
Priests and Prophets

Rapture, Repetition, and the Ratings

*“A little too abstract, a little too wise,
It is time for us to kiss the earth again,
It is time to let the leaves rain from the skies,
Let the rich life run to the roots again”.*

- Robinson Jeffers

Carved in marble over the entrance of the Temple in ancient Delphi were two massive commandments “Know Thyself” and “Nothing In Excess”. These ancient axioms have proven themselves over and over again in the face of challenge from both self-indulgent hedonists and self-denying ascetics. If we get to know our limits and don’t overdo them, our mental system will not fault out. Consciousness will not crash as long as we stay in the middle of its natural path. Once we get those two basic rules up and running, everything else is applications software.

The only glitch in the program is it neglects to mention how we are supposed to find those boundaries. Until we reach our limits, we can’t really know if we’ve exceeded them. And who is going to tell us who we are? Self-definition seems filled with personal bias, so whom do we choose to name us?

Only someone or something outside our own limits would be objective enough to rule on our validity, some entity beyond those very boundaries we're supposed to keep within. Coming up with answers to questions like these kept the Oracle of Delphi in business. A large portion of her working hours, it seems, were spent over a natural gas vent babbling in brain-addled intoxication. It was a giddy glossolalia, tongues unknown to everyone but the local priests of course, who translated her gibberish into something sounding like advice and charged a fortune for the interfacing services. This sort of scam, in our times, would be considered very in excess of "Nothing in Excess." The Oracle would probably be busted for drugs and her staff put away for a variety of morals charges and gaming violations. There are limits in every culture, and we all know them.

Still, devotional practices of the major world religions make daily use of powerful practices which seem to alter consciousness just as much. Swaying Evangelicals, swirling Sufis and bowing Buddhists all share the same beat and the same blessings. The heartfelt "Hallelujah" or "Thank You Jesus" brings the same peace to some as "Hare Krishna", "Inshallah" or "Amida Butsu" bring to others. African shamans and Mongolian monks speak in ecstatic tongues just like Christian Pentecostals. Throughout the world the spirit of the Oracle is reborn daily as millions go to other worlds for spiritual guidance. From Toronto to Tunis they dance, pray, shout, sing, faint, and swoon in new religious fervor. Fundamentalist Christians, Hassidic Jews, Modern Muslims, and Brazilian born-again are all excited about it. No matter what our culture the themes keep reappearing. "Born Again," "Enlightenment", "Awaiting the Rapture," "Embraced by the Light", "Bliss Consciousness," "Satori" "Cosmic Consciousness," "Samadhi" along with everything from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to the uncoiling of the Kundalini. Harvard theologian Harvey Cox described the largest Christian congregation in the world in 1996, an Evangelical church in Seoul with over 600,000 members. Korean Zen wasn't much fun and a deeply ingrained Korean shamanistic tradition has found ecstatic rebirth among the Christian reborn. But what does this

worldwide swing to the spiritual bring? Why is it sought after by so many? Have we transcended the limits and liberations of sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll to a genuine search for the ultimate connection or is this trend towards commitment and communion simply a new form of selfishness for a generation oversatiated on worldly thrills and self indulgence? Is it evidence of evolving human consciousness, or just multiple varieties of escapist or avoidance behavior. It's much easier to become self-satisfied believers and let God or guru take care of the paradoxes and problems of a rapidly changing world. Are we progressing, or just searching blindly for the simplicity of lost innocence in chaotic and stressful times?

Transcendental bliss, by itself, is easy enough. Many of us have heard of the unspeakable tortures suffered by lab rats. A few have probably also heard about the unspeakable joys of some other lab rats a few years ago. These wired rodents had electrodes implanted in the lateral hypothalamus, a critical part of the brain's "pleasure circuit." It was a pure connection to joy and each had a button to get as many peak experiences as desired. Oh rapture! The rats would sit on their buttons until they dropped from exhaustion. It was better than sex; it was better than drugs; they even liked it better than eating. Normal animals haven't the first hint of organized religion but this was the cult of the button for sure. They were converted on the spot. Blitz consciousness! Slain in the circuit and fulfilled with all the ratty forms of joy. It was rat heaven but the gods of their current redemption were more interested in their hormones than a rodent hallelu-jolt chorus. Joy at such a basic level was like any other chemical high. Predictable and reproducible. After a time, however, most of the reborn rats found their boundaries and learned to limit their bliss, leaving only a few devoted rodents still pushing for their singular paradise.

Brightening our own brain centers with that sort of impulsive ecstasy wouldn't be difficult. Human reaction is more variable, but with enough work who knows what refinement could bring? It's just hard luck for the priests of the button that normal humans have never elected for this sort of brain surgery. Less invasive procedures, such as electroshock therapy, do little more than scramble the system temporarily.

This will often derail a serious depression but even its strongest proponents would never suggest it was pleasurable. This being the case, at least in our personal lives, when we want to have fun we head for chemo rather than electro. It can do the same thing and it's much more subtle. It's a second glass of wine to put a glow on the evening, the touch of a special fingertip, the stirring chords of J. S. Bach, or the power chords of Chuck Berry. We have many ways to travel. By adulthood most of us have learned a variety of culturally acceptable ways to alter our brain chemistry and our state of mind at the same time.

What we seem to be looking for, or at least what we seem to be getting out of this, are various levels of mental generalization, creating momentarily a deeper communion with the other. This feeling of merging with the feeling, the action, the music, or the person serves as a touchstone to our deepest emotions. There is a basic area in the mammal brain, the *anterior cingulate cortex*, which activates after birth to trigger a sense of loss if the mother is absent. It is sensitive to isolation and disconnectedness. It makes rat pups search for a missing mother, and it is just as active in humans. It tries to re-unite us with our mother in that total one-ness that was the only world we knew before birth, when everything was taken care of. If that structure is damaged, an abandoned pup experiences no stress when its mother is absent. Because of this basic effect on behavior, the anterior cingulate cortex is referred to as the "Great Mother" by neurologists. It is always there to suggest we're missing some ultimate union to make our aloneness disappear. We all find our ways to the Great Mother. It can be the glad harmonies of music and prayer, the blurring effects of social drugs, or the personal and persuasive rhythms of erotic sensuality. In each case we are taken somewhat beyond our disconnected selves, momentarily becoming a part of something greater rather than the solitary soul we know so well. Outside our own self-definition, with momentary out-of-our-mind perspective, we can gain essential insights required to judge our limits and help find ourselves in our personal space and time.

