the way in all this richness. Our existence is thankfully far from simple or dull.

Finally, there is an unrequired course, available if you want it: to enter the inner way and see for yourself. My Western friends are surprised when I say this is the real essence of Buddhism. They think Buddhism must be full of dogmas and ceremonies. There are some dogmas and ceremonies, but these are not the essential. Over the centuries, Buddhism has collected ways that have worked for millions. But the only way to see the value of a practice is to enter upon it. Everything else is just “flowers in the air.” Real flowers grow out of the ground of human experience. Rightly understood, mysticism is profoundly empirical. We must test things out for ourselves, or we cannot really know. It is a life school, or a living/school.

In this way, the whole of our life is in the giant schoolhouse of levels of representations of the Divine. The Divine can be met and dealt with in any of these levels. In all of them are lessons that illuminate both ourselves and all there is. We cannot escape this school as long as we live, although we can disregard it and focus in on ourselves, only to miss the joy and scope of the greater experience.

Oddly enough, the difference between heaven and hell is

not obscure, secret, hidden, or difficult. There is pain in the self alone, attacked on all sides by others. There is joy in a widening discovery of one's self cooperating with the order of it all. All love and respect for the real lead back to the One. It is as though it is fully intended that we find our way back to the Source of it all.

### **SELF-FULFILLING ASPECTS OF THE DESIGN**

Skeptics will be the first to notice some self-fulfilling aspects in this design. Let us confront them now before we go on to enlightenment. Suppose we look in on a tribe of indigenous people, animists who believe there are spirits everywhere in the environment. We visit them in the midst of a little ceremony taking place in a river. They live next to the river and depend on it, so they are showing respect to the spirit of the river. To us, it is a bit of a surprise to see adult people dealing with the spirit of a river. What spirit? They must have created it. If we were foolish enough to attack the reality of the river spirit, members of the tribe would give us examples of times when a lack of respect for the river spirit caused trouble. These instances would seem self-fulfilling to us. To the outsider, of course, the people created both the river spirit and their ceremony to show it respect. Out of this, the skeptic would say, they discover instances where failure to deal with the river spirit caused the group trouble.

Does the river spirit really exist, or is it just a figment of their imagination? Who is right, the native or the outside skeptic? Oddly enough, both are correct. The skeptic cannot find the spirit; to him, it looks to be created out of thin air. But the

indigenous believers are also correct. They have lived near the water their entire life. Their people for generations have known the river spirit, and their ceremony of respect is a way to live next to the mysteries of the river. Over untold generations, they have worked out this matter of the river spirit. This way helps them to live in harmony with the life around them. Even as a Western outsider, if I wanted to live in harmony with them, I would learn and practice their way of respect to the river. Then, gradually, the river spirit would become alive for me too. If we lived in a mysterious and dangerous environment, wouldn't it seem wise to work out ways to live in harmony with each aspect? That is all animism is.

It is difficult to deal with internal realities we barely apprehend. It is easier to project them into some form and deal with them as this form. The whole level of incarnate gods is an example of this. Let us say the indigenous people have devised some kind of picture of an incarnate God. Because this vision is projected out of them, they can feel its reality. The image becomes a useful representation to them. To an outsider, however, the image may appear ridiculous because the outsider has no sense of the inner reality projected. As a mystic, I find this process far from foolish. It is better to have some way to deal with subtle internal realities than to overlook them altogether. Yet it is even better for the worshiper to realize that the power of the image lies within. In other words, a greater consciousness of the process is better than a mere physical representation. That a person can live in and appreciate one religious worldview rather than another simply means that he or she has found the internal basis of the preferred religion. The forms of others look strange because these alien forms are not tied to the onlooker's internal realities. Most of life involves dealing with our own projections,

so this process is not unusual. Although it may seem to be a self-fulfilling process to a skeptic, it is functionally useful to those involved.

Also note this area is one of relative realities. The skeptic cannot find a river spirit, so, for him, this is all nonsense. But the animist, raised in the framework of spirits everywhere, certainly can find and deal with the river spirit. It is a mistake to get so distant from actual human experience as to think we can know absolutely whether the river spirit exists. To the native, the spirit's existence is relative to the history and experience of his people. Moreover, to a mystic, the animist's approach seems sounder than that of the skeptic. A life of respect toward any aspect of existence is a way that leads to heaven and back to God. In heaven, the respect shown to this, that, and the other spirit opens up into the spirit of God. For this reason, the mystic Swedenborg, writing in the 1700s, said the blacks of Africa were favored by angels in heaven because they were so amenable to learning the reality of the spiritual world, while Christians in heaven, who were proud of their "superior" understanding, did not do so well (*Heaven and Hell* §326–328).

We seem to be in a realm of relative realities in this life. Those who see everyone as crooks out to steal find their attitude confirmed. The saint who treats everyone as Christ also finds this confirmed. In other words, in a world of relative reality, we are best off to conceive our highest reality and work to have it confirmed. Each way, and each religion, is a worldview, and all can be confirmed. I have explored several religions and became convinced, like Ramakrishna, that each could be workable and useful. In effect, we get back either what we have carelessly or deliberately created. In my study of the lives of saints, it became apparent that they had chosen

to seek out the highest experience possible and, through a long series of choices, had finally realized their goal.

We are all free to choose. But there are intrinsic consequences to this choice. The skeptic's way limits existence, rendering it barren, although logical. But when some say only their religion is right, they also create a limiting barrier that prevents them from seeing the wonder and uses in any other way. On the other hand, we can adopt one way while remaining interested in and respectful of the ways of others. A mystic of my acquaintance sees a heaven that is a wonderful mix of many peoples and their unique ways. Heaven is a harmonious union of differences.

The human is a realm of relative realities. We are free to confirm any of them. But the moment we begin to transcend the human, we enter an objective realm. It is as it is. We can learn to accept it as it is or run afoul of it. Many people do not even know there are objective realms. We leave the relativity of the human realm and pass into the objective the moment we open ourselves to what really is. The easiest example of the objective is the material world—regardless of our hopes and fears, it is as it is. The influential psychologist Carl Jung even called dreams objective because we cannot create them; they are simply given to us. In meditation, we enter the objective when we let things be and simply open ourselves to whatever is given to us. We cross into the objective when we say to God, “Let your will be done.” In the relative human realm, we effortlessly or deliberately set the reality we choose to find. But the objective realms transcend our choices. When we dig in the ground, we may wish to find gold, but we will have to accept the objective reality if it turns out to be only hard clay. All the objective realms are representations of the Divine that transcend our wishes. All ways into discovering what really is are ways of

showing respect to the design of creation. The scientists who spend a lifetime examining some aspect of cells are learning about themselves and the objective realm. Although their high hopes often are unrealized, an essential discovery may arise out of some odd discrepancy they notice in cells. Thus, scientists learn about themselves as an instrument of discovery. All encounters with the objective are illuminating, particularly whatever arises from within, as in dreams and meditation. Enlightenment opens up the objective realm within.

What is the relationship between the relative reality of the stream spirit and the objective reality of discovering God? The relative reality is not entirely false, as we have indicated. If we choose a relative reality in accord with the overall design of existence, it can lead into the discovery of the objective reality of God. The Hindu idea that all ways can potentially lead to God is intrinsically close to heaven. We should get over the idea that a relative reality like the spirit of a river is false because it can serve far better than the limited idea that only one religion leads the way to God. Some will balk at the idea that their religion is a relative reality. Tour the world and see that various religions are functioning in different ways, a sure sign of a relative reality. All religions point toward the objective reality of the One but are themselves in a relative realm.

Enlightenment is the highest objective experience people can have because it shows beyond all the relative levels of existence what is finally and ultimately true.

## **ENLIGHTENMENT**

When we discussed some of the inner aspects of meditation, we were presenting the beginning of the conscious return to



the One. Whenever we open ourselves to whatever is given, we are approaching the One, the objective, what is. For this reason, meditation is a major method used in Hinduism and Buddhism, two religions whose major goal is the experience of God. The experience of God is enlightenment because it enlarges our understanding.

The term *enlightenment* has been used in different ways. It is used here in its root meaning, “to be filled with light.” A few have foolishly thought enlightenment means to see light within. The light of God is understanding, that is, being filled with the sacred presence of God, which fills the person with the joyous light of understanding.

In the context of the design of existence, enlightenment represents some degree of the individual returning to the One, even for a brief time. In a relatively rich and full enlightenment, the person could confirm aspects of the design presented here since the design has emerged from mystics of various traditions. All mystics who have published their experience have contributed to our understanding of the design. Some of the greatest ones are the authors of the Hindu Upanishads, set down from an earlier oral tradition in 400 BCE.<sup>1</sup> As we have seen, the Western mystic Emanuel Swedenborg helped particularly in describing heaven and hell and the relationship of spiritual worlds to our inner life. Hinduism and Buddhism both are particularly rich on ways into the inner

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1. The Upanishads have some of the most advanced spiritual experience in the world's literature. The Upanishads are so central that it is said that, if you love and respect them, you *are* a Hindu. I recommend the one-volume book *The Upanishads*, trans. by Eknath Easwaran (Tomales, Calif.: Nilgiri, 1987). There are many translations of this text, which consists in its entirety of 108 Upanishads. The ones Easwaran covers are the essential ones.

world and to God. But these are only in the forefront of this design. In truth, all published mystics have confirmed various aspects of this design. The general agreement of mystics of all times, cultures, and religions arises because this is an objective realm of what ultimately is. The elements universally found by the world's mystics are these:

- (1) The One (given various names) is the All.
- (2) The One created all other levels of existence out of itself, as levels of its manifestation. These levels include us.
- (3) A moral life is an essential element of the return to the One in this life and in heaven.
- (4) There is a universal wish to return to and know God. Much of the return path is subtly built into our life. It is marked by a unique joy and pleasure.

