

The Divine Spark

By Anthony Aikman

"You say you have no divine spark in you. In that you are like the rest but unlike them will you believe in faith that fans that spark into a great flame?"

- Joseph Conrad 'letters'

Foreword – Forward

In the beginning was no-thing and from no-thing is created everything. Nothing is the creator of everything and as the creator is the inspiration of the creature and dwells in the creature, so nothing dwells in everything, and as the child seeks its parents, so the creature seeks its creator and everything seeks nothing. As the creatures contain the inspiration of their creator and are manifestations of the creator so the multiplicity of everything spring from the inspiration of nothing. All things created contain within them the spirit of their creator to a greater or lesser extent. Springs plants, rocks, waterfalls all contain some of the inspiration of their creator, but mostly this is dormant or sleeping or seems to be, while active creatures relying on instinct also possess the inspiration of their creator but it is contained within the confines of instinct. Creatures with free will contain the active inspiration of their creator. This inspiration is manifest in many various ways, in music, or art, in singing, dance, poetry, literature, and in manner and attitude of social individuals. The spirit of inspiration has dwelled to a greater and lesser extent in many individuals throughout the ages of the world. Through their teaching and by their example they manifested the nature of the spirit of inspiration and the relation of creator and creature, the responsibility of each to each.

1. Abandon the mind: treason or triumph?

I was on the train south through Thailand to Malaysia. Opposite sat a rather stern man dressed all in black with iron grey cropped hair. He introduced himself as Klaus. I inquired politely if he was enjoying his stay. "I am in Bangkok to purify my mind." he declared. "That is the purpose of my visit." It transpired he stayed near the Victory monument - one of the noisier and more crowded parts of an already unbelievably noisy and overcrowded city and visited a nearby wat (temple) for instruction.

I was instantly reminded of a bhuddist monk who used to sit under an umbrella beside the railway tracks outside Hua Lampong station in Bangkok. I always marvelled that he managed to appear to meditate in such a filthy, hot, noisy place. Crowded against the tracks pressed the cardboard shacks of shanty towns, litter lay ankle deep, children played, men drank, washing lay on the rails to dry, from food stalls blew acrid scents of frying garlic. Amid all this reposed the monk. I watched him in admiration as we chugged past. He seemed to represent hope.

Klaus was rather different. It is easy to criticise these western pilgrims who venture east seeking to salve their souls. I always wonder how much one can learn from another if you do not speak the language. I can speak Thai well but the moment the conversation departs from the practical to the abstract I am hopelessly lost, for in attempting to deal with the abstract we rely on similes and metaphors which are quite different in another language and cannot be translated. In Thai you cannot declare "I can read your thoughts" because to a Thai this is an impossibility. Nor can you refer to the "jungle within us", as jungles do not exist within us.

Seated opposite in the railway carriage Klaus obviously deemed me a worthy candidate to be instructed into the disciplines of mind purification and he embarked on introducing me to the ideas of various gurus whom he admired and whose teachings he subscribed to. I had to interrupt him. "I'm sorry," I apologised, "but I don't wish to purify my mind, rather I wish to lose it altogether." Klaus appeared startled by this heresy. I continued to offend him when I explained. "You see I consider the mind an enemy rather than an ally. Certainly it is in league with the body, manipulator, servant, controller. If one is seeking for the soul the mind cannot help. Like the body it is doomed to die. The mind is practical and can only deal with the abstract in real terms, not in mystical terms. I am seeking for 'No Thing', not Some Thing. And the mind, regardless of how much you may purify it is surely something."

Klaus looked at me in surprise. "Ah, good. I had not expected to meet someone like you. We shall have much to speak about."

I shook my head. Unlike him I had hoped to use the train journey as an opportunity to empty my mind, to drift- which is easy to do as the landscape unfolds and floats past outside- the emerald green rice fields, the stately palms, the rising and falling spine of the Burmese mountains accompanying us south. I certainly didn't wish to talk. "Please don't think me rude, "I apologised."But if you talk I will have to think, and if I talk you will have to think. I am sure you feel the need for contemplation as I have the wish to drift, so perhaps we may enjoy a companionable silence." I realise this may sound pompous, but I was

desperate to escape as I knew the paths of Klaus and I were very different. I certainly didn't need to be burdened with the teachings and philosophies of his gurus. As Gide declared in his 'Fruits of the Earth'," when I reached manhood I decided to unlearn myself of everything anyone- parents, teachers, prophets, had taught me, and to find out for myself. If someone says the sand by the seashore is soft I must put my foot in it (to decide)."

