

# 1

## THE HUMAN PARADOX

He felt happy and at the same time sad. He had absolutely nothing to weep about yet he was ready to weep. . . . The chief thing that made him feel like weeping was the sudden, acute sense of the terrible contrast between something infinitely great and indefinable existing within, and that narrow, corporeal something that he . . . was. The contrast wrung his heart and rejoiced him.

—Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*

**S**olving mysteries can be fun, enlightening, or a matter of survival. The best are all three. We're going to explore one of the ultimate mysteries. Its solution is readily accessible, yet it continues to bewilder many people, causing endless confusion and suffering. Although some of the earliest spiritual texts illuminate this mystery, and although more good and insightful people have devoted themselves to unraveling its enigma than perhaps to anything else in history, even the awareness of this paradox has often become lost through misunderstanding or forgetfulness. It has also suffered intentional suppression.

Our mystery is the paradoxical nature of human beings, the contradictory qualities that so often cause people to wonder, Who are we? Why are our lives so difficult to understand?

The usual way of stating the paradox is that we are both physical and spiritual; we live finite lives, yet we believe in and sometimes experience continuing beyond our mortality. An ancient and recurrent yet uncommon and unorthodox view, however, holds that we are infinite as well as finite beings.

Only by comprehending that we are both infinite and finite and by living accordingly can we resolve the quandaries of our paradoxical existence.

Being infinite, in the sense that I suggest, means more than having an immortal soul or being one with the cosmos. It also signifies something other than experiencing God within oneself. It means having, or more accurately, *being an infinite and eternal individual spirit* created



fants. We became skilled, however, at suppressing or explaining away most of these experiences; we redefined them so that they made sense within the agreed-upon ordering of the finite world we had to adapt to. Still, we continue to catch glimpses of our infinite potential when we sense we're much more than the limited self we normally imagine, have greater purpose and potential, and have settled for less than we could be. Most commonly, we feel the infinite in moments of quiet reverence in nature or in responding with wonder to the boundless beauty and possibilities of the universe. When these experiences occur, we don't understand them for what they are; both our upbringing and our religious and secular education actively prohibit recognition and provide no cognitive framework or language that includes them. Not many people enthusiastically immerse themselves in wonder or lose themselves in reverence, even for a while; fewer still allow deeper, spiritually illuminating experiences of their infinite self to emerge.

Instead, *we have unconsciously learned to try to make experiences of our infinite nature fit into the limits and rationales of our finite self.* Unfortunately—and this is the core of the human mystery and the crux of many of life's dilemmas—*we can never make these fit into the finite.* The finite self and world cannot contain the infinite self; experiences of it are not of the same order as finite experiences. However, because we don't even know we're trying to make them fit, we become confused, think something is wrong with us, consider ourselves failures, become compulsive, or decide the world is perverse and incomprehensible. It's impossible to make sense of our existence until we realize that we're dealing with two orders of experience and two aspects of self, not one.

### *The Continuity of Finite and Infinite*

Crucial to understanding the relationship between these two aspects of self is that there is no discontinuity between finite and infinite selves or between the spiritual and physical worlds; finite self only experiences an illusion of separation. This illusion can be most convincing, given that the infinite self, if it's allowed into awareness, is so intangible to the physical senses that it seems it must be separate and distant. Millennia of belief in a deity in heaven above reinforce this illusion. Nonetheless, the infinite self is within and throughout its finite creation at all times and under all circumstances, immanent and interpenetrating; it is continually creating and maintaining the existence of the finite self, which thus is never independent of it but instead interdependent with it. The finite self partakes, albeit finitely, of the full nature of the infinite self, which is unified fully and eternally with God.

We are strongly predisposed toward the illusion of separation. Western religion and science provide the framework for how the majority of people in the West think of and perceive the world, an approach that values making distinctions among discrete entities. The most advanced Western scientific thought, however, as well as Buddhist, Hindu, and Taoist religious traditions and some Christian mysticism, affirm the continuity between infinite and finite, divine and earthly, ultimate and mundane. Though most people also view physics and metaphysics as discrete endeavors, they are sounding ever more alike. Modern physics increasingly extends into the paradoxical and mystical in its pursuit of a unified theory of the fundamental forces of the universe.

