

Center Voice

Spring 1996

the newsletter of the Center for Sacred Sciences

Special Issue:

In November, 1619, a young French philosopher secluded himself in an old farmhouse and performed some experiments which were to influence the shape of Western philosophy from that time through the present. It is seldom remembered that Descartes' thought experiments were really very simple. Withdrawing from the busyness of the world and examining thought itself, he was able to see his relationship to the world in a new way. But, what would have happened if Descartes had examined thought from a mystical perspective?

This special issue of the *Center Voice* is devoted to a chapter from Joel's forthcoming book, *The Way of Selflessness*, based on a series of talks given by Joel at the Center. In this talk, *From Form to Formlessness*, he discusses thought and the processes of thought. As he weaves in the teachings of various mystics from different traditions, it becomes clear that Truth, the Ultimate Reality, cannot be grasped through reason, concepts, or thought. Yet thought, as limited as it may be, is something which doesn't want to go away. It's always there accompanying each moment. Is there a way we can use our thoughts to get at the reality underlying them? Joel suggests some simple experiments for examining the processes of your own thoughts in order to see for yourself the extent of their influence and more importantly the relevance of their effects on your experience.

In the first part of his article Joel raises the following questions: Are thoughts real? Are thoughts created or discovered? What is imagination? Where do thoughts come from and where do they go? Each question is followed by a simple thought experiment and a discussion afterwards. In the second part of his article Joel talks about the world of sensory forms that thought produces. Is this world real? Are sensory forms merely forms of

distinction? Is imagination lawful? Where do sensory forms come from? By examining your relationship with these sensory forms created by the mind, you can see through them to the formlessness beyond, that emptiness which the mystics tell us is the Ground of all Being, the formlessness from which the world of forms arises. Like Descartes you can focus in on thought itself and perform these experiments for yourself. You may not change the course of Western philosophy in the process, but you just might change the course of your own life and how you relate to the world around you.

We'd also like to announce the publication of a new book by Joel, *Through Death's Gate, A Guide to Selfless Dying*. After the loss of our fellow practitioner and friend Bonnie Linn to cancer we all recognized the need for a practical book on how to use death and dying as a spiritual opportunity. Joel rose to the occasion and has written a guide to be used in preparing to face death in a spiritual way. It summarizes the basic teachings on death and dying from the Great Traditions and gives us practical as well as spiritual guidance to help us pass through the Gate of Death as selflessly and effortlessly as possible. See our Publication and Supply Catalog for more information.

Don't miss our Enlightenment Day Celebration on Sunday, August 4th, honoring Joel's Enlightenment and all those who have walked the mystic's path. It's a good time to bring someone new to the Center! We'll have a cold plate potluck and a special talk by Joel on what the Center for Sacred Sciences is all about.

Center For Sacred Sciences

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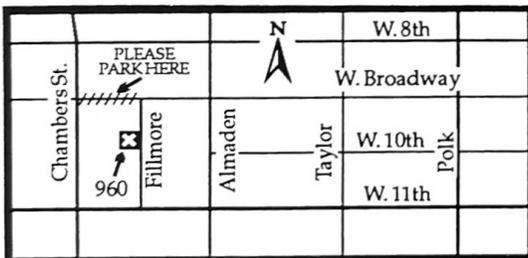
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The Center for Sacred Sciences is a non-profit, tax-exempt church dedicated to the creation and dissemination of a new Worldview based on the wisdom of humanity's great spiritual teachers, but presented in forms appropriate to our present scientific culture. Our programs draw on the teachings of the mystics of all traditions, as well as the evidence of modern physics. Among the Center's current offerings are Sunday Programs with meditation and talk by Joel, meditation classes, retreats, workshops and study groups. Joel also leads a weekly Practitioners' Group for committed spiritual seekers, as well as being available for individual spiritual consultation. The Center maintains an extensive lending library of books and tapes covering a broad spectrum of spiritual, psychological, and scientific subjects. Other than a small stipend for our bookkeeper, the Center has no paid staff. We rely entirely on volunteer labor to conduct our programs, and on donations and membership dues to meet operating expenses.



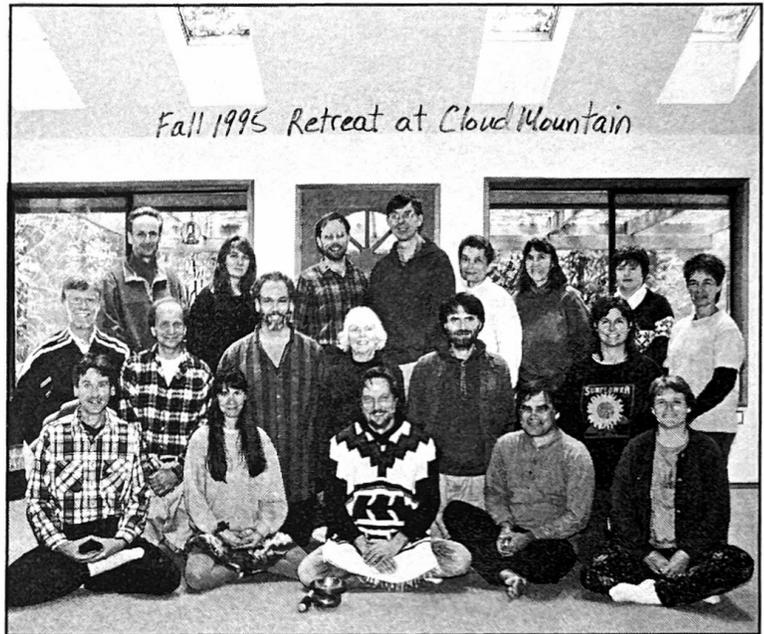
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CENTER NEWS:

Fall Retreat: The theme of our fall retreat was Integrating Practices of the Day and Night. Several people attempted all night vigils, and Joel surprised us this time by waking us all up in the middle of the night to come into the meditation hall for a session on impermanence. We practiced remaining lucid in our dreams (not to mention our waking state as well!) and being mindful of the differences between waking, dreaming, sleeping, dreamless sleep, and pondered the age old mystic's question: how do you Really wake up!



Retreatants: (top row from left) Gene Gibbs, Merry Song, Tom McFarlane, Thomas Reinhart, Therese Engelmann, Katie Geiser, Anita Runyan, Barbara Dewey, (middle row) Mike Taylor, Jim Zajac, David Cunningham, Grace Schneiders, Todd Corbett, Mora Dewey, (bottom row) Fred Chambers, Clivonne Corbett, Joel, John Richardson, Ann Mizera.

Palo Alto Talk: Joel will be traveling to Palo Alto again this spring (May 30-June 2) to deliver a series of talks. If you would like to attend, or for more information, contact Sita deLeeuw at (415) 857-1321.

Next Issue: With several members of our Practitioner's Group either in, or just returned from, India, and all the other traveling for spiritual purposes that has been going on lately, we thought we would devote our next issue of the Center Voice to their pilgrimages. What does this ancient ritual mean on the spiritual path, and how can it shape our lives and practice?

(Center News continued on page 15)

FROM FORM TO FORMLESSNESS

BY JOEL

INTRODUCTION:

In the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu writes:

When your discernment
penetrates to the four quarters
Are you capable
of not knowing anything?¹

Now that sounds pretty weird, doesn't it? On the one hand, Lao Tzu seems to be talking about some kind of very profound understanding, one which "penetrates to the four quarters" of the cosmos--which is another way of saying the whole of Reality. But, at the same time, he says that in order to attain this understanding you must "not know anything." What does *that* mean?

Maybe if we look at what mystics of other traditions have to say about this, it'll shed some light on it for us. In the Hindu *Upanishads*, we find this passage about the ultimate nature of Reality, which they call *Brahman*:

He comes to the thought of those who know him beyond thought, not to those who imagine he can be attained by thought...He is known in the ecstasy of an awakening which opens the door of life eternal."²

So, *Brahman*, the Ultimate Reality, cannot be known by thought. It can be known in some sense, but not by thought. For some mysterious reason, it can only be known beyond thought, through an "ecstasy of awakening."

