

Chapter 3

Aliveness in the Living Here/Now

In this chapter, I want to look at time from a biological point of view and from an experiential point of view. How do we experience time as living biological beings?

The Contemplative Mode of Inquiry

The above question presupposes a mode of inquiry that is different from the method of the empirical sciences. Let us call this mode of inquiry the contemplative approach to reality. All good religion and all good psychology employ this approach. Contemplative inquiry can be yoked with scientific inquiry, but the two are different. Empirical science deals with objective, publicly verifiable facts. The contemplative approach looks within--giving honest attention to our own interior functioning as experienced in solitude by our own centered consciousness. The contemplative approach is objective in the sense that we are honestly and openly investigating our actual sensations, emotional feelings, desires, thinking processes, inner states of being, and so on. Responsible contemplative inquiry does not create arbitrary opinions. Rather, it “looks” intently, defines terms carefully, and tests all rational statements with actual inner experience.

The contemplative approach to time is an illuminating place to demonstrate how different this approach is from empirical science. To our inward attentiveness, time is always and only now. We are, however, conscious of living in the flow of time. We remember. We anticipate. We know we have come from certain states of being and that we are moving toward different states of being. Yet these experiences of memory and anticipation are taking place now. The contemplative experience of time is different from the abstract time-line of the empirical sciences. In the now of our inward experience, we make selective imaginary loops into the past in order to make selective imaginary loops into the future. We make these loops of imagination into past and future for the sake of illuminating the making of choices in the present. This looping and selecting and deciding may go on very rapidly. Our amazing brains do a lot of this work without much effort from our consciousness. Our inwardly experienced “minds” are whirling continually with various layers of activity. We have to slow down our thinking and look very carefully in order to understand the inward experience of living in time.

Contrast this “living-in-the-now” with the view of time we find in the science of biology. “Biology” as we commonly use that term is not an inward looking discipline. “Biology” usually means an objective approach to knowledge. Biology approaches time more like physics than contemplation. In Biology we see life as an object we can put under a microscope or examine in an ecosystem. Yet as living biologists and living human beings, we know life from the inside as well as from the outside. In the doing of biology, however, we set aside our contemplative experience of living and attempt to be pristinely objective in the outward sense.

Outwardly, life is understood as complex molecules, viruses, cells, organisms, species, ecosystems and so forth. Inwardly, life is a capacity to contemplate our own aliveness, our feelings, our thoughts, our decision-making, our contemplative attentiveness, our freedom, intentionality, courage, compassion, equanimity, and joy. Furthermore, our inward experience of life includes our capacity to be aware of the interior life of other living beings. We intuit when we observe other living beings that they may have some or all of the same inward states that we experience.

The Human Brain, Inside and Out

The study of the human brain is an interesting focal point, because this study must be pursued both outwardly as an examination of brain cells (their chemical and electrical

interactions) and inwardly as processes of thinking, feeling, and other states of being. What makes brain research interesting is its efforts to make correlations between inward experiences and outwardly perceived brain functions.

Our objective examinations of brains would not be very meaningful if we could not correlate these facts with the witnesses being shared with us by the human brain owners whose brains we are studying. Even when we conduct brain research on non-human animals, we find that we must correlate our outward observations with what we can intuit about the inner life of the animal from its behaviors. Brain research of necessity combines these two very different approaches to reality: (1) the outward objectivity of empirical science and (2) the inward witness of contemplative experience.

In recent decades, we have made remarkable findings in brain functions and in their correlations with inward states. Three types of brain material and functioning have been distinguished in the human species. Let us call them **the reptilian brain, the limbic brain, and the neocortical brain**. The reptilian brain is that stem of basic, mostly unconscious functioning that coordinates the basic aliveness of our living organism. We share this type of brain with all vertebrate species, perhaps with all multicellular animals. The limbic or middle brain is a development we humans share with the other mammals. The limbic brain enables us to have complex states of feeling and an ability to discern these inward states in other animals. The neocortical brain is that part of the outer cortex of brain material that performs the functions of language, art, and culture building. All animals have cortex functions, but the neocortex is that expansion of brain material and functioning that is only fully developed in the human species.