I expect this attitude could be considered an excuse for not studying and certainly I am mentally lazy and at school proffered to dream, although in defence of dreaming I remind myself that during dreams one is invariably the object not the subject of ones dreams, and constantly surprised by what you see yourself getting up to. Nor can I claim to have been a hermit or gone on a course of yoga or meditation. Once as a young man I spent a week on retreat at Prinknash abbey in Southern England. Here after vespers a bell chimed to mark the start of the Great Silence and the guests all retired to their 'cells' for the night. There was certainly an air of calm about the place. The monks worked on the farm mostly, and at mealtimes we ate in silence except for one monk who read aloud in plainsong from a good book. I was surprised one day when he turned to the Times and read out the results of the country cricket matches, also in plainsong. However the rebel in me objects to imposed restrictions of any sort. In Indonesia- north Sumatra, where until very recently I was a 'bush doctor", I discovered my church to be beneath a shady tree behind a deserted shore, or by a waterfall high in the forests. Even as a child I found stone churches to be confining and always, even then felt closer to God in the open. In Moslem Aceh I conducted my own services in which with the help of a traditional prayer book, psalms, gospels and hymns, I was at once pastor and congregation, although I omitted both the sermon and the collection. Later when I transferred to a largely Christian enclave and had every opportunity to attend a Christian gathering of my choice; protestant, catholic (in Indonesia these are regarded as two separate religions!), charismatic etc and where loudspeakers blasted out the pastors message as if to converted by persuasion every fishing boat and water buffalo within a mile radius, I found I far preferred to take the 'Gospels' or the 'Teachings of Bhudda', up into the forest where quite alone beside a stream I could read and think. Unfortunately my inspired thoughts abandoned me the moment I descended to the hubbub of human kind. Trying to train my mind always seemed to fail. Gradually it seemed to me that the problem was my mind. I had always found it difficult to distinguish mind from spirit (and still do), but this busy mind of mine forever planning and plotting and taking sides and having opinions -Oh, if only I could detach myself from it, would I then have peace?

prerequisite to finding the sanctuary of no thing and no where, where everything and everywhere will simultaneously become possible. That then is the true reality I seek. The mystical or to the rationalists, the unbelievable reality.

2. The Creative Force

Everyone from an early age considers the nature of existence and their own part in it. I remember reading how pregnant Yoruba women in West Africa believe that the spirits of the unborn live in the trees, and they go into the forests and pray for a friendly and not a naughty spirit to take up occupancy in their womb. My aunt explained to me when I was quite small how babies were made from dough and baked in the oven. And I believed her. It made sense at the time when I implicitly believed everything I was told by 'grown-ups'. As a child born into a western culture I inherited a belief that mankind was special, unique, superior in every way from all other plants and animals. When I was naughty and my mother jokingly told me that in the next life she hoped she would be a bee so she could come back and sting me we both laughed. But gradually as I came to realise the transitional, episodically, nature of my life falling as it seemed between two mysteries;- the mystery before life and the mystery after life, so I came to wonder about the nature of the creative force itself.

If my soul was not my mind then was it something, some distilled essence of my self which could with effort be washed and dressed to become respectable. Or was it the essence of its creator. Did the Creator live in its Creation? Was the Creator something and were we, the creations, part of that something as in the hope expressed in the Christian communion service, "God dwell in us and we in Him", or was the Creator 'no thing' from which every thing comes? Although John's gospel starts, "In the beginning was the Word" most 'western' religions encourage the belief in a 'some thing' creator, and call this God. For many people the notion of 'no thing' is unsatisfactory. No thing becomes 'nothing', and nothing is negative. To believe in No Thing is an unbelievable paradox.

Perhaps this is where mysticism helps. Mysticism is usually defined as 'belief in the unbelievable'. I remember a graffiti message scrawled in large letters across a cliff face above a mountain road in Italy. "Il Mito Vince Sempre", (The Myth always wins), it declared. Myth not legend. And the vicar of my country church in England once surprisingly remarked, "The only reality is the mystical reality."

Bhuddism speaks of life as 'Maya' or illusion and in so doing turns everything on its head, suggesting the reality we believe in, invest our very lives in, this reality of daily life is in fact an illusion, not real. Sadly most of us regard ourselves and the life we live far too importantly to permit even consideration of such a heresy, as if to admit our lives are an illusion would seem to make them and our every action and activity of no account. After all if life was simply an illusion what of history, what of heroes, culture, traditions, patriotism, artistic or sporting endeavour, financial striving? Would these and so much more become meaningless?

Perhaps we should try to perceive things differently, to consider how by not taking our lives seriously we could free ourselves of some of the ties that bind us, free ourselves from the nets of the world so to speak. Klaus wished to purify his mind. I wished to detach myself from my mind. To seek no thing And if Klaus had asked me what no thing was I might have replied that because I had yet to discover it I was only able to suggest perhaps it was like some closed room which if one could enter and become no thing one would simultaneously discover and experience everything, only this everything would not be an illusion. Then what would it be? I don't know for I have yet to discover it and my mind can only allow me to consider the possibility but not the experience. My mind stops outside the door of the closed room. Yet to detach myself from everything is the

3. Responsibilities-Sacred and Secular

Recently I went on a course of paragliding. I have always wanted to fly. I enjoy sailing and I can easily float on water without moving. In my dreams I often fly- swooping and soaring through unpredictable landscapes. To my surprise the beginners course (I was the only candidate) took place outside a town on a hot plain at Sa Keo, not far from the Thai-Cambodian border where for two days clipped into a harness that was itself attached by dozens of cords to a huge sail I struggled to run this way and that not just to hoist the sail aloft but to keep it up. Having mastered this in sweltering conditions we moved to the hill which rose almost vertically above flooded rice fields and was covered with chest high razor grass. The plan was to hoist the sail aloft and leap forwards into space. Inevitably the fitful breeze died as one launched causing a headlong crash into hidden red ant nests and loose boulders. Finally however I found myself aloft and soaring. I am usually scared of heights but now the sensation was safe and euphoric except that all too soon I realised my path of descent was taking me inexorably into the muddy quagmire of the rice fields below.

