

Preface

*Know, O noble brother, that while the paths are many,
the Way of Truth is single.*

— Ibn al-'Arabi (Muslim)

During a particularly dark period in my life, when I despaired of ever finding happiness, I happened to stumble on some of the writings of the mystics—men and women who claimed to have discovered a universal and liberating Truth about the ultimate nature of Reality. What I found so striking about their testimonies was that, unlike the works of other philosophers and theologians, whose ideas seemed always to conflict, accounts of this Reality among the mystics were remarkably similar. And this was true despite the fact that they had lived in very different times and places, and come from very different religious traditions. Listen, for example, to one of the authors of the Hindu Upanishads, some of which date back to the eighth-century BCE in India:

As rivers flowing towards the ocean find their final peace and their name and form disappear, even so the wise become free from name and form and enter into the radiance of the Supreme Spirit who is greater than all greatness... In truth who knows God becomes God.¹

Now, compare this to how the sixteenth-century Spanish Christian mystic Teresa of Avila describes her union with God:

Here it is like rain falling from the heavens into a river or spring; there is nothing but water there and it is impossible to divide or separate the water belonging to the river from that which fell from the heavens. Or it is as if a tiny streamlet enters the sea, from which it will find no way of separating itself, or as if in a room there were two large windows through which the light streamed in: it enters in different places but it all becomes one.²

Three hundred years later, the West African Sufi sage Cerno Bokar had this to say about seekers who attain what he calls the highest light of truth:

Those who have the good fortune to reach the degree of this light lose their identity and become like a drop of water which has fallen into the Niger [River], or into a sea of infinitely vast extent and depth.³

And here's what the contemporary Tibetan master Dudjom Lingpa writes about the end of the Buddhist path:

It is like a drop of water blending with the ocean and becoming the ocean without altering it, or space within a vase blending with the space outside, extending freely throughout space without its being altered.⁴

Another difference between the mystics and ordinary philosophers and theologians was that, instead of trying to convince the reader of the truth of their ideas through argument, the mystics insisted that anyone willing to undertake the appropriate spiritual disciplines and practices could discover it directly for themselves. Thus, among Sufis (the mystics of Islam), seekers who reach the end of the path are called *al-muhaqqiqun*, which means *verifiers*. This is because, as the thirteenth-century Sufi shaykh (master), Ibn al-'Arabi, declares,

Knowledge of mystical states can only be had by actual experience, nor can the reason of man define it, nor arrive at any cognizing of it by deduction.⁵

So, too, the anonymous author of the two fourteenth-century Christian classics *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *The Book of Privy Counseling* writes,

You will not really understand all this until your own contemplative experience confirms it.⁶

And here's how the seventh-century Hindu sage Shankara sums up this insistence on empirical confirmation:

From the lips of your teacher you have learned of the truth of Brahman as it is revealed in the scriptures. Now you must realize that truth directly and immediately. Then only will your heart be free from any doubt.⁷

In this respect, mysticism is not unlike a science. In science, theories can be verified by observations gained through various kinds of experiments. So, too, the teachings of the mystics can be verified by insights and experiences gained through various kinds of practices—which is precisely what I myself did.

Slowly but surely I began to engage in practices of meditation, keeping precepts, cultivating love and compassion, and conducting self-inquiry. At first, I thought of all this more as a hobby—something to do in my spare time. But, eventually, walking a spiritual path became the priority of my life. I abandoned my career, friends, and family in search of the Truth to which all the mystics seemed to point. And yet, no matter how hard I tried or how far I traveled, that Holy Grail continued to elude me. Finally, after I had given up all hope of attaining my goal, it happened. In a cheap motel room on the night of August 13, 1983, I Awoke to a Reality at once far more astonishing and, at the same time, far more simple than anything I could have ever imagined. Here is part of what I wrote shortly thereafter:

I jump up, turn on the light, and look around. Sure enough, I no longer see through a glass darkly. The veil has been lifted and the glass has cleared—no, more than cleared—it has vanished! I see the Kingdom, and now I am laughing wildly, because the great joke of it all is that this exalted Kingdom I have been searching for in such anguish and despair is none other than the very room I have been sleeping in, with its dirty, cinder block walls, frayed

curtains, and horribly grungy, blue-green rug! I could have shouted! I could have danced! I could have done anything for that matter, because it really didn't matter. It didn't even exist and never had. I was free.⁸

In the years that followed a number of students sought my help with their own spiritual quests. In 1987 we established the Center for Sacred Sciences—a small organization dedicated to studying mystical teachings and engaging in mystical practices. This book is an outgrowth of that work. In it you will hear the voices of many mystics from very different traditions, but it is not meant to be an argument for the validity of their claims. Rather, it is meant to be a manual of instruction, a step-by-step guide for anyone who wishes to walk this path and find out for themselves whether what the mystics say is true. To this end I have tried to distill out the most universal principles and the most essential practices taught by mystics of all the great traditions. I have also tried to restate them in more generic terms, suitable for modern seekers, whether they belong to an established tradition or not.

How to Use This Book

There are several ways to approach the teachings contained in this book. Some of you may wish to read through the entire text and only then, if you are so moved, go back and actually do the practices. Others may want to start practicing from the very beginning. Either way is fine. However, because many of the earlier practices lay the foundations for later ones, it is important to undertake them in the order they are presented, practicing each one until you have gained some familiarity with it before moving on to the next. Then, at any point along the way, you can always return to a particular practice in order to deal with a particular problem you've encountered on your path.

So, then, the question is this: how long does it take to become familiar with a practice? The answer depends on a great many factors, such as how much previous experience you've had with the same or similar practices; how much time per day you have to devote to a practice; how strong your motivation is; and what sort of guidance you receive. Most practices are designed either to help you attain specific states of consciousness or specific insights and experiences. Thus, you should continue with any practice you take up until you have reaped at least some of its actual fruit.

The same applies to questions about how long the path as a whole takes to complete. Perhaps the shortest one on record was that of the seventh-century Chinese Zen master Hui-Neng. As the story goes, he was an illiterate wood-cutter, delivering a load of firewood to an inn. While standing in the courtyard, he heard a Buddhist guest chanting a verse from the *Diamond Sutra* and, suddenly, his mind

opened up! At the opposite end of the spectrum, it took my own teacher, Franklin Merrell-Wolff, twenty-five years to reach the end of his journey. In point of fact, no one can predict how long anyone's path is going to take, nor does it really matter, for as Merrell-Wolff writes,

I felt, and feel, that no cost could be too high as the price of its attainment, and I find that this testimony is repeated over and over again in mystical literature.⁹

Many of my students studied an early draft of this book in the context of our weekly practitioners groups and said they found the community setting very helpful. Not only does it provide an opportunity to share experiences and have questions answered but, as is well known in mystical traditions, the support of spiritual brothers and sisters is of immense psychological and spiritual benefit. This is why, for instance, the *sangha* (spiritual community) is considered to be one of the Three Jewels of Buddhism (along with the teachings and a teacher). It's also why the Sufis have a saying: *Travel with a friend*. So, if you don't have access to a circle of practitioners already using this book, you may want to consider forming one of your own.

In any case, whether you are starting out alone or in the company of fellow seekers, I hope the teachings and practices described in the pages to come will enrich your own path and make it more productive.

Before we begin, however, it may be helpful to get an overview of just where we are going and the various ways to get there.