These three types of brain material function as one whole interlocking system, each affecting the other, yet these three brains are also distinct groups of cells, each doing their characteristic things. Injury to the limbic or neocortical brain does not prevent the reptilian brain from continuing its work in keeping the heart beating, the lungs breathing, and many other vital functions. Injury to the reptilian brain, however, results in the death of the whole body. The reptilian brain is foundational. It is the product, in our particular line of evolution, of a complexification of nervous-system functioning that began with the first multicellular beings.

In order to get a sense of the functioning of the reptilian brain in our own interior lives, I invite you to look within your own experience and imagine yourself having:

pain without panic or questions
pleasure without gladness or wonder
sights without emotions or thoughts
sounds without feelings or words
startles without fear or puzzlement
actions without playfulness or planning
hunger without longing or indecision
thirst without desperation or explanation
sexual desires without romance or fantasy
aliveness without intimacy or poetry.

This poem-like chart gives us an incomplete but vivid sense of our reptilian roots. We seldom pay close attention to these roots, because we are usually absorbed with the other layers of our brain functioning.

This poem-like chart can also help us have an impression of the limbic or middle brain--the type of brain cells and functioning which we humans share with all the other mammals. The

limbic brain is indicated by the middle words in each line of the poem: panic, gladness, emotions, feelings, fear, playfulness, longings, desperation, romance, intimacy. It is interesting to note that dogs and cats are playful beings capable of intimate interactions. You cannot get such playful responses from alligators, snakes, turtles, or toads. Reptiles do not play with things we dangle before them. They are all business: eating or defending, copulating or fleeing.

Finally, the last word in each line of the poem gives us an impression of our human neocortical brain: questions, wonder, thoughts, words, puzzlement, planning, indecision, explanation, fantasy, poetry. Cats and dogs are very intelligent beings but they do not do these uniquely human things. My daughter has a very intelligent dog who can respond to over a hundred word commands, but this dog does not talk or even think in the symbol-using sense of thinking. This intelligent dog does these feats with her prehuman cortex. The dog is operating with levels of intelligence that we humans also possess in our pre-neocortical brains.

The above poem and my reflections upon it do not qualify as a careful scientific description of the probable experience of all reptiles, all mammals, and all humans. My aim has been to create a string of words that help us notice, within our own inner lives, the functioning of these three layers of our human brains.

Let us reflect further on the differences between reptiles, mammals, and humans. A dog or cat has wondrously evolved abilities for discerning the internal states of other living beings. Cat owners can testify that cats discern very quickly how their human companions are feeling. At least one cat, living in a nursing home, seems to know when patients are dying and goes to be with them at those times. Dogs and cats and other mammals make strong bonds with their own young, usually with their mates, and even with other species of mammals, such as humans. It is a continuing sense of wonder to me how our cat is capable of being and willing to be emotionally bonded with our family. Perhaps she considers us part of her family. Most reptiles, on the other hand, lay eggs that hatch on their own and fend for themselves. A mother turtle may never see her young nor recognize them if she does. Some reptiles even eat their young. Reptiles make no emotional bonds with one another nor with you and me. Sex for them is a strong attractor, but it is accomplished without emotional bonding.

Mammals have developed brains that enable them to notice the inward states of their young and bond with them. Mammals have a range of feeling-consciousness that is quite amazing when compared with their pre-mammalian ancestry. Dogs and cats tend to behave somewhat like reptiles when their limbic brains have been injured. They operate coolly and make no bonds. Mother mammals with injured limbic brains do not bond with their young.

In recent centuries, we humans have focused so strenuously on the capacities of our neocortex that we have quite often neglected our limbic brain capacities. We have suppressed our feelings and warped our natural limbic communications with our pre-verbal infants. We may not have noticed how smart an infant is in recognizing the faces and various states of being in the persons around them. Tests have been conducted in which human infants were induced to crawl out over a clear plastic surface that looked like a sheer drop off. When these infants came to this apparent drop off, they looked up at their mothers to see if this was safe. If her face scowled, they did not risk it. If her face beckoned, they ventured out over the seeming chasm. Similar communications go on between all mammals and their young. No words or even thoughts are needed for this communication. Limbic brains without benefit of linguistic thinking size up the expressions of other limbic enabled beings and know what those expressions mean.