In the 1970s, research psychologists Elmer and Alyce Green of the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, visited India. There they observed and recorded the unusual physical and mental powers of trained yogis. One adept, Swami Rama, was invited to the Greens' laboratory in Topeka. Under strict laboratory controls, he demonstrated extraordinary abilities to influence and regulate both his body and his brain activity. There could be no doubt that the mind could be both unleashed and controlled. It was capable of extraordinary powers which the West was just beginning to understand. In the early 1990's, the Dalai Lama invited researchers to India to examine Tibetan Buddhist monks. Observing brain and body states during meditation, they were again able to verify that some could voluntarily control basic aspects of brain and body metabolism through purely mental practices. Within a short time, versions of the techniques were being made available as part of a stress management program associated with Harvard Medical School. If meditators could literally alter their biochemistry with thought exercises, it wouldn't be much of a stretch to wonder if most states of mental happiness right up to pure bliss are variations on the same theme. If rats can do rapture with amps and Tibetans do it with chants, it probably isn't that complex.

Chemicals for Courage: The Rapid Response System

From a molecular viewpoint, we do joy with adrenaline, ACTH, serotonin, dopamine, and a few other brain chemicals. The recipe differs from location to location. Still, nearly all the physical and perceptual aspects of a state of bliss can be directly or indirectly associated with the effects of these hormones and neurotransmitters on some major organ system or brain structure itself. Adrenaline is a master hormone, a powerful natural metabolic catalyst that causes the release of numerous other compounds with dramatic effects. It is synthesized in the adrenal cortex, a clump of cells located at the top of the kidney. Since "kidney" in Latin is *rena*, "ad renal-ine" simply describes where it's made, "from over the kidneys," a handy place to get it into the bloodstream. Like a hormonal turbocharger, occasional adrenaline release is normal but too much can exhaust or impair. Too much adrenaline is associated with

anxiety, asthma, panic attacks, high blood pressure, drug and alcohol abuse, and impairment of the immune system.

One way to fire off the adrenal cortex is to create a sudden increase in brain activity. The biochemical trip signal is a rapid rise in the amount of the neurotransmitter *norepinephrine*. *Epinephrine* is medical Greek for adrenaline. Greek *epi* means “over” and *nephron* means “kidney”. Greek sounds more scientific than Latin, so noradrenaline became norepinephrine; the “substance preceding adrenaline.” If norepinephrine suddenly rises it’s like yelling “fire!” down the wires. The adrenal cortex immediately injects adrenaline in the bloodstream without asking what’s happening. Usually there isn’t time to ask, which is why it all happens so fast. It’s an emergency system designed for instant deployment in life-threatening situations.

For example, suppose we are walking down the street. Our body is operating well within its limit. Our senses are picking up the scene and processing it at normal speed. Then, suddenly, it happens. It doesn’t matter what happens. It just has to be jarring enough to create a sudden surge of norepinephrine. In this instance our pleasant stroll is shattered by the squeal of brakes shrieking into our auditory cortex together with an exploding image on our retinas of an out-of-control car skidding into the intersection just ahead of us. As information from the eyes and ears hits the top level of the brain, neurons race to compute escape trajectories, creating a surge of energy as cells careen into overload for a moment. The sudden flood of norepinephrine into synapses halts the lazy spontaneous firing of resting neurons, opening the gates for sensory information pouring in from outside. Neural circuits energize like neon signs flashing on in a crackling frenzies faster than thought. Patterns and networks interconnect all over, shifting the entire brain into electrochemical excess. We are not thinking yet because the first surge hits the adrenal cortex as fast as an airbag, completely bypassing the brain’s interpretive centers. Adrenaline shoots directly into the bloodstream, rocketing up the arteries to a brain only a heartbeat away. Like gasoline sprayed on a blaze it

hits the frantically firing neurons, supercharging both neural hemispheres for a massive reaction. The visual cortex shifts into overdrive, neurons pulsing away at triple speed like a whirring movie camera suddenly speeded up to the max. This is how both film makers and brains create slow motion visuals, that unworldly sense of “time standing still” when we really need a miracle to get us out of harm’s way.

The car is slowly skidding towards us and we’re already in motion. With our brain on fast and the whole world in slow, all the smooth muscle in our body contracts. Hairs snap straight up in their follicles. The diaphragm contracts in a gasp, and all the blood vessels give a squeeze, forcing a wave of blood toward the liver and a shiver through our body. Mentally we are immobilized in a state as close to the Sanskrit *samadhi*, total immersion in present reality, as we will ever know but there’s no time to reflect on it now. We’re totally in the Tao, but who’s got time to appreciate it ? Time and self-consciousness are jettisoned as we swing to our single purpose. We’re moving before we realize it. Less than a half second has passed. The liver pours its rich supply of glucose into the bloodstream, charging it and fueling the muscles for immediate action as the body sweeps through biochemical transformations faster than the mind can think, slamming muscle molecules into position, wrenching the spine straight. Time itself stops as life and death hold fast for a moment while we yank ourselves out of harm’s way. In adrenaline shock from trauma or terror mothers have lifted cars off children, hunters leapt to impossibly high branches, and accident victims walked with broken legs. If it kept on coming we’d drop from burnout and exhaustion. Under circumstances like this it’s hard to recognize the basis of a pleasure circuit. Terror is nobody’s idea of ecstasy. Excitement, perhaps, but hardly holy rapture in recognizable form.

As the car skids out of the intersection the hormones taper off just as quickly. The smooth muscle in the body relaxes with predictable results. The cold shiver is replaced with a warm rush as the blood returns to the extremities. Bladder or bowel may fail if their sphincters relax too much, not uncommon during a terrifying experience. There is a warm hormonal tingle throughout the body and the mind remains in a

fuzz. The brain slowly recovers in a foggy biochemical afterglow. It will take some moments to cool down, synchronize the parts, and reset the prefrontal time sequencer to normal thought again. And there are always artifacts. Brilliantly remembered moments when we were so much a part of the world around us we were nearly out of our minds and we lived to talk about it. We were pulled beyond our limits and returned to this life alive. If we had been lost in our personal virtual chronology up to that moment it was a sudden drop-kick into present tense perception with the volume up to twelve. A full-strength adrenaline rush always puts a new card in our files, a paragraph break with our past and something to seek or avoid in the future. We never expect the big ones but they make all the difference in the world. They give us our limits as well as the moments when we really know who we are.

Practice Makes Perfect

As our early ancestors developed abstracts and imagination they were also perfecting the details of recall and prediction. Soon, recollection of the seasons woke us to the cyclical nature of the world around us. We began to predict, prepare, and do the one thing that nature never does and never can do. We learned to repeat on purpose. It was the beginning of our control over our environment, our control over our destiny, and our evolution as a species. We learned when to sow the fields, to predict the return of the herds. We remembered how glazes melted on a pot and learned to make it happen again. The world never does it twice the same way but we learned to repeat things at first for mastery and later just for fun. Practice makes more than perfect, it seems. It also serves as the basis for makes an entire range of predictable pleasant experiences.