Ibn Arabi, one of the great Sufi mystics, writes that Mystical Knowledge:

cannot be arrived at by the intellect by means of any rational thought process, for this kind of perception comes only by divine disclosure...³

So, here it is again: Ibn Arabi is claiming that knowledge of Ultimate Reality cannot be grasped through the

intellect, through reason, through thought--through any of those ways that we normally think of as "knowing" in our culture. Instead, it is arrived at through some other way--through what he calls a "divine disclosure."

According to Buddhists, knowledge of Ultimate Reality cannot be communicated even by the Buddha's own teachings, for as the *Lankavatara Sutra* says:

These teachings are only a finger pointing toward Noble Wisdom...They are intended for the consideration and guidance of the discriminating minds of all people, but they are not the Truth itself, which can only be self-realized within one's own deepest consciousness.⁴

Aren't all these mystics saying the same thing? Ultimate Reality *can* be known, but not by words, not by reason, not by concepts, not by thoughts. It can only be attained through a "discernment," an "awakening," a "divine disclosure," a "self-realization"--or, as we would say, *Gnosis*. So, if you want to know Ultimate Reality--the Ultimate Truth of this whole cosmos--and more importantly, the Truth of your own situation in it--*who you are; where you came from; where you are going*--you have to transcend thought.

But why should that be? Why can't thought grasp Ultimate Reality? The Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart, gives us a clue:

The divine being is equal to nothing, and in it there is neither image nor form...[Therefore] When the soul...contemplates what consists of images, whether that be an angel's image or its own, there is for the soul something lacking. Even if the soul contemplates God...the soul lacks something. But if all images are detached from the soul,

and it contemplates only the Simple One, then the soul's naked being finds the naked, formless being of the divine unity.⁵

So, according to Meister Eckhart, the reason we can't know the "Divine Being" by thought is because the Divine Being is *formless*. And you'll find this same teaching in all of the other Great Traditions as well. Lao Tzu calls the Tao "an uncarved block"--that is, a block which has not yet been *formed* into anything. Shankara, another Hindu sage, says: "There is but one Reality--changeless, formless and absolute."⁶ Buddhists insist that the ultimate nature of Reality is *sunyata*, which means "empty"--not in the sense of being a vacuum, but rather in the sense of being empty of any sort of substance or form of its own.

But thoughts *are* forms, aren't they? Whether you're thinking in images, or symbols, or in abstract concepts--or your mind is just chattering aimlessly away--it all involves the creation of some sort of mental forms. So, the reason thought is incapable of grasping Ultimate Reality, is that thought *is* form and form cannot get hold of formlessness. In fact, in a certain sense, form actually hides formlessness. If you're trying to see white light, but you're always wearing colored glasses--well, you're never going to see the white light, are you? You may be looking right at the light, but you still won't be able to see its whiteness, because the light will take on whatever color your glasses are. It's the same when you're trying to apprehend the formless nature of Ultimate Reality. If you're always looking for formlessness through form, how are you ever going to see formlessness?

The trouble is, it's very hard to get beyond thought. One way is to stop the mind completely and empty it of all images and thoughts. This is what Patanjali's yoga is all about. "Yoga is

the restriction of the fluctuations of the mind”—that’s how he defines it. But this isn’t so easy to do. Try it and you’ll see. Just stop thinking about anything. Don’t let any thoughts at all arise. It sounds simple, but in practice it’s very difficult—especially if you’re a householder—because it takes a lot of time meditating to develop the kind of intense concentration needed to attain this state. Not only have you got to shut out all thought from consciousness, but all objects, whatsoever. This state is called *samprajnata samadhi*, which means “samadhi with support.” But even this isn’t the end. Even this isn’t Gnosis.

In order to attain Gnosis, it is not enough merely to experience a state of formlessness. You have to “discern,” or “awaken to,” or “Realize” its *significance*—that this formlessness is the ultimate nature of everything, including form. This is what Gnosis is all about. Patanjali calls it *asamprajnata samadhi*—“samadhi without support”—because it doesn’t depend on any particular state. You could say it’s the Realization of the State of all states. So, if you don’t attain this Realization, this Gnosis, you may have a very sublime, very blissful experience, but eventually it will fade—as all experiences must—and then you’ll be right back where you started from—lost in form.

But there’s another way to go which combines meditation with inquiry. Different traditions have different names for it, but we call it *contemplation*. To really practice contemplation right you also have to develop some degree of meditative stability, but you don’t have to become an Olympic champion. You just need enough stability to be able to focus on one object—or a series of objects—for a period of time without distraction.

The way contemplation differs from Patanjali’s yoga is that, instead of suppressing form, it actually makes use of form to lead you to formlessness. This is possible because, ultimately, form and formlessness are not two separate modes of being. Ultimately, as the Buddhists say, “form *is* emptiness,

and emptiness *is* form.” In other words, there’s no real distinction between form and formlessness, so if you Realize the True Nature of one, you automatically Realize the True Nature of the other.

So, let’s try it. Let’s contemplate forms—or at least make a start—so that you can get some idea of what it might be like to actually practice this in your own lives. And since there are so many kinds of forms, let’s first divide them into some broad categories so we can proceed in a more systematic fashion. In our own culture it’s customary to make a big distinction between sensory forms and mental forms. So let’s call anything that appears in one of the five sense fields—the fields of sight, sound, touch, taste, or smell—a *sensory form*. And let’s call everything else—memories, images, concepts, mental chatter, and so on—*thought forms*.

PART I: THOUGHT FORMS

So let’s begin with an investigation of thought forms. Let’s ask the question: *What is thought?* Now, usually, when people try to answer this question, right away they start *thinking* about thought. But all that will ever produce is more thought—thoughts *thinking* about thoughts. Of course, we’ll have to use thoughts in the form of words to communicate—to try to describe to each other what we’re experiencing—but what we’re really interested in here is conducting an *empirical* investigation. We want to try to get some *direct* insight into the nature of thought as it appears in our own experience. And the way we’re going to do this is to conduct some contemplative experiments. I’m going to ask all of you to become scientists of the sacred, using your own minds as laboratories. My role will simply be that of an instructor. I’ll suggest some things to think about, and ask you some questions, but you have to rely on your own experience to guide you to the truth.

Experiment #1 Are Thoughts Real?

Okay, let’s begin with the first experiment. Close your eyes and think of

something—anything that’s fairly concrete. Now, ask yourself: *Is the thought I am thinking real?* By that I mean, does the thought exist objectively “out there” someplace?—like you might think a stone exists “out there.” Or, is it purely imaginary? Does it have any existence apart from your mind, from consciousness?... Okay, now open your eyes, and tell us what you saw.

Student: My teddy bear.

Joel: So, was the teddy bear real or imaginary?

Student: It was a real teddy bear that I was remembering.

Joel: Yes, but the *memory*—was that real? Did it exist apart from your mind in any way?

Student: It’s out there in the world. I can go back to my room and it’d be there.

Joel: This is what we have to be very careful of. This is how thought often deceives us. We confuse what we are thinking about with the *thought* itself. Your teddy bear may or may not be in your room, but the *memory* of the teddy bear, where is that?

Student: In my brain.

Joel: Can you see it there in your brain? Close your eyes and look again. Can you see your brain?

Student: No, but that’s where memories are stored.

Joel: How do you know that? How do you know memories are stored in your brain?

Student: I read it somewhere, in a science article I think...

Joel: So this knowledge you have is, itself, just a *thought*, right? I mean, you didn’t experience it *directly*. You didn’t actually see that memory of a teddy bear pop out of your brain and then go back in there—or, did you?

Student: No.

Joel: This is what relying on your own experience is all about. You are your own authority in this kind of inquiry. Don’t take anybody else’s word for it. Close your eyes again, and remember your teddy bear. What you’re experiencing *right now*—that *memory*—does it exist objectively, outside of your mind—or is it imaginary?

Student: It's imaginary.

Joel: Anyone have a different experience? Anyone see something that was real and *not* imaginary?

Another student: I'm not sure what you mean by "real" or "imaginary."