In chapter one, we reflected on a dog catching a frisbee. No reptile would volunteer for this sort of playful activity. No reptile would return to its human companion with tail wagging,

surrender the frisbee, and signal, "More." But the dog shares with the reptile many functions. Basic sensory sensitivities, memory and anticipation, coordinated choices--all these functions reptiles likewise possess. All animals live in the living here/now, yet they possess in that now some sort of memory of past experiences, some sort of anticipation of future challenges, and some sort of decision-making ability.

Memory and Anticipation

With this picture of the three layers of the human brain in our neocortically enabled minds, let us return to the topic of time. Time, inwardly experienced, has to do with memory and anticipation. In the living here/now, a dog or human can experience a frisbee as moving. To experience a moving object entails memory and anticipation. The dog remembers where the frisbee was a short time ago, and the dog uses that memory to anticipate where the frisbee will be a short time in the future. In the here/now of dog consciousness, the dog chooses to focus on the frisbee and this focus engages specific memories and specific anticipations having to do with frisbee catching. These memory and anticipation processes enable the dog to choose, in the here/now, where to run and when to grab the frisbee with his or her teeth.

All this intelligent behavior takes place without what we humans call discursive thought. No language, no artistic talent, no objective knowledge is needed by the dog to catch a frisbee. Obviously, I am not looking at dog consciousness from the inside. I am intuiting what is going on in dog consciousness from my experience of these same conscious processes within myself.

And this is what I conclude from my intuiting. The brain of the dog is providing the inner mind of the dog with images of frisbee past, frisbee present, and frisbee future. The dog is living in the here/now, but this here/now experience is being enriched by memory reruns of experiences already had and by anticipation preruns of experiences it may have. These image reruns and preruns are excellent movies complete with smell, taste, and feeling qualities as well as sight and sound qualities. Each of these image packets has time and space qualities built into it. So the flow of images in the dog's mind gives the dog in its living here/now a sense of time flow and thus of objects moving through space.

Similarly, my cat remembers where her eating bowl is, where her cat box is, what time of day is meal time, and what time of day is bed time for the whole family. My cat clearly lives in the flow of time, yet she, the dog, and we humans as well live our actual lives only in the here/now. We live in the flow of time through memory and anticipation. Yet these memories and these anticipations are all happening in the here/now. Within the inner experience of a living being, there is no past and no future, there is just NOW.

Furthermore, within the inner experience of a living being, there is no up and down or out and back or left and right; there is just HERE. Our experience of the expanse of space is likewise made possible by the imaginal reruns and imaginal preruns of memory and anticipation. In chapter one, I illustrated how our sense of space would not be possible without our sense of time. Motion through space/time is so elementary to us that we do not often notice the wonder of it. In the here/now, living beings remember selected here/nows that have already happened to us, and we use that information to anticipate possible here/nows that have not yet happened to us. With this information flowing in our minds, we make our choices accordingly. But this flowing imagery from past to present to future does not take us away from the living here/now. All consciousness, all mental activity goes on only in the living here/now. We experience this here/now as having both flow in time and depth/height/breadth in space through the functioning in the here/now of memory and anticipation.

We can clearly see memory and anticipation functioning in the higher animals. Perhaps microbes remember. Perhaps even plants and fungi remember. And all these living forms are adapted to the elementary wisdom that time is a one-way street. We do not remember the future and anticipate the past. We keep this straight. Past memories are something different than future anticipations. And both are different from the immediately imaged sensory experiences. How the mind codes these mental pictures differently and keeps them straight is a wonder, but the fact that we can do this is quite clear.

How Human Beings are Different

Non-human animal forms, as far as we can tell, do not reflect upon all this as we are now doing, but as living beings they do operate in a manner similar to what we can describe in our own inner experience. There are significant differences, of course. A dog's memory and anticipation packets are more strongly informed by smell experiences than yours and mine. We know this from watching dogs find lost human beings buried in the snow or rubble. We also use dogs to track criminals, find dope, and so on. Dogs live in a world of intelligently processed smells to an extent that we humans find amazing. Yet in spite of such differences, the intelligence of all living beings is similar enough for we humans to empathize with every living being to a large extent.