These common universal elements in mysticism form in themselves an outline of the design of it all. The One creates itself into existence to go through adventures and discoveries to return to the One. Although mystics have discovered the outline of the design, it contains much that is still unknown.

There are several aspects that need clarification. Because enlightenment is the self-revealing of the One, it can only be created by the One. It is necessary to bear this in mind or individuals will try every possible stunt to create the experience of the One. The effort to create it blocks it, precisely because it substitutes our own will for that of the Divine. Enlightenment is more likely to occur when we abjectly give up. The Tibetans read their Book of the Dead to the dying and the dead to aid them in experiencing enlightenment. In Christianity, the last rites are a less vivid example of the same thing. These rites help the dying and the recently dead to put their

spiritual house in order. All acts of love are spiritually effective, reaching across worlds. Thus, love is never foolish.

One mystic was given the sentence, “The death of the self is the birth of all else.” The death of the self is giving up attempting any kind of mental manipulation and leaving ourselves open to all else. When we have given up every mental manipulation, when we accept the death of the self, then the whole spiritual world can open up. So the highest we can do is to seek God and open ourselves to whatever is given. This is the heart of meditation.

There are natural concomitants to enlightenment, common conditions that make its achievement more likely. The main one is living a moral life in which we attempt to show respect to others and to all things. In both my reading of world mystics and in contact with mystics, I have never known enlightenment to occur to someone leading an immoral life. Morality is an attempt to keep the self in harmony with all things, which is the foundation of a possible enlightenment. Immorality disregards one’s own personhood and that of others; we violate both ourselves and others. A life of immorality often makes the idea of God seem ridiculous. The basic teachings of Buddhism lay a foundation of morality as the very first step toward enlightenment, the real goal of Buddhism. Does this imply a moral perfection? No. That is perhaps impossible. The Divine sees our ends, what we attempt to do, quite well. So the essence of this process is a true, consistent attempt to live a moral life, a life that shows respect for ourselves and others. Is morality applicable only in regard to other people? Can it apply to the environment as well? Most certainly. Regard for all life, even for the environment, is a part of morality.

Morality lies not only in acts but also in the hidden inner

ends. In older traditions, God was represented by an all-seeing eye. The notion that we can put one over on God is foolish. By living a moral life, we are already attempting to be in harmony with all there is.

Enlightenment is often preceded by a long-term attempt to know God. This can be through the religion of one's culture. Ramakrishna had enlightenment following the forms of several very different major religions.<sup>2</sup> Literate people will likely study the sacred texts of their faith to look at God's revelation as a first attempt to know God, but the search for God could also function outside of any religion. Some may search their relationships with others; others may search through art. Artists often feel they are working with a higher inspiration. Their art is an attempt to get this out in a form that others can enjoy.

I am convinced that the search may well have no apparent "God" in it. Some people's "God" may be in social action or in work with plants and animals. If we look at the inner aspect of what such persons are attempting, we might find it to be much the same as a conventional search for God—reaching out for a higher realization that may be partly revealed and partly concealed their whole life. In death, they will realize it. A friend of mine was a thorough atheist with a very scientific bent. He had an enlightenment in which he met the universal energy, the force behind everything. He was awestruck by its pervasive power. This atheist simply gave God another name.

The idea of enlightenment also exists in Swedenborg's writings, where it is called regeneration. Although we could construct a picture of enlightenment from Swedenborg's

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2. Swami Nikhilananda, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1942).

works, I have chosen to use Hinduism and Buddhism for this because, over the centuries, these traditions have carefully experimented with safeguarded ways to enlightenment. Different mysticisms have contributed different elements to our understanding.

There are also degrees of enlightenment. The most common and lowest level is to sense the greater-than-yourself in nature. Even this lowest level can intensify to a strong sense of the divine presence. Levels beyond this usually occur with some loss of self or ego. This needs a little explaining. The sense of the divine presence can be so strong that the sense of self is overwhelmed or disappears. At a higher level, there may be a union of the self and God, so no duality remains. There is only the life of the Divine. Beyond this, the total order of existence may be revealed, including the One and Only, how the One formed out of itself the total order of existence, and how all existence returns to the One. The little self gradually recovers self-awareness after such an experience.

At the ultimate level, all duality ceases, even the duality of one's self and God. *En to pan*: the One is the all. The mystical union of the person with God removes this basic duality on the way to the ultimate experience of the One as all there is.

Unfortunately, the full confirmation of the ultimate design of existence—the ultimate level of enlightenment—is rarely achieved. But, of course, we are dealing with enlightenment in people on earth. In heaven, the experience of the full order of existence is common at the celestial level, according to Swedenborg. In *Heaven and Hell* §§270–272, he writes that the angels in that sphere have little sense of personal identity and live in the experience of the Lord alone as the real.

There is an apparent paradox in our discovering the Lord alone exists. How can an existing person discover this? The

apparent problem arises because it is assumed the person is a real thing and God is another thing. This is simply not true. The very core and life of every person is the Divine, the God within. When this awakens, there is no longer a little self or ego. The ego is a temporary stand-in and something of an illusion in itself. The ending of the ego can occur through the mystical union with the Divine or simply by the Divine's becoming prominent. In either case, the ego vanishes for a time. So, in Hinduism and Buddhism, all levels below Brahma or God are *maya*, or degrees of illusion. God is substantially real, being all that really is; all else is relative, an idea we will explore more later. So the ego or personal identity is a relative and temporary reality that can vanish when the real truth stands forth.

Similarly, God exists in all other people too. Out of this, the Golden Rule arises. All others should be treated with respect because ultimately they are the same as you. Mistreat them and you mistreat what is ultimately yourself. Hence, Christ could say what you do to the least of these you do to me (Matthew 25:40). This is not just figurative language; it is literal.

Enlightenment—the actual experience of the Divine—is a wonderful experience, as are all things of heaven. In this state, it is not possible to question. To question is to return to a lower dualistic state of me-versus-God. One simply drinks in and gratefully accepts what is given.

Some people often make the serious mistake of trying for an overwhelming experience, as though they say, “I’ll accept only the absolutely greatest experience.” This will cause them to wait for death itself for the real enlightenment. A far better approach is to look for tiny enlightenments throughout the day. Notice and write these down. Little

enlightenments can come in brief flashes that pass so quickly they are hard to record. Notice the smallest ones, brief moments of the feeling of “Ah ha!,” the tiny insights. It would surprise me if a seeker had even one day without these. The insights are always accompanied by a pleasant elevated feeling, as though, for an instant, everything were perfect. As you notice these insights, they will gradually become more consistent and longer lasting. Do not share these with others who are likely to scoff. The early stages of spirituality should be private, a slowly developing love affair with God. It is probably better not shared with others until it is strong and mature.

If we step back for a moment, we can see spirituality as a process. It begins in reflecting on what is most significant to each of us, our ideals and how to reach them. It deepens in efforts to realize our own love of life, the unique way in each of us. Reflecting on the wisdom literature of our own tradition deepens it. In meditation, we begin to discover what is beyond the bounds of the known self. In this, we can meet a friendly wisdom that knows us well and guides our life into wisdom. Finding little examples of enlightenment opens up the larger way. In all this, we venture out from the little self toward the All. In the end, we come to realize we were led by a wisdom intimately present in our life. The One wishes to be known. In the initial searching, the process seems long and complex; but, as more and more is found, the whole seems incredibly simple. A Buddhist scholar said his favorite book was the Sixth Patriarch’s Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra. Out of 380 pages one line stood out as the essence:

The true suchness self nature is the Buddha.<sup>3</sup>

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3. Tripitaka Master Hsuan Hua, *The Sixth Patriarch’s Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra* (San Francisco: Sino-American Buddhist Association, 1971), 365.

“Suchness” is the foundation level of our existence. In meditation, if we get beyond all the comings and goings of mind, there is a foundation level of steady being/awareness. This suchness is our self nature, and it is the true Buddha or God. It is very quiet, always the same, and the quintessence of our life and all life. It is far simpler than all the thousand volumes of explanation.

Is one religion better than another to reach enlightenment? Yes and no. At first, I was tempted to just name the religions that make enlightenment a central goal. There are many religions that hardly know that enlightenment is possible, yet alone the way to it. Yet, the Christian saying, “Knock and it will be opened to you” (Luke 11:9) is true. Much depends upon whether you are in an abiding search. All people intrinsically have the means. Even life’s difficulties are designed to lead and edify us. So, it almost does dishonor to the very nature of human experience to say this or that way is best. All ways are the way. Our lives are our way.