Joel: Right now I'm using these terms more or less as they're commonly used in our culture. When we say to somebody, "Oh, that's not real, that's just in your mind, that's imaginary"—we usually mean that what that person is experiencing is a purely subjective phenomenon which doesn't exist apart from consciousness. For instance, most people in this culture look at their dreams as being purely imaginary. If someone dreams about the Land of Oz, they don't think that Oz continues to exist "out there" someplace when they stop dreaming about it. But if they go to Los Angeles and then come back, they'll usually say, "Yes, Los Angeles is still there, even though I'm not currently experiencing it."

Another student: But we do experience dreams, so, in a way they're real, too.

Joel: Good point. Sometimes we use "not real" to mean that something never had any kind of existence at all. For example, I might say that I dreamed of Oz when actually I didn't. In that case, I'd be lying. The dream never happened, never appeared in any way. But that's not what I mean. I'm not saying that dreams, thoughts, memories don't *appear* in consciousness—obviously they do. What I'm asking is whether these things exist *inherently*, in their own right, or are they simply creations of the mind?—which is part of what I mean by "imaginary."

Another student: I saw a horse, and I can't think of a horse not being real because it exists even when you're not thinking about it.

Joel: Where does the horse exist?

Student: In my mind. But the horse has a life of its own and it would still exist even if I wasn't thinking about it.

Joel: It would? When you stop thinking about the horse will it still be running around in your mind someplace?

Student: I guess I was really thinking about horses-in-general.

Joel: Have you ever seen "horses-in-general?"

Student: I've seen *a* horse.

Joel: But have you ever seen the *category* of horse?

Student: No.

Joel: What is the category of horse? It's a thought-form, isn't it?—something imaginary.

Another student: In a way, aren't you taking for granted that thought is *not* real? I mean, just because I open my eyes and I'm not imagining it anymore, that doesn't mean it's not there. If I close my eyes again, sometimes I see the same image. So, am I just becoming aware of something that's been there all along, or am I creating it new each time?

Joel: What do you think?

Student: I'm not sure. I can't really say if it's something my mind is forming, or if it's something it's discovering.

Joel: Wonderful! You're beginning to ask the same kinds of questions Plato did! And these are exactly the kinds of questions I'm trying to get you to ask for yourselves. We take our thoughts so much for granted—this whole process that goes on continually inside our minds, that exercises such dominance over our lives—but we never bother to investigate, first hand, what thoughts actually are. We just slavishly believe everything that they tell us—especially about ourselves and the world. But what are thoughts, *themselves*?—that's what we're trying to investigate, here.

So, let's do just that. Let's look into your question about whether we discover our thoughts or create them? And to do this, let's try another experiment.

Experiment #2

Are Thoughts

Created or Discovered?

Okay, close your eyes again. Now, I'm going to suggest something for you to think about. But before I do, I want you to take a moment to investigate whether what I'm going to ask you to think about is already present.

Student: How do we know if it's already present unless you tell us what it is?

Joel: Well, if you were in a museum, for example, with say twenty objects on display, then I might ask you to look around and see what was there before I pointed out one of those objects in particular. In a case like that, you'd probably say the object was already present before I pointed it out, wouldn't you?

Student: Yes.

Joel: So, look around your mind now and then later you can decide if the object I am about to suggest was already present before I suggested it.

Okay, here's what I want you to think about. *Think about your mother's face.* Try to see it in your mind as vividly as possible, and then let it go.... Was anybody able to do that?

Student: Yes, I saw it pretty clearly.

Joel: And was it there *before* I asked you to think about it?

Student: No, I didn't see it until the moment you said, "Think about your mother's face."

Joel: Anybody else?

Another student: I had the same experience he did.

Joel: Did anybody have a *different* experience?

Another student: Well, I could see my mother's face, but in a sense it's always there because I can see it pretty much anytime I want to. All I have to do is start thinking about her.

Joel: Ah, but that's precisely my point. You have to "do something" to make it appear. It's not like an object in a museum which just sits there, whether you're looking at it or not.

Student: Yes, I guess so.

Joel: And, that's also part of what I mean by saying something is "imaginary." It requires some sort of—what would we call it?—an "*act* of imagination" to bring it into consciousness. Normally, we don't think that we have to imagine this cup, for example, to bring *it* into consciousness. We may have to direct our eyes to it, but we don't have to *imagine* it, right?

Student: Yes.

Joel: But what is this thing we're calling an "act of imagination?" I mean, how does this happen? How do we create these thoughts and mental images? Let's look at this more closely.

Experiment #3: What Is Imagination?

Close your eyes again, and *think of something*--anything you want, as long as it's fairly vivid. Now, let that thought go and think of something else. Now, watch carefully as you let the second thought go and think of the first one again. What I'm trying to get you to observe here is how the mind produces these thoughts, these images.... Okay, open your eyes and tell us what you found out.

Student: I thought of her teddy bear and then I thought of his horse and it was just like switching attention.

Joel: Well, switching attention is certainly part of this process, but does attention actually create the object? Is attention the hand that holds the paint brush?

Student: The actual attention--the shifting--was how I went from one to another. I couldn't say attention creates it.

Another student: I thought of a mountain that I like to climb, and then I thought of an apple tree in my backyard. The more attention I gave to them, the stronger and clearer they got.

Joel: The way we normally use the word *attention*, there has to be something there to direct your attention to. How did you create the mountain in the first place?

Student: It just popped in.

Joel: Did you pick the mountain or not?

Student: Consciously, no.

Joel: Well, what other way could you have picked it?

Student: Unconsciously.

Joel: It came out of your unconscious? How do you know anything about an unconscious?

Student: I've studied a lot of psychology.

Joel: So then "the unconscious" is a thought, isn't it? It's a concept in your

mind, which you posit to exist somewhere--but have you ever experienced it directly?

Student: I'm not sure what you mean...

Joel: I had a teacher once, Stephen Holler, who had a Jungian background, and he used to say, "The one thing about the unconscious is it can never be conscious. We can never be conscious of the unconscious." The minute we're conscious of the unconscious it's no longer *unconscious* by definition, right? But to get back to what you *did* experience--a mountain and a tree--do you know how they came into your mind?

Student: No, they were just what I happened to think of.

Another student: Maybe this is something different, but it seemed like it was a use of will.

Joel: Good observation. But what is "will"? Is it the same as imagination? Do we *will* our thoughts or do they just spontaneously appear?

Another student: I think I understand what you're getting at in the way that Nikolai Tesla would have visions of information coming to him for his inventions. He was out walking one day, and he looked up at the sun, and all of a sudden it just came to him how he could create alternating current, and he just dropped down and drew it right there in the earth. He wasn't thinking about it, it just came to him.

Joel: This is actually quite common for scientists and artists. I think it was Beethoven who described himself as God's secretary. God played the music in his mind, he said, and he just wrote down the notes as he heard them. Mathematicians sometimes describe their insights coming this way. One great mathematician was getting on a bus when suddenly he just realized how one whole area of mathematics related to another whole area. Again, it just came to him all at once. But whether we *will* thoughts or they just come to us, there is something happening in the mind. Mental forms appear and disappear. It's very mysterious *how* this happens, and right now we're not looking for any theory to *explain* it. All we are

looking for is a way to *describe* it, so we can communicate. So, let's call this the "power of imagination." That doesn't mean we're positing any metaphysical entity. We're just trying to describe this experiential fact that thoughts, memories, images do, indeed, appear and disappear in consciousness--and for the time being we're calling this the "power of imagination." So let's look into this more closely.

Can we say anything else about these thought forms which the power of imagination creates? I mean, what *are* thoughts, anyway?

Student: Words.

Joel: Well, it's true most of our thinking takes place in words. All day long there's a stream of words running through our minds. But can we think *without* words? Or, to put it differently, is this "power of imagination" simply the power of speaking to ourselves, or is it something greater, more inclusive?

Student: I've had some dreams where there really are no words to describe it.

Joel: Good example. Sometimes you experience things in dreams which you just can't express in words, because they're completely new. No one has ever experienced them before, so our language hasn't developed any words to express them.

Student: Sometimes, in a relationship, I start thinking about how I'm feeling, and it gets very complicated. Sometimes I don't think there's any way I'm going to be able to put my feelings in words.