My ambition to fly was to be detached from the earth but to achieve this detachment one first had to be very attached to harnesses, cords, and a huge billowing sail. The paradox disappointed me. It was so unlike flying in my dreams when I simply took off and went wherever I wished. Even more disconcerting with paragliding was that having landed one was trapped in hopeless tangle of strings that took ages to sort out. No, I decided, detachment - in my case the search for No Thing could not come from any attachment, be it the cords of a parasail or the bindings of a religion, for the very meaning of the word religion is in itself 'to bind'. As detachment from reality may hopefully bring an awareness of a different reality even if it may seem a non-reality, so detachment from religion may bring a new awareness, a new openness, new possibilities once one is detached from previously accepted rituals and dogmas, and a new trust in a sacred 'no thing' beyond everything.

But why sacred. Is it sacred. What is sacred? For it is easy to saddle something as sacred when it may be quite non sacred, purely practical. And then again why should not the practical be also sacred. Greek fishermen pour libations of wine into the sea to appease the irrational moods of Poseidon, while having an ikon of Saint Nicholas in the wheelhouse in an appeal for divine protection. Sacred, divine what do they mean. A water diviner is surely one seeking water, therefore is the study of divinity a study of seeking?

Scientist nowadays generally concludes that the universe was formed in a fraction of a second- from Nothing into Everything in what they term the 'Big Bang'. And the force, the inspiration causing this no thing to become every thing was it practical, was it sacred. What was it? We can only consider motives in terms of human experience; pity, greed, concern, disdain. Terms which seem very inadequate to explain the birth of a universe. Perhaps it was all a huge mistake that the creator has been trying to amend every since? For where we see force for good we see force for evil. But if there is a 'no thing' from which comes 'something' at least in our inability to discern, let us grant it neutrality.

We explain away the indifference or apparent cruelty of nature by agreeing that most animals and plants too perhaps act on instinct and are unable to weigh the merits or demerits of their acts. Indeed if a cheetah, for example, hesitated as it was about to launch an attack on its prey, neither it nor its cubs would survive for long. Survival even with sophisticated humans often requires difficult and daunting decisions. With plants we assume they are influenced to grow or expand by responding to the external forces of light, heat and water.

Mankind we judge should not act on instinct or impulse alone and if he does he cannot be excused as can other animals. Because to a greater or lesser degree we can foretell the results of our actions it is usually assumed we should act in a way that is, if possible, beneficial and not harmful, not just to ourselves but to the others involved in our actions. But why?

Some religions declared that a supernatural force literally wrote our rules of social behaviour on tablets of solid stone, or personally decreed them to be written in a holy book and to question if this was really so is considered heresy by those that subscribe to this belief, and the questioner may in some case be cast out, expelled, in order to better preserve in its purity the rules of that religion. But if we go far far back into the times of our ancestors, to types of mankind now extinct but then abundant in the forests, plains, deserts and mountains of this world, they also conceived and kept rules of social order so that some semblance of harmony reigned and that societies did not self destruct.

Is conscience then merely a model, a programme of convenience. A shelter, a shield which we can use to defend our action or inaction and which we can also abandon, lose, to explain away instances of savagery which so-called civilisation should have outcast.

4. Supernatural Forces

For all ages of mankind and in all societies it has been and still is common for many people to call upon supernatural forces to aid them. I remember the Chinese cemetery in Manila where the marble mansions built as shrines for the dead, and dwellings for the spirits of ancestors are far far grander than the humble flattened tin and cardboard shacks of the living crowded outside the cemetery walls. There were even security guards paid to make sure the needy living did not rob the halls of the dead. A guard showed me inside one mausoleum. Within were chairs and tables, a kitchen, toilets and in the main room an altar with photographs of the deceased. Then he showed me the most important feature- the letter box. A letter box in the house of the dead! But not absurd if you believe the spirits of the dead can read your requests and intervene in the 'whirligig' of chance to aid you. As children we wrote letters to Santa Claus at Christmas and left them in the chimney. This at the festival of Loi Krathom which takes place at the full moon of the eleventh month place candle-lit floats on the rivers and lakes and seashores in respect of the spirits of the waters, and many daily newspapers have an astrological column where we may consult our birth star and see what may befall us that day. Once in Kandy, Sri Lanka I visited an astrologer. It was rather like a visit to the doctor except there was no examination. I waited in a small brick room behind a Hindu temple and when my turn came all I was asked by the quiet bespectacled astrologer was the date and time I was born. And the place. "Ah," he said, when I explained I was born in London, "Then I'll have to add five and a half hours to my calculations. Come back tomorrow at 5 pm." Back I went. On a sheet of paper he had drawn some overlapping circles and some comments. "You'll never be sick," he said, "Just a little now and then but you'll get over it. You won't marry." I can't remember the rest. The reason I went was because I was worried that I was very sick and also because I wanted to get married. His predictions proved correct. Each of us has a similar story just as each of us has a story of lucky intervention in moments of crisis. I will offer some of my own experiences.