The experience that God is present is fairly easy to discover. Higher levels of the Divine in which personal identity is lost for a time are relatively rare and difficult to come to. It is quite rare in this world to experience a direct discovery that the One alone is. So there is a hierarchy of experiences from common to rare. In the spiritual worlds beyond this one, the situation is similar. Those in hell are likely to miss these experiences altogether. These experiences increase in heaven, depending on your spiritual level, with those at the celestial level easily finding the Lord alone exists. This whole matter is described only to complete the total picture of the return to the One. Ultimately, you do not lose personal identity. Instead, the highest experiences go with an intensifying of



awareness and the sense one is part of the all. In enlightenment, nothing is lost; rather, everything is gained.

In this chapter, I have implied much but have not spelled out the way to God. There is a confusing amount written on this, including my own small contribution.<sup>4</sup> Realize that the One designed life as a voyage of discovery. What we seek seeks us. Our own seeking comes from the One; no seeking is possible without the One. The Second Coming referred to in some religions is enlightenment in which the Lord lives again in someone's life. I close this chapter with the words of Emanuel Swedenborg, from *True Christian Religion* §786:

For the Divine love of God had no other end in creating the world than to conjoin man to himself and himself to man, and thus to dwell with man.

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4. See Wilson Van Dusen, *Returning to the Source* (Moab, Utah: Real People Press, 1996).



## Overcoming Apparent Differences

**T**he design of existence may have never been broached before, in part because of our great religious differences. To overcome this, I have attempted to view religions in a universal sense and as human processes. But, for the moment, let us deal with the heart of religious differences. At the level of the One, which is the All, there is complete unity. We cannot really describe it, for it is quite beyond our powers. At the next level down from this ultimate, we are at the level of representations of the One. Here all our gods and lesser representations of God enter. In Islam, there is Allah and the one true and final prophet Muhammad. In Christianity, there is Jesus Christ, the Twelve Apostles, and all the saints. In Hinduism, there is Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma, and a host of gods and saints besides. This level of representation of the Divine is a source of images that separate us.

## IN THE LAND OF MULTIPLE GODS

Each religion develops over time in a social and religious context. In the history of religions, some gods have appeared on center stage and then disappeared, taking with them a whole religion. At one time in the fertile Mesopotamian crescent, the bull god reigned; now it is gone. Some gods have continued but have been transformed. Avalokitesvara, a Buddhist god of compassion, though clearly male at one time, is now the feminine lady Qwan Yin.<sup>1</sup> Indigenous groups have so many spirits of various sorts that even a listing would hardly be possible. Major gods can be mythological, such as Vishnu, or real, such as Jesus Christ, or a mixture of both. An actual historical figure may be greatly mythologized. And if we add in saints and avatars (divine incarnations), our number of representations of the One greatly increase. People not accustomed to saints and avatars may have trouble seeing how they fit in with the host of gods. Saints and various kinds of avatars are regarded during their lifetimes as persons through whom God showed. So now, having died and entered the spiritual world, they are fitting intermediaries people can turn to. In ancestor worship, our own kin have entered the spiritual world. We know them and love them. They are now in the spiritual world and can act as intermediaries for us to the one God. In past ages, sacred animals were used as intermediaries to the One. So, a great number of representations of God are possible.

Through the passage of time, a given representation of God comes to feel real and valid to a people. The chosen and honored images of God are culturally determined. But some will be disturbed by this formulation. Even though their

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1. John Blofeld, *Bodhisattva of Compassion* (Boston: Shambhala, 1988).

representation was a person, with a real history—for example, Jesus—over time, he became regarded as a real God, so it no longer looks like a case of a culture’s choosing a representation. Let us look at this because it lies at the heart of the issues.

When someone else has a representation of God, we can easily say their culture chose that representation. But when it is our own representation, the God we have lived and interacted with for some time, it has acquired a higher reality and appropriately so. Our own God figure has become interiorized. It now represents the very essence and nature of our life and of life in general. It has become very real, as real as ourselves, or it may have become more real than ourselves. So to refer to it as a chosen cultural image no longer seems appropriate. Those who have not really lived and interiorized a religion may have difficulty following this. For them, no image or representation of God is real. But for those who have lived and interiorized a religion, their image is as real as themselves. When I speak of a religion in this chapter, I always mean this high level in which a religion is a real part of a person’s life.

Let us look at an example of a woman who has interiorized her religion and made it a real part of her life. I once toured a Buddhist temple with a woman who is a Christian mystic. For me, both her Christian ways and the Buddhist ways are real. But she was bothered by the guardian deities painted in large size in full color on either side of the entrance. Here were great fierce Chinese gods, threatening all with a spear. I explained that these represent forces that protect the sacred within the temple. Couldn’t she feel as the Chinese Buddhists do that it is comforting to feel the sacred is fiercely protected? She could not. To her, they seemed out

of place. But I enjoy the color, size, and vigor of protection of the sacred. They did not detract but rather made me feel the sacred was alive in the temple. To her, they were a threat. Other people's gods are often hard to recognize. So from the perspective of a person who has interiorized one form, all other forms seem odd, alien, somehow not as good or fitting. Even more simply, all other religious forms may feel wrong.

To overcome this blindness to others' ways, we should try to enter the way of others as simply a human experience. Suppose you are not a Buddhist but anything else, even an atheist. We go into the Buddhist temple with the fierce guardians at the entrance. It is quiet. This is the Temple of 10,000 Buddhas, so the walls are covered with gold niches, each with a gold Buddha. On a stage in the front of the room is a giant figure with several heads and many arms all covered in gold leaf. A little, old Chinese woman, in the brown robes of a nun, comes in and prostrates herself before the giant figure. Knowing nothing of all the surroundings, could you empathize with what she is doing and wish her well with Buddha? If not, perhaps when a few of the circumstances are clarified, you may more easily empathize with her. The term *buddha* means the enlightened one. Enlightenment means to know God directly. The 10,000 Buddhas mean this gift of enlightenment is for everyone. The golden main figure on stage has a column of four heads above his head. This represents a hierarchy of states of consciousness. The multiple arms indicate an infinite capacity to do things—omnipotence. The nun is praying to the omniscient and omnipotent One. She leads the simple life of a Buddhist nun while also baking bread in the monastery kitchen. So now, does the scene seem strange or does it make a little human sense? Atheist or believer, can

we honor what she is doing and wish her well in her seeking Buddha enlightenment?

Why are there multiple forms of God representations? Because we need forms to embody our ideals. Different forms arose out of different people's cultures and times. The One does not seem opposed to different forms. The religions of the world look like a giant tree with ever finer branches growing. When, like God, we look at people's ends, isn't it possible to respect the richness of the various ways people have found to seek God? Being in the land of multiple gods is like enjoying a vast garden with a pleasing variety of plants and creatures. The variety itself is needed. It enriches the whole. As we have said before, heaven is the harmony of infinite differences. When we look deeply into what others are trying to do, can we recognize the same life, the same wondering and seeking that exists in us? And even if we have no wonder and seeking, can we let others try in their own peaceful ways? The desecration of a Jewish synagogue or burning of a black church upsets others, besides Jews and African Americans. Whoever does such acts is opposed to the root principle of our life, respect and tolerance for our endless differences.

## **THE PRINCIPLE OF SPIRITUAL RELATIVITY**

While I was meditating, the principle of spiritual relativity was given to me, together with a review of its implications. Work in the inner world aids in any enterprise. This principle is useful in deciding spiritual issues.

The One creates all levels of existence from representations of the Divine, through the spiritual worlds, to the inner

and outer of the human, to the material world. This is a hierarchy of distance from the One. It is also a hierarchy of reality. As we approach the One, reality increases; and, in the other direction, falsity and illusion increase. In this hierarchy, only the One, the Divine, is substantially real, while all else is relatively real. Whatever approaches the One is relatively more real; whatever leads away from the One is relatively unreal.

Here is a simple but critical example. Religions themselves are only relative realities. Because they arise out of a culture, religions can disappear without the people and culture to support them. A religion's reality or spiritual substance rests on the quality of the lives of the people in it. However much theologians would like to think of their religion as transcending all human contingencies, they do not. If all in a religion are scoundrels, the religion is dead. It is also dead when no one believes or practices it. But there is a deeper relativity in religion. Insofar as it leads people to God, it has divine support. If it leads to false ideas, human vanity, and presumption, it has the seeds of its own death within it. So, in several ways, religions are relative realities that become substantial insofar as they lead back to the One. This is the basic design of spiritual relativity. What leads toward God has the qualities of eternal life in it. What leads away from God is temporary and insubstantial. You can think of this as the will of God, but it is also in the very nature of things.

I have not seen this enunciated before. When I first learned of this principle, I looked at hell in Swedenborg's experiences. There were clear indications that hell is a kingdom of appearances, of falsities.<sup>2</sup> It contains all that leads away

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2. See *Heaven and Hell* §§113, 233, 487, 539, among others. Literally, hell is not as real as heaven, so heaven and hell are not really a duality of opposites. Heaven is ultimately substantial, whereas hell is closer to a bad movie.

from the Divine, all the opposition to the general order of things. In comparison, heaven is real, while hell is all appearances, illusion, and *maya* itself.