Joel: Another good example. Feelings can be very complicated. They can have very subtle nuances. So even though we can certainly *think* about feelings--still, when we try to *express* them in words, the words seem crude and not at all right.

Student: I think it was Einstein who said he did most of his thinking without words, and that it was sometimes a real problem to have to put his thoughts into language.

Joel: Yes, he said his best thinking took place in the form of very abstract

images, and it was only later that he actually translated these images into words. But you don't have to be an Einstein to know what he's talking about. It's happened to me--especially when I'm trying to ponder something I've never thought of before. Has it ever happened to anybody else?

Student: Well, I'm a musician and when I'm thinking up a song--I mean the melody--it's just sounds in my head. I don't know if you'd call that thinking, but I don't use words at all....

Joel: By our definition of *thought*--which is any form appearing in consciousness that *isn't* a sensory form--it certainly is. And what this example--and all of your other examples--point to is that, while words can, indeed, express thoughts, thinking isn't necessarily confined to words. We can actually think without words. So, if thoughts don't necessarily involve words, what do they involve?

Student: Creativity.

Joel: Good. But what does thought create?

Student: More thoughts?--I don't know....

Joel: Doesn't thought always create a distinction? Doesn't it always create some sort of boundary, some sort of separation? Even if it's not very clear, not very precise--even if there are no words for it, thought always creates a distinction, a boundary. It may be a shifting boundary, but it's a boundary nonetheless. Has anybody ever had a thought that doesn't do at least that--make a distinction, create a boundary?

Student: How about a boundless thought?

Joel: Well, has anybody ever had a boundless thought? That's a very good question.

Student: I've felt being in a state of boundless experience that maybe I've attached a thought to, but I don't know what the difference is.

Joel: It may very well be possible to have some sort of experience that you would call "a boundless experience." Interesting though, because once you think, "I've had a boundless experi-

ence," you've distinguished that experience from a bounded one, haven't you? It's been bounded by imposing the thought "boundless" on it, so you've actually made a distinction.

Student: How about emotion?

Joel: Which emotion?

Student: One of those we talked about where you can't name it.

Joel: But that's the point. Even though you can't name it because there's no *word* for it, it's still distinguishable from other emotions--for instance, sadness--because if it *was* sadness, you *could* name it.

Student: Well, it might be an emotion that has sadness in it, but other things too.

Joel: Then, you might say what you're feeling is a mixed emotion--an emotion with various nuances in it. But, again, that would still be something *other than*--and so *distinct from*--a pure emotion, like sadness, right?

Student: Yes, I suppose.

Joel: So, this mysterious "power of imagination"--as we are calling it--is really the power to *distinguish*, isn't it? And it's this power to distinguish that creates thoughts, because you can't have a thought form without a distinction. That's what a form *is*--something created by making a distinction that distinguishes it from other forms. So, all forms are really *forms of distinction*.

Student: Wow!

Joel: Yes, "wow"--but don't take my word for it. You go and check this out for yourself. Try creating various thoughts, images, memories--any thought form you like--and see if what they all have in common is that they are all forms of distinction. Experiment on your own, until you, yourself, are convinced that it's true, or not. That's how this inquiry progresses. I can only try to give you a taste of it here.

So now, let's ask another question about thought forms--these *imaginary forms of distinction*. Let's ask, where do they come from and where do they go to? And let's conduct another experiment to try to find out.

Experiment #4

Where Do Thoughts Come From?

For this experiment, I'm going to ask all of you to close your eyes and, again, think of a variety of things--just like before. They could be images or memories or whatever--only this time, instead of trying to see how they're created, try to see *where they come from, and where they go to*. Everybody got that? Okay, let's begin. Close your eyes. [pause] Okay, now open your eyes and tell us what you discovered.

Student: I had an image of the house I grew up in, and it seems to me that I created this out of some sort of mental energy. Then, when I switched to another image, it seemed like the first one got displaced by the other.

Joel: Where did the image go when it got displaced?

Student: I don't know--out of mind--I don't know where.

Another student: Maybe it just goes out into space, into nowhere.

Another student: Supposedly it just goes into short term memory which is kind of a holding area of the brain.

Joel: Well, again, that's not a description of your *immediate* experience, is it?

Student: No.

Joel: In fact, it's not the immediate experience of any human being that I've ever heard of. It's a *theory* based on some sophisticated neurological experiments, which some scientist conducted and which, somewhere along the line, somebody taught you. Now, I'm not saying that a particular theory about short term brain memory is *wrong* from a scientific point of view. I'm sure there are good ways to test it, but that's not the purpose of this kind of inquiry. This inquiry is purely experiential. The point here is not to start concocting any new theories. The point is to see what the nature of thought, itself, is, so that eventually we can get *beyond* thought--which is actually what we're trying to do right now.

So close your eyes and go back and look at the *thought* that "thoughts go into a short-term memory holding area of the brain" and see, from your own

experience, where *that* comes from and where it goes...

Student: There's nothing there.

Joel: "Nothing there." Okay, anybody else?

Another student: The first thing I thought about was my bedroom and then my work-space; and my bedroom kind of came out to here [gesturing], and then went back in, and then my work-space came out, and then went back in the same way.

Joel: *In?* In where?

Student: There seemed to be an inside and outside.

Joel: Where was the boundary between the "inside" and the "outside?" Was there like a doorway or something?

Student: No, it was more like a space.

Joel: A "space," okay. Somebody else mentioned "space" too. Anybody experience something different?

Another student: Thoughts come from the Void.

Joel: "The Void"--that sounds like a Buddhist term. Is that your own experience, or is that something you read somewhere?

Student: Kind of both. I mean, I have read about it, but then I've also tried to see it for myself. I've tried to look at where thoughts come from before, and all I ever found was a void.

Joel: Good for you. This kind of inquiry you have to do over and over again--go deeper and deeper. You can't just treat it like a parlor game which you do every once in a while when there's nothing good on TV. If you want to get real insights--insights that actually transform your experience of yourself and your world--then you have to take this inquiry very seriously. You have to pursue it relentlessly.

So, right now, let's see where we stand. When you looked to see where thought forms come from and where they go, most of you said things like "nowhere," "nothing," "space," "void." But aren't all these just other ways of saying that the place thought forms come from is *formless*? For instance, this "void" you just mentioned, did it have any form?

Student: No.

Joel: And that "space" where your workshop came from--did *it* have a form?

Student: Not that I could tell.

Joel: So, when you all looked to see where thought-forms came from, you found *formlessness*, right?

Another student: But is it really formless, or are you just not aware of the form?

Joel: Close your eyes, think of something, then let it go and tell me what you see right after it's gone.

Student: I see black space, emptiness.

Joel: And does that "emptiness" have any form?

Student: No, but aren't you making an *assumption* that it's formless?

Joel: Well, what form does it have?

Student: I don't know, but maybe it could have....

Joel: Stop with your "maybe's"--that's just speculation! It's like you're speculating whether it's raining outside or not, and getting into a big discussion, when all you have to do is go look out your window and *see*. It's the same thing here. There's no need to speculate. All you have to do is look into your mind, into consciousness, and see what's there.

Another student: When I closed my eyes I didn't really try to think of something. I just let things appear in my mind. For the twenty-one years I've been alive, I've been looking at stuff--forms, images. I saw a fish and a train. Why *those* things? At first I didn't see anything, then I saw....

Joel: Stop! What did you mean when you said, "At first, I didn't see anything?" This is what we're trying to investigate here, the background of thoughts, the place where thoughts come from. For our purposes it doesn't matter what the *content* of the thoughts were. What we're trying to observe is, what was there *before* any thought arose?

Student: Well, what's actually there is--I don't know. So I must be willing it. Whether I think I'm willing it into existence or not I am, because before and after there is really nothing.

Joel: Let's grant for the time being that you *are* willing it. What I am interested in is where it *comes from*--the before and the *after*--what you just described as "really nothing."

Student: Where does the nothing come from?

Joel: No. Where does the *thought* come from?--whether it's a train or a fish, it doesn't matter. You just said it. You said, "There really is *nothing*." Isn't that another way of saying, it's *formless*? It's a *no-thing*. It has *no* form.