We can also be aware of a huge difference between humans and other animals. The other animals do not specialize, as we humans do, in the symbol-using intelligence that makes our reflections about all these matters possible. Image-using animal intelligence exists in all animals, including humans. But our symbol-using intelligence is like an added layer of intelligence built on top of the foundational layer of image-using intelligence. Our symbol-using intelligence would not function without this foundational layer. Symbols are abstract groupings of images. Without images there could be no symbols. And if we do not continually relate our symbols back to our images, our symbols become useless abstractions floating around in an artificial abstract world. Nevertheless, symbol-using is the core power of our species.

Nevertheless, symbol-using is not the whole of our intelligence. Let us look more closely at our basic mammalian intelligence. Our sensory image reruns are like dreams. They are real experiences in the present, yet our intelligence knows which images are reruns of the past, which are preruns of the future, and which are being created by current sensations. It is as if each image has a time code built into it. Each image also has a space quality built into it. In our sensory based flow of image reruns and preruns, space and time are not separated. Each image is a space/time packet of experience that we have had, are having, or may soon have.

Most of this image processing is unconscious to the animal having it. We animals are very practical in our use of consciousness. We pay attention only to what we feel needs our attention. And our "lazy" consciousness is usually grateful for any mental processes that will get the mental work done without requiring our conscious attention and effort. Being more conscious of these basic image-using processes requires us to do intensely conscious mental work. No motivation to make such an effort exists in a dog, nor does the dog have the ability to make such an effort if it wanted to.

Human language, art, and other symbol-using mental activity is amazing, but mammalian and reptilian mental activity are no less amazing. And we humans need to be conscious of the limitations of our symbolic mental capacities, especially of the severe limitations of our linguistic mental capacities. In our linguistically rational mental reflections upon mental activity itself, we can only approximate these vast mental processes taking place within our inner beings. For example, I am picturing memory as little tapes in a complex library of tapes. But this is only a

picture of a process far more complex than any human-made tape library. Our brains can find and associate relevant tapes with a speed and effectiveness that is astonishing. We don't really understand this. We just talk about it the best we can.

Nevertheless, it does seem useful to me to describe the living animal as having the mental facility to tape experiences and store past experiences in a tape library. As each present situation is being experienced, the animal seems to turn on those tape reruns that are deemed relevant to that present experience. Obviously mistakes can be made, but this image-rerun tape library is also wondrously effective. A very complex association process instantly calls forth the tapes needed to inform a constantly changing life situation. For example, when a dog is focused on frisbee catching, the tapes related to frisbee motion and frisbee catching are the ones that rerun. If during the process of frisbee-catching a car horn sounds, other tapes run, tapes which may assist the dog to avoid being hit by the car. Life is complex and this tape-rerun, imaginal intelligence of animal life is also very complex.

Human symbol-using intelligence is an added complexity to this already complex image-using animal intelligence. With symbol-using our memory is enriched. With symbol-using our anticipations are enriched. With symbol-using our capacities for decision-making in the present are enriched.

Human Pathology

Our symbol-using intelligence, while being a formidable enablement, is also a formidable possibility for pathology. The other animals have no difficulty avoiding these characteristic human pathologies. But we humans can live in our minds, as we say. We can break the natural ties with our image-using intelligence and fly off into our symbol-invented artificial worlds. We can mistake these artificial worlds of symbols for the actual world of nature where our actual experiences are taking place.

Flying off into a symbol-constructed world is not in itself a problem. We do that every time we add up a set of numbers. We are creating pathology only when we forget that numbers, like all the rest of the symbol-constructed world, are abstractions. The real world is not the world of numbers. Numbers are part of the real world in the sense that human number inventors are part of the real world, but numbers are part of the world of human-made. Thinking is a process of nature; but thoughts themselves are products of a human-made world. We make flights of thought in search of better models for living in the real world, but the real world remains the world that we are immediately and constantly experiencing in the living here/now through our image-using processes. As the poet E. E. Cummings put it: "the world of made is not the world of born." Human thinking is helpful but also deceptive.