Now let us apply this principle to ourselves. Even though many think the body is the only reality of a person, the actual is quite different. We know that the body exists but only for a short season, and it then deteriorates into the elements it was composed of. The spirit of a person is a greater reality than the body because it goes on after the body dies. But what of the life of a person is really substantial? Your love of life is spiritually substantial because it continues forever. You will recall that, according to Swedenborg, the spiritual world we enter immediately after dying sorts us out into levels of heaven and hell. The real “I”, even if we have only a vague notion of it, determines our place in the worlds beyond this one. So this real “I” transcends all our lesser notions, hopes, and fears, all the clutter of our ideas and opinions. The levels of heaven are themselves arranged in an order of greater reality from a level similar to the natural world, to the spiritual heaven of those who love their neighbor, to the celestial heaven where God is the central reality. The levels of heaven are themselves steps up in relative reality because they are degrees of approach to God.

If we look at everything people consider important, we will see that they are almost as nothing in this scheme of things. Money, property, honors, all these things are part of our brief sojourn in this world. They mean nothing against the relative reality of our inner spiritual worth, for this relates to our eternal. Of all the things human, our spiritual worth is most real for it transcends all the outer worldly aspects of us. So this principle decides relative importance and reality in terms of what is good, eternal, and God-directed. All that



leads away is toward the false, unreal, *maya*, and human strife. This principle aids judgment in spiritual matters. Christ illustrated it when he was criticized for doing good on a Sunday. He answered with a question: what is more important—man-made laws or the good that is done? Good reaches up to heaven, but man-made laws are part of the clutter of this world. You will see this principle applied when we ask if reincarnation really exists.

## **KARMA AND REINCARNATION**

Between the Western and Eastern religions, there exists a major disagreement on the topics of karma and reincarnation. Even Christianity has signs of reincarnation, but this is more common in the older religions. Karma and reincarnation are prominent in Hinduism, Buddhism, and in the Sikh and Jain religions.

The first confusing element is that, in common usage, a doctrine that is at least partly false even within the major religions is widely accepted. Let us call this “the common view.” In this view, karma is an inexorable law by which our deeds have effects; we are restricted or elevated by these effects. Upon dying, we go to a world in which our karma determines if we will be born again as a human or even as another sort of creature. This round of successive rebirths is seen as part of a cosmic process in which the soul is given a chance eventually to become wiser and free from the round of birth and death. This, then, is roughly the common view. Differences exist in whether a religion sees transmigration as possible (a person can come back as any life form) or only reincarnation (people return as people, with each round, of course, starting over in

infancy). Some accounts say this process is practically endless; in other words, few escape this round of birth and death. This is another aspect of the common view, the one most often talked about and even taught. It should be noted that this common level provides a socially useful doctrine. People who accept this view are likely to try to improve their karma so they can one day transcend birth and death and attain heaven. I hesitate to disturb an idea that is socially useful.

When we look closer, karma stands up to scrutiny; but, even under Eastern teaching, reincarnation does not. Why is this important? In this book, I have taken as my standard Swedenborg's report of years of experience in heaven and hell. Swedenborg's extensive spiritual experience found no evidence whatsoever for reincarnation. In fact, he came up with a reason that people may believe in reincarnation even when it doesn't exist. But Eastern religions' theory of reincarnation directly contrasts to Swedenborg's 27 years of experience in heaven and hell. Moreover, this is a marked difference between the Eastern and Western religions in general, at least as we have come to know them in the modern era, a difference in a critical area. Do we go on in spiritual worlds, or do we return to this life again and again?

Let us first examine karma. The word is from the Sanskrit, meaning action or deed. In the simplest terms, karma means that we reap what we sow. It is not a matter of God's judgment but is an automatic process. What we do has effects that affect the doer. In some ways, we are bound and limited by our past choices. This is karma. When linked to reincarnation, the sum total of our karma determines whether we return to live another life or not. When not linked to reincarnation, karma has a simpler and more immediate meaning. Of course, we all experience the harm or benefit of

what we chose to do. When counseling people, it becomes painfully clear how people create their own troubles. A Hindu way of detaching from karma is described in *The Bhagavad Gita*, a part of the Upanishads and, as such, an ancient text. The *Bhagavad Gita* instructs us to do our duty and detach ourselves from the outcome of our acts because the attachment to how well we are doing, how we impress others, etc., makes the karma from our acts binding.

People often think of karma as a sort of blessing or even a matter of luck, which has outward results: “He is rich, so he must have good karma.” But karma is a more powerful idea when looked at in an inner and spiritual way: “He is outwardly rich, but inwardly so badly off that I would not trade places with him.” In an inner sense, people who have practically nothing can be very wealthy in the spiritual quality and richness of their life. This is often true of saints. In the inner realm of real-life experience, we can more easily see karma at work.

One can do an entire book just tracing the personal effects of karma, as is often done in novels. In fiction, we may see how an early decision affects later events, which spin their inexorable way to color the outcome of the character’s life. Also, in novels, we can see how, with a great deal of effort, we can overcome past karmic debt. Anyone who thinks they can get away with anything simply has not looked at the full order of things. Have you ever heard of a rich gangster who lived a life of depth and quality?

The Eastern idea of karma, when separated from reincarnation, is in many ways a better description of the effect of a life of good or evil. When seen in its subtle inner aspects, it provides a useful lesson for all of us. Fortunately, karma is automatic, a part of the very nature of existence, so no

manipulation can get around it. In some form, karma is almost universally accepted by the world's religions. The Eastern formulation is stronger and clearer than the simpler "we-reap-what-we-sow" maxim.

When linked to reincarnation, karma is often presented like a mysterious, gigantic debt; we must die to learn our account balance. If we are in debt, then we must go through life in this world again. Even if we prefer this world to all others, it still is not a good choice: we will be born again somewhere in circumstances that give us the experiences needed. If we misused wealth, how about a life of grinding poverty? When linked to reincarnation, karma can resemble Western preaching about the dangers of hell. We suffer because we deserve to.

But, in truth, when not linked to reincarnation, karma can be developed as an accurate portrayal of the way things are. With just a little care, we can see the karmic benefits of even a kind word to strangers. Kindness to those we live with is even more apparent.

There is also an odd aspect to karma in Eastern religions. Enlightenment eliminates karma. It certainly destroys the accumulated karma of past lives, although it may leave some karma from this life. I have not seen a good explanation of this, but we can work out one. The social function of karma is to remind us how our acts affect our destiny. In enlightenment, there is a real sense of the golden rule: what I do to others I am also doing to myself. In enlightenment, there is a drift toward the one life, so a reminder of interdependence is no longer needed.

Linked to reincarnation, karma almost seems foolish. Do I have to wait until I die to learn how well I have really done? But, as a sharp metaphor for how we get what we sow, the

notion of karma not only makes good sense, but is part and parcel of all other religions. What we do to others in an almost automatic and inexorable way affects others and through them, in turn, affects us. Seen in an inward way, there is an accumulation of karma. The homeless, debilitated drunk has quite an accumulation. The good woman with children, grandchildren, friends, and respect has a positive accumulation. We can take practically any short segment of the life of each person and see a marked difference in the quality of that individual life. Karma taken out of the remote idea of rebirth and seen as a real immediate reality is more than acceptable: in some ways, it is a precise statement of what all religions teach.

Reincarnation is a more complex topic than is karma. Reincarnation is a fairly common idea in older religions. In Eastern religions, it originates in Hinduism and was passed to Buddhism, and the Sikh and Jain religions. In Hinduism, both reincarnation and karma are treated in the Upanishads. Even in this early source, the idea of reincarnation is associated with ignorance. To understand the spiritual tends to abolish it.

I can find no evidence that reincarnation is based on anyone's direct mystical experience. So we are comparing an ancient idea to Swedenborg's extensive actual experience in which he found no sign of reincarnation in 27 years of exploration in heaven and hell. Swedenborg's direct experience and immensely detailed description stand in sharp contrast to the rather vague Eastern descriptions of what happens after death.

We have already accepted the general truth of karma, as if it were an answer to a question asked by people long ago: "Why am I so disadvantaged, while I see others are well off?"

The combination of karma and reincarnation accounts well for inequalities: “I was born blind because I am serving out past-life karmic debt.” Karma and reincarnation are a socially useful explanation. If I am paying off past-life karmic debt, I must try harder in this cycle of life so I will be better off in the next life. Because karma/reincarnation provides an explanation and is a social motivator, it serves a useful social and cultural purpose.

And there is another element to bear in mind. We should not be surprised that cases have been found that seem to support the theory of reincarnation. Some substantial and confirmed cases have appeared in the *Journal of the British and American Society for Psychical Research*. In these cases, a child may report details of a past life, and investigation shows the child has correctly reported someone else’s past life. Or an adult may report historical knowledge that he or she should not have, but is proven true. In the 1960s, I did research on the effects of the drug LSD-25. In Western subjects, who had never heard of reincarnation, we picked up reports of past lives, although not confirmed. One subject went through a series of lives back to primal ooze before she had enlightenment. Her experience was similar to the Buddha’s, who also went through a series of past lives and then experienced enlightenment. Another case will illustrate. In one experiment, we gave LSD-25 to an alcoholic woman. She came up with the details of the life of a Bavarian woman whose life was marred by being forever faithful to a man who died young. Before the Bavarian woman died, she swore she would never remain faithful again. My patient was noted for her promiscuity. She felt she was the Bavarian woman and did not even know the word *reincarnation*.