This is possible because repetitious mental activity enlarges neural networks. Each time any thought or a muscular activity is repeated, patterns will extend. Specific networks will grow each time we repeat, making us more sensitive to the expected while paying less attention to the formless or the incidental. We

become oriented towards further repetition as we remember pleasurable feelings created this way and seek to repeat them. As we start to prefer some aspects of our world to others, it allows us to invest personal meaning into whatever we know the best. To the extent that we can, from this point on we begin to reshape the world into a mirror of our likes and dislikes. It is the beginning of both personality and force of habit, the unconscious repetition the East calls samsara and the West calls ego. Over time, in each of us, repetition of familiar activities and thought patterns eventually so extend and interconnect that any familiar stimulation can awaken very large associative networks. Many neurons are often on the edge of firing simply from the activity of internal chatter and are easily sparked into heightened response by small doses of stimulation. Consequentially, in humans, synergy between a large and energetic associative neural network and any additional stimulation can create enough brain activity to fire off the adrenal cortex when very little may be happening in the “real” world.

An example of this effect, as mentioned in Chapter Five, would be the sudden and unexpected face of a long-lost loved one in a crowd. Facial recognition is quicker in women than in men, but either way visual data takes a shortcut directly to the limbic system, a basic brain area that links memories and emotions. It defines our reality by denying emotional existence to all but parts of moment-to-moment perception. As we all judge reality by emotional cues, the limbic system is our constant personal virtual reality-check. In the case of the face, with many memories available, familiar patterns in the hippocampus respond in immediate recognition. The hippocampus is an ancient part of the brain, evolved directly from the olfactory bulb. In fact, the “smell brain” circumvents the reticular activating system, letting scent-related memories roll into consciousness without any brakes. Familiar smells can push old buttons so hard it surprises us when a perfume or a place revive vivid feelings from the past.

Returning to the face in the crowd, even though the speed of human consciousness, dependent on both sequential and parallel events, is rather slow, the “shock of recognition” appears instantaneous to us.

Having so many large associated networks linked to old memories can trigger a small avalanche of sudden brain activity. The face in the crowd can, in this manner, have the same impact as the car skidding into the intersection. It creates a rise in brain activity very suddenly, only this time there's no danger. This much is obvious to our senses, which are about to be overruled by the powerful effects of an internal pattern-recognition cascade. With so many associative networks responding, the giveaway norepinephrine surge initiates the fight or flight sequence. Out rushes the adrenaline, all excited and nowhere to go. When we experience mild adrenaline shock from familiarity rather than danger, we call the hormonal jolt "delight." Now the gasp, the shiver, and the warm rush are magical. The sense of time slowed down is dreamlike, not nightmarish. It's exactly the same molecules, but this time we did it to ourselves by energizing networks all over the brain. It adds dramatic impact to our time and space, pulling us out of our reflection and involving us directly in the world around us. We call these home-made hormonal surges everything from sudden insight to joyful recognition, from a burning inner certainty to a happy thought. Rock stars and religious leaders have all been in the media so often fans and followers are mentally saturated with their images. When the actual person appears, suddenly uniting all the parts, both devotees go a little adrenaline wild. Heavy metal fans have religious experiences while the seriously faithful rock, sway, and see stars.

Excitement has its limits, however. Even basic brain structures can be exhausted. If the hippocampus is overstimulated too long, its cellular mechanisms will fail. If things get too excessive, in other words, it can lose control and the limbic system will fault out, or "disinhibit". This effectively blows the fuses on any boundaries we may have separating fantasy from fact. If it happens, our entire virtual reality, our sense of the world and its meaning, could destabilize. It is limbic system distortions, along with suspension of chronological time, which create the altered perceptions of dreams, delusions, and death. Our place in space may be based in a part of the brain as old as the hills but it's not hard to overload the system with all this evolved brain mass to work with.

As the great majority of our memories are in an unconscious state most of the time, we are subject to specific and personal responses to old and forgotten patterns all the time. If they are memories we treasure, recollection and thought can intensify and further personalize our response. The natural extension of this ability to amplify experience with memory, creating pleasurable hormonal rewards, is how we each inadvertently and unconsciously overdrive the hormonal system to get our bearings in life. The consciousness we depend on for everything must operate within a personal virtual reality and if we don't test the limits of our own egos occasionally we can start to believe that our world is the only one there is. This is because we don't re-boot our consciousness every morning when we wake up. There's no reset button, so experiences simply accumulate into a massive memory bank.

Inevitably, the continual buildup of preference and avoidance make us repetitious and insensitive to the changing world around us. How, then, can we re-focus the present moment to see it as it really is rather than distorted with outdated recollections and expectations? How to get a really fresh look at it all? Why, simply trigger those networks for an adrenaline blast and drop into psychosensual overdrive for a moment. If we energize enough internal associative memories we can make any experience more intense and involving. Then, with only limited amounts of external involvement, we can experience all manner of meaningful excitement right between our ears. It's a synthetic dose of the same wake-up shock normally occurring when something extreme happens but if enough internal networks light up at once we can trigger a storm of brain activity that will feed on itself like a brush fire.

As a result, minor events can be amplified in the brain enough to arouse hormonal highs in people for reasons ranging from romance to scholarship, from a celebrity on the stage to a cockroach in the kitchen. The human mind has harnessed the world to our whims but individually it can lead us into some of the most inane sorts of behaviors. With age, we only become more specific. Teenagers excite en masse at current pop stars while adults, having grown more personal, have more specific heroes in their own larger but

specialized fields of association. In fact we seek the excitement we're helping to create just as we seek salt for our diet. It is the necessary and repeated meeting with our hormonal cues, forcing our feelings to their natural limits, that alone can keep us defined and alert in a world we have made much too safe for such a curious little ape. Sometimes the trip circuit is unconsciously planned into our professional work routines, such as never allowing enough time and getting caught in panic deadlines much too often. Some hobbies, sports, and occupations are clearly going to include more thrills than others. Police officers, drug dealers, and rock stars wouldn't do it if it didn't excite them. The official company slogan of rock-climbing outfitter Yvon Chouinard is simply "Let's Go Get Scared." Nobody ever lost money with a good rollercoaster. Still, most of our personal routines and repetitions are not unpleasant, and provide us our hormonal highs less dramatically through varying forms of exercise, entertainment, intimacy, and ritual; domestic, cultural, or religious.

There is a dark side to this, however. The more we repeat anything at all, the more familiarity it will have and the more we will tend to further repetition. Survival is the only thing the brain was evolved for so anything we survived is better than the unknown. This means anything from daily habits to self-destructive relationships can and will, through repetition, create self-regenerating habits. Over time the cumulative effects of these patterns can alter our course through life like the invisible attractions of large planets, massive with our past, able to pull us again and again into old familiar orbits without our conscious will or even realization.

By the time we've lived a number of years we are already repeating by unconscious habit many activities which were once quite coincidental simply because they make us comfortable. Our walls are being erected without a lot of noise. We are left with limited space to exercise the full spectrum of our powerful systems of perception, thought, and action. Rarely if ever facing real life-threatening or life-enhancing situations, we become dependent instead on dependable emotional triggers like a rat in a cage

twiddling the button for safe little jolts. Buddhists believe past lives generate karma that affects our present dispositions, but it doesn't take more than the timelessness of infancy and a few more years to start getting into the invisible rhythms of repetition. Unless we can find ways to engage ourselves in realistic exercise of our human consciousness in a world both impersonal and unpredictable, we head into the safer world of synthetic challenges, wins, and losses.