I had been driving my small 4 wheel-drive jeep along a rarely used coastal track through the Tihama desert that lies between the Red Sea and the highlands of Yemen. It was evening. In the fading light I missed the track and suddenly found the jeep sinking down to the axles in soft sand. I tried to do the right things- jacking up the jeep and stuffing grass under the wheels except the jack sank into the sand. Now it was dark and I was desperate. I set off towards the faint lights of what turned out to be a poor settlement of grass hut. My Arabic was rudimentary but two armed men followed me back to the jeep, pointed their rifles at me and proceeded to loot the jeep. Then they eyed me. Without hesitation I put my arms on their shoulders and forcing a grin cried "Sodierk, sodierk," (friend, friend) hoping the time-honoured rules of Arab hospitality should argue against my immediate disposal. They looked bemused and made off laden with my gear leaving me feeling very desolate. In despair I knelt on the sand and raising my arms cried aloud to the heavens, "Help me, God!" Almost at once a sense of reassurance calmed me. I lay down and despite the mosquitoes slept the night through waking up in the dawn to find close by the track I had missed. I was following it through the dunes when a man appeared on a motorbike and cheerfully took me some miles inland to a remote military outpost on top of a low hill. I explained my plight to the astonished commander. An old truck was pulled from a shed and pushed

started until it thundered into life .Everyone jumped aboard and in no time we reached my jeep, attached a cable and plucked it from the sand onto firmer ground.

My next example was when my yacht sank off Greece. I had been sleeping on deck and woke to find it barely afloat wallowing in the waves. I climbed into the rubber dingy just before she went down but shortly afterwards the dingy was tossed over and over. As I held on I saw a small orange light, star or beacon just above the horizon. So long as that stays there I will be okay, I decided. Despite the storm, the rain, the black cloud-fast sky, the orange point remained clearly visible. In the dawn I was washed towards a small island where some fishermen rescued me. When I looked for my beacon it had suddenly vanished.

Once I cycled on a heavy old-fashioned bicycle through the Sumatran island of Nias. It was only 70 kms from the north port of Gunungitoli to the inland town of Lolowauwu. An easy days pedalling, so I supposed. But I hadn't reckoned on the steep mountains nor the slithery gravel and mud track. The brakes quickly burned out so I could not safely ride downhill and always seemed to be pushing uphill. By late afternoon and with more than 30 kms still to go I was quite exhausted when two boys on bicycles appeared from nowhere. When I stated my destination they merely smiled and nodded, saying nothing but encouraging me to keep going, waiting, beckoning, helping push. I felt my strength renewed by their strength. We kept going in the dark until finally far away across a valley twinkled the lights of Lolowauwu. I had always assumed that my companions were also heading for the town, but at the plank bridge in the valley they turned around. "Where are you going? "I asked but they merely smiled. "There's nowhere back there for 40 kms.Have a coffee, have a meal, stay the night, "I pleaded. I tried to give them money but they politely refused and mounting their bikes vanished into the night. Without my guides I would never have reached the town. Who or what had inspired them to go 60 and more kms out of their way to conduct a total stranger to where he wanted to go. I was reminded of St Paul's comment," You never know when you may be encountering angels unaware."

5. Discovery

Many years ago when I visited the pyramids of Giza I found myself quite alone in the great chamber reached by long poorly lit passages that reminded me strangely of interconnecting tunnels in the London underground. The chamber itself was quite bare and smelt faintly of urine. At one end stood a stone sarcophagus with the lid removed. What impressed me was the graffiti on the wall. Messages scribbled in charcoal from decades before and the first read, "scoperto di (discovered by) G. Belzoni 2 Marzio (2nd March) 1818."

If one could write a similar message of discovery on the wall of the secret chamber of No Thing deep within us , (or without us) would it be a date of enlightenment as when Bhudda sat up under the sacred Bo tree having finally discovered the path to follow that would liberate his soul.

There is inscribed on a stone beside the sacred way at Delphi-the path seekers took long ago on their way up to the oracle. The journey begins at the pool of Lethe (forgetfulness) where aspiring gushes out from the base of Mt Parnassus. Here one was supposed to drink the sacred water and lose all memory of one's past before ascending the sacred way and entering the realm of the oracle. Half way up you passed the stone bearing what are referred to as the Apollonian Hymns and the famous inscription "Man know Thyself." which was perhaps the crux of Greek philosophy.

There is a verse from Plato which reads, "And if the soul is to know itself it is unto a soul that it must look. The stranger and the enemy, we see him in the mirror."

Our village vicar once said to me. "Dear boy, the jungle outside us- we can hack our way through. But the jungle within- it's best to leave alone."

Perhaps self discovery is considered a healthy therapy just as basket weaving helps hands recover after a stroke. But is it a therapy of the mind, or May we suddenly find ourselves exposed and frightened by dark secrets we had hitherto safely locked away.

