



A SPIRITUAL PATH
FOR THE MODERN WEST

BENJAMIN RIGGS

Finding God in the Body

A Spiritual Path for the Modern
West



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Finding God in the Body: A Spiritual Path for the Modern West
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12 The Freedom to Love

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” ~ John 13:35

The glossy rhetoric that swirls around love attracts many of us to spirituality like moths to a flame. We get all revved up and come in hot. We skip the ground work and, as a result, we burn out. We want to love the poor and destitute, but find it exhausting and overwhelming. We want to love our enemies, but quickly realize this is easier said than done. When the seeds of love are planted in shallow ground, they are scorched when the sun rises. Love bears fruit only when rooted in the deep soil of freedom.¹

Unconditional love is an expression of unconditional freedom. As long as we are chained to the false-self, we are a slave to its agenda. We do not see our fellow man, but only how they affect us. We see them through the eyes of the false-self, the knowledge of fear and expectation. The ability to love others as our Self is born out of freedom *from* self. It grows out of the freedom *of* God to love our fellow man as they are. So before we can talk about loving others, we have to address bondage or sin.

Original Sin

¹ Matthew 13:1-9

The Western conception of sin begins with the fabled events that transpired in the Garden of Eden. The Garden is ground zero for any discussion about sin. As the story goes, God planted the Garden in the east and filled it with “every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.”² Then he placed man in the Garden and told him “to tend and cultivate it.”³ Recognizing the need for companionship, God later added woman. “And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.”⁴ They were in paradise.

In the Garden, Adam and Eve enjoyed an unquestioned unity with God. But they did not tend to their garden. Obviously, the moral of the story is not that they were bad farmers. We are not talking about a literal garden. The Hebrew word for “mankind” is *adam*, which comes from the word *adamah* meaning, “ground or earth,” as in, “God formed *man* from the dust of the *earth*.”⁵

The garden is the body. It is the soil out of which our life grows and the plot of land we must cultivate. Adam and Eve neglected this responsibility. This was their great sin.

God told the couple, “You may freely eat of every tree in the garden; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.” But the temptation was too great. Adam and Eve wanted more. It was not evil that seduced them. It was the desire for something better. They saw the tree was *pleasing* to the eye and knew it would make them clever, so they ignored God’s warning and ate the fruit.⁶ With one bite their eyes were opened.

² Genesis 2:9

³ Genesis 2:15

⁴ Genesis 2:25

⁵ Genesis 2:7

⁶ Genesis 3:6

Adam and Eve were not visually impaired before eating the fruit. “Their eyes were opened” is a figure of speech. It means they became self-conscious. They realized that the body was naked and made coverings for themselves.⁷ These coverings hid them from the indwelling presence of God.⁸ This is sin—alienation, separation, disembodiment. Cut off from the life of the body, they became identified with an external self. And shame came over them.⁹

Like Adam and Eve, we are born into a state of unquestioned unity. And like them, we take it for granted. How could we not? As children innocence is all we know, then life throws us a curve ball. This unity is called into question and we become confused. We anxiously begin thinking about our own thoughts until the illusory world of our imagination appears to be real. Suddenly, it feels like there is a thinker behind those thoughts. Then the cunning and crafty serpent whispers in our ear, “You are that thinker,” and we become “like gods.”¹⁰ We live in a world of our own making and identify with the creator of that world, the thinking mind.

God told Adam he would die if he ate from the Tree of Knowledge. Despite God’s warning, Adam supposedly lived for an astonishing 930 years! The death God warned Adam of was a spiritual death, not a biological one. When we eat of the fruit of knowledge, we migrate up into the lifeless world between our ears. We stop living and become identified with what we think about life. This is spiritual death or disembodiment.

⁷ Genesis 3:7

⁸ Genesis 3:8

⁹ Though not explicitly stated, the idea that the fall resulted in shame is the implication of the pre-fall state of affairs: “And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.”