For most of us most of the time the world of numbers is quite obviously an abstract world, and we are skilled in both going to and returning from this abstract world without difficulties. But with regard to our more complex artificial worlds of symbol creations, we quite often get confused about what is the real world and what is the artificial world of humanly created thought. We even become so identified with some of our worlds of thought that we defend them from new information arriving from the real world in our imaged sensory packets.

Perhaps some defense and thus conservation of our present view of things is necessary in order to avoid complete confusion in our living. But if we lose sight of the fact that the thinking process is open to new input as well as useful for conserving old input, we are creating a pathology. We have given such pathology many names: defensiveness, bigotry, arrogance, inattentive living, distraction, out-of-our-minds, in-our-minds, lost-in-thought, insane, and other

such names. We have a large vocabulary for describing the nuances of being absorbed into our symbol-using mental processes in such a way that we become disconnected from our here/now imaginal processing of the immediate flow of space/time living.

The depth of this characteristically human pathology is a profound and often hidden unhappiness called “despair.” Despair can be defined as a passionate hope for the impossible, a striving to move the unmovable, an attempt to escape the inescapable, or a livid hatred of the unavoidable. Despair is the unwillingness of a human being to be what that human being actually is. The other species do not despair; they do not have the imagination for it. The other species experience pain, but they do not despair over it. The other species die, but they do not despairingly seek for an alternative to dying. Though the other species avoid dangers and death, they do not consciously contemplate their inescapable journey toward that final abyss.

Human Authenticity

Human authenticity has a thousand names and all of them can be confusing. By human authenticity, I do not mean some humanly constructed ideal toward which we might strive. I mean something so simple that it is difficult to describe. I mean the actual aliveness that humanity has when all the pathologies that are producible by our symbol-using intelligence are missing. Perhaps the following poem can provide an initial overview of this vast topic.

Authenticity Includes

Authenticity includes your reptilian brain:

your hunger and thirst for food and drink,
your desire for sexual union,
your alertness to preserve your life.

Authenticity includes your mammalian brain:

your awareness of the inner states of other beings,
your dreams, affections, bondings, loneliness and grief,
your playfulness and your boredom.

Authenticity includes your image-using mind:

your immediate processing of sights, sounds, touches, tastes, and smells,
your sensory and emotional memories and anticipations,
your coordinated, practical intelligence.

Authenticity includes your symbol-using mind:

your fancy with abstract movements, words, and numbers,
your facility with scientific exploration and contemplative wisdom,
your rational overviews of meaning and your awareness of enigma.

Authenticity includes your habits of personal functioning:

your childhood conditioning and your adult additions to it,
your conventional behaviors and your quirky particularities,
your dependabilities, talents, biases, prejudices, and addictions.

Authenticity includes your Spirit freedom:
your capacity for detachment and engagement,
your capacity for yes to this and no to that,
your capacity for equanimity, compassion, and a happy YES to ALL.

Authenticity even includes your temptation to live a NO to ALL:
your temptations to scorn your reptilian and mammalian brain,
your temptations to deny your intelligence, hide your person, reject Spirit,
your temptations to be unhappy.

Authenticity includes your power to overcome temptation:
your support by the forces of the living Here and Now,
your support by the gifts of Freedom and Compassion,
your support by the The Way Life Is.

This poem introduces a few new topics not yet thoroughly discussed. The last three verses deal with a topic that I often call “Spirit,” perhaps with a capital “S.” The fourth from the last verse deals with a topic we often call “personality.”

Let us define “personality” as the habits of living which an individual has built up over the course of his or her life. So understood, personality is an objectively observable and describable pattern. So understood, personality is always changing, always in a process of becoming. We are not exactly the “person” we were ten years ago, and ten years from now we will not be the “person” we are now. Every decision we make changes to some extent who we are as a personality. Emotionally rooted habits which we formed as young children stay in place for our whole lives unless strong and skillful efforts are made to change them. But even if our personality has considerable continuity from one decade to the next, our basic habits of living, our personality, is also in constant flux. Every year things are added to and subtracted from the “person” we were before.