What does all this mean? I am forced to believe that there

are occasional cases in which a person feels he or she has lived a past life. Swedenborg, however, says that this is an illusion; instead, as he explains in *Heaven and Hell* §256, we can experience *someone else's* life if that spirit exposes us to his or her own memory:

If a spirit were to talk with us from his or her own memory, then it would seem to us entirely as though the thoughts were our own, when they would really belong to the spirit. It is like remembering something that we have never seen or heard. . . . This is why some of the ancients were of the opinion that after some thousands of years they would return to their former life and all its deeds, and that they had in fact returned. They gathered this from the fact that sometimes a kind of memory would come up of things that they had never seen or heard. This happened because spirits had flowed from their own memory into the images of these people's thoughts.

This does not mean that we lived before, but it is a possible human experience that would make a person believe in reincarnation. It can happen. It happened to me. I discovered I had lived as a Mayan priest before the Spanish conquest. Moreover, I discovered one does not simply “get” some random past life; rather, it fits the person who receives it. My unhappy woman patient found a reason for promiscuity. My own Mayan priest was on a quest for ultimate knowledge, as has been true of me. There has even arisen a therapy that works through past lives to illuminate the nature of the client. Past lives are an image of the present person, hence the use of reincarnation therapy. Therefore, I am convinced there is a general human possibility for coming into knowledge of someone else's life whether they are dead or alive. This

human potential does not prove reincarnation exists. In fact, it may prove the opposite.

If anything really keeps being born again, it is surely the Divine. Then the discovery of a whole sequence of past lives could be steps on the way to enlightenment, as it was in the case of the Buddha and that of the woman I treated. When the real self is being uncovered, one may go through a series of past lives on the way to the ultimate truth—that only the One returns endlessly. It is a lot more credible that the One incarnates endlessly rather than the little ego, which is a pure illusion in both Hinduism and Buddhism, materializing again and again.

We will need to examine reincarnation in Hinduism and Buddhism separately since they differ. The Hindu version is the earlier. After death, we fall asleep and awaken in the astral planes, *astral* meaning simply “in the spiritual world.” The spiritual worlds are states of being, not places. After some learning in the inner planes (sometimes called heaven and hell), we fall asleep again and are reborn into a situation suitable to our karma. Transmigration occurs—that is, we can awaken as any sort of creature, not just as a human being. The entire world of life is seen to be on the same journey as the individual. It is thought a single life is not time enough to obtain *moksha* or enlightenment and escape this immensely ancient round of births and deaths. Those who obtain enlightenment no longer reincarnate, and they live a higher life in the spiritual worlds. There is a strong sense in this process that, if we identify too much with earthly life, we will return to it. The way out of this cycle is to identify with the Atman or God within, the real source and nature of one’s being. One’s life and awareness come from the Atman. All those who desire release from the endless round of life and death can



find it. Various aspects of the way to obtain release comprise much of the substance of Hinduism. Those who find release journey on to Brahma, the One which is the highest and most satisfying experience possible.<sup>3</sup>

Hinduism believes that there is no ego to reincarnate. What we consider personal identity or ego is a part of *maya* or illusion. How can an illusion survive death? What really exists is the Atman, which is the One in its personal aspect, related to the individual. The Atman, the divine life within, is the basis of awareness and understanding. Reincarnation is believed due to ignorance of our real nature. After we consider Buddhism, we will come back to this thought.

Buddhism appears to hold in common with Hinduism the doctrine that we die and end up reincarnated, but only as a person. The mind in Buddhism is the result of *skandhas*, five aspects of mind that create the illusion that we are someone. These *skandhas* are forever changing so the “I” of a moment ago is not this same “I” now. Far less is the mature person the same being as the child. All of the tissues have been replaced, and one’s life experience has created a new person with an entirely different outlook. The idea of a fixed self is not true, so it can’t reincarnate. Reincarnation has the idea something is there to go through death and be born again in another body; Buddhists, rather, speak of *rebirth*. When we die, we go through a sleep. Then, the collection of our tendencies evolves and changes. We sleep again and then are reborn as a person. The idea of dying to sleep for a time and then

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3. To those interested in reading more about reincarnation in Hinduism, I recommend the following: Yogi Ramacharaka, *The Life beyond Death* (Chicago: Yogi Publications Society, 1937); Swami Nikhilananda, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1969); and Ernest Wood, *Yoga* (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin, 1959).

awakening in spiritual worlds is belied by the near-death experience, in which the transition from this world to the next is instantaneous. This is also true in Swedenborg's findings, in which, as he states in *Heaven and Hell* §§445–449, we die to this world and awaken in another in an instant. The tendencies that were temporarily “you” change and go on to become another person.<sup>4</sup> It is very like a wave in the ocean that looks substantial at the moment but dissolves back into the ocean that can create endless waves. Personal reincarnation, which everyone is thinking of, is not possible because there is no fixed self.

In addition, enlightenment ends the possibility of reincarnation. There are several ways to explain this. In enlightenment, one realizes that only God exists. The little ego thing we thought could reincarnate loses its reality. Also all people who have experienced enlightenment so enjoy the experience they seek more of it, which is to proceed away from ego toward the One.

It is said there is no God in Buddhism. This needs explanation. The highest state in Buddhism is *nirvana*, which is to enter the life of the One. The Buddhist believes in a level of the ultimate, which is unlike the Western tendency to create a thing-like god. Nirvana is the experience of the One, which is equally all things and no thing. In this chapter, I refer to “God” in Buddhism for convenience but with the recognition that Buddhism points quite beyond any sort of circumscribed object. At the level of representations, Buddha stands for enlightenment and nirvana.

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4. For more information on the Buddhist theory of rebirth, see John Snelling, *The Buddhist Handbook* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 1991); Walpola Ruhula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove, 1959); and Christmas Humphreys, *Karma and Rebirth* (London: Curzon, 1983).

Let us now look at both the Hindu and the Buddhist concepts of reincarnation. That enlightenment ends reincarnation in both systems is another way of saying that reincarnation is relatively but not absolutely true. That is, it is an appearance that arises out of our ignorance or association with this world. These two are the same. The apparent substantiality of this world is due to ignorance of the spiritual worlds. We might suggest that the idea of reincarnation arose because of a lack of understanding of the spiritual. In all religions, there is a general belief that the human goes on—but how? Since the only world we see is this physical world, it must be that we come back to it.

But the more a person meditates the more he or she comes into the direct sense of the spiritual. In meditation, we are in the spiritual world. As we explore it, it becomes more substantial and real. Unfortunately, without this experience, this material world seems to be all there is; thus, death must be an interim experience preceding a return to this world in some form. Early religions saw animals as more substantial and real than humans; hence, early religions believe in transmigration, in which we might come back as any form of life.

We can apply the principle of spiritual relativity to reincarnation. It is suspicious when something occurs with ignorance but doesn't exist with wisdom. What exists with wisdom (no reincarnation) is more real than what exists with ignorance. That alone suggests reincarnation is a relative truth but not reality.

But we need to consider the situation of Tibetan Buddhism in which a spiritually advanced person deliberately tries to return again. There are persons who vow to delay entering nirvana until all have enlightenment. Our current Dalai Lama originates from a series of Dalai Lamas who deliberately tried

to return. My respect for Tibetan Buddhism is so great that I suspect they may be able to do this. But they encounter the problem of finding the child who is the reincarnation and having to educate him into his role. They feel this series of rebirths preserves the will to serve and the latent wisdom and experience of these figures. I believe reincarnation can occur when deliberately attempted in this way. Let us set this aside when we consider the general situation for ordinary people.

This is a summary of this series of findings:

- (1) The idea of transmigration or reincarnation often appeared in earlier religions, such as Hinduism, where it arose in preliterate times before the common era.
- (2) I have compared Swedenborg's years of detailed experiences in heaven and hell in which he found an explanation for why some people may believe they have been reincarnated.
- (3) It is possible for a person to experience someone else's life who died in the past or is alive now. Neither proves reincarnation. In the majority of cases, no proof of historical validity is even possible.
- (4) This general human capacity to discover other lives may be steps to the realization of the One, who alone returns endlessly.
- (5) In both Hinduism and Buddhism, there is a question of the reality and substantiality of personal identity, which is commonly thought to reincarnate.
- (6) In both Hinduism and Buddhism, enlightenment abolishes the endless return just as it ends the spiritually false idea that we are beings separate from God.

What does all this suggest? It suggests that reincarnation is a socially useful idea that appears to be only relatively true,

not actually true. Hence, it is associated with a lack of spiritual understanding, even in the ancient Upanishads. If it doesn't really exist, then one life is enough, and we leave this world to enter the spiritual world in an instant. The deliberate reincarnation of gifted bodhisattvas is another matter and it may be that this instance of reincarnation actually occurs.

Karma, however, is quite real. One need not wait for death to see its effects, which are readily apparent. Bad deeds constrict the scope and quality of the life while good acts expand and enhance life. Neither karma nor reincarnation (or rebirth) should divide East and West. We can learn something of spiritual realities from all religions.



## Living in the Design

**I**t has taken seven chapters just to put in place all the main elements of the design of existence. It takes some reflection and working with the design to see how well it all fits together. Now that the elements are in place, we can proceed to work within the design to see how well it functions. One of the evidences for the design is how beautifully conceived it is and how well it fits with human experience.