¹⁰ Genesis 3:5

Life and death are set before us in every moment. From the Tree of the Knowledge of *Good* and *Evil* falls the fruit of dualistic thinking. This fruit is filled with the seeds of disembodiment, shame, and suffering. Under the Tree of Life we find true freedom, freedom from the false-self. We must choose between the stale and lifeless world of disembodied knowledge and the vitality of the present moment. This is the only real choice we ever make: Are we going to cling to our fears and expectations, the knowledge of good and evil? Or are we going to accept life as-it-is? If we cling to the former, we are bound by the fear-driven agenda of the false-self. If we choose the latter, we are set free. This choice defines our life.

Falling into Freedom

The myth of the Garden is a timeless motif. Its staying power is owed to its deep connection with the human condition. We are all born into perfect unity and we all misplace that unity. This is not a judgment of our moral character. It is just a fact: we all fall from the individuated state. We live east of Eden.¹¹

Sin is separation from God. Since God lives within the body, sin is disembodiment. Original sin refers not only to the state of separation, but to mankind's inherited predisposition to mistake words and ideas for the realities they represent. The concept of original sin suggests that disembodiment is foreshadowed by our human nature. In other words, the fall is fate, not punishment.

On one hand, freedom is an essential quality of our inmost nature. On the other, freedom cannot be compulsory. To actualize freedom we must consent freely. We must come by it

¹¹ Genesis 3:24 (Adam and Eve went East when they exited the Garden)

honestly, or it isn't freedom. The state of involuntary unity does not stick. We take it for granted *because* it lacks consent. It is potential freedom, not actualized freedom.

Exile is not the punitive will of a cosmic overlord as it is often described. "The fall" is inevitable. We are thinking, imagining creatures. We are bound to taste the fruit of our knowledge—to mistake the images of our imagination for the realities they represent. The unity of mind and body has to be challenged. We have to die a spiritual death to be resurrected.

Just as exile is a possibility within the structure of unity, atonement (at-one-ment) exists as a possibility within the condition of exile. "The power of God," says Tillich, "is that He overcomes estrangement, not that He prevents it."¹² The spiritual path sees our misidentification with the ego as part of our development. Just as it recognizes the fall as a stage of our journey, spirituality sees the opportunity to throw off the false-self and recover our True Nature as a part of our human maturation. We have to be deceived by a forgery before we can develop an appreciation for the genuine article. In short, we all lose ourselves, because in finding our Self we gain a degree of depth and fulfillment that is otherwise unobtainable.

On Earth as it is in Heaven

In truth, the separation between man and God is an illusion. We are not actually separated from God. God is a symbol for *Being-Itself*, which we participate in through our Being. We could not separate ourselves from the reality of God even if we wanted to. This inability to be estranged from the presence

¹² Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications*, Oxford University Press (1954), pg. 112-113

of God is what Matthew Fox calls “Original Blessing,” and Original Blessing cannot be trumped, not even by original sin.¹³

Our life is rooted in the presence of God, not sin. God lives in the body as the life of the body. Sin is a figment of our imagination. We only think we are separated from God. “The chief thing that separates us from God,” writes Fr. Keating, “is the thought that we are separated from Him. If we get rid of that thought, our troubles will be greatly reduced. We fail to believe that we are always with God and that He is part of every reality. The present moment, every object we see, our inmost nature are all rooted in Him.”¹⁴ Every sight, sound, idea, feeling, smell, and sensation arises from the Ground of Being. This may be a nice sentiment, but to realize it we have to let go of the idea that we are a solid, separate self.

“The only true joy on earth,” writes Merton, “is to escape from the prison of our own false-self, and enter by love into union with the Life Who dwells and sings within the essence of every creature and in the core of our own souls.”¹⁵ If we cling to the false-self with its fear, resentment, ambition, and stress, then we are too bloated to pass through the eye of the needle. With all that baggage we cannot enter the Kingdom of our Being because the gate is too narrow.¹⁶ Only the simplicity of our True Self can fit through the gate because the gate is a cut out of our True Self.

God’s will is often described as if it were a cosmic scavenger hunt: “God wants me to go to college, find a job, get

¹³ Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing : A Primer in Creation Spirituality*, Bear & Co (1996)

¹⁴ Fr. Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel*, Continuum (1998), pg. 44

¹⁵ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New Directions Book (2007), pg. 25

¹⁶ Matthew 7:14

married, have 2.5 kids, attend this church, and buy a boat.” We spend our whole life looking for God’s will, but never find it. Why? Because we have confused self-will with God’s will. Self-will is extraneous, busy, and needy. What is God’s will? In reality, God does not have a will for you.