Soon, our existence is characterized mainly by repetition, a self-centered life enriched almost entirely by predictable and usually paid-for pleasures. At the same time even the most painfully unpleasant real life events are avoided or woven in as part of a repeating and self-fulfilling scenario. "Honest" expressions of anger can become repetitious ritual conflicts against the same old adversaries. Genuine concern can be blurred by compulsive focusing on any person or activity, forcing them to fit into our powerful expectations of what happened before. When human inventiveness in prediction and planning begins to be used mainly to arrange personal repertoires of the same loves, the same hates, the same fights, and the same triumphs, it's hard to explain it. As a result, we go to great lengths to create and articulate personal, cultural, and even national myths to justify repeating the same old patterns of expectation, pleasure, disappointment, and rage; the human hormonal four-step that we so often mistake for the harmony of life.

Media Technology and the Rise of Virtual Violence

Helping us along in this universal trend to replace pure perception with predictable thrills is the enormous amount of sophisticated technology currently employed to create and promote events that are clearly going to arouse us. At this time, the manufacture of vicarious excitement, professional sports, movie stars, star wars, drug wars, news bites, superheroes, and sitcoms is a multi-billion dollar industry. As soon as our modern civilization saved us from being faced with real danger it seems we started spicing our lives with ritual romance, drama, and mock involvements to save us from terminal boredom. Julius Caesar, one of the first to hit on this sure-fire formula, was asked how he kept Romans from rioting. "Bread and

circuses;” he replied: processed foods and cheap thrills. There is nothing new two millenia later. We’ve simply brought the Coliseum into our living rooms so that mayhem for the masses is more profitable for the media caesars of our own time.

Dealing with everyday life challenges doesn’t seem exciting or meaningful enough in a world filled with individuals who don’t know why they’re so anxious and don’t know whom to blame. Since few of us feel we have any control over, or even meaningful input into, our technical twentieth century world we’ve developed an unconscious itch to find some deeper meaning. To many, this simply translates to anything that gets them excited and the overwhelming majority of them got that excitement mainly from popular media and entertainment. Our seeming inability to be satisfied without constant arousal, the ability to enjoy the simple congeniality of a so-called normal existence, pure paradise for any lower creature, can be blamed almost entirely on the private media. They reap fortunes while force-feeding our senses a deadening and degrading diet of danger and drama. As a result, the real world dulls. We begin to use it mainly as a staging ground for dreams and fantasies constructed from synthetic hopes and popular fears, and erected like scenery in our mind, creating a world view as colorful and two-dimensional as any soap opera, docudrama, or MTV video.

Eventually, these self-generated cycles of internal fun and games can build such barriers that instances of real human drama, tragedy, or joy lose their power to teach or guide. Most of us fall back into the comfortable and familiar patterns of our virtual pleasures and synthetic fears, punctuating and perpetuating our life of oscillations in a world of echoes and dreams. We learn to avoid activities with disturbing implications; people or experiences we cannot fit into a predictable, defined, world. Our neural nets, there to save us from need, spread untended like kudzu across our internal landscapes until we are strangled in our tangles of illusionary triumph and imaginary fears, cultivated now more for self stimulation than safe passage through a life now stuck in a parking orbit around some dark star. These days we have

developed ever more novel ways to shield our senses from the present moment and be further led by our own noses, never having to react to reality. We have everything from Walkmans to talk shows to hide us and guide us and give us familiar mental cud to chew until we wish for no more. Many become completely satisfied with a nearly total avoidance of the uneven experience of real life, replacing it with routines as easy to maintain as the rat's pleasure button.

Subtly at first, and with greater regularity as we become habit-ridden, our emotions can become stunted and ritualized. We become as engrossed in our self-created virtual sideshows as any video game or Internet addict hunched over a keyboard world, flashing and beeping in a dark arcade. Like rapturous rodents with a wire up the thalamus, we avoid the real world while turning increasingly to well-rehearsed, reliable forms of self-stimulation, getting our buttons punched again and again, waiting for the jackpot. It is no wonder we seek ways to escape those boundaries. Our temporary solutions are to shock the mind into a state of thoughtlessness with the help of various social substances, excessive sensuality, and thrilling ritual. These will always be available. If there were any permanent solutions however, or at least some practical methods for an exciting dip into the present moment without self-denying or self-destructive behavior, it would seem whoever has them should step up and tell us about it.

Can we cleanse our mind of its accumulation of outdated pasts and impossible futures without getting brainwashed in the process? Can we straighten out the self-indulgent tangles in our neural nets, the cycles that keep sending us in circles, without losing our bearings or our brains? In fact, it is not only possible, but a variety of ways to achieve mindful reconstruction have been taught and perfected throughout history as spiritual instruction, physical training, social skills, and even more powerfully embodied within some of the fundamental rituals of traditional religious practice wherever they are found. The methods we use to find both our freedom and our fulfillment are clever in theory, often elegant in execution, and available to us any time we choose.

Holy Hormones, Batman!

One easy solution is to ground personality temporarily, neutralize the virtual ego and consciously experience perception from that perspective without our filters of repetition. Fortunately, we don't have to do anything violent. All we have to do is overdrive our prefrontal cortex and we'll start blurring self consciousness just like that. If we can't focus time or search memory we can't do future transforms or abstracts or anything. At any moment our ego is anchored in our patterns of memory and expectation. Cognitive thought works only in chronological time because we think comparatively. With cognitive controls off-line we would be "thinking" with our limbic system; pure emotive perception with no space-time limitations at all. This certainly comes close to Godhead or the Great Mother, but it is also perilously close to nowhere. Whatever it is, it is way beyond "Know Thyself" and "Nothing in Excess." In our daily virtual world of time and space we need one to perceive the other. When time checks out, the self goes with it and we get a chance to experience life from a more universal, unlimited perspective. If we could keep our mind in that place for a moment we would actually return to mental synchrony with the rest of the world without the shadings and burdens of hopes or fears. This is no state of mind for doing the taxes or even crossing the street, but it is superlative for experiencing the immediate moment, an refreshingly direct interface with the world. It is considered a form of higher consciousness in the East, where getting beyond personal context is the goal of human spiritual endeavor. So how do we do this?

Fortunately we don't have to open up the brain and pull out memory chips. Chaotic quantum-pattern memories aren't built like that. The easiest thing to do is to create "I-O" or "Input-Output" faults. In computers, this means that data input speed and output speed are out of synchrony. If we can manipulate our brain into overdrive there are ways to create even more profound experiences by forcing consciousness into extremes through biochemical gymnastics. Eventually, these planned electro-chemical stretching

exercises can lead to states of consciousness ranging from mild hormonal highs to complete adrenaline shock; from delight, to amazement, to ecstasy.