This design reflects the combined discoveries of the world's great mystics. So much is involved that it would take volumes to name them all and trace their specific contributions. And this detailing would take away from understanding the design itself. Emanuel Swedenborg's contribution has loomed large for two reasons. It is far easier to trace a point in his works than in the world's mystical literature. But, even more importantly, Swedenborg detailed the nature of heaven and hell and how it relates to the interior of people.

Hinduism and Buddhism are especially good on the Godhead and spiritual practices. Other religions have contributed too, but mainly to affirm the significant aspects that can more easily be drawn out of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Swedenborg's discoveries. There have been a couple of unimpressive attempts to link Swedenborg and the two Eastern religions. These have linked an idea covered by different terms in two different religions. In truth, if we look at religions in their human functions, the similarities become more obvious. Terms can divide us even more than can doctrine. How many Christians are unable to even consider a religion that does not use the term *Christ*? When countless people in all corners of our world are attempting the same function (praying to the Ultimate), we should be able to understand and respect this effort.

A survey of mystics of different traditions would show that some elaborated some part of the whole better than others.<sup>1</sup> For instance, for the love aspect of the mystical, the Islamic Sufis, some Christians, and bhakti yoga are the masters. For the mysticism of the natural world, some indigenous peoples are the masters. For a very fine understanding of the harmony of the natural order, you should consult Taoism. The most humorous of the mystics is Chuang-tzu. Different faiths, cultures, and times elaborate some aspect of the mystical better than others. This is simply to recognize different gifts. Yet mystics of different backgrounds are intrinsically more alike than people of a single faith. There is a broad tendency for mystics to recognize each other even though their culture and faiths differ widely. It is as though mystics have discovered a universal center. Their religious and cultural

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1. For such a survey, see Wilson Van Dusen, *Beauty, Wonder, and the Mystical Mind* (West Chester, Penn.: Chrysalis Books, 1999), Chapter 9.

differences simply add color and enrich the universal they discover. In a similar way, Swedenborg reports that the number of people and their diversity enrich heaven.

There has been such an emphasis on the human in this design that it is appropriate to ask whether the design applies to plants, animals, rocks, and all the rest of creation? The answer is yes. The human is at the center of involvement in the design; but, because plants and animals live in their natural given order, they are less “lost” than humans. We have the freedom to question, examine, choose this or that. In a real sense, we humans have both the richest possibilities and hence the greatest possibility of losing our true way. A rock is an excellent example of an aspect of creation that is thoroughly in its natural order. In contrast, humans will endlessly debate and search for this order. But while humans are the most lost aspect of creation, they are also a better window into the overall design. So, in a deep spiritual sense, all but humans are taken care of through their inner, natural order. They are as they should be. They express the divine order very well. So it is paradoxical. Although all of the natural order is in and displays the divine order, humans—the most lost part of creation—consider themselves superior to the rest of creation. Deep in mystical experience, it is easy to see all the rest of creation is marvelously full of God. So, our return to God is problematic, but the rest of creation is in its order. Do plants and animals survive death? We may as well ask if we survive bodily death. The life in plants and animals survives for it is the One. It is possible to see the hierarchy of heaven reaching toward the celestial as a sign that our little selves are not substantial. At the celestial level, there is the strong experience that only God exists. The little self can expand into the All, which is the basic experience of enlightenment.



In this final chapter, we will use all the elements of the design so we may see better how they work together in their living aspects.

## **THE INTERNAL/EXTERNAL DIMENSION**

Many people hardly know they have an internal dimension, let alone what it is or how it works. Problems in this area arise because we often take the external things-of-this-world as the real person, similar to regarding actors on stage, while playing their roles, as the real character. But if we sat and talked with them, without costume and makeup, we would soon learn there was a real and very different person behind the role. We tend to play a role when we are with others and especially when we want to impress them or get something out of them.

As we move from the outer role of a person to the person within, we often run into what that person feels is his or her real problem. It may be a spouse or a health issue. Somehow things are holding the person down. Behind this problem is the casual, more natural person. In this more interior level are dreams, which are nightly bulletins on how we stand. As we move toward the interior, we move into a more affective or feelingful realm. Here are deeper hopes and fears and more of the living aspects of our existence. At this level, the inner can seem somewhat irrational. Strict logic is outside; it is part of the actor's role. Inside, in the feeling realm, things connect in an amazing way. A smell reminds one of a childhood incident. One suddenly feels tearful about a dead relative. Even deeper than this realm of feeling connections is a universal wisdom where certain things are just felt to be

substantially true. The creative person learns to visit this realm for creative ideas. My writing stems from this realm with a little outer restraint to attempt to put it in a form others can use. In meditation, we learn to open and live in this realm. Here is the real person. The wisdom of this realm appears endless.

If we look at all levels at once, a person seems to be a bit of a mess. Outside, there is role-playing, beneath that, problems. Feeling connections are going every which way. Beneath that level, we find a quiet wisdom. It is ideal if the person can contact the inner wisdom to solve some of the outer problems. In such a case, we really have everything we need. For all problems, consult the wisdom within. Meditation leads to this inner realm. Spiritual practice also opens it. The wisdom in us is to be brought out and used to improve our life and the lives of others. What a paradox we really are—thick as a brick on the outside but wise within. Might it be dangerous to bring the wisdom out? Some will not understand; a few might want to lock us up. Actually, the wisdom within knows all the circumstances of our life better than we do. Its aim is to manifest in whatever are our circumstances. So it is not strange or alien.

Now, how can all this be related to the religious life? Religions vary widely in their understanding of the wisdom within. Many dramatize it through ceremony, but often both the minister and followers are vague about how the traditional ceremony was intended to work. The best way is to reflect on the ceremony, on how it affects each of us, because, ultimately, churches are for our benefit. The more we get into it, get involved, and recreate the deepest meaning of the ceremony out of our interior, the more effective the ceremony will be. We watch too much television and expect

the minister to put on a show. Our interior is the show. The purpose of ceremony is to evoke the inner show.

The aim of this process is a harmony between what is in us and all outside of us. Some view the material world as dragging us down. It need not do so. Ideally, the beauty of the world is the ultimate showing of all in us. Reflect for a month on the wisdom of a plant and come to see your own wisdom. Inside/outside. Perhaps the world we perceive is a mirror image of ourselves. So the one who sees injustice everywhere is being very unfair to themselves and to others. Study with the person who finds the world very beautiful. The created universe is the unknown depth of ourselves. Immense, isn't it? And don't forget the stars and the galaxies.

Why does the inside level of feelings and connectedness exist? Because the depth of ourselves and all there is is most like love. What we most love is what we really are.

Inside/outside, two halves of a One.

## **YOUR EXPERIENCE OF THE DESIGN**

Many will say, "This design is far beyond anything I know of." But the truth is that each of us is already a part of the design and has been all of our lives. It is really a matter of reflecting on the design to see it. We have spoken much of the "spiritual"—a term that means nothing to some, irritates others, and seems alien territory to many. So here are a series of phrases that could substitute for the term *the spiritual*:

- (1) our inner life
- (2) the significant aspects of life
- (3) the aspects of life related to eternity
- (4) your relationship to the order of existence

- (5) your loves
- (6) those matters that make you feel most elevated and free
- (7) your ideal
- (8) whatever matters most to you.

Can you understand the overall trend in these terms? The spiritual is evident in everyday activities, but it involves a shift toward greater significance. Say you are a gardener, walking in your garden, just checking up on how the plants are doing. While walking around, you reflect for a few minutes on how you fit into the total order of existence. You think, “I love gardening. If heaven is anything like this—taking care of things so they show a harmony of beauty—I’ll do okay.” Here there is simple shift from a mundane question of which plants need water and care to an examination of one’s preferred role in eternity. This is not a big shift. You could notice plants looking droopy and get them more water while reflecting on this. Yet this simple incident reflects all seven aspects of the spiritual above. How does it reflect number 1, the inner life? Recognizing what you love is a recognition of your inner tendencies. Having reached into the spiritual while gardening, you could use gardening to explore your loves. This process would probably even aid the quality of garden work. It slows down work to a more enjoyable and reflective pace. The plants get more consideration. Your enjoyment might cause you to work longer. Can a gardener enter the spiritual as simply as this? Yes, of course. It is only a shift to a wider consideration of significance for the person. The spiritual is significance; habitual acts done without thought are insignificant, the opposite of the spiritual. The inner of the spiritual gardener shows in the quality of the garden. Inner and outer are in harmony.

Some people feel a spiritual person creates a kind of fairy-land existence of artificial certainties. Both the unreflective worker and the spiritually reflective person create a world. The world of habit and thoughtlessness is full of simple conclusions: “Today I work at the factory eight hours and then come home to beer and TV.” Spiritually reflective persons may do the same eight hours of work, but they will discover something of others in the work and in break periods. At night, they may find peace reading something of interest to them. So, the two types of people may face the same work duties, but what they do with them and in their own time is quite different. Habit and ignorance create a simpler world, while a spiritual perspective opens up a broader, more satisfying world. Spiritual seekers hope to survive death, even though they may not be certain. They try to do good but are unsure how well they are doing. The spiritual quest is a long search, full of adventurous uncertainties. In their reading, seekers will have walked with great minds. They may well catch glimpses of the eternal and have sudden illuminations as to what doctrine really means. In effect, each of us, with or without forethought, is creating the nature and quality of our eternal life. We do not need to die to get a sense of where we are. Any day of the week we should be able to get some sense of our eternity—if we live reflectively. Look at your deepest moments in the day and see if you don’t have a sense of what heaven will be like.