The term “ego” is sometimes used to mean the coordinating center of our personality. The ego, so understood, is the creator of personality, the conscious regulator of personality, and a capacity to follow or not follow the personality habits of the past.

But the more we focus our contemplative inquiry upon our actual inner lives, the more puzzling we find such terms as “coordinating center,” “ego,” and even “self.” The question “Who am I?” becomes more profound the more we inquire into our actual experience. Words like “coordinating center,” “ego,” and “self” seem to mean an entity located somewhere doing something more or less distinct from all the other doings of our inner life. But the more intently we focus our attention on our inner life, the less we can find anything that might be said to be an unchanging core. Nothing stands still. Language does not hold the dynamism of our inner beings.

Here is poem that points to this dynamism. Perhaps all good poems are thinking beyond language; this poem speaks directly to that topic.

Thinking Beyond Language

Language tends to differentiate
the undivided
and stop the ceaseless flow
of the ever-moving.

In the actual flow of reality,
there are no nouns;
there are only verbs.

Even verbs are static language
that differentiates and stops for examination
the flow that is beyond verbs.

But let verbs be a symbol
for pushing our thinking
beyond language.

There is no such thing as life;
there is just living.

There is no such thing as death;
there is just dying.

There is no such thing as mind;
there is just thinking.

There is no such thing as mindfulness;
there is just paying attention.

There is no such thing as heart;
there is just feeling.

There is no such thing as soul or self
there is just centered be-ing.

There is no such thing as spirit;
there is just the ever-moving
wild winds of wonder.

Furthermore, there is no such thing as ego;
there is just identifying
with our own self-imaging.

There is no such thing as personality;
there is just our habitual functioning
established over time.

There is no such thing as will;
there is just decision-making.

There is no such thing as perception;
there is just the automatic imaging
of our sensory inputs.

There is no such thing as reason;
there is just linguistically ordering
the imaging of sensory inputs.

There is no such thing as the irrational;
there is just some flowing reality
for which we see no order.

In conclusion, there is no such thing as faith;
there is just trusting
the wild winds of wonder.

And there is no such thing as freedom;
there is just choosing
to choose the necessity of choosing.

Further, there is no such thing as compassion;
there is just affirming all and each
being in the encompassing world.

Yes, and there is no such thing as equanimity,
tranquility, fulfillment, or enlightenment;
there is just happily surrendering
to the constant flow of becoming.

Disciplined attention witnesses to the constant flux of our lives. And what is attention? Is it fixed somewhere? I seem to have the freedom to attend to this or that sensation, feeling, thought, or state of being. I can attend to the actuality that I am both a passive receiver of inputs and an active chooser of outputs. My attention can even attend to attending itself, yet my attention is also like a pair of eyes with no mirror. Attention sees without seeing itself seeing. Who is this mysterious witness? My own attention reveals the experience of being an “I” that is always moving like a wind, flowing like a river. “I” do not find any sort of solid shape or specific place where this “I” takes on definite form. Indeed the “I” seems to have no definite location other than being within the general direction of within.

This elusive “I” is different from my ever-changing personality. I am some sort of continuity that persists through many personalities. I am clearly something more than my feelings, my ideas, my body, my roles, my status in the surrounding world. It is I who have all these experiences. All these passing things come and go, while I remain as some sort of continuing witness to this passing flow of events.

This mysterious “I” simply appears when “I” do not cling to the passing parts of my life, when I do not identify with my pleasures, my roles, my body, or my status in the world. This deep “I” is present when I identify with the full mysteriousness of this ever flowing “I.” This “I” has been referred to as “Spirit.” But “Spirit,” so conceived, does not mean a spook from some other universe. “Spirit” means the wildest depths of our wild natural beings. So the deep question raised by these reflection is this: do you or do I identify with this deep Spirit dynamic as the true “I”?