If what we are seeking is No Thing we need have no fears. In nothing we will have drunk from the waters of Lethe, the waters of forgetfulness and discover a liberation, just as Bhudda felt when he sensed he had found the source of enlightenment. Because we are not seeking to know ourselves- which may to some seem incredible arrogance and to other incredible folly, but to Not Know Ourselves, to discover complete and total detachment from the mind and the body, from our ego, our personality as well as our memory. Some people find this, the loss of what they consider essential- their identity, the hardest sacrifice. Most people live securely within their identity; loss of this would seem the same as loss of life. Yet even as we are reminded in the gospels, "One must lose one's own life, to find It." and as Jesus said to a puzzled Nicodemus, "You must be born again of water and the spirit "(Not of flesh and mind).

But as we ponder this possibility of the discovery of No Thing and our total detachment needed to find it, can we contemplate the nature of No Thing. Are there any clues to the identity of the spark of No thing within us, and the great No thing beyond us, the void from which all creation came.

Surely the clue to the character, the nature or non-nature of the Creator is evident in its creations. The nature of the No Thing must be evident in the Things that came from it simply because every creation, be it in our terms artistic or practical must be a manifestation of the inspiration of the creator. Everything must reflect No Thing. Many of us camping or having a picnic must have cursed the midges, mosquitoes, wasps and ants that irritate, and wondered why they ever existed. Certainly the millions who suffer each day from malaria, or the multitude of infections that abound must have doubted the Creator's consideration in allowing such microbes and minute organisms to flourish. Generally we are generous in our judgement putting these things down to a vague generality called 'Nature'.

The difficulty is that we assumed the whole world is designed for us. As far as a fox or a mosquito is concerned the hen house or the human body is just another meal. And mosquitoes will bite cattle or even elephants just as they will us. I recall a film based on the Tarzan story where some Belgian explorers are going upriver deep in the African jungles. They see a lot of natives on the bank pointing to them and jabbering excitedly. One explorer asks the interpreter what are they saying? The interpreter replies, " They are saying 'Dinner has arrived'," The fox and the human have this in common, they both like a chicken supper, although they go about it different ways.

In the gospels, (John), Jesus says "In my fathers house there are many mansions." There is immense scope for diversity for evolution for perhaps we are not the end of the story simply an essay in the art, an experiment along the way. Very possibly we may go the same way as so many species before us and make way for a more sympathetic, less arrogant creation. Surely when we consider the immense diversity of plants and animals it only makes us more amazed at the inspiration of the Creator. The unbelievably complex intricacy and inter-relationships of creatures holds us in humble awe of the power of the creator, the marvellous tale of everything, leads us to marvel at the magnificence and magnitude of No Thing from which they come.

6. Power and purpose of Prayer.

It may seem odd that I pray to a personal deity while seeking an impersonal non-God. But I never doubt the need to pray. As Psalm 121 begins, "I will lift up my eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help" And indeed pray has always felt like that. However muddled it may sound my reasoning goes something like this; the very impersonality or non-personality of God the No Thing allows it, (He or She- depending on who is doing the praying) to be All Things to all people, and perhaps even to certain other creatures such as chimpanzees, elephants and whales and more for who knows and how can we arrogantly declare that mankind alone has a rapport with the Creator. And why not for if the creator dwells in us, it dwells in all of its creations. So there is no paradox. To pray is simply to pray. But why? We pray to share ourselves with God our thoughts, needs, hopes. We also pray to offer thanks. In times past penance or sacrifice was considered an important accessory to prayer but psalm 51 reminds us "thou desirest not sacrifice else would I give it. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."

I recall vividly when I was called out to a poor hut in a remote village on the Sumatran island of Simeleu where I had been for some time the local 'bush doctor'. A ten year old boy lay feverish on a mat. Ten days before he had fallen out of a tree. I realised his thigh bone had snapped. There was also a small puncture in the skin. As I started to splint his legs together his body kept twitching. Then I noticed the rigid set of his jaw. I asked him how many days had he been like this. He held up three fingers. His eyes watched me with an imploring look as hopelessly I injected everything I had in a vain attempt to quell the tetanus in his small body. Streptomycin and penicillin was all I had. I felt hopeless because once lockjaw has set in it can rarely be cured. I went to the beach nearby. Fluffy clouds overhead, blue sea, palm trees waving in the breeze- nature quite indifferent to the human tragedy unfolding in that small hut. Never have I prayed to hard, so desperately, so fervently. Surely to pray for a ten year old, to ask for a small miracle to quell the spasms was possible. I offered anything, even myself in return, but it wasn't to be. I gave the boy what tranquilisers I had to calm the spasms and lower the fever but the boy died at midnight. I felt keenly how very badly I had let him down. His pleading eyes haunted me. Later I related this incident to an Indian doctor who told me, - yes, he had tried diazepam on a similar child but it rarely succeeded once the fever had taken hold. The only thing to do, he said, was to pray. And? I asked. He nodded gravely, the prayer was answered, the child recovered. Were we praying to different Gods? No. In the end it is always the same God, the same spirit of Compassion, the same Source of Mercy and Understanding.

Working as a bush doctor in communities of Christians and Muslims I always prayed with or without the patient. If they were Muslim we would pray to Allah, if Christian to God (Tuhan in Indonesian). But in all cases it was to the one God, to the inspiration of compassion that comes along with everything else from the Sacred Mystery beyond everything. The Nothing beyond the Everything. But perhaps I am being over complicated. Far wiser heads than mine realised long ago that mankind requires simplicity;-

parables, fairy tales, rituals, symbols like candle flames and incense and bells and chants, faith, trust, oblations all of which are accessible to everyone;- rich, poor, young, old, clever and not so clever.