The eternal is not endless time. Neither time nor space exists in heaven because they are part of this lower, material world. For the word *eternity*, substitute the term *living in significance*. Thus, looking at significance in the everyday is a preparation for eternity. By considering our present life in spiritual terms, we begin to open up to the experience of

heaven. In Buddhism, the basis of ignorance is to see things that cannot be separated as separate. The main example is seeing ourselves separated from the One. How can we be separated from what is ever-present? We can't be. Those working toward heaven are not separated from heaven but begin to enter it here. Only ignorance sees separation. Wisdom sees all things joined, interdependent. In the spiritual life, we grow in cooperation with the total order of things. We become part of the total order.

All things are interdependent in the spiritual. In ordinary life, we tend to set things apart as though everything, including ourselves, is a separate unit. I bought some books from a Buddhist monastery bookstore. Most of the books they sold were *sutras*, the words of the Buddha. There was a sign in the store that these books were to be treated with respect; they should never be put on the floor. This seemed odd to me. No bookstore had ever taught me how to handle books before. But I was delighted to comply. The point was simple: these were sacred. If I treat the sacred as sacred, I would be better off. It actually helped me to feel myself a member of this community. Treat a book with respect, and you are more likely to learn from it. Treat the sacred as sacred and you enter into the experience of the sacred—as simple as that.

Earlier we said that leading a moral life was a step toward enlightenment. Many treat morality as an external set of rules. But actually a moral life is care and regard for ourselves and others. Living such a life alters perception. By attempting to lead a moral life, we see ourselves and our effects on others better. We become a harmonious part of the community. Anyone can reflect on bad acts and see their effects over time. If a child is seriously neglected, that child may grow up to be a burden on himself and on society. Mothers often feel the

awesomeness of their responsibility. But we can also look at the spread of effects of good acts over time. The person who acts in goodness is closer to the order of things and enlightenment. Enlightenment is, in effect, the order of things recognizing our effort and revealing itself. Morality alters perception and life experience and thereby contains its own reward. It is as though good were a colorful thread, which, if followed, leads to all things. Those who believe that rewards for good conduct will be received only in the next world have not looked closely enough. Rewards are very much here *and* in the next world.

If we have a class of ten children who are to be taught spirituality, we might first distinguish good and bad as what joins us in love versus what hurts and sets us apart. Each child might be asked to do something mildly hurtful to each other and then to trace its effects over subsequent days. Then each child might be asked to try something more loving and considerate and to trace out its effects. The differences would be obvious. This experiment differs from ordinary life experience only in the careful observation of the effect on ourselves and on others. Spirituality is that simple and obvious. A lifetime of attempting to live a good life has very obvious rewards in this life. A good life is not simple; it is a search in itself. But a searching life is one that opens into other possibilities.

Those not attempting a religious life while in the world often get an odd view of what such a life involves. They see a self-created fairyland that overlooks harsh realities, as if religious people make up their God. That may well be how it seems from the outside. But inside, a religious life is quite different. One's God is not made up but found in one's tradition. It is as though the religious tradition only gradually takes

over and becomes a real part of the person's life. There can be years of struggle before the tradition begins to make sense. There are precious little moments in which God seems present and comforting, and many in which God seems deaf and on vacation. Over years, there develops a gradual fit between the individual's inner life and the forms of the religion. Then, the religious person can begin to teach the religion because its main book is in the person's life, written on the heart. He or she gradually collects personal confirmations. The truths are found over and over and become part of the person's life. The vicissitudes of life also become part of this learning. Life is really a schoolhouse, even a grammar school, a beginning of a larger eternal process.

But what about the good Jew meeting the good Roman Catholic in heaven? Wouldn't differences be immediately recognized? Theologians might think so. But, if both the Jew and the Catholic had acted on the good they knew from their religions, then cooperation should be easy. It is something of a wonder the way some people think doctrines divide us; this is seeing our words, our thoughts, as the key to it all. Instead, the spiritual worlds operate in terms of our ends, what we are attempting to do and our acts, getting down to the essential and overlooking the clutter of words. When falsities fall away, only essentials are left.

If our Jew and Catholic had been bricklayers, then in heaven they could share experiences. They could even experience real bricklaying in heaven. Bricks are solid substantial realities, like truths. They can be put together to make dwellings, just as we put together our truths and make our life of them. This truth/bricklaying is part of creating something useful and permanent. Our bricklayers would see how their lives in the world prepared them for the next level of



bricklaying. Debate about doctrinal differences would fade in favor of essentials.

In our lives, there are many signs of the validity of this design. Heaven is not a faraway place. If we look at all our most elevating and joyous moments, we begin to see our heaven. The truth is, all of the design can be experienced in this life; it just needs to be understood and looked for. Have we not all experienced days, weeks, and months in hell, enough to not need any more? And have we not all experienced heaven, enough to seek more? Those days we forgot ourselves—were they not wonder days? Who wants to carry around a little self, so concerned with its status? It is far better to do something useful for the whole and enjoy being a part of it all. What is the miserable little self compared to this? We are already an integral part of the divine order and experience the order, our part of it all. Begin to look for and see the design. Spirituality is a slight shift into greater significance. The ultimate of significance is God, the All.

## **THE EXPERIENCE OF THE ONE**

The fundamental aspect of the design of existence is the One, which has also been called THAT, the Absolute, God, Allah, the Father, etc. I have used the term *the One* because it is the One and the Only, a concept that transcends particular religious usage.

But how can we know this One on which all else rests? Those who have seriously reflected on this matter accept that the One is beyond human conception. Can you conceive of what is present everywhere always? Most of us cannot, although, for some, it is easily done. If we reflect on the three

*omni* (omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience), we will soon see that the One represents another order of existence from our ordinary sensual experience.

Then, on what grounds can the One be said to exist? All cultures accept this One. Some acknowledge only the level called here incarnations of the One. The main evidence for the existence of the One is the experience of mystics of various traditions. The Upanishads affirm various ancient mystics's experience of the One. It was the Buddha's experience, although Buddhism avoids objectifying the One. How many times has the One been experienced by the world's mystics? Probably untold times, humbly including my own experience.

Then, we may well ask, how can a human experience what is beyond human conception? This really means the One is beyond any presumptuous concepts we might have. It is not another object for the mind to manipulate. It is better, like the Hindu, to say "*netti netti*," meaning that it cannot really be spoken of.

Then how can some mystics even experience this level of existence? Again, we should remember that, at this level, the self dissolves into the One. Our ego or personal identity is a flimsy, temporary thing. It's like a bank account number: it is real for a time and functions for a time, but is destined to disappear and become irrelevant. The One fully knows itself. The mystic temporarily loses all personal identity in the experience of the One's self-knowledge. Such an experience is the self-revelation and self-awareness of the One. Is there anything else in human experience like this? Yes.

I once received a letter from an older woman awakening to the fact she is a mystic. She recalls as a child staring at a wonderful pattern of wood grain until she disappeared and only the wood existed. This was a high joyous experience, as

it usually is when a person loses his- or herself. Many have asked whether we can approach the level of the One and come to know it. Even though the One is beyond any conceptual manipulation, in subtle experience, it can be approached, as we have seen from the woman's childhood experience. The mystic's full and direct experience of the One requires much preparation, but let us regard the One for the moment in an easier way.

It is said the One is the All. Then, no matter how much or how little we try, no matter if we do not try at all, actually, we experience only the One. We can look at the whole of creation as a manifestation of the One. This creation includes even our own interior dimension. Then, the One is solidly manifesting everywhere. The wonder of nature is that we are always in the midst of the One's loving creativity. The immense starry sky on a clear, dark night is the playful creativity of the One, spilling out stars and galaxies forever. But the One is also manifest as our body, cell by cell, wise and complex far beyond our understanding. And, of course, our interior mental life is another manifestation of the One. Where did that lost thought arise from? Who knows?! So the One is all we see and all we know. We are of the One, walking around in the One. Having awakened to this wonder, we can then look anew on everything as revealing the One. Observing our bodies and ourselves as part of the manifestation is an excellent way to enlightenment. It overcomes the primal ignorance of seeing ourselves as separate units cut off from all else. Buddhism is correct; separation is the prime error. So how can we know the One? It is the All, and we never know anything else.

I was sitting alone in a parked car overlooking a lake and asked the Divine to show me some sign of its existence. It

literally tapped the dashboard of the car and gave me to know it meant the material car and all of existence. Then, it asked me if this was not sign enough. I had to admit it was enough.