The continuity between the infinite and finite aspects of self and the absence of duality or division between spirit and matter requires a profound revaluing of matter. Unfortunately, many beautiful spiritual descriptions of our higher nature involve an inherent devaluation of material existence, as if the relationship of spirit and physical existence were a zero-sum affair, such that when the one is exalted, the other requires degrading. Recognizing the continuity of our infinite spirit with our earthly form requires matter to be viewed, as in some religions, as being spiritual itself (see the first section of appendix 1).

The greatest significance of this relationship of spirit and matter is that the finite aspect of self can learn to experience and express the infinite self in bodily existence, manifesting as individuated spirituality. It can evolve to be a partner with it in fulfilling the purpose for which infinite self created the mental, emotional, and physical aspects of finite self.

Theologians often have taken the continuity of God, or infinite self, and finite self to mean oneness without essential distinction. Many mystical and metaphysical voices throughout the ages have spoken of submersion in the divine and thus of an end to individual identity (seen as finite) through union with All. The Sufi mystic Mahmud Shabistari (d. c. 1320) describes this: "There is no being save only One. . . . In his divine majesty the *me*, the *we*, the *thou*, are not found, for in the One there can be no distinction."<sup>3</sup> The burden of individual identity can seem heavy, and losing it in God may feel like a great relief.

Being an infinite, divine self involves more than being one with God. We don't merely partake of the energy of God or enter into the consciousness of divinity. Rather, our infinite aspect is an individual eternal identity, a *unique* creation of God expressing qualities of God in a singular pattern as an infinite self. I use the term "identity" here in its most fundamental sense: for the "I am" which we always are, which preexists all particular finite identities such as gender, nationality, profession, and family connections, and which we cannot cease to be, no matter

what we do. It gives finite self a profound sense of purpose and of being worthy of that purpose.

The continuity of infinite self and finite self does not negate or lessen individual finite identity, just as our knowledge that everything in the universe is part of an unbroken space-time fabric of energy fields doesn't dissuade us from our everyday experience that distinct people and things exist in our world. Exploring our infinite identity, in fact, enhances our personal identity and reveals it to be a divine gift and blessing.

### *The Tripart Self*

The infinite self has often been confused with the soul. It differs profoundly from this in a number of ways, however.

The infinite self is eternally existent. Having an infinite and eternal nature is not the same as having an immortal soul. A common belief is that God creates soul and body at the same time; if so, or if the soul is created any time after the beginning of the cosmos, the soul is immortal only after that, not eternal in the sense of existing through all time, before and after time, or completely outside it.

The infinite self is the creator of the mind and body and is omnipotent and omniscient within them. In contrast, the soul, while often viewed as capable of thought, feeling, will, desire, and ethical choice, is not seen in any religious system as creator of body or mind.

The infinite self is never separate from God. Many beliefs, such as Christian doctrine regarding damnation, hold the soul to be at risk of separation from God.

Having an infinite self means that the individual is, at minimum, tripartite. The three aspects of self are: personality (mind, perspectives, and emotions) and body taken together; soul (as well as, in some views, other spiritual attributes created by infinite self); and spirit (infinite self). (For a fuller discussion, see appendix 1, s.v. "Soul, Spirit, and Nature.") Other terms for the infinite self or spirit are: higher or actual self, being of light, divine self, God child, or the immortal one within.

In its union with the divine, the infinite self partakes of all the attributes of God. The individual infinite self creates the body, personality, and soul and is all-pervasive within them in the same way that God is omnipresent throughout the cosmos. Every person is the creation of an infinite self. Each infinite self relates with infinite and unconditional love to its creation, and its light pervades body and soul; this is the heritage of each finite self. Drawing on that heritage, the finite self evolves spiritually, growing in ability to discover the truths of its unique identity and spiritual purpose and to creatively embody and express its divine

nature. Its destiny is partnership with its infinite self.

At this stage of human spiritual development, our most important work is not just earning a blissful afterlife apart from the body (or in a resurrected body at the end of time) or achieving the Buddhist no-self. Rather, it is to interrelate and integrate finite self (body, personality, and soul) with the individual infinite self *in this life* in a synthesis termed wholeness. Wholeness involves finite and infinite fully unified and interacting interdependently, so that finite self can learn to access and express the wisdom, love, and creativity of the higher self. The capacity for wholeness grows with heightened self-awareness.