The will of God is the *image of God* in man as his essential nature. “God does not want to be believed in, to be debated and defended by us, but simply to be realized through us,” writes Martin Buber.¹⁷ God wants to become you. In short, you are the will of God. The will of God is fulfilled when our inmost Self is brought into the world through our actions. Or, to paraphrase the Lord’s Prayer, “The Kingdom comes when God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven.”¹⁸

While God may be present within us as “our inmost nature,” this nature remains dormant until we consent. The act of consent is consummated with action. Action is the final stage in the process of *actualization*, which means, “to embody.” In short, God is born on earth through our actions. “Our world” becomes “the Kingdom” when the light of God illuminates every aspect of our life.

The light of awareness must shine out from the center of our Being onto every relationship, every interaction, and through every thought, word, and deed. This is a tall order and we will fall short many times. Our daily practice gives us a foundation. Personal inventory, study, prayer, and meditation make us more transparent, enabling the light of our True Life to shine on all of our affairs. Though a daily practice is indispensable, we cannot stop there. Our spirituality cannot be limited to a list of daily

¹⁷ Martin Buber, *On Judaism, Schocken Books* (1995), pg. 94

¹⁸ Matthew 6:10

chores. For spiritual practice to be effective, we must bring the principles of personal inventory, prayer, and meditation into our day. Love makes that possible.

The Power of Love

On the spiritual path, we will fall short many times. It is easy to become impatient, frustrated, and overwhelmed. That is why love is so important. Love sees life in everything. It recognizes the life that abides within every creature. This recognition begets respect. Love is patient, kind, and endures all things, as anyone who has attended a wedding knows. Our knowledge, plans, and strategies will reach their wit's end, but love never tires.

One day, while watching my favorite television show, *The Office*, I heard those famous words of St. Paul's yet again¹⁹ but this time with new ears because I was holding my newborn son. As I looked at him and heard, "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love," I understood. For the first time, I understood.

In that moment, I knew: I knew that I could read every book in the world and make plans from now until the end of time, but my knowledge would be exhausted and my plans would fall short. No strategy and no amount of preparation could ever get me to the finish line. The only thing that remained was love. Only my love for him can bear the hardships and difficulties that our relationship will bring to the surface. Only my love for him can overcome my impatience and arrogance. Only my love for him can guide him without trying to bend him to my will. Only love is humble enough to teach him *how* to

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 13:3-13

think without teaching him *what* to think. For only the eye of love sees him as his own person and only love is selfless enough to grant him the space he needs to grow into that person. Love is the only voice within me honest enough to admit that he does not belong to me.

Truthfully, it is not “my” love and it is not “for him.” Love is the defining characteristic of the Kingdom. I do not create love. I receive it. Love is a gift.

“Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”²⁰ And as children of God, we resemble God. Love is our birthmark.²¹ When freedom from self is realized the likeness of God is reflected in our actions. The cataracts of fear and expectation are removed and we can see the world as-it-is. When we recover the freedom to see people as they are, we see the life that dwells and sings within them, and love is our natural response.

Throughout the pages of this book I have placed considerable emphasis on man’s inner life, not because it’s more important than man’s outer life, but because it is the spring from which our outer life flows. The indwelling image of God is the fount of love that erupts at our center, breaking through our skin onto the plane of our Incarnation. Such love sees beyond the projected self of others to their inmost depths where their True Self abides. When the eye of God within us makes contact with the eye of God in our fellow man, there is communion, which is the meaning of “Namaste.”

I cannot teach people how to love. To my knowledge, no

²⁰ John 4:8

²¹ John 13:35

one can. Love is wild. It has no manners. It comforts the afflicted, and afflicts the comfortable. Love often defies logic. It would have us embrace our enemies and be uncomfortably honest with our friends. This cannot be taught. Love does not come with a manual. It is the spontaneous expression of our True Nature.

