



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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3 The Backdrop of Impermanence

When asked to sum up the Buddha's teachings in one phrase, Suzuki Roshi said, "Everything changes."¹

The underlying cause of our discontentment is the belief in a solid, separate self. But context is crucial to our understanding of the false-self. Why is our belief in a solid, separate self a false belief? To answer this question we will need to turn our attention toward the backdrop upon which the false-self is projected—the backdrop of impermanence.

We have all heard about impermanence. It has become a threadbare spiritual catchword, along with its sterile cousin, “the present moment.” Intellectually we understand the concept of impermanence but we do not feel it. This detached knowledge fails to effect change. The intent here is not to explain the concept of impermanence, but to point it out—to wake you up to the truth of impermanence within yourself.

Impermanence is a fact. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus famously said, “No same man could walk through the same river twice because the man and the river have since changed.”

¹ Nalanda Translation Committee, “The Four Reminders,” www.nalandatranslation.org

Impermanence is the nature of life and all that lives. In fact, change is just another word for living—“to live” means “to grow” and growth is change. But few of us are conscious of this fact, which means we go through life without living fully.

Life is the blossoming of our inmost nature and living is our conscious participation in that process. To participate we must be present. The false-self is assembled with thought and thought flows forth from memory. “We have no transition from one imagination to another,” writes Thomas Hobbes, “whereof we never had the like before in our senses.”² Simply put, we don’t think about it unless we have experienced it—or some variation thereof.

Memory is formed from sense impressions and, through a process of association called “thinking,” it is recollected. In other words, thinking is memory set in motion. Consequently, when we identify with thought, we experience ourselves as something that has already happened. We see ourselves as a finished product, and to be done is to be dead. The false-self is a thought-self, an image created and maintained by the thinking mind. So when we identify with the false-self, we feel dead inside.

The Apple Doesn't Fall Far From the Tree

The natural world is not *in* a constant state of fluctuation. It *is* fluctuation. The natural world is forever growing, evolving, disintegrating, dying, and giving birth to new life. Furthermore, we are not born *into* this world. We are born out of it. Mankind is a product of nature. We grow out of the earth just like a

² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Hackett Publishing Company 1994), pg. 12

dandelion, apple, or a pine tree. Since we come from nature, our nature is change—or better yet, our True Nature is the space or plasticity that facilitates birth, growth, adaptation, disintegration, and death. In short, the apple does not fall far from the tree.

Our True Self is a process of unfolding, not a solid entity. We are not a noun, but a verb. When we think of ourselves as a solid, permanent entity we separate ourselves from nature, which lives within us as our True Nature. This is the inner meaning of “exile” in the Jewish tradition. The concept of spiritual exile comes from the Hebrew word *galut*, which, according to Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel, means “everything is moving except me.”³

The Song of Life

Alan Watts, the popular philosopher of Eastern religion, used to compare life to music. “The point of music is music,” he would say. People enjoy listening to music for the rhythm, the stream of melody. No one listens to music to hear it end. If they did, as Watts pointed out, their favorite songs would be the ones that began and ended with a single uproar of noise. Life is the same way. The point of life is to live, to participate in the melody. Melodies are streams; they are flowing. You cannot freeze them. When you do, there is no flow. That is spiritual death.

The only way to participate in the melody is through basic awareness. Basic awareness is open. It is fluid. An open mind loses its sense of self in the music, whereas a self-centered mind tries to pause the song. It is not enough to enjoy the music. The self-centered mind wants to know the words. It wants to identify

³ Elie Wiesel, “We Are All Witnesses,” *The Inner Journey: Views from the Jewish Tradition*, Morning Light Press (2007), pg. 302

with the song. So the false-self rewinds it, trying to commit the lyrics to memory and claim the song as its own.

The false-self derives a sense of identity or meaning from its interactions with “other.” These interactions produce vouchers—memories or impressions that we collect and try to redeem at a later date for validation. The false-self isn’t concerned with being there, but what being there says about it. Instead of enjoying the concert, the false-self takes pictures of the show to prove it was there. It is more focused on making a mental scrapbook than participating in the experience.

The false-self is the ultimate hoarder—it keeps every voucher, every memory from which it stands to profit. A self-centered mind is a cluttered mind. There is no space, no room to breathe. Deep down the false-self knows that at any moment its whole world could collapse. It remembers the space at our core—the silent gap between each note that enables the song of life to flow. This memory haunts the false-self. It breeds paranoia and insecurity because it challenges the solidity of the false-self. The silence between each note reminds us that everything changes, including the self.

Everything Changes

Things change. But the river isn’t the only thing that changes. According to Heraclitus, so does the man. Unfortunately, the false-self doesn’t see it that way. It sees itself as unchanging. When we stand in the river of life with our feet planted in the ground, life feels overwhelming. Daily life feels like a wall of water bearing down on us. Take, for example, the transition from being single to in a relationship.

When you are single, you develop a lifestyle that doesn’t

have to take another person into consideration. You can wake up, drink your coffee, listen to music, have breakfast, go to work, stop by the gym afterwards, hang out with friends, and watch whatever you want on television. But when you bring another person into the mix, you cannot go on living as if they aren't there. The situation has changed, so your old schedule and your old self-image are outdated. When "I" is a fixed entity or a habit of thought, this transition is difficult. When you cling to the expired image, the relationship feels claustrophobic, like there isn't enough space for the other person. There is one confrontation after the other. The intensity continues to build over time until everything—your self-image and the relationship—washes out.

What we think about ourselves is challenged by change. Spiritual practice is our response to this challenge. Many people say, "I shouldn't have to change to be in a relationship." I say, if you don't change, then you aren't in a relationship. In fact, if you don't give up who you are every day, then you are not living. To be alive is to be in a constant state of revolution. Changing situations *should* affect our behavior. That is sanity. Confucius said, "They who would abide in wisdom must often change." A sane mind is a renewed mind inspired by emerging information. Our point of view—the man in Heraclitus's example—must remain open or fluid. The ego has to be transparent to our experience.

"Everything changes," is the basic point, according to Shunryu Suzuki. Everything—society, politics, the weather, relationships, our beliefs, and the physical body—is fluctuating. When we are open to change, the transition is relatively smooth. For example, we can easily adapt our diet to the changing demands of our aging body, if we are open and receptive. When

we allow our bachelor lifestyle to be swept away by the tide of impermanence, we realize there is plenty of space for our new partner. On the other hand, when we try to save our vouchers, we drown. We cannot swim when our hands are full.

In basic awareness, the man and the river pour into one another. Things change and this change is so pervasive, so continuous, that you cannot determine where one thing begins and the other ends. The line between the man and the river is blurred. At this point, the truth of impermanence deepens. It transforms into the truth of selflessness.

Life is change. Change is life. They are the same thing. Trying to organize impermanent phenomena into permanent categories of thought is a frustrating and impossible waste of energy. It is like trying to herd cats. Furthermore, we are not other than this change—we are life. We are change. The river of life flows through our core, emptying out into the truth of selflessness. We are not a noun standing on the bank watching life flow by; we are a verb or a wave emerging out of the stream of impermanence.

Now we will turn our attention toward the false-self system and the truth of selflessness.

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