Student: Well, yes, I guess so....

Joel: This is fascinating, isn't it?--how the mind works, the thinking mind. Here we are staring right into formlessness, but the thinking mind can't tolerate that. Right away it starts generating thoughts, speculations, theories--all of which simply mask that naked experience of formlessness.

Another Student: My experience is I don't know where my thoughts come from.

Joel: That's beautiful! You see, she's actually experienced what Lao Tzu meant when he said you have to be capable of "not knowing anything." The reason you don't "know" where thoughts come from is because they come from formlessness, and you can't know formlessness by thinking about it. That's what mystics have been saying for centuries! And this is just what you are discovering for yourself, right now! If you want to know formlessness, you have to be capable of "not knowing anything," because so long as you are focused on the *things* in consciousness--the thought-forms--you can't know formlessness. But when you look *beyond* these thought forms, or *between* them, that's when you start to *experience* formlessness.

Student: But when I do that, I don't see anything!

Joel: *Exactly!* That's what formlessness is! You're experiencing it whenever you "don't see anything." Don't turn away from that experience! Trust it! Stay with it! This is precisely how contemplating forms leads you to formlessness! So, keep looking into this formlessness, because that's where

the whole secret lies. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Let's try to summarize what we've discovered up to this point in our inquiry.

Beginning with thought forms--when we observed them closely we saw that they're all imaginary. They don't exist apart from the consciousness in which they arise. We also saw how these thought forms arise from formlessness by what we are calling the power of imagination, or the power to distinguish. Somehow, this power to distinguish creates forms, images, thoughts out of nothing--out of formlessness. So, now let's move on to contemplate sensory forms--those forms that appear in our five sense fields of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell.

PART II: SENSORY FORMS

It's all well and good to say that thought forms are imaginary; that they don't exist apart from consciousness; that they are created by the power of imagination out of formlessness. But what about sensory forms? What about the world of cups, and glasses, and rugs, and floors, and solid walls? In our culture we usually think of these things as existing *objectively*, "out there" somewhere in physical space.

Student: Isn't that materialism?

Joel: Yes, indeed, that's materialism. And, while materialism agrees that thought forms are imaginary--that they are images existing only in consciousness--it also claims that there are *real* material objects which exist outside of consciousness, like objects in a museum. And so as we move around, we pick up all sorts of stimuli coming from these material objects--light-photons and sound-waves, and such--and these various stimuli affect our brains, which somehow convert them into the images and sounds that appear in consciousness. And if we move around some more--out of range of these stimuli--these sounds and images will disappear from consciousness, but the objects themselves still exist "out there" just as before. In other words, they are *not* imaginary, they are *not* created by any power of imagination. They are

real objects which don't depend at all on mind or consciousness. In fact, according to materialism, consciousness, itself, is only imaginary--or to use the more technical term--it's only an *epiphenomenon* of the brain. Of course, exactly *how* the brain actually produces this epiphenomenon is something of a mystery even to materialists.

But, in the meantime, most of us grow up thinking this way about sensory forms because the materialist worldview dominates our culture--especially our educational system. And not only do we *think* about sensory forms this way, but, more importantly, this is the way most of us actually *experience* them. We live in a world of "real" objects, existing "out there," and we take this world completely for granted, because it just seems so obvious that this is the way things are...but *are* they?

This is what we want to investigate next. So, let's conduct some more experiments--this time into the nature of sensory forms--to try to see what our own experience can tell us about them.

Experiment #5

Are Sensory Forms Real?

For this next experiment I'm going to place this gong out here in the middle of the room where everyone can see it. Can you all see it? Good. Now, I want you to look at this gong for a few moments and simply become aware that it is a sensory form appearing in consciousness. To be more specific, it is a *visual* form, appearing in the visual field of consciousness.

Now, I want all of you to close your eyes and *notice how this visual form disappears from consciousness*. [pause] Okay, now open your eyes and *notice how the form reappears in consciousness once more*.

So, did everybody have the same experience? Did the form disappear from consciousness when your eyes were closed, and is it now back in consciousness? Yes? Okay. So, as far as your actual *experience* goes, this gong-form does not exist continually in consciousness. It comes and goes

very much like a thought form, right?

Student: Except for the gong is still there.

Joel: Really? How do you know that?

Student: Because even when my eyes are closed I can still reach out and touch it.

Joel: Well, why don't you try that? Move up closer....Can you reach the gong? Good. Now, stop touching it and just look for a moment. Right now, there's a visual image in consciousness, right?

Student: Yes.

Joel: Okay, now close your eyes again and notice how that image vanishes. Now, keep your eyes closed and reach out your hand and tell us what happens.

Student: I can feel the gong.

Joel: You can *feel* that *visual* image?

Student: No, I can feel the gong, itself.

Joel: Don't you mean that something has appeared in the touch field of consciousness--some *sensation*?

Student: Yes, there's a sensation there.

Joel: Could you describe it for us?

Student: Well, it's smooth, and hard--and there's a kind of cool feeling to it.

Joel: Now, observe carefully. Is that sensation the same as the visual image that was in consciousness a few moments ago, or is it different?

Student: Well, it's different, because it's not an image.

Joel: So what we're really talking about here are two *different* objects or forms appearing in consciousness, right? We're talking about a *visual* image and a *touch* sensation, and they're quite different--quite distinct--aren't they?

Student: Yes, I guess they are.

Joel: Okay, open your eyes. Did everybody get that? Do you understand how there's a big *experiential* difference between these two forms--that one's a *visual* image and the other is a *touch* sensation? Do you see that they are *not* the same thing--that they are

two *different* things?

Another student: But both come from the gong.

Joel: Well, let's not jump to conclusions. I mean, that's what we're trying to investigate: Is there *really* a gong here, or do we only *imagine* there is? For instance, normally we would say this gong has a certain smell, right? [He picks up the gong and sniffs it.] This one's got a kind of brassy aroma. We'd also say it has a certain taste...[licking the gong]...sort of a sharp metallic flavor. Here, want to try it?

Student: No, thank you.

Joel: We'd also say that the gong makes a certain sound if I ring it, right? [He does.] Hear that? That's a *sound* form, appearing in the sound field of consciousness. But now notice how that sound form is quite different from the other forms we've just been investigating--the visual image, the touch sensation, the smell, and the taste. They're all quite different, quite distinct. So what we have here are actually *five* different sensory forms, which keep appearing and disappearing in consciousness. So, which one is the "gong?"

Another student: Well, I'd say they're all *properties* of the gong, because an object can have many properties.

Joel: Okay, let's call these various sensory forms "properties." Let's say what we've just experienced are *five properties*. But have we ever experienced the *gong*, itself--the actual *object* which is supposed to possess these properties? Or is the "gong" only an *idea*--something that we posit to exist "out there," as a kind of short-hand way of talking about these different sensory forms and the fact that they don't just appear in consciousness randomly, but in an orderly and harmonious fashion?

Student: I'm not sure I'm following you...

Joel: Okay, let me put it to you this way: Does the gong exist as a sensory form *apart* from its properties?

Student: Well, sure.

Joel: Good. Let's test that theory. Look at the gong. Now, the only "property" that you're presently experiencing is the visual image that's appearing

in consciousness right now. I mean, you don't hear any ringing, do you? You're not touching it, so no sensation is arising; and you don't taste or smell it, right?

Student: Yes.

Joel: So could we say that all the gong's properties have been *subtracted* from consciousness except one--its visual property?

Student: We could say that.

Joel: Okay. Now, I'm going to ask you to subtract that last property from consciousness--the visual one--and I'm going to ask you to do that by closing your eyes. And then I want you to see what's left. Okay, close your eyes. Now, are any of the gong's properties still in consciousness?

Student: No.

Joel: So is there anything in consciousness you would call a "gong?"

Student: No, but it's still there.

Joel: You mean, you *think* it's still there.

Student: I sure do.

Joel: And that's precisely the point! You are experiencing *something*--but it's not a *sensory* form. What you're presently experiencing is a *thought* form--the thought of a gong--right?

Student: Well, it's a very strong thought.