Planned Satisfaction: Stretching the Nets

Of course, if we continue to overstimulate our higher brain areas with enough repetition we will eventually force perception to default down to lower-definition consciousness. This would drop us back into something closer to instinctual sensibility for a short time, leaving us unthinking and yet quite aware. This highly charged form of selfless perception is usually described as a state of grace to a religious Westerner, samadhi to a Hindu, satori to a Zen Buddhist. It's the same mind, a self-realized state described as higher consciousness. It's a lower consciousness in fact, and we all have the ability to experience it. In fact, we've all approached it many times without realizing it, and some of us have already taken it one or two steps further.

The way we do this is to create huge synthetic interlocked patterns in the brain through directed concentration on planned activities which are largely repetitious. We need to create enough associative neural networking to eventually trigger a mild hormonal avalanche. Over time, repetition of any complex activity can trigger enough associative response for mild hormonal body highs, providing us with pleasant mental and emotional stimulation without either fantasy or frustration. It's not a virtual event; it's a real world experience and our intensified feelings add to our experiential perception. Creating such large networks takes time, however. Unless we are into Eastern meditative practices or artistic obsession, most of us are not by nature very good at nearly perfect repetition. In fact, the way most of us achieve this state of grace has the advantage of ganging different brain areas together for an overkill. We can do this with any mind/body activity which requires thoughtful practice, from music, to jogging, to drama, to dance. We will cross-associate all sorts of networks if we repeat any complex activity over and over. The constant

repetition involved in mastering any skill takes place as we challenge ourselves again and again until we gain a desired level of competence, matching those imaginary images we project in our own mind. Tibetan lamas refer to this concept when explaining the purpose of their complex ritual dances. “If the mind is focused on directing the body to act smoothly, then the mind must eventually become smooth itself.” Any guitarist discovers that as soon as the fingers learn to form chords, the mind fills with melodies.

As mastery requires practice, constant repetition, it leads inevitably to emotionally charged experiences. Soon, we learn to enjoy the “feeling” of our ability, our craft, or our art. The constant repetition of the same mental challenge also allows for the generation of plentiful new abstracts, giving birth to a range of philosophical musings that always arise during favorite activities. Eventually, this creates immense extended patterns linked throughout higher brain centers routinely handling perception and thought. Incidental resonance between these internal mega-nets and external conditions could easily trigger a powerful hormonal response. Unlike our unconscious repetitions, the mental habits we repeat and try to justify, these are events we made happen with conscious attention and full knowledge of what we were doing. The anterior cingulate area, our Great Mother, is also involved with how we focus our attention. Over time our areas of greatest interest and familiarity begin to resemble the Great Mother as the way adult humans learn to banish isolation or loneliness. In meditation, in competition, in music or mortgage banking, we locate and understand our place in the world when, like Barbara McClintock with her friendly corn chromosomes, we are so involved with what we are doing that we are not aware of ourselves at all. If we just stop worrying about how we’re appearing and devote ourselves to whatever it is we’re doing, the next time we hear from our crowd of critics they’re clapping. Rock stars aren’t kidding when they blow kisses to the crowd and hug each other on-stage. It really was fun. They really are grateful. It’s a gift both ways.

This is how artists and athletes, machinists and musicians, and anyone else who has experienced the personal glow of a job well done gets those thrills. When skill and circumstance combine just right we will lose ourselves in the moment. These moments are instructive, not destructive, because they were done purposefully. What makes the experience so nice is that it often happens when we are doing our best and often in the presence of friends or even admirers. There are hours of dues to pay, of course as we set up those deep patterns during days of mindful repetition. The long hours practicing scales, the steps of dance, slap-shots that slip and dunks that don't; all are part of a patient assembly of those mental patterns that will let us lose our fears without losing ourselves. Over time, amateurism becomes expertise. The body begins to move in smooth curves of carefully controlled energy; the fingers find the frets without a doubt; the colors hold; the dancer's body awakes; and the energy begins to flow from within. Sooner or later, the experience must happen. Practice and action are finally in tune, and it's puck into the net, ball over the goal posts, and moments all musicians experience sooner or later. So much is happening we end up blowing a few fuses. Out comes the adrenaline and the moment takes over, sweeping us into universal reveries as mind and body forsake time and space in a glow we know so well. This is the feeling of being totally in the flow of life, the Tao, the Dharma, the Kingdom of God at Hand, in the groove, swinging along blessed and grateful simply to be, the childlike wonder before self-consciousness.

Every time that we repeat thoughtfully something that we love to do, we knit another set of neurons to our growing networks. Then, as outside events energize them within the right setting, we can find ourselves experiencing pleasant hormonal happiness in supportive and protective surroundings. The more brain area called into resonance, the stronger the feelings. It takes a lot longer if we just watch. An active involvement in our life and the things we love to do makes it much easier. In fact, whenever we immerse ourselves in our music, art, hobbies, studies, athletic contests, professions, personal fitness, volunteer activities; even cooking, working, and parenting it always pulls us out of our virtual reality and makes us a

part of a bigger picture. As the joys of personal fulfillment always require practice, it's important to find a practice that we can enjoy. If paying the dues is a pleasure in and of itself, the payoff will come sooner and be even more pleasurable.

Faith and Familiarity: Awaiting The Rapture

There are, moreover, even more powerful versions of these methods of finding the eternal moment. The basics are the same, but with added effects which tend to act as catalytic boosters. Like the sequenced finale of a fireworks display, they provide special emphasis at the right time, adding direction and depth that can last for days, months, or even longer. To Christians, Muslims and Jews such experiences are considered religious rapture. Hindus call it shaktipat or samadhi and African shamans would recognize possession by a great spirit. Jonathan Earle, whose work in altered states was mentioned previously, believes that with continued overstimulation the entire pre-frontal cortex may default and relinquish its ability to provide any abstract sense of self. This would leave us in the passive limbic consciousness of an infant, a world experienced without observational reflection or mental distance. This is the world we knew before we became chronological creatures, before we left our personal Eden. In these rapturous states, as in highly charged meditative states, the experience is one of intense, and yet passive, immersion in the moment. They are states of being, of nearly selfless awareness and clarity.

When these experiences occur within the focus of a regular religious symbolic or physical practice, they can induce deep emotional responses, pure personal fulfillment, powerful and indescribable. In fact, the only time that we can be so completely fulfilled is when we are much less complex ourselves. There will never again be a time of such sure and undifferentiated self as the one we knew as young children. Without the accumulation of memory to crowd our sureness with caution or regret, time was always now. This universal time of early innocence is, in that sense, also a time of incomparable self-knowledge. It is our

human condition that this form of perception is nearly impossible to recapture or reproduce in the mature consciousness of the human brain. Even if we were to recapture it, we could only use it for the experience itself. Our early non-comparative, timeless consciousness may be the experience we have sought ever since, but it is what it is: an immature and generalized version of our precise and measured adult consciousness, a infant's view from an infant's brain. Still, it was the last time our mind was at actually one with our world and it seems we need the reminders. If we want to find ourselves this is the way to go, but it is not a transcendent move upward. It is a return to another reality, the one that we knew before we knew anything else. "Let the little children come unto me," said Jesus, "hinder them not, for unto such belong the kingdom of heaven." To experience that kingdom we have to relinquish our own virtual world, the entangling neural website we spent so long constructing. In fact, we nearly have to crash the entire system.