A woman mystic friend of mine fell into an enlightenment that went on for weeks. Its main content was that there was only the One. How did she manage the details of her life for weeks? She didn't. The One, as usual, did it through her. Since this time, she is a follower of Hindu Advaita Vedanta or non-dualism, a major school of Hinduism that attempts to realize the One directly, the highest truth of Hinduism and the Upanishads.<sup>2</sup>

Some people's main recreation is thinking. So is there a thinking person's way to the One? Indeed there is. There are signs of it in all the major religions. It is a large part of the Jewish Kabbalah. It can also be found in Islam and Christianity, and there are major efforts in this direction in both Hinduism and Buddhism. The result of this intellectualization is not as clear and powerful as the direct experience of the mystic, but it is entertaining. Here is a small example. The three *omni* are taken as central characteristics of the One. One can then reflect on, for example, omnipresence and try to experience what it would be like. You would first turn to objects and reflect on the omnipresence there: it is in my books, my house, my wife, and even in me. Thus, it must transcend all forms. It is like an ever-present *isness*, a reality that permits all things to be real, although it is not caught in their form but

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2. Representative works of Advaita Vedanta or non-dual Vedanta are the Upanishads. Sri Nisargadaita Maharaj, *I Am That* (Bombay: Chetana, 1973); Ramesh Balsekar, *The Final Truth* (Los Angeles: Advaita, 1989); and Awind Sharma, *Advaita Vedanta* (Delhi, India: Banarsidass, 1993). In Tibetan Buddhism, see *dzogchen*. Non-dual Vedanta is a direct attempt to realize the One.

only in their being real, a foundation to existence on all its levels. Without this reality in an object, it would vanish out of existence. Although an intellectual analysis of the One is possible and serves some uses, it rarely leads to the powerful impact of the direct experience of the One. Yet an intellectual analysis can help set one's own house in order. For instance, having found spiritual relativity, we can reflect on those aspects of our lives that are nearer to the One and have less falsity. Or having found that our own false ideas (aspects of our own hell) obscure our vision, we can ask to be led beyond them. The One is, of course, also omnipotent and can lead us past our false thinking. Plotinus, a Greek philosopher who lived around 200 CE, is one of the greatest mystical thinkers. His dialectical thinking often leads to stunning conclusions.

As we go into depth in ourselves, oddly enough we run into a wisdom greater than our own. This is the omniscient One. In its vicinity, wisdom spontaneously arises. This means that, as simple humans, we have ourselves backward. We take the body and senses as real, but the outer us is really our lost aspect. Deep within, feeling, love, and wisdom are our real selves. Being within, in touch with these greater aspects, is to be in the vicinity of the One. The One Life is our real center. In this center is immense joy, as though the prodigal son or daughter has come home. The ultimate One is within. This One created our own order and the order of it all. We are in order and of order. So even reflecting on order can help bring us into harmony with it all. Heaven is a state where we enjoy the order; hell is a state where we deny and oppose the order. Hell is like deciding we want all water to do our bidding and flow upstream. Instead, water is humble and flows down and seeks its own kind. This being the actual order, we would best

reflect on it. What is water here? How is it ourselves? How is it a letting-go to find the ocean of our great self?

What is ego when we regard the One? Not much. Hardly anything. Poor little ego was an ignorant, beset, temporary stand-in for the One, our real being. From the standpoint of the One, we can feel love and tears for the little ego. It strove in such darkness, thinking it was the all and tried to do much. If we buried our own ego, it would be a sad affair: “Good-bye, little one. You did your best. And good-bye, old body. Thank you for serving well, so long until you were worn out.” How many think burying these is the end to all when it is actually just a new beginning?

As we walk around and reflect on the design of existence, it should more and more make intrinsic sense. Heaven and hell may have seemed far off and problematical until we discover we have been and are experiencing them. The choice between heaven and hell only seems to await our dying until we discover we are moment to moment involved in making this choice. None of this design is really far off and remote.

Why does this particular design of creation exist? Mystics have received hints but have not been shown enough to come to a consensual answer. One Hindu answer is *lila*: the One creates for fun or play. This answer comes from the actual experience of the One creating existence so casually. Swedenborg reports the One as the Only, so full of love it wishes to create what it can join in a reciprocal love relationship. Recently, I asked the One why these levels of manifestation exist and received a surprising answer. We think of ourselves in time and in a material world, the lowest order of existence. Yet, in meditation, we begin to experience timelessness. The spiritual worlds have no time, only a change of state. The One is timeless, ever the same. So, as we go higher in

existence, the sense of a temporal order disappears. In other words, the sense of a time-bound, sequential order of existence is due to our ignorance. We are in illusion, *maya*. When this is overcome, the problem disappears.

Is there coercion in this design, or are we free? We are essentially free. Heaven and hell are both active potentials, so, in this world, we can choose. It looks like compulsion in that the way of hell is unpleasant and the way of heaven is pleasant. But these differences are part of the natural order. To go against the current of a stream is a struggle. One can relax and go with the current. Moreover, those in the way of hell become accustomed to it and may well prefer it. In the way of hell, one's perception and entire life experience are limited. Those in the way of hell do not know what they miss. So there is no compulsion. In general, almost any kind of search in these matters leads to the richer way of heaven. The road signs are there if looked for.

## POSTSCRIPT

My whole life has been a search for the design of it all. To me, this book is just a first approximation. I hope that, over the centuries, others will come forward to improve on my attempt. I am a mystic respectfully borrowing from other mystics. Mysticism is basically an empirical field. Mystics of various faiths, times, and places have been shown different aspects of the whole design, yet there is a pervasive unity in these reports, as though mystics are reporting the same thing with minor cultural variations in presentation. The more mystics of various traditions, times, and cultures report the same revelation the more we can trust it. In addition, what is reported must fit with whatever is already known and respected. If someone reports that God led them to teach racial hatred or gave them the right to kill others, we need not waste time on such a report. It goes against the experience of all mystics.

To report on this design, I borrowed the best available from various sources. For instance, that the One is beyond our understanding comes from all mystics who experienced the One, including myself. The rest of the Godhead comes in part from mystics, in part from the universal, and in part from our understanding of comparative religion. I have deliberately tried to keep to a universal view that transcends religious differences. If you consider it, not many works attempt



this universal level of understanding, but I hope it will become more common as time goes on. It is an attitude of tolerance and respect for various religious ways. This universal view is far more easily realized by seeing all religions as similar human endeavors than by the endless word game of debating terms and doctrine.

A major element has previously prevented dealing with the entire design, and that is direct experience of the world beyond this one, namely, heaven and hell. A survey of world mystics showed this to be the least known element. I would wish there were hundreds of mystics reporting on this, but there are not. So I presented the direct and extensive experience of Emanuel Swedenborg, which fits with the general tenor of all religions and all the experience of mystics. Although Swedenborg was Christian, it is relatively easy to see the universal aspect of what he reports. His discoveries have now received some confirmation from the near-death experience and from some clinical findings. Because we now know how Swedenborg entered heaven and hell, others could retrace his steps, although the way will be difficult and dangerous.

Both Eastern mystics and Swedenborg report how our internals relate to the spiritual worlds beyond this. For simplicity, I reported Swedenborg's discovery of how heaven and hell relate to our internals, even though this could have been done from a host of mystics of various faiths. It was simpler and clearer to report it from Swedenborg.

Meditation and ways of attempting to know God directly came mainly from Hinduism and Buddhism. Swedenborg's work is weak on spiritual practices, but Hinduism and Buddhism are world leaders in this regard. So, basically, I borrowed from many mystics to create as clear and understandable a design as possible.

I would be pleased if the idea of an overall design of existence was accepted and others, drawing on their and other mystics's experiences, would fill in some of the remaining mysteries. Guesswork and speculation are not permitted. Real answers are given to us by God. It is clear that we do not know it all. Yet isn't it a wonder that it is possible to elaborate even this much of the whole design of existence?

One does not look at the design of existence without coming to feel small and inadequate. Without considerable guidance from the One, this entire task would simply be beyond me.

What is the most critical aspect of this design? It is the slow, inexorable process in which our day-to-day choices in this world set our eternity. And this eternity is not far off in the someday, after we die. If we reflect on it, our heaven or hell can begin to be seen here. All religions preach this essential aspect: they all say to do good.

But what is good? We know in part, but it rests, to a degree, on what we are trying to do, our real ends. If we are honest, we are always near mystery. But this mystery only asks that we seek to do good and seek to be shown more of the good. This design is not a matter of hard, inexorable laws. Rather the entire design is partly human, like us. The human side of the One is shown in various incarnations. We are made in the image.

I hope that one day the idea of an overall design of existence will be accepted and taught as part of each person's cultural heritage. This could be aided by simple exercises in which each individual would be encouraged to test and confirm aspects of the design for him- or herself. This would not substitute for religion but rather be known as the heart of all religions.

The dedication to this book honored the world's mystics. But here we also honor seekers. Seeking leads to finding the guidance of the One. When this occurs, the process has its own light. For, after all, it was the One that was sent into the world as a helpless infant. The same One designed the way to return home. The whole process of seeking and finding is a cosmic adventure. Being aware of the design and its implications for us is another light on the way and the reason for this book.

## THE DESIGN OF EXISTENCE

The One  
Which is the All and the Only,  
Quite beyond comprehension,  
Creates out of Itself  
All there is,  
Showing its nature  
In succeeding levels,  
Down to us  
And this world.

Our Gods,  
Avatars, and Saints,  
And loved ones  
Are lower levels  
For us to be with.

We are  
A spirit in a body,  
Born into the utter limitation  
Of infancy,  
To live here a short while  
To learn.

We are ever guided  
Inside and out.  
Misery says,  
This is a wrong way.  
Joy leads to the higher,  
The awareness  
Of the order of existence.

All of creation  
Returns to the One  
From the limitations  
Of body/world,  
To participation  
In the whole order of things.  
Enjoying the order  
Is the return  
To the One.

The One  
Enjoys  
Meeting Itself  
Everywhere.