Joel: No doubt. But as we saw from our earlier experiments, *all thoughts are imaginary*. Right now, you are literally *imagining* some gong sitting out there somewhere in front of you, isn't that right?

Student: I suppose so.

Joel: And, if you continue with this inquiry, I think you'll find that this *thought of a gong*--this *mental* form--is the only "gong" you'll ever experience. I don't think you'll ever experience some sensory form called a "gong," that exists independently of all these other sensory forms--the visual images, the touch-sensations, the sounds, tastes, and smells--that continually appear and disappear in consciousness. So, if you want to call these forms "properties" of some *object*--that's fine. But the object they are properties of is a *mental* object--a *thought-form*--which is not something

real, but only *imaginary*.

Another student: What I was thinking was, if I close my eyes and I'm seeing a ball, and I open my eyes and I'm seeing a physical object--like this cup, and then I close my eyes again, I cannot guarantee that the physical cup is still there--like when I open my eyes, I can't guarantee that the ball I was seeing in my mind is still there. Does that make sense?

Joel: Indeed it does! What you're discovering is that there is no fundamental difference between sensory forms and thought forms. Both depend on consciousness for any kind of existence.

Another student: But that would mean nothing's real!

Joel: Well, again, let's not jump to conclusions. This is exactly what we're trying to find out through this practice: what--if anything--*is* ultimately real? And what we discovered before was that thought forms are *not* ultimately real: they are created by the power of imagination. And what we're in the process of discovering now is that the idea of an "objective" world of material forms, which is supposed to exist "out there" somewhere, is, itself, just another thought form, also created by the power of imagination. So, let's continue our investigation with another experiment.

Experiment #6 Are Sensory Forms Forms of Distinction?

Earlier, when we tried to determine what thought forms were, we decided that they were all *forms of distinction*. Now, we want to see if this is true of sensory forms as well. But, in order to investigate this here, we're going to have to be a little more sophisticated and a little more philosophical. We're going to have to perform some *thought-experiments*. That means we're going to have to carry out these experiments mostly in our minds, because I don't have the equipment necessary to perform them right here in front of you. So, this might be a little more difficult for some of you if you're not used to thinking this way, but let's give it a try,

okay?

Now, I have here a wool sock [He holds it up.] Notice that this is a sensory form, appearing in the visual field of consciousness. Also notice that you can *distinguish* this form from other sensory forms. For instance, you can distinguish this sock from this gong, and from this cup, and this pen. So, this sock is a *form of distinction*. Does everybody get that?

Student: Not, exactly...

Joel: Well, let me put it this way: the form of the sock--the fact that it is a form--depends on a distinction which *distinguishes* it from all other forms. If you couldn't *distinguish* this sock from any other forms, it wouldn't be a form at all, would it? For instance, here's a gong and this is a pen. You can distinguish one from the other, right?

Student: Yes.

Joel: But supposing I put them both in a crucible and melted them down into a big blob. Then, you wouldn't be able to distinguish the pen from the gong. Both forms would cease to exist because by melting them down together I erased the distinction between them. Do you see that?

Student: Yes, I think so.

Joel: Good. Now back to the sock. My first question is: *what is this sock made of?*

Another student: Well, you already said it's wool.

Joel: So, I did. But, to be more precise, it's made out of wool *threads*, right? And, although I'm not actually going to do this here, because it would take too much time--and, besides, I cannot afford to buy new socks--I *could* start to unravel these threads, couldn't I? I could unravel all the threads and put them down in front of me in a big pile. So, the next question is--if I did that, *what would happen to the sock?*

Student: It would disappear.

Joel: *What* would disappear? I mean, all the threads are still here. I didn't burn anything, or throw anything away.

Another student: The form would disappear.

Joel: Yes, the *form* would disap-

pear--or, again, to be more precise, the *form of distinction*, which we call "sock," would disappear. Why? Because the sock *is* a form of distinction. And once the distinction vanishes, so does the sock. But now what about the threads, themselves? What are *they* made of?

Another student: Sheep hairs.

Joel: Right again. Have any of you ever spun wool on a spinning wheel? It's really nothing but a bunch of sheep hairs all spun together. So, if I were to pick each one of these threads apart, what I'd end up with would be a pile of sheep hairs. But, then, what would happen to the threads?

Another student: They'd disappear, too.

Joel: And for the same reason, right?--because threads are a *form of distinction*, and when I can no longer make that distinction, the "threads" vanish.

Another student: I see where you're going. If you took the hairs apart, you'd get to molecules...

Joel: Actually, cells first.

Student: Okay, cells--*but then* you'd get to molecules, and atoms, and then--what do you call them?--electrons and things...

Joel: Sub-atomic particles.

Student: Which are made of quarks or something, right?

Joel: Well, actually things start to get pretty weird, pretty paradoxical at that level--at least according to quantum physics. And it's very interesting, *why* they get paradoxical--because, according to quantum physics, *forms of distinctions* start to break down. All sorts of distinctions we normally have no trouble making start to break down at the sub-atomic level--like the distinction between waves and particles, between one particle and another--even the distinction between the observer and the observed. And this raises some of the very questions we've been investigating: Are these forms of distinction "real?" Do they exist "out there" somewhere? Or are they created by the power of imagination and then *super-imposed* on our experience? But, fascinating as

all this is, we don't have time to go into it this morning.

And we don't have to, either. Our inquiry here doesn't depend on the theories of modern physics. We can just think of all these forms in the old fashioned materialist way, because even in the materialist view there's nothing intrinsic about sub-atomic particles that says we couldn't further distinguish them into sub-sub atomic particles; and these sub-sub-atomic particles into sub-sub-sub atomic particles, and so on. In other words, there's no logical reason to suppose we'd ever get to anything substantial, something that wasn't just another *form of distinction*. So, maybe that's all there is. Maybe it's just forms of distinction all the way down.

Another student: Still, it seems to me there's a big difference between making distinctions in your mind and the ones in the physical world. Like, I can close my eyes and imagine anything I want, but I can't do that with physical things.

Joel: Well, there are certainly constraints on imagination when it operates in the sensory fields that you don't find in the mental field. But is there really that much of a difference? Is the difference really a *qualitative* one--an absolute difference--or only *quantitative*--a matter of degrees? For instance, you just said you could close your eyes and imagine anything you want to, but is that really true?

Student: Why not?

Experiment #7

Is Imagination Lawful?

Joel: Well, let's do a little experiment to find out. Everybody close your eyes. Now, I'm going to ask you to try to imagine three things, one after the other. Okay, here we go:

First, *imagine a square circle.*

Second, *imagine a solid space.*

Third, *imagine closing a door that is already closed.*

All right, now open your eyes and tell us if you could imagine any of those things.

Student: I could imagine a square circle.

Joel: You could?

Student: Well, actually it was a square *in* a circle.

Joel: But that's not the same as imagining a square circle—a single figure that is *both* a square and a circle at the same time—is it?

Student: No, I couldn't do that.

Joel: Could anybody else? How about some of the other ones? Could anybody imagine a solid space? Or closing a door that was already closed? No? So what does this little experiment tell us about the power of imagination? It tells us that imagination—this act of making distinctions, of creating forms—is *lawful*. There are some things imagination can *not* create. You can't just imagine "anything you want." In particular, you can't imagine contradictory forms. You can make a contradictory statement by putting two words together like "solid" and "space," but you cannot really *think* it. A thing cannot appear as A and not-A at the same time. An A can change into not-A over a period of time, but it cannot appear as both simultaneously. That's where logic comes from. That's why people reject illogical arguments. The only way to maintain an illogical position—even in your own mind—is *not* to see its contradictions. Once the contradictions are pointed out, if you want to hang onto that position you have to take it on some sort of dogmatic faith—which really means you have to, literally, *stop* thinking about it. If you continue to think about it, you'll either go crazy, or you'll be *forced* to some other position which explains the contradictions in your original position—at least to your own satisfaction.

Now, notice that this is *also* true of sensory forms, isn't it? I mean, we never find square circles, or solid spaces, appearing in the sensory fields of consciousness. And if I asked any of you to close the front door there, which is already closed, not one of you could do it. And why not? Because sensory forms obey essentially the same laws that thought forms do. This is why we can apply logical thinking to sensory forms and come to valid conclusions about

them.