Only through widespread disruption of the circuitry of the brain will multiple parts of reflective consciousness flicker out at the same time, creating for a moment a cohesive but much more basic universe, a place beyond understanding. If we can experience for a moment our reunion with *chairoi*, pure timelessness, we will know oneness again. This is to experience the Holy Spirit, to know Enlightenment, to be Brahman. It is so far beyond cognitive perception that our earliest and simplest worlds, long lost and longer forgotten, become momentarily sensible again. The mind settles to the bottom as it simplifies to a nearly primeval state and we are reacquainted with the simple consciousness of infancy. We were all gods then; and as all the great teachers have said, we can be just as holy now. We simply have to regain that fearless, innocent perspective and we can find ourselves again at any age.

To accomplish this we must involve even more brain mass, but the new activities need not be personally meaningful. In fact, it is better if they originally seem meaningless. This way they become meaningful through repetition alone, creating large networks connecting rarely with earlier associations.

These enlarged synthetic networks are easily re-stimulated by ritual repetition and pumped to higher energy levels without affecting conscious thought at all. If enough of the brain's patterns are routed through these networks, if an adrenaline surge hit, they can blow out like overdriven amplifiers. Parts of consciousness would blank right out, dropping us immediately to limbic system limbo again, an infantile consciousness accompanied by everything from out-of-body perceptions to rapturous experiences, from dream scenarios to superhuman exertions.

We can weaken entire levels of consciousness by repeating stimulation just as visual focus will blur if we stare at an object for too long. If any part of the brain is engaged too long in stimulating or stressful activity, neurons will stop firing momentarily to rest. The resulting traffic jam disrupts normal consciousness and the backed up signals default downward to more basic brain structures. If these lower structures are already at the edge of exhaustion themselves, a cascade hits the adrenal cortex and the released hormones hit a hair-trigger brain. If the resulting double overstimulation disinhibits the limbic system, our entire sense of self can melt momentarily into a powerful experience of being dissolved into timelessness as our entire cognitive system goes momentarily off line. Nobody who has been there ever forgets it and preparing for the journey has never been easy.

Getting there usually requires precise mental and physical practices repeated over and over. This time it is not in furtherance of personal goals. It is ritualistic and recognized as such. The fingers move over prayer beads for the devotees of the Virgin Mary, Lord Krishna, and the Buddha. The mind directs faithful hands to fold, or move, or hold. The Muslim bows to Mecca in a precise formula, hands out, hands down. There may be familiar music. Familiar scents, such as incense, will excite the olfactory cortex and prime the limbic system. There may be ceremonial swaying, walking, kneeling, ritual hand movements, ritual dance, or prostrations. Shakers danced in circles, Southern Baptists clap, Buddhist lamas move their hands

through ritual gestures, Hassidim daven, rocking back and forth, Sufis spin in white gowns, Chinese walk T'ai Chi, Catholic priests raise the Host.

We can add other subroutines as well. To automate the auditory cortex we repeat a familiar line of syllables in our mind over and over. It can be a prayer, it can be a mantra; it can be a name or a title. "Hare Ram", "Hail Mary", "Kyrie Eleison", "Our Father", "Nam Yoho Renge Kyo", "Om Mani Padme Hum". We repeat it until it comes without thought. We fix our eyes on the altar, the icon, the cross, the candle, or the image we memorize, keeping our visual cortex in a state of repetitive overstimulation. To focus the emotions of the already excited limbic system we direct our mood to openness and vulnerability. To fill the prefrontal lobes we imagine the same hopes and dreams. All of these we repeat together over and over again. Eventually we will have created such huge networks that if the adrenaline hits, the higher brain could go up like a munitions dump dissolving us into the arms of the Great Mother, Eternal Father, God, Allah, Buddha, Brahma, Ahura Mazda or whatever our faith or culture has taught us to call the universal one and only timeless state of grace.

Once again, we are using brain ballistics to blow the roof off, but it's about the only way that we can become oracles ourselves. It can easily leave the unprepared babbling nonsense syllables until normal processing is restored. By synchronizing certain physical and mental practices, we can greet God, join with Jesus, ally with Allah, rally with Ram, dissolve in the Dharma, and come back blessed. Real spiritual masters and saints know how to do this from a standing start, but they have been working at it a lot longer than most of us. Forcing shortcuts through compulsive religious activity or obsessive use of the Asian meditative and tantric traditions can actually be harmful to the unprepared, leading not only to hurt feelings and headaches but mild mental derangement as well. Luckily, there are so many forms of gentler activity both with others and by ourselves that our chosen personal meditative or devotional practices can easily be integrated into our lives. In time, the keys to the good times become easier to find as we find sincere ways

to lose ourselves not out of our minds, but very deeply into our minds. There we will find the answers we were looking for and often when we least expect them. It is interesting to speculate when, and how, the intense effects of interlocking physical and mental exhaustion could have triggered the first transcendental experience. One possible scenario could have been a shuffling “dance” around a guard-fire in front of a prehistoric cave or lean-to.

Fire from Heaven

It is very, very late at night. The wind is arid and warm in the dry season when the grasses dry up and small bands of humans must move continually from place to place seeking water and food. We are back to the time before history, easily forty thousand years ago. This is the original Garden of Eden, primeval and unaware, without priest and without prophet. The brain is now sophisticated enough that our ancestors were finally living as much by their plans as by their primitive weapons. Life was harsh, and the dry season was harsher. The small “family” is asleep. The hunter is keeping watch. The darkness surrounds him with sounds and stirrings. He shivers in fear. He knows too well the growls of each cat hunting out there in the black night. Beyond the faint light of the flickering coals are the jackals and the hyenas. They are hungrier than the hunter. He knows it. The woman is asleep, the infant is ill, so he must stay awake by walking to and fro in front of the fire. If it dies, if he falters, the animals will come. He knows that too. By himself, or with a brother or clan cousin, night after night he shuffles about the fire, waving his throwing-stick, shouting hoarsely into the darkness where the eyes lie waiting. Hour after hour it continues; the coals glowing at the center of his exhausted circle, the waving stick, the surge of memories and hopes, always the same. They echo through the auditory cortex in unspoken supplication. “Come dawn, come morning light, come before I fall asleep, come save me from this night of darkness, this night of fear.” It may not have been spoken aloud. It may not have even been in words, but it was the seed of

what would become all chants and all prayers. All night the endless circling, the same movements, the red coals, the smoky smell of the fire exciting the olfactory cortex and priming the limbic system, the same words, the same thoughts exhausting one layer of cells after another in the auditory cortex, the visual cortex fixated on the glowing fire against the blackness of night, blurring, circling. His eyes grow heavy; his mumbling chant keeps beseeching the sun to rise.