The Hindu religion recognises the God of no attributes (The supreme No Thing), and the God of attributes, of manifestations. For christens, Jesus represents the manifestation of God the Father, God the No Thing. Jesus is not just something. In him the divine spark is total, absolute, unquenchable, fulfilled and fulfilling. He is filled with this 'Holy Spirit'. In him the Knower is revealed. We only find it hard to understand because for us lesser mortals how can we hope to know the Knower.

7. Light

John's gospel opens with an introduction...."In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God..." He goes on to say, "In Him was Light and the light was the life of men." So we try to understand The Word. Is it The Way as in Taoism. It is certainly not Word as in dialogue or discourse. Perhaps it is more closely allied to Light. In his book Language and Silence, Steiner refers to light as a language, a communicable and fulfilling language. Jesus says to his followers "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works..." But this is a very practical light. It blazes out. A very different light to the enlightenment of Bhudda. Or is it? For the path (the Way) to enlightenment is found by the dhama, the way to live. For Bhudda too believed in Cause and Effect. Do good works and reap the rewards of enlightenment. St Paul was more humble in his approach "The good I would, I do not."

So what is this Light? Is it purely figurative or illustrative?-the halo of light that renaissance masters painted around the heads of holy ones. And what is the source of this light? John continues, "In Him (God) was life and the life was the light of men. And the light shined in darkness and the darkness comprehended it not." He goes on to state that John(the Baptist) was not that light but was sent to bear witness of that light-'the True Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world'. And I assume this light to be akin the Holy Spirit whom Jesus later describes as the comforter. Because God, the Way, God the Light, God No Thing and Everything, was complete within the persona of Jesus, then Jesus was a bearer of this symbolic light, as have been so many others to varying degrees who by their lives and compassion and sometimes self sacrifice have made such a contribution to the human world over the centuries.

But bring it to a personal level. What does this Light mean to each of us? If we are Bourne with it (as John suggests) and the source is accessible to us, do we discover it as Klaus, my train journey companion, by 'purifying the mind'? I may have been unfairly dismissive of Klaus, but I still feel the mind will not reveal the source of light, or the 'divine' spark within us. Then there is the contradiction between good works to earn merit and the bhuddist ideal of entering Nirvana, described as total liberation of the spirit but also a putting out of the flame (the light within us) Is this light within our source of inspiration for this mortal life which can be set aside as we hope to be reunited and librated with the complete No Thing of which we are but a fragment now.

Identity is very important to most people. A loss of identity would frighten most of us simply because as we grow through childhood the importance is instilled into us. Our birth certificate, our name, passport, pin number, etc. To take our identity away seems unthinkable and unforgivable. What, after all can a personality be without an identity tagged to it. And so in many faiths the concept of afterlife, rebirth, paradise, are all tailored to our needs by the assurance that our identities will be preserved. Yet can this be and is it necessary. To be reborn with the same identity we had before we died would mean entering a new life with all the baggage of the old one; memory, needs, wants and so on. Most of us would willingly lose unpleasant memories- particularly those where we are the guilty party, and we would

certainly not wish to renew unpleasant associations but can we have one without the other? And anyway is identity so very important. Is not a lot of identity imposed on us, is it not often contrived? Jesus says to Nicodemus, "Unless a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of heaven," and adds, "I say unto you unless a man be born of water and of the spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Water and the spirit - not very much of identity and personality there. To be reborn must be as it was to be born. We start with a blank page that life sets to and writes upon. Many people, myself included have had experiences of 'deja vu', of already been there. But this only adds to the mystery of where we were or what we have experienced.

I was driving with a friend through Greece when after passing the town of Ionnina the map indicated we would approach a lake. At this moment I exclaimed excitedly to my companion, "I know where we are. I've been here. We will see a reedy shore. There are shady trees along the road. Across the lake there are buildings- a long white building," And so it was. As we drove I gave a commentary of what we should see next. How the road would rise and curve to the left and below the lake would spread out and there was a small island close to the shore. And it turned out as I predicted. My friend assumed I had been there before and I was too embarrassed to say I hadn't. Because in my memory instead of the bright sunny day we were enjoying, the lake in my mind was grey, and the white building full of black empty windows and an air of foreboding

To be reborn without memory, worries, desires etc must be rather like the first day of the holidays when we momentarily put everything behind us and all cares aside, and exclaim "What bliss!"

8. The Lord's Prayer.

One Sunday morning in St Andrews (Anglican) church in Tangiers and elderly expatriate resident, and a well known water-colourist who lived then at No. 0 Place du Kasbah, recited 'sotto voce' his London bus conductors version of the famous prayer. It went; "Our Father which art in Hendon, Hammersmith be thy name. Thy Kingston come, thy Willsden be done in Erith as it is in Camden " and so it continued on a tour of the boroughs, concluding, "For ever and ever Crouch End"?