Student: That may be, but I still can't agree with what you just said about imagination creating physical forms, because no matter how much I try to imagine a Cadillac, there's just no way I can make it materialize. I mean, I would if I could, believe me...

Joel: Ahhh! Now, you're coming back to something we touched on earlier—this question of *will*. You're equating the power of imagination with personal will here, aren't you?

Student: Well, aren't you?

Joel: Not at all. In fact, I specifically avoided doing that. If you remember, when we were talking about thought forms, I said, "Whether we will them or not they *do* appear." That's all the "power of imagination" means—that thought forms appear out of formlessness. Now, I agree it *seems* that one of the big differences between thought forms and sensory forms is that we can "will" thoughts into existence, but we can't "will" sensory forms into existence. But, is there really such a thing as "personal will?" Are there really a lot of separate individual wills at work in the universe? Or does everything ultimately happen through a *single* will?—the "will of God," as Christians would say—or, as Buddhists would put it, as "manifestations of the one *Dharmakaya* [Buddha-Mind]?"

Unfortunately, there isn't time to investigate this now. But, if you're interested, one of the things you can do is to watch very closely how decisions are made. Usually, we think of decisions as being something that happens by an act of personal will. But ask yourself, is this really true? Is there really some "I" in there that actually *wills* decisions to happen? Or is it more like what someone said earlier about thoughts—how they just seem to pop into consciousness? This is a very profound inquiry, but—like I said—you'll have look into it yourself. Right now, we've got some more experiments to perform.

Experiment #8

Where Do Sensory Forms Come From?

Earlier we tried to see where thought forms come from and where they go, and what we found was that they came from Formlessness. Now, let's see if we can discover where these sensory forms come from and where *they* go.

So, let's start with visual forms. Everybody pick something to look at—this gong, a cup, the flowers on the mantle, it doesn't matter what. Take a moment to realize that whatever object you're looking at is actually a visual form appearing in consciousness. Okay, now close your eyes and try to see *where that visual form goes*. Then, open your eyes and try to see *where it comes from*. Do this several times and then we'll talk about it...Okay, what did you discover?

Student: I was looking at you, and when I closed my eyes you disappeared into a kind of blackness.

Joel: Was it "black," like the color black?

Student: Well, it seemed very dark.

Joel: Try it again, and this time pay close attention to what happens *immediately* after you close your eyes.

Student: [Closing his eyes] For a moment, there's a kind of nothing. Then, it's all dark....Now some colors are sort of moving through it—mostly bands of red, I think—but it's hard to say what they actually are.

Joel: Where did those colors come from, the reds?

Student: I don't know. It just seemed like they just came out of nowhere—out of that nothingness.

Joel: "Nothingness." Okay, anybody else have a different experience?

Another student: I was looking at a branch out the window there, and when I closed my eyes, I could still see an image of it.

Joel: Was the original image and the after-image one continuous form? Or was there a gap between them in which the after-image appeared? Look again and see.

Student: [Closing his eyes] Yes, there's a moment when there's noth-

ing--like a black hole or something.

Joel: A "black hole"--good, who else?

Student: I'm not sure. When I close my eyes, there's almost a kind of fluttering. I don't know how else to describe it--like some sort of strobe effect, maybe.

Joel: What were you looking at before you closed your eyes?

Student: My hand.

Joel: So, where did your hand go?

Student: It just vanished.

Joel: Into where?

Student: I don't know--that space where the fluttering is. It just seemed to dissolve into that space.

Joel: Notice anything about these descriptions? The words you're using to describe where sensory forms go--"nothing," "nowhere," a "black hole," "space"--they're pretty much the same ones you used to describe where thoughts come from and go--aren't they?

Student: You mean, it's formless.

Joel: Well, what's your experience?

Another student: Somehow, I don't think I'm getting this because it seems there's always *something* in my consciousness. I mean, it's never *completely* formless.

Joel: Normally speaking, this is true. Except for certain extraordinary states--like samadhi or dreamless sleep--consciousness is almost never totally without form, in the sense that there are no forms at all arising. Some form--no matter how subtle--is usually passing through. But if you continue with this kind of practice you'll begin to experience formlessness as actually being present all the time--as permeating all of your experience.

Student: But how can there be formlessness if there are forms?

Joel: Well, we could use the analogy of physical space. For instance, there are a lot of objects in this room. But really there's more space here than objects, isn't there?--I mean, if we measured by volume. Really, this room has a lot more space in it than it has objects, but we don't normally notice this because our attention is so dis-

tracted by the objects. Now, one way you might become more aware of the space is to start removing the objects and focusing on where each object used to be--the *absence* of the object. In a sense, this is similar to what we're trying to do here. We're trying to become aware of formlessness, by watching that "space" of consciousness out of which these forms appear and disappear. Does that help any?

Student: Yes, thank you.

Joel: Okay, so far we've discovered that all forms--whether they're thought forms or sensory forms--are forms appearing in consciousness, that none of these forms has ever been experienced outside of consciousness. We've also discovered that all forms are *forms of distinction*, and that they are created by some mysterious power we're calling the Power of Imagination, which is simply the power to make distinctions. Finally, we've discovered that this Power of Imagination creates all of these forms out of the formlessness. But there's one thing we haven't investigated yet and that's *consciousness*, itself. We keep using this term--we keep saying that all these forms appear "in consciousness"--but what does that mean? *What is Consciousness, Itself?* For instance, does Consciousness, Itself, have any form?

Student: Well, it's in your body, so I guess its form is whatever your body is.

Joel: Consciousness is *in* your body? You mean you're not conscious of anything outside your body? How about this gong here. Are you conscious of that?

Student: Well, yes.

Joel: So consciousness extends beyond your body. In fact, this whole room is in consciousness, isn't it? And, if you went outside at night, and you looked up at the stars--which scientists tell us are millions and millions of miles away--they'd all be in consciousness, too, wouldn't they? So where are the boundaries of consciousness?

Student: I don't know.

Joel: Well, what about other things? What about color? Does Consciousness have any particular color?

Another student: No.

Joel: Well, how much does it weigh? Does it have a smell, a taste--or any other properties?

Student: I can't think of any.

Joel: Can anybody else? No? So, in other words, Consciousness, Itself, doesn't have a form--it's *formless*, right?

Student: The way I look at it is, each of our individual consciousnesses are really part of God's consciousness, so everything is connected through that.

Joel: Well, that's a traditional way to look at it--there's a "little spark of God in each of us." But, really, what's the difference between "your" consciousness and someone else's? I mean, how many consciousnesses have you ever experienced?

Student: Well, personally, I've only experienced one.

Joel: Has anybody here ever experienced more than one consciousness? How many have *you* experienced?

Another student: Just one.

Joel: Let's take a poll. How many people here have experienced more than one consciousness? [No one raises their hands.] Nobody's ever experienced more than one?

Student: The amount of consciousnesses could be infinite.

Joel: We could say that, but how many have you *actually* experienced?

Student: Just my own.

Joel: So why posit infinite consciousnesses when it's totally beyond your experience. Why not trust your experiences and say there's only one consciousness?

Another student: Maybe it's my one consciousness that's creating this whole situation in this room, and if my one consciousness is all that exists, then all these other consciousnesses that I created are part of my consciousness too.

Joel: But you haven't *really* created any other consciousnesses, have you? I mean, where are these consciousnesses you've created? Have you ever experienced any of them?

Student: No.

Joel: So, you've just *imagined* them, right?

Student: But isn't that like saying nobody exists but myself?

Joel: No. What I'm suggesting is that maybe *no* one exists--not me or you or anyone else. Maybe *all* selves are imaginary--maybe words like "I," and "you," refer to *imaginary* forms of distinction. Now don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that such distinctions aren't *useful*. They're very useful. If we couldn't distinguish between "I" and "you," then if I said something like, "I have to go to the bathroom" all of you might jump up and rush in there at once--What a disaster that would be! So, these distinctions are very useful, very necessary. But are they ultimately *real*?--that's the question.

Another student: So, what *is* ultimately real?