How often had he shuffled in that same circle? It was nearly every night as they camped across the dry African savanna. Every night the same ritual would be repeated, the same movements, the same overstimulation of the senses and the same exhausted prayer. The ingredients would all be there: rhythmic repetitious physical movement, focused attention in conflict with neural exhaustion, a stimulated anterior cingulate surrounding us with isolation and loneliness and an overstimulated limbic system. It was the same for Moses, troubled and trudging into to a desert sunset in the hot exile of the Sinai. It was the same for Saul, about to become Paul, swaying in rhythm back and forth under a blazing noon on the back of a donkey carrying him to Damascus. Gautama meditated, famished, at the base of a tree as Sujata approached. Mohammed prayed isolated in a cave in the desert hills. Saviors and Prophets, intense, searching for the inner light. It comes out of the sky, out of blazing bushes, from angels, in deepest meditation and it can be stunning. It knocked Paul right off his donkey, converting him on the spot. Moses exited to start the Exodus, Buddha became enlightened, Mohammed received the Koran, and India's Mirabai and Sri Chaitanya danced in joy from town to town.

Back in the endless rhythms of a prehistoric night, our ancient ancestor is in a nearly hypnotic state. His shuffling movements are on autopilot. His exhausted consciousness is at the sleep threshold, his eyes barely open. Sleep tugs at his mind. He falters. The throwing stick clatters onto the rocks. He lunges forward, skips a beat, trips and stumbles towards the fire. He jerks back, the flames leap, a jackal howls a dozen feet behind him, and it is suddenly just too much. The howl makes it to the auditory cortex but

massive associative networks are starting to break down in overload. Signals break loose as swarms of neurotransmitters clog uptake slots but there's not enough room. It's too much to handle. In waves, unleashed chaos begins to surge through overloaded neural channels, shorting out levels of consciousness like floors collapsing in a burning building, plunging the hunter into the fail-safe of sheer being. As his cognitive world dissolves in uncontrolled neural saturation, consciousness veers into pure timeless reality without any limitations.

He staggers, momentarily stunned, and drops heavily to his knees before the fire. Is this death? The world sways and sparkles. He reaches out towards his sleeping mate and child. His companions, awakened now, see it all. What is he doing at the fire? Inside his bowed head, the whole history of his labors and devotions are avalanching into the present moment and his body swims in hormonal shock. The overstimulated and exhausted networks flicker and blank out, the cerebellum seizes, the prefrontal cortex wails a chorus to the brain stem, the hippocampus goes haywire, and the limbic system disinhibits. The adrenal rush floods his veins just as reality unhinges. Anything is real now, and anything can be real. The hunter jerks upright like a puppet on a string. The adrenaline hits the visual cortex. His vision clears instantly, his movements become sure and confident and his limbs glow with inner fire. His prayers are answered! God has just kissed him on the top of his brain and he knows that he is the one and only beloved. More than that, he is strong, and he is chosen. Heart pounding, he strides in what seems slow motion to where he keeps his stone ax, grabs it like a toy, and screaming like a demon dashes into the night, smashing jackals into jackal chops as he goes.

The first time was unrecorded, but it happened. And when they came to him the next day with the gifts and the fearful respect, there was something new on earth. He had discovered the first internal connection to something beyond ourselves, something that made us much more than ourselves. We, in turn, had discovered the first holy man. There would be many more.

Varieties of Grace: Taking the Time

If our Paleolithic hero by the fire learns to repeat all the preliminaries exactly the same way again, or if he's done it enough times, or if he adds any plant intoxicants for a little booster, he may become the first shaman. Over many millennia, the fire and the steps became stylized. Weapons and implements became sacred objects, and heartfelt utterances were formalized into chants and prayers. The holy wisdom took words and was made poetic, but the combination of repeated thought and action that could create a symphony of hormonal overload became a secret understanding, unspoken and still acknowledged with difficulty by those who have been touched by it. It has not been, nor will it ever be adequately described because it is a temporary brush with a consciousness we knew before we knew speech. In fact, the experience usually leaves the faithful temporarily speechless.

These ancient paths to a renewed vision eventually became bound into religious and mystic traditions wherever humans live, embodied in innumerable cultural variants wherever there is a priesthood and a tradition. We are actually familiar with many forms of mental and emotional self-cleansing, experiences that may provide some with insight, others with wisdom, and all a richer experience of life. All religions, cults, and even newer holistic philosophies have these practices available within them. For the Christian who seeks a stronger faith, there are eager Evangelicals and passionate Pentecostal preachers to raise the spirit. The Orthodox Jew sways at shul while his kids kibitz with the Kabbala. Muslims can swirl with dervishes, follow Sufi saints, and read Rumi. Hindus and Buddhists have a particularly rich collection of meditative and tantric practices to unlayer and massage the mind in precise degrees. Depending on how far we wish to take our involvement, we can help generate everything from the warm glow of fellowship to the nearly uncontrollable surges associated with ecstatic singing, talking, and dancing.

We can, over time, learn to let loose the ego just enough to work a little better with our friends in the real world, or go all the way and dissolve our personality into the mind of the universe. The prayer can be “Hail Mary,” “Hear, Oh Israel!” “Allahu Akbar,” “Om Mane Padme Hum,” “Amida Butsu,” “Nam-yohorenge-kyo,” or “Hare Krishna.” They all work equally well, so say “Hallelujah,” “Amen,” and “Thank you, Jesus,” “Salaam” and “Shalom.” If we wished any of us could devise our own movements, mantras, prayers, and rituals. With enough practice they would probably do just as well. On the other hand, it’s easier on the personal emotional reality check of our limbic system to use a method historically familiar and culturally natural. If we want to follow one religion or another or even just make use of helpful devotional or meditative practices it is easier to find inspiration within our own culture. Anyone can know Lord Krishna’s love with enough devotion, but returning to Jesus may be easier for a lapsed Christian who was once a child who loved her Bible stories and junior choir.

Now that we are a little more familiar with some of the neurological staging behind our transcendental forms of pleasure seeking, it should come as no surprise that none of this can be accomplished without patient and sincere practice. We can’t rush biochemistry, nor can we ever predict when we will harness enough of our neural energy to dissolve chronology and share the incomparable experience. As Diana Ross put it so simply, “You can’t hurry love, no, you just have to wait.” This is probably why both St. Paul and John Calvin stressed that one cannot get a guarantee on heaven with deeds and why Buddhist tradition insists on lifetimes of mindful practice. To even start our journey to fulfillment we must be focused on daily life and the pleasures we find on a moment-to-moment basis. Our attention must be in the present tense, not wandering about in our personal past or our expectations of some desired personal future.

When traditional prayers or practices are done with any consistency there will always come a time when the practitioner begins to notice the world is, for some reason, looking better and more inviting. By

feeding the mind a diet of natural experiences, each well remembered day filed away creates expectations of a similar future. We can't change our chaotically woven system of human consciousness, but we can start loading the loom with good times and watch the patterns change. We can even darn up the holes in the neural networks we don't like, build new ones, and fine tune our virtual reality to the tunes that please us the best.