I don't mean to ridicule this most complete prayer suggested to us as a model by Jesus Christ, who also advised us on how to pray- in private behind closed doors and not to make a public performance of praying. So, with great respect for the integrity of the Lords Prayer my version might go something like:

"Our No Thing which is No Where, Holy be your name. May your influence be felt in our world and in our daily and personal lives. Help us with our 'needs' but not necessarily our 'wants'. And when things go wrong give us the encouragement to manage the situation, to be patient and understanding to others involved."

They next part- 'forgive us our trespasses....' needs a little expansion because I am ever mindful of all those who I have offended or those who were offended by me. Perhaps I never intended to offend them but nevertheless if by my actions or utterances I caused them offence, please bless them. And especially bless those I did knowingly offend. Please guide me so that if I feel offended I will try to understand the circumstances, the traditions and the culture, the personal feelings. To appreciate the others' point of view and the other persons' aims and ambitions."

'Lead us not into temptation'-Please guard and guide me because left to myself I will make mistakes, I will follow the inclinations of my mind and body and make excuses for my actions. I need guidance and although punishment scares me- I sometimes need a punch on the nose to show me the error of my ways."

'Deliver me from evil'- Save me from disgrace, from imprisonment for I cannot even stay in a room without a window and the idea of confinement fills me with terror. May the fear of shame deter me."

"For thine is the No Thing and the No Where where we may lose our identity and become one again with thee. Where we can return to the No thin gand the No where in which we were created and where instead of the 'illusions of reality' we now live in, we will discover how everything and everywhere become possible for evermore. Amen"

I sometimes wonder whether silence isn't the best prayer, as made up prayers like the one above sound trite or naive. But I do think the act of using a familiar prayer and expanding it to embrace one's own hopes and failings is an important part of prayer.

Gabbled and repetitive prayers seem as pointless as those who stand up. Raise their hands, shout "Hallelujah" and speak 'gobbledegook' in tongues. I used to experience this in Yemen. The only place

where Christians could worship together was in the safety of the American embassy and often the service was interrupted by people who suddenly transformed from matter-of-fact types, and trance like started to speak 'in tongues' leaving the rest of us wishing they'd shut up so the service could continue.

Many years ago in Bermuda a certain African Methodist pastor who gave rousing television sermons on television each Sunday and always went about wearing a big Stetson hat, announced that the next Sunday he would walk on the water at Allbuoys Point in Hamilton harbour. Next week half the island population gathered expectantly to see this amazing feat. The pastor appeared and in a hushed silence walked to the edge of the Warf, stepped over and vanished into the murky waters with only his Stetson hat floating. The pastor emerged a moment later covered with a green slime. Climbing back onto the Warf he silenced the chuckling crowd. Extending his arm he pointed to them. "And do you know why I could not walk on the water? It is because you sinful people have turned it into sinful water." So his credibility was restored at least for a couple of weeks when suddenly he was arrested for loitering in a public lavatory. In court he insisted he was there to save souls and the magistrate in fear of rebuke dismissed the charges.

9. Sacred Places

The chapel I remember in particular was a roofless and largely wall-less ruin in Paxos, an Ionian island south of Corfu. These islands, Paxos in particular are covered by massive ancient olive trees, so that as you walk you seem to be buried under a silvery veil of leaves. I first came here in a little wooden yacht nearly 40 years before my recent visit where retracing steps and trying to find my way to the wild cliffs of Mousmouli I followed a path that led me close to a little ruined Byzantine chapel. It was late may and the ground beneath the trees was strewn with wild flowers and the scent of wild herbs was heady. Only the eastern wall was standing and I imagined how much generation of people had come here over the centuries, climbing the rough track, bringing their hopes and fears, the sick to be healed, the feast days.

Some places are sacred in themselves, some become sacred because of something that happened there, and some slowly attain an auro of sacredness through use and devotion. In that Byzantine chapel I felt at one with all the worship of the past, one with all that faith and simple trust, but to be honest most churches feel more like prisons than holy places. Perhaps it is the way they are built in Europe, massive walls and tiny windows, dim interiors when the candle flames flicker. Some say, pressing their palms together in prayer, that this shape is the steeple. But if I pray I try to open my palms not to close them, open them as if one was releasing a white dove into the blue sky. Perhaps I liked this chapel on Paxos because it had no roof, no walls. For usually I feel the sacredness of a place when I wander in the wild, climbing up through the forest to a waterfall.

One particular place was behind the village of Mela in western Sumatra. Here the Muara River reaches the sea and out in the bay are small islands dotted with palm trees while far off the mountains of Musala Island crown the seas horizon. Fishermen keep their boats near the river mouth. But behind the village the river comes out of the forest and runs between meadows over pebble beds where village go to wash themselves and clothes. Behind the meadows the forested slopes rise steeply into a backcloth of lofty heights five thousand or more feet high. Hidden in these steep forests is a wonderland of secret pools and cascades rarely visited except by wandering rubber tapers. And here I often climbed or sat or swam. And it seemed to me that the presence of God was the, walking in his garden in the cool of the day. The forests were cool, especially by the cascades where the sunlight created rainbows in the fine mist of drifting spray.

10. The morality of detachment

Is detachment also disobedience. And disobedience to what? Does it smack of anarchy? Is it negative and does that matter? These are just a few of the questions that come to mind.