Joel: Well, what *isn't* imaginary? I mean, if *all* forms of distinction, appearing in *all* the fields of consciousness, are imaginary, what's left?

Student: Consciousness?

Joel: Maybe--but is there some way to test that--to see for yourself if consciousness is imaginary or not? For instance, you might try to imagine consciousness, the way you *imagined* your mother's face? Can you do that?

Student: I don't think so.

Joel: Well, *try* it.

Student: [Closes his eyes.] I'm drawing a blank.

Joel: So there's formlessness, right?

Student: Yes.

Joel: Well, is consciousness still present?

Student: Yes.

Joel: So there's Consciousness Without Form, right? Now observe very carefully: Are you creating that Formless Consciousness by some act of imagination--or is it just naturally *there*?

Student: It seems like consciousness is just there.

Joel: So, maybe you've discovered something that *isn't* imaginary--that isn't created by the power of imagination. But if Consciousness, Itself--this Formless Consciousness out of which all forms come--*isn't* imaginary, what is it?

Student: I guess it's *real*.

Joel: Well, that's what mystics

would say. Consciousness, Itself, is the Ultimate Reality, precisely because it is *not* a form of distinction--*not* some "thing" that is created. It's a *no*-thing that's *just there* as the Formless Ocean out of which all these waves of form arise and into which they return. But normally we don't see this--we're not aware of this Ultimate Reality. Normally, we walk around in a kind of *delusion*, thinking we're separate from the world of form, separate from each other, separate from Consciousness, Itself.

Why? Because normally we only see forms and we ignore Formlessness. We have no gnosis (which is what *i-g-n-o-s-i-s* literally means) of that Formless Ground out of which all forms spring. We get so wrapped up in these forms that we no longer notice where they come from and where they go. It's like what happens when you go to a movie. Images are projected onto an empty screen, and you get so caught up by the drama of it all that half way through the movie you hardly notice that what you are actually seeing are reflections on an empty screen. You get all involved in the play of this illusion, and so you begin to lose track of the reality behind it.

So, in order to Re-cognize Formlessness, you have to do the opposite of what you normally do. You have to ignore forms and try to find Formlessness. And the way to find Formlessness is to follow forms back to their Source. You contemplate forms arising and passing in all the fields of Consciousness--in the "four quarters" of the Universe, as Lao Tzu put it. You observe how these forms arise and pass into that "nothingness," that "space," that "emptiness," which many of you described. You do this over and over, until you can identify Formlessness, and focus it on without distraction.

Once you can do that, it's very simple. You just stay there in that nothingness, that space. You don't suppress forms. You don't get rid of forms. You allow all forms--mental and sensory--to arise and pass, but you don't follow them; you don't become fascinated and start thinking about them; you don't

cling to them or try to push them away. You just abide in and as this Formless Consciousness, itself--not "knowing" anything.

And then, suddenly, with no more effort on your part, something will happen. There will be an "ecstatic awakening," a "divine disclosure," a "self-realization." Suddenly, there will be a *Gnosis* beyond all thought, all images, all conventional ways of knowing--and you will Realize: I am *not* any form; I am *not* any "self;" I am *not* any "individual that possess a consciousness;" I AM CONSCIOUSNESS, ITSELF--CONSCIOUSNESS WITHOUT FORM! And, at the same time, you will Realize: I AM THE POWER TO DISTINGUISH FORM, which is inherent in this Formless Consciousness. And you will also Realize: I AM THE FORMS DISTINGUISHED BY THIS POWER, because FORM, FORMLESSNESS, and the POWER TO DISTINGUISH FORMS--are, themselves, all ultimately INDISTINGUISHABLE.

This is the Realization that sets you free from all forms, forever. But, it's no good just thinking about it. It's no good just "knowing" this intellectually. You, yourself, have to actually do this practice. You can't rely on anybody else. You have to perform this inquiry time and again, until you, yourself, attain this Gnosis. All I can do is hope that our little experiments this morning have been of some help to you along the Way.

Peace to you all.

❖ Joel 1996

NOTES:

1. *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. D.C. Lau (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 66.
2. *The Upanishads*, Juan Mascaro, trans. (New York: Penguin Books, 1965), 52.
3. Ibn Al'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R.W.J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 51.
4. "The Lankavatara Scripture" in *A Buddhist Bible*, ed. Dwight Goddard, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 293.
5. *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 187, 206.
6. *Shankara's Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, 3rd ed. (Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Press, 1978), 100.
7. Patanjali, *Yoga Sutras* 1.2--my rendering.

Jesus at 2000: A National Scholarly Symposium

In February Jennifer went to the Jesus at 2000 conference in Corvallis, Oregon, featuring well know Jesus scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. Huston Smith, author of *The World's Religions*, Harvey Cox, from Harvard University, and scholars Karen Jo Torjesen and Alan Segal also made presentations.

The adventure began on a Thursday evening when Jennifer left Eugene at 5:30 p.m., during the heavy flooding in Oregon, to attempt what is normally a 45 minute drive to Corvallis, in order to attend the opening program at 8:30. Arriving inside the Corvallis city limits after 1 1/2 hours on a storm ravaged road, she was turned around by the state police and given detour directions. The directions sounded easy--take the roads to Alpine, Belfountain, and Dexter. "Remember ABD," said the trooper. After crossing several streams running across the road, getting lost 3 times, getting new directions from a pajama-clad shop keeper while the wife held a shot gun at the top of the stairs, and being

towed by a Good Samaritan farmer from a 3 foot lake that had formed on the highway, she arrived in Corvallis just after 9 p.m. Of the trip Jennifer said, "I had a lot of time to reflect on the nature of directions, both geographical and spiritual: they must be kept simple to be communicated, but when life unfolds in front of you, the directions never match the complexity of your experience."

Of the conference itself, Jennifer found Marcus Borg's lecture the most interesting. Borg talked about the Pre-Easter and Post-Easter Jesus, focusing on the difference between Jesus of Nazareth vs. Jesus Christ; historical fact (what you would have caught on a camcorder if you had been there) vs. Faith; and Jesus as a figure of the past vs. Jesus as a figure of the present. While this may sound alarming to some Christians, one of the major points of Borg's talk was that stories don't have to be historically true to communicate a powerful spiritual Truth. Later in the conference, Huston Smith came back to this theme and argued that while it may help us to examine Jesus from

different points of view and separate out what may or may not be historically true, in the end spiritual Truths are more important, and even more True.

Jennifer's favorite line from the conference was from Alan Segal's talk. He said, "*resuscitation* is something that happens to a corpse, *resurrection* is about a different kind of existence, an existence beyond the categories of life and death." Another aspect of the conference that Jennifer especially appreciated was that both Marcus Borg and Huston Smith were able to talk about the relationship between their scholarship and their religious lives. Parts of their talks were very personal and refreshingly frank.

The Center has purchased two of the conference videos for the library--Marcus Borg's "From Galilean Jew to the Face of God: The Pre-Easter and Post-Easter Jesus" and Huston Smith's "Jesus and the World's Religions." At a later time we hope to purchase the complete set of audio tapes from the conference.

(Center News cont. from p. 2)

Enlightenment Day: Our annual Enlightenment Day celebration will be held on August 4th this year to honor the anniversary of Joel's Enlightenment and all those who have gone before traveling the path of the mystics. We will have a special Sunday talk by Joel at 11 a.m. followed by a cold plate potluck. It's a good

time to introduce new people to the Center or catch up on what's been going on.

Christmas Party: We'd like to thank Mike Hussey and Barbara Dewey for the gracious use of their home for our annual Christmas party where the usual good time was had by all.

** NOTICE **

The Center Voice is offered free of charge to all who ask. Enclosed in this issue is a prestamped postcard with the information we need from you to review and update our mailing list. We would appreciate it if you would fill it out and return it to us so that we can serve you more efficiently in the future.

*When thought is in bondage the truth is hidden,
for everything is murky and unclear,
and the burdensome practice of judging
brings annoyance and weariness.
What benefit can be derived
from distinctions and separations?
If you wish to move in the One Way
do not dislike even the world of senses and ideas.
Indeed, to accept them fully
is identical with true Enlightenment.*

Sengtsan-Third Zen Patriarch

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