This is not a deification of human beings, who, while being infinite selves, are clearly “all too human” as finite selves. It’s also not polytheism, because while God children are infinite and eternal, they are the higher aspects of human beings (or, more accurately, human beings are the finite aspects of God children), and are omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent *only* within their respective creations. They are eternally unified with God and act in the name of and in alignment with the will of the divine. They partake of divine qualities, each being distinct in the particular qualities of the divine that it manifests, and each expresses these according to its own singular God-given creative purpose. They are creations of God and completely consistent with God’s nature.

### *An Invitation to Explore*

While the concept of the individual infinite spirit—the divine self—might be viewed as a religious belief, its better use is to lead an inquisitive mind to confirming experiences. It has practical value in helping to make better sense of one’s life. It addresses questions that are ancient yet most contemporary: Who are we? What is our purpose and destiny?

The infinite self is not something to believe in. The idea that each of us is an immortal individual spirit, a being of light endowed by God with the ability to generate and sustain an individual human being who is that spirit’s own finite self-expression, is emphatically a working hypothesis, an invitation for you to explore, experiment, and learn by means of your own experience. Hypotheses are valuable in terms of their ability to fruitfully focus attention, explain consequences, and predict consistency of outcomes. The test of this one lies in how well it enables you to sort out different kinds of experience, make better sense of your life, act more wisely and effectively, and feel more alive and joyous.

Discussing the infinite self involves all the limitations inherent in

employing language to describe the ineffable. Words and the concepts they form are at best metaphors or symbols, not the real thing. Humankind, as it increases in self-awareness and knowledge of the cosmos, has continuously evolved the metaphors it uses to speak about the ultimate and its own nature. In our time, increased knowledge of the world's spiritual traditions has fostered greater open-mindedness in spiritual inquiry; together with the modern acceptance by science and mathematics of the concept of the infinite, this expands our framework of consciousness so that we can create new metaphors for who we are.

To speak and think of the spiritual part of us as an infinite and eternal self is an idea that is only now beginning to be available in its fullest sense. "Infinity," having meaning in both the spiritual and scientific realms, serves well to facilitate the rejoining of these long-separated arenas of the search for ultimate truth. Its use supports a spiritual seeker in employing all the tools and tough-mindedness of the scientific investigator, while it reminds the scientist that all truth is open-ended and in the end spiritual. It fittingly symbolizes our highest sense of self for the era we're entering. In the future, better descriptions will inevitably evolve.

As to whether the notion of the infinite self is more than metaphor, each of us must form our own conclusions based on personal experience. My own experience satisfies me that it's a valid and useful description, as much as one can say that about any representation of the unknowable.

### *What Is Your Experience?*

It can be tempting to explain away any sense of being infinite by reducing it to a carryover of infantile feelings of having no boundaries; likewise, one may legitimately argue that whatever is said about experiences of the divine self could easily and more acceptably be interpreted simply as the presence of God. This isn't provable one way or the other. We can only rely on whether we have an inner resonance to the idea and, if so, we can experiment and pay close attention to the experiences this produces.

A brief exercise will help you explore this (exercises 3 and 4 in chapter 20 expand on this):

Close your eyes, relax, and clear your mind. Think of your (putative) infinite self, within and all around you. For a minute or two, let yourself observe whatever qualities of this aspect of you that may enter your awareness. Then think of the infinite self of a person you know. (Your infinite self will immediately connect with whomever you think of.) Notice the distinct qual-

ities of this person's higher self, differing from those of your own. Then do this with another person, and again note the differences. Do it with someone you dislike; you may be surprised by unexpected qualities of that person's higher self that differ from the personality you know. Try this with someone from history (immortality is obviously of help here), and compare your experience with your expectation. Now let yourself open to an experience of God. Note what is different.

Your results are likely to be subtle. Simply file them away with an open mind and without drawing any conclusions. Repeat this at other times, and base your opinion on the cumulative results of several trials. Is what you feel your imagination? With practice, you can distinguish what your mind creates (imagination certainly may enter the process, especially at the beginning) from what originates outside your mind. These have different qualities, and you'll learn to tell them apart as you repeat the exercise.