The whole purpose, of course, is to reach the point in our lives where from a Western religious perspective the Kingdom of God is at hand or from an Eastern perspective, we are in the Dharma or the Tao, our true and natural path. From a systems approach, we could say that we're finally running the debugging utilities which can override that cycling glitch in the original software, letting us reset our goals and restart our life. Whatever the path we choose, our purpose will be revealed in the way life itself becomes more inviting than any talk show, soap opera, historical romance, or future cash flow. In reviving and maintaining a full and active involvement in the world around us, we are freed from the gridlock of virtual ego and returned, reborn, to a moving world with a peaceful, personal center.

Unfortunately, a lack of rational perspectives on religious belief and practice has had the backward effect of fostering and even promoting a trend towards mindless emotional and devotional fundamentalism in nearly every major world religion. Denied a universal, and thereby a generic, guidebook to the mystical experience and the personal security it can bring, stressed-out seekers in every nation are being manipulated into trading personal will, common sense, and even basic decency for the reassurances of dogmatic certainty in a relative world. This growing need for some sense of final authority in these challenging times of global religious mixing and matching seems to have re-established all the self-appointed guardians of the words of God, be it Gospel, Torah, Koran, Sutra, or Say-So. Hoards are herded into the presence of self-promoting salesmen of local popular priesthoods, all promising bliss and blessings for simply surrendering all to this guide or that guru. Promising us that we can bring all the problems in our lives and even in the

world to some higher power, media mega-ministers use mobs of orchestrated followers singing, praying, swaying, and chanting to pump up the stimulation levels and hormonally hype unsuspecting souls through the portals of glory. Sinners are slain in the spirit for Jesus Christ, while Hindu devotees experience their synthetic shaktipat with a mantra and a touch. Preachers promising easy certainties swarm in times such as these, taking advantage of national and worldwide stress and frustration to promote their simplistic solutions and the synthetic reassurance of intense and exclusive ritual.

As might be expected, few of these shortcuts to Shangri-La have lasting effects. Without the steady and consistent repetition of positive, thoughtful action required to create the natural neural networks and mental associations, these spiritual supersalesmen have to continually hammer their followers into adrenal excess with everything from “love bombing” to fire walks. If the message has to be channeled it’s time to change the channels. When they start waving the holy books, it’s time to wave good-bye. Real priests, pandits, mullahs, and ministers generally avoid this forced rock ‘n roll of the nervous system. There is a good reason that Jesus directed his followers to pray in the privacy of their rooms and why the Buddha directed his students to find calm and quiet places for meditation. The practices that reach the deepest are truly self-tailored; they are not group events. They are personal, and they are precious.

The sincere and simple paths to empowerment are there to lift us out of both past and future and rededicate us to the present, the only place shared by us all. In truly finding ourselves again we are not confined to co-practitioners, we are liberated to go and involve ourselves even more fully in the world around us. The big secret, if there ever were one, is that each of us has within us the ability to do it all by ourselves. There’s nothing, and nobody, to prevent us from taking greater pleasure in life by looking at it as the best chance to improve a good situation we ever got. We are, after all, the top of the scale for evolution on this planet, which is a nice place to start from to begin with. With a viewpoint like that, it’s hard to fail.

Seeking true self-fulfillment for a human, then, is nearly the opposite of the rat with its pleasure button. While lower animals drive themselves quickly to exhaustion, only a small percentage of humans are that compulsive. In fact, most of us do learn to enjoy the conscious generation of joy and happiness as part of our life goals just to make life itself more vibrant. We can get excited about our art, our work, our dance, our friends, our family, our skills, and even our mystical mental spirituality. We can all learn to live inside, and occasionally outside, our limits, learning about ourselves daily in a full involvement with life.

It's not always easy living with a fully evolved human consciousness. We have some unique problems. We slip easily into so many forms of mental mind block, cycling, and repetition, not to mention getting caught in the gridlock of chronological time. On the other hand, it seems that we have developed some useful and even pleasurable mental utilities and even specific applications to enhance and improve our own consciousness. Putting them into practice, we see why the great religious leaders had so little to say about ritual. Jesus never mentions speaking in tongues, nor did Mohammed do Sufi dances. The Buddha walked with his monks teaching from town to town; he did not sit chanting in a cave. Our greatest guides were not telling us to give up on life, but to give out to life and enjoy the greater community of the entire human family. This is why they all speak not of power and wealth, but of simple consideration, forgiveness, generosity, and above all, love and kindness. These are the sort of subtle pleasures that only humans can know, and in practicing them, they bring us always closer to the best of our own humanity, the part of us that makes us more than simply human. They make us fully human; even touched with the brush of the divine.

As natural pleasure seekers, then, we have so many ways that we can travel. There is everything from full-blown fantasy to true self discovery and all the stages in between. We can be angry at life's obstacles and get our excitement stressfully, or we can be enthusiastic about life's challenges and get it sweet. We can all find ways to make life as stimulating as we want it to be, and we usually use the routines

we've gotten used to. But the careful and graduated steps to inner tranquillity and personal fulfillment are also there and available to any of us with the will to improve and the patience to keep at it. Day by day, step by step, and moment by moment we can reweave the tapestry of our own virtual perception with mindful attention to our craft, our art, our hopes, our practice, and our prayers. We can repattern our mind for easy gladness and make personal happiness into a habit. Our tools may be molecules and heavenly experiences are still born in our own brain states, but we can get an entirely new outlook if we give it a try. This is one world that gives us more chances for a good time than we ever thought possible. It is, after all, Eden, Shambhala, Fat City, and the Kingdom of God; and we are right now right in the middle of it. In going beyond our personal, cultural, and even conscious limitations, we have the chance to finally awaken, and aim towards that better world. We just have to take the steps to reach that new perspective, and the vision will change us forever.

These days we are going further beyond both our personal and cultural boundaries than we have ever gone in the history of mankind. What happens when we stop chatting, look around, and realize we're all talking about the same things? Could there be an human mystic experience, a global re-set, and a new awakening of our human consciousness? It seems possible and probable, for all of us now as it has always been for each of us up until now. What will be the result? Gautama gave us a hint in his Heart Sutra, where he got to the heart of it all. In simple Sanskrit it goes. "Gate, Gate, Paragate, Parasamgate, Bhodi, Svaha". "Go, go, go beyond, go completely beyond, awaken, and rejoice". In letting go the limits that constrain us and flowing beyond ourselves we finally find ourselves, and there we find our souls. When we all realize how similar we all are, perhaps we can all get beyond the boundaries, discover for once our collective human spirit, awaken, and rejoice. Many of us will be actually be around for this extraordinary development, which may happen sooner than we think. For these lucky ones, it will be a new world. But

many of us will not be there. It is for them that the next chapter is dedicated, for they will have gone beyond long before, to the final and unknown destination that we actually know so well.