The ambition of detachment must be to achieve No Thing. To merely continue in afterlife as one has in this, but possibly with the mind purified as Klaus was hoping does not give us the infinite possibilities No Thing offers. Ah, you may say, but you will not know! Is that important. You often go somewhere you don't know and are pleasantly surprised. But simply to follow the instincts of the mind however purified is suspect as the mind cannot go there. The mind is doomed. Like the body it will perish. Any concept of afterlife that the mind produces must be wishful thinking. Intelligence-the product of the mind-is also deceptive. Yet it is hard to dismiss the mind as we can dismiss the body. The body ages while we hope the mind remains young and agile. We agree we would not wish to be reborn with an ageing body. Would we wish to be reborn with a restless and conspiring mind? Is that a path to peace? No, intelligence is not the way to find answers. Paul says in Corinthians, "Where is the wise? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world " And later in the epistle he remarks "Whether there be prophecies they shall fail, whether there be knowledge it shall vanish away..."

A good person is not necessarily an intelligent or clever one. Just as a religious person who follows and fulfils all the rituals demanded by his chosen persuasion, is not necessarily a good or compassionate person. And morality, what is it? Often an artificial concept created by politicians and judges to sustain a certain way of life often rigid, inflexible and unnatural. Is the sign, 'Do not walk on the grass' a moral code and if we dare to disobey have we sinned? We may disobey the social rules and conventions of society without disobeying the wider concepts of a natural law or a super natural law. We often talk of an all-seeing and all merciful God, but is it easier to be immoral if one believes in No One and No Thing? No- not if one wishes to be detached from all attitudes and persuasions. One may appear to drift aimlessly but the sea is wide and the horizon far.

Imagine a plant law which declares 'do not shade out other plants' or a dog law that says, 'do not copulate in view of other dogs' or 'do not pee on lamp posts'. A lot of our laws may to an outside intelligence appear just as ridiculous. That one may smoke a harmful substance that alerts one but not a fairly harmless substance that relaxes you, or that one religion bans one type of meat while another allows its adherents to wolf it down not to mention all the incredible codes of sexual conduct an outside intelligence would find as bewildering to comprehend as a monkey when at the same time we are told there are such things as 'just wars'

So in the end I come back to Klaus and I can see sense in purifying the mind if only in order to purify and make sensible the odd rules of society. But I wonder if that is what he had in mind. Certainly it is hard to abandon the mind. The everyday nature of existence demands the mind. If I completely detached myself from mine I would be lost. But that must be the gradual aim so that things that seem so important will gradually lose their importance. But even this is difficult. I remember going on retreat to Prinknash

Abbey in southern England. The monks had a rule of silence. I asked an Indian visitor what they thought. He suggested I offer a cigarette "when no one is looking", I was astonished how rapidly they dropped their veil of silence and also how mundane and ordinary were their thoughts. At lunch which was also eaten in silence one monk read in plainsong from a holy book-' the life of St Dominic' perhaps but there must have been cricket enthusiasts present for without changing his plainsong he suddenly switched to the 'Times' country cricket commentary.

11. Going Home

Some people speak of the 'Divine Mystery' at the core of everything. But as mystical is the belief in the unbelievable and mystery is the unanswered question, perhaps 'Mystical Mystery' might be more appropriate a term.

All of us need symbols. To some this is a cross, to others a statue of the Buddha glowing patchily from the gold tinted paper pressed on by countless pilgrims, and to other the Black Stone at Mecca which of course long preceded the Muslim faith. For me it is a waterfall where no one, no picnickers revellers or courting couples, come to disturb the peace and solitude. For solitude like faith and death are things we should trust and not fear, embrace and not shun. A waterfall half hidden by trees where sitting below on a rock beside a pool and looking up one cannot see the source only the surge and where sometimes through the misty spray sunlight casts a rainbow. So to what inner source do these symbols appeal; the cross, the Buddha, the black stone, the waterfall falling from nowhere?

I remember when I stayed in Venice a companion took me to a villa designed by that most famous of all architects Palladio. The villa was fronted by a long row of colonnades, eleven on each side of the slightly larger entrance arch. My friend pointed out the odd number of eleven and explained, "so that they seem to suggest an endless, unlimited line of arches...."

So it is with the waterfall, or a stream bubbling over rocks, from nowhere seen to nowhere seen.

I look forward to 'Going Home'. To returning to the source from where I came. Not an urgent plea but a quiet wish that I am sure will be fulfilled when I have detached myself enough for it to be possible. Going home, to nowhere and no place and be no one.

When we swim in the sea we drop for a moment or two our identity. Here young and old, rich and poor, clothed in very little and without ostentation frolic happily together, all barriers of class, age, wealth abandoned. As we stroll in the countryside we feel a oneness with nature and with the source of creation from which all nature, ourselves included come. There are many instances we all feel of this breathless, unlimited freedom. For some it may come when listening to a soaring aria, or a lingering chord. 'It had a dying fall, 'says Shakespeare in Twelfth Night. For some it may be light itself that suddenly unexpectedly takes our spirit and lets them soar. Such experiences are not crafted by our minds, purified or not, they come from nowhere and entering our inner being take us with them towards where they came from and to where we belong.