Here's an example from my own experience. I don't wish to give the impression that one should feel anything in particular; no one's encounter with the infinite will be just like mine or anyone else's. My ongoing relationship with my infinite self is very understated. It's the most important thing in my life but also unobtrusive and easy to miss. I often register my infinite self's presence only by inference from seemingly coincidental occurrences that in timely and intelligent ways illuminate my inner growth processes or questions I'm grappling with. I have a highly skeptical mind and, I'm sure like many people, tend to write off these occurrences as pure chance picked out by the selective focus of my mind. My higher self, however, can be blatant in these communications, clustering them past the point of it being reasonable to dismiss them. It will even "sign" them with a pun implicit in the structure of these events. (I'm fond of puns.)

A more direct and abiding experience is of a larger part of myself in and around me at all times. This is full and vibrant, completely respectful of the lesser me and not demanding attention, but if I focus on it (especially when I'm feeling compressed or weighed down), it's expansive and lifting both physically and in spirit. While there's no apparent boundary to this aspect of me, the expansion is usually just enough to get me beyond false limits imposed by circumstance or my internal state.

Another ongoing feeling is a sense of self—individuality and personhood in their largest meaning—that pervades me. I can't define it; it is simply "I," but it's more than the "I" that I usually identify as myself. I experience each part of me having its own unique sense of identity; however, that which I'm referring to is deeper than and common to all

aspects of me. It is what's left when I factor out all particular self-definitions. Any other sense of individuality, such as arises from vocation, accomplishments, or relationships, is open to change or suspicion of being circumstantial; this one (so far in my experience, at least, and according to my intuition) is clearly not changeable. It provides a subtle and simple sense of there being a point to my life and of my having inherent value.

A fourth feeling is of being specially, forgivingly, and playfully loved. I perceive that anyone I meet is similarly loved but not from the same source. This isn't sentimental love; many of life's difficulties seem to be there to provide me a caring and cautioning reminder to be more aware and a challenge to act with deeper integrity.

There's nothing dramatic, revelatory, or extra-sensory in these experiences, but they fill my life. I feel partnered, yet interaction depends significantly on my choice and openness. If I sit quietly and go within in meditation or contemplation to focus on my infinite self, I always get a lift, an insight, or some other welcome but often unexpected change in my interior state or approach to the world. Focusing on God provides similar experiences, but these are not as personal, direct, intimate, and empowering. God provides the overall context; in contrast, these feelings and perceptions are integral to the fabric and processes of my life.

I think of this as mundane mysticism. I don't think I have a special gift; if I can experience relating with infinite self, anyone can; it just requires a little effort and attention. Each of us perceives uniquely; we each can discover how best to experience and relate to the infinite being of light we are.

### *A Turning Point in Spiritual Evolution*

As you discover the ways that you experience your own infinite self, you'll explore personally and in your own way the mystery of your paradoxical nature. You'll also encounter the challenge of a spiritual frontier, the cutting edge of our inner growth as we enter a new era of self-knowledge and responsibility. You are called to a quest that will put to trial everything you think you know about yourself spiritually. Deeper experience and understanding of the unique infinite nature of each of us will mark a turning point in the evolution of our spiritual consciousness, one which will profoundly effect our lives and abilities to contribute to society. It will mark the beginning of a maturing process in our sense of who we are and how we can best relate to each other and to our world. It will move us toward the development of a cosmic

perspective that is spiritual as well as scientific, toward recognition of emerging potentials, and toward a higher valuing of all of humanity and nature. At the same time, the accountability implicit in this recognition of our true stature will motivate us to come to terms with our recently acquired capacity to inflict catastrophic damage on ourselves and on our planet's ability to sustain life.

This quest is ancient and ongoing. The paradox that we as finite human beings have existence and purpose on an infinite scale as an individual divine self is an idea that has been recognized and explored in differing forms for more than three thousand years, primarily in Western religions and mysticism. Ancient Egyptian belief, Zoroastrianism, Platonism and Neoplatonism, early Christianity, Gnosticism, medieval Christian mystics, Catharism, and Kabbalah have all entertained to some degree the notion of a divine individual infinite and/or immortal self. (These are explored in appendix 2, parts 1-3.) Yet, we can now understand, engage, and embody our infinite nature as never before.