I am hesitant to talk about love, but I'm more reluctant to say nothing. I am afraid that if left unfastened, the truth of love will be reduced to an ambiguous and miasmatic sentiment that fails to connect the reality of our True Self to the responsibilities of our daily life. So now we will turn our attention to love, which consists of three qualities that correspond to the three modes of Being discussed in chapter six.²² Those three facets of love are unconditional love, gratitude, and creative love.

Unconditional Love

As I said before, love is complete freedom—the freedom of God to love friend and foe as our Self. Love is complete and total freedom because it is selfless. Selfless awareness is wide open, *agapic* awareness.²³ This is the all-embracing quality of *Undifferentiated Awareness* that recognizes and embraces everything that is real and true, regardless of whether it is comfortable or not.

Self-centeredness is the worst kind of prison. It keeps us chained and shackled to our fears and illusions, reserved to making decisions that serve our own narrow-minded agenda. Love doesn't see the world or the people in it through the knowledge of good and bad. Love does not see what we stand to

²² Undifferentiated Awareness, Basic Sanity, and Incarnation

²³ *Agape* is the highest form of love in Greek philosophy.

lose or gain. It sees things-as-they-are. And when you see things-as-they-are, you see the spark of divinity that lives within all things.

Gratitude

In the embrace of unconditional love, it feels like we are loved *into* Being. This awareness brings about a phase change. It transmutes the energy of unconditional love into gratitude. Dominion is not control, but responsibility.²⁴ Gratitude accepts this responsibility. When you are grateful for something, you “tend to it.” When God told Adam to tend to the Garden, he meant love it—love the body, your fellow man, and the earth.

Gratitude is an action, not an idea. It is the act of caring for that which we are grateful. Gratitude doesn’t hang out in the oceanic presence of unconditional love. It reaches out to the world *from* the deep space of love. It invests, not only in the maintenance of our Self, but through likeness recognizes and welcomes the True Self in others. Likeness is a quality of *Basic Sanity*. It looks beyond race, religion, gender, sexual orientation and social status to find its kind in others. In this way likeness gives rise to kindness, which is the foundation of relationship. Having established relationship, love goes through yet another conversion.

Creative Love

At this stage, gratitude and kindness give way to the creative power of love. The principle of *Eros* or erotic love isn’t limited to “sexual desire.” It refers to the creativity of love. Therefore, sexual union is both an example of Eros and a most

²⁴ Genesis 1:26

useful symbol for its creative nature. We are born *out of* love and therefore born *to* love. Love is the Alpha and Omega.

Eros is the desire to *make* love. It is the creative force that seeks to express love through relationship, art, poetry, music, prayers of devotion, and songs of worshipful silence. Eros articulates love. In fact, creative love is art—it is the aspect of love that lends shape to the unformed inspiration of our inner life. Eros is love *Incarnate*.

While creative love is the principle that underlies the great works of art, it is not limited to painting, music, or theater any more than it is to the bedroom. In fact, creative love is most active in our daily life. It is the aspect of love that expands the field of practice. It brings our spiritual practice out of our home and into our day.

Love in Daily Life

The Upanishads say, “And then He realized that he was this creation, as it had poured forth from Himself. In this way He became this creation. Therefore, he who realizes this becomes, in this creation, a creator.” To become a creator is to bring the divine image to fruition. Having discovered an untapped inner wealth, we are no longer dominated by our poverty mentality. We are full. We seek to give back, to create.

Eros transforms our life into an art form. It is the art of living. When we consent to the power of love, it shapes our life in the same way Michelangelo chiseled his sculpture of David from raw stone. This happens in relationship. We cannot wall ourselves off from the world and call it spirituality. Without relationship our practice is incomplete. Commitment connects the responsibilities and obligations of our daily life to the

indwelling reality of our True Self.

Committed relationships are difficult because they demand that we give of our Self. This is hard because the false-self is selfish. It wants to avoid discomfort and clings to immediate gratification. Creative love matures us by reminding us that we cannot hope to grow into our True Self without something demanding our false-self in return.