Our common tendency is to identify with some quality of our passing lives that we especially admire or that we want to hang onto forever. Such identification separates us from half of our lives, the half that we usually call “suffering.” Such identification with passing realities adds to our normal unavoidable suffering yet another suffering--the suffering that results from refusing to embrace the normal unavoidable sufferings as part of our aliveness. “Despair” is a good name for this added suffering, for “despair” is the hopelessness that derives from refusing to participate in the unavoidable. The following two poems express what it would mean to open to the whole experience of living, and thereby avoid the despairing suffering of trying to escape the inescapable sufferings of our lives.

Living Both Halves

Suffering is half of life; for
every security is surrounded by insecurity,
every pleasure is passing away,
every love is a companion of loneliness,
every knowledge is a widening of mystery,
every noble action is a suffering of rejection,
every good action is laced with guilt.

Authenticity means staying with both halves of life:
avoiding both safety and foolhardiness,
avoiding both indulgence and asceticism,
avoiding both enmeshment and isolation,
avoiding both dogmatism and foolishness,
avoiding both ambition and sloth,
avoiding both perfection and debauchery.

Authenticity means taking on both halves of life:
engaging both security and insecurity,
engaging both pleasure and pain,
engaging both love and loneliness,
engaging both knowledge and ignorance,
engaging both honor and rejection,
engaging both success and failure.

Living/Dying

Living and dying
do not characterize a rock.
It is only the living that are dying;
It is only the dying that are living.

Living is not a stable entity but a process.
Living is a countercurrent
swimming upstream
against the main current of the cosmos.

Living pushes on toward more living--
more consciousness of living.
But more is never all,
and next is never forever.

The destiny of living is dying,
and dying is the essence of living.
Each moment of living
vanishes into the abyss of nothingness.

Nevertheless, each moment of living
breathes in and breathes out
the energies of the entire fullness,
connecting each living moment with everythingness.

This awareness of nothingness and everythingness
is a state of living beyond all comprehension.
The capacity for such awareness is as mysterious
as the mysteriousness of nothingness/everythingness combined.

When we consent to live in this boundless land of mystery,
we also journey on great rivers of freedom,
climb great mountains of compassion,
and find the joy unspeakable.

Such poems attempt to say in words what words can never fully say, yet we do or can experience the actualities indicated by these words. We do or can experience that living both halves of life is not a tragedy, but rather a most wondrous freedom. Though facing up to the nothingness and the everythingness that engulfs us means the loss of a stable selfhood, it also means finding the grandeur of freedom and the wonder of out-pouring compassion for our own beings and for all other beings. Freedom and compassion blend together into a happiness that

cannot be spoken--a joy unspeakable. When we are despairingly running away from the wholeness of our lives, authenticity does not seem to be the path of happiness, yet authenticity and happiness are the same actuality. This statement is not a dogma to be taken on faith, it is a lesson we can learn for ourselves through our own experience in the living HERE/NOW.

This depth of living is what I mean by the word "Spirit" with a capital "S." But having a word like "Spirit" can deceive us unto thinking we know more about this deep "I" than we do. So I want to conclude this chapter with one more poem.

Inspiration

What is Spirit?
Lao Tzu says:
"Those who say don't know,
and those who know don't say."
Buddha says:
"It is not this;
it is not that.
It is an emptiness
that is also freedom and compassion."
The Bible says:
"It is like wind;
it blows where it wills;
no one knows where it comes from
or where it is going."

We see a chair,
but no one is sitting upon it.
We see footprints in the mud
but we do not see the walker.
We see the tree under which he sat,
but we do not see the Buddha.
We see the tomb in which they put him,
but we do not see the Messiah.

It is said that words can speak
the WORD of TRUTH;
but words are not the WORD.
And the WORD is not words.
The WORD is SILENT,
yet every noise, every sound
screams with this SILENCE
to those who have ears
of Spirit.

So again, what is Spirit?
Let us never stop asking,
for then we think we know.
Asking means we do not know,
which is true.

When the mind of knowing
surrenders to freedom and compassion,
when the heart of longing
clings no more to this or that,
when the will of achieving
renounces both failure and success,
then Spirit is left
to know and do
its own un-self.