We have much work to do: to sort and synthesize experiences and ideas and to create a new psychological and spiritual balance for the current configuration of the human psyche. This work requires discipline and inspiration, intuition and analysis, insight and dedication, and a clear mind. It requires courage to face the experience of the full living reality of the infinite and to overcome both the fear of discovering who one actually is and the ego's terror of losing control. (While fear occurs for some people, intense joy is just as likely.) We need steadfastness to encounter our resistances and illusions. If we do this work, we can explore the human infinite self in ways never before possible. This will enable us to achieve an inner marriage of our seemingly opposite and contradictory qualities that is wholeness—the integration of finite and infinite selves. In so doing, we can profoundly alter our civilization to assure our survival, improve our quality of life, and produce unparalleled accomplishments in art and science. Otherwise, after our current flowering of relative enlightenment, we may enter another dark age of forgetfulness and mystification. What we do right now will be immensely influential in determining which path humanity follows.

The discipline and analysis of science must be part of how we approach this subject. Yet, science is as much about mystery, including the human mystery, as spirituality is. Mystery has two meanings. One suggests the obscure, bizarre, dark, scary, and impenetrable. Many people see human nature this way, particularly its unconscious and mystical aspects. Mystery, however, can also be magical and miraculous, exciting curiosity and offering a puzzle to solve, which is what motivates many scientists. The scientific process is open-ended and without final

answers; similarly, our mystery as infinite and paradoxical beings will never be fully unraveled (after all, we do like to think of ourselves as endlessly fascinating.) Although in spiritual as in scientific exploration the search for answers to mysteries is endless, each discovery along the way offers great rewards. We have a clear choice. Which kind of mystery, sinister or wondrous, will we be to ourselves?

Exploring our mystery leads to self-knowledge, the ultimate foundation of peace and joy. Joy is most profound when we experience our infinite dimension, our divine self. It is this joy, and the accompanying energy and sense of purpose, which lightens the burden of responsibility in our historical moment. To deeply enjoy life is part of our spiritual purpose; to experience and express joy is to complete the world. In joy, we bring the infinite, the divine, to earth; through it, we facilitate our sacred inner marriage. By it, I mean passionate surrender to the beauty and awesome splendor of creation. Less than that doesn't serve the purpose. Surrender must involve the exercise of free-will moral choice, that is, choice that recognizes costs and consequences and therefore affects the evolution of consciousness. Only we as human beings can do this in its full spiritual dimension. Too often, we choose the inverse of joy as a spiritual path. That we are willing to suffer so much indicates both that we recognize the importance of our purpose and that, paradoxically, we will learn to choose joy of our own free will, because transcendent joy is requisite to the accomplishment of our spiritual purpose. We are sufficiently dedicated that in the end we will embrace joy, if necessary. We needn't wait, however, for completion of our purpose to enjoy ourselves. We don't have to keep looking for the light at the end of our spiritual tunnel. We can see light and feel joy wherever in the tunnel we happen to be and embrace our mystery in this spirit.

## Notes

1. "Ode. Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," I.1-4, 9; V.59-63, 65-69.

2. Physicist David Bohm suggests that the Western way of encountering the world has its basis in a mental-perceptual illusion that conditions us to view things as separate and so to fragment what is by nature indivisible. He argues that quantum and relativity theories, in contrast, imply that we must see the cosmos in terms of "an *undivided whole*, in which all parts of the universe, including the observer and his instruments, merge ... in one totality" (Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, 1-8, 11.) Bohm proposes the concept of undivided wholeness in a flowing movement that preexists the objects of our world that take shape and disperse in the flow, where "mind and matter are not separate substances." Consciousness and body are projections of a higher dimension, a more fundamental reality (*ibid.*, 209); this precisely matches how the infinite and finite selves relate.

In both Buddhism and Hinduism, the highest metaphysical realities, *Dharmakaya* and *Brahman* respectively, suffuse material existence, mirrored in the finite minds of human beings as enlightened wisdom, or *bodhi*. They are therefore simultaneously both gross and spiritual; the most sublime reality is indivisible from the forms in which it enters existence. Lao Tzu referred to the Tao, ultimate existence, as beyond description but everywhere. One can't be outside it or get perspective on it; one can experience it but can't know it, can practice it but not understand it.

3. A. Schmölders, *Essai sur les écoles philosophiques chez les Arabes*, abr. (Paris, 1842), 210, qtd. in William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, New American Library, Mentor Books, 1958), 322.