The resurrection of our True Life is proportionate to the death of our inauthentic life. The false-self is incapable of accepting this truth. It is bound to itself. Love is free to accept this maxim. This is the power of love to endure all things: marriage, divorce, success, failure, friendship, rivalries, heartache, and death. The freedom of love enables us to adapt to life's changing circumstances. From the point of view of creative love, there are no problems, only opportunities. If the problem can be solved it is not a problem, just something for you to work with; if it can't be solved, it is not a problem, just something to accept and move on. Creative love sees everything as workable.

Eros recognizes disappointment as part of our path. It doesn't see tribulation as something to be avoided. The Dalai Lama once said that we cannot view a beggar as an obstacle, if we hope to grow in generosity. This axiom can be applied to all other virtues as well. Patience is an indispensable spiritual principle, but when given the opportunity to grow in patience, many of us reject it. We rail against the person trying our nerves. We label those who try our patience as "assholes," but without an obstruction or an "adversary" there is no growth.²⁵ Creative

²⁵ The Hebrew name Ha-Satan translates as "the adversary." The adversary was not originally a villain. Satan, as clearly illustrated in the book of Job, was more like the DA in the court of God. He would go out and identify shortcomings and prosecute

love knows that we cannot grow in patience without an asshole in our lives and binds our actions to this principle.

Without struggle there is no growth which is why Shantideva writes, “All enemies are helpers in my *spiritual* work and therefore they should be a joy to me.”²⁶ Where there is an enemy, a shortcoming, or an obstacle, creative love sees a gateway. When we are angry, afraid, jealous, depressed, or obsessed, love knows there is an underdeveloped aspect of our Self struggling to be born into the world. Love seeks to cultivate it. It loves our devils into the present moment; it does not reject them. We may be intellectually sympathetic to this idea, but only the power of love recognizes this on a practical level.

What we call spiritual principles live within us as potentialities embedded within the structure of Being, but just as the capacity to walk is a potentiality that has to be exercised by toddlers, these potentialities have to be actualized through the struggle of daily life. In this way, God is born into the world.

Spirituality is about accepting our obstacles as the path, not avoiding them. Only love is capable of seeing the relationships and tasks that present us with difficulty as the plots of land that we must cultivate. In short, what we call obstacles, love calls the path, and all paths intersect.

Conclusion

If we look closely, we will see an intricate web of interdependence emerging. It may appear that we are attracted to

those defects of character, in order to bring people closer to God. See the book of *Job* 1: 1-12

²⁶ Shantideva, *The Bodhisattva's Guide to the Way of Life*, Shambala (2006), pg. 92

*The original text uses the word “*Bodhisattva*” (awakened being) not “*spiritual*.”

this person or that job for one reason or the other, but if we look closer—beyond the veil of the false-self—we will see that the power of love has brought us into this relationship. “Driven by the forces of love, the fragments of the world seek each other so that the world may come to being,” writes Teilhard de Chardin, the brilliant Catholic theologian.²⁷ It is as if the universe is working as a midwife, assisting in the birth of our Self. But love is never a one-sided situation. The forces of love are at work in the other person as well. The universe is using us to assist in their birth. There is something deep in the other that yearns to be realized, and it has identified a relationship with us as part of its path. We are there to aid in their birth, just as they are there to aid in ours.

While love may bring us together, it does not chain us to one another. It binds us to the truth in our hearts. So in love, there is solitude. “For the pillars of the temple stand apart,” writes Kahlil Gibran, “and the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other’s shadow.”²⁸ Selfish love—which is no love at all—sees the other as an object to be exploited or a hostage to be taken; authentic love recognizes the symbiotic structure of the relationship. A healthy relationship moves back and forth between solitude and communion. It sees both interdependence and independence.

The longer we stick with this process, the more obvious it becomes that we are not in control. We are just along for the ride. There are forces beyond the jurisdiction of our conscious mind that arise out of the darkness of the body and organize our life. It is our job to be disciplined by these forces. So in the words of the great Muslim poet Rumi, “Let yourself be silently

²⁷ Teilhard de Chardin, *On Love & Happiness*, Harper & Row (1984), pg. 43

²⁸ Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*, Chapter 3

drawn by the strange pull of what you really love. It will not lead you astray.” This strange gravitational force pulls toward a center that is both within us and outside of us. This force is the will of God. In the final analysis we realize that our life is not our own. We live in the Mind of God.

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